Highlights in the Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ

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Lesson 1:
Introduction to the Series

Introduction

When I was a youngster my family observed the practice of opening Christmas presents on Christmas Eve. The positive side of this was that we got to open our presents one day sooner than others. The one drawback to this arrangement was the torture of enduring the preliminaries. First of all, we waited for my grandmother—to my recollection, she never did arrive either early or on time. Then there was dinner. Of course, we children choked our food down only to have to suffer the wait for our elders to finish eating at a more sensible pace. Then there were the dishes to wash. Then finally we had to wait until all the presents were passed out, each of us with a small pile at our feet.

As I approach this study on the life of Christ, I feel much as I did as a child years ago, watching the driveway for the first signs of my grandmother’s arrival, itching for the preliminaries to be done with so the real pleasures could be enjoyed. The distressing fact is that now I am grandma and it is I who am holding up the proverbial show. Nevertheless, there are some preliminaries which must be gotten out of the way before we begin to immerse ourselves in the text of the gospels themselves.

The Importance of
the Study of the Life of Christ

I can honestly say that I approach the study of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus with more eagerness and expectation than any study I have ever attempted from the Word of God. Before we look into this ‘one solitary life,’ let me mention some of the reasons why it is such a significant topic for study.

(1) When we come to the Christ of the Gospels we are at the fountainhead of the New Testament and the fulfillment of much of the Old.

David Brown has written, “The Fourfold Gospel is the central portion of Divine Revelation. Into it, as a Reservoir, all the foregoing revelations pour their full tide and out of it, as a Fountain, flow all subsequent revelations.”

Even better put are the inspired words of the apostle Paul who wrote, “For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17).

1 David Brown, The Four Gospels (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), p. iii. Brown goes on to say (pp. iii, iv),

“In other parts of Scripture we hear Christ by the hearing of the ear; but here our eye seeth Him. Elsewhere we see Him through a glass darkly; but here, face to face. The orthodox Fathers of the Church well understood this peculiar feature of the Gospels, and expressed it emphatically by their usages—some of them questionable, others almost childish. Nor did the heretical sects differ from them in this; the best proof of which is, that nearly all the heresies of the first four or five centuries turned upon the Person of Christ as represented in the Gospels. As to the heathen enemies of Christianity, their determined opposition was directed against the facts regarding Christ recorded in the Gospels. And it is the same still. The battle of Christianity, and with it of all Revealed Religion, must be fought on the field of the Fourfold Gospel. If its Credibility and Divine Authority cannot be made good—if we must give way to some who would despoil us of its miracles, or to others who, under the insidious name of ‘the higher criticism’ would weaken its historical claims—all Christianity is undermined, and will sooner or later dissolve in our hands. But so long as the Gospels maintain their place in the enlightened convictions of the Church, as the Divine record of God manifest in the flesh, believers, reassured, will put to flight the armies of the aliens.
To put the biblical revelation together concisely, Jesus Christ is the focal point of all history. He is the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes; He is the source of all New Testament revelation and expectation. He is all in all. To study the life of Christ is to study the fountainhead of all New Testament revelation.

(2) To relive the pages of Scripture recorded by the gospel writers is to walk with our Lord in His earthly ministry.

There is much interest these days in “walking where Jesus walked,” that is, in visiting in the Holy Land. I could wish that every Christian might have that privilege. But far greater is the privilege which every Christian does have to walk the dusty roads of the Holy Land with our Lord Jesus through the eyes of the inspired Gospel writers. It is in these pages that we encounter the greatest personality of all history.

Harnack once said,

“The man who can read the first three Gospels … without being sensible that a mighty personality is at work in them—a personality swaying the hearts of men and far beyond the power of men to invent—must be denied the capacity to distinguish between fiction and the documentary evidence to a historical and personal life.”

(3) To study the life of Christ is to behold God in human flesh. No gospel writer has said it more clearly or concisely than John:

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of Him, and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’” For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him (1 John 1:14-18).

Throughout the Old Testament men were forbidden to attempt to represent the living God by means of graven images. The fundamental reason for such a prohibition was that no man-made image could properly reflect the majesty and perfection of the infinite God. In the Old Testament period, God was to be worshipped on the basis of His words (revelation) and works. With the invasion of Jesus Christ into human history, man may now worship God in the person of His Son. In that sense, Jesus Christ is the only image of God acceptable to God. He is the full disclosure, without any blemish or distortions, of God Himself. “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). If we wish to know more about God, especially as He relates to the day-to-day matters of life, we need simply learn more of Christ. As Godet has written, “Jesus is God lived by man.”

(4) When we study the life of Christ in the Gospels we meet the “real” Jesus.

In spite of all of the bizarre and incredible acts of men, few have been so candid as to admit that God was not on their side. It is easy to comprehend why so many have made Jesus the leading proponent of their cause. As a result we have been bombarded with nearly every type of ‘Jesus.’ I mention but a few.

There is, for example, the gentle Jesus, hero of the pacifist cause. This is the Jesus meek and mild who instructs us to turn the other cheek, even as he submitted, non-violently, to the abuse of men.

Then we have the humanitarian Jesus. He is the Jesus whose high calling was to relieve the world of misery and suffering. Just as he devoted Himself to battle suffering, pain and misery, so must we.
On the opposite side of the spectrum, there is Jesus the revolutionary. Here is the hero of the anti-establishment movement. Just as this Jesus rocked the boat of the status quo, so should we. Just as He, they allege, sought to overthrow corrupt and unjust institutions of His day (even by use of violence), so should we.

There is also the broad-minded Jesus, whose love (we are told) seems to permit, or at least tolerate, the sins defined by ‘wooden literalists,’ ‘fundamentalists,’ and other narrow minded bigots. He would welcome women into positions of church leadership as well as homosexuals.\(^6\) He would take a more tolerant view of divorce, sexual morality and such.

The liberals would introduce us to the misled and mundane Jesus. This individual, from what little truth we could ferret from the ‘mythical’ accounts of the gospels, was one who was misled as to His true identity and mission, and who surely could have performed no miracles.

Some of these views (though not all!) contain elements of truth. Jesus did manifest compassion and concern for the physical needs of people. But generally even where some truth is present, there is an improper emphasis placed on one aspect of Christ’s teaching or example. Rather than seeing our Lord as a whole person equal to and greater than the sum of His biblical portraits, we perceive Him only in those areas which support our own hang-ups.

The ‘real’ Jesus is not the figment of our imagination Who comforts us in our errors and confirms our prejudices and preconceived notions. The real Jesus is the Christ of the Gospels, the full manifestation of deity in human flesh. It is this Jesus Whom we shall meet in the gospels. The Jesus of our imaginations has little to offer, but the Jesus of biblical history is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

(5) The life of Christ confronts us with a personality which forbids indecision and neutrality.

The unreal Jesus, who is the product of human imagination, is not a very commanding figure. At best He requires a mere ‘tip of the hat’ or a few words of polite praise. Men can easily sidestep commitment to the Jesus which men have reshaped into their own image. But the real Jesus leaves man no such option. His life and teaching demands decisive decision. He was either God or He was not. If He was not God’s Messiah, He was either a deceiver or self-deluded. In John chapter 7, we see just one instance of the way Christ divided men. The reactions of men were decisive and extreme. They were either willing to die for Him or that He should die.

As R. T. France has so well said it, “Those who understand who Jesus is and what He stands for are still today given to extreme reactions … It is only those who do not understand who can be indifferent, and dismiss Jesus with a well-meant but patronizing word of praise.”\(^7\)

Those who resist Christ are as zealous about it as those who receive Him as Savior. To face the person and the work of Christ in the gospels is to forever leave the middle ground of neutrality and non-commitment.

I will never forget a Bible study we conducted in our home several years ago. We decided, with another neighbor, to study the gospel of John. Our neighbor ended up inviting virtually everyone in the neighborhood. One couple came for the first time when we were dealing with chapter 3. Then we left for vacation. I urged our neighbor to continue the study in our absence. The next week when he was teaching the study, the unsaved woman

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\(^6\) Note, for example, this letter to the Editor, printed in the Wittenburg Door (I do not believe they endorse his view, however):

“You have often supported the cause of the Christian feminists with a compassion for them and their struggle with the Apostle Paul. It is my hope that you have the same compassion for the Christian gays which we represent. Homosexuality can be sinful, but it can be Christian as well. Any form of sexuality (homo or hetero) can be abused, but it can also be used for the glory of God and the blessing of God’s people. I would be interested in sharing more if you are interested. I only hope that you are some compassion for the gays who struggle with Paul and who love the Lord Jesus Christ. John Martin, Evangelical Concerned, Chicago, IL.” “Letters,” The Wittenburg Door, April-May, 1977, p. 6.

\(^7\) R. T. France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire: A Portrait of Jesus (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 15.
blurted out, “You know, it almost appears that Jesus was claiming to be God.” My good friend and neighbor wisely replied, “Why don’t we keep that in mind as we continue our study.” Somewhere in the study of John, both this woman and her husband were converted.

Perhaps as you are confronted with the person of Jesus Christ in this series, you will be compelled by the sheer weight of the evidence to the kind of commitment some would call fanatical. If so, you would be in the company of many who beheld Him in the flesh, and multitudes more who have believed yet have not seen, save through the eyes of faith and the testimony of those among whom He tabernacled.

(6) When we study the life of Christ we learn of God’s pattern and provision for our Christian experience.


First and foremost, the Lord Jesus Christ is God’s provision for man’s sin. Jesus Christ died in the sinner’s place. He Who was sinless took man’s sin upon Himself, and suffered the penalty of God’s wrath for all who believe (2 Cor. 5:21). He provides every believer with His righteousness so that we may spend eternity in fellowship with God (Rom. 3:21-26). But in addition to this He is the example, He is the standard of righteousness for all who believe. The trials and tests which we face are not unknown to Him, for He was tempted in all points, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). His life is the pattern for Christian conduct (1 Pet. 2:21).

Thank God Jesus Christ is not only the standard of righteousness, He is also the source of it. He is both the pattern and the provision for the Christian walk. It was the death of Christ which saved us from sin in the past; it is the life of Christ which delivers us from sin in the present and future.

Paul wrote in Romans chapter 5,

“Much more, then, having been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Rom. 5:9,10).

Again in Romans chapter 6 we are told,

“Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection” (Rom. 6:4,5).

The teaching of the New Testament is that the Christian life is one in which Jesus Christ lives His life out in us. Orthodox Christians have taught much on the death of Christ (although much more should be done), but we have not given sufficient emphasis to the life of Christ. It is in this study of the life of Christ that we shall learn more of our Lord as the pattern and provision for Christian living.

(7) Further, the study of the life and teachings of Christ is foundational to a proper understanding of the dispensational distinctions between God’s program for Israel in the Old Testament, and His program for Gentiles in the New.

Even a casual reading of the Old Testament leaves us with the impression of incompleteness. That which God had promised, that for which Israel hoped, had not yet been fulfilled. Israel awaited the literal fulfillment of God’s promise both of a king who would reign eternally with peace and glory for the nation and anxiously awaited the coming Messiah and His reign.

Yet when we turn to the epistles of the New Testament, little is said of this kingdom. And more puzzling yet, God’s interest and activity seems focused upon the Gentiles more than the Jews. We read much about the church and little about Israel. Some have understood this transition to mean that God will fulfill His promises to...
the nation Israel through the church and that Israel as a nation has no literal earthly kingdom to which she can look forward.

But the Apostle Paul explained in Romans chapters 9-11 that although God’s purposes for Israel have been temporarily postponed, they are still certain, for Israel’s unbelief is neither total nor permanent (cf. especially 11:25-32). God will literally fulfill His promises to His people.

Our study of the life of Christ will help us understand just why this delay has occurred. First of all, we can now look back upon the Old Testament prophecies and discern two distinct lines of prophecy. One line predicted the first coming of Messiah as the suffering Savior, Who would forever put away the sins of His people by His death on the cross (cf. Psalm 22; Isaiah 52:13–53:12). The other line of prophecy foretold the kingdom that Messiah would establish after atonement had been made for His people (cf. Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 7:13-14).

These two comings of Messiah were not perceived by Old Testament saints. We now understand because of the gospel accounts and their explanation by the Apostle Paul. When the Lord Jesus Christ presented Himself to the nation Israel, He did so as their promised Messiah. In Luke chapter 4, He presented Himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa. 61:1-2). By His works, He validated His power and authority to make such a claim. By His teaching, He revealed that true nature of His kingdom.

Most Israelites had a different kind of Messiah in mind, and a different concept of the kingdom. Consequently, they began to withdraw from Him and Jewish leadership quickly began to resist Him as a real threat to their aspirations.

None of this caught our Lord by surprise, for the Messiah must first suffer before He could reign. Our Lord began to withdraw from ministry to the masses and pour His life into His disciples. He began to teach the crowds in the veiled language of parables and to explain in detail only to His intimate followers and friends. He began to speak less of His earthly kingdom and more of His interim program for the church. He dealt less with Jews and more with Gentiles. Our Lord began to more openly and aggressively attack the Jewish leaders, showing their error and provoking their anger. He strategically retreated when things became prematurely volatile. He literally engineered His own death by the hands of His opponents.

All of this, as Paul makes clear in Romans 9-11, was a part of God’s marvelous master design to save both Jews and Gentiles. Jewish unbelief and rebellion brought about the death of Christ for the sins of men, whether Jew or Gentile. It also made possible the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. In God’s program for the church, He saves Jews and Gentiles precisely the same way He has always saved men, by faith in Christ. It is not the Gentiles who must be saved by becoming Jews (and thereby submitting to circumcision, self-baptism, and the Law), but the Jew who must enter by the door the Gentile Christians have passed through, the door of faith.

The life of Christ, then, records the authentication of Jesus Christ as Israel’s Messiah, His presentation of Himself, and His rejection by His own people. All of this fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning Messiah. Israel’s rejection of Messiah (not only by putting Jesus to death, but by rejecting the apostolic presentation of the gospel after His resurrection) necessitated the parenthetical church age in which we live. For this we Gentile Christians can greatly rejoice, for it has meant our salvation.

(8) Jesus Christ is the determining factor between life and death, heaven and hell.

I am well aware that many people sincerely believe that God has provided many ways to Heaven. Some will enter God’s heaven, we are told, by faith in Buddha, others by good works, still others by the way of Islam. If man were responsible for such matters, this might be the case. But Jesus Christ is unique in that He makes an exclusive claim to be God’s own provision for eternal life. Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6).

Such is the teaching of Peter, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

With Peter, John agrees: “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18).
Jesus Christ is the most important person in all of recorded history. When you stand before the judgment bar of God, God will not ask you what church you joined, or how many attendance buttons you earned, or how much money you gave, or whether or not you were baptized. God will ask you but one question, “What have you done about My Son, Jesus?” Have you trusted in Him as your Savior? Do you believe He died for your sins? Are you resting in His righteousness for God’s approval? To have Him, is to have eternal life. “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:12).

The Approach of This Study

Perhaps my greatest struggle in preparing for this series in the life of Christ has been the decision as to how I should approach the study. Some have endeavored to deal with the subject chronologically, but there is little agreement on such matters, for chronology was not a great concern to the gospel writers.

Others have approached the gospels harmonistically. Such a study seeks to look at the life of Christ through the eyes of the gospel writers collectively. There is great value to such a study, but this would necessitate a lengthy analysis of the gospels. In our study we will deal with the major events in the life of our Lord, expounding (generally) the passage that most fully depicts that event. We will begin with the crucial events at the birth of our Lord and the early parts of His ministry. Then we will deal with some of the more prominent themes of His teaching. Finally, we will return to a more chronological approach toward the end of our Lord’s earthly ministry, focusing upon His last week of ministry.

May God use this study to enable us to know Him more intimately and to serve Him more devotedly.

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Lesson 2:
The Invasion of Planet Earth

The Incarnation

Introduction

The inconsistency manifested by we humans never ceases to amaze (and sometimes amuse) me. For example, I note that most theologians today are strangely silent when men attempt to play God in the matter of human conception. They intervene in the natural process of human reproduction by methods such as cloning, sex determination and test tube fertilization. And, yet, some of these same theologians who do not protest against human intervention in so sacred a matter as reproduction are the first to prohibit God from intervening in the birth of the Savior some 2,000 years ago. As I say, such inconsistency puzzles me. They insist that God could not, should not, and did not intervene in the conception of Christ to make it anything more than a normal and natural phenomenon.

With all due respect to the sacred cows of the liberal theologians, it is our privilege to investigate from the inspired records of the Gospel writers the matter of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, I have titled this message “The Invasion of Planet Earth.” Few subjects are more important for our study, so let us begin by reviewing several reasons why this investigation is so vital to men today.

1 The doctrines of the virgin birth and the incarnation are matters of current theological debate. Last year seven British theologians collaborated to publish a book entitled, *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The sum and substance of the book seems to be that we cannot take the Gospel accounts of the virgin birth and incarnation of Christ literally, although one may wish to take them seriously. The authors want us to divorce our faith from the facts of the Bible. The Gospel records, they say, are not accurate historical reports but fanciful fabrications to give credence to their personal faith in Christ with Whom they have had some kind of subjective encounter. The virgin birth was not an event in time but an embellishment suggested, we are told, by either Jewish expectations or pagan belief in supernatural births. All of this, mind you, is coming from those who would have us believe they are part of the family of God. Departures of this kind are not unique to our age.

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1 “If the idea of a virgin birth for the Messiah lay ready to hand in the theology of Judaism, it is conceivable that the early Christians could have taken it over from this source. But the difficulty is that no evidence can be cited in favor of such a Jewish expectation. Isaiah 7:14 was not given a messianic interpretation among the Jews of our Lord’s time, unless the use of parthenos (virgin) in the Greek translation of the Old Testament be regarded as proof of such an expectation in some quarters of Judaism. At any rate it cannot be demonstrated that Matthew worked from Scripture to event rather than vice versa. Though there is an undoubted miraculous element in the birth of certain individuals in the Old Testament period, such as Isaac, these cases are clearly not parallel to the virgin birth of Christ. The very notion of a virgin birth was foreign to Jewish thinking, especially at the beginning of the Christian era, when the transcendence of God was more strongly emphasized than through the Old Testament period.” Everett F. Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 45-46.

From ancient Jewish writings, Alford Edersheim has compiled a list of every Old Testament text interpreted Messianically by Jewish scholarship at approximately the same time as the coming of Christ. Significantly, Isaiah 7:14 is absent. A virgin birth was not understood by the Jews of Jesus’ day as part of Messianic prediction. Cf. Alford Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), II, pp. 710ff.

2 “After a careful, laborious, and occasionally wearisome study of the evidence offered and the analogies urged, I am convinced that heathenism knows nothing of virgin births. Supernatural births it has without number, but never from a virgin in the New Testament sense and never without physical generation, except in a few isolated instances of magical births on the part of women who had not the slightest claim to be called virgins. In all recorded instances which I have been able to examine, if the mother was a virgin before conception took place she
The doctrines of the incarnation and virgin birth are at the heart of the Christian faith. Not only are the doctrines concerning our Lord’s birth a matter of hot debate, they are also the very heart of the Christian faith. The doctrines of the virgin birth and incarnation are what we might call fundamentals of the faith. Although it is certainly possible that one could come to saving faith in Christ while ignorant of these doctrines, it is difficult to conceive of any Christian rejecting these verities. Let me suggest several reasons for this:

a. The credibility of the Gospel writers is at stake. Few would dare to deny that Matthew and Luke boldly held to a virgin birth, taught in the clearest terms (cf. Matthew 1:18,20,23-25; Luke 1:27,31,34-35). If the Gospel writers cannot be trusted in these matters, how can we believe anything they have reported to us? The Gospels are cut of one piece; they stand or fall together. We cannot distrust any portion without undermining the reliability of it all.

b. The credibility of our Lord is at stake. The Old Testament prophets had written that Messiah would be no mere man, but God Himself (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; Micah 5:2). Jesus openly made this claim (John 4:26; 8:58; Luke 22:66-70). He manifested the attributes of God (Hebrews 13:8; Colossians 1:17; Matthew 28:18,20; 1 Corinthians 4:5), claimed the authority of God (Mark 2:5-7), and accepted worship as God (John 20:28). If the Gospel writers were in error, then so was our Lord. His credibility, as well as theirs, is on the line.

To press this point one step further, not only is the credibility of our Lord at stake, but also His credentials. Jesus Christ came as the second Adam, the perfect, sinless Lamb of God Who alone could die as an innocent substitute for the sins of men. If His birth were anything less than what it is described to be by Matthew and Luke, then He would be disqualified as the substitute for sinners. As Dr. Chafer put it:

“His full deity and complete humanity are essential to His work on the cross. If He were not man, He could not die; if He were not God, His death would not have had infinite value.”

(3) Our response to the doctrines of the incarnation and virgin birth of Christ set a precedent for our response to the rest of the New Testament. When we come to the matter of our Lord’s invasion of planet earth, we have come to the landmark case for supernaturalism in the New Testament. It is the touchstone for our faith in a God Who can and does intervene in the affairs of men, and Who can and does have the power to override the normal course of nature. No one has said it more concisely than J. I. Packer:

could not make that claim afterwards.” L. M. Sweet, The Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ (1906), p. 188, as quoted by Everett Harrison, p. 45.

3 One of the authors of The Myth of God Incarnate is Maurice Wiles, chairman of the Church of England’s Doctrine Commission. The book was published in England by SCM press, an arm of the Student Christian Movement, and in the U.S. by Westminster Press, an agency of the United Presbyterian Church.


6 “This is the real stumbling-block in Christianity. It is here that Jews, Moslems, Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and many of those who feel the difficulties above-mentioned (about the virgin birth, the miracles, the atonement, and the resurrection), have come to grief. It is from disbelief, or at least inadequate belief, about the incarnation that difficulties at other points in the gospel story usually spring. But once the incarnation is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties dissolve.” J. I. Packer, Knowing God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 46.

7 Lewis Sperry Chafer, Major Bible Themes, Revised by John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 56.
“If Jesus had been no more than a very remarkable, godly man, the difficulties in believing what the New Testament tells us about his life and work would be truly mountainous. But if Jesus was the same person as the eternal Word, the Father’s agent in creation, ‘through whom also He made the worlds’ (Hebrews 1:2, RV), it is no wonder if fresh acts of creative power marked His coming into this world, and His life in it, and His exit from it. It is not strange that He, the author of life, should rise from the dead. If He was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that He should die than He should rise again. ‘Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies,’ wrote Wesley; but there is no comparable mystery in the Immortal’s resurrection. And if the immortal Son of God did really submit to taste death, it is not strange that such a death should have saving significance for a doomed race. Once we grant that Jesus was divine, it becomes unreasonable to find difficulty in any of this; it is all of a piece, and hangs together completely. The incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains.”

The Investigation of the Birth of Christ in the Gospels

Probably the greatest difficulty to overcome in our study of this portion of Scripture is our familiarity with it. I would suppose that most of us could recite the story with little difficulty. To catch the significance of this event, let me share several pertinent observations concerning the birth narratives contained in the Gospels.

(1) **The fingerprints of God are everywhere evident on these accounts.** The lines of evidence pointing to a supernatural birth are numerous and varied. First of all, there is the prophetic word. Old Testament prophecies are frequently cited as fulfilled in the birth of Christ. These prophecies indicated a supernatural birth, or we should rather say, a supernatural conception brought about through a virgin, resulting in the manifestation in human flesh of the second person of the Godhead (cf. Matthew 1:18-23). In addition to ancient prophecies, it was preceded by supernatural announcements and events. Before the virgin conception of the Savior, Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, was visited by Gabriel and promised a son. His request for a sign was answered by a spell of speechlessness. Zechariah and Elizabeth were given a son in their old age, indicating that ‘with God nothing is impossible’ (Luke 1:36-37). Mary and Joseph both received angelic communication (Luke 1:26ff; Matthew 1:20-21). Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary uttered inspired testimonies concerning the coming of Messiah (Luke 1:67ff; 1:41-45; 46-55).

The birth itself was accompanied by many divine attestations. Angels announced the coming of Messiah to shepherds in nearby fields. Even the heavens gave witness to the birth of Messiah as ‘His Star’ appeared in the East and prompted the magi to journey to Palestine and worship the new King.

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8 Packer, pp. 46-47.

R. T. France says virtually the same thing when he writes, “… the man who cannot accommodate a birth without a human father within his understanding of what God can do is going to make heavy weather of much of the story of Jesus, indeed of the Christian faith.” R. T. France, *I Came to Set the Earth on Fire*, p. 34.


11 “The Magi were priest-sages, students of science, especially of astrology and religion, but also philosophy and medical science. Their researches, mysterious and mostly unknown to us, embraced deep knowledge not unmixed with some superstition. They came from the East, probably from Persia, Arabia, or Babylonia. At that time there was a sacerdotal caste of the Medes and Persians scattered over the East, and also many Jews of the Dispersion through whom the priest-sages may have received some knowledge of Israel’s Hope. Perhaps they may have received knowledge through the prophecies of Balaam of the promise of a King who would
Subsequent to Christ’s birth, He was heralded and worshipped as the One for Whom righteous Israelites had waited. Simeon, under the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Him as the Lord’s Christ (Luke 2:25ff). Anna also gave witness to Messiah’s arrival (Luke 2:38).

Before, during, and after His birth, God gave remarkable witness through angels, through inspired prophets of the past and present, and through creation itself. What greater proof could one desire?

(2) The birth of Christ is reported with amazing brevity and simplicity. Those who challenge the historicity and authenticity of the Gospel accounts of the birth of our Lord insist that these stories of a virgin birth are embellishments to add substance to their faith in Christ.

Anyone who looks carefully at these accounts would, in my opinion, be impressed with the opposite conclusion.12 There is a striking simplicity and lack of sensationalism when the Gospel narratives are compared with apocryphal accounts of our Lord’s childhood.

“Tradition, and the apocryphal gospels written many years later, tell many absurd and fanciful things about the flight of the family and their entrance into Egypt. The flowers were said to spring up in their steps as they entered the land; the palm trees to bow down in homage, and wild animals to come near in friendly approach.”13

With great economy of words, and without any of the sensationalism of other ancient writings (or those in our own day), the Gospel writers described the birth of the Messiah. This simplicity is one of the convincing evidences of divine inspiration which sets apart the New Testament canonical books from those which were rejected.

(3) The invasion of planet earth by our Lord was revealed to devout men and women, but concealed from the rest. When I read through the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, I am impressed with the open proclamation and presentation of Messiah to those who were godly men and women: Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the humble shepherds and astute wise men, the elderly and expectant Simeon and Anna. These people were God-seekers and God-servers. To such as these, the Messiah was presented with divine testimony.

But where are the others? Where are the seminary professors of Jerusalem? Where are the religious leaders? They are conspicuously absent. While the wise men had traveled from afar, Herod would not go the six short

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12 “. . . the brevity and sublimity of the virgin-birth narrative in the Gospels is what we should expect if it belongs to revelation, but not what we should expect if it is the attempt of human minds to explain the incarnation.” Everett Harrison, A Short Life of Christ, p. 47.


“This famous writing, known at least as early as the time of Origin, presents the boy Jesus in the light of a wonder worker. It does not seem to matter that he works harm as well as good by his miraculous power. Here the thaumaturgic element has outrun any ethical norm. Jesus molds clay pigeons on the Sabbath. When objection is raised he claps his hands, whereupon the pigeons take to the air and fly away. When a child running through the village bumps him on the shoulder, he cries, ‘Thou shalt not finish thy course,’ and forthwith the child drops dead. When the parents come to expostulate with Joseph, they are smitten with blindness. A certain teacher, desiring to have Jesus as a pupil, soon regrets the arrangement, for when he is asked by the child to explain the letter Alpha and is unable to do so, Jesus elaborates its meaning and makes fun of his teacher, to the great discomfort of the latter. This incident reflects an esoteric interest and may be a Gnostic touch in the childhood tradition.”
miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. And lest we suppose that Herod was the only one who worried while the others worshipped Messiah, Matthew informs us that all Jerusalem was stirred up by reports of the birth of Messiah (Matthew 2:3). The entire city was disturbed because they were the establishment and they had the most to lose if some new king were to overthrow the existing regime.

As our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers.” (John 4:23)

God reveals Himself to those who seek Him and will serve Him. Only those who were God-seekers witnessed the coming of Messiah, while the rest slept in complacency and unbelief. And so it is today.

(4) The coming of the Christ foreshadowed His later ministry. One can barely overlook the parallels between the response of men to His birth and their later response to His ministry and message. While the humble in spirit recognized Him as Messiah and worshipped Him, the vast majority ignored Him. His humble entry into the world typified His humble position in life. Just as Herod tried to eliminate Him in His infancy as a threat to his power, so Israel’s political and religious leaders put Him to death to protect their own interests.

(5) There is historical accuracy in the minute details of the Gospel accounts. Critics of the Word of God are quick to point out differences in the Gospel accounts. Robert Coughlan in the article “Who Was the Man Jesus?” (Life Magazine, Vol. 57, No. 26 [December 25, 1964]), stated his criticism by this headline: “In detail and many important points, the Gospels do not agree” (pp. 90-91).

Coughlan criticized the discrepancies between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke and the fact that these two writers chose to trace a different sequence of events following the birth of our Lord. Although Christians must admit that defensive arguments for every challenge may not be sufficient to convince the skeptic, there are viable solutions for the man who is willing to listen. Further, we would maintain that further linguistic and archaeological findings have greatly reduced these alleged discrepancies or ‘errors.’

Let me cite one example which underscores the meticulous accuracy of Luke as a historian. Critics had a heyday when they read in the Antiquities of Josephus that Quirinius was governor over Syria in 6 A.D., and yet Luke states that the census took place at the time of Christ’s birth (probably 5 or 6 B.C.). It has now been discovered from a series of inscriptions that Quirinius was twice governor of Syria. (This might be understood better by the analogy of Richard Nixon who served both as vice-president of the U.S. and as president in later years.) The accuracy of Luke as a historian is now widely accepted.

(6) The prophecies concerning Messiah’s coming were precisely fulfilled but in a way totally unexpected. Over and over in the Gospels we find the statement ‘in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled’ or something to that effect. We learn in the Gospels how Christ could be born in Bethlehem and yet be known as a Nazarene. God’s providence is everywhere evident. God moved the Roman Empire to initiate a census in Palestine so Mary would be in Bethlehem and not Nazareth to give birth to the Messiah.

My point here, however, is not that we should wonder at the providence of God (of course we should!), but that we should be cautioned about being too dogmatic about the interpretation of prophecies yet to be fulfilled. If no one could have predicted in advance precisely how the ancient prophecies would be fulfilled in the first appearance of Messiah (and this is just what Peter tells us—1 Peter 1:10-11), let us be very cautious about being overly detailed or dogmatic concerning the details of His Second Coming.

The Interpretation of the Gospel Accounts of Our Lord’s Birth

From the Gospel records, we are compelled to arrive at two conclusions: first, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ resulted from a virgin conception; second, the result of that conception was the perfect God-man, God incarnate.


(1) **Jesus Christ was virgin born.** Let’s begin with a definition: “The birth of Jesus Christ was a birth in normal human flesh from a normal human mother, whose conception was not the result of sexual intercourse with any man, but by the supernatural activity of the Holy spirit.”

The virgin birth was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

The virgin birth is the clear claim of both Matthew and Luke.

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18,20).

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. And Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God’” (Luke 1:31,34-35).

There are many who would have us reject the virgin birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, but to my knowledge, none of them dares to deny that such a birth was what Matthew and Luke claimed to occur. Those who deny the virgin birth cannot say the New Testament does not teach it. No matter how carefully worded, the bottom line of such criticism is that Matthew and Luke were liars—that they deliberately falsified their accounts to further their own ends.

Then the real reason men reject the doctrine is not because they consider the Gospel writers unreliable, it is because they have concluded that miracles cannot happen. The whole matter of the virgin birth and the incarnation is determined on the basis of presuppositions and not on the weight of evidence. Michael Green sums up the problem of those who criticize the historicity of the Gospels by listing three wrong assumptions or presuppositions which they must hold:

- a. There is no divine element in the Bible.
- b. There is no possibility of a miracle.
- c. There is no finality about Jesus.

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17 As stated previously (fn. 1), what is most significant about this prophecy is that of all the Old Testament texts considered by the Jews to be Messianic prophecies, this was not included. This means that a virgin birth was not expected by the Jews. It also nullifies the argument of those who would have us believe that the Gospel writers added this ‘story’ or ‘myth’ to give substance to Israel’s Messianic hopes, based upon Jewish expectations.


19 By way of illustration, Green cites this quote from James Barr: “My account of the formation of the biblical tradition is an account of a human work. It is man’s statement of his beliefs, the events he has experienced, the stories he has been told, and so on. It has long been customary to align the Bible with concepts like Word of God, or revelation, and one effect has been to align the Bible with a movement from God to man.

“It is man who developed the biblical tradition and man who decided when it might be suitably fixed and made canonical. If one wants to use the Word of God type of language, the proper term for the Bible would be Word of Israel, Word of some leading Christians.” *The Truth of God Incarnate*, pp. 108-109.
(2) **Jesus Christ was God incarnate.** If Matthew emphasized the truth that Jesus was the Messiah, the rightful heir to the throne of David, and Luke stressed the humanity of our Lord, John confronts us with His undiminished Deity.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:1-3,14,15).

When we speak of the doctrine of the incarnation and of our Lord as God incarnate, we refer to Jesus Christ as undiminished deity and perfect humanity united permanently in one person.

There has been much confusion concerning this doctrine because of a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching on the *kenosis* (or emptying) of Christ in the second chapter of Philippians. Some have attempted to make room for errors in the Bible (and even in the teaching of our Lord) by suggesting that our Lord, at His incarnation, emptied Himself of some of His deity. They would say that He laid aside some of His attributes, such as omniscience. 21 Thus, if our Lord did not know all things, He could have been mistaken in some of His teaching.

A look at the context of the passage informs us that the main point of the apostle is that we are to be truly humble—to consider others ahead of ourselves. In this we should imitate our Lord Who willingly set aside His visible glory, who voluntarily veiled His divine splendor, and who made no claim to the exercise and privileges of His divine prerogatives. He put this aside (not His deity but His rights as God) in order to die on a cross for our salvation. Incarnation itself was an act of humiliation. How can one even conceive of the humiliation of the cross?

The Gospels reveal not only the fact of the incarnation, but the purpose.

**First of all, the Eternal Son took on human flesh to reveal God to men.** “No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:18).

Our Lord could truthfully say, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father …” (John 14:9).

**Second, the Word became flesh to reign over His people.** “And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:33a; Matthew 2:2). Many have not taken this purpose of the incarnation seriously enough. They are content to spiritualize this reign and to see its fulfillment through the church. Careful attention to the Scriptures necessitates a literal reign of Messiah over the nation Israel.

**Third, He came to redeem.** As Mark records the words of our Lord, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The Implications of the Incarnation

There is far more application of the doctrine of the incarnation than any preacher will ever be able to expound, especially in one message. But let us focus our attention on several relevant truths.

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20 By this Green means that the liberal critic of the Bible refuses to hold that Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for eternal life. The liberal believes that ‘all roads lead to Rome.’

21 “In England, the *kenosis* theory was first broached by Bishop Gore in 1889, to explain why our Lord was ignorant of what the nineteenth century higher critics thought they knew about the errors of the Old Testament. Gore’s thesis was that in becoming man the Son had given up His divine knowledge of matters of fact, though retaining full divine infallibility on moral issues. In the realm of historical fact, however, He was limited to current Jewish ideas, which He accepted without question, not knowing that they were not all correct. Hence His treatment of the Old Testament as verbally inspired and wholly true, and His ascription of the Pentateuch to Moses and Psalm 110 to David—views which Gore thought untenable. Many have followed Gore at this point, seeking justification for rejecting Christ’s estimate of the Old Testament.” J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 52.
(1) **The incarnation is the measure of God’s ability to save.** The best answer to the critic of the virgin birth is the words of Gabriel to Mary as he foretold of her miraculous conception: “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

God was able to give elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth a child. God was able to impregnate Mary without the participation of a man. God was able to move the Roman Empire to take a census in Palestine so that prophecy could be fulfilled. God was able to save an infant from the treachery of a king.

At least some theologians have been honest enough to concede that their God is dead—and so He must be. To others we must say, in the words of J.B. Phillips, “Your God is too small.” If God is God indeed, then God is capable of bringing forth a child from a virgin; He is capable of rising from the dead, and He is able to save a rebel like you and me.

(2) **The incarnation is the measure of God’s willingness to save.** We can be sure that God, if He is God at all, is able to save, but is He willing to do so? The answer of the incarnation is a resounding yes. My friend, what greater love can God have than to give His Son as the payment for men’s sins?

If there is anything clear in the Gospel accounts of our Lord’s birth, it is that God has taken the initiative in seeking men for Himself. The incarnation is the measure of God’s love for man.

(3) **The incarnation is God’s standard for measuring our love for one another.** In Philippians chapter two, Christians are exhorted to have the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ was a love of others which compelled Him to lay aside the glories of heaven for the humiliation of birth in a stable and death on a cross. This is the standard which God has appointed as the measure of our love for one another.

(4) **The incarnation is the means God has ordained to save men.** It is hypothetically possible that God could have chosen any number of ways to redeem fallen man to Himself. But the message of the Gospels is that God has chosen to save men through the humiliation and sacrifice of His Son.

Now let me ask you very frankly, my friend, if you were God and you have provided a way of salvation through the incarnation and crucifixion of your only Son, how would you feel about someone who tried to earn salvation by some other way?

Religionists believe that all roads lead to heaven, but there is not one word of assurance that this is true from the Word of God. The Gospels inform us that God has made one way of salvation available through faith in the substitutionary death of His Son. Have you had the audacity to suppose that you could enter God’s heaven through any other means? May God grant you the faith to acknowledge your need of His Son as your Savior, your Substitute, your righteousness.

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me’” (John 14:6).
Lesson 3:  
John the Baptist

Introduction

Several years ago I had perhaps the most unusual introduction of my ministry. I was about to preach when a man whom I greatly respect stood to introduce me to the audience. During the week, there had been considerable press coverage of a famous preacher who was referred to as ‘the man with the silver tongue’ and so on. Well, my dear brother had had just about enough of all that, so in introducing me he took a moment to put things in perspective. “There is too much emphasis these days,” he began, “on the instrument through whom the Word of God is proclaimed. It’s not the man, but the message that counts. It doesn’t matter if the man’s shoes are shined, or if he has a new suit, it’s the message which should be paramount.” He then went on to say, “And now the man with today’s message is Bob Deffinbaugh.”

I knew my brother too well to misunderstand his meaning and loved him too much to take offense. But, when I got up to preach, I found it difficult to miss the humor in it all, so I said, “What our brother meant to say was, ‘Here’s Bob, he’s not much, but he’s all we’ve got.’”

As I have been preparing this week’s message, I’ve found my mind turning back to that introduction for several reasons. First of all, I think that might be the way I would have introduced John the Baptist had the occasion ever arisen. I mean, you have to admit John the Baptist was a unique individual. I can’t even conceive of him fitting into the contemporary Christian scheme of things. For example, can you feature John doing a thirty-second spot on the ‘I Found It’ campaign? Or can you envision an interview with John on the Johnny Carson show? I find it difficult to even feature John standing behind the pulpit on a Sunday morning. Yes, sir, I think I might preface an introduction of John with a disclaimer, too.

Second, although such an introduction contains an element of truth, it also suggests something which it does not seem to convey. There is a great deal of truth in the fact that our attention should not be so much on the speaker (his flashy sport coat, wild shoes, or trembly voice), but on the message which is spoken. Surely it is wrong to glorify and emulate the messenger. In this sense, we might say that while the Catholic church has only one pope, Protestantism has many.

But my real interest in such a statement is that it can be understood in such a way as to be very misleading, even erroneous. The man cannot be separated from the message. Messages are seldom more effective than the man who utters them. As I have studied the towering figure of John the Baptist, I have become convinced that the magnitude of his ministry came not only from the greatness of the message, but also from the godliness of the man. It is my sincere conviction and prayer that our study of this man and his message will be as discomforting and challenging to us as it was to those in his own day.

The Message

The most puzzling aspect of John’s ministry was that he had any audience at all. What was it that compelled residents of Jerusalem to leave the comfort of home to venture miles into the Judean desert to hear John? Some of the uninitiated may puzzle as to why people brave the traffic and the sweltering afternoon heat to watch the Dallas Cowboys. But these people poured out in multitudes, miles into the wilderness to listen to John preach. It would not be stretching the truth to say that John’s sermons were more scorching than the blistering Judean sun. And let us remember that John is never reported to have performed so much as one miracle. Even Herod himself was strangely attracted to his preaching.

Surely there were some who listened to John whose motives were far from noble. To some, it may have been a matter of curiosity. To others, peer pressure. To the religious leaders, it was likely pride and self-preservation. After all, John was a competitor who was cutting into their territory. Others who were fed up with Roman
occupation and domination would be hoping for a political revolutionary who would deliver Israel from foreign domination.1

Although some came for reasons less than noble, the vast majority came by virtue of the explosive force of John’s message. Pause with me for a few moments to consider the basic ingredients of John’s message, a message so simple that it could be concisely summarized by the Gospel writers in just one sentence, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2).

(1) A Prophetic Message. John’s call to the nation not only penetrated the silence of the wilderness, it shattered the silence of 400 years. The last written word of prophecy was that of the post-exilic prophet Malachi in the 5th century B.C. From that time until John’s public preaching, it was as though the heavens were made of brass. The nation anxiously awaited a word from God, and they were not about to be choosy about the instrument. John was the last of the great Old Testament prophets.

(2) A Messianic Message. When we say that Israel anxiously awaited a word from God, it was specifically a Messianic word that they desired. All through the Old Testament, God had promised an Eternal King and a literal kingdom. Messianic hopes, though diverse, were running high. When John announced that the ‘kingdom of God was at hand,’ many different expectations filled the minds of his audience, but all understood this to be a reference to the Messianic Kingdom.2

(3) A Preparatory Message. When Zacharias was told of John’s birth by Gabriel, his ministry was defined as one of preparation:

“And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

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1 The ancient historian, Josephus, tells us that Herod imprisoned John the Baptist because he feared John’s political power with the masses.

“Now some of the Jews thought that it was God who had destroyed Herod’s army, and that it was a very just punishment to avenge John, surnamed the Baptist. John had been put to death by Herod, although he was a good man, who exhorted the Jews to practise virtue, to be just one to another and pious towards God and to come together by baptism. Baptism, he taught, was acceptable to God provided that they underwent it not to procure remission of certain sins but for the purification of the body, if the soul had already been purified by righteousness. When the others gathered round John, greatly stirred as they listened to his words, Herod was afraid that his great persuasive power over men might lead to a rising, for they seemed ready to follow his counsel in everything. Accordingly he thought the best course was to arrest him and put him to death before he caused a riot, rather than wait until a revolt broke out and then have to repent of permitting such trouble to arise. Because of this suspicion on Herod’s part, John was sent in chains to the fortress of Machaerus ... and there put to death. The Jews therefore thought that the destruction of Herod’s army was the punishment deliberately sent upon him by God to avenge John.”


2 “There is no such thing as the Jewish Messianic hope. Many quite independent ideas are usually grouped under this term. Some looked for a new and greater prophet, some for a priestly leader, some for a supernatural figure, a sort of angelic judge. But the dominant hope was for a king like David, and that meant, by the time of Jesus, a warrior capable of defying the power of Rome and restoring the political glory of Israel. The theologians may have had other ideas, but if you had spoken to the man in the street about the Messiah, he would certainly have understood you to mean the ‘son of David,’ the warrior king of the coming empire of Israel.” R. T. France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire, Portrait of Christ, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 22.
John continually stressed that he was not the Messiah, but that he was the forerunner of Messiah prophesied by both Isaiah and Malachi. His task was to prepare the people spiritually for Messiah’s appearance. In the Old Testament, God’s choice of Israel’s King was designated by a prophet. Samuel designated and anointed both Saul and David. So it was fitting for John, the last of the Old Testament prophets, to designate Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. The word Messiah itself means ‘anointed one.’ Jesus was the Christ, God’s anointed one, whom John pointed out by public proclamation, and whom God publicly proclaimed at His baptism.

(4) A Negative Message. John’s preaching was a far cry from that to which churches are accustomed today. There were no syrupy sweet pious platitudes or discourses on positive thinking. John’s message was one of warning. The day of the Lord was not just a time of rejoicing and blessing. It was a day of vengeance when God would separate His true believers from the phony and the false professors of religion.

(5) A Partial Message. Some may have observed that little in John’s preaching was positive. That is partially true, but we need to put this in proper perspective. In the days of the physical presence of our Lord among men, people were saved in slow motion. Let me explain what I mean by this. Today, when we share the gospel of Jesus Christ, we should begin with the fact that men are sinners, justly under the condemnation of God, headed for eternal torment. We should then immediately move from man’s problem to God’s remedy. We should inform men that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to bear our punishment and to provide us with His righteousness in place of our wretchedness. All one need do is acknowledge his need and trust in Christ’s work on his behalf for eternal salvation.

Now this did not happen quite so quickly in the days of our Lord’s earthly visitation. John came with a message of sin and judgment. He could not tell men that Jesus Christ died for their sins, for that was yet future. He simply preached that God’s solution for sinners was going to appear, and after Jesus’ baptism, had appeared. Upon our Lord’s death on the cross, men who had acknowledged their need of forgiveness of sins then needed to place their faith in what Christ had done. That is why the early ‘conversions’ in the book of Acts were those of God-fearers, those who already had faith that God would provide a solution for their sins, and indeed, now had done it in Christ (cf. Acts 19:1-7).

The full disclosure of the message of salvation in the time of John the Baptist and of our Lord took several years. This should help us understand why John’s message was so negative. It is because it was preliminary and preparatory. The good news of the gospel begins with the bad news of man’s sin and of God’s righteous anger because of it.

“He Himself will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear out His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16c-17).

From time to time, I hear Christians speaking of the ‘baptism of fire’ as something which we should seek. But the baptism of fire of which John speaks is the baptism of judgment, and that is something from which we should flee. That which prevented God’s kingdom from being established on earth was the problem of sin. Israel must be restored to an unfallen condition. And the necessary action required for this is repentance.

(6) A Call to Repentance. The word repent usually brings several pictures to mind. First of all, is the image of the hairy, disheveled creature holding a sign, ‘repent, the end is near.’ Then, too, we think of sorrow and anguish, of remorse for wrongs done. The biblical term employed (metanoeō) combines several nuances. The root meaning of the term conveys a change of mind. By its usage the idea of sorrow or remorse is also suggested. Finally, this repentance produces a change in behavior. Biblical repentance is a genuine sorrow which is the product of a changed mind, looking at our sin as God sees it, and which results in a change in our actions.4 5

3 “In the orient, a herald went before the King, calling the people together to repair the roads which were usually very poor, that the royal equipage might pass safely.” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 61.

4 “In the New Testament the terms ‘repent’ (metanoeō) and ‘repentance’ (metanoia) refer basically to a change of mind. It is all-important to note this signification. For repentance consists in a radical transformation of thought, attitude, outlook, and direction. In accordance with the pervasive Old Testament emphasis and with what
John was very pointed about the change of mind which the Gospel required. Israelites were depending upon their ancestral origins and externalism as the basis for entering into the blessed Kingdom.  

“… do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8).

The all-important question for those who wished to enter the kingdom was not, ‘Who is your father,’ but ‘In whom is your faith.’ Those who listened to John were reminded of their sinfulness and the need for spiritual cleansing to enter into the kingdom.

The call to repentance was not unexpected, for “it was currently taught and believed among the Jews, that ‘if Israel repented but one day, the Son of David would immediately come’”.

The outward sign of repentance was the rite of baptism. Baptism was not without its Old Testament antecedents, rites and washings of purification, but the closer analogy is to be found in proselyte baptism.

appears also in the New Testament, repentance is a turning from sin unto God and His service. The co-ordination of turning (epistrephó) with repentance places this fact in relief (cf. Acts iii. 19, xxvi. 20) as well as the frequency with which turning from sin unto God occurs as the virtual synonym of repentance (cf. Lk. i. 16; Acts ix. 35, xi. 21, xiv. 15, xv. 19, xxvi. 18; 1 Thes. i. 9; 1 Pet. ii. 25). Repentance is a revolution in that which is most determinative in human personality and is the reflex in consciousness of the radical change wrought by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. It is a mistake, however, to underrate the place of grief and hatred for sin and turning from it unto God. It is true that there can be a morbid and morose sorrow which has no affinity with repentance. It is the sorrow of the world which works death (2 Cor. vii. 10), exemplified in Judas (Mt. xxvii. 3-5) and Esau (Heb. xii. 17). But there is a godly sorrow that works repentance unto salvation (2 Cor. vii. 9,10) and it is an indispensable ingredient in evangelical repentance.” “Repentance,” New Bible Dictionary, ed. by J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p.1084.

5 “… such a virtuous alteration of the mind and purpose as begats a like virtuous change in the life and practice,’ Kettlewell), which we call repentance…” Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Marshallton, Delaware: The National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.), p. 243.

6 “For, no principle was more fully established in the popular conviction, than that all Israel had part in the world to come (Sanh x.1), and this, specifically, because of their connection with Abraham. This appears not only from the New Testament, from Philo, and Josephus, but from many Rabbinic passages. ‘The merits of the Fathers,’ is one of the commonest phrases in the mouth of the Rabbis. Abraham was represented as sitting at the gate of Gehenna, to deliver any Israelite who otherwise might have been consigned to its terrors. In fact, by their descent from Abraham, all the children of Israel were nobles, infinitely higher than any proselytes. ‘What,’ exclaims the Talmud, ‘shall the born Israelite stand upon the earth, and the proselyte be in heaven?’ In fact, the ships on the sea were preserved through the merit of Abraham; the rain descended on account of it. For his sake alone had Moses been allowed to ascend into heaven, and to receive the Law; for his sake the sin of the golden calf had been forgiven; his righteousness had had on many occasions been the support of Israel’s cause; Daniel had been heard for the sake of Abraham; nay, his merit availed even for the wicked. In its extravagance the Midrash thus apostrophises Abraham: ‘If thy children were even (morally) dead bodies, without blood vessels or bones, thy merit would avail for them!’” Alford Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, pp. 271-272.


8 “John immersed the entire man in the water in the Jordan river. This mode of baptism symbolized a complete moral cleansing. It was a public confession of sin and of the need of a Saviour-Messiah. The one receiving this rite had to first give evidence of genuine repentance, a sorrow for sin and a determination to turn away from it. It was a declaration also of allegiance to the coming Messiah, when He should appear. John’s new rite was not a means to secure the remission of sins. It was a baptism on the basis of repentance and a confession of sin which accompanied the rite, being related thus to the remission of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels, p. 63.
“A Gentile who was converted to Judaism had to be circumcised (if he was a male) and to offer a special sacrifice in the Temple (while it stood), and also to undergo a ceremonial bath.”

There were differences between proselyte baptism and John’s baptism. While proselyte baptism was self-administered, John baptized those who came to him. But baptism surely was a humbling act for the Jew. In effect, it implied that just as a pagan must undergo baptism to enter into Judaism, so the sinful Jew must join the ranks of the pagan and enter into relationship with God in the same way as the Gentile.

Baptism was not the means of attaining forgiveness of sins and readiness for the coming kingdom, but the manifestation of it.

If the sign of repentance was baptism, the fruit of true repentance was to be a radical change of life for individual Israelites.

“Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance…” (Luke 3:8a).

Selfishness should be replaced with sharing. The one who has two tunics should share with him who has none. The one who has food should share with the one without (Luke 3:11). Rake-offs should be replaced by righteous dealings. Taxation was a sore point for Jews. Tax gatherers were despised for good reason. It was common practice to increase the tax to include a healthy margin of profit for the collector. Such rip-offs were inconsistent with the kind of righteousness required in the kingdom.

Extortion must be replaced with contentment. When John tells the soldiers to ‘be content with their wages’ (Luke 3:14), I do not think the force of his teaching bears upon the matter of wage disputes and labor unions. The soldier who was unhappy with what he made had no recourse with his employer. But what he could do was to use his police powers to supplement his salary. They could, for example, press false charges and benefit from the fines thereby collected. Now we should not look so pious, for the same thing goes on today. We tell ourselves we are worth much more than we are paid so we extend our lunch hour and coffee breaks. We ‘borrow’ little things like paper and pencils, tools and materials, all under the guise of bringing our salary to our real worth. John says to the soldiers of his day, don’t misuse your job in order to increase your salary. Be content to live on what you are paid without practicing extortion.

The Man

(1) His Credentials. As I have suggested previously, the measure of the impact of the ministry of John the Baptist cannot be determined apart from a consideration of the man. No greater compliment could be paid to John than the assessment of our Lord: “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” (Matthew 11:11a).

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10 “In so far as proselyte baptism provides an analogy to John’s baptism John was saying in effect to true-born Jews, proudly conscious of their descent from Abraham: “Your impeccable pedigree is irrelevant in God’s sight; if you wish to be enrolled in the new Israel of the age that is about to dawn, you must take the outside place, acknowledging that you are not better in his eyes than Gentiles, and you must enter the end-time community of his people by baptism, as they have to do.”” Ibid.
11 “It has been calculated that the total taxation, Jewish and Roman together, may have exceeded 40% of an ordinary man’s income. An elaborate taxation system demands an elaborate civil service, and it was here that the grievances were multiplied. The lucrative privilege of tax-collection went to the highest bidder, who then farmed the work out to smaller fry, and they in turn to others. The top men would be Romans; the lower rank, who actually made contact with the people, were Jews. And each had to make his position profitable to himself. Provided the correct tax was produced, the officials would not worry about how it was collected. So the officially required tax was swollen by the necessary rake-off at each level of civil service, and the name ‘tax-collector’ became in common parlance a synonym for an unscrupulous quisling and extortioner.” R.T. France, *I Came to Set the Earth on Fire, Portrait of Christ*, p. 20.
The Gospel writers give us an indication of the extent of his ministry: “And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins” (Mark 1:5).

His ministry touched multitudes in Judea. To whatever degree numbers indicate success, John was a successful man.

When evaluated by the standard of longevity, John was also a successful preacher. Most of his ‘converts’ were rather quickly blended into the mainstream of Jesus’ teaching and ministry, even some of John’s disciples (cf. John 1:35ff). Perhaps the most interesting evidence of John’s effectiveness is Luke’s reference in Acts 19 to the small group of men that Paul encountered in Ephesus who were ‘believers’ only to the extent of believing in what John had taught. This was nearly 25 years after the abrupt conclusion of John’s preaching ministry.

(2) His Clothing. One of the most unique features of John was his apparel. A camel’s hair garment and leather belt were not the attire of the fashionable young men of Jerusalem. Neither were locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4) served in the finest restaurants. Today we would be likely to identify this kind of clothing and food with the attire of a rebel, as an indication of a kind of counter-culture. I don’t believe this was entirely the case. There were, I believe, several reasons for John’s unusual appearance.

First, his appearance was intended to result in an association. Zacharias had been told that his son John would go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Elijah was described as “… a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins” (2 Kings 1:8). John’s attire was designed to associate him with Elijah and his ministry.

Second, his appearance was intended to signify separation. His dress was not that of the man on the street. John stuck out like a sore thumb. Again, this separation was prophesied at his birth: “For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit …” (Luke 1:15).

John was to be a Nazarite (cf. Numbers 6:2ff; Judges 13:4-5), and remain separate, set apart from normal defilements for divine service. John was pointedly aloof from the religious system of his day, for it did not reflect the old time religion of the past at its best. Jesus did not come to patch up the existing mess in Judaism, but to create something new. John’s dress symbolized his separation from all that constituted the worn out Judaism of his day.

Third, his raiment revealed application. John had preached that true repentance should result in a compassion for the needs of others. It would have been glaringly inconsistent had John arrived at his speaking in an airconditioned Cadillac and a silk suit. The food and clothing of John were the fare of the poor who lived the simple life of the desert dweller.

(3) His Character. Thomas Carlyle once said, “To teach religion, the first thing needful and the last, is to find a man who has religion.”

As we assess the character of this man John through the Gospel accounts, we can readily see that he is a man who has religion, or better, a man who’s religion has him.

John was a man of strong convictions and great courage. He did not coddle his audiences; he condemned them. When Herod married Herodias, the wife of his brother, John called it sin. Preachers today are hardly willing to call homosexuality ‘sickness’ and immorality ‘wickedness,’ let alone call it sin. John was a man who spoke boldly to his times. Even when it was Herod himself, John did not shrink from his calling.

Our Lord said we are to serve as salt in our society, but most of us function more like sand—we make good ballast, rather than to rock the boat. John was a man who believed God was listening to what he said.

John was a man of deep humility. The nature of John’s task kept him in the spotlight. Not only did he have the opportunity to enhance his position and prestige, but the crowds were inviting him to do so. There is no greater insight into the character of John than the discourse between the religious leaders of Jerusalem and John as

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recorded in John 1:19-28. They wanted him to speak of himself, but he could only speak of Messiah. John openly encouraged his disciples (one of whom was Andrew) to leave him and follow Jesus (John 1:35ff). When others tried to stir up jealousy due to the popularity of Jesus, John indicated that he was privileged to draw the attention to Christ and not himself. In his words, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

John was a man with feet of clay. Lest we bestow too much praise upon John, let me conclude by reminding you that John was a man with feet of clay. John witnessed the divine testimony of God that Jesus was his Messiah (John 1:29-34) and was fully convinced. And yet in the last dark hours of his life in Herod’s prison, dark clouds of doubt began to form. Luke tells us that he sent a deputation to Jesus for a word of assurance and our Lord sought to assure him (Luke 7:18ff). Even so great a man as John had feet of clay.

**Application**

John’s ministry has much to say to us about evangelism. Today, evangelistic methodology seems to be best summarized by the words of the song, ‘Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative.’ We avoid the ugly matter of sin and the wrath of God. The fires of hell and the future judgment of eternal damnation are considered passé. John, as the Lord and His apostles did, emphasized the day of judgment. The way we present the gospel, there is no more urgency about conversion than buying a set of encyclopedias or joining a social club.

We do not, and we must not preach only the message of John. We should not speak only of sin and damnation. The problem of today’s evangelism is that it speaks too little of it—if at all! The Gospel begins with the bad news of sin and judgment. Let’s be reminded by John’s preaching that the Gospel of God begins with the bad news of man’s sin and impending damnation and ends with the good news of Jesus’ work on the cross.

Second, there is an amazing contrast between John’s priorities and ours today. Note John’s attitude toward the three most frequent priorities of man (and young people) today.

1. **Popularity.** Our children want more than anything to be sought out as friends by others. They (as we) suppose that this happens when they do the ‘in’ things, use the right terminology, and are ‘cool.’ How different was John. He dared to be different, and the result was that he was sought out by all Judea, even Herod, miles in the Judean desert.

2. **Prosperity.** Money is the god of many men today. John had little if any of that. He ate from the produce of the wilderness, locusts and wild honey. He preached that money is to be shared, not selfishly hoarded. John was never rich in this world’s eyes, but he received of our Lord the greatest compliment given any man.

3. **Position.** The third goal for which men will sell their souls is position—power. They will, in their desire to get to the top, climb rough-shod over anyone who gets in their way. How different was John. “He must increase, but I must decrease.” He willingly took second place, willingly saw the limelight shift to the Savior, willingly encouraged his disciples to follow Jesus. And yet in God’s eyes, and even in that of men, John was a powerful figure in Israel’s history. When Luke introduced the preaching ministry of John, he mentioned the names of five of the most powerful political leaders known to John’s day, and the two most powerful religious leaders (Luke 3:1,2). Luke scarcely gives these men the time of day other than as points of reference by which to introduce John.

Another emphasis I wish to call your attention to is the interrelationship between the man and the message. John had a divine revelation from God; he had a message. But more than that, the message had him. You and I have the Word of God—we are men with a message. But that message will never have great impact in our times until it has taken hold of us. I know of no other city in America where Bible doctrine and teaching are so available than in Dallas, Texas. But my prayer is that we will be marked out in our communities as those men and women whose lives manifest that God is in us. May God grant this to be true in our lives.

Not only should we learn from John, let us also learn from Herod. Here was a man strangely attracted by John’s preaching, yet also repelled by it. Herod’s problem, like ours, is that his morality had control of his theology. Our rejection of the Gospel is seldom based, in the final analysis, upon theology, or upon intellectual hang-ups, but on morality. Believing the Gospel would mean cleaning up our act. Herod attempted to straddle the fence. He was somehow trapped between Herodias and John. Just as his morality finally was his downfall, so will it...
be with you. My friend, if you understand your sin and understand that Jesus Christ has died for your sins, don’t delay. Surrender to Him Who can save.
Lesson 4:
The Baptism and Temptation of Messiah

Introduction

Martin Luther once said, “There are three things that make a Christian—prayer, meditation, and temptation.” Luther might very well have great difficulty in getting anyone to agree with him. If, indeed, temptation is a sort of 'necessary evil,' one would be hard-pressed to find a non-Christian who would call it an evil, or a Christian who would think it necessary.

A careful look at the Scriptures will prove Luther right. Temptation plays a vital role in the growth and maturing of the Christian. And what is more, temptation played a significant role in the preparation of our Lord Jesus Christ for His public presentation as Israel’s Messiah.

The temptation of Christ is the sequel to the account of His baptism. His baptism was so crucial that it is recorded by all four Gospel writers. In the will of God, we shall study the significance of our Lord’s baptism and temptation with a view to their contribution to our Lord’s preparation for His public ministry which followed on the heels of these events. We will also dwell on the lessons to be learned by all Christians in the matter of dealing with temptation in such a way as to avoid sin and achieve God’s purposes for our lives.

The Baptism of Our Lord

Many pages have been written concerning the meaning of our Lord’s baptism, especially the statement of our Lord by Matthew, “… Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness …” (Matt. 3:15). Too often the problem has been intensified by the fact that interpretation has been attempted before sufficient observation has taken place. Let us fix our minds on the Gospel account so as to get facts clearly in mind.

1 The baptism of Jesus was more private than public. Luke seems to state that Jesus came to be baptized after the multitudes had already received baptism at His hand: “Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized, …” (Luke 3:21).

While the accounts of Matthew and Luke never mention a public audience or any response to the supernatural phenomenon of the Lord’s baptism, they do give the impression that the two who were most affected and involved were Jesus and John (note the change from the second person in Luke to the third person in Matthew). Finally, although the disciples of our Lord were those who were with our Lord from the time of John’s baptism (cf. Acts 1:21,22), they did not mention this spectacular event. But note that almost the same divine testimony occurs

1 Quoted by Thomas Watson, A Divine Cordial (no publication data given, first published 1663), p. 28.

2 As a suggestion for further study, let me outline Thomas Watson’s comments as to how the evil of temptation is overruled for good to the godly: (1) Temptation sends the soul to prayer. (2) Temptation to sin, is a means to keep from the perpetration of sin. (3) Temptation ... abates the swelling of pride. (4) Temptation ... is a touch-stone to try what is in the heart. (5) Temptation ... makes those who are tempted fit to comfort others in the same distress. (6) Temptations ... stir up paternal compassion in God to them who are tempted. (7) Temptations ... make the saints long for heaven. (8) Temptations ... engage the strength of Christ. Thomas, A Divine Cordial, pp. 24-27.

3 The baptism of Christ is included in all four Gospels, while the temptation of our Lord is omitted by John. Since John seeks to establish the deity of Christ (and God cannot be tempted, James 1:13), it is unnecessary to his argument. Luke seeks to stress the humanity of our Lord, and thus it is not difficult to comprehend his reasons for placing the genealogy of our Lord (which traces His lineage back to Adam) between his account of our Lord’s baptism and temptation.

4 In this change from second person to third person, the substance is the same, but in Matthew (in accord with John’s account in John 1), the stress is on the thrust of this testimony toward identifying Messiah for John, while Luke emphasizes God’s assurance and confirmation for the benefit of our Lord.
at the transfiguration of our Lord (cf. Luke 9:35) and Peter clearly refers to this event as a divine testimony to the
kingly majesty belonging to Jesus the Messiah (2 Peter 1:17-18). Now why was no mention made of the experience
of our Lord at His baptism, unless of course, no one witnessed it except John and Jesus? The additional words,
“Hear ye Him” seem to add weight to this line of argument.

(2) The baptism of Jesus by John was unlike every other baptism he had performed. The baptism
which John proclaimed was one signifying repentance. Our sinless Lord had no sin for which to repent. John rec-
ognized this and sought to dissuade our Lord from submitting to baptism. If any needed a baptism of repentance, it
was John at the hands of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 3:14). The baptizing of Jesus by John in some way fulfilled all
righteousness (Matt. 3:15).

(3) John tells us that the reason he baptized was to identify the true Messiah of which he spoke.
John’s questioners interrogated him as to who he was. If he was not Messiah, then why was he baptizing (John
1:25)? John’s first response to this question was that the baptism of Messiah was far superior to his. Then in verse
31 we find the purpose of John’s baptism so far as Messiah is concerned: “And I did not recognize Him, but in
order that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water” (John 1:31).

By means of the divine testimony, John was able to know Israel’s Messiah for certain. From that day on,
John presented Jesus as the Messiah (cf. John 1:29-30,34).

The interpretation of the significance of our Lord’s baptism becomes even more evident when we consider
the words of divine testimony: “This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

It is my understanding that by these words and the bestowing of the Holy Spirit, the Father identified Je-
sus both as Israel’s Messiah King and as the Servant of the Lord. In 2 Samuel  7:14 God assured David of an ever-
lasting Kingdom with these words: “I will be a Father to him and he will be a son to Me; …” (2 Sam. 7:14).

The point here is not that the one referred to (David’s son, Solomon) will be Messiah, for in the next
statement it is assumed that son will sin, but that Yahweh’s installation of a King is spoken of in terms of a Father
and Son relationship (cf. also Psalm 89:26,27). God appointed the kings over His people. The one installed was
called God’s Son. In the Second Psalm God’s anointed, the Messiah, speaks: “I will surely tell of the decree of the
Lord: He said to Me, ‘Thou art My Son, Today have I begotten Thee” (Psalm 2:7).

Paul, in Acts 13:33 quotes this very passage, but to prove the necessity and historicity of the resurrection
of Christ. I understand these passages in the Gospels and Acts to harmonize in this way. Long before David was
publicly presented as Israel’s King, he was privately designated to Samuel by God (1 Sam. 16) and anointed by
him. It was also at this time of secret identification to Samuel that David was empowered by the Holy Spirit (1
Sam. 16:13). It was not until years later, after David had fled from Saul many times, that God removed Saul and
inaugurated David as King.

In similar fashion at the baptism of Jesus, God signified (privately, I believe) to John that Jesus was the
promised Messiah. At that time, He received the anointing of the Holy Spirit for the task ahead. It was at the trans-
figuration of our Lord that His disciples received divine confirmation that He was God’s Messiah. In Acts, Paul
used the resurrection of Christ as an evidence that God had accepted His sacrificial work on the cross and had ex-
alted Him to His heavenly throne where He waits the time of His final and public coronation when every knee will
bow and every tongue will confess Him as Lord (Phil. 2:9-11) because God has put all things under His feet (cf.

Not only does the testimony of the Father at the baptism of Jesus identify Jesus as King, Who will inherit
the throne of His father David (Luke 1:32), but it also identifies Jesus as the Servant of the Lord. Old Testament
saints could not put together the two themes of Old Testament prophecy—one concerning a mighty king, the other
of a humble servant Who would suffer for the sins of His people (cf. Isaiah 52:13-53:12). The testimony of the Fa-
ther identified Jesus as the fulfillment of both streams of prophecy. Listen to the words of Isaiah: “Behold, My Ser-
vant whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; …” (Isa. 42:1).

Is the similarity of this statement with that of the testimony of the Father not too obvious to overlook? This
one brief statement of the Father identified Jesus as both the Messiah-King and the suffering servant Who would
die for the sins of His people. Christ is the deliverer Who came to die.
Many interpretations of the baptism of our Lord have been suggested, some of which we should immediately reject, while others have some merit. But in the final analysis we can conclude two things for certain.

- The baptism of our Lord was a testimony to John, identifying Jesus as Messiah.
- The baptism of our Lord was a confirmation to the Son of His high calling.

Even if only these two suggestions are true, surely we could agree that this event fulfilled all righteousness. Here all the righteous program of God was coming to culmination. Things, we might say, were coming to a head.

The Temptation of Our Lord

The two events, the baptism and temptation of our Lord, cannot be separated. They are linked together both chronologically and logically. Chronologically, the temptation of our Lord immediately follows His baptism. Matthew connects the two events by the word, ‘then,’ Mark and Luke ‘and.’ Logically, the two events are inseparable. At the baptism our Lord’s calling and testing is told. In the wilderness, our Lord’s fitness for such a mission is tested. In the temptation, Satan never assails the identification of Christ as Israel’s Messiah. He simply attempts to divert Him from His task. In the wilderness experience we have recorded a trinity of tests which reveal the character and cunning of Satan and the perfections of Messiah which qualify Him to die for the sins of His people.

The First Temptation

(1) The proposition. Satan’s first line of attack concerns the hunger which our Lord experienced due to His 40-day fast:

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

(2) The premise. Satan’s suggestion was based on several erroneous premises or presuppositions. Let’s read between the lines to get them in mind. First, a God Who is good would not deprive one of His creatures. Doing without food cannot be the will of God. Such was the insinuation in the temptation of the first Adam in the garden. “Surely a good God would not withhold such a good thing as this fruit,” Satan suggested. Second, Satan...

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5 "From earliest ages it has been a question why Jesus went to be baptized. The heretical Gospels put into the mouth of the Virgin-Mother an invitation to go to that baptism, to which Jesus is supposed to have replied by pointing to His own sinlessness, except it might be on the score of ignorance, in regard to a limitation of knowledge. Objections lie to most of the explanations offered by modern writers. They include a bold denial of the fact of Jesus’ Baptism; the profane suggestion of collusion between John and Jesus; or such suppositions, as that of His personal sinfulness, of His coming as the Representative of a guilty race, or as the bearer of the sins of others, or of acting in solidarity with His people—or else to separate Himself from the sins of Israel; of His surrendering Himself thereby unto death for man; of His purpose to do honour to the baptism of John; or thus to elicit a token of His Messiahship; or to bind Himself to the observance of the Law; or in this manner to commence His Messianic Work; or to consecrate Himself solemnly to it; or, lastly, to receive the spiritual qualification for it.” Alford Edersheim The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, p. 279.

6 “By his statement to John about fulfilling all righteousness, Jesus seems to mean that for the purpose of accomplishing his mediatorial work it is necessary for him to be baptized. This must be understood as a deliberate identification of himself with the nation, and so is in line with his birth, circumcision, presentation, and assumption of the yoke of the law. Since John’s baptism was bound up with the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 1:4), and no personal sin is involved in Jesus’ case, the conclusion is fairly obvious that the baptism was the first public step taken in the direction of bearing the sins of the people. It may be significant for the understanding of Matthew 3:15 to recall that the servant who was destined to bear the iniquities of the people is called righteous” (Isa. 53:11). Everett F. Harrison, A Short Life of Christ, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 74.

7 In the original text, the expression ‘If you are the Son of God’ is a first class condition and casts no doubt on the fact of Christ’s sonship. It could accurately be rendered, ‘Since You are the Son of God.’
supposes that men serve God and submit to His will because God bribes them to do so with material blessings. Remember Satan’s statement to God concerning Job: “Then Satan answered the Lord, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’” (Job 1:9). Satan simply could not conceive of the Lord Jesus submitting to the will of the Father when it meant personal discomfort.

(3) The potential outcome. Had our Lord followed Satan’s solicitous advice several situations would have been inevitable. First of all, if personal pleasure comes before God’s will our Lord would never have gone to the cross of Calvary. If submission and obedience did not involve personal sacrifice, the atonement would never have been accomplished. Then, too, if physical needs have priority over spiritual necessities, then our Lord would never have preached the gospel. All His life would have been spent feeding the hungry and healing the sick. The only result of our Lord’s coming would have been some kind of ‘great society’ with no salvation wrought for men. Also, our Lord could never have spoken on the subject of discipleship and self-denial (as He so often did cf. Matthew 10:31-39; Luke 9:23, 57-62) unless He Himself had experienced it.

(4) The principles. Our Lord’s response indicates several vital principles of Christian service, as relevant for us today as they were 2,000 years ago. First of all the physical hunger which our Lord experienced was the will of God for His life. The account of the temptation begins: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1, cf. also Luke 4:1).

Our Lord was Spirit-led to fast and hunger in the wilderness. Second, obedience to the will of God takes precedence to one’s physical appetites. That is the implication of the statement, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’ (Matt. 4:4). Physical appetites are good because they are God-given. Bread is important to physical life, but there is no real life apart from obedience to the revealed will of God. Third, physical deprivation in the will of God is not bad, but good, for it tests our faith and strengthens it. This is the force of the context of our Lord’s quotation in Deuteronomy chapter 8. Note the words which immediately precede those quoted by our Lord to Satan:

“And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:2,3).

Israel hungered in the wilderness by the will of God. Submission cannot be tested in abundance so much as in adversity. We do not test the obedience of our children by telling them to go to the ice cream store, but by telling them to go to the doctor for a shot. Israel’s faith was strengthened as they learned to trust God for their every need.

Likewise, our Lord’s hunger was a test of His submission to the Father’s will. Just as God provided sustenance for the Israelites in the wilderness, so He would do for His Son, in His own time. The Son would not act independently of the Father to provide food for Himself. After the test was completed, God did supernaturally provide for this need (Matt. 4:11).

Finally, the measure of a man is not to be found in the assertion of his rights, but in his submission to God. One of the things which has always hindered Christianity is the false notion that devotion to God is a womanly trait, and that real ‘he men’ don’t go for the sissy stuff of submission to God. That is one of Satan’s lies. The measure of a man is his submission to God. Satan suggested that our Lord look out for Himself and act independently of the Father. To do that would have depreciated His manhood.

(5) Practical application. The error of communism and its underlying principles of materialism come immediately to mind. Communism says that man does live by bread alone. It is materialism and economics that makes the world go ‘round. Material needs are important, our Lord would say, but they are not primary. Then there are those (even Christians no less!) whom I have heard say, “God does not give us any desire which he does

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not satisfy.” Physical appetites are God-given, but life’s highest calling is not always to fulfill them. A man may have the desire for the companionship and intimacies of marriage, but he may choose to set these aside for higher spiritual priorities.

The Second Temptation

(1) The Proposition. Having failed in the first recorded effort, Satan moved to an alternate approach:

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

This was a very subtle challenge for Jerusalem was the sacred city, and the temple was the center of Israel’s religious life. Furthermore, the Old Testament prophecies anticipated Messiah’s public presentation at the temple (Mal. 3:1). Besides this, there was a rabbinic tradition that Messiah would reveal Himself from the roof of the temple. As a rule, the Jews expected Messiah to be introduced in some kind of blaze of glory, and a spectacular leap and miraculous deliverance would precisely fill the bill.

(2) The Premise. Satan’s presupposition in this challenge was that God’s faithfulness is best demonstrated by the spectacular. In addition, there is the implicit assumption that one’s trustworthiness should be put to the test. If God was the Father of our Lord Jesus, let Him prove it, and in such an unusual way that no one could miss it.

(3) The Potential Outcome. The most distressing possibility had our Lord failed this test is that the Jews would have immediately hailed Him as Messiah. What would have been tragic about such an occurrence is that the Kingdom would have been established on the wrong basis, not right, but might. The moral and spiritual foundations of the Kingdom would have been completely over-shadowed by the spectacular and material elements.

(4) The Principles. There are two principles brought to light by the response of our Lord to Satan’s scheme. First, there was the principle of hermeneutics, or biblical interpretation. Satan said, “it is written.” Our Lord responded, “On the other hand (literally, ‘also’), it is written …” (Matt. 4:7). Satan had used one passage, but he had ripped it out of context. Worse yet, he interpreted and applied it inconsistently with other Scriptures.

Second, our Lord would remind Satan and every Christian that testing is not trusting. The 91st Psalm which Satan quoted from speaks of the quiet confidence which the child of God possesses. But divine protection

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10 “From here James, the Lord’s brother, was thrown down thirty-eight years later and killed. This wing was the watch-post, where the white-robed priests customarily called the people to the early worship and the priests to the morning sacrifice, as the massive Temple gates swung open ere sunrise.” J.W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 77.

11 “It should be noted that the rabbis identified the person addressed by God in Psalm xci with the Messiah. The Midrash, known as Pesiqta Rabbati (162a), records a traditional belief that Messiah would manifest himself standing on the roof of the temple. The part of the temple indicated in the temptation narrative may have been the part overlooking the “Royal Colonnade”—which Josephus (Antiquities, xv. 11,5) describes as looking down a precipitous descent into the Kidron valley, the height being so great as to make the spectator dizzy.” Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 162.

12 G. Campbell Morgan rightly comments, “No one statement wrested from its context is a sufficient warrant for actions that plainly controvert other commands. … How excellent a thing it would be if the whole Church of Christ had learned that no law of life may be based upon an isolated text. … Every false teacher who has divided the Church, has had, ‘it is written’ on which to hang his doctrine.” G. Campbell Morgan, The Crises of the Christ (Old Tappan, New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1936), pp. 181-82.
does not encourage presumption. Our Lord’s reply again from the book of Deuteronomy is that, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:16).

The context of this quotation is the incident at Massah, where the Israelites demanded that God provide water. Submission and demanding are at opposite ends of the spectrum. God was challenged to vindicate Himself by acting in a specified way. This was putting God to the test. We might say it was attempting to force God’s hand. Real faith and trust delights in God’s manifestation of Himself in the mundane. It is not faith, but failure when we demand God prove Himself in the spectacular. Over and over in the life of our Lord the Jews demanded a sign (e.g. John 6:30), but our Lord continually refused such requests.

(5) Practical Application. It is sad to see Christians putting God to the test today by insisting on the spectacular. “I expect a miracle,” the song lyrics demand, “and nothing else will do.” Those who are terminally ill are instructed to ‘take a stand of faith’ that God has healed them. Doctors, nurses and family are to be informed that a miracle is happening. In this we are wrongly assuming not only that suffering is improper for the saint, but it demands that God jump through our hoops, that God act just as we have purposed. The Bible knows of none of this.

There are those who are regarded as faith healers who call upon God to heal, without leaving Him the option of continued illness or death, and who insist that Jesus receive all the glory. But in His earthly life Jesus refused to heal men for His own glory. His miracles were both selective, limited, and always purposeful.

Finally, there is the use of the spectacular to win a hearing and acceptance for the Gospel. Our Lord refused to grandstand in order to be accepted. He chose to be accepted because of His message, not His bizarre methods. There is far too much grandstanding of the Gospel in our times. Everything from pony rides to parachutists are employed to get men’s attention. Our Lord rejected all such actions. He came to establish a church, not a circus.

The Third Temptation

(1) The Proposition. Having failed in his first two efforts, Satan makes one last ‘no holds barred’ attempt to divert our Lord from His mission. Our Lord has so frustrated Satan that all masks and facades have been torn away. It is here we see Satan at his worst. The proposal was simple and straight-forward:

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

(2) The Premise. Satan had come to realize that our Lord could not be deceived. As I see it, Satan puts aside the deception and lays all his cards on the table. In offering our Lord the kingdom of the world, Satan proposes to exchange that which was his most valued possession for that which he most diligently aspired, the worship of God Himself. There are no subtleties here, no deceptions, just a hard-nosed business proposal: Give up your kingdom for mine, the future for the present, with only the bow of the knee. Satan had desired to be ‘like the most high’ (Isaiah 14:12-14), to exercise the prerogatives and privileges of God. To receive homage from Messiah would be worth any price.

(3) The Potential Outcome. To once bow the knee to Satan is to forever be in his service. Our Lord’s kingdom would have been one of fallen men in rebellion against Himself. To serve Satan would have been God in rebellion against Himself, something inconceivable.

(4) The Principle. Before we deal with the principles of Scripture which our Lord did employ, let me suggest another passage which makes Satan’s proposal preposterous and ludicrous. It is a passage which our Lord may well have been meditating upon during the 40 days in the wilderness. I have suggested that Psalm 2 was directly alluded to by the testimony of the Father at Jesus’ baptism. A look at the entire Psalm gives ample reason for our Lord’s rejection.

If you will look at this Psalm in your Bibles, you will see that the present state of the world is described. In verses 1-3, the nations are in an uproar, in open rebellion against God and His Messiah. Such is the kingdom which Satan offers in exchange for Messiah’s Kingdom. In verses 4-6 God laughs at man’s rebellion and promises
to bring the world into subjection through His ‘anointed.’ In verses 7-9 Messiah speaks and promises to declare God’s decree to men, because of His divine appointment. But note especially verse 8:

“Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as thine inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession” (Psalm 2:8).

Think of it; God invites His Messiah to ask of Him, and He will give the nations as an inheritance. Satan offered his broken-down kingdom; God offers the nations. How hollow Satan’s offer must have sounded in contrast to that in Psalm 2, a Psalm which must have been prominent in our Lord’s thinking!

One final comment about Psalm 2. Look at verses 11 and 12:

“Worship the Lord with reverence, and rejoice with trembling, Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!” (Psalm 2:11,12).

Verses 11-12 give the response appropriate to those in opposition to God and His Messiah. Worship Him! Do homage to Him! Fear His anger! Serve Him! Think of it. Satan had the arrogance (I think it was sincere) to request worship from Messiah, rather than to fall before Him.

Incredible, you say. But let me ask you, my friend. Have you acknowledged your rebellion against God, your sin, your pride? Are you trying to enlist God in your service rather than surrender to Him? If so, you are, in the words of our Lord, a child of the devil’ (John 8:44). To fail to surrender to Him and to serve Him is to repeat the sin of Satan. May God keep you from it.

Now the principles which our Lord applies to this situation. The first principle is that God alone is to be worshipped. Here is where Christianity departs from other ‘religions.’ Many world religions gladly add Jesus to their host of deities, but God demands exclusive obedience and worship. In His humanity, our Lord could not submit to or worship any other than the Father.

The second principle is that worship necessitates service. Satan requested what appeared to be only a momentary act of worship, a mere bending of the knee. But such is never the case with true worship:

“You shall worship the Lord Your God, and serve Him only” (Matt. 4:10).

True worship involves service. Satan hoped our Lord would underestimate the implications of bowing the knee in worship.

(5) Practical Application. There is a great deal of lip service in religion concerning worship. The man who tells us that he worships God in the woods and on the lake on Sunday has some real inconsistencies with our Lord’s concept of worship. He may truly see God’s hand in His creation and praise Him for this, but where is his service? Like love and marriage, worship and service must come together. To put it in the words of the song writer, “You can’t have one without the other.”

Sometimes I fear that the church of Jesus Christ has borrowed the techniques of Satan in evangelism. Satan presented his offer as though it were but a trivial request to worship him, while the implications were both profound and permanent. I often have the feeling that Christians are attempting to bring men and women into the

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13 “Very nobly the early Church followed its master there. It is an extraordinarily significant fact that of all the new religions that came pouring out of the East in the early centuries the religion of Jesus was the only one to arouse real persecution. When the religions of Osiris, Cybele, and other gods and goddesses came, Rome welcomed them all with open arms. But when the lonely God from Palestine came and the Nazarene’s name was first heard on the imperial streets, Rome girded herself to fight him to the death. Why? It was because Osiris and the rest were content to live together and share the honors, but the young God with the nail prints in his hand would not live together or share the honors with any. From the day of Jesus’ decision in the desert the demand of his religion was all or nothing.” James S. Stewart, The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), pp. 49-50.
kingdom without spelling out the implications. We put the long-term commitments in proverbial ‘fine print.’ That is not God’s way, but Satan’s.

**Overview**

Having spent considerable time among the ‘trees,’ let me take a moment to look back over the temptation of our Lord as a whole. Several striking features are apparent.

**1. The temptation is not evil in and of itself.** Our Lord was ‘spirit led’ to be tempted. What Satan meant as a temptation, God used as a test. While Satan seeks to cause the saint to fail, God strives to bring about greater faith. Temptation is a part of God’s program in the lives of the saint for his growth, and His glory.

**2. The temptation of Christ proved Him qualified for His work on the cross.** Only a sinless, spotless ‘Lamb of God’ could take upon Himself the sin of the world. Our Lord’s sinlessness stood out when tempted by the master deceiver.

**3. The temptation of our Lord prepared Him to be a merciful High Priest.**

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Our Lord’s temptation ‘in every point as we are’ enables Him to be a sympathetic High Priest (cf. also Hebrews 2:17-18). While His temptation proved Him sinless, it made Him sensitive to our weaknesses.

**4. The temptation of Christ was a test of submission.** Underlying the entire temptation was a solicitation to set aside submission to the Father and act independently of God. This was the cause of Satan’s fall. It is interesting to ponder the fact that Satan had no idea of the actual program God had devised to bring about his destruction through the work of Messiah (cf. Gen. 3:15). If Satan would have ever realized that the cross was his defeat, he would never have instigated the crucifixion through the instrumentality of Judas (cf. John 13:2). Satan’s strategy was to entice the Son to act independently of the Father. By undermining the submission of the Son to the Father he could attain his own purposes, just as he had done in the garden.

**5. Because our Lord could not sin, He bore the burden of the temptation to the full.** When Adam was created, he was made able not to sin. When Christ, the last Adam, was begotten, He was not able to sin. Some have concluded that the impeccability of Christ would diminish the victory of our Lord over Satan, but, in fact, it intensified the victory:

“In this way the sinlessness of Jesus augments His capacity for sympathy: for in every case He felt the full force of temptation” (in loc.). And Westcott remarks at Hebrews ii. 18: “Sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin, but on the experience of the

14 The actual Greek word rendered ‘to tempt’ or ‘to test’ is actually the same. Only the context dictates whether the sense is a ‘test of character’ or ‘a solicitation to sin (temptation).’ What God intends as a test, Satan may exploit as a temptation. But God never tempts us to sin (James 1:13).

15 Cf., footnote 2.

16 God’s order of authority (chain of command) was man, woman, creature; the order of the fall was creature (serpent rebelling against creator), woman (acting independently of her husband), man. Satan always attempts to overturn God’s order. G. Campbell Morgan draws our attention to this same process of reversal in the sequence of temptation as compared with the Lord’s replies from Deuteronomy:

“These answers of Jesus reveal the order of the attacks. First bread, then trust, and then worship. If the references in Deuteronomy are now observed, it will be discovered that they are quoted in opposite order to the way in which they occur in the book. In answer to the temptation concerning bread Christ uttered words to be found in Deuteronomy 8:3. In replying to the temptation directed against trust, His quotation was from Deuteronomy 6:16. While in replying to that in the realm of worship, the quotation is from Deuteronomy 6:13. In the law of God, the order is worship, trust, and bread. That order the devil inverted, and his temptations proceeded as to bread, trust, worship.” G. Campbell Morgan, *The Crises of the Christ*, p. 201.
strength of the temptation to sin, which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. He who falls yields before the last strain.”

If we bear these considerations in mind, we shall realise that the Saviour experienced the violence of the attacks of temptation as no other human being ever did, because all others are sinful and therefore not able to remain standing until the temptations have exhausted all their terrible violence in assailing them.”

Applications

Virtually every verse of this portion of the Gospels is saturated with personal application. As we come to the conclusion of our study, let me spotlight several key facets of Christian living which our text has spoken to.

We can learn much about the ever-present reality of temptation.

1. It should be expected by the Christian.
2. It often comes after moments of triumph or commitment.
3. Satan’s temptations are God’s tests. Remember that Satan tempts only in the will of God, and that temptations are never beyond our capacity (in Christ) to stand (1 Cor. 10:13).
4. Temptation often come in the area of application of truth, and not just the area of interpretation. Satan never challenged Christ’s interpretation of His baptismal experience (the fact that He was both Messiah-King and Suffering Servant), only the application of His position.
5. Temptation often solicits us to sin by doing something that appears ‘religious,’ even biblical.
6. Temptation often arises concerning the will of God. The will of God is not to be determined by our feelings, our desires, or even our logic, but according to the principles of the Word of God.
7. Temptation is best resisted with the Word of God, interpreted in its context, and in light of other Scripture.

We learn a great deal concerning the biblical concept of submission.

1. Submission does not imply inferiority (for our Lord was fully God, equal in essence with the Father), but functional subordination.
2. Satan is ever seeking to overturn God’s chain-of-command by inciting men and women to throw off their bonds and follow him.
3. Submission means not acting independently of the will of the one in authority, nor of forcing him to act in a way we see fit.

May God enable us to apply the principles of this passage to our lives, to His glory.

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Lesson 5:
The Manifestation of Messiah
(John 1:29–2:25)

The Drawing and Driving of Men

Introduction

Wherever and whenever our Lord Jesus appeared before men they were either drawn to Him or driven from Him. That surely will be the case when our Lord Jesus returns to the earth again, for the Scriptures say on the one hand:

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

And yet on the other hand we are told:

“For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, …” (2 Thess. 1:6-10a).

If the Bible tells us that at the second coming of our Lord some will be drawn and others driven, what is the deciding difference? From the divine perspective, the difference is the elective purpose of God. It is the choice of God that makes the difference. But from the human perspective, there is another reason, and this reason is revealed to us in the initial manifestation of the Messiah at His first coming as recorded by the apostle John in chapters one and two of his Gospel. While the disciples were compellingly drawn to follow our Lord, those in the Temple were driven from His presence. Not only is the contrast clear, but also the condition in men which brought about the distinction in our Lord’s dealings is revealed as well. From the human perspective, the difference which determines men’s destinies is given to instruct us as we study this crucial passage of Scripture.

The Declaration of John the Baptist
(1:29-34)

We have concluded from our earlier study of the baptism of the Lord Jesus that the main reason for Jesus’ baptism by John was that God might signify to John that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. When the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and the Father proclaimed Jesus to be His beloved Son, John was assured that Jesus was the Messiah.

There was no one common concept of Messiah or His kingdom, but in the vast majority of cases, Messianic expectation was much more external than internal, much more political than spiritual. This is precisely why John the Baptist was sent to prepare the people for their King. They needed to repent—to have a change of mind and heart. Few were prepared for the introduction of Jesus as Messiah by these words of John: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29b).

This introduction I take to be a summary statement, drawing together all of the Old Testament passages concerning Messiah in His suffering and substitutionary atonement. The Passover lamb was a picture of the Messiah who would come (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7, “Christ our Passover”). The Suffering Servant was described by Isaiah as being like a lamb:
“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearsers, So He did not open His mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

The apostles continued to identify Jesus as the Lamb of God (cf. Acts 8:26ff., 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:6,8, etc.). How different was John’s concept of Messiah from the majority of Israelites! John presented our Lord, not as the One Who would throw off the shackles of Rome, but as the One Who would Himself bear the penalty for sin.

Two words summarize John’s evaluation of Jesus. First, He was the sin-bearer. John’s message was one of repentance from sins. Jesus came to accomplish the removal of sin—He ‘takes away the sin of the world.’ Secondly, Jesus was John’s superior. Although John’s birth was prior to that of the Lord Jesus (cf. Luke 1), our Lord’s existence was from eternity: “This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me’” (John 1:30).

The prophet Micah predicted that Messiah would be eternal:

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be Ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity” (Micah 5:2).

Our Lord did not begin His existence in Bethlehem’s manger. It was there He began to exist as God-man, whereas from eternity past He had existed solely as God. It is because of His eternity that our Lord could claim: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM” (John 8:58).

Then, also, Jesus was superior to John because His baptism was greater. John baptized with water, but he persistently preached that the One Who would come after him was far greater for He would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16).

The Drawing of the Disciples
(1:35-51)

The first to respond to Jesus as the Messiah were some of John’s own disciples. It is not surprising that they did so, but it is unusual that they did so at the instigation of John:

“Again the next day John was standing, and two of his disciples; and he looked upon Jesus as He walked, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus” (John 1:35-37).

The greatness of this hairy man of the wilderness is nowhere more striking than in these few words. John actually encouraged his own disciples to follow Jesus. There is a great emphasis today (and often rightly so) on this matter of discipleship. But all too often we want to make men our disciples. The goal of all true discipleship is to enlist and encourage men to become followers of our Lord. How forcefully John reminds us of the nature of true discipleship. We are not to be attracted and attached to the man, but to the Master. John made it easy for these two to do what was right. They took the hint and began to follow Jesus.

If the drawing of these two men was instigated by John, it was also invited by Jesus:

“And Jesus turned, and beheld them following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ And they said to Him, ‘Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come, and you will see.’ They came therefore and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour” (John 1:38-39).

We are given the name of only one of these two, Andrew (verse 40), but the identity of the other is not too difficult to determine. No doubt John in his modesty, neglected to mention his name, but the fact that John knew the very hour at which the invitation of Jesus was given (verse 39) leaves little room for doubt. Our Lord’s words to Andrew and John were rightly understood as an encouragement to follow Him. In the case of Phillip (verse 43) the invitation was even more forceful.

Not only did the first disciples of Jesus follow Him because of the implied instruction of John the Baptist and the invitation of Jesus, several followed Jesus because of the invitation of those who first found Him. Andrew
immediately found his brother Simon, whose name our Lord changed to Peter. In this act of changing the name of Peter our Lord was, by implication, asserting His authority over him (cf. 2 Kings 23:34). When Adam named the animals of creation as well as his wife he was evidencing his authority over them. (No doubt this is one reason why ‘liberated women’ refuse to have their names changed when they marry—they are resisting the implications of having their names changed.) Also, the Bible informs us that the change of name indicates a change in one’s character and destiny (Gen. 17:5,15; 32:28). As the Gospel accounts make absolutely clear, Peter was no rock, but by the grace of God he became a part of the sure foundation of the church.

While Andrew invited his brother Simon to follow the Messiah, Phillip sought out his brother Nathanael. This episode of the drawing of Nathanael is especially interesting. When Phillip introduced the Messiah to Nathanael as “Jesus of Nazareth,” it brought about immediate skepticism. To come from Nazareth was to be a backwoodsman. No one important ever came from such an insignificant place as that. It was like introducing Jesus as an ‘Aggie.’ Reluctantly, perhaps, Nathanael came to Jesus. On seeing him, our Lord greeted him with the statement,

“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47).

Nathanael was recognized as a true Israelite, without deceit or deception. Not a sinless man, but a sincere one. Being a man of honesty and truthfulness, Nathanael could not deny our Lord’s assessment, and without false humility, he responded, “How do you know me?” (John 1:48)

Our Lord responded with an even more astounding statement, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (John 1:48).

This statement of our Lord was very significant, for it swept any remaining skepticism and resulted in an affirmation of faith: “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” (John 1:49).

What was so astounding about our Lord’s statement, that brought Nathanael to his knees? First of all, our Lord, even from a great distance, was fully aware of Nathanael and where he was. The fig tree in those times was a symbol of one’s home, and was frequently the place of prayer and meditation. Our Lord did not tell all, but when He said that He saw Nathanael while under the fig tree, I get the distinct impression that He is discreetly informing Nathanael that He was aware of his deeds and his thoughts at that particular moment. Perhaps Nathanael was praying, for something in particular. Perhaps he was beseeching God to send His Messiah. Whatever the specifics were, Nathanael knew that our Lord was aware of his most intimate thoughts. This One had to be Israel’s Messiah and yet our Lord promised that greater things than this they would someday witness.

The Wedding at Cana
(2:1-11)

Our Lord is now in the company of followers who will be known as His disciples. They were convinced that He was their Messiah, but their concepts of what this meant were destined to change drastically. As yet, the faith and commitment of these men did not have the support of one spectacular miracle (such as Satan had suggested in our Lord’s temptation). The first attesting miracle which these men were to witness occurred at a wedding at Cana of Galilee.

Weddings in the days of the New Testament were considerably different from what we know today. There was an engagement period of up to twelve months. This engagement was actually a written and binding contract, which had to be terminated by a written bill of divorce. On the evening of the marriage, the bride was escorted with much ceremony to the home of her husband. The bride was led to her husband where some kind of ceremony took place, followed by the washing of hands and a great feast which could last as long as a week. It is not difficult to understand why the wine may have run short. Whether the lack of supply was due to poverty or poor planning we are not told, but the consequences could be much worse than the embarrassment which such a situation would bring about. We are told that there was a strong element of reciprocity in weddings of the ancient Near East and

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that failure to provide an adequate wedding gift could result in some kind of litigation. The family of the bride would suffer not only much embarrassment, but also stood to face financial losses.²

Mary seemed to understand the urgency of the situation and pleaded with her son to save the situation. Although our Lord complied with her request, He also made it clear that with His public manifestation the old relationship between them as mother and son had ceased. His time had not yet come, and Mary should not attempt to use her relationship with Jesus to alter God’s time table.

Mary, knowing that Jesus would not let the joy of the marriage feast be turned to sorrow, instructed the servants to do whatever Jesus asked (John 2:5). Nearby were six stone water vessels, which held about twenty gallons each. They were present for the rites of Jewish purification. Jesus instructed the servants to fill the water pots and then to serve from them, beginning with the master of ceremonies. The wine, contrary to customary practice, was better than any that had yet been served.

John calls this miracle the first ‘sign’ of our Lord Jesus. A sign is a miracle with an inherent lesson. It is like an arrow that points to a conclusion. What impresses us about this sign is that it was not intended for all, but primarily for the benefit of the disciples, for we are told, “This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His Glory, and His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11). We might call this a private miracle. In this way our Lord answered the petition of His mother, without altering His own time table appointed by the Father.

Another interesting observation from this miracle is that only those who served saw what Jesus had done. Now if you will permit me to ‘spiritualize’ for a moment, it seems to me that we have a significant principle illustrated here. Those who sat at the table received no lasting benefit, other than the privilege of tasting vintage wine. Those who served were the only ones who benefited from the ‘sign’ that here was One who had power over natural processes.

How frequently we see this in the context of the local church. There will always be those who come and sit, and we are grateful to God for them. But those who witness the miraculous power of God are those who serve, not those who sit. Our Lord could have made water into wine without any human participation, but He chose to do so with the involvement of the servants. The privilege of the servants was not in helping God perform a miracle but in participating in it, and in witnessing it. That is one of the great benefits of Christian service, for in serving Him we are privileged to see His working, which others miss.

Unfortunately, men have made more out of the presence of wine at this wedding than its meaning. The tee-totalers assure us that this wine was greatly diluted,³ while others point out that the text literally suggests that the poorer wine is served when men have become drunk (margin, NASV, John 2:10). My personal opinion is that this wine did have some alcoholic content, and that men could have gotten drunk on it. The Scriptures do not condemn drinking wine which contains some alcohol (cf. 1 Tim. 5:23), but they do forbid drunkenness (Eph. 5:13) and the consumption of those strong drinks which are clearly made to get you ‘high’ (cf. Pro. 20:1; 23:30-31).

We should be instructed by our Lord turning the water into wine that our Lord is not a cosmic kill-joy. He tacitly gave His blessing to the joys of matrimonial bliss. He created the wine for the pleasure of the guests and for the preservation of the honor of the host.

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³ “Jesus made real wine out of the water. But there was a great difference between the Palestinian wine of that time and the alcoholic mixtures which today go under the name of wine. Their simple vintage was taken with three parts of water and would correspond more or less to our grape juice. It would be worse than blasphemy to suppose, because Jesus made wine, that He justifies the drinking usages of modern society with its bars, strong drinks, and resulting evils.” (Source unavailable.)
The Incident in the Temple
(2:13-22)

Although only the previous visitation of our Lord to the Temple at the age of 12 (Luke 2:41ff.) is recorded in Scripture, we are surely correct in assuming that a visit to the Temple was an annual event (cf. Luke 2:41, which indicates that was the usual practice of Jesus’ parents). There is one decisive difference in the visit reported only by John in the second chapter of his Gospel. This was the first visit of our Lord to the Temple as Messiah. Some critics have pointed out that while John records a cleansing of the Temple at the outset of Jesus’ ministry, the synoptic Gospels place the cleansing during the last week of His life. Those who wish to find ‘errors’ in the Bible will call this some kind of literary license, but those who take the Scriptures as the Word of God simply reply that there were two cleansings, as the Gospel writers indicate.⁴

How our Lord refused to accommodate Himself to the limited understanding of men is most evident in this account. The Jews had expected Messiah to be manifested in some spectacular way in the Temple. While our Lord refused Satan’s proposal to leap from the pinnacle of the Temple and thereby manifest His divinity, He chose to reveal Himself in Temple by driving out the money-makers.

Like most deviations from the truth, the scene in the Temple which so angered our Lord resulted from some very practical problems. Those who pilgrimaged to the Holy City from afar were obliged (with the native Palestinians) to pay the half-shekel Temple tax (cf. Matt. 17:24-27). They needed to exchange their foreign coinage into Palestinian currency. In addition, those who came from a great distance needed to purchase sacrificial animals to offer at the Temple. What may have begun as an essential service became a highly profitable business, and eventually a corrupt racket, owned by none other than Annas, the ex-High Priest and operated by some corrupted priests. When Jesus struck out against the evils present at the Temple, He opposed no less than the hierarchy of the Judaistic religion.

The corruption and the abuses had made a profound impression on our Lord over the years, but these seem to be more prominent in the second cleansing. Paramount in our Lord’s rebuke on this occurrence of the first cleansing is the inappropriateness of the place where all this activity was going on. The Temple was a place of worship and prayer, but the atmosphere in the courtyard was more like that at a carnival. Imagine if you can that we are about to begin the worship portion of our meeting. There is no organ music quietly playing in the background, nor the sound of a magnificent choir. Rather there is the bleating of sheep, the flapping of pigeon’s wings, the ringing of cash registers, and the characteristic haggling over prices. And the smell is like that of the stockyard. What a way to worship.

Perhaps the worst error of all is the fact that it was in the Court of the Gentiles. This was the only place that Gentiles were allowed to enter for worship. Jews might be able to get away from it all, but this market place in the Temple virtually excluded the Gentiles from worship.⁵

The wonder of it all is how our Lord managed to cleanse the Temple without any real resistance. He did not manifest any of His divine attributes (other than righteous indignation), so men did not shrink back due to fear of His power. Why, then, did they allow our Lord to drive them out? Let me suggest several possibilities. First of


⁵ “It is erroneous to suppose that Jesus’ action is an attack on the whole sacrificial system. His motive was one of reverence for my Father’s house, and of deep concern that the spirit of worship should thus be dissipated at its very door.” The court in which all this noisy and boisterous traffic took place was the only court to which Gentiles might go when they wished to pray or meditate in the temple. They ought to have been able to worship in peace. Perhaps we could go so far as to say that they had the right to worship in peace. Instead they found themselves in the midst of a noisy bazaar. “A place that should have stood as a symbol for the freedom of access of all nations in prayer to God, had become a place associated with sordid pecuniary interests” (Wright). On the necessity for sternness in the face of evil Wright quotes Ruskin, that it is “quite one of the crowning wickednesses of this age that we have starved and chilled our faculty of indignation.” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, p. 195, fn. 68.
all, our Lord was absolutely right and immoral men shrink back when their evil is exposed. Second, although this business enterprise was owned and operated by the religious establishment, it was despised by the masses. Shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, this practice was abandoned due to popular pressure.\footnote{\textit{J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels}, p. 93. Cf. Shepard’s excellent discussion on the abuses of the Temple system on pp. 92-94.} Even at this early point in our Lord’s ministry, the Jewish leaders recognized that our Lord had popular support. Finally, they recognized that here, at the very least, was a powerful personality, and that in this act He was making an impressive claim for Himself.

Most of us feel somewhat uncomfortable with passages such as this, for we would rather that the Gospel writers tickle our ears with accounts which reveal the love of Jesus, rather than His holy anger. One way in which we fall short of the standard set by our Lord is that we seldom get angry at the right things. Some of us get mad for the wrong reasons—this is sin. Few of us get mad when we should—this, too, is sin. Parents should be angry at disrespect in their children. Christians should get angry about corruption and injustice.

The Jewish leaders did not take the act of our Lord lying down. Far from it! But they did calculate the cost of open and public opposition and reckoned it too high. Instead they made a very shrewd counter-offensive. They determined to put our Lord on the defensive. And they did so by appearing to assume that this act declared Him to be Messiah. They intended to force the hand of our Lord by a statement sounding like this, “All right, we are willing to assume that you are claiming to be the Messiah. Now give us a sign that will prove your claim beyond a doubt.” (Cf. John 2:18.)

There was nothing original about this challenge. It was a mere echo of Satan’s taunt not many days past. Our Lord refused to accept such a challenge, for His kingdom was not to be established on such spectacularism. Instead, He chose to answer them in a statement so enigmatic that it partially and temporarily disarmed his critics. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19).

The only sign unbelieving Israel would receive was the sign of the prophet Jonah (cf. Matt. 12:38-40). Of course, they did not comprehend our Lord’s words, and largely disregarded them as insane babblings. It was only later that our Lord’s disciples grasped our Lord’s true meaning (John 2:21-22).

**Overview:**

**Interpretation and Applications**

As we look at this portion of Scripture as a whole, there are several observations which we can make by way of interpretation.

1. **Messiah is manifested here, not so much in terms of spectacular miracles, but in term of revelations of His deity.** Notice the attributes of God which are attributed here to our Lord Jesus Christ. There is an indication here of the sovereignty of God, for our Lord was at all times in full control of His situation, drew men to Himself, and He drove men from His presence. He chose those who would be followers of Himself. The eternality of God is evident, for John introduced Jesus as the one who existed long before him (John 1:30, cf. 1:1-18). The omniscience of our Lord is revealed by our Lord’s knowledge of Nathanael’s presence and thoughts beneath the fig tree. The omnipotence of Jesus is displayed by His turning of the water into wine. It is very difficult to read the Gospels without very quickly discerning the writers’ intentions to convince us that Jesus Christ was God manifested in human flesh.

2. **I am impressed with the fact that Jesus went about the presentation of Himself as Messiah in a way totally unexpected, indeed inconsistent with what we would think to be best.** Let’s liken our Lord’s manifestation to Israel to a person running for high political office. How would a political candidate seek to get himself elected to office? He would certainly seek to gain wide exposure and acclaim. He would probably hire an advertising firm and enlist a press agent. He would seek to get in the public eye and to convey himself as the one who best represents the highest hopes and ideals of the community. He would certainly endeavor to gain the support of men of high political standing. If this is the best way to go about things, then our Lord did it all wrong.
He was One Who came with no great external appeal (Isaiah 53:2). His message was not one of political liberation, but of sin and its forgiveness. His home town was a place of obscurity. He was a backwoodsman whose speech immediately set him apart as uncouth in the minds of the sophisticated. Rather than to get the attention of the masses by a spectacular series of miracles, He disclosed Himself by an act of censure and one which immediately alienated the most powerful political figures of His day. Those whom Jesus chose to be His intimates and His closest followers were not men of great standing or influence.

(3) Jesus' initial presentation was a foreshadowing of the outcome of His ministry. Some may tend to suppose that at the beginning of His ministry Jesus was popular and welcomed by all, and that only later was His rejection conceived in the hearts of a few who succeeded in winning the support of others to destroy the Messiah. From the very outset our Lord chose to alienate the religious hierarchy of Judaism. He never had their support throughout His life and ministry, nor did He desire it. His coming to draw men to Himself and to drive men away is strikingly parallel to His future coming to the earth.

(4) The Lord Jesus dealt with men so differently in this presentation of Himself. The contrast between the drawing of the disciples in chapters 1 and 2 with the driving out of the money-changers in the last part of chapter two is so dramatic it cannot escape our notice. The real question which comes to mind is, “Why did Jesus draw some men to Himself, while others were driven away?” The answer to this question is to be found in the last three verses of chapter 2:

“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man” (John 2:23-25).

Let me be the first to remind you that I am what has been called a Calvinist. I do not prefer the label, but I do hold to this position. I believe in the sovereignty of God in salvation. God is the One Who determines man’s destiny, ultimately. But every good Calvinist that I know believes that man has a decision to make concerning his salvation for which God holds him accountable. As Paul states in Romans, man is lost because God has not chosen him (chapter 9), but he is also lost because he has not chosen God (chapter 10).

The passage which we are studying stresses the human element in man’s relationship with God. What is it that determined what our Lord’s response would be to those He encountered? It is the condition of men’s hearts, which our Lord, as omniscient God, was able to discern. Let me take a moment to characterize the difference between those whom our Lord drew and those He drove away. It is these same factors, I believe, which explain the difference (from a human perspective) between intimacy with God and enmity with Him.

First of all our Lord sought men who were looking for a spiritual Savior, not primarily a secular one. Israelis wanted a physical king, a great liberator, but they were not vexed by the weight of their sins. True Israelis sought a solution to the problem of sin. The primary issue was not revolution or reform, but redemption.

Second, our Lord devoted Himself to the givers, not the getters. The disciples immediately began to share their new-found faith with others. The Jewish leadership sought only to gain financially from religion, and they had no qualm about excluding others (such as the Gentiles) from worshipping God.

Third, our Lord sought out men who desired fellowship with Him. These were men who were content simply to be with Him. They asked nothing more from Him than that. The others cared nothing about His presence, but simply for His presents.

Fourth, our Lord drew men who were willing to find God in the mundane matters of daily life, rather than to demand His self-disclosure in the mighty miracles and signs sought by unbelieving Israel.

We might summarize most of what I have said in this statement: God drew servants, not spectators, not spongers. Those who recognized Jesus for Who He was (and is) were those who served Him. The spectators are oblivious, the spongers uninterested in the kind of Messiah Jesus proved to be.

As we come to the conclusion of this initial presentation of our Lord Jesus as the Messiah, I find that there are four different kinds of people described. The first type are those like the guests at the wedding in Cana. They are totally aloof to the presence of God in their midst. They enjoy the benefits of His presence, but are unaware of
His existence. The second variety is that person who seeks God, who to some extent believes in Him, but not as the sinbearer, only as the miracle worker. They seek the spectacular, not the Savior. There are many of these seekers, today, just as there were in Jesus day. If they are Christians at all they are exceedingly shallow ones. The sad thing is that Christianity often appeals to misguided motives. The third kind of person found in our passage is the religious renegade. They are religious outwardly, but they are the enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord speaks of these in the book of Matthew:

   Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’ (Matt. 7:22-23).

As I have said many times before, Hell is going to be populated with religious people. Religion has never saved one soul from Hell, but it has led many there. It is only by acknowledging your sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus as God’s provision for your sin that you can come to a living faith that saves.

That brings us to the fourth kind of person. They are the God-seekers who realize their sinfulness and rest in Jesus Christ as God’s only way of eternal salvation. I pray that you are that kind of person.
Lesson 6:
The Manifestation of Messiah to Nicodemus
(John 3:1-21)

Introduction

Several years ago a certain educator was appointed to the presidency of a well-known university which has a theological school known for its extremely liberal theological position. When this president was asked to speak to a group of local businessmen, he told them a story which he considered quite amusing. While the president was downtown, he passed by a Salvation Army kettle and stopped to put in a contribution. The elderly volunteer who stood by confronted this dignitary with the question, “Are you saved?” He replied that he supposed that he was, but she pursued, “I mean, have you ever given your full life to the Lord?” It was at this point that the president said he thought that he should inform this persistent woman with his identity. He said, “I am the president of such and such university, and as such I am also president of its school of theology.” The lady gave that a moment’s thought and then replied, “It doesn’t matter wherever you’ve been, or whatever you are, you can still be saved.”

The most tragic part of this story is that the seminary president actually thought this story was amusing, and so did his audience. The reason why I have shared this true story with you is because it is strikingly similar to an account recorded in the Word of God in the third chapter of John’s Gospel. The renowned theologian of this time in history was named Nicodemus. His problem was precisely that of the man who was confronted by the elderly Salvation Army volunteer—he thought that his position and his religion was what constituted him as acceptable before God.

Before we go on let me caution you that this may be your problem, too. The thing that will keep many men and women from God’s heaven is the very thing upon which so many men rely—their religion. It would surely not be an original title, but this account might well be labeled “How to Be Religious Without Being a Christian.” The question which John will pose to us in this lesson is simply this: Are you a Christian, or merely religious?

For the Christian, there is much instruction in this passage concerning the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and how it can be shared with others. In addition, we find in Nicodemus a beautiful demonstration of that fatal disease which troubled Judaism. For in this interview we see the theology of the Jews contrasted with that of their Messiah.

The Man Who Met the Messiah
(3:1)

One’s initial temptation in being introduced to Nicodemus is to berate and belittle. We are inclined to think of him as the man who was so cowardly that he had to sneak into his interview with Jesus by cover of darkness. To the twentieth century Christian, Nicodemus has several strikes against him. First of all, he was a Jewish leader. John tells us that he was a ‘ruler of the Jews.’ By this, John meant to inform us that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the highest and most powerful religious and political body within Judaism.

It was this body of men which was ultimately responsible for the shabby trial and unlawful execution of our Lord. Second, Nicodemus was also a Pharisee. By and large, it would probably be safe to say that the Pharisees were the

1 “The Sanhedrin, under the chairmanship of the High Priest, was both the supreme religious council and the national parliament. It was also the supreme court for all except political charges. Their powers were limited by Romans rule, but their influence was still enormous. To the ordinary Jew, they were the true government.” R. T. France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 21.

2 Perhaps no one has more concisely summarized the different sects within Judaism than James Stewart, when he writes, “The Pharisees had externalized religion, had made it a matter of outward observance, not of the heart. There were the scribes. The scribes had professionalized religion; they were the dry ecclesiastics, not saints with the fire of God in them. There were Sadducees. The Sadducees had secularized religion; they were skeptical
religious conservatives of their day, while their counterparts, the Sadducees were the liberals. The Pharisees believed in the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament Scriptures and in the supernatural (miracles, life after death, angels, demons). The Pharisees were separatists (in fact the word Pharisee means separated), who made every effort to keep Judaism pure of heathen influences. You and I would be far more comfortable in the company of a Pharisee than a Sadducee. The great problem with Pharisaism was that they had become highly ritualistic and legalistic. The Old Testament was to be interpreted in accordance with oral traditions passed down and recorded in almost endless volumes. Traditions became of higher priority than sound biblical interpretation. Nicodemus’ problem was that he relied upon conformity to the moral codes of Judaism and observance of religious ritual for entrance to the kingdom of God.

Having said all this, we do Nicodemus a great disservice to suppose that he was some kind of weak-kneed coward, coming to Jesus as he did. Our Lord implied that he was perhaps one of the most well-known and respected religious teachers of his day. In John 7:50-52, we read of Nicodemus taking a very unpopular stand with his colleagues in defense of the Lord Jesus. In John 19:39 Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea came forth publicly to bury Jesus when all of the disciples had fled.

It is hard to conceive of the difficulties which Nicodemus overcame to speak with Jesus. When Jesus cleansed the Temple, it was the Sadducees with whom our Lord most dramatically clashed, for they were the establishment. The Pharisees no doubt detested the ‘simony’ going on in the Temple courts under the auspices of the Sadducees. But it was also clear from the ministry of both John the Baptist and Jesus that Jesus had not come to ally Himself with traditional Judaism. To put it in Jesus’ own words, He had not come to put a patch on Judaism, but to replace it with something entirely new (cf. Mark 2:21-22). Jesus had not come from within the system. He had not been trained at the feet of men such as Gamaleil. He had no diplomas from the leading Jewish schools. Worse yet, He was a Galilean, disdained by any Judaean Jew. Nicodemus’ coming to Jesus was somewhat akin to the president of the AMA asking the medical advice of a hospital orderly or Muhammad Ali seeking boxing pointers from a ruffian on the streets of New York. It was like the Pope seeking advice in a passage of Scripture from Martin Luther. What I am saying in all of this is that in focusing our attention on the fact that Nicodemus came to our Lord at night, we lost sight of the significance of the fact that he came at all!

**The Theology of Nicodemus Turned Upside-Down (3:2-15)**

As we begin to focus upon the interview between Jesus and Nicodemus, it is important to understand why John chose to record this incident. I personally suspect that John was present at this conversation. John does not record this encounter with Jesus to show us the conversion of Nicodemus, for no affirmation of faith is recorded here. Nicodemus came to Jesus, perhaps out of his own personal interest in Jesus, but in spite of this he beautifully

and worldly. There were the zealots. The zealots had nationalized religion, making it a mere adjunct and slave to their one consuming ambition, ‘Down with Rome and up with Jewry!’” James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 24.

3 We know from verse 1 that he was a religious leader, but in verse 10 he is referred to by our Lord as the teacher of Israel, implying that he was well known by his contemporaries.

4 “A certain Galilean once went about enquiring, ‘Who had ’amar?’ ‘Foolish Galilean,’ they said to him, ‘do you mean an “ass” for riding, “wine” to drink, “wool” for clothing or a “lamb: for killing?”’ (Babylonian Talmud, Erubin 53b).

This Jewish joke, which pokes fun at the slovenly speech of Galilee with its indistinct vowels and dropped aitches, indicates the Jerusalem Jew’s attitude to his northern neighbours. Galilee had once been predominately Gentile territory, and even now its population was far from completely Jewish. Cut off from Judaea by the hostile territory of Samaria, and under a different system of government, it tended to develop along its own independent lines of speech and character, and of religious tradition. Hence the great disdain in which a Judaean Jew held his Galilean brother.” R. T. France, *I Came to Set the Earth on Fire*, p. 30.
represents the classical stance of orthodox and conservative Judaism at the time of Jesus. This seems evident in the words of our Lord in verse 11: “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you (plural) do not receive our witness.”

In this discussion, the theology of Jesus is contrasted against the backdrop of contemporary Jewish orthodoxy, represented by Nicodemus. Here is how Nicodemus and all of Judaism must change their thinking before they can see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus’ evaluation of the person of Jesus is stated in verse 2: “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

From this, I would conclude that to Nicodemus Jesus was at least accepted as a prophet, a bonafide spokesman for God. The signs our Lord had performed in Jerusalem had convinced him of that. But the theology of Nicodemus and his contemporaries did not go nearly far enough. Because of this Jesus overturned Jewish theology at several crucial points. This is spelled out in the following verses.

1) The Kingdom is experienced, not by reform, but by rebirth, verses 3-4. Essentially, Judaism believed that would come when all Israel obeyed the Law for one single day. The problem for Nicodemus, and others like him, was to reform the nation. The kingdom was almost exclusively an earthly one to the Jews, and it would begin when they could ‘clean up their act’ sufficiently for Messiah to come. Jesus had something far different to say on this subject: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again,” he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

The figure of speech ‘born again’ was not foreign to Nicodemus. It was a figure applied to a bridegroom on the occasion of his marriage, to the Chief of the Academy on his promotion, to the king on his enthronement, and to the proselyte on his entrance into Judaism. The application of this expression to the entrance of a Jew into the kingdom of God left Nicodemus’ head reeling. A literal interpretation of these words seem most likely, but made no sense at all. This statement by our Lord caught him completely off guard, and the complete lack of understanding on the part of Nicodemus is apparent. “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” (John 3:4).

2) The essence of rebirth is not physical, but spiritual, verses 5-8. There is a material aspect of the kingdom. Our Lord will come bodily to the earth and establish the Millennial Kingdom for the nation Israel, fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. But this was all that the Jews could think about—just the physical and material side of the kingdom. Nicodemus revealed that he was thinking materialistically and not spiritually. Our Lord restated the biblical requirements for entrance into the kingdom in different terms: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

This expression, ‘born of water and the Spirit’ has not clarified the issue, but clouded it, at least for many theologians. Some have found in it evidence for the unbiblical doctrine of baptismal regeneration (i.e., that baptism is the means of salvation, rather then the manifestation of it). Others interpret it to mean that men must be born both physically (of water) and spiritually (of the Spirit). This position has much to commend it, for water was employed in those days symbolically for human sperm. Also, the next verse (verse 6) contrasts that which is merely physical from that which is spiritual in nature.

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5 “Wescott comments: ‘It is worthy of notice that St. John never notices (by name) the Sadducees or the Herodians. The Pharisees were the true representatives of the unbelieving nation.’” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 1971), p. 252.

6 This expression, ‘born again,’ can be legitimately rendered either ‘born again’ (as Nicodenus obviously took it), or ‘born from above.’ As it is used here it would seem that both senses merge. To be born again is to be born from above.


8 “‘Water’ may be connected with procreation This conception is quite foreign to us and we find it difficult at first to make sense of it. But Odeberg has gathered an impressive array of passages from Rabbinic, Mandaean, and Hermetic sources to show that terms like ‘water,’ ‘rain,’ ‘dew,’ and ‘drop’ are often used of the male semen.” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, p. 216.
If Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture, the best commentary on these words of our Lord is to be found in Ezekiel 36:24-27, where the prophet speaks of the future restoration of the nation Israel:

“For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own Land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”

Here the rebirth of the nation Israel (cf. also Ezekiel 37) is described in terms of washing (with water) and the induement of the Spirit. As a teacher of Israel, more than this as ‘the’ teacher of Israel (vs. 10), Nicodemus should have associated the statement of Jesus with the words of Ezekiel concerning the establishment of the kingdom. Ezekiel used both water and the Spirit with reference to the process of spiritual birth, by which men entered into the kingdom of God. Israel must not enter into the kingdom by means of reform, but by rebirth. And more than this, it is by means of a spiritual rebirth, whereby God cleanses His people and places within them His Spirit.

The work of the Spirit is distinct from that of the flesh. They are real in two different dimensions. Rebirth is a spiritual process. The work of the Holy Spirit cannot be observed or controlled, but its effects, like that of the wind, are obvious (verses 6-8).

Further Clarification, verses 9-12. Nicodemus could not seem to grasp what he was being told, for he questioned, “How can these things be?” (verse 9). Our Lord gently rebuked the ignorance of Nicodemus, for as yet He has not gotten to the more difficult aspects of His teaching. As ‘the teacher’ of Israel Nicodemus should have immediately recognized what our Lord was talking about, for entrance into the kingdom of God by rebirth was revealed by the Old Testament prophets. Our Lord had not yet ventured from the theological stomping ground of those who taught from the Old Testament Scriptures.

Nevertheless, it was at these very crucial points that Jesus differed from contemporary Judaism, including Nicodemus (verse 12). When our Lord used the expression ‘we’ (‘we speak,’ ‘we know,’ ‘we have seen,’) it may be that He was alluding to the presence of some of His disciples. I am more inclined to think that our Lord was referring to Himself and John the Baptist, His predecessor. If Nicodemus cannot understand those things of which the Old Testament writers spoke (the ‘earthly things,’ verse 12), how would he be able to grasp the even deeper spiritual truths which our Lord was about to reveal (in verses 13-21)?

(3) Jesus: Not a Man sent from God, but God come as Man, verse 13. The one thing about Jesus that impressed the crowds (Matt. 7:28-29) and irritated the Jewish leaders (Matt. 9:1:23) was that He taught and acted with authority. The basic issue for a Pharisee like Nicodemus was the authority of Jesus. Nicodemus was willing to grant, by virtue of the signs performed by our Lord, that Jesus was a man sent from God, but this was not nearly enough. Jesus was God sent as a man. Our Lord’s heavenly origin set him apart from every other Israelite, even the great men such as Abraham, Moses and the prophets: “And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descends from heaven, even the Son of man!” (John 3:13).

This is why Jesus was qualified to speak to Nicodemus of ‘heavenly things’ (verse 12)—He is the only one who has come down from heaven. He is the Son of Man. In my opinion, our Lord employed the term ‘Son of Man’ with reference to Himself with the specific intent of identifying Himself with the Messiah, referred to in Daniel 7:13 as the ‘Son of Man.’ Neither Nicodemus nor anyone else can give sufficient heed to the words of our Lord Jesus, until they have come to grips with His person. He is God come as man. Once that is settled, men must heed His teaching.

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9 On this title, ‘Son of Man,’ Morris comments: “… Jesus adopted the term, first because it was a rare term and one without nationalistic associations. It would lead to no political complications. ‘The public would … read into it as much as they apprehended of Jesus already, and no more.’ Second, because it had overtones of divinity. J.P. Hickenbotham goes as far as to say, ‘the Son of Man is a title of divinity rather than humanity.’” J. P. Hickenbotham, The Churchman, LVIII, 1994, p. 54, as cited by Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 172.
(4) **Jesus: Exalted, not by a crown, but by a cross, verses 14-15.** Every devout Israelite eagerly awaited the coming of Messiah. They looked for Him to be lifted up, to be exalted as the King of Israel. But what they failed to comprehend was that the kingdom was not initiated by a crown, but by a cross. The triumphal entry was Israel’s idea of the introduction of the kingdom. What the nation failed to understand was that God’s sequence is suffering, then glory; the cross, then the crown (cf. Philippians 2:5-11).

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal Life” (John 3:14-15).

From his background Nicodemus could understand that to be ‘born again’ meant an entrance into a new state, a new condition. He should have understood by now that this rebirth was not a material or fleshly matter, but that produced by the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit. But the basis of that rebirth is only now revealed by our Lord. The basis for entrance into eternal life is the work of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is by virtue of the fact that God’s Messiah has been lifted up on the cross of Calvary that men can be born again.

To facilitate the Jewish mindset of Nicodemus, our Lord likened His death upon the cross to the lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness as recorded in the book of Numbers chapter 21. When the Israelites rebelled against Moses and God, God sent fiery serpents to smite the rebels. When Moses interceded for the people, God instructed him to make a bronze serpent and to lift it up on a pole. Those who were bitten had only to look upon this bronze serpent to be healed.

The death of Jesus upon the cross was much like this. Men are guilty, sinners—rebels against God, and under the sentence of death. Jesus Christ took upon Himself the sins of men and suffered the wrath of God in their place. He was lifted up on a cross, bearing their punishment, and God’s holy wrath. Those who look up to Him, who trust in Him for forgiveness of sins are born again and enter into the kingdom of God.

How is one to see the kingdom of God? He must be born again, that is, he must enter into a new kind of life by the work of the Holy Spirit, based upon the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross of Calvary. To be born again is to admit that you are suffering from the terminal illness of sin and to find healing from it in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross for sinners. It is to believe that He died in your place and provides you with His righteousness, thus accomplishing entrance for you into His Kingdom.

**The Heart of God and the Hearts of Men**

*(3:16-21)*

The previous verses seem to have said it all. What more is there to say? Bible students are not all agreed as to who is talking in verses 16-21. Some say it is our Lord; others, that John is now editorializing. It really makes little difference, for either way it is still the Word of God. Whether or not it is printed in red ink is only a matter of academic interest.

What is important to me about these verses is that we are taken beyond the meaning of salvation, taken beyond the means of our salvation, to the motive behind it. It is not sufficient for the writer of this Gospel under inspiration to simply tell us how God has made salvation available to men, but He is constrained to also tell us why. Here we are exposed to the heart of God, as well as to the hearts of men.

I suspect that most of you realize that I am what would be called a ‘Calvinist,’ not because I am a follower of Calvin, nor because I am overly excited about some others who claim the same distinction, but because I believe this best fits the teaching of Scripture. I hope you will understand what I say when I suggest that in many ways the Pharisees, such as Nicodemus, were very inclined toward Calvinistic viewpoints. They believed in the sovereignty of God, for example. They were firm believers in election. The difference is that they believed God had elected Jews to salvation and condemned the rest. The Pharisees were separatists who strove to keep Judaism distinct from pagan influence. They despised paganism. They even disdained the common people of Israel who were not nearly so meticulous on matters of ceremonial cleansings and so on (John 7:48-49). The love of God did not seem to

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dominate their thinking, or their actions. It is for this reason, I believe, that our Lord did not stop with the plan of salvation, but went on to probe the reason for it.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Here the heart of God is revealed. It is not the love of the Son which is here emphasized but rather the love of the Father Who gave the Son. The cross of Calvary is the measure of God’s love for man. Now any Pharisee would gladly agree with this. The bitter pill for them to swallow was the revelation that God’s gift of eternal life through the death of His Son was for ‘the world.’ The doctrine of election confirmed for the Pharisee salvation for every Jew, and consigned the nations to perdition. But the love of God constrained Him to make provision for the salvation of men from every nation. This was news for the Jews.

If the positive motivation for the cross of Calvary was the love of God, negatively it must also be said that the primary motivation for sending the Son was not in order to condemn men: “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him!” (John 3:17). Salvation, not damnation, was the purpose of God’s love for mankind. Condemnation was incidental, but not primary in God’s gift of His Son at Calvary. Verses 18 and 19 help to clarify this point:

“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil” (John 3:18-19).

Strictly speaking, the coming of Christ to the world and His death on the cross did not condemn men to eternal damnation. Men were already condemned. The Son came to accomplish salvation for condemned men. He came into a world of sinners, who were under the sentence of death. Those who look to Him for salvation are delivered from condemnation. Those who do not remain in the state of condemnation in which they were found. Our Lord’s death is the solution, not the problem. Our Lord came as light to reveal man’s need of a Savior. Men revealed their sinfulness by rejecting that light and nailing Him to the cross. It was because men were condemned sinners that Christ came to provide salvation. It was because men were worthy of condemnation that they rejected His provision.

While verses 16 and 17 reveal the motive of God in sending the Son, verses 20 and 21 expose the wickedness of the hearts of those who reject Him.

“For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:20-21).

Man is a sinner. He does not sin reluctantly, but with pleasure. When his wickedness is exposed, he has no intention of forsaking sin, and so he extinguishes the light which reveals it. Man in both deed and motive is a sinner. It is for this reason that he is worthy of condemnation. It is for this reason God sent His Son to save.

**Conclusion and Application**

We must begin to apply this portion of Scripture to our own lives only after we have grasped what our Lord’s teaching meant to Nicodemus. By these words of our Lord, Nicodemus learned that entrance into the kingdom of God necessitated his forsaking much of the traditional theology of his peers, for the teaching of Christ. The kingdom was to be entered, not by the rigorous keeping of the Law and traditions of Judaism, nor by religious reform, but by radical rebirth. This rebirth is not to be achieved by human effort, but is the work of the Spirit of God. Jesus was not merely a man sent from God, but God sent in the form of man. The Messiah was to be exalted, not with a crown, but on a cross, and by looking to Him, men would be saved. The salvation which Christ was to accomplish was not for Jews only, but for men from all nations who would look to Christ for salvation. God’s primary motive in sending the Son was not condemnation (though this must inevitably result), but salvation. It was the motive of love. Men are condemned, not by Christ’s coming, but by their own condition which is manifested in their rejection of Christ.
If this interview with Jesus had much for Nicodemus, it also says much to us, for there are countless men and women who look to their religion to save them. The university president who relies on his position to save him is representative of all too many today. This last week Pope John Paul died what would appear to be an untimely death. Someone asked what I thought of his passing, and I responded that my only question was whether or not he was born again. My friend, have you been trusting in your religion to save you? You must be born again! God does not demand reform; He has provided rebirth. It is not your efforts which can save you, but God’s reaching out in the person of His Son Who died in your place, Who took your punishment, and Who offers His righteousness in place of your wretchedness.

Several years ago when I was teaching in Plano I was involved in a time of Bible study and fellowship with some of the students. We met in the home of a couple who attended a denominational church. We happened to observe the Lord’s Table that night and I spent some time explaining what the elements represented. The following week as our meeting was getting started some of the kids were sharing their experiences of the week. The hostess could not wait to share what had happened to her. “Do you know what happened to me this week?” she questioned. “I got saved.” She had been a member of that church for years. Years before she had walked down the aisle, thinking that this would make her a Christian. But all along she had not been born again. In what are you resting, my friend? Are you trusting in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross on your behalf, or are you trusting in your religion? You must be born again!

There is in this account a word of caution for those of us who count ourselves among those who are labeled Calvinists, for all too often we present the doctrine of election in such a way as to give the impression that God chooses one and rejects the other with no more emotion than a tornado which levels one house and leaves another. It is God Who ultimately determines the destiny of men, but He does so with great compassion. He saves men out of His love. He condemns men out of His justice, but He never delights in it. It is His ‘strange work’ (Isaiah 28:21). In determining to save some, He chooses to pass over others, but they are already condemned by their own sins and they willfully reject the provision of salvation in Christ freely offered to all men.

Finally, there is much for us as Christians to learn concerning methods of evangelism. We talk far too much about commitment to Christ and far too little about conversion. As James Stahr has aptly put it:

“Conveniently set aside is the Bible teaching that man is an enemy of God who needs to be reconciled (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21). Instead, man is pictured as a nice guy with a few problems, who only needs to realize that God is even nicer, and the two ought to get together.

In modern evangelism ‘commitment’ is substituted for ‘salvation.’ Good, moral upright people can make a commitment without the humbling experience of admitting they are sinners, much less lost.”11

Modern evangelists would be greatly troubled at the methodology of our Lord, for He did not press Nicodemus for a decision. I do not personally feel that Nicodemus left this interview saved, but rather greatly troubled. In time he came to faith, but Jesus did not feel constrained to ‘twist his arm’ as so many do today. Presenting the Gospel is a far different thing than selling insurance. Our job is not to get men’s signatures, but to confront them with the truth.

May God apply the truth of this passage to each of our lives.

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Lesson 7:
The Manifestation of Messiah to the Samaritan Woman
(John 4:1-42)

Introduction

In the Evangelical church, there is nothing more comfortable than an evangelistic sermon. Those who are
saved delight in hearing them for several reasons. First of all, in that one remote area they have spiritually arrived.
No one is more comfortable during an invitation to salvation than the one who is saved. Second, it means that the
preacher can’t step on our toes. The message sails comfortably over our heads to those who really need it. In the
meantime, subjects like sanctification and the spiritual life (areas in which we are miserable failures) are neglected.
Finally, we feel that if the preacher is laying the gospel on people, we need not devote ourselves to it.

In spite of what little comfort is derived from the hearing of evangelistic preaching, a Christian does not
long enjoy the luxury of comfort. We know that the Bible commands us to be witnesses of our faith. We are
guilt-ridden because of our failures and frustrations in sharing our faith. If you are like me, you could share far
more on your failures than on your triumphs in evangelism. To be perfectly honest, most of us are just plain fright-
ened by our obligation to give witness to our faith.

If you are as troubled about your witness as I am about mine, you will find encouragement and instruction
from our study of our Lord’s dealing with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in the third and fourth chapters of
the Gospel of John. The similarities in these two encounters are few, while the contrasts are numerous. In both
cases, our Lord is presenting Himself to individuals as the promised Messiah of Israel.

Here is where the similarities end, however. Nicodemus was a man, the Samaritan was a woman. Nico-
demus was an orthodox, conservative Jew, the woman a half-breed apostate from Judaism. Nicodemus was a
prominent, highly-regarded leader, perhaps one of the best-known religious teachers of his day. The woman was
well-known, too, but her reputation had to do with the number of men she had lived with. Nicodemus sought out
his interview with the Messiah, while the woman ‘chanced’ to meet with Him.

So far, all the pluses seem to be in favor of Nicodemus. But we should not fail to point out some additional
contrasts. Nicodemus was not reported to have been immediately converted, while the woman’s faith is evident.
The conversation with Nicodemus had no impact on the lives of his peers. Indeed, Jesus had to leave Judea because
of the Pharisees (John 4:1-3). But the woman brought back nearly the whole town with her testimony, and Jesus
was invited to stay on (4:39-42). While Jesus spoke of Himself to the Jews in veiled terms (cf. John 2:18-22), He
gave one of the clearest statements of His identity to this woman (4:26). The Jews had already begun to reject Him,
but the Samaritans received Him as the Savior of the world (4:42).

Let us look, then, to this account of the conversion of a Samaritan city, for lessons from the Master in
sharing our faith, even across tremendous cultural barriers.

The Conversion of the Samaritan Woman
(4:1-26)

The occasion for our Lord’s encounter is a bit unusual. Our Lord was passing through Samaria, retreating
from Judea to Galilee. The reason for our Lord’s departure was His untimely popularity. The Pharisees were at-
tempting to capitalize on the greater popularity of the ministry of Jesus than of John. They sought to promote a rift.
Rather than revel in this popularity1 our Lord ran from it, for it was untimely, and would tend to undermine John’s
ministry rather than underscore it.

1 I must share Shepard’s comment here, “Not many preachers run from over-popularity.” J.W. Shepard,
The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 114. Popularity is seldom at the center of God’s
program. If our Lord retreated at the prospect of it, how much more should we!
Much has been made of John’s statement that Jesus must travel through Samaria. Technically, it was not a necessity at all, and culturally, it was not customary to do so. If you will look at a map, you will see that Samaria lies between Galilee on the north and Judea to the south. The shortest distance between points is obviously a straight line, which would mean passing through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee. But because of the animosity which existed between these two peoples, scrupulous Jews chose to avoid passing through Samaria by traveling around it to the east, crossing the Jordan and passing through the friendlier territories of Peraea and Decapolis.

In what sense was Jesus compelled to pass through Samaria? In part, our Lord may have done so to express His contempt for the narrow bigotry of some of the Jews of His day. Certainly from the divine perspective, He did so in order to bring many Samaritans to faith. But the Jewish historian, Josephus, used exactly the same expression in the sense of necessity for rapid travel. From the divine perspective our Lord must pass through Samaria in order to fulfill the purpose of God. From the human, it was the shortest and most sensible route. Racial prejudice and bigotry were no consideration at all to our Lord, who came as the Savior of the world, of Jews and Gentiles (cf. John 3:16; 4:42).

The journey from Judea to Sychar was a hot and dusty one. After a grueling 20 miles, our Lord was tired, thirsty, and hungry. His disciples left him sitting by a well dug by Jacob many years before while they went on into Sychar for provisions. Apparently, the time was about six o’clock in the evening when the Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water.

The racial and cultural (not to mention the theological) barriers present at this encounter were insurmountable. When our Lord asked this woman for a drink of water, she was caught completely off guard, for in her own words, “… Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9).

That was putting it mildly. There had been bitter feelings between Jews and Samaritans for centuries. The Samaritans find their origin at the time of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. According to Assyrian figures, nearly 30,000 Israelites were deported, being replaced by heathen captives from all

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2 “Josephus says that it was the custom of the Galileans to pass through Samaria when they went up to Jerusalem for the feasts” (Ant. xx, 118).” Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 255, fn. 16. Perhaps this helps us understand in part, the disdain that Judean Jews had for the Galileans.


4 It is doubtful that the disciples left our Lord alone in this hostile territory. Once again, it would seem that John was silently at the side of our Lord, taking note of the event in detail.

5 Jacob’s well was located at the intersection of several ancient Roman roads. This hand-dug well is a bit unusual, for there were numerous springs nearby. It is one of the best attested biblical landmarks in Palestine. Estimates of the original depth of this well vary from 75-150 feet. Its water was probably much tastier than that of nearby springs.


7 There is some disagreement among Bible students as to whether John reckoned time according to the Jewish (i.e. 12 o’clock noon) or Roman mode (6 p.m.). Edersheim’s arguments in favor of the Roman reckoning seem more persuasive:

“We have already expressed our belief, that in the Fourth Gospel time is reckoned not according to the Jewish mode, but according to the Roman civil day, from midnight to midnight. For a full discussion and proof of this, with notice of objections, see McLellan’s *New Test*. vol. i, pp. 737-743. It must surely be a lapsus when at p. 288 (note ), the same author seems to assume the contrary. Meyer objects, that, if it had been 6 P.M. there would not have been time for the after-events recorded. But they could easily find a place in the delicious cool of a summer’s evening, and both the coming up of the Samaritans (most unlikely at noon-time), and their invitation to Jesus ‘to tarry’ with them (v. 40), are in favour of our view. Indeed, St. John xix. 14 renders it impossible to adopt the Jewish mode of reckoning.” Alford Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, p. 408, footnote 1.
over the Assyrian empire (cf. 2 Kings 17:3f.). It was not long before the purity of the Israelites was defiled, not only racially, but spiritually.

Ultimately, Samaritan theology differed greatly from that of orthodox Judaism. The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) as inspired and authoritative. They rejected the Psalms, the prophets, and other books of the Old Testament. When the Babylonian exiles returned to the Holy Land, the Samaritans made efforts toward merger, but were rebuffed and rejected (and rightly so). As a result, open hostility sprung up from time to time. The Samaritans held that the center of worship was at Mt. Gerizim, while the Jews maintained that it was Jerusalem (cf. John 4:20). The Samaritans actually tampered with the Scriptures to substantiate their theology. Around 400 B.C., a Samaritan Temple was built on Mount Gerizim. Around 128 B.C., this temple was destroyed by the Jews and relations between these two peoples worsened. Such was the background to this conversation between Jesus and the woman. Evidence to the friction between the Jews and the Samaritans is easily found.8

When Jesus asked for a drink, He boldly refused to fit the Jewish stereotype, for Jews never used the same vessels as the Samaritans.9

The racial and cultural barriers, I believe, have been hurdled. The woman is now willing to converse, paving the way for further penetration with the Gospel. Notice that Jesus neither defended Jewish bigotry, nor did He explain how He differed with them. His actions spoke decisively enough. Concentration on such issues would not convert this woman.

The barrier to evangelism was now one of disinterest or apathy. The need was to make the Gospel both relevant to this woman as well as desirable. To do this, our Lord worked upon her sense of curiosity and physical need. He said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (John 4:10).

This statement generated interest on two fronts. First of all, who was He? There had been no formal introduction. To make a claim to be Messiah without substantial proof would appear insane. Jesus haunts her sense of curiosity. Second, what was He trying to offer? No doubt this woman had heard a lot of approaches before, and yet it appeared that this Man was trying to give, not to get. What was His angle?

She chose to set aside the question of identity and to get to the bottom line. What was this ‘Living water’ that He spoke about? To a person in that time, the expression ‘Living water’ referred to running water, such as that of a spring or stream, as opposed to that which had no movement. Jesus seemed to be offering water even superior to that of Jacob’s well. As Nicodemus had done, so she took the words of Jesus strictly literally.

Whatever Jesus meant, she thought, He could not be speaking of water from this well, for it was at least 75 feet deep and He had nothing with which to draw from it (vs. 11). This led her to pursue another line of questioning? “Just Who are You anyway? Do You think You are better than Jacob? Do You think Your well better than his?” (cf. vs. 12). Her question was far more profound than she could have imagined (compare John 8:53).

The water which our Lord offered was of a far different kind. It was not a literal drink, but the life-giving gift of the indwelling, presence of God by the Spirit, Who produces a continual refreshing and sustaining source of strength and blessing (vs. 14; cf. John 7:37-39).

8 “Something of the feeling between the two groups may be gauged from the words of Ben Sira: ‘With two nations my soul is vexed, and the third is no nation: those who live on Mount Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people that dwell in Shechem’. (Sir. 50:25f.)’ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, p. 256, fn. 18.

9 “The verb means properly, ‘to use with,’ and this appears to be the meaning in the present passage. Jews do not use (utensils) with Samaritans. This was built into a regulation in A.D. 65 or 66: “The daughters of the Samaritans are (deemed unclean as) menstruants from their cradle” (Mishnah, Nidd, 4:1), i.e. they are all regarded as ceremonially unclean … Danby summarizes the complicated situation as “(a) a Samaritan conveys uncleanness by what he lies, sits, or rides on, by his spittle (including the phlegm of his lungs, throat, or nose) and by his urine; and (b) the daughters of the Samaritans even from their cradles (convey uncleanness in like manner), as also do the Gentiles” (Danby, p. 803; see also SBk, I, pp. 538-60). Morris, p. 259, fn. 25.
Not yet comprehending the meaning of His words, the woman is ready to receive what He has to offer. She thought He offered the equivalent of hot and cold running water, and she was ready for that. She had a sense of physical need. What was lacking was a conviction of spiritual need. Our Lord’s words brought the matter of personal sin into uncomfortably sharp focus. “Go, call your husband, and come here” (John 4:16).

She tried to tactfully evade the issue. “I’m single,” she replied in effect (vs. 17). There is in this verbal exchange some skillful use of words. The original term rendered ‘husband’ can mean either ‘man’ or ‘husband.’ Our Lord did not necessarily mean for her to bring, her husband, but for her to bring her ‘man.’ Not knowing what our Lord knew, she chose to take the term in its technical sense, and thus thought she would evade her immorality.

Our Lord cut through the cover-up by informing her that she was technically correct. She did not have a husband, but she had a lover, and he was not number one, but number 6. She may have had, in fact, someone else’s husband. Now, as we might say, we have gotten to the ‘nitty gritty.’ The physical has given way to the spiritual. Whereas this woman would not have had any interest in spiritual things, now she welcomed the subject. Far better than dwelling on the realities of her moral life!

This woman’s awareness of Whom she was speaking to continued to grow. He was a Jew, but far from typical. He claimed to be greater than Jacob. He spoke with divine insight.

I do not know whether or not this woman was deliberately changing the subject (though we surely would have been inclined to do so), but for whatever reasons she brought the conversation around to the theological issue which divided Jews and Samaritans. Where was the central place of worship? Was it Mount Gerizim? (No doubt she pointed to the mountain with the ruins of their former temple in sight.) Or, was it at Jerusalem, where the Jews insisted?

The question was irrelevant, for with the coming of Messiah, all of that was to change. No longer did man need to seek God’s presence in one place. God is not to be worshipped in a place, but in a person, Jesus Christ. God is seeking true worshippers, but those who wish to worship Him must do so in accordance with His essential nature.

God is spirit, and thus He must be worshipped in spirit. Spiritual worship is that which takes place in the spiritual realm. No one who has not trusted in Christ as Messiah can truly worship, for they are ‘devoid of the spirit,’ (Jude 19, cf. Romans 8:9). While religionists view worship in terms of ceremony, true worship is a matter of the spirit, prompted and produced by the Holy Spirit.

Further, worship must be within the confines of truth. The Samaritans worshipped in ignorance. They worshipped ‘that which they knew not’ (verse 22). Samaritan worship consistently deviated from the revealed truth of God. One particular truth upon which worship must be based was the fact that salvation was to come from the

10 “A woman could not divorce her husband in Jewish Law. But under certain circumstances she could approach the court which would, if it thought fit, compel the husband to divorce her (see, for example, Mishnah, Ket. 7:9, 10). Or she might pay him or render services to induce him to divorce her. (Git. 7:5,6). In theory there was no limit to the number of marriages that might be contracted after valid divorces, but the Rabbis regarded two, or at the most three marriages as the maximum for a woman (SBk, II, p. 437).” Morris, p. 264, fn. 43.

11 “At the beginning of the conversation He did not make Himself known to her ... but first she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed her dislike of the Jew, she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet, and she adored the Christ (Findlay, p. 61).” Morris, p. 254, fn. 13.

12 “Cf. G.S. Hendry: “it has commonly been taken to mean that God, being Spirit, is present everywhere and can be worshipped anywhere; the important thing is not where men worship, but how they worship.” This he vigorously denies. The saying “means the precise opposite; it means that God is present in his own realm, to which man as such has no access. To worship God in spirit is not a possibility that is always and everywhere open to man ... But this is just the gospel of Christ, that this possibility has now been opened to men. ... The meaning is that the location has been redefined, and God is now to be worshiped in the place where he is present, i.e., in Him who is the truth incarnate (The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology, London, 1957, pp. 3lf.).” Quoted by Morris, p. 272, fn. 62.
Jews. The Messiah was to be a Jew, not a Samaritan. It is never enough to be sincere; one must be in accord with truth to be a real worshipper of God. To worship a god who does not conform to the truths of Scripture is to practice idolatry.\(^{13}\) Worship concentrates both upon truth (doctrine) and devotion prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the conversation arrived at the subject of the Messiah. The Samaritans, as well as the Jews, looked for a coming Messiah, although their expectations differed significantly from those of Judaism.\(^{14}\) This woman, too, looked for Messiah. When He came all these matters would be straightened out (verse 25). It is at this point that Jesus made one of His boldest and clearest claims to be Messiah. “Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am He’” (John 4:26).

The reason Jesus refrained from bold claims to be Messiah in Israel was because of the wrong concept the nation had of Messiah’s activity. They looked for a political activist and revolutionary, not a sin-bearer. Here, away from Jewish fanaticism, Jesus was free to openly declare His identity.

It is possible that this statement of our Lord in verse 26 is even more bold than simply a declaration of His identity as Messiah. When our Lord said, ‘I who speak to you am He,’ the ‘He’ is not present in the original text, but rather supplied by the translators. Jesus, I believe, made claim to be the ‘I AM’ of the Old Testament, where God instructed Moses to tell the Israelites that “I AM” sent you (Exodus 3:14). If this is the case, Jesus claimed to be Messiah and God at the same moment.

**The Disciples Instructed**

*(4:27-38)*

The disciples arrived back at the well at the end of our Lord’s conversation with this woman, and they were absolutely amazed. We need to look carefully to grasp the true cause for their incredulous surprise. It was not because of this woman’s reputation, for they did not know what our Lord did concerning her past. Nor was it because she was a Samaritan. Notice John’s record: “And at this point His disciples came, and they marveled that He had been speaking with a woman …” (John 4:27).

The Rabbis had some very strict traditions concerning women. A man was not even to speak to his own wife in public. One of their sayings went like this:

“A man shall not be alone with a woman in an inn, not even with his sister or his daughter, on account of what men may think. A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even with his wife, and especially not with another woman, on account of what men may say.”\(^{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) “The Samaritan name for the Messiah was Taheb. … “He who returns,” or “He who restores.” According to Odeberg, “A prominent feature in the Taheb traditions was that the Redeemer, in accordance with Deut. 18 would teach the faithful concerning all things” (FG, p. 183). Dodd reminds us that we should not build too much on this figure, for our information about him is late and we do not know whether or not the Taheb was known in New Testament times (IFG, p. 240, n. 2). But Josephus recounts an incident where a man gathered armed men to Mt. Gerizim, saying that he would show them sacred vessels hidden there by Moses (Ant. xviii, 85). This looks very much like messianic expectation during the New Testament period.” Morris, p. 272, fn. 63.

\(^{15}\) “SBk, II, p. 438. Nor was it only discourse in public places that was discountenanced.” Jose B. Johanan of Jerusalem said: Let thy house be opened wide and let the needy be members of thy household; and talk not much with womankind. They said this of a man’s own wife: how much more of his fellow’s wife! Hence the Sages have said: He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna” (Ab. 1:5). R. Jose the Galilean once asked a woman, “By what road do we go to Lydda?” only to be rebuked by her: “Foolish Galilean, did not the Sages say this: Engage not in much talk with women? You should have asked: By which to Lydda?” (Erub. 53b; soncino trans., p. 374). Perhaps the greatest blot on the Rabbinic attitude to women was that, though the Rabbis held the study of the Law to be the greatest good in life, they discouraged women from studying it at all. When Ben Azzai suggested that women be taught the Law for certain purposes R. Eliezer replied: “If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery” (Sot. 3:4). The Rabbis regarded women as inferior to men in every way. A very ancient prayer
What may have appeared on the surface to be merely a concern for keeping appearances above reproach, was, in my estimation, only a thinly-veiled disdain for woman in general (cf. fn. 15). Our Lord refused to follow the narrow-mindedness of the Rabbis and the disciples did not dare to question Him about it (verse 27).

While the woman was inviting the townspeople to come out to the well, the disciples were urging Jesus to partake of the food they had purchased in town. Our Lord took this opportunity to instruct them about evangelism. The first lesson for the disciples was in the area of priorities. In a sense the disciples were merely mouthing again the first temptation of our Lord Jesus by Satan. They were more concerned about eating than evangelism. Our Lord reminded them that doing the will of God is more important than dining.

The reasons for this urgency in evangelism is two-fold. First of all, the time is far spent. The disciples seemed to sense no great urgency. The expression ‘There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest’ (verse 35) was very likely a colloquial way of saying, “What’s the hurry; there’s plenty of time.” Such a casual attitude was not acceptable to our Lord.

From the imperfect tense employed in verse 30 (‘were coming’) we are informed that while this conversation between Jesus and His disciples was taking place the crowds were making their way from Sychar to the well. I believe it is this our Lord referred to when He said, “… Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest” (John 4:35).

By this he meant for the disciples to see that there was no time for preparing a meal and eating it. Those hungry for the gospel, those ready for reaping, were arriving momentarily and God’s purpose to save is of far greater priority than that of eating a meal.

A second lesson in evangelism has to do with its nature. Those who were arriving at the well were those who were prepared to receive and respond. The work of Jesus and His disciples was that of reaping. It was the woman who had sown the seed, and they would bring in the harvest. That is the nature of evangelism. It is team work, a cooperative effort. So often today, it is represented as a one-man, one-time operation. I find that most often when people share with me how they came to the Savior it was a long process, often the combined efforts of several persons. Let the disciples learn from those who came to hear at the urging of the woman, that evangelism is a team effort. Some sow, others reap.

**The Salvation of a City**

(4:39-42)

It is significant to observe that the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus seemingly resulted in no noteworthy results. Personally, I do not feel that even Nicodemus was immediately saved. If you and I would have been asked to predict which evangelistic effort would produce the most fruit, we would undoubtedly have put our money on Nicodemus. But it is the (forbidden) conversation with this woman that led to the conversion of a city.

Initially, it was the woman’s testimony that convinced the Samaritans that Jesus was Messiah. But her words were like the light of the moon when compared with the sunlight of direct exposure to Jesus and His teaching. While Jesus could not stay in Judea, the Samaritans urged Him to remain with them (verse 40). While the Jews were still standoffish, the Samaritans were convinced that, “this One is indeed the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

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16 “There is evidence, moreover, that the agricultural year was divided into six two-month periods, seed-time, winter, spring, harvest, summer, and the time of extreme heat. Thus four months elapsed between the end of seed-time and the beginning of harvest. This might well have given rise to a proverbial saying indicating that there is no hurry for a particular task. The seed may be planted, but there is no way of getting round the months of waiting. Growth is slow and cannot be hurried.” Morris, pp. 278-279.
Interpretation and Application

Historic Interpretation

John’s purposes for including this conversation and resulting evangelistic campaign seem quite clear. First of all this account greatly contributes to John’s purpose of establishing the deity of Christ (John 20:31). Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, and the ‘I AM’ of the Old Testament (verse 26). In addition, He revealed His omniscience by disclosing to this woman the most intimate details of her life. Only she and God knew how many men had been in her life. In this, the woman recognized that Jesus knew all about her (verse 29).

Further, John included this incident in the life of our Lord in order to give an additional exposure to the message of the gospel, presented in just a slightly different way. Just as Jesus gently brought this woman to the point of recognition of His deity and of her sin and ignorant worship, so you must come to this same conclusion and commitment to enter into God’s heaven.

Finally, I believe John included this conversion story in order to foreshadow what was going to take place later on in His ministry. In John 3 and 4 we have two presentations of the Gospel, back to back. The one conversation is with a representative of orthodox Judaism. It has no apparent immediate results and has no significant repercussions. The other is with a representative of the Gentiles so rejected and despised by orthodox Jews. She is immediately converted and that leads to the salvation of a city.

Such was soon to be the case on a much greater scale. Orthodox Jewish leadership would be instrumental in rejecting Messiah and hanging Him upon a Roman cross. But the rejection of the Jews meant salvation for the Gentiles (cf. Romans 11:15, 28, 31-32). This event in Samaria was prophetic of things to come. The rejection of the Jews and the salvation of many Gentiles was evident, even at the earliest stages of our Lord’s ministry.

Lessons for Living

There are many levels of application for men today in this text. We will give our attention to some of the most obvious.

(1) Lessons in Evangelism. One of the most common questions about evangelism pertains to the timing of it. When should I witness? The New Testament reports almost nothing of the kind of witnessing most familiar (and frightening) to us today—that of door-to-door, or some type of cold presentation. Our Lord witnessed in the midst of His normal activities. Two guidelines for when to witness emerge from this text: (a) When you have the opportunity. (b) When you have a listening ear.

The Lord had an opportunity to witness at the well. It might be better to say that the Lord made an opportunity. She did not ask Jesus the way to heaven. He brought her around to the subject. One far wiser than I gave this guideline. “Whenever in the course of a conversation I have the choice of determining the topic of discussion I make every effort to speak of spiritual things.”

The Lord had the opportunity to bring the conversation with the Samaritan woman to spiritual matters, and He used it to full advantage. I believe this is what Paul referred to when he wrote, “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person” (Colossians 4:5-6).

Once having arrived at spiritual things we should be sensitive to interest or hostility. We should not ‘cast our pearls before swine’ by forcing an unwanted discussion. Rather, like Jesus, we should pursue spiritual conversation as deeply as the unbeliever wants to carry it.

We must be sensitive to the situation. Our Lord had one point of contact with this woman. He pressed on until she trusted in Him. Whenever I have unbelievers come to me for counsel or I visit an unbeliever in the hospital, I make the effort to give them the gospel clearly and completely. I realize I may never speak to them again. But I don’t press so hard with my neighbors. I have to live with them and generally I must be more gradual.

There is a most significant lesson for us in this passage about how we should witness. There is no one ‘canned’ approach that our Lord forced indiscriminately upon everyone He encountered, rather the Gospel is individualized. How different was His approach to Nicodemus than to this woman.
More significant is the way our Lord gradually moved from impersonal communication to that which was intimate. Here is a tremendous blind spot for many Christians. When once we are saved, our new life crops out everywhere. We want to share Christ with others. We are far more open in our expression of emotions, joys, convictions and so on. But the unbelieving world is just the opposite. They are touchy about spiritual things. They are frightened of them, and they make every effort to avoid the subject. For a Christian to suddenly blurt out, “Are you a Christian?” is absolute trauma. It is something like my meeting you casually and asking your take-home pay.

Communication research indicates that there are several levels of communication. The least intimate is that on the level of the cliche, “How’s it going?” “Great.” “Nice weather,” and so on. Then there is the next level of that which is routine and non-personal. “How do I find Main Street?” It is not until we begin to express our opinions, our feelings, our aspirations, fears, and so on that we really begin to communicate. (Incidentally, there is all too little communication, even in Christian homes.)

When our Lord spoke with this woman, he began an a very unthreatening level. He asked for a drink of water. Actually, this woman initiated a deeper level of communication by bringing up the ethic and cultural differences which separated Jews and Samaritans. Jesus chose not to dwell on that subject and pressed on to spiritual matters, couched in familiar terms (‘living water’). When the woman’s curiosity was sufficiently aroused, the Lord Jesus began to delve into the most intimate area of this woman’s life. By revealing her sinful past, the spiritual need and necessity of salvation was in the open. It was only at this point that a meaningful theological discussion could occur. When Jesus at last corrected her theology, He revealed His identity as Messiah.

If many of us had been sitting at that well when this woman came to draw from it, we would probably have blundered, “Are you saved?” It is no wonder so many people are turned off by the witness of Christians. If I could give any advice to those who sincerely desire to share their faith, I would suggest two things. First of all, learn the Gospel so well that you are free to share it with great flexibility, rather than in terms of a formula. Second, develop the ability to communicate with people, and begin at home. Whenever we begin to communicate with people about deep-felt beliefs, fears, problems, etc., then the Gospel touches people where they really hurt. Most of us don’t know our friends and neighbors on intimate enough terms to be able to touch their deepest needs with a word from God.

(2) A Lesson on Guidance. Many people are greatly troubled about discerning the will of God. How did our Lord Jesus discern that it was the will of God for Him to pass through Samaria and witness to these people? I do not think that He received any spectacular revelations, nor do I believe He had some strange inner urge.

First of all, our Lord acted on biblical principle. The Old Testament Scriptures told of Israel’s responsibility to take the light of the Gospel to the nations. Although there were racial and cultural barriers between Jews and Samaritans, there were no biblical ones. To the contrary, the Scriptures insisted upon evangelizing the nations. Second, and this will probably smack of being unspiritual, passing through Samaria was the shortest and fastest route. My friend, don’t spend hours praying for guidance in matters which can be settled by common sense. If God wants you to do the unusual, He can make it clear. I know of a seminary professor who’s flight schedule was inexcusably altered so that he missed his plane. As he sat waiting in a coffee shop, he encountered a woman who desperately needed a word from God. When God has such unusual appointments, you can be sure you will not miss them. God’s guidance is always within the confines of what is biblical, and most often in accord with what is practical and logical.

(3) A Lesson on Culture. The thing about Jesus that caught the Samaritan’s initial attention was the fact that He was not controlled by His culture as a Jewish Rabbi. Whenever our culture is contrary to the Scriptures, it must bend. Our Lord did not shrink from speaking to a woman, and thus shocked His disciples. Our Lord did not hesitate to witness to a Samaritan. Jesus was not controlled by culture.

Having said this, I must hasten to add that Jesus did not totally reject or ignore culture. The culture to which He was most sensitive was not His own, but that of the woman. He bent His culture in order to cross over the barriers imposed by the Samaritan woman. Some of the greatest faux pas committed by Christians are senseless violations of culture. Jesus did not let His culture keep Him from reaching those of another.

Perhaps you have not considered the fact that Christians have a unique culture of their own. That is often why we work so hard at meeting all the time. We want to isolate ourselves from the world (and its culture) from...
within the walls of the church (and its culture). I am privileged to participate in a ministry designed to reach Blacks. I am most grateful to God for my Black brethren who have sought (and continue to do so) to enhance my understanding of the Black culture. Many of you could probably profit from such an education as I am receiving. But I would like to suggest that you make an intensive effort at learning the culture of your unsaved neighbors. I did not ask you to adopt it, but to accept it for what it is. Set aside those non-essentials of your culture, and adapt your witness to the culture of the unsaved American.

(4) A Lesson in Worship. We have already touched on the subject of worship, but let me simply remind you of the essentials of true worship. It is first of all factual—that is, it must be consistent with the truth revealed in the pages of the Word of God and in the person of the Son of God. Second, our worship must be 'in spirit.' Worship is not mechanical, not a ritual. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s working in the life of the Christian. There is no worship apart from truth and spirit.
Lesson 8:  
The Meaning of the Miracles  
(Mark 4: 35-41)  

Introduction  

When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. Henry M. Morris, co-author of *The Genesis Flood*, spoke to the student body. In an effort to distinguish between Class A and Class B miracles, Dr. Morris told the true story of a young pilot named Tom (now with Missionary Aviation Fellowship) who was flying at 30,000 feet when his plane exploded. All in the plane were killed except Tom. As Tom was plummeting to the earth, he pulled the rip cord, but his chute failed to open. At the last minute, the chute did open but it was in shreds, hardly breaking the speed of his fall.  

Meanwhile, a Christian woman was standing in her drive watching this horrifying scene. Knowing he was in desperate trouble, the woman prayed for his safe descent. Tom, needless to say, was praying, too. Tom landed virtually at the feet of the woman. Looking up, they saw that the ropes of his parachute had caught in two trees, breaking his fall and lowering him gently to the ground.  

The most interesting point about this true story is that Dr. Morris used it as an illustration of what he called Class B miracles. After recounting the story, Dr. Morris said to the assembled faculty and student body, “Now men, don’t be overly impressed by the Class B miracles.”  

Since we understood Dr. Morris’ conservative theological position, we were not upset, but amazed at his dry sense of humor. But the sad truth is that many theologians throughout the history of the church have not taken any of the miracles of our Lord seriously. The Jews of our Lord’s day did not challenge the actual events, but rather the power by which these miracles were performed (cf. Mark 3:22ff.) The heathen Greeks did not challenge the miraculous event either, but only its interpretation.1 Others, such as Spinoza, held the pantheistic view that miracles were contrary to the nature of God.2 Miracles were considered impossible by Spinoza because of his presuppositions. Skeptics, like Hume, held that miracles are simply incredible, because they contradict man’s normal experience.3 Since Hume doubted that nothing could be known with absolute certainty, those phenomenon which took place outside of the normal course of nature could never be accepted as true. Schleiermacher and others explained the miraculous in terms of the unknown and misunderstood. Our Lord’s miracles were ‘relative miracles,’ as a savage might consider television, which he does not understand.4 The Rationalistic School would have men believe that Christ never claimed to perform any miracles. Only those who sought the spectacular found something miraculous in the records.5 Christ did not change the water to wine at Cana, but merely provided a new supply of wine. He did not walk on the water, but on the nearby shore. Others, Like Woolston have found the Gospel miracles to have no factual or historical validity, but are merely ‘tales’ which contain a much deeper spiritual truth.6

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1 “Having recounted various miracles wrought, as he affirms, by Appolionus, he proceeds thus: ‘Yet do we not account him who has done such things for a god, only for a man beloved of the gods: while the Christians, on the contrary, on the ground of a few insignificant wonder works, proclaim their Jesus for a God.’” R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), p. 39.  
3 Ibid., pp. 42-44.  
4 Ibid., pp. 44-46.  
5 Ibid., pp. 46-48.  
6 “...Woolston undertook, by the engines of allegorical interpretation, to dislodge them from these also, and with this view published his notorious *Letters on the Miracles*. It is his manner in these to take certain miracles which Christ did, or which were wrought in relation to Him, two or three in a letter; he then seeks to show that, understood in their literal sense, they are stuffed so full with extravagances, contradictions, absurdities, that no reasonable man can suppose Christ actually to have wrought them; while as little could the Evangelists, as
Such are the views of the skeptics and critics of God’s Word. But for the sincere student of Scripture, there is no satisfaction in these theories. The miracles are an integral part of our Lord’s ministry. They not only authenticate His message; they are a vital part of it.

We have been studying highlights in the Life and Ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have already dealt with the period of preparation, and are now considering the presentation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. The miracles of our Lord are an essential part of that presentation, for, in part, they authenticate His claim as Messiah.

The Terms Employed

The miraculous works of our Lord Jesus were communicated by the use of three primary terms, each of which accentuated one particular facet of the supernatural activity of Christ. These three terms are found together in several passages. “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22, cf. also 2 Corinthians 12:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:9).

The term ‘miracle’ (dunamis), emphasizes the mighty work that has been done, and, in particular, the power by which it was accomplished. The event is described in terms of the power of God in action.

If ‘miracle’ emphasizes the cause of the miraculous event, ‘wonder’ (teras), underscores its effect on those who are witnesses. On many occasions, the crowds (even the disciples) were amazed and astonished by the works of our Lord (e.g. Mark 2:12; 4:41; 6:51, etc.). Origen pointed out long ago that this term ‘wonder’ is never employed alone in the New Testament, but always in conjunction with some other term which suggests something far greater than a mere spectacle.

The most pregnant term used with reference to the miracles of our Lord is ‘sign’ (sēmeion), which focuses upon the deeper meaning of the miracle. A sign is a miracle which conveys a truth about our Lord Jesus. A miracle is usually a sign, but a sign need not always be a miracle (cf. Luke 2:12).

honest men, men who had the credit of their Lord at heart, have intended to record them as actually wrought, or desired us to receive them as other than allegories, spiritual truths clothed in the garb of historic events. The enormous difference between himself and those early Church writers, to whom he appeals, and whose views he professes to be only re-asserting, is this: they said, This history, being real, has also a deeper ideal sense; he upon the contrary, Since it is impossible that this history can be real, therefore it must have a spiritual significance. They build upon the establishment of the historic sense, he upon its ruins.” Ibid., p. 49.

7 “There is an indissoluble connexion of proclamation, miracle, and faith. The Gospel miracle cannot be isolated from this service. None of the miracles takes place in a vacuum. None of them takes place, or is recounted, or claims significance, in and for itself. Their significance is only as actualizations of His Word, as calls to repentance and faith.” Everett F. Harrison, A Short Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 109.

8 “Wescott wrote, ‘They (miracles) are essentially a part of the revelation, and not merely a part of it.’ Warfield expressed himself similarly. ‘Miracles are not merely credentials of revelation, but vehicles of revelation as well.’” Ibid., p. 116.

8 “Origen … long ago called attention to the fact that the name repara is never in the N.T. applied to these words of wonder, except in association with some other name. … The observation was well worth the making; for the fact which we are thus bidden to note is indeed eminently characteristic of the miracles of the N.T.; namely, that a title, by which more than any other these might seem to hold on to the prodigies and portents of the heathen world, and to have something akin to them, should thus never be permitted to appear, except in the company of some other necessarily suggesting higher thoughts about them.” Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Marshallton, Delaware: The National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.), p. 320.

9 “In this word (‘sign’) the ethical purpose of the miracle comes out the most prominently, as in “wonder” the least. They are signs and pledges of something more than and beyond themselves (Isai. vii. 11; xxxviii. 7); valuable, not so much for what they are, as for what they indicate of the grace and power of the doer, or of the connection in which he stands with a higher world. Oftentimes they are thus seals of power set to the person who
The miracles of our Lord are at one and the same time a visible manifestation of divine power (miracle) an awe-inspiring spectacle (wonder), and an instructive revelation about God (sign).  

**Classification of the Miracles**

Perhaps the most common classification of the miracles of our Lord is into three categories: (1) those which pertain to nature; (2) those which pertain to man; and, (3) those which pertain to the spirit world.

I find it helpful to distinguish between what can be called ‘Class A’ and ‘Class B’ miracles. ‘Class A’ miracles overrule or transcend the laws of nature. Such would be the case of our Lord’s walking on the water (Mark 6:45-52). Here the law of gravity was overruled. ‘Class B’ miracles do not overtly violate natural laws. For example, the stilling of the storm did not appear to violate any natural law. Storms on this lake, we are told, stopped as quickly as they commenced. The fact that it stopped at the time of our Lord’s rebuke is evidence of His sovereignty over nature. ‘Class B’ miracles would be viewed by unbelievers as mere coincidence. ‘Class A’ miracles, such as the raising of Lazarus were an outright affront to natural laws and processes (thus the statement, ‘he stinks’ in John 11:39, stressing the normal course of nature). Both categories, ‘Class A’ and ‘Class B,’ are miracles, but ‘Class A’ miracles are more undeniably so to the skeptic.

**Characteristics of the Miracles of Our Lord**

Miraculous deeds were not unknown to the age in which our Lord revealed Himself to men. But the miracles which He accomplished were far different than those claimed by other religions. For a few moments, we shall attempt to characterize the miracles of our Lord:

1. **They were truly historical.** In the Gospel accounts, the writers have not presented the miracles of our Lord as anything other than actual events. They are not true myths, mythical stories with ‘spiritual lessons,’ but real events conveying spiritual truths. The Miracles of other religions are far more mythical in nature. Though perhaps not precisely stated, we can sense a kind of ‘once upon a time’ mood. Not so in the Gospels.

2. **They were reasonable.** The miracles of the Apocryphal Gospels are fantastic and questionable. They are completely out of character, with Jesus arbitrarily and capriciously using His supernatural powers. In contrast, the Gospels show a highly ethical use of His power, in a way totally consistent with His person.
(3) They were useful. Almost every miracle of our Lord was designed to meet a physical need. Our Lord refused to employ His powers to satisfy His own appetites, or to ensure His protection. He turned down every invitation to do the miraculous to satisfy idle curiosity (cf. Luke 23:8).

(4) They were accomplished openly. The miracles were performed in the most public situations, not oft in a dark corner. While so many alleged ‘miracles’ of today defy documentation, those of our Lord were mainly public.

(5) They were accomplished simply. Others who claimed to be ‘miracle workers’ always operated with a great deal of ritual and ceremony. A ‘miracle’ was an extravaganza, a carrying-on with pomp and circumstance. Our Lord most often merely spoke a word, and at times performed His miraculous deeds at a distance (cf. Matthew 8:5-13).

(6) They were accomplished instantly. With very few exceptions, the miracles of Jesus were completed instantly and completely.

(7) They were accomplished in a variety of circumstances. While some could do their deeds only under the most controlled environment, Jesus did His works under a great variety of circumstances. His powers were demonstrated over nature, over sickness and disease, and over the forces of Satan. The sicknesses He healed were of amazing variety.¹⁴

(8) They were accomplished on the basis of faith. The miracles of the Gospels were accomplished on the basis of faith, either that of our Lord (cf. John 11:41-43), or of the one cured (cf. Mark 5:34), or of others who are concerned (cf. Matthew 8:10, Mark 2:5). Where there was little faith, little was accomplished (cf. Mark 6:5,6).

(9) They were gratuitous. While in the cults, a fee of payments was expected, the miracles of our Lord were free of charge. No fee was expected or accepted. Our Lord’s ministry, from start to finish, was one of grace.

(10) They were free from retaliation. With the possible exception of the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14) none of the miracles of Jesus were of a punitive or negative variety. This is in contrast, not only to the desires of his own disciples (Luke 9:52-56), but also the practices of other ‘healers’ of His day, and even of what often occurred in the Old Testament.¹⁵

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¹⁴ “Jesus cured a wide variety of complaints. Making due allowance for the imprecise medical terminology of the Gospels, we may distinguish various forms of paralysis, congenital defects like blindness, deafness and dumbness, diseases like leprous, dropsy and fever, hemorrhage, curvature of the spine, and a severed ear. If even half of these are correctly diagnosed, the Gospel account of Jesus healing ‘all kinds of diseases’ seems no exaggeration.” R. T. France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976), p. 67.

¹⁵ “Those of the Old wear oftentimes a far severer aspect than those of the New. They are miracles, indeed, of God’s grace, but yet also miracles of the Law, of that Law which worketh wrath, which will teach, at all costs, the lesson of the awful holiness of God. Miracles of the Law, they preserve a character that accords with the Law; being oftentimes fearful outbreaks of God’s anger against the unrighteousness of men; such for instance are the signs and wonders in Egypt, many of those in the desert (Num. xvi. 31; Lev. x. 2), and some which the later prophets wrought (2 Kin. i. 10-12; ii. 23-25); leprosies are inflicted (Num. xii. 10; 2 Chr. xxvi. 19), not removed; a sound hand is withered and dried up (1 Kin. xiii. 4), not a withered hand restored. Not but that these works also are for the most part what our Lord’s are altogether and with no single exception, namely, works of evident grace.
(11) **They were eschatological.** The miracles of Jesus were evidence of the dawn of a new age. With the presentation of Jesus as Messiah, a new age had begun. He had come to restore man from his fallen state, and creation from the chaos resulting from sin. He had come to restore and to save. Man had been placed on the earth to rule over it. When the last Adam (Jesus Christ) came nature immediately recognized its master. When our Lord confronted sickness and disease He mastered it. He came to save, and thus the word often used for healing was ‘to save.’

The Purpose of the Miracles

Several purposes emerge from the Scriptures for the exercise of miracles by our Lord.

(1) **They attracted men.** Though not the primary thrust of our Lord’s miraculous ministry, one outcome was that His miracles attracted men and women who were anxious to hear His message. To many, His deeds were at least those of a prophet (cf. John 3:2; 4:19). Here was a man with a message from God.

Our Lord made many attempts to avoid the spectacular and to arouse misdirected Messianic hopes (Matthew 8:4; 12:16; 16:20, etc.). But we must also recall that it was the miraculous healing ministry of Jesus which drew the multitudes to the place where the Sermon on the Mount was delivered (Matthew 4:24-25).

(2) **They accredited Jesus.** It was expected that when Messiah came He would be accredited by miracles. When our Lord presented Himself at the synagogue in Nazareth, He quoted a passage from Isaiah chapter 61:

> “And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord’” (Luke 4:17-19).

The people expected Messiah to present Himself by signs (John 7:31). Our Lord’s power over demons demonstrates the coming of the Kingdom: “But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). By reason of His work alone, men should receive Him as Messiah (John 10:37-38).

(3) **They reveal God.** As we have previously noted, the miracles of Jesus were not merely deeds to authenticate the message of Messiah, but a vital part of that message. The miracles not only revealed the power of God, but His person. In the miracles of Jesus we see the sympathy and compassion of God. Jesus was deeply moved by human suffering and need (cf. John 11:35). These needs prompted Him to action. Again, the miracles reveal Jesus to be the Redeemer and Restorer of a fallen universe. He came to save.

and mercy. I affirm this of all our Lord’s miracles; for that single one, which seems an exception, the cursing of the barren fig-tree, has no right really to be considered such. He needed to declare, not in word only but in act, what would be the consequences of an obstinate unfruitfulness and resistance to his grace, and thus to make manifest the severer side of his ministry. He chose for the showing out of this, not one among all the sinners who were about Him, but displayed his power upon a tree, which, itself incapable of feeling, might yet effectually serve as a sign and warning to men. He will allow no single exception to the rule of grace and love. When He blesses, it is men; but when He smites, it is an unfeeling tree.” Trench, *Miracles*, pp. 25-26.

16 “The word commonly employed of our Lord’s gracious acts is *heal*, but now and again the word is *save* (to make sound or whole), pointing to a connection between the restoration of afflicted bodies and the saving of the soul. The Lord came to redeem the whole man. Not infrequently the healing of the body was closely linked to a pronouncement of forgiveness of sins, as in the case of the paralytic who was brought by his four friends (Mk. 2:1-12). The Savior bore men’s sicknesses and infirmities in the days of public ministry, and their sins he bore at its close.” Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ*, p. 117.
The Stilling of the Storm
(Mark 4:35-41)

Jesus had spent the entire day teaching the multitudes (verse 35), entering into a new phase of teaching by the use of parables. No doubt, He was completely exhausted, as any preacher could testify. Our Lord had been sitting in the little boat, and apparently without even getting out of the boat, they pushed away from shore and set out for the other side of the lake, leaving the multitudes behind. Following along were other little ships (verse 36).

Within moments, our Lord was in a deep sleep in the stern of the ship, resting an a cushion. (This is the only reference in the Gospels to our Lord sleeping.) Some have piously referred to this sleep as the slumber of faith. If I could be less spiritual, I would simply call it the slumber of fatigue. Once again the humanity of our Lord Jesus is evidenced.

The Sea of Galilee was surrounded by hills, through which the winds violently funneled, creating violent storms which ceased as quickly as began. Such a storm arose as they were in the middle of the lake. The waves were lashing at the ship, filling it faster than the men could bail it out. Even these seasoned sailors were terrified. Higher and higher the water rose within the ship as well as without. How incongruous it must have seemed to the disciples for Jesus to be resting peacefully while they were floundering helplessly.

When they could stand it no longer, they abruptly and rudely wakened the Master with words of rebuke, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38). Although the synoptic writers describe the event independently, Mark (as reported by Peter) chose to report their rudeness by the fact that He was not called Master, or Lord, but only Teacher.

Many Bible students seem to think that the underlying problem was the lack of the disciples faith in God’s protection since Messiah was in their midst. The ship, they tell us, could not have sunk. It is my personal opinion that the disciples believed that Jesus was fully able to save them. That is why they called on Him for help. The real problem of the disciples is precisely that of Christians today; they did not rebuke Jesus for His inability, but rather for His indifference. “Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?” What irked these men was not that Jesus was helpless in the face of the storm but heedless of it. They were sinking and He was sleeping! Don’t You care?

When Jesus was awakened, He rebuked the winds and the waves. The forces of nature recognized their Lord even if the disciples did not. There was an immediate calm. But not only did the wind and the waves need a word of rebuke, so did the faithless disciples. “Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?” (Mark 4:40). You see, the ‘lack of faith’ for which Jesus rebuked His disciples was not a lack of faith in His ability to save, but a lack of faith in His attentiveness to our needs. Their ‘God’ was able to save, but insensitive to their need.

The words of our Lord, and even more, the obedience of the wind and the waves overcame the disciples with wonder and awe. “Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” (Mark 4:41).

The question of the disciples is probably rhetorical, and the answer is left for us to supply. That answer is not difficult to arrive at. The Jews believed that only God had power over the winds and the seas. “O Lord God of Hosts, who is like Thee, O mighty Lord? Thy faithfulness also surrounds Thee. Thou dost rule the swelling of the sea; When its waves rise, Thou dost still them” (Psalm 89:8,9). The disciples believed that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, but because their concept of Messiah was largely shaped by that of their contemporaries, they had much to learn. Their understanding of this One would continue to increase, even until the time of His ascension. But now they are forced to the conclusion that He was far more than they anticipated. He had authority even over the forces of nature.

17 Geldenhuys, for example, states, “Just as it was impossible for that ship, with the Redeemer of the world on board, to founder, no matter how many storms broke over it, so it is equally impossible for the church of Christ, the body of which He Himself is the Head and Preserver, ever to be destroyed, notwithstanding all the forces of hell that continually assail it.” Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), pp. 252-253.
Application

The unbelief of the disciples is just as evident in us who are Christians today as it was in that little ship, tossed by the sea. It is not so much that we doubt God’s ability to save as it is God’s awareness of our needs. We falsely suppose that because our Lord is with us the storms of life will pass us by. And when the trials of life sweep full force over us and it seems that we are losing ground, here our faith is tested. We impugn the character of God by challenging His failure to act in our defense. We wonder at why God seems to be ‘asleep at the wheel’ while we are only too aware of our impending peril. We do not doubt God’s power to act in our behalf; we wonder at His refusal to act. Can God really care for us and let us sail headlong into disaster? It is God’s timing that we question. Our Lord’s sleep was that of human fatigue, but God was not asleep, as Elijah accused Baal (1 Kings 18:27). God delays His deliverance of men to the point of despair so that His salvation will be acknowledged as totally divine. It was only when the disciples were snatched from the jaws of death that they sensed their inability and His omnipotence. We must trust God’s ability as well as His timing if we are to be people of faith.

The miracles of our Lord force us to come to a decision concerning Jesus Christ. He was no mere man. His claims were either that of God or of a lunatic or a liar. The Person the Gospel writers present to us is no mere man, and His mighty works (miracles) must be taken as seriously as He.

“But there are no such miracles today,” you respond. No, as such there are not. But it was not the miracles alone which brought men to faith. It was belief in what our Lord said, in the final analysis. You must respond by faith or rejection to the works of our Lord as documented by the Gospel writers. But more than this you must place your faith in the Person of Jesus Christ Who came to bear the penalty for your sins and to provide the righteousness which God requires for salvation. Ultimately, it is the condition of your heart that determines your response to Jesus Christ and not the spectacular works which He performed.

“But he said, ‘No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead’” (Luke 16:30-31).
Lesson 9:
The Gerasene Demoniac
(Mark 5:1-20)

Introduction

The subject of demons and demon possession has always seemed somewhat remote and academic to sophisticated 20th century Americans. Bible-believing Christians have always accepted the fact of demons and their activity in New Testament times, but most of us are inclined to relegate demonic activity in these days to pagan lands and missionary experiences.

In recent years the matter has been getting uncomfortably close to home. My office mate of several years back was interrupted by a young and very zealous new Christian teacher accompanied by a student from whom she wanted my friend to cast out a demon. Not long after that, while I was still a student in seminary, there was a car parked by the seminary in a somewhat suspicious manner and I called the police to check it out. Five squad cars converged on it. I felt somewhat guilty, particularly fearing that I may have created an unintentional hardship for some classmate. A friend of mine told me later that two students were attempting to cast a demon out of a fellow. I have always wondered what my Christian brothers had to say to the police officers by way of explanation.

Like it or not, demons and demonic activity are likely to become much more of a concern to you in days to come. Paul tells us that our struggle is, at bottom, a spiritual one (Ephesians 6:12). Even in our sophisticated times, there is an intense interest in the supernatural and the occult. Ouija boards are found in many American homes. Horoscopes and astrological predictions are found in most major newspapers. In the past several weeks, there has come to light the case of a man arrested for various crimes who has several of the symptoms of demon possession, including multiple personalities, even multiple IQs.

For the Christian, there are two extremes which must be avoided with reference to Satanic activity. As C. S. Lewis aptly put it:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.

The confrontation between the powers of heaven and hell are nowhere seen in better perspective than in Mark’s account of the encounter of the Gerasene demoniac with our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Setting

(5:1)

In the third chapter of Mark’s Gospel, our Lord’s miraculous works were attributed by His opponents to the power of Satan (verse 22). Our Lord responded sternly by calling this accusation blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and as such was the one unpardonable sin (verses 28-30). From this point on, Jesus began to speak to the crowds in parables in order to veil or conceal the gospel from those who had blasphemed the Holy Spirit (Mark 4:1ff). At the conclusion of this day of teaching by parables, the Lord had instructed His disciples to cross over the Sea of Galilee to the other side. This is when the storm arose which threatened to destroy the ship (Mark 4:35-41). Sometime after the Lord Jesus miraculously calmed the storm, the ship landed, perhaps late in the evening.

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2 Edersheim maintains that it must have been late the same night of the storm: “Most writers have, indeed, suggested, that the healing of the demonized on the other side took place at early dawn of the day following the storm on the lake. But the distance is so short that, even making allowance for the delay by the tempest, the passage could scarcely have occupied the whole night. This supposition would be further confirmed, if ‘the evening’ when Jesus embarked was what the Jews were wont to call ‘the first evening,’ that is, the time when the
other side of the lake in the country of the Gerasenes.\(^3\) If, indeed, it was late at night, the scene must have been an eerie one, with the nerves of the disciples already worn thin by the terrifying experience of the storm.

**The Malady of the Madman**

(5:2-5)

Immediately, as this weary group disembarked from the ship, they were met by what appeared to be a madman. Our children would probably understand best if I said that his appearance must have been somewhat like

sun was declining in the heaven, but before it had actually set, the latter time being ‘the second evening.’ For it seems most unlikely that multitudes would have resorted to Jesus at Capernaum after ‘the second evening,’ or that either the disciples or other boats would have put to sea after nightfall. On the other hand, the scene gains in grandeur—has, so to speak, a fitting background—if we suppose the Saviour and His disciples to have landed on the other side late in the evening, when perhaps the silvery moon was shedding her pale light on the weird scene, and laying her halo around the shadows cast upon the sea by the steep cliff down which the herd of swine hurried and fell. This would also give time afterwards for the dispersion, not only into ‘the city,’ but into ‘the country’ of them who had fed the swine. In that case, of course, it would be in the early morning that the Gerasenes afterwards resorted to Jesus and that He again returned to Capernaum. And, lastly, this would allow sufficient time for those miracles which took place on that second day in Capernaum after His return thither. Thus, all the circumstances lead us to regard the healing of the demonized at Gerasa as a night scene, immediately on Christ’s arrival from Capernaum, and after the calming of the storm at sea.” Alford Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, pp. 606-607.

\(^3\) Skeptics and liberals have made much of the differences between the Gospel writers as to the place Jesus landed with His disciples. Textual variations have compounded the problem. Lane believes the modern Kersa is the most likely place:

“The point of arrival is indicated in a general way as the district of the Gerasenes, most probably in reference to a town whose name is preserved in the modern Kersa or Koursi. At the side of Kersa the shore is level, and there are no tombs. But about a mile further south there is a fairly steep slope within forty yards from the shore, and about two miles from there cavern tombs are found which appear to have been used for dwellings.” William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p.181.

Earle’s comments are helpful: “The difference in names for the destination on the east side of the lake has caused considerable comment. In the King James Version it is called the country of the Gadarenes in Mark and Luke, and of the Gergesenes in Matthew. As indicated in the textual note, the best Greek text reads Gerasenes in Mark and Luke, Gadarenes in Matthew. There seems to be no excuse here for the charge of contradiction. Dr. Thomson discovered on the eastern shore the ruins of a village called Khersa. This is probably the Gerasa of Mark and Luke. The reference could hardly be to the better known Gerasa (Jerash) between thirty and forty miles southeast from the lake. On the other hand, Gadara is only six miles from the southern tip of the lake and could easily have given its name to the district. Gergesa may have been a variant spelling of Gerasa.” Ralph Earle, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 70.

F. F. Bruce adds additional helpful insight: “According to the best texts, Matthew calls it “the country of the Gadarenes” (viii. 28); Mark “the country of the Gerasenes” (v. 1), and Luke, probably, “the country of the Gergesenes” (viii. 26). T. H. Huxley, in his *Essays upon some Controverted Questions* (1892), made merry over the escape of the Gadarene swine, running the seven miles between Gadar and the lake of Galilee, crossing the deep river Yarmuk en route. The best known Gerasa was a Greek city nearly forty miles southeast of the lake (modern village of Khersa, on the east shore of the lake. Luke’s reading “Gergesenes” may represent even more accurately the ancient name of this place, as Origen knew of a Gergesa on the lake of Galilee. But the city of Gadara owned some territory round about Khersa, so that the district and the pigs could properly also be called Gadarene.” F. F. Bruce, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1950), fn. 1, pp. 61-62.
that of the television creation, The Incredible Hulk. Although his symptoms would have appeared to be those of an insane man, the Gospel writers inform us that he was demon-possessed.

4 “According to the Talmud there were four characteristics of madness: walking abroad at night; spending the night on a grave; tearing one's clothes and destroying what one was given. This man demonstrated all four characteristics.” Lane, Mark, p. 182, fn. 7.

5 We are indebted to Edersheim, who reminds us that the expression ‘demon possession’ never occurs in the New Testament: ‘The term ‘demoniacal possession’ occurs not in the New Testament. We owe it to Josephus, from whom it has passed into ecclesiastical language. We dismiss it the more readily, that, in our view, it conveys a wrong impression. The New Testament speaks of those who had a spirit, or a demon, or demons, or an unclean spirit, or the spirit of an unclean demon, but chiefly of persons who were ‘demonised.’” Edersheim, Life and Times, I, p. 479.

It is Geldenhuys who gives us the most concise description of ‘demon-possession’: “in the New Testament demon-possession means that a person is dominated by the spirit of a demon and tormented by him. It is noteworthy that it is distinguished (especially in the Gospel of the physician, Luke) from cases of ordinary sickness, insanity (‘lunacy’), leprosy, blindness, lameness, deafness and other natural defects and diseases (cf. e.g., Matt. iv. 23, 24. viii. 16. x. 8; Mark vi. 13; Luke iv. 40, vii. 21,22). Accordingly this was not merely an ordinary form of mental disease as some writers have alleged, but a special phenomenon which was particularly frequent during Jesus’ earthly sojourn and thus was directly connected with His coming to destroy the power of darkness.

That the unclean spirits were personal beings is evident from what is related about their leaving a possessed person, talking or crying out, possessing knowledge concerning Jesus, as well as other supernatural knowledge—showing fear, and the like.

Demon-possession is, therefore, not merely a mental state in which someone suffers from a delusion or is subjected to some subjective disturbance of the world of ideas. Neither is it only a kind of physical disease, although spiritual and physical disease often accompany it (e.g. Matt. xii. 22, xvii. 15; Mark ix. 18).

It is noteworthy that Jesus nowhere speaks of forgiveness of sins or of purification-sacrifices, that have to be brought after His curing of such cases (as He did in some cases of physical illness). Those possessed are depicted throughout as unfortunate sufferers who by no fault of their own are dominated by evil spirits and who, when the spirits are cast out by Jesus, accept their deliverance with joy and gratitude (Mark v. 18-20, Luke viii. 2).

It should also be observed that nowhere in the Old Testament (except in I Sam. xvi. 14ff. and 1 Kings xxii. 22ff. where something similar occurs) is a demon-possession mentioned, and that outside the Gospels it is referred to only twice in the New Testament (Acts xvi. 16ff., xix. 13ff.). From this it is clear that demon-possession is a phenomenon which occurred almost exclusively, but then to be sure on an amazing scale, during Jesus’ appearance on earth and to a lesser extent during the activity of the apostles. For the reason why this is so we refer the reader to the introduction preceding the exposition of verses 33-7.

Although demon-possession after that time no longer occurs on such a devastating and noticeable scale, the absolute form of demon-possession will appear at the end of the age in the Antichrist and in his followers (2 Thess. ii. 9. Rev. xiii. 2ff., xv. 8ff.). But then also Christ will triumph, and finally put an end to the evil one and all his powers of darkness (Rev. xvii. 14). Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 174.

Putting all of these factors together the term demon-possessed implies too much. It indicates full and permanent control. This was surely not so in every case, and perhaps in none. Men and women (as well as children) were ‘demonized’ in that they fell under the influence of these unclean spirits. Some appeared not to be oppressed by them so much as exploiting their powers (cf. Acts 16:16), while others were the virtual pawns of these spirits, losing their own identity and autonomy. When addressed, the person was the mouthpiece of the demon (such as Legion, Mark 5:9). Demonized individuals are not to be viewed so much as a pigeon hole category, as they are a continuum. The spectrum ranges from those who seem to control the demonic powers to those who are utterly controlled by them. The best human analogy might be in the area of drug abuse. Some illicitly use drugs, supposing that they have them completely under their control. Others are absolutely controlled (hooked) by the drug and totally dependent upon it.
Although the manifestations of demonization vary widely, this man evidenced several of the classic symptoms.

1. **Severe personality change.** The ‘before’ and ‘after’ descriptions of the demoniac reveal that he was a totally different person under demonic influence. It is something like the behavior and personality change in a man who is totally intoxicated. More than this, however, is the fact that the man’s own identity and individuality were swallowed up by the demons with him. When Jesus asked his name the man answered, “Legion, for we are many” (Mark 5:9). Those who have witnessed demon possession tell us that each demon has its own distinct personality and that the individual possessed begins to manifest the distinct personality of the demon by which he is possessed. If it is a feminine spirit, the voice will be a feminine one, if masculine then very manly.

2. **Anti-social behavior.** The conduct of this pathetic individual was obviously anti-social. That is why he was living in the solitude of the tombs, away from civilization.

3. **Spiritual insight.** The demoniac further evidenced demon activity by the depth of his spiritual insight. Instantly he recognized the Lord Jesus to be the Son of God (verse 7). There was a source of spiritual insight beyond human capabilities here. In addition, Matthew includes the comment, “Have You come here to torment us before the time?” (Matthew 8:29). This reveals to us that demons have an intuitive knowledge of their impending doom.

4. **Super-human strength.** Also, frequently associated with demon possession was a super-human strength (cf. Acts 19:16). The demoniac was uncontrollable by any of the normal means of human confinement. No matter what men attempted to bind him with, he broke loose. No one was strong enough to subdue him (verses 3,4).

5. **Torment.** The price tag of possession was high, for those who fell victim to the demons agonized in constant torment. Such was the case with this man (cf. verse 5). His animal-like shrieks must have sent chills up the spines of any who were nearby.

6. **Tendency towards self-destruction.** Another indication of demonic control is the fact that this man was continually doing harm to himself by gashing himself with stones (verse 5). Other demoniacs described in Scripture were bent on self-destruction as well (cf. Mark 9:17-29). The destructive desires of the demons were dramatically carried out in the drowning of the swine.

### The Confrontation and Casting Out

5:6-13

It is not difficult to imagine what was going through the minds of the disciples as their ship landed and as these two demon possessed men rushed to them. It was like being attacked by two ‘Hulks.’ They probably thought of quickly getting aboard ship and pushing off. Perhaps they clenched their fists or picked up driftwood with which to defend themselves.

Such must have been the response of those with our Lord. But from all of the Gospel accounts, I get the distinct impression that this man’s eyes were riveted on Jesus. He did not appear to rush upon the small group of men to attack them (as he would normally have done), but rather to plead with Jesus. Though Legion bowed before Jesus (verse 6), it was no act of worship (as the King James Version would seem to indicate). He seemed to view

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6 While Mark and Luke describe only one demoniac, Matthew informs us that there were two. There is no conflict, however, for Mark and Luke have apparently focused their attention on the most striking of the two.

7 As Lane observes this title ‘Son of the Most High God,’ “is not a messianic designation but a divine one.” Lane, *Mark*, p. 133, cf. especially fn. 14.

8 “… so that, by their own confession, a time is coming when there shall be an entire victory of the kingdom of light over that of darkness (Rev. xx. 10). All Scripture agrees with this, that the judgment of the angels is yet to come (1 Cor. vi. 3); they are ‘reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day’ (Jude 6); and what the unclean spirits deprecate here, is the bringing in, by anticipation, of that final doom.” R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), p. 100.
Jesus’ approach as the launching of a direct attack on the demonic forces. He pleaded with Jesus not to be tormented. How ironic, as others have noted, that the tormentor pleads not to be tormented.

The pleas of Legion were in response to the command of Jesus for the demons to come out of him (verse 8). Significantly, the demons are called ‘unclean spirits’ (verse 2,9). When Jesus asked the demoniac his name, it was not without significance for He was, I believe, asking the demons to reveal their identity. The reply ‘Legion’ may be some kind of evasion, a reluctance on the part of the demons to individually identify themselves. To the evildoer, anonymity is always preferable to identification. On the other hand, it may be correct to understand that although there were many demons, they had combined as one force to possess this man. While Mark records Legion’s request as one of not being sent out of the country (verse 10), Luke adds a significant explanation by interpreting the meaning behind this request: “And they were entreating Him not to command them to depart into the abyss” (Luke 8:31). In Jewish thinking, spirit beings were assigned to certain geographical territories.

Jewish theology, at least on this point, seems consistent with biblical revelation. Demons are highly organized (cf. Daniel 10:13; Ephesians 6:12), whose leader and prince is Satan (Matthew 12:24). The passage in Daniel especially suggests specific geographical boundaries within which spirit beings must abide. For these demons to be sent out of the country would have meant that they would then be confined along with other fallen angels (cf. Jude 6), no longer to afflict men or resist God.

As an alternative to confinement, the demons posed the option of being permitted to enter the pigs, some 2,000 in number, feeding nearby. This request was granted and the entire herd rushed headlong to their own destruction.

The drowning of these pigs has caused a great deal of discussion amongst Bible students, for as a friend of mine once observed, “That’s a lot of pork chops!” Had our Lord achieved such a miracle today He would have been in deep trouble. First of all, the EPA would have been investigating the pollution of Lake Galilee with decaying pigs. Then the SPCA would have been up in arms over such cruelty to animals. Then the Livestock Association and consumer groups would have been greatly distressed over the sudden decrease in the pig population and the resulting impact on pork prices.

These, however, are not the problem raised by Bible students. Their first question is a rather pragmatic one, namely, “How can demons possess animals?” To this we must confess that we know too little to understand the mechanism of demon possession but the reality is very evident. The second question is an ethical one: “What right had the Lord to inflict this loss on the owners of the swine?” Put even more crassly, Huxley censored this act with these words: “… the wanton destruction of other people’s property is a misdemeanour of evil example.”

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9 “H. Preisker, TWNT IV (1942), pp. 68f. recognizes the military background of the term, pointing out that in the imperial period a legion consisted of 6000 foot soldiers, 120 horsemen and technical personnel. The entrance of the term into colloquial speech indicates that the Roman occupation was a heavy burden. In this context, however, he insists that “legion” has nothing of its usual Roman military overtones, but is the designation of numerous powers which oppose themselves to Jesus as the embodiment of the power of God.” Lane, Mark, fn. 17, pp. 184-185.

10 Ibid., fn. 19, p. 185.

11 “The request is in both cases the same; for, according to Jewish notions, certain countries being assigned to evil as well as to good spirits, whose limits they were unable to overpass, to be sent out of their own country, no other being open to them, implied being sent into the abyss, or bottomless pit, since that remains for them alone.” Trench, Miracles, p. 101.

12 Trench, Miracles, p. 102.

Some of the proposed answers to this question are totally unacceptable to an orthodox, evangelical Christian. By way of explanation, there are several factors which should be given serious consideration.

1) As Lord of all, God has the right to make use of his creation any way that he deems best, and this includes not only pigs, but people (cf. Romans 9:19-23).

2) Pork was a food forbidden to Jews, and as such, those who raised these pigs may have done so knowingly in violation of divine injunction. It is in no way certain, however, that the pig raisers were Jews.

3) Our Lord was moved with compassion by the torment of Legion and the loss of these pigs should in no way dim our view of the deliverance of the demoniac. Also, the wholesale slaughter of these pigs dramatically illustrated the destructive purposes of the demons.

4) Our Lord did not command the demons to enter into the pigs and bring about their destruction; He only permitted it.

5) What our Lord could have given the people of this territory was much greater than what He took away.

As we pass from this section to the next, let us not end on the note of the death of the pigs, but on the deliverance of the demoniac. Whereas he had been a slave, he was now delivered from demon possession. While he was once wild and uncontrollable, he was sitting quietly at the feet of Jesus. When once he was an instrument of Satanic opposition against the Messiah, now he is a witness to His power. Once naked, he is now clothed. Once a menace to society, now a messenger with words of deliverance and healing.

The Response of the Residents

(5:14-17)

It didn’t take long for the word to spread quickly. The pig tenders reported it far and wide, in city and country (verse 14). Like the Samaritans who followed the woman at the well to see this One who had ‘told her all she had done,’ so these residents came to see for themselves what had happened.

The typical explanation for the petition of the residents that Christ leave their country is that they were motivated by materialistic considerations. In other words, Jesus had caused a loss to them of 2,000 swine already; what else would His presence cost?

In both the accounts of Mark and Luke, the primary motivation is described as that of fear. Luke seems to base this fear solely upon what happened to the demoniac, not on the loss of their pigs.

“And the people went out to see what happened; and they came to Jesus, and found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting down at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they became frightened. And those who had seen it reported to them how the man who was demon-possessed had been made well. And all the people of the country of the Gerasenes and the surrounding district asked Him to depart from them; for they were gripped with great fear; and He got into a boat, and returned” (Luke 8:35-37).

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14 “1. The whole story is a myth. 2. The healing of the demoniacs and the repulse of the Healer by the inhabitants are historical, but the incident of the swine is a later figment. 3. The demoniacs frightened the swine, and the transfer of demons from them to the swine was imagined. 4. The drowning of the swine was an accident, possibly simultaneous with the healing, and report mixed up the two incidents. 5. The demoniacs were mere maniacs, whom Jesus cured by humouring their fancies; and His giving leave to imaginary demons to enter into the swine, produced the story of the disaster to the herd.—All these explanations assume that the Gospel narratives are wholly or in part unhistorical.” Plummer, Luke, p. 228. (it should be added that Plummer himself does not hold to any of these views.)

15 “Augustine: ‘The devils were driven out and permitted to go into the swine’; and Aquinas: ‘But that the swine were driven into the sea was no work of the divine miracle, but was the work of the devils by divine permission.’” Quoted by Trench, Miracles, fn. 4, p. 102.
As these people began to piece together the previous events, not only of the destruction of the pigs, but also the deliverance of Legion, they began to sense that there was One far more awesome, much more to be feared, than Legion. They had dealt with Legion (I suspect) by forcing him from their presence. Now they would deal with this One greater than he by doing likewise. It is ironic that while the demons didn’t want to leave the country, the dwellers of that land didn’t want the Messiah to stay. Here is one of the few times that a miracle drove people away, rather than to draw them to Jesus. It would seem that these people had no Messianic expectations, and therefore wanted nothing to do with One Who had such awesome power, a power over which they had no control.

The Response of the Released Demoniac
(5:18-20)

The Lord granted the only request of these residents, which was for Him to leave. As Jesus began to get back into the boat, the delivered demoniac pleaded with Him that he might accompany Him. He who feared His arrival now dreaded His departure. It is even possible that his request was to become one of our Lord’s disciples.\(^\text{16}\)

The Lord refused this request and commissioned this delivered man to return to his own people and declare to them what God had done for him. His greatest impact would be on those who knew his former state.

The commission of our Lord is considerably different from His instructions to the Israelites whom He had delivered. They were instructed to keep quiet about what Jesus had done for them (cf. Matthew 8:4; Luke 8:56). In Galilee and Judea there were Messianic hopes which would have been quickly fanned into flames if the miracles of Jesus were too widely publicized. There was no such danger in Perea, and thus the mercy of the Lord was to be heralded.

The particular focus of this man’s testimony was the Decapolis region. This was a federation of ten cities (\textit{deka} = ten, \textit{polis} = city). This was a region east of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River. It was greatly influenced by Greek culture.\(^\text{17}\)

Conclusion and Application

The Historical Interpretation

As always, we must begin with the principle: Interpretation is one, application is many. What purposes did Mark intend to achieve by the inclusion of this event?

First of all, I believe Mark was attempting to warn his Gentile readers of the great danger of demonic influence and activity. The Greeks were believers in the spirit world, but not necessarily convinced that demons were evil.\(^\text{18}\) As a result, Mark’s readers needed to be instructed as to the essential nature of demons and demon possession. The scene which Mark presents is deliberately dark.

A word of clarification is in order here for we must recognize that in this account the dark side of Satan is exposed, but this is perhaps the more unusual side of Satan. Satan’s most effective tool is not the demoniac wandering about the desolate places. Satan’s most useful instrument is the outstanding, outwardly moral and upright religious man, whose good deeds are done independently of God. “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

As has been said before, look for Satan’s man behind the pulpit. Here is where Satan can use a man to influence scores of people, blinding minds and hearts to the truths of the Word of God (2 Corinthians 4:4). Demon

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\(^\text{16}\) This is the position of Lane, \textit{Mark}, p. 187. The expression ‘to be with Jesus’ is used particularly of His disciples (cf. Mark 3:14).

\(^\text{17}\) Earle, \textit{Mark}, p. 73.

\(^\text{18}\) “The view of Greek philosophy was that these were the spirits of those who lived in the Golden Age. They were not looked upon as necessarily evil in all cases. Hence there was demon-worship, the worship not necessarily of evil spirits; but of the spirits of those who had existed in the Golden Age.” G. Campbell Morgan, \textit{The Gospel According to Mark} (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1927), p. 114.
possession, such as that of the Gerasene demoniac is the crudest and cruelest form of Satanic control, but by and large also one of the less common manifestations of Satan’s work in the world today.

Second (and primarily), Mark employs this event to authenticate the claims of Jesus to be the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah. While the Jews had not denied the works of Jesus were supernatural, they had declined to admit they established His deity. Rather, they attributed the power of Jesus to Satan (Mark 3:22). The confrontation of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac made it clear that Jesus was no servant of Satan. Far from this, He had stormed the gates of Hell and prevailed. Even the demons confessed that He was the Son of the Most High (Mark 5:7).

Implications and Applications

In this account we, by inference, learn much about the demonic spirits. They are ‘unclean spirits,’ (vss. 2,8) who can ‘possess’ men and animals. Their influence and control leads to untold agony and destruction. Demonic influence further destroys man’s reflection of God as originally designed.\(^{19}\) Demons have great spiritual insight and reluctantly submit to Jesus as Lord of all. They look forward to their future with great dread. They greatly desire to enter and control a physical body, whereby they may reflect their character and attributes.

For many Christians today, the horrifying experience of Legion should be sufficient testimony of the reality of the Satanic underworld. We should know from other Scriptures that our present spiritual experience is one of spiritual warfare. The occult and every ‘front’ for demonic influence and activity should be avoided like the plague. We should be warned that fooling with these Satanic ‘fronts’ is like experimenting with drugs. At first we may deceive ourselves into thinking that we are controlling them, but the ultimate likelihood is that they will master us.

Although the Gospels give us little information as to how individuals become targets of Satanic control, I would suggest for your consideration that they sometimes do so by leaving themselves open to Satanic influence. Ananias and Sapphira did so by allowing their greed to grip their hearts (cf. Acts 5:1-6). Such seems to be a similar case with Judas (John 13:1-2). The house that is left swept and clean is a likely target for Satanic influence (cf. Matthew 12:43-45). Whenever a man, woman, or child surrenders control of himself either to fleshly desires (anger, lust, passion, etc.) or by some form of self-emptying (such as various forms of eastern meditation) in my opinion, they are in a precarious position.

Having been properly warned of the demonic underworld, let us not fall into the opposite error of absolute paranoia. The lesson of this passage is that Satan is a defeated foe. When our Lord confronted the demons, they had to submit to His power and authority. By His power, we, too, are able to overcome Satan’s treacheries. For those who are shaken like leaves in the wind at the mention of demons, let us remember from this story that demons cannot even possess pigs without prior permission from our Lord. As the servant of Elisha was told, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:16).

Some today have given demons far more than their due by blaming demons for every malady of mankind. There is the so-called demon of doubt, of anger, of overindulgence, of drunkenness, laziness and so on. Let me say as graciously as I can, Satan does not need to work on us in those areas as we are doing very well without his exploitation. There is, as we know, the world, the flesh, and the Devil. But for most of us, the world and the flesh are all that are necessary to cause us to stumble.

As I have been studying this account through the week, it has seemed to me a rather bizarre and remote situation, the liberation of this Gerasene demoniac. But having recalled a passage in Ephesians, I realize now that this man is a reminder of the dilemma of every man, woman, and child who have not come to a saving dependence upon the work of Jesus Christ for sinners on the cross. Paul says of the former life of the Christian, “And you were

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\(^{19}\) “In most of the stories of possession what is at issue is not merely sickness but a destruction and distortion of the divine likeness of man according to creation. The center of personality, the volitional and active ego, is impaired by alien powers which seek to ruin the man and sometimes drive him to self-destruction (Mk. 5:5). The ego is so impaired that the spirits speak through him. Jesus is conscious that He now breaks the power of the devil and his angels because He is the One in whom the dominion of God is present on behalf of humanity.” W. Foerster, as quoted by Lane, *Mark*, fn. 4, p. 180.
dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 1:1-2).

How Satan blinds our minds! Men in their unbelief suppose that the choice is either to be free (independent of God) or to be the slaves of Christ. That is not the choice at all. The choice is to be free by submission to Christ (cf. John 8:32; Matthew 11:28-30), or to be the pawns of Satan (Ephesians 2:1-2). Unbelieving men may not rave and carry on like the Gerasene demoniac, but they are nevertheless under Satan’s control, doing his bidding. There is no true freedom and fulfillment apart from Jesus Christ, the Creator and Redeemer of men.

Finally, there is in demon possession a counterpart to the filling (or control) of the Holy Spirit. Just as demons desire to possess persons through whom they can exhibit their personalities, so the Spirit of God indwells man, imparting new life, and progressively gaining control so that the character of God is exhibited, but not in such a way as to hinder our individuality and identity. May the Spirit of God be so evident in us that men may see God in our lives.
Lesson 10:
Where There’s Death There’s Hope
(Mark 5:21-43)

Introduction

Interruptions are always frustrating. I just get engrossed in reading the morning paper and my wife wants me to take out the garbage right away. I am out in the garage working on the car with my hands literally oozing with grease and I’m wanted on the phone. Interruptions are a part of life. Few of us would consider the possibility of God being interrupted, but this is precisely the case in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus was on His way to heal a young girl on the verge of death, when He was interrupted by a woman who was also in desperate need of help. For those of us who have not thought very deeply on the theological implications of divine interruptions, this passage invites us to engage in such a novel and noble enterprise.

As we look at the account of the healing of the daughter of Jairus in the synoptic gospels, we find that in each of them the author interweaves the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage. The focus, I believe, is primarily upon the dying daughter, while the ailing woman is presented as a tragic, unnecessary and fatal interruption. As we work our way through the events of this great authenticating miracle, I want us to do so through the eyes of the synagogue official, sensing what must have been his feelings and fears as he learned to trust in the Lord Jesus, even when all the circumstances of life seemed to be working against him.

The Plea of Jairus
(5:21-24)

Jairus was an official of the synagogue, and as such he was a man of influence and prestige, but when he came to Jesus he did so as a desperate father seeking to spare the life of his critically ill child. Jesus was not present at what seemed to be the ideal time to deal with the illness of this child. He had crossed over the Sea of Galilee and had not yet returned. I would imagine that the other little ships (Mark 4:36) which had followed Jesus into the middle of the lake and were caught in the storm had returned to port and had told of the miraculous stilling of the sea.

If I had been Jairus these reports would have been of little consolation, for they would only have served to underscore the tragedy that, though Jesus could have helped, He was not present. From Luke’s account (8:40), we know that when Jesus returned by boat from the other side of the lake there was a large crowd gathered which had been there waiting for the return of Jesus. It would not take much imagination to suppose that Jairus was one of the crowd, wringing his hands in dismay, knowing that even now his daughter may have passed away. Every minute was critical and the only One who could help was absent.

Using a bit of sanctified imagination, I can envision Jairus as being the first one to greet Jesus as He stepped from ship to shore. Mark tells us (verse 2) that Jairus fell at the feet of Jesus, beseeching Him to quickly come to the aid of his daughter who was on the verge of death. Mark graphically describes the pleading of the father and we can almost feel the intensity of the situation. Without delay, the Lord Jesus made His way to the home of this dying girl thronged by a host of on-lookers.

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1 The synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are referred to in this manner because they record the gospel in a similar fashion, as distinguished from the unique approach of John. The term ‘synoptic’ means ‘to see together.’ For further information, consult Everett Harrison, Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 136ff.

2 “The chief function of the ruler of the synagogue was the conducting of divine service; he determined the persons who were to take part in public prayer or reading of the Scripture; he invited those with suitable capacity for the preaching of the sermon; he saw to it that everything was carried on in an orderly and decent manner.” Strack-Billerback as quoted by Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 263, fn. 2.
An Unwanted Interruption
(5:25-34)

Even the presence of the crowd must have been an irritation to Jairus, who would have looked upon these people only as a hindrance to more rapid travel to his home. Some may have wanted to ask questions or to be taught as on the day He had departed. Others might have asked for healing for themselves or others. Regardless, the crowd refused to be left behind. Perhaps they only lingered to see another miracle. If so, they were not accommodated (cf. 5:37).

One woman in the crowd is singled out by the gospel writers. She was a woman who had suffered from some kind of hemorrhage for twelve years. Her suffering was much more than physical, though that would have been enough. She suffered as much from her ‘cures’ as she did from her case of bleeding. From various sources we are informed as to the nature of some of these ‘cures.’

“Pliny’s Natural History reveals the generally low condition of medical science in the world at that time. Physicians were accustomed to prescribe doses of curious concoctions made from ashes of burnt wolf’s skull, stags’ horns, heads of mice, the eyes of crabs, owl’s brains, the livers of frogs and other like elements. For dysentery powdered horses’ teeth were administered, and a cold in the head was cured by kissing a mule’s nose.”

From Jewish writings, such as the Talmud, we learn of some of these ‘cures’:

“One remedy consisted of drinking a goblet of wine containing a powder compounded from rubber, alum and garden crocuses. Another treatment consisted of a dose of Persian onions cooked in wine administered with the summons, ‘Arise out of your flow of blood!’ Other physicians prescribed sudden shock, or the carrying of the ash of an ostrich’s egg in a certain cloth.”

To add insult to injury (literally) this woman was also subjected to tremendous social pressures. The nature of this woman’s illness fell under the stipulations of Leviticus 15, whereby she would have to be pronounced unclean. As such she had been an outcast for twelve years. She could not take part in any religious observances, nor could she have any public contact without defiling those whom she touched. Apparently, she was also forced to be separated from her husband.


“On one leaf of the Talmud not less than eleven different remedies are proposed, of which at most only six can possibly be regarded as astringents or tonics, while the rest are merely the outcome of superstition, to which resort is had in the absence of knowledge. But what possesses real interest is, that, in all cases where astringents or tonics are prescribed, it is ordered, that, while the woman takes the remedy, she is to be addressed in the words: ‘Arise (Qum) from thy flux.’ It is not only that physical means are apparently to accompany the therapeutical in this disease, but the coincidence in the command, Arise (Qum), with the words used by Christ in raising Jairus’ daughter is striking.” Alford Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, p. 620.

5 “According to the Jewish ideas of that time the woman was an utter outcast on account of her disease—she was not allowed to take part in any religious proceedings, could not come into the temple, could not touch other persons and had to be separated from her husband. Her disease came within the scope of the regulations of Leviticus xv. So she was not only impoverished through having had to give all her possessions to physicians in the hope that they might heal her—she was a despised and solitary woman. If her cure had taken place without the Saviour making it known publicly, she would have had the utmost difficulty in removing from the inhabitants of the town the prejudice and scorn that she had met with for years. For this reason the Saviour, who knew her in all her need and sorrows, and understood her circumstances makes her appear before the whole multitude to testify publicly that she has been healed.” Geldenhuys, p. 261.
Last of all, this pathetic woman has lost all of her financial resources. Mark tells us that she had spent all of her money on doctor bills, with no relief—indeed, with added affliction. And in those days, there was no such thing as a malpractice suit.

This unnamed woman, like Jairus, had heard that Jesus was back in their region and set out to find relief through His power. Conditioned, no doubt, by her long-term rejection and isolation she dared not approach Jesus to ask for a miracle. Her physical contact would defile all that she touched. The best she could hope for was a kind of secret healing. “I need not bother the Master,” she may have rationalized. “I but need to touch the hem of His garment.”

The faith of the woman may well have been mingled with magical ideas as to the power conveyed by one’s clothing. Regardless of this, the moment she touched Jesus, she was healed.

After her healing, the woman probably began to shrink back into the faceless mob who were pushing and shoving for a look at the Master. To the great dismay of Jairus, Jesus stopped. It would seem that for an instant the crowd was perfectly silent. They expectantly waited to hear what Jesus would say, but they could not believe it when He questioned, “Who touched My garments?” (Mark 5:30).

The disciples considered such a question absolutely incredible, worse yet stupid. The rudeness of their thoughts was expressed by none other than the spokesman, Peter: “You see the multitude pressing in on You and You say, ‘Who touched me?’” (Mark 5:31, cf. Luke 3:45). Everybody was touching, pushing, shoving, grabbing at the Master. How could He ask such an insipid question, they thought.

Surely we are to understand that Jesus was not ignorant of what had happened, nor that He needed to be told who had touched Him. This miracle was not snitched from Jesus like a boy steals an apple off a peddler’s cart. Jesus, in His omniscience, knew the need of the woman before she ever put forth her hand to His garment. Knowing her faith, His power was granted for her healing.

Why, then, did Jesus ask this question? More than this, why did Jesus stop at such a critical time to ask the question? Surely Jesus knew the importance of time.

(1) Our Lord Jesus did not need to learn the woman’s identity. Mark does not tell us that Jesus looked to see who had touched Him, but, “He looked around to see the woman who had done this” (Mark 5:32).

(2) Our Lord delayed in order to give the woman the opportunity to give testimony to her healing. Had Jesus not stopped and asked who touched His garments, no one would have known of the miracle save Jesus and the woman. When she saw the eyes of Jesus fixed upon her, she knew that He knew everything. She had taken nothing from Him, but He had given healing to her. She now poured out her sad and miserable life story, telling how Jesus had done what all of medical science could not.

(3) Our Lord stopped in order to correct any misconceptions on the part of the woman. If there were any elements of magic in the thinking of this woman, Jesus swept them away by making it completely clear that it was her faith that had saved her, not her grasp on His clothing. Jesus touched many as He went about, but few of these found in physical contact with Him a wonder such as this. It was her relationship with Jesus by faith that made her whole.

(4) It has also been suggested that this was a gracious act of our Lord to make it publicly known that this woman had been made whole, so that she was no longer to be considered ceremonially unclean.

(5) Most significantly in the context, this delay of Jesus resulted in a greater miracle, and greater faith on the part of Jairus, for now the young girl was not sick, but dead.

Upon this woman’s confession of faith, the Lord Jesus sent her off with the words, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your affliction” (Mark 5:34).

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6 For a detailed description of the kind of clothing worn by a Rabbi in Jesus’ day, cf. Edersheim, Life and Times, Volume 1, pp. 620 ff.

7 Lane, Mark, p. 192, fn. 47.

From Tragedy to Triumph:
The Raising of Jairus’ Daughter
(5:35-43)

If the disciples were irritated by our Lord’s seemingly unnecessary delay, you can well imagine that Jairus was fit to be tied. He know that at any moment his daughter would be dead, and here was Jesus making mountains out of mole hills. Why could He not have simply ignored the woman in view of the present crisis? I can remember only too well a number of years ago when my mother was seriously injured and bleeding severely. I rushed into the hospital to get help, and who should I encounter but a nurse who must have had her training in bureaucracy from the civil service. All she could think about was filling out the right form, and all I could think about was carrying her out to the car, if need be, to help my mother! Such must have been the frustration of Jairus, but how do you hurry God?

Jairus’ world came crashing down with the report of his servants that his daughter had died (verse 35). The common belief in his day, as ours, is that ‘where there’s life, there’s hope.’ And now all hope was gone. I can vividly remember the morning that my wife and I awoke to discover that our first and only son had died during the night, his crib just a step away from our bed. It was so obvious that he was gone. There was no life. There was no hope. That is the way Jairus felt.

Knowing that every ray of hope had been swept away by this announcement, Jesus ignored these words, and spoke encouragingly to Jairus, “Do not be afraid any longer, only believe” (Mark 5:36). His faith was faltering, and it was through faith that the child would be raised. Where there is life, there is hope. But with God, we must also believe that where there is death, there is hope as well.

Leaving the crowd with all of His disciples but the inner three, Jesus continued on to the home of the deceased daughter. Outside the home the commotion of a typical near-eastern funeral had already begun (verse 38). All of this carrying-on was unnecessary our Lord informed the mourners, for this girl was asleep. By the expression ‘asleep,’ our Lord did not mean that this girl had not died, but was indirectly stating that for those who have entered the kingdom of God, death is not a permanent state, but a temporary one. Death could not claim this girl, for the Prince of Life was present.

Thinking our Lord to be either naive or completely self-deceived the professional mourners mocked and ridiculed Him by their laughter. They knew death when they saw it. Such unbelief will never witness the power of God and so these people were put outside, with only our Lord, the inner three (Peter, James and John), and the parents going to where the girl’s body had been lain.

The actual event was both simple and sweet. With a couple of softly spoken words, our Lord took the young girl by the hand and lifted her up so that she began to walk about. Earle, sensing the tenderness of this event, suggests that these words, spoken in Aramaic (verse 41), could have been the very familiar words of the mother of this girl by which she was awakened at the dawn of every new day. The result was that those who witnessed this great miracle were completely astonished (verse 42).

The Lord of life and death gave these overjoyed parents two instructions. First of all, no one was to be told the details of this miracle. Now by this we understand that it was impossible for those outside not to know that this

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9 “Arriving at the house Jesus saw that preparations had been made already for the funeral. The minstrels and professional mourners were performing their duties as the first part of the mourning ceremony. The wailing consisted of choral or antiphonal song accompanied by handclapping. Since even the poorest man was required by common custom to hire a minimum of two flute players and one professional mourner in the event of his wife’s death, it is probable that one who held the rank of synagogue ruler would be expected to hire a large number of professional mourners.” Lane, Mark, p. 196.

girl had been raised from death. But what Jesus commands is that the details of that healing be withheld, and, I would suspect, that the deliverance of their daughter from death be kept a secret until Jesus was well on His way.  

The second instruction was that this girl be given something to eat. What a human touch. This spectacular miracle did not nullify the natural physical needs of the child. Our Lord is so deeply concerned with His creatures, even with such an insignificant thing as a needed meal.

Conclusions and Application

Historical Interpretation

Mark’s primary reason for including this interrupted miracle, I believe, was to authenticate the claims of Jesus to the Messiah of Israel. When viewed as a whole, the four miracles of Mark 4 and 5 prove Jesus to be not only the Messiah, but Lord of all. He is Lord of creation as shown in the stilling of the storm. He is Lord over Satan and his demons as shown by the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac. He is Lord over sickness and even death, as revealed in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman and the raising of the dead daughter of Jairus.

It is helpful to recall that in each of these cases the individuals were completely helpless and hopeless, and that others were totally incapable of helping them either. The storm on the lake terrified experienced sailors. The demoniac could not be subdued by anyone (5:3,4). The hemorrhaging woman had been seeing doctors for twelve years with only a worsening condition. The young girl was no longer ailing, but dead. In the most hopeless cases which men could present to Jesus, there was healing, deliverance, and salvation.

Not only does Mark demonstrate the power of our Lord Jesus, but he also reveals His person. What we see in these passages is not just that God is a God of infinite power, but that He is a God of infinite compassion and tenderness. He is deeply touched by human needs. He is sensitive to our sufferings and trials in life. He cares not only for the raising up and putting down of kingdoms, but also for the missed meal at a time of illness.

11 “Special motivation for the injunction to silence may be found in the rank unbelief of those who had ridiculed Jesus with their scornful laughter. It is clear throughout Mark that Jesus revealed his messiahship only with reserve. It is appropriate to this consistent pattern of behavior that he was unwilling to make himself known to the rauccous, unbelieving group that had gathered outside Jairus’ house. He did not permit them to witness the saving action by which the girl was restored to her parents, and he directed that it should continue to remain unknown to those outside. He recognized that the responsibility of the parents in this regard could not continue indefinitely. When the child appeared in public the facts would speak for themselves. The parents could, however, withhold what had happened and thus fulfill the intention of Jesus. Before it was known that the girl was yet alive, the purpose for which the charge had been given would have been fulfilled; Jesus would have departed and could no longer be subject to ostentatious acclaim.” Lane, Mark, pp. 198-199.

Edersheim gives this explanation for the somewhat confusing command not to publish what could hardly be kept secret.

“And perhaps this may help us to understand one of the reasons for the prohibition of telling what had been done by Jesus, while in other instances silence was not enjoined. Of course, there were occasions such as the raising of the young man at Naian and of Lazarus—when the miracle was done so publicly, that a command of this kind would have been impossible. But in other cases may this not be the Line of Demarcation, that silence was not enjoined when a result was achieved which, according to the notions of the time, might have been attributed to other than direct Divine Power, while in the latter cases publicity was (whenever possible) forbidden? And this for the twofold reason, that Christ’s Miracles were intended to aid, not to supersede, faith; to direct to the Person and Teaching of Christ, as that which proved the benefit to be real and Divine; not to excite the carnal Jewish expectancies of the people, but to lead in humble discipleship to the Feet of Jesus. In short, if only those were made known which would not necessarily imply Divine Power (according to Jewish notions), then would not only the distraction and tumult of popular excitement be avoided, but in each case faith in the Person of Christ be still required, ere the miracles were received as evidence of His Divine claim. And this need of faith was the main point.” Edersheim, Life and Times, I, pp. 618-619.
Those of us who are so-called ‘Calvinists’ are known for our emphasis on the severity of God. We must proclaim to men the bad news of sin, of the righteous indignation of God, and of the eternal punishment men face apart from faith in Christ. But as Paul reminds us, “Behold then the kindness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22a). In emphasizing the severity of God, let us not represent God as austere and aloof, for He is a God of infinite kindness. Nowhere is that more clear than in these miracles recorded by Mark in the fourth and fifth chapters.

Implications and Applications

There is much instruction in the interrupted miracle for those who have never yet come to a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps you are like those in the crowd who brushed against the Master, but never reached out in faith. Perhaps you have heard the Gospel many times, and in an intellectual sort of way, for as James warns us, even the demons believe that much (James 2:19). What made the difference for this woman was that she recognized her complete and total inability to help herself. She looked to Jesus as her only hope of healing. When you come to a genuine conversion experience with Christ, you must reach the point of realizing your total inability to do anything which will ever contribute to your eternal salvation. You, like this woman, must look to Jesus to provide what you cannot. When Jesus came to the earth, He lived a perfect and sinless life. This qualified Him to die on the cross, not for His sins, but for yours (2 Corinthians 5:21). In place of our wretchedness, He offers His righteousness. Relying fully on Him alone is what will save you, just as this woman’s faith saved her.

To look at this same lesson from a slightly different light, let us consider the raising of the dead daughter. We would say, ‘Where there is life, there is hope.’ But when it comes to salvation, this is not the case. So long as we think that there is so much as one spark of goodness, one flickering possibility that we can do something to contribute to our own eternal salvation, we are hopeless. So far as salvation is concerned, it is only where there is death that there is hope. When we come to the point of agreeing with Paul that we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1,2), then we shall look to Jesus alone as the source of life. May God grant that you will turn to Him, Who alone can save those who are dead in their trespasses and sins.

But there is a lesson here for the Christian as well. It is a lesson in divine delays. Perhaps we might call them unanswered prayers. Here I mean those times in our lives when we think everything around us is collapsing and yet God seems to be putting around heaven, totally unconcerned about our trials and tragedies in life. May I suggest to you that delays are by divine design. Our Lord deliberately tarried here, just as He did at the report of the sickness of Lazarus, so that when He did act there was no question of who should receive the credit and the glory. Surely these miracles inform us that delays are not due to our Lord’s lack of concern for us, for He is sensitive to the most insignificant needs (such as a meal). It is the purpose of God that these delays will result in greater glory for Himself, and greater faith for us. How beautifully this interrupted miracle illustrates the truth of Romans 8:28: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”
Lesson 11:
Israel’s Hour of Decision
(John 6:1-71)

Introduction

Nearly all of us have had the experience of having unexpected guests drop in and end up staying for dinner. While I was attending seminary, my wife and I began to invite people from church over for dinner. Though times were difficult, Jeanette had prepared some cabbage rolls, stretching our meager supply of hamburger to the point where we could invite someone home for dinner. We went to church that morning, not knowing who we would invite. After the service Jeannette informed me that she had invited one couple, and I added that I, too, had invited a couple. There was no problem we thought for there were plenty of cabbage rolls for all. When we arrived home with our guests, the house was filled with smoke. The oven had been turned up too high and the dinner was burned to a crisp. Jeannette could not understand how it could have happened, since she checked the oven just before she walked out the door. The only problem was that I checked it, too. It was a five dollar stove, and it had no thermostat as most ovens do today. You judged the oven temperature by the height of the flame. Well, to me it didn’t look high enough, so I set it up just enough to burn up the entire dinner.

You can imagine the consternation at our house that Sunday with two families arriving for dinner and nothing but ashes in the oven. Well, as bad as that was, it could not compare to the situation in John chapter 6 where somewhere around 20,000 folks showed up and stayed late for dinner. This, as you will recognize, was the situation facing our Lord and His disciples prior to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 men.

The significance of this miracle is apparent even at the surface, for it is the only miracle (with the exception of the resurrection) which is recorded in all four gospels. Of far greater importance, this event was indeed the ‘hour of decision’ for the nation Israel. Jesus had long since been written off as a candidate for Messiah by the Jewish leadership, but His popularity among the masses was at its peak. The discourse on the ‘bread of life’ which was the sequel to this miracle was the determining factor for many which caused them to cease following Jesus as their potential Messiah. It is for this reason that we shall give our attention to this crucial event in the life and ministry of our Lord.

The Feeding of the 5,000
(John 6:1-15)

It is only when we put all of the gospel accounts together and get a composite picture that we can ascertain the setting for this great miracle. Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee for several reasons. First of all, Herod had just put John the Baptist to death (Matthew 14:1-12), and he was also eager to see Jesus (Luke 9:9). It was not without good reason that Jesus retired to a desert place on the mountains near Bethsaida, just outside the jurisdiction of Herod.

Second, the disciples had been sent out as apostles to proclaim the message of the Kingdom (Mark 6:7-13). As a result of their taxing ministry, the Lord recognized the need for rest and relaxation, as well as time for reflection. It was to be a time of retreat (Mark 6:31).

Third, to put all of the factors together, the Messianic expectations of the people were at an all time high, dangerously so. Since John the Baptist was dead, all eyes were upon Jesus as his successor. The Jews were ready to throw off the shackles of Rome. Further, the apostles had just been on a campaign preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God. Thus, expectations were heightened. Finally, it was the time of the Passover (John 6:4); there were many zealous Jews who had made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the spirit of religious expectation and enthusiasm, due to the season, was unusually high. All of these factors combined to make an explosive situation, one which should be allowed to cool off if at all possible.
For these reasons, our Lord and His disciples set off for the other side of the lake by boat, rather than by land so as not to attract attention. Perhaps because the ship was well-known, it was recognized as it made its way to the other side of the lake. Many people ran ahead by land, gathering a larger and larger crowd as they went. Some of these people actually arrived before the little ship, while the rest arrived somewhat later.

When the Lord saw these sheep without any shepherd (remember that John was now gone) He was moved with compassion. He began to teach them much about the Kingdom, as well as to heal many who were sick (Luke 9:11). It would seem that early in the day our Lord raised the question of how this large group was to be fed (John 6:5ff.). As the day wore on, the impact of our Lord’s earlier question began to grip the disciples. Their solution was to send the crowds away and let them fend for themselves. There is probably a great deal of their humanity disclosed here, for they had come expecting a quiet day with the Lord to themselves. They had probably seen all the people they cared to on their preaching tour.

The impossibility of the situation was brought out by our Lord’s discussion with Phillip. According to Shepard, Phillip, in bookkeeper-like fashion, computed the cost for each person to receive even a bit of a snack. When the disciples were told to assess the situation more carefully, five loaves (not loaves in the sense that we know them but more like biscuits that didn’t rise) and two small sardine-like fishes were found in the possession of a boy. But how could this be of any help?

Our Lord instructed His disciples to have the men sit in companies of 50 or 100, the women and children sitting apart from the men, in typical Jewish fashion. After blessing the loaves and fishes, Jesus distributed the food by means of the disciples. Although the meal was not a luxurious one, it was very adequate, for all who ate were filled (John 6:12). The unused portions were collected so as not to be wasted, and, significantly, there were twelve baskets full, one for each disciple to carry, as I would take it, an object lesson.

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1 “St. Mark vi. 32 has it ‘by (or rather in) the ship,’ with the definite article. Probably it was the same boat that was always at His disposal, perhaps belonging to the sons of Jonas or to the sons of Zebedee.” Alford Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, p. 678, fn. 2.

2 “For already the bright spring day was declining, and what was called ‘the first evening’ had set in. For the Jews reckoned two evenings, although it is not easy to determine the exact hour when each began and ended. But, in general, the first evening may be said to have begun when the sun declined, and it was probably reckoned as lasting to about the ninth hour, or three o’clock of the afternoon. Then began the period known as ‘between the evenings,’ which would be longer or shorter according to the season of the year, and which terminated with ‘the second evening’—the time from when the first star appeared to that when the third star was visible. With the night began the reckoning of the following day.” Edersheim, *Life and Times*, I, p. 681.


4 “In keeping with Eastern customs, according to which the women and children were kept apart, the men alone appear to have sat down in the order indicated. This explains why, as say the synoptic Gospels, they alone were counted, besides women and children.” Godet, quoted by R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), p. 166, fn. 3.

5 “There can be little doubt, therefore, that the words which Jesus spake, whether in Aramean, Greek, or Hebrew, were those so well known: ‘Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, King of the world, Who causes to come forth … bread from the earth.’” Edersheim, *Life and Times*, I, p. 684.

6 “When we read that these five were barley-loaves, we learn that, no doubt from voluntary choice, the fare of the Lord and of His followers was the poorest. Indeed, barley-bread was, almost proverbially, the meanest. Hence, as the Mishnah puts it, while all other meal-offerings were of wheat, that brought by the woman accused of adultery was to be of barley, because (so R. Gamaliel puts it), ‘as her deed is that of animals, so her offering is also of the food of animals.’” Edersheim, *Life and Times*, I, pp. 681-682.

7 “The word for basket here (κοφίνος) means a wicker container such as the disciples would have used for carrying provisions on a journey. Juvenal mentions it as used by poor Roman Jews. They carried their own provisions so as not to be defiled by eating Gentile food.” Ralph Earle, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), p. 87.
This miracle has been variously explained. The liberals, trying at all costs to avoid the supernatural, have explained this as a ‘miracle’ in the hearts of the crowd. These selfish folks had brought plenty of food along, we are told, but they did not want to share it with those who had none. When the example of the generous little boy was put before the crowd by Jesus, everyone felt ashamed and brought out their food to share with the rest. Surely this does not fit the gospel accounts. Others say that it was a sacramental meal, with each person receiving a mere tidbit, just as we do in a communion service. It is hard to see how the crowds could be ‘filled’ by such a fragment. It is also hard to see how so little food could be divided among such a large crowd. The only logical interpretation is to understand it as the gospel writers have recorded it as a full-fledged miracle. If we are not willing to accept it as such, then let us call these writers deceivers and their works mere fiction.

Matthew and Mark inform us that Jesus forcefully instructed His disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to Bethsaida, while He remained behind to dismiss the crowds. John tells us the reason for what must have seemed highly unusual to the disciples: the crowd had determined to make Jesus their king. Jesus had sought retreat from the crowds, due to their heightened messianic expectations, but instead they gathered about Him, and now He performed this miracle which further added fuel to the flames of their hopes for Messiah. It was difficult enough to deal with the crowd alone. His disciples (with their own messianic hopes running high, perhaps higher than the crowd’s) would have only made matters worse.

**Walking on the Sea**

(6:16-21)

Our Lord, having dismissed the crowd, went off by Himself to pray (Matthew 14:23). He may have originally intended to walk to the other side of the lake, just as the crowds had come. Looking out from His mountain place of prayer, Jesus may have seen the disciples struggling at the oars, and set out across the lake to help them. As the Lord drew near they supposed that they were seeing a ghost, and cried out in fear (Mark 6:49,50). Immediately, as our Lord got into the ship, the winds became calm and they were at their destination. The amazement of the disciples was due to their hardness of heart (Mark 6:51-52). In particular, Mark informs us that they did not understand about the loaves (6:52). If I understand the passage correctly, the incident with the loaves should have proved Jesus to be One greater than Moses. If the disciples had realized that they were with One Who was greater than Moses, then just as the Lord had provided bread from above, so He could make a path through the sea. They should not at all have been astounded at what took place, for it was the logical corollary to the feeding of the 5,000.

**Discourse on the Bread of Life**

(6:22-59)

The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 was a sign (John 6:14) which pointed to a deeper spiritual truth about the person of Jesus Christ. John is the writer who records the discourse on the ‘bread of life’ given by our Lord on the following day. The crowds interpreted the miracle in the light of their distorted messianic hopes. Since Jesus was not this kind of messiah, He sent the crowds away in bewildered disappointment. In this discourse, He indicated the difference in His program, correcting their misconceptions.

The messianic kingdom for which the Jews waited was completely materialistic. Edersheim describes it this way:

“What they waited for, was a Kingdom of God—not in righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Ghost, but in meat and drink—a kingdom with miraculous wilderness banquets to Israel, and of coarse miraculous triumphs over the Gentiles. Not to speak of the fabulous Messianic banquet which a sensuous realism expected, or of the achievements for which it looked, every figure in which prophets had clothed the brightness of those days was first literalised, and then exaggerated, till the most glorious poetic descriptions became the most repulsively incongruous caricatures of spiritual Messianic expectancy. The fruit trees were every day, or at least every week or two, to yield their riches, the fields their harvests; the grain was to stand like palm trees, and to be reaped and winnowed without labour. Similar blessings were to visit the vine; ordinary trees
would bear little fruit trees, and every produce, of every clime, would be found in Palestine in such abundance and luxuriance as only the wildest imagination could conceive." 

Not finding Jesus at the place where the 5,000 had been fed, the multitude made their way to Capernaum, and when they found Him they asked, “Rabbi, when did You get here?” (John 6:25).

Perhaps they sensed another miracle had taken place and were hoping to draw the details out of Him. But Jesus brushed this question aside, to get to the true motivation for seeking Him. They were not seeking Him for His presence, but for His presents. It was not Jesus that they sought, but some kind of ‘great society’ where men would no longer have to work in order to eat. To put it in yet another way, they did not receive the miracle of the preceding day as a sign, but only as a mere miracle (verse 26). They did not consider the purpose of the miracle, but only sought for the perpetuation of it. It was, at best, a kind of ‘soup line’ mentality revealed in those who were seeking after Jesus. Their eyes were not on the person, but on the provision.

As a sign, the feeding of the 5,000 signified that Jesus was a person who had to be taken seriously. More than this, He should have been acknowledged as One on Whom God had set His seal (John 6:27). Again we see that the miracles of our Lord were accomplished to authenticate the claims of Jesus to be the Son of God, Israel’s Messiah. It was not the person of Jesus that they sought, but His power: “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” (John 6:28).

They perceived Jesus to be no different than any other Jew. If He could work such miracles, so could they. They merely asked Him how to duplicate the works that He did. According to Jesus, the only work acceptable to God (and accomplished by God) is the work of faith. “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29).

The Jews perceived that Jesus was attempting to shift their attention from the bread of the previous day to Himself. Consequently, they urged Him to produce some spectacular sign to verify His claim to be their Messiah: “What then do You do for a sign, that we may see, and believe You?” (John 6:30).

Here the gauntlet was thrown down before our Lord. “If You are the Messiah, prove it!” “If Moses provided bread in the wilderness for forty years, let’s see You do better.” By this, they insisted that Jesus should produce better bread and for a longer period of time.

But this was exactly the point. They had fixed their focus only an the physical bread. Now they fixed their eyes on Jesus only as the instrument through which bread was given. Ultimately, it was not Moses who gave the bread, but God. The manna was bread from heaven. Jesus came not as a mere provider of bread, but as the bread from heaven. The superiority of Jesus over Moses was not just to be sought in the period over which the bread would be provided, but in the effect which it produced. The bread which was given in the wilderness did not give eternal life, for they all died (verse 49). The bread which God has provided in Christ is far better, for it gives eternal life. Those who taste of it will never again hunger or thirst for what it provides (verses 50,51).

Although Jesus attracted the multitudes with His works, He repelled them by His words as recorded in verses 32-59. His words were the truth necessary for the moment, both to correct misconceptions concerning Messiah and His Kingdom and to cool the feverish expectation of Messiah’s return in splendor and great power. What He did not accomplish by retreating to a remote spot, He achieved by His discourse on the bread of life. We shall summarize His teaching in seven striking statements.

(1) The issue is not one of physical bread, but spiritual. The kingdom which the Jews sought was almost exclusively material, while that which Jesus came to institute was primarily (though not exclusively) spiritual.

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8 Edersheim, Life and Times, II, p. 28.

“This may be illustrated from the prophecy concerning the messianic age in II Baruch 29:5, “The earth also shall yield its fruit ten thousandfold and on each (?) vine there shall be a thousand branches, and each branch shall produce a thousand clusters, and each cluster produce a thousand grapes, and each grape produce a cor (about 120 gallons) of wine.” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 364, fn. 87.
He came not to provide free meals, but to satisfy man’s spiritual hunger by the free gift of salvation. Consequently, our Lord could claim that His program was vastly superior to that of Moses.

(2) Christ’s Kingdom was not one established by the good works of (as Israel supposed), but on the basis of faith (verse 29).

(3) Christ came not as a spectacular wonder worker but as the wonder. There was in Israel at this time (as with us in our own time) a craving for the spectacular. It was because of this that Satan challenged Jesus to make a spectacular death-defying leap from the pinnacle of the temple (Matthew 4:5,6). It was the spectacular provision of bread and the mighty miracles of Jesus which attracted the crowds. They sought the works to the neglect of the Worker. It was He that was the wonder, not so much His deeds. They were preoccupied only with the spectacular works.

(4) Those who are to enter Christ’s Kingdom do so by means of election and divine drawing. The Jews supposed that by virtue of their national origin and religious works they were assured of a place in the Kingdom. They thought that they could manipulate Messiah into adapting to their conception of the Kingdom. Quite the opposite was true, our Lord revealed. Entrance into the Kingdom is not ultimately a matter of our choice, but God’s. It is not we who bring God to us, but God Who draws us to Himself.

“All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me; and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37).

“No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44).

Every Israelite does not have a reserved seat in the kingdom, but only such as submit to the rule of Jesus as their Messiah. The issue is solely one of receiving Christ or rejecting Him (cf. John 6:36,40,45,47).

(5) The Kingdom of our Lord is not merely for the present, but also for eternity. We speak sometimes of our own age as the ‘now generation.’ By this we point out that those in our day live only for the present. So it was in Israel in our Lord’s manifestation as Messiah. Their concept of the Kingdom was material, not spiritual. It was present, not future. The Kingdom of our Lord Jesus is both present and future. The present manifestation is predominantly spiritual, followed in the future by more physical and material dimensions. So it is that our Lord spoke here of the future aspects of His Kingdom instead of what the Jews wanted now.

“For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal Life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40).

“No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47).

It is no wonder that the theme of resurrection is so prominent in their discourse.

(6) The watchword of the Kingdom is not self-satisfaction, but self-sacrifice. The Jews sought the Kingdom largely for what it would do for them. They projected their own desires into their concept of messiah. They had no intention of entering into a Kingdom which taught self-sacrifice and denial, much less a Messiah Who would die, rather than deliver them from the tyranny of Rome. But Jesus insisted in speaking of His destiny as that of giving His body and His blood for others:

“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.’ Jesus therefore said to them, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day’” (John 6:51,53-54).
Popular Reaction
(6:60-65)

The discourse on the bread of life revealed that Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom was diametrically opposed to the popular expectations of the masses in Israel. As a result, there was a negative reaction. “Many therefore of His disciples, when they heard this said, ‘This is a difficult statement, who can listen to it?’” (John 6:60).

The masses are not troubled because they cannot understand what Jesus has said but precisely because they have understood Him too well. It was not difficult to comprehend but hard to cope with, for it failed to line up with their own distorted views of the Kingdom of God.

Once again, Jesus made no effort to modify or re-state His doctrine so as not to lose popular support. He rather sharpened the issue. If they stumbled at His teaching, how much more would they be distressed at His ascension to return to the right hand of the Father (verse 62). They had chosen to understand God’s Word in an almost crassly literal way, while our Lord’s were more metaphorical. He did not teach the eating of His literal flesh, but of making His person and work a vital part of themselves (verse 63). The real problem, as always, was that of unbelief (verse 64), just as was the case with Judas. They appeared to be true disciples, but were in reality only thrill seekers and deadbeats, looking for a handout. Their unbelief was to be expected for they could only come by means of the Father’s drawing (verse 65).

The Decision of the Twelve Disciples
(6:66-71)

Those who followed Jesus were all called ‘disciples’ (cf. verse 66), but the dividing line was about to be drawn. When the masses heard the discourse they went their way in unbelief. When Jesus’ disciples were given the opportunity to back away, Peter answered for the twelve when he said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69).

Here was the response of Jesus’ most intimate followers. They had no other options, for He was the only One Who had the words of life. Yet, even at this point, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas was known to the Master (vv. 70-71).

Conclusion and Application

Historically, the feeding of the 5,000 and the discourse on the Bread of Life was the turning of the tide of national sentiment away from Jesus as Messiah. With the death of John the Baptist, every eye was upon Jesus as his successor. But Jesus’ teaching made it clear that He did not come to conform to the popular thinking about Messiah.

By way of application to us today, it is most interesting to note that in Jesus’ presentation of Himself as Messiah, He refused to accommodate their entirely materialistic ideas and expectations. How different it is in our day and age when men and women proclaim the Gospel, not in terms of its spiritual demands, but in the light of its material benefits. We make it sound as though God is promising a utopian life of unusual and continual blessings for whoever gives at least lip service to Christ.

The real focus of the gospel of our Lord was not on the matter of self-gratification and indulgence, but rather on sacrifice and death. Jesus came to die for men’s sins and only those who have accepted the suffering Savior will reign with Him. Such is the great divide in Christianity. Many are those who name the name of Christ and

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9 "The idea of eating, as a metaphor for receiving spiritual food and the benefits flowing there from, was familiar to the Jews. 'In the Rabbinical literature, sacred instruction was called bread and those who eagerly absorb it were said to eat it.' ‘Thy words were found and I did eat them’ (Jer. 16:16). In the Talmud Hillel says: ‘The Messiah is not likely to come to Israel, for they have already eaten Him in the days of Hezekiah.’ The Rabbis spoke of their instruction as ‘the whole stay of bread.’ It was a common saying among the Jews: ‘In the time of the Messiah the Israelites will be fed by Him.’" Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels*, p. 275.
who call themselves Christians. But when the matter comes down to suffering, they quickly go their way (cf. Mark 4:16-17).

Then, too, we are reminded by this passage that salvation comes not by mere mental ascent, the polite tipping of the hat to Jesus (as a good man, a good teacher, etc.), but by the bowing of the knee, by the actual and personal acceptance of His person and work on the cross of Calvary. It is not just a matter of believing about Him, but of trusting in Him alone for eternal salvation.
Lesson 12:
The Light of the World
(John 9:1-41)

Introduction

“In 167 B.C. Antiochus’ army put a stop to the Jew’s sacrifices. The people of Jerusalem, under the leadership of Matthias, revolted and then fled to the desert. Their hiding place was soon discovered, and the pursuing soldiers demanded that they repent and surrender.

The Jews refused to give in, but they also refused to fight because it was the Sabbath. They would not block the entrances to their caves or fight in any way. Approximately 1000 men, women and children died without resistance, because they considered the Sabbath sacred.”

The death of 1,000 people resulted from the sincere conviction that the Sabbath should not be violated. Although this event happened nearly two centuries before the healing of the blind man in John chapter 9, it does give us a feel for the intensity of the conviction of devout Jews that the Sabbath could not be broken. As a matter of fact, the intervening years between the days of Matthias and Christ did not weaken this conviction, but strengthened it.

The sect which especially set out to protect the Sabbath was the Pharisees. In the light of many pagan forces at work to corrupt the purity of the Jewish faith, the Pharisees took upon themselves the task of keeping Judaism pure of foreign and pagan influence. As a result, the Pharisees were separatists (the word Pharisee means separated). Initially devout and well-motivated, this sect became more and more rigid and legalistic. The central issue for the Pharisees was the preservation of the Sabbath.

“The Jerusalem Talmud contained 64 pages, and the Babylonian Talmud 156 double pages, with specific rules on observing the Sabbath.”

The Pharisees succeeded in turning the Sabbath rest into a burden, rather than a blessing.

“The scribes drew up a list of forty works save one which were forbidden and which, if done knowingly, rendered the offender liable to stoning, and if done inadvertently demanded a heavy sin-offering in expiation. These thirty-nine works in the technical language of the legalists were called ‘fathers,’ and the subsections of derivative pieces of labour were called ‘descendants.’”

For example, plowing was a ‘father’ prohibited on the Sabbath. Digging was a ‘descendant.’ Dragging a chair on the ground would make a kind of furrow, and therefore was forbidden, but dragging a chair on a hard surface was permitted. Another ‘father’ was carrying a load, and this prohibition was attended by a host of ‘descendants.’ To wear an unneeded garment was prohibited. A tailor had to leave his needle and thread at home, and a scribe could not carry his pen. One matter which caused a great deal of discussion was what a man could do if his home caught on fire on the Sabbath. Nothing could be carried out, but clothing, if it were put on one piece at a time, could be worn outside, taken off, and then one could return for another garment. People must have come from miles around to watch the spectacle as the house of a devout Jew burned down!

Although we have only scratched the surface of the issue, you can easily see why our Lord viewed the regulations of the Pharisees as a heavy burden upon the Jews (cf. Matthew 11:28-30; 23:1-4). Those who were skilled in the Law also were skillful in devising ways to circumvent most of the meticulous rules which they had

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2 Ibid. p. 59.
4 Ibid.
The worst feature of it was that, when the mass of legislation proved impossible of performance, causistic subterfuges were devised by the same legal experts, as means of escape by which they and others could circumvent their own regulations. A most useful fiction was what was called ‘connection.’ A Sabbath-day’s journey was 2,000 cubits beyond the city; but suppose a man wished to go farther than that on the Sabbath. On Friday he could travel to the boundary and deposit food for two meals. This point then technically became his home, and on the Sabbath he could travel to it, and then continue as again. Or, to quote another example, it was unlawful on the Sabbath day to carry anything from one house to another. But suppose several houses looked on to one square or courtyard. The various inhabitants had only to deposit a little food here on Friday, and the whole area was considered as one house on the Sabbath, with all the neighbours able to go and come with what they desired. Another effectual method devised by the lawyers for evading their own Sabbath-observance regulations was that known as ‘intention.’ For example, it was not lawful to eat an egg which a fowl had thoughtlessly laid on the Sabbath day. But if one stated before hand that the hen was intended for the table, the egg might be legitimately eaten, as being something which had merely fallen off the doomed hen.” E. M. Blaiklock, Acts, p. 39.

“The connection between the close of the preceding chapter and the opening of this one appears so close, that one is apt to conclude that all happened on one day, and that a Sabbath (vs. 14). But the violence with which the former chapter closes, and the tranquility with which this one opens, renders that somewhat doubtful. At all events, the transactions of both chapters could not have been far apart in time.” David Brown, The Four Gospels (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint, 1976), p. 407.

man suffer blindness, even from his birth. Rather than stress the human reasons for this man’s suffering, He turned His disciples’ attention to the divine purpose, that ‘the works of God might be displayed in him’ (vs. 3). We shall say more about suffering in the will of God later, but the response of our Lord to the question of His disciples is directed more to their attitudes and actions than to their doctrinal instruction. The disciples, like most of us, had rather philosophize about human suffering than to philanthropize. Our Lord had no time to probe into the specific cause of this man’s suffering. Time was late; His time was limited. They must do the work of God while there was the opportunity (cf. verse 4).

Just prior to healing this man, Jesus made this statement: “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). This Jesus said to establish a clear connection between the healing of this blind man and His claim to be the ‘Light of the world’ (John 18:12; cf. John 1:4; 12:46). What our Lord previously claimed He now demonstrated by this miracle.

The healing of this man was unusual from several vantage points. First of all, as we have previously remarked, it was apparently completely at the initiative of our Lord. Then, also, it was not marked with the simplicity of other healings of the blind (cf. Matthew 9:27-30; 20:30-34). Our Lord made clay from the dust and His spittle. With this mixture, He anointed the eyes of the man and then sent him to the pool of Siloam, instructing him to wash there. When he returned with his sight, it would appear that our Lord had long since departed.

Why, then, did our Lord heal this man in such a unique fashion? Let me suggest several reasons for the clay and the washing. First of all, we are told by some that spittle was thought by those in Jesus’ time to have medicinal value. By the use of the clay and the spittle, our Lord is said to have accommodated Himself to the popular beliefs of His day in order to strengthen the faith of the man. Also, as Shepard has suggested, our Lord technically violated the Pharisaical interpretation of keeping the Sabbath, for the mixing of the spittle and clay would be considered work, and the application of spittle on the Sabbath was expressly prohibited by Jewish tradition.

Having noted these scholarly suggestions, let me suggest a couple of my own, much more pragmatic in nature. The smearing of the clay on the eyes of this man greatly facilitated his faith in a very practical way. Even if the man had his doubts about a man smearing mud in his eyes and promising healing, he had to wash his face anyway, and the pool of Siloam may well have been the closest place. Then, also, by having the man wash in the pool of Siloam, the actual miracle took place away from Jesus, and probably away from the gaping eyes of the Pharisees, who were looking for any cause to bring further accusations against Him. The confrontation in this account is between the healed man and the Pharisees, not Jesus and the Pharisees.

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8 There seems to be significance for John in the pool of Siloam, which he informs us means ‘sent’ (verse 7), but it is difficult to determine precisely what John intends for us to grasp. Charles Eerdman suggests, “Jesus had continually declared that he himself had been sent of God, and he is now intimating that he alone could heal; that he fulfilled all the blessings which Siloam typified. Each day of the feast of tabernacles a libation had been brought from that pool, to suggest the gifts of God to his people. Jesus is now saying that as the waters of Siloam will wash the clay from the eyes of the blind man, so he, the true Siloam, the One sent of God, will take away his physical blindness, and also will restore spiritual sight to the world.” Charles Eerdman, The Gospel of John (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1944), p. 86.

9 “We may here recall, that the use of saliva was a well-known Jewish remedy for affections of the eyes. It was thus that the celebrated Rabbi Meir relieved one of his fair hearers, when her husband, in his anger at her long detention by the Rabbi’s sermons, had ordered her to spit in the preacher’s face. Pretending to suffer from his eyes, the Rabbi contrived that the woman publicly spat in his eyes, thus enabling her to obey her husband’s command. The anecdote at least proves, that the application of saliva was popularly regarded as a remedy for affections of the eyes.” Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), II, p 48.

10 “In so doing, He accommodated Himself to the current popular belief in the curative effects of saliva and clay, especially in the case of weak eyes, in order doubtless to stimulate initial faith in the man, as well as to technically violate the traditional rules.” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 360.

11 Cf. footnote 10.

It didn’t take long for the word to get out that something strange had happened to this blind beggar. Not only was he no longer blind, but he no longer begged either (cf. verse 8). The neighbors were the first to notice the change, but they did not all agree as to how they should interpret what had happened. Some maintained that this man only resembled the blind beggar (verse 9). When they asked him to explain in detail all he could say was that a man named Jesus had accomplished it, and that he did not know where He was (verses 11, 12).

The Blind Man Receives a Hearing

(9:13-34)

While Jesus gave him his sight, the Pharisees gave him a hearing. Those who had first witnessed that the man had been healed did not know how to handle the situation, so they brought the man to the Pharisees (verse 13). Although this was not a meeting of the Sanhedrin, it was no informal gathering either. It must have been some smaller body, convening as a preliminary hearing to see if there was sufficient cause to take more rigorous action.  

At this initial hearing, several points were established. The man apparently had been healed by Jesus, and most significantly, on the Sabbath. The evidence presented led to two contradictory conclusions. Some recognized that such a great work could not be anything other than the work of God. Others, pointing out that the Sabbath had been violated, concluded that Jesus could not have been from God (verse 16). Perhaps in frustration they turned to the man himself. No one was more qualified to judge this matter than the healed man himself. What did he think of Jesus? Without hesitation, he answered, “He is a prophet” (verse 17).

This conclusion was totally unacceptable to the opposing Pharisees. Consequently, they had to investigate the matter more fully. Perhaps this was some kind of hoax. Maybe this man only resembled the blind beggar, as some had already suggested. Perhaps his parents could shed some light on the matter.

The parents were guardedly tight-lipped. It was known to them that the Pharisees had already put the word out that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue (or excommunicated). As a result, the parents confirmed the fact that this man was their son, and that he had been born blind. As to who had healed him and how it was accomplished, they would not conjecture. If the Pharisees wanted to know more, let them ask their son, for he was of age and could speak for himself (verse 21).

Again, the man was called before the Pharisees with the words, “Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner” (John 9:24). The intent of this instruction is not just that the man should give all the glory to God for his healing, and none to Jesus, but it is in effect the swearing of an oath, promising to tell the whole

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13 “Similarly, the formal question now put to him by the Jews was as much, if not more, a preparatory inquisition than the outcome of a wish to learn the circumstances of his healing.” Edersheim, *Life and Times*, II, p. 181.

14 “There were two, or as some say three, kinds of excommunication among the Jews, greatly differing in degrees and intensity; and Christ often speaks of them, as among the sharpest trials which his followers would have to endure for his name’s sake (John xvi. 2). The mildest form was exclusion for thirty days from the synagogue. To this period, in case the excommunicated showed no sign of repentance, a similar or a longer period, according to the will of those that imposed the sentence, was added: in other ways too it was made sharper; it was accompanied with a curse; none might hold communion with him now, not even his family, except in cases of absolute necessity. Did the offender show himself obstinate still, he was in the end absolutely separated from the fellowship of the people of God, cut off from the congregation—a sentence answering, as many suppose, to the delivering to Satan in the apostolic Church (1 Cor. v. 5; 1 Tim. i. 20).” R. C. Trench, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), pp. 188-189. Cf. also J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels*, pp. 361-362, Edersheim, *Life and Times*, II, pp. 183-184, Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John*, p. 488, fn. 35.

15 It is difficult to read the words of Isaiah 66:5 without thinking of this incident in John 9: “Hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble at His word; Your brothers who hate you, who exclude you for My name’s sake, have said, ‘Let the Lord be glorified, that we may see your joy.’ But they will be put to shame” (Isaiah 66:5).
At this point, the man did not attempt to interpret the events of his healing, but he tenaciously held to the facts: before, he was blind, but now he could see. Whatever the Jews decided, they could not alter the facts.

Setting aside for a moment the fact that this man had been genuinely healed, and by Jesus, they probed into the manner of the healing. Perhaps there was something here to give the Pharisees a toehold and thus enable them to press charges against Jesus. And so they asked the man to repeat once more how the miracle was accomplished.

The patience of the man gave way to exasperation. He knew all too well that they had no interest in the matter other than to find fault with Jesus. The man turned the tables on his inquisitioners and asked them a question: “I told you already, and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?” (John 9:27).

Here the motives of the Pharisees were laid bare. They did not seek truth, but some shred of evidence that they could use against Jesus, to prove He was not the Messiah. They did not seek this for their sake so much as for the crowds who still generally held Him a likely candidate.

That little word ‘too’ may be significant, for it may indicate that this man has progressed to the point in his thinking that he included himself among the disciples of our Lord. This is the way that the Pharisees took it, for in verse 28, they referred to him as a disciple of Jesus.

The choice confronting the man was to decide whose disciple he would be. They were disciples of Moses, while he followed Jesus. Assuming their traditions to be a part of God’s Law, they thought that Moses was on their side. This also meant that Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker by their definition, and that, as such, He could not be One sent from God. He must be a sinner. He would have to choose between Moses and Jesus. The point they failed to notice was that Moses, like Jesus, was authenticated as God’s messenger by the miraculous works that he performed.

The blind beggar had not only gained his sight, but he was continually gaining insight into the true motives of his inquisitors. They had no interest in the facts. Their minds were made up. They were simply looking for some loophole in the facts which would make room for their preconceived ideas. With this insight, he turned the tables and put the Pharisees on the defensive. He manifested a boldness in the truth that is unmistakable.

“The man answered and said to them, “Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners; but if any one is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing” (John 9:30-33).

There was an obvious note of sarcasm in this indictment of the Pharisees by the one who had been healed. How could they possibly conclude that He was not sent from God when He did that which no other prophet had done? How could they defend their position as religious leaders when they had no explanation for His appearance or actions? Their position was so weak and indefensible that even this untrained layman could shoot holes in it. He had lost all respect for their authority, and no longer feared whatever penalty they might mete out to him. He wanted no part of their religion anyway. Let them throw him out.

The self-righteous Pharisees were cut to the quick. All semblance of impartiality and calm judgment were swept aside by the stinging rebuke of the former beggar. In this debate between the beggar and the bigots, the beggar won. This is evidenced by their response to his rebuke:

“‘How dare you, a man whose sins have brought about blindness, speak to us in such fashion,’ they retaliated. And with this they excommunicated him” (John 9:34, my paraphrase).

16 “The phrase (Give glory to God) is a solemn charge to declare the whole truth. Compare Josh. vii. 19; I Esdr. ix. 8; (1 S. vi. 5). The man by his former declaration (v. 17) had really (so they imply) done dishonour to God. He was now required to confess his error: to recognise in the authoritative voice of ‘the Jews’ his own condemnation, and to admit the truth of it.” B. F. Wescott, The Gospel According to St. John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint, 1973) , p. 146.
The Blind Sees and the Seeing Are Blind
(9:35-41)

Just as our Lord initiated the restoration of sight to this blind man, so He now sought him out to grant him spiritual sight. The Savior did not hasten the spiritual birth process. His physical healing set the process in motion. The opposition of the Pharisees, far from hindering his conversion, compelled him to it. The failure of Pharisaism was all too evident. If the Pharisees were wrong, then Jesus must be right.

When our Lord found the man He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (verse 35). He was willing to accept Jesus as a spokesman for God, but did not yet know who the Messiah was. And so it was that he asked who the Messiah was, that he might believe on Him. The One Whom he had beheld with his restored eyes, the One to Whom he had been driven by the obstinacy of the Pharisees, the One to Whom he spoke; this One was the Messiah. With this, the man fell at the feet of Jesus in acknowledgement and adoration of His person. And with this bending of the knees came the full sight of the blind man, both physical and spiritual.

But while the healed man bent his knees, the Pharisees stiffened their necks in rebellion and resistance. Our Lord’s coming resulted not only in the restoration of sight to the blind, but also in the blindness of those who professed to see: “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind” (John 9:39).

There is no contradiction in these words of our Lord with what He said elsewhere to the effect that He did not come to condemn men, but to save them (e.g. John 3:17; 12:47). Our Lord’s purpose in coming to the world was to accomplish salvation. But in the process of His coming as the ‘Light of the world’ (John 1:4; 8:12; 12:46), He exposed the sinfulness of men. Those who reject the light and refuse to turn from their sins and receive His pardon seal their own condemnation. I may go to my office late at night to get a much needed book, and in the process encounter a burglar who, because of my call to the police, is captured and convicted. What was done for one primary purpose may result in something different. Such is the case with the coming of Christ as the light of the world.

The Pharisees, who were now watching Jesus like a hawk, seeking any infraction of their meticulous rules, could not help but overhear this statement of Jesus and ask, “We are not blind too, are we?” (John 9:40). They, no doubt, hoped for a simple “No,” while expecting a stinging “Yes.” Jesus explained their guilt in more detail. They would not be blind if they were aware of the issues. But their problem was not a lack of evidence. Their sin was manifested in their refusal to admit that the evidence was true. They refused to let the evidence persuade them to come to the only logical conclusion. Because they claimed to perceive the issues, they were blind, and by their own admission (verse 41).

Conclusion and Application

Historical Interpretation

As I understand this passage in the context of John’s gospel, it serves several purposes. First of all, this healing accredits the claim of our Lord Jesus to be the ‘light of the world,’ especially as it was made in chapter 8 (verse 12). This miracle authenticated the claims of Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, just as the miracles of Moses identified him to Israel as a prophet of God. The blind saw the implications of his healing and knelt in worship before Jesus. As the blind man himself reminded the Pharisees, there was no record of a man ever receiving his sight. More than this, the giving of sight to the blind was viewed in the Old Testament as a work of the Messiah (cf. Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7). It is not without significance that Jesus is recorded to have performed more miracles of restoring sight than of any other kind of healing (cf. Matthew 9:27-31; 12:22f.; 15:30f.; 21:14; Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52; Luke 7:21f.).

The expression ‘Son of Man’ was deliberately chosen by our Lord so as to avoid, in this intense period of opposition, a crystal clear statement that He was the Messiah. The blind man understood the implications of this expression, but the opposition could not build a case on it. For a more detailed analysis of this expression, ‘Son of Man,’ see Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, pp. 172-173.
In addition to providing evidence in defense of the claims of Jesus, His miracles practically forced men to come to a decision about him. In this chapter, we can see that the healing of the blind man divided those who learned of it. Some could not resist the compelling nature of the evidence, while others could not accept it. But in either case, it pushed people off ‘dead center.’ No one remained neutral about Jesus. Even the opposition of the Pharisees forced people to arrive at a strong conviction in the matter. Humanly speaking, the blind man might have given no more thought to his healing had the Pharisees not made such an issue of it.

Implications and Applications

This passage has a great deal to say to men today: First of all, it addresses those who have attempted to remain neutral on the issue of Jesus Christ. Let me say to you, my friend, that there is no such thing as neutrality concerning Jesus Christ. To attempt to remain neutral is only a more sophisticated way of rejecting Him. As our Lord Himself said: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6).

The apostle John wrote: “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:12).

Once again, our Lord said, “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Matthew 12:30).

Those who profess neutrality have failed to take the words of Scripture seriously enough. Those who witnessed the claims and actions of Jesus knew that they must either accept Him for Whom He claimed to be, or utterly reject Him. In this sense, the logic of the Pharisees was not too far from the truth. If Jesus was not the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world, then He should have been done away with. Such a man would have been a menace to society. But if He was right, then men must fall before Him as the Creator of the universe, and the Redeemer of men to Whom all things will be put in subjection (cf. Philippians 2:9-11).

Whatever you do this morning, my undecided friend, do not go away tipping your hat to God by acknowledging that Jesus was a good man, a good teacher, a good example for us to follow. If He was not the Son of God, He was an imposter, deceived and deceiving. Do not give Him what He does not deserve. But if, as the gospel writers tell us, He not only healed the blind and raised the dead, but also claimed to be God in human flesh, then you must accept Him as your Savior or reject Him as a fraud. There is no middle ground. You must face the compelling force of the miracles and teaching of Jesus.

I must also go on to say that this text exposes the real reason why men reject Jesus as their Savior. It is not an intellectual problem. Let me say it again; it is not, at its roots, an intellectual reason for which men reject Jesus. It is a moral problem. There was no deficiency in the evidence. The problem was that the Pharisees rejected the sheer weight of the evidence, because it did not conform to their preconceived ideas as to the conclusion. It was their presuppositions that killed them (so to speak). They had devised a religious system which outwardly seemed to comply with the Old Testament revelation, but which really defined a God under their control. The reason they rejected Jesus was because He did not conform to their preferences as to what God should be like. They had created a God after their own image, rather than conforming their theology to what God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

And so it is with men today. “I like to think of God as ...” people say. And that is precisely their problem. It doesn’t really matter how you wish to think of God. The destiny-determining reality is that we must worship God ‘in spirit and in truth’ (John 4:23). When God does not conform to our preferences, our preferences must give way to the precepts of the Word of God. There is more than enough evidence in the Word of God to persuade any man who is open to the truth (and this, of course, is ultimately the sovereign work of God). No amount of evidence will persuade the one who has determined not to submit to God (cf. Luke 16:27-31). Men do not accept the gospel of Jesus Christ because they know that they must undergo a radical transformation of lifestyle, and rebels against God that we are, we do not (by nature) wish to do any such thing. That is why, in the final analysis, that our salvation must originate with God and not with us.

There is here as well instruction for Christians. We should be rebuked by the hardness of the disciples to the suffering of this man. We, like they, are all too inclined to speculate about the sins of others, rather than to
minister to the misery of the suffering. We would rather philosophize than to philanthropize. If we would do His work, we must work while the opportunity is ours, to manifest the grace of God to men.

There is also instruction for the Christian in the matter of apologetics. I am amazed at how this untaught, unlearned beggar stood up to the most highly educated skeptics of his day. He refused to speculate, but tenaciously held to what he knew to be the facts, based upon his own experience with Jesus Christ. And so, I believe, must we stick to what little (“this one thing I know” verse 25) we know from our own experience to be true. The one thing men can’t explain is a life completely transformed by the power of Jesus Christ.

I dare not depart from this text without a word on the matter of suffering and the will of God. First of all, it was a part of the decretive (purposed, determined) will of God that this man be born blind. Second, God is not untouched by suffering (as the disciples seemed to be), but rather was moved with compassion to heal this man. Our Lord came not only to deal with the symptom of suffering, but its root, which is sin. Although the Christian is no more exempt from suffering in this life than was our Lord, when the restoration of all things takes place, there will be no more suffering (cf. Romans 8:18-23; Revelation 21:4). For the time being, suffering is both for the glory of God and the good of the Christian. Although this man spent years in darkness, he came in contact with the ‘Light of the world’ because of his blindness, and came to see not only physically, but spiritually. That man will never, in all of eternity, look back on those years of blindness with regret. He came to experience the truth of Romans 8:28 that suffering, for the Christian, is for the glory of God, as well as the good of the saint.
Lesson 13:  
The Resurrection and the Life  
(John 11:1-53)  

Introduction  

A couple of years ago I attended the funeral of a young woman who died of cancer. The woman who had passed away was a young mother, 32 years old, who left behind a husband and two young children. It was indeed, in human terms, a tragic death. The minister who conducted the funeral was the pastor of a very large and liberal church. I will never forget his message, for it was instrumental in my life to completely change my way of handling a funeral service. In the course of his message, he made this statement: “I am convinced that it was not the will of God for this young woman to die.”

It was hardly more than a week later that I was called upon to preach a funeral message from behind the very same pulpit that this liberal pastor had stood. My family and I had slipped away to Houston for a couple of days of retreat. We had just arrived when the call came that an acquaintance had passed away, and that, if possible, the family would like me to handle the service. I can still remember my thoughts as I was driving back to Dallas, pondering what I would say. I had been reading in the gospel of John, chapter 11, when all of a sudden the matter of a Christian view of death came into sharp focus against the backdrop of the funeral service I had attended just a few days before. It is that view of death which I would like to share with you as we come to the greatest miracle in the life and ministry of our Lord, the raising of Lazarus from the grave. An account recorded only in the gospel of John, chapter 11.¹

Comfort in the Purpose of Death  
(11:1-6)  

From the last verses of John chapter 10, we would conclude that Jesus was in Perea, approximately 20 miles from the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus when word reached the Master that Lazarus was gravely ill (John 11:3). As we piece together the details of the account it would seem that even at the time word reached the Savior Lazarus had already passed away.² Mary and Martha are known to us from Luke 10:38-42. In the 12th chapter of John, we are told of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus in preparation for His death and burial. In the ur-

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¹ Liberal scholars make much of this fact, citing the absence of this miracle in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) as evidence that there really was no such miracle at all. Shepard summarizes the orthodox position when he writes, “There is no real ground for questioning the literal exactness of the evangelical record. The objection raised, that this miracle is not mentioned by the synoptic gospels, is offset by the fact that neither did John mention the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Matt. 9:22,26) nor that of the widow’s son at Nain (Luke 7:11-17). The fact is, John gives special emphasis in his gospel to the ministry of Jerusalem and Judea, while the synoptics emphasize more the Galilean ministry. Furthermore, the dramatic vividness of details, the remarkable delineation of personalities, and the numerous minute touches in the historic record, leave no room for doubt, that an eye witness wrote it. He made use of it to show forth the divine personality of the Saviour. This sign is tied up indissolubly with the whole argument of the fourth gospel. He who questions it will also doubt the divinity of Jesus and His resurrection from the dead.” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 432.

gent message sent to the Master, there was evident a confidence and faith in Him as both Savior and Friend. He was simply informed of the situation. No suggestion was made as to the course of action He should take. They knew Jesus would do what was best.

What Jesus actually did was a complete surprise, for we would have expected Him to heal (or raise) Lazarus from a distance (cp. Matthew 8:5-13). At the very least, we would have expected Him to immediately go to Bethany. But instead He purposed to stay where He was for two days (verse 6). The disciples would hardly question the decision of Jesus, assuming it a matter of common sense. Bethany was only two miles from Jerusalem (verse 13), and the Jews had already attempted to put Jesus to death there (John 8:59; 10:39). No sense putting your head in the lion’s mouth. But concern for personal safety was not the issue at all to Jesus, as we shall see later. The reason for our Lord’s delay was due to the divine purpose for Lazarus’ death.

“But when Jesus heard it, He said, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified in it.’” (John 11:4).

Here is where the liberal preacher whom I mentioned before was absolutely wrong. It was the will of God for that 32-year-old mother to die of cancer. Just so, it was the will of God for Lazarus to die, while the Savior Who could have healed him was 20 miles away. If God is God at all, He is God of all. It is impossible for God to be God and not to be responsible (ultimately) for all that occurs. By this I do not mean to say that God is the source of all evil, but that God is responsible for including the existence of evil, tragedy, and suffering in His plan. He does not cause sin, but He does purpose to employ its commission to further His purposes (cf. Genesis 50:20).

The immediate outcome of God’s will for Lazarus was for him to die (verse 14), but the ultimate goal was for him to live (verse 23). It is for this reason that the Master spoke of his temporary condition of death as sleep, for he would soon be awakened.

God’s purpose in the death of Lazarus was to glorify Himself, through the glorification of His Son (verse 4). Although there were other times that Jesus raised men from the dead, this was done after Lazarus had been dead for four days. While others had been raised from death in more out of the way places (cf. Matthew 9:22-26; Luke 7:11-17), this took place at the very heart of Judea, only two miles from Jerusalem. This was the high-water mark of the miracles of our Lord. In the raising of Lazarus, Jesus was shown to be the ‘resurrection and the life’ (verse 25). No greater evidence of His person can be found in all of the Gospel accounts.

This was the word of comfort which Jesus sent back to Martha and Mary: Lazarus is only temporarily dead, and better yet his momentary death would be used to the glory of God through the exaltation of the Son. And this, my friends, is precisely where we must find comfort as well. Whenever the Christian comes face to face with death, whether the reality of his own, that of a relative or friend, or that of a stranger, whether saved or unsaved—we are to find comfort in the fact that this death, every death is for the glory of God.

You will understand that I am momentarily departing from our text, but we have come to a point too crucial to pass by without comment. Let me suggest several reasons why death is to the glory of God. First of all, death reveals God to be holy and just, a God Who cannot overlook sin, but Who must punish sin. He is a God Who deals decisively with sin. Centuries ago God told Adam concerning the forbidden fruit,

“But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

Paul wrote, ‘The wages of sin is death’ (Romans 6:23). Contrary to popular opinion, death does not make God look bad. It shows how offensive sin is in God’s sight. It reveals God’s holiness and justice in dealing with it so severely. The fact that every man will die reveals that God is absolutely consistent and unwavering in His judgment on sin.

Second, death brings glory to God in that it is the ‘last enemy’ over which our Lord Jesus Christ will prevail, and in so doing He will manifest Himself as Lord of all (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Third, I would suggest that death is designed to bring glory to God through the victorious testimony of His saints in the face of death. The world dreads and avoids every suggestion of it. The Christian does not delight in it, for it is an ugly reminder of sin, but he does not dread it. Instead, he considers it a defeated enemy. Death to the Christian is a necessary step in entering into the presence of the living God (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:50-58; Philippians 1:19-24; 2 Corinthians 5:1-8).
I have lingered long on the fact that death is a part of the purpose and plan of God to bring glory to Himself. In this, we may find comfort. But in the midst of the fact that God has purposed death to glorify Himself let us not miss another clear and resounding strain which permeates the first six verses of John 11—that is the depth of the friendship and love which existed between Jesus and Lazarus and his sisters: “Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus” (John 11:5).

Throughout the entire account of the raising of Lazarus, the intimate friendship and love of Jesus for this family is underscored. And herein is one of the most comforting of all principles to strengthen and comfort us in the face of death: THE PURPOSE OF GOD IS NEVER SEPARATED FROM HIS LOVE FOR HIS OWN.”

So often those who stand solidly on the truth of the sovereignty of God (as I pray I do) tend to depreciate the love of God. God’s purposes never sacrifice the best interest of His own. God’s love for His own is never surrendered to His purposes. The two go hand-in-hand. What a comfort we should find in that truth!

Comfort in the Possibility of Death
(11:7-16)

The real concern of the disciples was not distress over the death of Lazarus (for they did not yet comprehend that he had died (verse 13), but over the possibility, better yet, the probability, of their own if they went with Jesus into Judea. After the two days had passed, Jesus announced to His disciples that they were going to Judea. To them, this was suicide (verse 8). At this point of fear for the future over what seemed certain death, Jesus laid down another principle for Christians of any generation concerning danger in the service of the Master:

“Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him’” (John 11:9-10).

Jesus had already been shown to be the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5). If the light of the world is in us (as He surely is when we are engaged in His service), then there is no danger of harm or injury outside of God’s will. Men only stumble in the absence of the light. The disciples need not fear physical harm for the light of the world is with them. The principle then boils down to this: “THERE IS NO PERIL IN THE PERFORMANCE OF GOD-GIVEN DUTY, ONLY IN ITS NEGLECT.”

When we commit ourselves to doing God’s will, we have, so to speak, a charmed life so long as we are fulfilling God’s purpose for our lives. When we are in real danger is when we depart from divine duty to pursue our own selfish desires. Men have suffered and died in the service of the King (as did our Lord Himself), but such was the purpose and plan of God for them when they did. No matter how great the danger may appear, it is a mere illusion when we are on a divinely appointed task. So long as God has work for us to do and we are busily engaged in that work, we are indestructible.

Having laid down this principle, our Lord went on to explain to His disciples that Lazarus was physically dead, and that this death was, in part, for the strengthening of their own faith. The disciples did not fully comprehend what our Lord had said, but as Thomas expressed as their spokesman, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him” (John 11:16).

They would rather die with Him than live without Him. These men were not so much afraid to die for the Savior as they were uncertain as to how they could live for Him.

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3 “From the non-mention of Peter and the prominence of Thomas, it seems at least doubtful, whether all the Apostles were there.” Edersheim, Life and Times, II, p. 313, fn. 1.

4 “One small piece of evidence supporting the view that Peter was absent is the fact that Thomas is the spokesman for the Twelve in v. 16. Normally we should expect Peter to fill that role.” Morris, John, p. 535.
Comfort in the Presence of Death
(11:17-37)

I would like to pass by many of the details of the death and burial of Lazarus in order to highlight the significant factors which brought comfort to Martha and Mary in the presence of the death of Lazarus. He brought comfort by His presence, His promise and His person.

(1) Comfort in the presence of Jesus. More than any other factor, it was the absence of Jesus at the time of the death of Lazarus which plagued Mary and Martha. No doubt, the thought expressed by both sisters to our Lord had been repeated to each other often during the absence of the Master: “Lord, if only you had been here …” (John 11:21,32).

The mere presence of Jesus was sufficient to calm the troubled hearts of these two who grieved over the death of their brother, Lazarus. It was in His physical presence that He manifested His deep concern and sympathy over the suffering of His own. Jesus wept (verse 35) and was deeply moved in His spirit (verses 33, 38). Some have suggested that here we see the real humanity of our Lord revealed in His expressions of grief and emotion. I would personally prefer to look upon this as a reflection of the deity of our Lord. When our Lord was deeply moved with the pains and sorrows of His children, it was not merely as man, but as God. Compassion is a divine attribute, more so than a human one. God is deeply touched with our sufferings. It was not the ugliness of sin which brought our Lord to tears, nor was it the awareness of His coming death or the hypocrisy of those who stood by, rather Jesus was deeply moved by the sorrow of those He loved (cf. verse 33).

When I was a student in seminary, my wife and I promised our girls that as soon as we moved from campus housing we would let them have a pet of their own. When we finally moved into another home, we purchased two kittens. After several days, it became apparent that one of them was desperately ill. When we left for church, one was in its final struggle with death. After church, we came home to find that the one kitten had died. I cannot even today speak of my daughter’s emotional trauma without becoming emotional myself. You see, I was moved, not so much at the loss of a cat, but at the sorrow of my daughter. And so it is with God. Whenever we suffer, our Lord is deeply touched. When you and I face the ugly realities of death, even today we may be assured of the fact that we can find comfort in the presence of our Lord.

(2) Comfort in the promise of Christ. This brings us to the second basis of comfort in the presence of death, and that is the promise of our Lord when He said,

“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25,26a).

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5 “The four days had been sad and trying ones for the bereaved sisters. They had fasted the day of burial and had eaten nothing since but an occasional egg or some lentils. The funeral procession had been very depressing with its dirge flutes and the wailing friend-mourners, who ‘wept as those who had no hope.’ These were followed in the procession by the two sisters, neighbors, and relatives. At the tomb the men had chanted the ninetieth Psalm and circled the bier seven times, while friends spoke words of comfort to them in formal mien. How they wished for their great Friend, Jesus, in those weary dragging hours, and cast many an anxious look down the Jericho road. In their desolate home they sat on the floor heavily veiled, with unsandalled feet, surrounded by the mourning friends, with their rent clothes and dust-covered heads.” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels, p. 436.


6 The word used here (wept) is quite different from that in verse 33 (klaio) which denotes loud wailing. Jesus’ weeping was restrained and dignified. Cf. David Brown, The Four Gospels (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint, 1976), p. 419.

7 Some commentators suggest that the expression ‘deeply moved in spirit’ denotes divine indignation, but such does not appear to be its meaning here. Cf. Edersheim, Life and Times, II, pp. 323-324.
The promise of Jesus to these sisters, even at the time of the first report of the illness of Lazarus was that his sickness was not to terminate in death (verses 3,4). That promise of the Master was a source of great comfort, even in His absence. But for us, that promise was forever guaranteed when our Lord Himself rose triumphant from the grave. If death could not hold Him, neither can it stand between Him and us. Our hope of life beyond the grave is grounded on His promise, and His promise is certain because of His power over death and the grave (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:12ff.).

(3) Comfort in the person of our Lord. Mary and Martha found comfort not only in His presence, and in His promise, but in His person. The promise of our Lord to Mary and Martha was rooted in His person. Jesus said to them, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25a). Those who find in Jesus merely a good man, a famous teacher, will find no great comfort in Him at the time of death and sorrow. Perhaps the confession of faith expressed by Martha is even greater than that of Peter, for even at this hour of great trial and testing, she could make this affirmation of faith in the person of Christ: “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world” (John 11:27).

Those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God come into the world to save sinners, the One Who is the resurrection and the life, need have no fear in the presence of death. Those who trust in His person are assured of His presence (Hebrews 13:5), and can rest in His promises.

Comfort in the Power of Christ Over Death
(11:38-44)

The most amazing feature of this miracle is its brevity and simplicity. Nowhere is there to be found any of the embellishments of other spurious writings from this age. Jesus simply ordered the stone to be removed, and with a loud voice, ordered Lazarus to come forth. Even after four days in the tomb, when all hope of recovery was gone, Lazarus came forth.

With the current obsession with life after death, men today would have desired much more detail about what Lazarus experienced during these four days. We should have liked to hear John’s account of the conversations which took place between those who were reunited, but without comment John passes such matters by. This miracle was performed as a sign. Our Lord’s prayer was primarily for the benefit of those who stood by. What was important was the response of men to the miracle which had taken place.

Culmination in the Condemnation of Christ to Death
(11:45-53)

For some, yes many, of the Jews, this miracle compelled them to acknowledge Jesus to be their Messiah, just as Martha had previously affirmed (verse 45, cf. vs. 27). The raising of Lazarus was a sign that, to them, could not be ignored. As a result, many came to faith in Christ.

To those who chose to disbelieve, this miracle was not a matter which could be ignored either. When word quickly reached the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (verse 46), they called a meeting of the Sanhedrin to decide what should be done. They had to acknowledge it was a miracle. They even granted that it was a sign (verse 47). But

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8 “According to the Talmudists, says Lampe, quoting from Maimonides, it was forbidden to open a grave after the stone was placed upon it. Besides other dangers, they were apprehensive of legal impurity by contact with the dead. Hence they avoided coming nearer a grave than four cubits.” Brown, The Four Gospels, p. 419.

9 The loud voice of Jesus at the grave of Lazarus is in contrast to the whisperings and mutterings of the magical healers (cf. Isaiah 8:19). Also, we should take note that if Jesus had not specified Lazarus as the one who should come forth, every corpse within the sound of His voice should have come forth from their graves.

10 “It was the common Jewish idea that corruption commenced on the fourth day, that the drop of gall, which had fallen from the sword of the Angel and caused death, was then working its effect, and that, as the face changed, the soul took its final leave from the resting place of the body.” Edersheim, Life and Times, II, pp. 324-325.
they stubbornly refused to come to the conclusion this sign demanded. Although they refused to believe, the masses seemed to be turning to Him as Messiah.

If there was ever any doubt as to the real reason why the Jewish leaders refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, verse 48 spells it out in the clearest terms: “If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” Money and power, these were what the Jewish leaders refused to cast at the feet of Jesus. His kingdom was not the kind for which they had hoped. They desired their own position in the present regime far more than what He seemed to offer them. They, as do all who are part of ‘the establishment,’ want the status quo. They had power, influence, prestige. More than this, they had wealth. If Jesus were heralded as Israel’s king, the Romans might view this as treason. The Jewish leaders would be held accountable, and the whole establishment would be snatched from their hands. This was too high a price for them to pay.

What all of the Sanhedrin council members had been secretly thinking was now boldly expressed by Caiaphas, the Sadducee who was the high priest: “You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11:49b, 50).

This statement by Caiaphas is to be understood on two levels. First of all, Caiaphas meant to say that it was only common sense that one man should be expendable for the protection and preservation of a nation. Better to sacrifice an individual than a nation, we might say. What in times past had been the informal intention of the Jewish leadership was now the official policy and position. This was the beginning of the end.

But by virtue of his official position as high priest, his words were meant to convey a much deeper meaning. They were really a prophecy of the sacrificial death of Christ for the sins of the world (verses 51,52). Even as the Old Testament prophets had foretold, God was going to send His Messiah so that through His substitutionary death, men might be reconciled to Himself.

**Conclusions and Application**

**Historical Interpretation**

Historically, so far as John’s gospel is concerned, the raising of Lazarus is the high point of our Lord’s self-disclosure to men. This is without a doubt the greatest miracle of His ministry. Humanly speaking, there was no hope of recovery, and yet at the point of absolute helplessness and hopelessness, Jesus gave life to the dead. The spiritual parallel is obvious, for all men are ‘dead in their trespasses and sins’ (Ephesians 2:1-3). When we reach the point of utter despair and self-distrust we find that what we can never do to merit eternal life God has provided as a free gift (Romans 3:20-25; Ephesians 2:8-10). Jesus Christ has come, not to aid men in their struggle toward heaven, but to give life to those who are dead. As He gave life to Lazarus, so He offers spiritual life to all men, on the basis of faith.

As this miracle is the high point of Jesus self-revelation as the Messiah, the Son of God, so it is also the high water mark of human resistance and rejection of the person of Christ. In the face of the most irrefutable evidence the Jewish leaders chose to set aside the evidence for the sake of expedience and sentence the Savior to death. Once again, the rejection of men was not based upon a lack of evidence, but upon moral decay and willful rejection of the truth. Our Lord was not taken by surprise, for He said in the gospel of Luke, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

This miracle also anticipated the coming death of the Lord Jesus and guaranteed the fact that He would rise from the dead, as He informed His disciples (cf. Matthew 16:21; 20:18-19). If Jesus had power over death and the grave, then surely death could not hold Him in the grave.

**Implications and Application**

In addition to John’s primary reasons for this miracle there are numerous lessons for us by way of practical application. First of all it confronts men with the same decision which men had to make in Jesus’ day: What will you do with Jesus? You must either accept Him as the Savior and the Son of God, or you should reject Him as
a phony and a fraud. He cannot be anything less than one or the other. If we take these gospel accounts seriously at all we must face the same destiny-determining decision as those who witnessed His works while on the earth.

In addition, we are presented with a Christian view of death. Death which is faced by faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is not to be feared, for He is the resurrection and the life. If we trust in Him as the Son of God and the coming Savior, as Martha did, then we need not dread the grave. The Christian can rest assured that death is in the will of God and that its purpose is to bring glory to God. Death, in Christian terminology, is only sleep, for it is a temporary state, which will terminate at the call of Christ for His own (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; 1 Corinthians 15). Though we will grieve as did Mary and Martha, our grief is of a much different kind than that of those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

There is much to learn on the matter of Christian suffering. God’s purpose is not that none of His own should suffer, for even His Son suffered untold agony. God’s purpose in suffering is to strengthen our faith (cf. John 11:14-15). Oftentimes Christians who resist the possibility of suffering seem to suppose that God’s highest purpose is that we may be free from pain, when His purpose is to build up our faith through trials and tests (cf. James 1:2-4).

At the outset of this message, I mentioned a funeral sermon in which the minister made the statement that he was convinced the death of the young mother was not the will of God. His fundamental error in that statement was that God’s will can be separated from His power. He viewed his role as something like that of a presidential press agent who is called upon to explain (or cover up) a disastrous presidential error. He stood before that gathering of mourners to apologize for God’s mistake. “God didn’t mean it to come out this way, but it happened anyway, and He is awfully sorry.”

In a very beautiful way, this passage informs us that God’s purposes and His power are never divorced from His eternal love for His own. “Jesus wept.” That is the verse that I want you to remember about this passage, for it was His great love, combined with His infinite power which accomplished this miracle. It was His measureless love which motivated His fathomless purpose to employ suffering to bring glory to Himself and to strengthen the faith of His own. My friend, let us never attempt to make excuses for God’s actions, for whether it is pain or pleasure, it is for the glory of God.
Lesson 14:
The Transfiguration
(Luke 9:18-36)

Introduction

In one of the great Christian classics of the 19th century, The Training of the Twelve, Dr. A. B. Bruce says of the transfiguration of Christ that it is one portion of the Word of God which he would prefer to pass over in silence. As we know from the biblical text, Peter’s unconsidered commentary on this event was completely erroneous, for we are told that Peter did not realize what he was saying (Luke 9:33). Fortunately for Peter and for us, God gave him the privilege of sharing with us his more considered (and inspired) opinion in his second epistle (cf. 2 Peter 1:15-19). This mountaintop experience for the three disciples is also the high point of biblical revelation in the gospels. The transfiguration of our Lord is the culmination of the earthly life of Christ, but in addition, it is the prelude to the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross.

In the 9th chapter of Luke’s gospel, we are informed of the estimation of the person of Jesus by every important party save one—that of the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. We have already been told of their estimation (John 11:47-53), and it is not worth repeating again. We shall learn of the estimation of the person of Jesus by the masses within Judaism (verses 18-19), by the disciples (verse 20), by our Lord (verses 21-27), and by the Father (verses 28-36). It is from this revelation that we shall learn how it is that we should esteem the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In recent times, there has been an interest in the crisis or turning points in one’s lifetime. In a way, that is what we are endeavoring to focus upon in this series in the Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ. We are currently directing our attention to the presentation of Jesus Christ to the nation Israel as her Messiah. His claims to be Messiah are based upon His miracles and His messages, His words and His works. We have now come to the miracle of the transfiguration, a great turning point for both our Lord and His disciples.

The Popular Estimation of Jesus
(9:18-19)

We can only properly understand the miracle of the transfiguration when we view it from a distance. It is obvious in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that the transfiguration is directly related to the so-called ‘great confession’ of Peter.

Our Lord had taken the disciples apart in order that He might pray (verse 18), and it was on this occasion that He asked them a leading question, “Who do the multitudes say that I am?” (Luke 9:18).

It is interesting that He did not ask what the Jewish leaders thought of Him. That was all too evident! It was the popular estimate of Jesus which the disciples were to verbalize. This was what we might call the majority report.

The multitudes’ appraisal of Jesus can be summarized by several statements:

(1) The view of the masses was varied and inconclusive. Some, like Herod (Luke 9:7), supposed Jesus to be John the Baptist raised from the dead. Others perceived Jesus as manifesting the characteristics of one or another of the prophets, perhaps risen again (cf. Luke 9:7b-8).

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3 “These opinions are explained in part by an expectation then commonly entertained, that the advent of the Messiah would be preceded by the return of one of the prophets by whom God had spoken to the fathers, partly by the perception of real or supposed resemblances between Jesus and this or that prophet; His tenderness
(2) The masses held Jesus in esteem, viewing Him as more than an ordinary man. Compared to the view of the Jewish leadership (who considered Jesus to be a servant of Satan), the masses held a high view of Jesus. He was to most a prophet (cf. John 9:17).

(3) To the masses, Jesus was not the Messiah. Although the majority of Judaism esteemed Jesus as a person Who spoke authoritatively for God, they did not go far enough, for they did not regard Him as Messiah. Their silence on this issue is not without great significance.

The Disciples’ Estimation of Jesus (9:20)

Our Lord was not nearly so interested in hearing a commentary on His acceptance by the multitudes as He was of causing the disciples to face the issue of His identity and to disclose the implications of His identity for His ministry and theirs. And so He posed the question, “But you, who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9:20, my translation).

Luke’s account of Peter’s reply combines that recorded by Mark and Matthew. Peter, as the typical spokesman for the others, answered with a two-fold acknowledgment. First of all, Jesus was the Messiah for whose coming pious Jews had anxiously waited. Jesus was the Christos, the anointed One. The New American Standard Version indicates in the margin of verse 20 that the term ‘Christ’ is synonymous with the title ‘Messiah.’ What the Jewish leaders refused to admit, and what the masses failed to recognize, was what Peter professed. “You are the Messiah.”

Second, Peter made an even more significant admission. Not only was Jesus the Messiah, but He was the Son of God, or in Peter’s words, “the Christ of God” (verse 20). Matthew’s account is even more pointed: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). The traditional view of the Messiah Who was to come was that He was merely a man, albeit one with extraordinary gifts. This view, of necessity, did not do justice to certain Old Testament passages which identified the coming Messiah as divine (e.g. Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; Micah 5:2). Peter had come to realize that One far greater than mortal man was with them (cf. Mark 4:41). Jesus was both Messiah and the Son of God. While the Pharisees and Sadducees rejected Jesus altogether, and the majority accepted Him as a great man, the disciples had come to see Him as both Messiah and God.

In this confession, we can detect both progress from previous levels of understanding and yet imperfection in coming to grips with all of the implications of the profession just made. While the disciples had previously acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah (cf. John 1:49), their grasp of what was meant by the title ‘Messiah’ had greatly expanded. Through His miracles and teaching, they had also concluded that Jesus was God manifested in the flesh. All of this understanding converged in Peter’s confession. But in spite of the advance in the thinking of

reminding one hearer of the author of the Lamentations, His sternness in denouncing hypocrisy and tyranny reminding another of the prophet of fire, while perhaps His parabolic discourses led a third to think of Ezekiel or of Daniel.” Bruce, Training of the Twelve, pp. 164-165.

4 “At a time when those who deemed themselves in every respect immeasurably superior to the multitude could find no better names for the Son of man than Samaritan, devil, blasphemer, glutton and drunkard, companion of publicans and sinners, it was something considerable to believe that the calumniated One was a prophet as worthy of honor as any of those whose sepulchres the professors of piety carefully varnished, while depreciating, and even putting to death, their living successors.” Ibid., p. 165.

5 “But however men differed on these points, in this all agreed, that they regarded Him not as an ordinary man or teacher, but His mission as straight from heaven; and, alas, in this also, that they did not view Him as the Messiah.” Alford Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, New American Edition, 1965), II, p. 79.

6 This translation reflects the original text which places the pronoun (you) in the most emphatic position possible in the Greek language.

7 “St. Chrysostom has beautifully designated Peter as ‘the mouth of the Apostles.” Edersheim, Life and Times, II, p. 80.
the disciples, it is all too apparent that their conception of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God was far from complete. A full grasp (so far as is humanly possible) came only after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord.

Our Lord’s Estimation of Himself
(9:21-27)

The full report of our Lord’s response to Peter’s confession is not recorded by Luke, but only by Matthew:

“Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:17-19).

This passage in Matthew is outside of the limitations of our time and our text, but it is obviously important because of the doctrines which have been built upon its interpretation. Several comments on the additional details of Matthew’s account must suffice for the present time.

(1) Jesus endorsed Peter’s conclusions when He greatly praised his confession. By this, our Lord indicated that His concept of Himself was in agreement with Peter’s.

(2) It was not Peter’s person so much that was praised by our Lord as his faith, and his conclusions.

(3) The ‘rock’ to which our Lord referred exegetically can refer either to Peter himself (as an apostle, cf. Ephesians 2:20) or to the ‘rock’ of his confession, that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

(4) Peter was called the foundation stone first, since he was the first to proclaim Jesus as such, but in reality, he is a foundation stone only in the same sense as all apostles.

(5) It is significant that Mark, whose account rests upon the testimony of Peter, records our Lord’s stinging rebuke to Peter (Mark 8:33) while omitting the words of praise recorded by Matthew.

Peter’s confession, though praiseworthy, must be kept private for the time being (verse 21). Many have been perplexed at our Lord’s insistence on the silence of His identity as Messiah. When the demons addressed Jesus as the Son of God they, too, were silenced (cf. Mark 1:24-25). The reason for silence at this point was several-fold. First, as Jesus commanded Peter’s confession, He made it clear that his conclusions were not prompted by men, but by God (Matthew 16:17). Just as the disciples were convinced from within by taking heed to the words and works of the Savior, so should others. Secondly, He wished to avoid arousing ill-conceived hopes for a political

8 Bruce, Training of the Twelve, p. 167.

9 “Of this only we are sure, that not Peter’s person, but Peter’s faith, is the fundamental matter in Christ’s mind. When He says to that disciple, “Thou art Petros,” He means, “Thou art a man of rock, worthy of the name I gave thee by anticipation the first time I met thee, because thou hast at length got thy foot planted on the rock of the eternal truth.” Bruce, Training of the Twelve, pp. 168-169.

10 “He doubtless here plays on the name of Peter which denoted a smaller detachment—a stone broken out of the quarry for building purposes. The rock on which Christ would build was the massive ledge of the eternal truth of His divinity, incarnated in the personality of all believers, transforming them, as it had transformed Peter, into the rock-nature, suitable for the purposes of kingdom-building. To Peter was given the honor of being primus enter pares the first to have expressed the great confession. Jesus did not assert the supremacy and primacy of Peter, as Romanists contend. He expressed first to Peter, His purpose to found His church, because Peter had been the first to confess Him confidently as the Messiah and Son of God. Peter is to be one of the foundation stones along with the other apostles, and he has the honor of being the first mentioned. He is worthy of this first mention because he was the first to make the bold confession, just following the great defection, and in the face of the united hostilities of a far-reaching conspiracy. Peter was the kind of man Jesus could use in building His great spiritual temple of the universal church—a living stone.” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 304.
messiah who would throw off the yoke of Rome. To outwardly proclaim Jesus as Israel’s Messiah would be to identify Jesus with their erroneous views of messiahship. They must renounce their misconceptions and adapt to our Lord’s program and person. Thirdly, mere words could not and would not suffice to convey the truths about His person and work.¹¹

One can hardly fathom how devastating the next words of Jesus were to the disciples’ high hopes. How exhilarating our Lord’s commendation of Peter must have been to them. But this confession of faith was seemingly nullified by our Lord’s talk about death. “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (Luke 9:22).

In a way totally beyond the grasp of the disciples, Jesus was the glorious King of Israel, and yet He kept speaking of His death. There was a mixture of triumph and tragedy, sovereignty and suffering, incomprehensible to them.

The matter of suffering and glory was not only a paradox to be reckoned with so far as the Lord’s death was concerned, it was also the fundamental principle for true discipleship. In verses 23-26, Jesus laid down the principle for true discipleship. In verses 23-26, Jesus laid down the principle of discipleship that those who would truly be His disciples must also be willing to give up their life for His sake. As Matthew informs us, Peter recoiled at the thought of Jesus giving up His life (Matthew 16:22). How could He be Messiah if He were put to death? But as our Lord made clear, the paradox of Christian discipleship is that we can only save our soul by giving up our life (verses 23-26).

These were matters too deep for the disciples. Little wonder that we have no recorded account of what took place during those eight days between the great confession and the transfiguration. Knowing that His words were difficult to accept, our Lord did give one promise which somehow left room for hope: “But I tell you truly, there are some of those standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:27).

God’s Estimation of Jesus (9:28-36)

Here, then, is the background of the transfiguration. The Jewish leadership had rejected Jesus and planned His death. The vast majority of Judaism regarded Him highly, but not highly enough. The disciples believed Him to be both Messiah and the Son of God, but only vaguely comprehending the implications of what they professed. The joy of Jesus’ praise of Peter’s confession was quickly nullified by His declaration that He was about to die, and that their responsibility, if they would be His disciples, was they must be willing to do likewise.

Now some six or eight days later,¹² Jesus took Peter, James, and John apart to pray. The ‘high mountain’ (Matthew 17:1; cf. Luke 9:28), is thought by many scholars to be Mt. Hermon.¹³ Several factors seem to indicate

¹¹“One day when Jesus was walking in Solomon’s porch in the Temple, a group of his fellow countrymen accosted him. ‘How long dost thou make us to doubt?’ they said. ‘If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly’ (John 10:24). But the greatest things in life cannot be ‘told’ in that way. Can you ‘tell plainly’ what honor is or beauty or love? Can you put a sunset into a sentence? Can you express the glory and mystery and magic of a great symphony in one terse phrase? None of life’s really great, moving experiences or discoveries can be told plainly in words. And how should we expect the greatest and most moving of all to be thus told—which is the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ? Jesus knew that it would not be by any voice proclaiming, ‘I am the Son of God,’ that conviction would be born in human hearts. But the wind bloweth where it listeth, and the men who live with him and love him learn his nature and his name.” James S. Stewart, The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ (Nashville: Abingdon, Festival Edition, 1978), p. 134.

¹²“Matthew and Mark make it a six-day interval (Mt. 17:1; Mk. 9:2). Luke has ‘about eight days’ (Lk. 9:28), which probably indicates that he is counting the days on which the two episodes occurred as well as the actual interval between them. This inclusive method of reckoning is not uncommon in the Scriptures.” Everett F. Harrison, A Short Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 150.

¹³“The traditional site of the transfiguration according to the Greek church was Tabor, where they celebrate annually, on the sixth of August, the Feast of the Transfiguration, The Thaborium. But this is an
the event took place at night. While our Lord prayed, the disciples slept. We should not be too hard on the three, first of all because we have often done likewise, and second, because the day had worn on and the climb had been physically taxing. I would imagine that the prayers of our Lord would have been largely for His disciples at this critical time. They were struggling with His identity as Messiah and His certainty of coming death. If I am correct in suggesting that our Lord’s prayers were largely for His disciples, then we must view the transfiguration as an answer to those prayers, and an event designed primarily for their benefit.

Several prominent features of this event are highlighted in Luke’s account:

1. **The outward glory of Jesus Christ was momentarily displayed.** “And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming” (Luke 9:29).

   When the second person of the Trinity took upon Himself human flesh, His glory was veiled, so that the prophet could rightly say, “He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him” (Isaiah 53:2b).

   Throughout His earthly life, men challenged Jesus to manifest His splendor and majesty as Messiah, but it was the inward attributes of God, those of His character, that He wished most to reveal. On this one occasion, the veil of His humanity was momentarily lifted and His divine splendor and glory burst forth.

2. **Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus.** No doubt, we are to understand the presence of these two men as symbolic of the Old Testament law and the prophets. Moses, of whom the Jewish leaders claimed to be disciples, (John 9:28), was here, not as the Son of God, but only as a servant. In Jesus, both the Law and the prophets found their fulfillment.

   The topic of conversation was that of our Lord’s exodus or departure (verse 31). The choice of the term ‘exodus’ is no accident, for just as Moses had led the people into the promised blessings of God by passing through the Red Sea, so Jesus would lead the people of God into the promised blessings of God through His passing through the waters of death. Although there are similarities between these two men and Jesus, the contrasts are impossible, since Tabor is almost fifty miles from Caesarea-Philippi and Jesus was at this time avoiding Galilee. The summit of this mount was also occupied by a fort and was no fit place for such a scene. Furthermore, Mark states that Jesus did not “pass through Galilee”—in which Mount Tabor is situated—until later. The most probable site of this wonderful event was one of the lower spurs of snow-clad Hermon, visible from all parts of the land as far south as the Dead Sea. There could be no more suitable place in all Palestine than the accessible slopes of this famous mountain, cool and fresh with the evening breezes from the snow-clad heights above, where solitude reigned, and one of the grandest scenes of all nature and history lay visibly before them.” Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels*, p. 314.

   “Our sources do not say whether the transfiguration took place during the day or at night, but several factors favor the idea that it was a nocturnal scene. The sleep of the disciples points in this direction, as does Luke’s note that Jesus went to pray. We know from other notices in the Gospels that he usually withdrew for prayer in the night seasons. Then there is the consideration that the descent from the mountain came on the following day (Lk. 9:37).” Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ*, p. 154.

   “Moses’ presence signified that in Jesus the shadows of the law were all fulfilled and now withdrawn. In Jerusalem men were still fighting, not merely for the law of Moses, but for the traditions of the elders, and priests and leaders were still arguing about the tithe of mint and cumin, while here upon the mount was the great law-giver himself, by his presence acknowledging that this glorified One, Who should presently be crucified in the name of the law, did in Himself gather up all that was hinted at, suggested, included in the economy of the past.” Morgan, *The Crises of the Christ*, pp. 238-239.

   “… these two had much in common with Jesus of Nazareth. Moses performed signs and wonders before Israel in the name of the Lord, but to little avail. The people were stubborn in their unbelief and failed to enter the promised land because of it. Jesus had a similar reception for his mighty works. And as Moses interceded for Israel in the midst of failure and threatened judgment, being willing to be cut off himself if they could be spared, so Jesus wept in compassion over Jerusalem. Elijah was a lonely prophet, even when surrounded by the thongs on Mount Carmel. Jesus, too, was in many ways a lonely figure, despite his popular following. He prayed alone, suffered
probably greater, for here was one vastly superior to them. While these were great men, they were men with feet of clay. Their redemption rested in the future work of Christ on the cross for them. What a comfort this conversation must have been to our Lord, for although the disciples could not grasp the truth and significance of His imminent death, these two men from out of the past did.

(3) We are also given a clear picture of the ineptitude of the disciples. While Jesus prayed fervently, they slept. We do not know how long the conversation between these three went on before the disciples finally realized what was taking place. Perhaps it was the brightness of the radiance of our Lord that finally awakened them, but whatever the precise details the text informs us that they were dazed and groggy, far from a complimentary picture of the three, but very realistic and life-like. Peter’s remark is simply verbal confirmation of the same truth. He was a firm believer in that slogan “Don’t just stand there, say something.” (That is why we all identify so well with him.) Perhaps wishing to preserve or prolong the glory of that moment, Peter proposed that three booths be built, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah (verse 33). As Peter would now admit, it was a stupid remark, and one which inadvertently placed Jesus and the two visitors on the same level. We can all be grateful for the divine interruption which prevented Peter from saying anything even more inane.

(4) The divine testimony. In verses 18 and 19 the estimation of Jesus by the multitudes is recorded, in verse 20 that of the disciples. It is in verses 34 and 35 that we are given God the Father’s estimation of Jesus: “And while he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My Son, My Chosen One; Listen to Him!’”

The great confession verbalized by Peter and praised by our Lord was divinely authenticated by the heavenly voice from the cloud. Truly, Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, for God had said so. While the heavenly voice at the baptism was intended for the benefit of John, to identify Jesus as the Savior, the voice here is for the primary benefit of the disciples.

In addition to the solemn identification of Jesus as the Son of God, there was the emphatic command to give heed to His teaching. While they may find His words difficult to fathom, they must give careful attention to what He said. Perhaps there was here a rebuke for Peter’s hasty and senseless words. The words of the Savior must not only be heard, but obeyed (as the word ‘hear’ often suggests in Scripture).

Interpretation and Application

The transfiguration of Jesus is a crucial point in the life and ministry of Christ for it both sums up His previous ministry and anticipates His death. As G. Campbell Morgan aptly put it:

“The transfiguration of Jesus was the consummation of His human Life, the natural issue of all that had preceded it. … here, at last, that humanity, perfect in creation, perfect through probation, was perfected in glory. The life of Jesus was bound to reach this point of transfiguration. It could do no other.”

It was also the prelude to His death, for from this point on He spoke plainly of His coming death. His face was now set toward Jerusalem. His glory was to come through suffering.

Primarily, the transfiguration was for the benefit of the three disciples. For them, it was a divine confirmation of Peter’s great confession. God attested what Peter affirmed. In addition, it was a confirmation of our Lord’s conception of His mission as Messiah. The popular expectation was that Messiah would come clothed in splendor and break the bonds of Rome. It was an almost exclusively materialistic concept of the kingdom. Jesus came first and foremost to redeem men from sin by dying on a cross. The literal and material aspects of the kingdom would come, but only after the necessary and preliminary spiritual preparations were complete.
Then, too, the transfiguration of Jesus was a divine commentary on the teaching of Jesus concerning His coming death. The disciples could not put together the seemingly contradictory threads of suffering and glory. The transfiguration visualized for the three that the glory which was to be our Lord’s (and thus, theirs and ours) was to come through suffering (His exodus). They did not fully comprehend this truth, but they did understand, I believe, that both elements, suffering and glory, were essential to God’s purpose for Messiah.

This event must also have been a great consolation to the disciples. Their hopes of entering into the kingdom seemed to be dashed by Jesus’ disclosure of His coming death in Jerusalem at the hand of the Jewish leaders. Jesus did not, as some students of Scripture affirm, teach that there would be no physical, literal Kingdom. Rather, He taught that this Kingdom was not to be established now. Lest they lose sight of the certainty of that Kingdom, the transfiguration gave a sort of ‘sneak preview’ of it. They tasted a sample of the glory to come. It was this hope, this certainty of the coming of the Kingdom, which helped to keep them going when things got rough.

Finally, the revelation of the majesty of our Lord humbled these men, instructing them to keep quiet and listen to the Master. Perhaps as the saying goes, ‘familiarity breeds contempt.’ Such seemed to be true for Peter. His prolonged contact with Jesus eroded his sense of awe and wonder. When the glory of the Master flashed before His eyes, there could be no more rudeness such as he displayed when our Lord told of His death. His obligation was to fall in adoration and wonder before his Lord and Master, and listen to His every word.

The impact of the transfiguration on the apostle Peter is summarized by his inspired interpretation in his second epistle:

“And I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you may be able to call these things to mind. For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased’—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:13-19).

This incident has much by way of implication and application for us today. The first and foremost question of course must be, “What is your estimation of Jesus?” This is the question which divided men in the days of our Lord, and it is the question which divides men for all eternity. He is the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God. He is the One Who died that you might live. Have you come to trust in Jesus, not just as a good man, not just as a prophet, but as the only begotten Son of God, the bearer of the sins of the world?

The story is told of Thomas Carlyle18 who, at the time of his imminent death, was read the words of Christian comfort from the first verses of the 14th chapter of John’s gospel: “Let not your heart be troubled. … in my Father’s house are many mansions.” “Aye,” broke out the bereaved man, “if you were God, you had a right to say that; but if you were only a man, what do you know anymore than the rest of us?” And so, you see, our estimate of Jesus makes all the difference in the world.

For those of us who have come to faith in Him, we must heed the words of the Father, “Listen to Him.” I am not so sure that we are giving much attention to the words of our Lord as we have them recorded in the Scriptures. Do we make the study of God’s word a primary part of our day? God said that we must.

There is also, by inference, a word for us about life and after life. We see in these two men, Moses and Elijah, that those who have trusted in the Savior are still alive, conscious, aware of what is now taking place. More

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than this, they were recognizable, though we know not how the disciples knew them to be Moses and Elijah. So, I would assume, we will be able to recognize our loved ones in glory.

I am reminded in the text of the importance of prayer. The great confession was preceded by prayer, as was the transfiguration. Prayer was a vital part of the life of our Lord, as it should be for us as well.

Finally, there is a great lesson for Christians in the matter of suffering. Suffering is an essential, inseparable part of the Christian faith. It is one of the basic prerequisites of discipleship. Suffering is the road to glory, not only for our Lord, but for us. It is suffering, then glory, so far as the Scriptures are concerned. The matter of suffering will never be explainable on a purely human level. It is only grasped from the divine perspective. So it was for the three on the mount of transfiguration. So it must be for us.
Lesson 15:
Discipleship: Its Definitions and Dangers
(Matthew 23:1-12)

Introduction

Apart from His sacrificial work on the cross, the most significant thing our Lord did upon the earth was to make disciples. Our Lord had written no books, He had built no organization; there were no physical structures or monuments left to commemorate Him. He had placed the future of His earthly work entirely in the hands of His disciples. Had they failed their task, humanly speaking, the church of Jesus Christ would not exist today.

In the last decade, discipleship has become a popular subject in Christian circles. The great difficulty is that when we use this term we frequently mean something entirely different from that denoted by the biblical term. For instance, we hear much talk about discipling others or being discipled. Being in close proximity to a great seminary, I have seen many young and enthusiastic theologs come and go. Very frequently, they will go to the pastor of their church and ask to be discipled, just like Paul ‘discipled’ Timothy. A friend of mine and fellow-laborer in the ministry used to respond to such a request, “And just how did Paul disciple Timothy?”

This is precisely the problem. We almost completely fail to grasp the biblical concept of discipleship. It is interesting that we never find the term ‘disciple’ used with reference to the relationship between Paul and Timothy. As a matter of fact, we find the two primary terms for discipleship employed very frequently in the Gospels, sporadically in the book of Acts, and almost never in the rest of the New Testament. Did Paul really disciple Timothy, and if so, how? Most of the young men who desire to be discipled, and I say this seriously, ask more of me than does my wife. It is because of this lack of clarity as to what discipleship really is, and how it is done that we shall devote several lessons to its study. What was so important in the life and ministry of our Lord should be very clear to us today who wish to be known as His disciples.

The Backdrop to New Testament Discipleship

The concept of discipleship was not foreign to men in the days of our Lord Jesus Christ. The terms used in the New Testament of disciples had through years of use developed nuances important for us to comprehend. It is the distinctions between our Lord’s concept of discipleship from those of His contemporaries which is most crucial for us to grasp, for it is here that the great differences arise between Jesus and His opponents. It is also here that many present day misconceptions find their origin.

In Ancient Greek, the verb manthano is used to denote the process by which one acquired theoretical knowledge. A disciple was a learner. A man was known as a matheōs or disciple when he bound himself to another in order to acquire his practical and theoretical knowledge. The word was sometimes nearly synonymous with the term apprentice. There was never a disciple without a master or teacher. In some Greek circles the teacher was paid by his disciples.

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1 Passages such as 2 Timothy 2:2, and others in which Paul exhorts Christians to imitate his example, will be dealt with in a later message.

2 The two primary terms relative to discipleship are the verb ‘to follow,’ and the noun, ‘disciple.’ For an excellent study of these terms, cf. Collin Brown, General Editor, The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), I, pp. 480-494.


4 Ibid., p. 484.

In the Old Testament, the concept of discipleship is strikingly absent. Men were, of course, to be learners of the will of God (cf. Deuteronomy 6:10-12, etc.), but they were not disciples. In my estimation the reason is to be found chiefly in the fact that there was no master worthy for them to attach themselves to. We know of the relationship between Elijah and Elisha, Moses and Joshua, and so on; but these men were known as servants, not disciples. Moses was, in the final analysis, only a servant of God, one through whom God revealed Himself.

Rabbinical Judaism, unlike the Old Testament, made much of the concept of discipleship. The advice of a pre-Christian writer was: “Take to yourself a teacher and acquire a companion.”

As R. T. France has observed, “Every Jewish teacher worth his salt had his circle of ‘disciples’ who ‘followed’ him (literally walking behind him as he rode or walked ahead), looked after his daily needs, and soaked up his teaching. Their teacher was the most important person in their Lives.”

In Judaism one must learn not only the Old Testament Scriptures, but also the oral traditions, the traditions of the fathers. One would attach himself to a Rabbi, who would serve as a kind of mediator between the student and the Scriptures. One dared not to interpret the Scriptures independently, and could only speak with authority after years of study under a master. Since there were several masters, there sprang up several schools of rabbinical thought, each in competition with the others.

**The New Testament Definition of a Disciple**

In the New Testament, the picture of a disciple is not as clear or simplistic as one might wish, for the terms, *matheōs* (disciple, learner) and *akoloutheō* (to follow) are used in a variety of ways.

Not only did Jesus have His disciples, but so did John the Baptist (Matthew 9:14; 11:2; John 1:35,37, etc.), the Pharisees (Matthew 22:16; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33), and even Moses (John 9:28).

There is great diversity among those who are identified as the disciples of Jesus in the Scriptures. John (John 6:60,66) uses the term ‘disciple’ to refer to those who are uncommitted, unbelieving followers of Jesus, motivated mainly by curiosity or impure desires. The masses who have come to faith and trusted in Jesus as their Mes-

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6 Ibid., pp. 426, 427.
7 Ibid., pp. 430-431.
8 Joshua B. Perachiah, Aboth 1:1,16, as quoted by Rengstorf, TDNT, IV, p. 434.
10 “The situation is different in Rab. Judaism. Here the talmid is someone whose concern is the whole of Jewish tradition. According to Shamai (Shabbath 31a), this was the written Torah (the biblical writings of the OT) and the oral Torah, the *paradoseis tôn presbyterōn* (the traditions of the fathers) which includes the Mishnah, Midrash, Halachah and Haggadah. The talmid now, as originally the Gk. *matheōs*, belongs to his teacher, to whom he subordinates himself in almost servile fashion. It was the distinct casuistic form of Rab. theology, built around emphasis on achievement in the religious thought of developed Judaism, which created the pre-requisites for attributing a value of its own to human authority which previously was entirely unknown in Israel and Judaism. Since the Rabbi’s knowledge gives him direct access to the Scriptures which facilitates right hearing and right understanding, he becomes a kind of mediator between the talmidim and the Torah. To listen to the Scriptures without the guidance of a teacher is something to be avoided at all costs (cf. B. Berakoth 47b). *lāmad* and *manthanō* still mean to learn, to occupy oneself with the Torah in order to discover God’s will in it. But now learning is determined by the authority of the teacher and his interpretation of the Torah—not by a personal and, as far as possible, unbiased study of the Torah. Therefore learning means primarily that the talmid appropriates the knowledge of his teacher and examines it critically by comparing it against the Torah. Only one who had studied and served under a *hākām* (a Jewish scholar) for an extensive period, and had thus concluded his essential study, could later become a *hākām* with authority to teach his own tradition in his own school. The pupil-teacher relationship of Rab. Jud., in contradistinction to the OT, thus became an important institution for detailed study of the Torah.” D. Müller, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, I, pp. 485-486.
11 Cf. Fn. 2.
siah were also called disciples (John 8:30,31). Then, of course, the term was used particularly and most frequently of the twelve disciples (Matthew 10:1, etc.) one of whom was His betrayer (John 6:70,71). Within the circle of the twelve was an inner circle of three: Peter, James and John (Luke 9:28). In the book of Acts, the word ‘disciple’ seems to be used synonymously with the term ‘believer’ (cf. Acts 6:1,2,7).

What is a disciple? I suspect that Mark summarizes it best in his gospel: “And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed the twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:13-15).

Who is a disciple of our Lord? Anyone who is deeply and personally committed to Jesus Christ by faith, who manifests the power and authority of our Lord, and who continues and extends His work.

**Distinctives of Christ’s Discipleship**

Although the concept of discipleship was common knowledge in the days of our Lord, His teaching on discipleship differed greatly from contemporary thought. Several of these distinctives will serve to illustrate what I mean.

1. **Jesus called His disciples.** In Jesus’ day, it was the followers who chose their master. The students chose their teacher or rabbi. But in Jesus’ ministry, it was He Who chose them (cf. John 15:16). Some of those who volunteered their services were put off by the Master (cf. Luke 9:57,58,61,62).

2. **The relationship between Jesus and His followers was more personal than pedagogical.** In Judaism, the relationship between a rabbi and his disciple was largely a matter of academics. It was the impartation of knowledge. Granted, on the part of the disciple, there was a very pronounced dependency upon the Rabbi, but there was never the sense of intimacy which existed between Jesus and His disciples (cf. John 15:15). Although Jesus taught His disciples, they perceived their commitment as a very personal one. It was only after His death and resurrection that His teaching was fully understood and valued. For example, when Jesus was crucified, the disciples were so taken back by the loss of His person that His teaching about His death and resurrection never occurred to them.

3. **The path of a disciple of Christ was far different than of contemporary Judaism.** One who chose to be a disciple of a great rabbi looked forward to the time when he, too, would be a great leader in Israel. The path which a disciple of our Lord chose to walk was the path of service and self-sacrifice. His disciples must take up their cross (Luke 9:23-24). They must suffer rejection and persecution (John 15:20,21). They, as their Master, must give up their lives in service (Mark 10:45).

4. **Christ’s discipleship was not a burden, but a blessing.** It is obvious that the demands of our Lord’s discipleship were great. These we shall study in a later message. But it is amazing that in the final analysis it is the disciple of the scribes and Pharisees who has the real burden: “And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger” (Matthew 23:4).

How different is this from that of our Lord: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

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12 D. Müller, p. 488. (3b).

13 “The Gr. pupil and the Rab. talmid bound themselves personally to their master and looked for objective teaching, with the aim of themselves becoming a master or a Rabbi. But Jesus’ call to discipleship does not mean that a disciple is put in a learning relationship from which he can depart as a master (cf. Matt. 23:8). Following Jesus as a disciple means the unconditional sacrifice of his whole life (Matt. 10:37; Lk. 14:26f.; cf. Mk. 3:31-35; Lk. 9:59-62) for the whole of his life (Matt. 10:24f.; Jn. 11:16). To be a disciple means (as Matt. in particular emphasizes) to be bound to Jesus and to do God’s will (Matt. 12:46-50; cf. Mk. 3:31-35).” D. Müller, p. 488.
The Dangers of Discipleship

Failure to fully comprehend the distinctions between the discipleship of our Lord and that of the Jews of His day would have led to disaster for the followers of Christ. The horror at Jonestown is perhaps the most striking reminder in recent times of misdirected allegiance. The warning of our Lord recorded in Matthew chapter 23 addresses the dangers of discipleship as practiced by the Jews of His day.

“Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying ‘The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brethren. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted’ (Matthew 23:1-12).

At first glance, the direct connection between this warning in Matthew chapter 23 and discipleship may not be convincing. However, we must bear in mind that the meaning of the term disciple implies that the disciple submit himself to a higher authority who will serve as his teacher, guide and leader. This is the way the Jewish leadership regarded themselves and their position of authority. In effect, the whole clash between Jesus and the Jewish leaders was one of authority (cf. Matthew 21:23). They were greatly distressed over the fact that the masses appeared to be slipping from their grip, and submitting to the leadership of Jesus (cf. Matthew 27:18; John 4:1,2; 11:47,48). The warning of Jesus in Matthew 23 is at the heart of the dispute between Judaism and Jesus. It also exposes the critical danger threatening evangelical churches today.

The error of the scribes and Pharisees was that they had exalted themselves to a position higher than that of Moses (verse 2). They had boasted to the man born blind that they were disciples of Moses (John 9:28). Such was not really the case, however. To have been a disciple of Moses would mean that they would have placed themselves under the authority of his teaching and doctrine. In effect, they had ousted Moses (that is the five books of Moses) by making the interpretation and application of these sacred writings subject to their own traditions and interpretations (Matthew 15:1-9).

In a more contemporary vein, I suspect that the authors of our constitution might roll over in their graves at the way the Supreme Court has changed the intent of the Constitution by their interpretations of it. This is precisely the error of the scribes and Pharisees. They had placed themselves in the chair of Moses. They were now over the Scriptures, judging them rather than being judged by them. Such is the case in much of religion today. Man is the highest authority. If Paul condemns homosexuality, that is just narrow-minded Paul, they would have us believe.

The scribes and Pharisees usurped the authority to subject men under them as disciples. In so doing they commanded men to follow the clever system they had created by codifying the Law of Moses into 365 prohibitions and 250 commandments. The effect was to place upon unsuspecting Israelites a burden which no one could bear,
and which they did nothing to lighten (verse 4). While they ingeniously devised ways to circumvent their own regulations, the masses were buried under them. It is no wonder that our Lord said to His hearers: “My yoke is easy, and it load is light” (Matthew 11:30).

The motives of the scribes and Pharisees were at the heart of their sin. They were proud and puffed up, just as Satan was when he fell (Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezekiel 28:2,17). These men desired disciples because they basked in the glory and adulation of men. They desired the seats of prominence and greetings which puffed up their pride (verses 5-7).

Verses 8-12 are some of the heaviest words of the Word of God for church leaders. Here is described in the plainest of words the great danger of Christian leadership: We wish men to become our disciples. We aspire to have authority over others who become our disciples.

“But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:8-12).

Although this passage in Matthew has always been significant to me, I never really grasped its full impact until I came to it from the perspective of discipleship. Essential to discipleship is a master, or teacher to whom the disciple submits.15 The sinfulness of Jewish religious ‘establishment’ is beautifully contrasted against the humility of our Lord in this matter of disciples. They gloried in the limelight, while He came to be overlooked and rejected by the nation as a whole. He came to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45); they lived only for the praise and adulation their position gave them.

Our Lord cautioned His own disciples and the crowds that the favorite titles of the scribes and Pharisees were not to be part of their religious vocabulary. The three titles, Rabbi, Father, and Leader, were never to be taken by men, nor were men to bestow them on mere mortals. There is only one authoritative teacher or Rabbi, our Lord Himself. No one dare usurp His title (as did the Jewish Rabbis). Moreover, there is to be no hierarchy among men in Christ, for we are all brothers (verse 8). The title ‘Father,’16 respectfully applied to Jewish men of prominence, belongs only to God. He alone is our Father. To take His title is to usurp His authority (verse 9).

Neither should we assume the title of leader, or guide, for the Lord Jesus alone is our guide and leader (verse 10). Greatness in the kingdom of God is not measured, as the Rabbis supposed, by determining how many disciples they had under their authority. It was rather to be measured in terms of service. It is the number whom we serve that reflects our measure of greatness in God’s sight (verses 11-12).

Conclusions and Application

Frankly, I am frustrated by the lack of understanding in Christian circles of this concept of discipleship. We use the term glibly, without any real grasp of its implications. Worse yet, I am frightened as I look about the Christian community and observe that the very same evils practiced by the Jewish leaders in New Testament times are blatantly evident in the church of Jesus Christ.

Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?” This shows us that those who submitted themselves to the Pharisees were disciples of the Pharisees. They became disciples by voluntarily submitting themselves to the rule of the Pharisees over them.” J. Dwight Pentecost, Design for Discipleship (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p. 24.

15 “One can only be a mathētēs in the company of a didaskalos, a master or teacher, to whom the mathētēs since the days of the Sophists generally had to pay a fee.” D. Müller, p. 484.

16 “Father is used as a title of honour for a priest (Jdg. 17:10; 18:19), and for a prophet (2 Ki. 6:21; 13:14). In 2 Ki. 2:12, on the lips of the prophet’s disciple, it also expresses spiritual relationship. In Rab. Judaism, where the title of father was frequently used of respected scribes (SB I 918 f.), the metaphor of father and child is occasionally applied to the relationship between a teacher of the Torah and his pupil (SB III 340 f.).” O. Hofius, “Father,” New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, I, p. 617.
Many who are either poorly informed or insufficiently motivated find it easier to be the disciples of men than to become the disciples of Jesus. They cannot go to the Scriptures independently to search out a matter. Instead, they would prefer to read a man’s book on the subject, especially if a truth is presented in a very cut and dried or simplistic way. I do not condemn the use of books, or tapes, or printed messages, or listening to sermons ‘live.’ I do insist that an attitude of dependence and unqualified submission to any one man or group of men is wrong. The reason why we have so many authoritarian, dogmatic, puffed up preachers today is because people want them that way. How much easier to believe something because an authoritative, pulpit-pounding preacher does, than by personal study and conviction.

I cannot stop yet, for the other reason why so many ‘little popes’ are prevalent in Christianity (as well as the cults) is because there are men whose pride has been fanned by unwitting followers who have become their disciples.

I know it is difficult to explain to other people why we, as a church, do not have a man that we call ‘our pastor.’ But, you see, to take on a title such as that in our day and time implies that there is some physical head of the church, who usurps the place of our Lord. I remember well hearing one preacher refer to himself as the chief shepherd from 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 4, a passage in which Peter himself only dares to refer to himself as a fellow elder (verse 1). In this same passage, the elder is forbidden to oversee as a lord (verse 3, ‘lording it over’) but as an example.

We are a church that fallibly strives not to exalt men, but our Lord Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that we reject titles commonly used by other Christians. More than this, whatever the titles may be, we reject the concept of men setting themselves in the place of our Lord.

Perhaps the heart of what I am trying to get at so far as our church (or any other) is concerned is found in the use of either the definite article, ‘the,’ or the indefinite article, ‘a.’ If you say, Bob Deffinbaugh is a teacher, an elder, a leader, hopefully you are not terribly far from the truth. But when you say Bob is the minister, the pastor, the teacher, then we have a real problem. God has ordained leaders who guide and give counsel, but not in such a way as to elevate themselves above others.

Lest you think that this is only the problem of an individual (usually the full-time preacher, or senior pastor), it can also be a great problem collectively. I have read recently of churches in which the elders, as a group, have placed themselves in a position of total and unquestionable authority. In a rather dictatorial and arbitrary fashion, they direct the wife contrary to her husband. They tell a man what job to take or to turn down. In short, they assume the position of our Lord in the lives of their congregation. These things should not be! As I view the authority of an elder, it is not due to his title or office, but is a direct result of his work, his manner of life, and his skillfulness in the Scriptures (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 2 Timothy 3:10,11, etc.).

Herein lies one of the great dangers in Christianity. Men and women seem to be more interested in being a discipler or a disciplee than a disciple. Worse yet, we are seemingly encouraging people to become our disciples rather than disciples of our Lord.

In Matthew chapter 23, our Lord was warning His disciples not to look at themselves as did the disciples of the Pharisees. They were not to view their discipleship as a kind of stepping stone to prominence and authority. They were not to seek to get men to be their followers and to submit to their authority. They were not to take upon themselves either titles or positions which would exalt themselves while usurping the position and prerogatives of God Himself.

Let us not seek to disciple others, so much as to be disciples ourselves. Let us not seek to become disciples of men but rather followers of God. I fear that we have become obsessed more with the process, the practice, and the prestige of the discipler than we have with the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. I fear that we all too often equate the study of the Bible and theology with spirituality. I fear that there is far too much emphasis upon becoming leaders, rather than becoming servants.
Lesson 16:  
Discipleship: Its People and Process  

Introduction  
I don’t know how many times I have heard a statement something to this effect: “If John were ever saved, just think how God could use him. Why with his enthusiasm, leadership ability, and bank account, there would be no stopping him.”  

Such reasoning is far from the mentality of the New Testament. By these standards our Lord made a terrible mistake when he was approached by the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16ff; Mark 10:17-30; Luke 18:18-30). You will remember that in order to become a follower of Jesus he would first have to sell all that he had, give it to the poor, and then come after Jesus (Matthew 19:21). In our modern and enlightened times, we probably would have handled it much differently. The rich young ruler would have been put high on the list of ‘contacts’ to pursue as a member of the board of directors. Why, think of what God could do with his money and influence. And perhaps if he sat through the business meetings and had close association with Jesus, he might even get converted and committed.  

But the very thing which in our minds would have commended him before our Lord, Jesus told him to get rid of. Here was a self-righteous man who felt he could ‘use his influence’ to get to heaven. Jesus loved this man, we are told (Mark 10:21), and invited him to become a disciple, but not because of his potential to contribute. Rather, he loved him as a person.  

One of the most rewarding studies in the Word of God is an investigation of the kind of people God has chosen to be His followers. I believe we shall learn from a study of the disciples of our Lord that God does not choose men because of their potential, but because of their person. He chooses few who are prosperous and prestigious, but many who are in poverty and spiritual hunger. In short, I believe our study will indicate that God chooses people like you and me to do great things, and that it is by His power and His process that these things come to pass.  

The Kind of People God Chose as Disciples  
What kind of men did our Lord choose to commence the greatest endeavor of all time? They were to establish the church of Jesus Christ. They were to do so with no financial ‘clout,’ with no formal theological training, opposed by the combined forces of Satan, the Judaism of their day, the paganism of other religions, and (later) the power of Rome. Whatever kind of man God could use to overcome these difficulties is surely needed today as well.  

As we consider the twelve disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, there are a number of characteristics that strike us.  

(1) They were young men. By and large, it would seem that the greatest impact of our Lord was upon the younger generation. The terms (tekna, teknia or paidia), often used by our Lord in reference to His disciples, imply youthfulness. Our Lord Himself was in the prime of His youth. So the early church applied Psalm 110:3 to Jesus:  

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“Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth” (King James Version).  

In the original version of Isaac Watt’s great hymn, the youth of our Lord was emphasized: “When I survey the wondrous cross where the young Prince of Glory died.”

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2 Although this verse is variously translated, it would seem to emphasize either the youth of our Lord (as the King James Version implies) or the youth of His disciples (which the NASV and the Berkeley Version suggest).  
3 *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ*, p. 66.
It is also noteworthy that when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians nearly a generation after the death of our Lord that he could say that of the 500 who saw our Lord raised from the grave, “the greater part remain unto this present” (1 Corinthians 15:6). If most of these witnesses were still alive, they surely were not old when they saw the resurrected Lord.

(2) They were from the middle class of their society. In our efforts to emphasize the humbleness of these men and their lack of position or formal training (cf. Acts 4:13), let us not suppose that they were the dregs of society. As a group, these men were relatively successful businessmen, who came from the middle class of their society. Peter and Andrew, James and John, were fishermen (Mark 1:16-20). Matthew was a government employee (Matthew 5:27). I probably should go on to say that these men were intelligent and capable, not blundering idiots.

(3) They were Galileans. With the possible exception of Judas, all of the disciples seem to be Galileans. The significance of this may be easily overlooked. To be a Jerusalem Jew was a matter of real status. To be a theologically trained Jerusalem Jew was like being a “Harvard man.” To be a Galilean was like coming from somewhere in the Ozarks, to be a real unsophisticated, uncultured “country bumpkin.”

(4) They were a diverse group in personality and philosophy. Though all of the eleven had their status as native Galileans in common, they were a very diverse group. In personality, they ranged from the flamboyance of Peter to the hesitance of Thomas, from the political conservatism of Matthew (who was a government-employee and supporter) to the radicalism of Simon, the Zealot, a political revolutionary. Only the strength of their commitment to our Lord could have bound these dramatically diverse men together.

(5) They were men who had a heart which sought God. We do not know the backgrounds of all of the twelve disciples, but we do know that some were previously the followers of John the Baptist (John 1:35ff). These had come to the point of acknowledging the emptiness of contemporary Judaism and recognized the need for repentance and the coming Messiah. Nathaniel (John 1:45-51) was clearly described as a pious man, spiritually prepared for Messiah’s appearing.

(6) They were men without formal religious training. What most amazed the religious establishment was the fact that the apostles had such power and authority, and yet had never been formally trained in their schools of theology.

“Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

Now there is no great virtue in having no formal training, nor is there a curse to a theological education. But being trained in the Rabbinical schools of theology would have been of very restricted value, since their whole system of interpretation was defective. Being trained in the Jewish rabbinical schools would be somewhat parallel to your going to the most liberal seminary in this country. There would be some value, but you would have to unlearn most of what you were taught. As theologically uneducated Galileans, the disciples were to a great extent undefiled by the religious pollutions of their time. Just as John the Baptist spent much of his life in the wilderness, so the disciples were from an area remote to the evils of Judaism, and as such more open to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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5 “A certain Galilean once went about enquiring, ‘Who has ‘amar’? ‘Foolish Galilean,’ they said to him, ‘do you mean an ‘ass’ for riding, ‘wine’ to drink, ‘wool’ for clothing, or a ‘lamb’ for killing?’” This Jewish joke, which pokes fun at the slovenly speech of Galilee with its indistinct vowels and dropped aitches, indicates the Jerusalem Jew’s attitude to his northern neighbours. Galilee had once been predominately Gentile territory, and even now its population was far from completely Jewish. Cut off from Judaea by the hostile territory of Scamaria, and under a different system of government, it tended to develop along its own independent lines of speech and character, and of religious tradition. Hence the great disdain in which a Judaean Jew held his Galilean brother.” Ibid., p. 30.
Implications for Discipleship Today

We would have to conclude from what we have seen of the disciples that they would not have been tagged as ‘most likely to succeed’ by many in Christian circles today. Our Lord did not choose them because of what they could do for Him, so much as that He (due to their inabilities and limitations) could do great things through them.

There is a principle underlying the Lord’s choice of His disciples which is as applicable to us today as it was in New Testament times. Paul verbalized it in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31:

“For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”

We are not told here that God never chooses the wise, the noble, or the prosperous, but that He seldom does so. Why has God chosen to work through the weak and the foolish things? First, so that He receives all the glory whenever great things are accomplished. And, second, those who are weak must trust in God to work in them, and in spite of them. As Paul recorded elsewhere, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9b).

If we really believe this principle to be true, then we must recognize at least two specific applications. First of all, we must recognize that much of evangelicalism is flatly in error when they place the emphasis on reaching what they call ‘key people’ with the gospel so that by means of their prestige, influence, and money, the work of God can be furthered. God’s work is furthered in God’s way and through God’s resources.

Several times I have told the story of my uncle who tells of an interview between the owner of a gas station and a prospective employee. When asked for his qualifications, the young man quickly responded that he was a college graduate. “Well, my boy,” responded the owner, “I think that can be overcome.” It is my conviction that what many feel are assets to the cause of Christ are really liabilities. We make far too much of the superstars in Christian circles, and conduct ourselves in a way far from in keeping with the New Testament.

In my short lifetime, it has been interesting to observe how easily money comes in to support the ‘ministries’ of very popular or prestigious individuals while those who are not as spectacular learn to do without. It is because we all love to associate ourselves with a winner. Let me remind you, my Christian friend, that neither in days gone by, nor in the present, is our Lord Jesus considered a winner by the world’s standards. As I view the gift of giving, it is the ability to recognize real ministry and real needs in the plethora of solicitations in the name of Christian ministry.

But since neither you nor I are superstars anyway, there is a very personal application for us. We are the kind of people that God chooses through whom to do His work. Now isn’t that an amazing and wonderful truth? God has chosen to use men and women like you and me, insignificant and having little ‘clout’ in the world, to carry on the greatest cause in the world, the building up of His church. Martin Luther is reported to have said, “Let no man lose the faith that God willeth to do a great work through him.”

Nothing is more exciting and motivating in my own Christian life than to realize that this is true.

The Process of Discipleship

Some biblical scholars have puzzled over the fact that the Gospels record several ‘calls’ of the twelve disciples. The skeptic is predictably quick to draw the conclusion that the Gospel accounts are in conflict with one another, thereby giving credence to his presupposition that the Bible is not the inspired, inerrant Word of God.

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6 James S. Stewart, p. 69.
There is a much more plausible, biblical, and simple explanation; one that has too often been overlooked. Put in its simplest form, we must conclude that there was no one call to discipleship. Now it sounds very impressive when we read in the Gospels that Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, called Peter and Andrew, James and John, and they immediately left everything and followed Jesus. We almost get the impression that this was their first encounter with Jesus, and yet, they made a life-long commitment on the basis of His invitation.

But such does not appear to be the case when we look at the Gospels as a whole. Although the chronology of the life of Christ is subject to much discussion and debate, the following sequence of events seems to occur:

1. **Jesus was proclaimed as the Messiah by John the Baptist and several followed Him and spent the day with Him** (John 1:35ff).

2. **Jesus, at some later time, invited these men (and others) to be His followers.** They left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). It is in no way evident to me that they left their jobs and spent all their time with Jesus at this time. They may have temporarily taken leave of their work to follow Jesus on a particular campaign.

3. **It was sometime later that Jesus appointed the twelve to be apostles, that is, to be commissioned to go out as His emissaries and preach the gospel and display His power** (Matthew 10:1ff; Mark 3:13ff; Luke 6:12ff). This assignment was limited, and their power apparently temporary.

4. **Not until after our Lord’s resurrection and ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit did the disciples rise to the task of establishing the church of Jesus Christ.**

What we should learn from these various calls to follow Jesus in the Gospels is that there is no one decisive call to discipleship, but rather a life-long process with many decision points along the way.

G. Campbell Morgan has written a classic work entitled *The Crises of the Christ*. In this book, he deals with the critical, destiny-determining situations and decisions in the life of our Lord. What he has done with reference to our Lord’s life and ministry could likewise be done for His disciples. The initial call(s) to follow Jesus were an invitation to an intimate personal relationship. All the time they spent together was seasoned with practical and biblical instruction. As their relationship grew and their faith deepened, they left home and occupation to be with Him continually. When the masses left Jesus after the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:60ff), the disciples, also, were faced with a decision to stay with Him or leave. The more our Lord taught about His suffering and death (and theirs), the more the implications of discipleship came home to them.

And so we see an extended process of disciple-making in our Lord’s ministry to the twelve. It was not a one-time decision, but a sequence of decisions each based upon further realization of the implications of true discipleship.

**Implications of New Testament Discipleship for Today**

Discipleship, then, was not something instantaneously and casually presented, nor immediately and totally accepted by the twelve. Rather, it was a gradual process of revelation and response. Discipleship, like sanctification, is progressive, not instantaneous.

What does this truth imply for the Christian today, who truly desires to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Let me suggest several possibilities.

1. **Discipleship is a life-long process.** In a day of instant mashed potatoes, instant coffee, and microwave ovens, most of us want to accelerate processes that take time to accomplish. God has no instant formulas for discipleship. God invites you to follow Him at whatever point in life you may be.

   I must emphasize that there are no shortcuts at the outset. All enter into discipleship by personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior. Every disciple of our Lord must come to the point of recognizing that he or she has nothing to offer God. Rather, we are in rebellion against Him because of our sin. God has removed that barrier by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to bear the penalty for our sin and to provide a righteousness which is acceptable to
Him. Those who become His disciples stop trusting in themselves, in anything they can do for God, and trust only in what God has done through Jesus Christ.

Once saved, the disciple of our Lord need not re-experience his initial conversion, nor continually rededicate himself to our Lord. Instead of this, he or she should continue to grow in the knowledge of our Lord and as further revelation is grasped, their commitment should become fuller and deeper.

(2) **There is a distinct sequence in discipleship.** In the lives of the twelve, there was a clear sequence. The first phase of their discipleship centered on knowing Jesus Christ intimately. It was considerably later that Jesus sent them out to preach and heal. I fear that in too many churches we have equated discipleship with service. We immediately urge new Christians to begin to go to work for our Lord. It was a number of years until those who were physically present with our Lord were qualified to carry on His work. Paul spent years in preparation also (Galatians 1:15-18).

What I am suggesting is that those who are newly saved need to spend their initial efforts in getting to know their Lord in a much more intimate way. Once this is done (though it never is fully arrived at, cf. Philippians 3:10ff), the quality of our service will be vastly superior.

(3) **Discipleship is a life-long process by which we become servants (and friends, John 15:14,15) of our Lord Jesus Christ.** On one occasion, I was invited to preach at a church in the Northwest, and I (unwisely) chose to speak on a somewhat emotional and controversial issue. I tried to forewarn the pastor, and I shall never forget his response. He said, “Go right ahead, brother, you’re the Lord’s servant, not mine.”

I am not at all certain that most Christians really believe this. It seems that all too often we measure service to our Lord by service to us. “If you are really a disciple, then you will do thus and so …” That is not the way I understand the New Testament.

How graciously our Lord dealt with the failures and weaknesses and ineptitude of His disciples. How harsh and demanding we are. So often we establish a rigid program and imply that all who are truly committed will follow it (and us!).

The discipleship process of our Lord was personal and individualized. It took people at whatever level of commitment and maturity they were and encouraged them to press on. When they failed, our Lord stood by them, suggesting that even their failure would enhance their value as His disciple (cf. Luke 22:31-32).

There are some who teach the doctrine of so-called “Lordship Salvation” and by this they imply that the salvation is a final and once for all commitment to salvation by faith and service. I do not see this in the training of the twelve.

Are you a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ? Have you trusted in Him as your Savior? If you have, you have begun a life-long process. It is an exciting process by which you will grow in an intimate relationship with the Savior, and in time, you will be given work to do in His name.

Since much of the present discipleship emphasis falls upon human responsibility and commitment, let me conclude with a reminder that it is our Lord Who is in complete control, not only in the calling of disciples, but in the process of making them. Our Lord assured His disciples,

> “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that Your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you” (John 15:16).

May God grant that you may wonder at the fact that God has chosen to reveal Himself to you and to use you in His service. May you find comfort that, while the requirements of discipleship are rigorous, the Savior is gentle and gracious, and the process, though life-long, is sure.
Lesson 17:
Discipleship: Its Requirements and Its Rewards
(Luke 14:25-33; Mark 10:29-30; Matthew 11:28-30)

Introduction
I find that I am always prone to overestimate the benefits of things I desire and to underestimate the price involved. My wife and I recently committed ourselves to a ‘small’ remodeling project. Any of you who have done the same know that it has become a far bigger commitment than we anticipated.

This is also a danger in the matter of discipleship. Repeatedly, our Lord cooled the enthusiasm of eager candidates for discipleship by urging them to consider its cost. In evangelical circles today, there seems to be a trend in the opposite direction. We urge people to be saved and to become disciples of our Lord, highlighting its benefits and blessings. We conceal the true cost of discipleship and any liabilities in the fine print, if we mention them at all.

If we truly desire to be followers of our Lord along the path of discipleship, it is imperative that we first heed the words of our Lord and count the cost of discipleship. Lest we become falsely discouraged or disillusioned, we should also weigh these costs against the benefits of being a follower of Jesus. In this way only can we make an intelligent decision in this decisive matter of discipleship.

The Requirements of Discipleship
In the gospel of Luke, we find the requirements of discipleship outlined by our Lord.

“Now great multitudes were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms for peace. So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions” (Luke 14:25-33).


2“The type of ministry that is here in mind starts by stressing, in an evangelistic context, the difference that becoming a Christian will make. Not only will it bring a man forgiveness of sins, peace of conscience, and fellowship with God as his Father; it will also mean that through the power of the indwelling Spirit, he will be able to overcome the sins that previously mastered him, and the light and leading that God will give him will enable him to find a way through problems of guidance, self-fulfillment, personal relations, heart’s desire, and such like, which had hitherto defeated him completely. Now, put like that, in general terms, these great assurances are scriptural and true—praise God, they are! But it is possible so to stress them, and so to play down the rougher side of the Christian life—the daily chastening, the endless way with sin and Satan, the periodic walk in darkness—as to give the impression that normal Christian living is a perfect bed of roses, a state of affairs in which everything in the garden is lovely all the time, and problems no longer exist—or, if they come, they have only to be taken to the throne of grace, and they will melt away at once. This is to suggest that the world, the flesh, and the devil, will give a man no serious trouble once he is a Christian; nor will his circumstances and personal relationships ever be a problem to him; nor will he ever be a problem to himself. Such suggestions are mischievous, however, because they are false.” J. I. Packer, Knowing God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 222.
From one perspective, discipleship centers upon the issue of dependence and submission. Taken from another direction, we might say that discipleship entails a complete rearrangement of our priorities. To be a disciple of our Lord demands that He become the most important thing in our life. This is what Luke sought to remind us of when he recorded the words of our Lord in the fourteenth chapter of his gospel. Consider with me the rearrangement of our priorities demanded by discipleship.

(1) The disciple of Jesus Christ must put his Master above those nearest and dearest to him. “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, … he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

We should all understand that Jesus did not mean by this that we cannot love God and family at the same time—that we can only love God while hating those nearest and dearest to us. The Scriptures speak too plainly elsewhere of our obligations to our families, husbands, wives and children.

What our Lord means is that our love for Him must have precedence over any other. Our attachment to Him must be greater than any other. While husbands are to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25), they are to love the Savior more. No human relationship should be more intimate, no human bond more inseparable than that between the disciple and his Master.

We in America can hardly grasp the potential threat that family ties pose to true discipleship. In the days of the New Testament as well as down through church history, individuals have been confronted with the ultimatum to choose either Jesus or family, but not both. Many Christians have been totally disowned and disinherited because of their faith in Christ, the Savior.

Several years ago when I was teaching school, I had a little Jewish girl as a student. More than anything else in the world she dreaded telling her parents of her new faith. She was a handicapped child and to be put out by her family would seemingly be disastrous.

Not only is our relationship to Christ to have priority over family ties, our union with Him is to have precedence over all human relationship. Friendship (or identification) with Christ will inevitably result in enmity with the world.

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore, the world hates you” (John 15:18-19).

The disciple of Christ may not desire persecution, but he can depend on it.

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!” (Matthew 10:24-25).

(2) The disciple of the Lord Jesus must value following Jesus Christ above life itself. The basic instinct to preserve life is inherent in all of creation. Discipleship demands a devotion to the Lord Jesus that surpasses the instinct to preserve our own life. The history of the church sufficiently proves that this requirement has resulted in the death of countless Christians through the centuries. Once again, we Americans can scarcely comprehend the demands of discipleship as faced by many of our persecuted and oppressed brethren. Perhaps even in our own lifetime conditions in our nation may become such that we will come to appreciate the significance of this requirement of devotion to Christ above life itself.

3 I must comment here that some, in the name of Christian commitment to Christ, have neglected or forsaken their family responsibilities, and with considerable harm, while sincerely supposing that they were obeying our Lord’s instructions in this passage. This text, as all others, must be interpreted and applied in the light of all other Scriptures on this point. When the Lord has highest priority in our lives, we find that our family obligations are taken more seriously, too. We obey Him by loving our wives as He loved the church (Ephesians 5:25). We submit to our husbands as unto the Lord (Ephesians 5:22). We obey parents and honor them (Ephesians 6:1,2). We deal lovingly with our children (Ephesians 6:4).
(3) The disciple of Jesus Christ must place his commitment to Christ above material possessions. I have the distinct impression that we are now beginning to arrive at the real crunch for those of us who are complacent, affluent, American Christians. “So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions” (Luke 14:33).

Simply put, we must love God more than we love money and what it can buy. The story of the rich young ruler illustrates this requirement of discipleship. He wanted to be a disciple of our Lord (and therefore obtain the fringe benefit of eternal life), but not at the cost of his material possessions.

I do not think that the Bible teaches that one can become a Christian only after disposing of his material assets. It is the attitude behind our affluence that is the crucial factor. Oftentimes the poor are more materialistic than the rich, for they assign too much importance to material things. The desire to have money and material goods is what is sinful. In biblical terms, “The love of money (not the possession of it) is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang” (1 Timothy 6:10).

Paul instructed those who were rich in material things to be rich in good works, and not to trust in the uncertainty of riches (1 Timothy 6:17-19). That is the point. Nothing must compete with our devotion to and our dependence upon the Lord Jesus.

(4) The disciple of Jesus Christ must daily die to self-interest. Even as our Lord spoke of His destiny leading Him to a cross, so also every true disciple must also bear a cross. “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). Our cross must not be confused with the cross of our Lord. His was a cross borne once for all, while ours must be taken up daily. “And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23).

His cross was the instrument which put to death the sinless Son of God. Taking up our cross involves the daily putting to death of the selfish desires and ambitions of the old self, our lower nature (cf. Romans 6:1-14; 1 Corinthians 15:31; 2 Corinthians 4:7-12; Colossians 2:20; 3:11). There is a “Christian” song which is nicely done, but its theology makes me cringe. The words go something like this (be grateful I don’t attempt to sing it):

Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free?
No, there’s a cross for everyone
And there’s a cross for me.

Now I would agree that all of us must suffer in this life and bear the reproach of Christ. Paul calls this: “… Filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Colossians 1:24). As Christians, we will suffer and be persecuted for the sake of Christ, even as our Lord told us. But our sufferings are not atoning; they contribute nothing to our salvation, nor to anyone else’s.

Taking up our cross daily is speaking of our willingness to lay aside all self-seeking and selfish ambition. It means that our desire and ambition is not to satisfy ourselves, but to please the Savior. He, rather than self, is the object of our supreme affection. Pleasing Him is the highest, most compelling motive of our lives.

We, like the disciples, do not come out looking very good on this point. Over and over the disciples evidenced a jockeying for position, and a desire to get ahead of the other eleven. And repeatedly our Lord rebuked and instructed them on this very point (cf. Matthew 18:1ff.; 23:11-12; Mark 9:34ff.; Luke 9:46-43; 22:24,26). The supreme example is that of our Lord who looked not after His own pleasure and comfort, but Who was obedient to the point of infinite suffering and death for our salvation (Philippians 2:4-8).

Putting all these elements together we can conclude that true discipleship puts Jesus Christ above everything and everyone else. We esteem His fellowship above that of any other. We consider it a far greater thing to be related to Him than any human kinship. We see His purposes, His desires, as vastly more important than our own.

On a human plane, discipleship is something like joining the armed forces. No one can sign up and yet retain his autonomy. (At least, this is the way it used to be!) When you are enlisted, your own interests are subservient to your superiors. You eat when you are told, you get leave when it is granted. You contribute to a greater cause by making yourself expendable to that cause. And so, to some degree, it is with discipleship (cf. Luke 9:57-62).
The Rewards of Discipleship

With the requirements of discipleship so demanding, we are not greatly shocked that so few chose the path of discipleship to our Lord. In fact, we may wonder why anyone would choose to do so. Let me suggest several principles of discipleship which prove to be compelling reasons for being a follower of Jesus Christ. As we shall see, the rewards of discipleship make its requirements look pale. The first principles of discipleship are found in Matthew’s Gospel: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-30).

**Principle 1: We must all have a master, and none is more gentle than the Savior.** The Scriptures make it clear that we are the slaves of whatever it is that controls us (Romans 6:16). Some are the slaves of the body and its appetites. Others submit to a religious system. Our Lord described those enslaved in the Judaism of their time as ‘weary and heavy-laden’ (Matthew 11:28). It is hard to think of a more fitting description. Ultimately, if we are not the servants of Jesus Christ we are slaves to sin and to Satan (Romans 6:16). What a cruel taskmaster he is!

In contrast, our Lord is ‘gentle and humble in heart’ (Matthew 11:29). To be His disciple is not a dreary task, not a drudgery, but a delight; not a burden, but a blessing. While the scribes and Pharisees lorded it over the people and ruled in pride and arrogance, Jesus gave His life for His sheep. He humble and gently leads His own. Though the path is rough, the way is sure, for we have a gentle and skillful guide.

**Principle 2: Although the demands of discipleship are great, He never requires of us anything which He does not enable us to do.** We have seen that the requirements for discipleship are rigorous. How, then, can Jesus speak of His burden as ‘light’ and His yoke as ‘easy’? Why is the way of the Jewish scribes and Pharisees hard and their burden heavy? It is because they demand much and do not give so much as one bit of help (Matthew 23:4). But what our Lord expects, He enables us to do. This is the crucial difference. Let us not think about the demands of discipleship without also contemplating the dynamic enablement which He provides to meet them.

**Principle 3: It is only to His disciples that our Lord reveals His innermost thoughts and most intimate secrets.** While our Lord spoke plainly to His disciples of His purposes, these were carefully concealed from the masses. “And He was not speaking to them without parables; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples” (Mark 4:34). The reason for this was sought by His disciples, and the Lord explained it when He said, “To you has been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables’ (Mark 4:11, cf. also verse 12). Discipleship brings one into a level of intimacy with the Lord that others cannot experience. It is to His intimate friends (cf. John 15:15) that His intimate secrets are revealed.

**Principle 4: Our rewards as disciples are based not on the magnitude of our actions, but on their motive.** Many, in my opinion, shy away from discipleship because they sense that they have little or nothing to contribute, and hence, that their rewards will be few. We have already established the principle that God does not choose us on the basis of our potential contribution. He chooses the foolish things of this world (1 Corinthians 1:26-31). The basis for our rewards as disciples is defined in the Gospel of Matthew:

“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly, I say to you he shall not lose his reward” (Matthew 10:40-42).

I understand from this text that rewards are based not so much on the magnitude of our service, but on the sincerity of our motives; not so much on the response to our service as on the reason for it. If we are obedient to our Lord and live so as to please Him, we shall have a reward.

**Principle 5: Our great reward is Jesus Himself.** Whenever we begin to think about this matter of rewards and blessing, let us never forget that He is our great reward. In the book of Hebrews we are told that God is “a rewarer of those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). God also told Abram, “I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward” (Genesis 15:1 KJV).
If we seek to be followers of our Lord only for the fringe benefits we have succeeded only in kicking materialism and self-interest out the front door while inviting them in through the back door. He is our reward. The cost of discipleship is nothing compared to the riches of fellowship with Him.

**Principle 6: There is nothing which the Lord denies His disciple which is for his ultimate good, and nothing which He takes away which He does not replace with something better.** In the Garden of Eden, Satan succeeded in deceiving Eve into thinking that what God forbade was really good and that in so doing, God was not really good. Satan is always changing the price tags and the labels. When we come to the matter of discipleship, Satan wants us to dwell on the negative side of the ledger. He wants us to ponder what we are missing. But God withholds no good thing from those who follow Him: “For the Lord God is a sun and shield; The Lord gives grace and glory; No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11; cf. Psalm 34:10).

But even more than this, what God takes away He replaces with something even better. Look at these words from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10:

“Jesus said, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers (notice the omission of father) and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the world to come, eternal life’” (Mark 10:29-30).

Do you see the principle behind this promise? God only withholds what is not for our good. What He does withhold, He replaces with something far better. Now Christianity is often accused of promising ‘pie in the sky, bye and bye.’ And, with certain qualifications, we must say this is surely true. God does promise many great blessings in the future. But, to quote an insightful writer, most disciples would insist that they have received a good sized slice of the pie already.

**Implications and Application**

The relevance of these things is almost too obvious to mention, but let me reiterate some areas of application. First, we should neither underemphasize nor overemphasize the demands of discipleship. Many who discover what is involved in true discipleship will avoid it, as did the rich young ruler. But if we thoughtfully consider the rewards of following Jesus, along with the alternatives to it, we should quickly conclude that there is no other way, there is no better way, there is no easier way, than His way.

Second, we should see the folly of those who suppose that they are getting the ‘best of both worlds’ when they trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and then walk far behind in daily life. The theory is that by straddling the spiritual fence we can enjoy the blessings of heaven while also soaking up the pleasures of sin for the present. Discipleship is not to be understood only as the sacrifice of pleasant joys for future rewards. Discipleship is God’s provision for a purposeful and pleasurable life in the present, as well as a blissful eternity in the presence of God, His angels, and the saints. No one but the disciple of our Lord is living life to the maximum.

Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ? Is He the most important person in your life? If not, you are being cheated out of life at its fullest. Have you considered the cost of discipleship, as well as its rewards? If you do, you will conclude that the way of discipleship is not a way; it is the way. May God grant that we may become His disciples by His grace.

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5 This is, however, one aspect of the Christian life (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Hebrews 11:24-26). The point I wish to make is that the sacrifices we make in this present life are to our benefit now, as well as in eternity.
Lesson 18:
What Happened to Discipleship in the Epistles?
(Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 16:1-3; 1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Timothy 2:2)

Introduction

As I began to approach my study of discipleship several weeks ago, I wrote down the questions for which I would like to find the answers on this subject. Let me share some of the most troublesome.

(1) In the matter of discipleship, are we not guilty of constructing a theology and methodology solely on the Gospels, while ignoring the epistles? Is this not what we accuse others of doing with regard to other doctrines?

- Why do the terms for discipleship occur so frequently in the Gospels and yet virtually disappear in the Epistles?
- Why is this so in the light of the Great Commission to ‘make disciples of all the nations’?
- Why are the twelve disciples not called disciples, but apostles in the book of Acts and the epistles? Is there a difference between apostles and disciples?

(2) Have we been correct in using the relationship between Christ and the twelve and between Paul and Timothy as a model for discipleship?

- Are the twelve to be used as a measure of our spirituality?
- Were the twelve any more spiritual than any of the other ‘disciples’?

These are questions which have haunted me in the matter of discipleship. It is my conviction that to answer these will contribute significantly to our understanding of the nature and practice of making disciples in the New Testament.

The principle question which we shall seek to answer (and also the title of this message) is, ‘What happened to discipleship in the Epistles?’ To answer this question, we will begin by looking more closely at the Great Commission. Then we will turn our attention to the teaching and practice of the apostle Paul. From this we will draw our conclusions and application.

Discipleship and the Great Commission
(Matthew 28:18-20)

Few commands of our Lord weigh more heavily on our Christian consciences. It is little wonder that we feel compelled to engage in some kind of discipleship program based upon the last words of our Lord to the eleven:

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18-20).

The current emphasis on discipleship from this passage is a swing of the pendulum in reaction to a poor translation in the King James Version of the Bible. Unfortunately, the translators failed to reflect some grammatical distinctions evident in the original text in their English translation. The first failure was in rendering the participle (‘going’ or ‘as you go’) as an imperative, with the same verbal force as the primary command (make disciples). The second error was in not indicating the difference between the term mathētēuo (‘make disciples’ rendered in the KJB ‘teach’) and didaskō (‘to teach’ correctly rendered ‘teaching’).

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1 It must be pointed out that ‘make disciples’ is an active imperative verb, while ‘go’ (literally going, as you go, in going), ‘baptizing,’ and ‘teaching’ are all participles. Participles can have imperatival force (cf. J. H.
The outcome has been unfortunate, for we have placed more emphasis upon going than was grammatically intended. Then, too, we have not given the full force to the command to ‘make disciples.’ Teaching has seemingly come to have a disproportionate emphasis. Current exposition has endeavored to put proper emphasis upon ‘making disciples,’ but in the process has invested more in the term than it originally implied. So we have swung from one extreme to the other. In banking terms, we were originally ignorant of the fact that we had money in the bank, but now we have overdrawn on our account.

What does our Lord mean by this command to ‘make disciples of every nation’? Looking back in the Gospels we are reminded that the term ‘disciples’ was used of those who were the followers of Jesus. In the book of Acts, the term seems to be used as a synonym for ‘Christian’ or ‘believer’ (Acts 6:1,2; 9:1,26; 11:26, etc.). From this we should conclude that the command of the risen Lord was to carry out the task of leading men to be His followers, just as men had done during His earthly sojourn.

Why use the term ‘make disciples’ then? Why not simply command that we evangelize the world? The reason is that Christianity is more than a decision to trust in Christ as Savior. It is not enough to invite men to believe in Christ as Savior. In the Gospels, our Lord invited men to follow Him, not just to believe on Him. Christianity is more than a moment-in-time conversion; it is the radical transformation or conversion which leads to a whole new way of life. It implies the forsaking of our former way of life, and our commitment to live as God requires, by His grace. In other words, discipleship is used because it compresses conversion and Christian living, salvation and sanctification, into one term. Conversion to Christ, in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, was inconceivable without a commitment to follow Him in life. That is why our Lord persistently challenged would-be followers to count the cost, as well as the rewards.

The main verb, ‘make disciples,’ does not really explain the means of discipleship, but its goal. It is the three participles that help us to grasp what is involved in the making of disciples of all nations. Behind the Great Commission was a radical new concept which our Lord gave to the eleven, who were dyed-in-the-wool Jews.

First of all, making disciples necessitated ‘going.’ This commission nullified the previous instruction of our Lord to go only to the Jews (cf. Matthew 10:5-6). Now they were to proclaim the grace of God in the gospel to all nations. Judaism had previously (and reluctantly) granted Gentiles to come the way of the proselyte. Now Jewish believers were to go to the Gentiles with the good news. Going did not come easily to these racially biased men. The racial separatism which once was thought to be a measure of spirituality was now shown to be a hindrance to it (cf. Ephesians 2:20).

If the first participle, ‘going’ emphasized the need for an invitation to discipleship, the second participle, ‘baptizing,’ draws our attention to the initiation of men into the life of discipleship. “… baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19b).

Those who believe in ‘baptismal regeneration’ (the doctrine which says that we must be baptized in order to be saved) would be quick to leap on this verse to prove their point. Unfortunately, those of us who reject this erroneous doctrine neglect this verse in order to avoid any semblance of their error.

Baptism in the New Testament is a rite of initiation. It does not save anyone, for it is a work of man. It is not the cause, but the result of salvation. It does not contribute in any way to one’s salvation; it is a public confession of it. Furthermore, this command is not addressed to the would-be convert; it is given to those who already are disciples, and indeed, men who are apostles. It speaks of the responsibility of the church toward new converts. It implies the proclamation of the gospel of salvation through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ for sinners. It implies a genuine faith and conversion to Christ. But it also includes a public profession of faith and a public re-

Moulton, _Grammar of New Testament Greek_, Vol. I, Prolegomena, pp.180-183; or Dana and Mantey, _A Manual Grammar of Greek New Testament_, p. 229) but only relatively infrequently. Following the grammatical inferences from this text, we would conclude that the primary command is to ‘make disciples.’ This command is implemented by ‘going,’ ‘baptizing,’ and ‘teaching.’ ‘Making disciples,’ then, is the goal; ‘going,’ ‘baptizing,’ and ‘teaching’ are the means of attaining the goal.

2 Some of these, as previously explained, followed in unbelief, cf. John 6:60ff. Others were true believers, John 8:30,31. Some were in the inner circles of the seventy, the twelve, or the three (Matthew 10:1; 17:1,6).
nouncement of the old way of life and an entrance into a new lifestyle. Baptism summarizes all that is involved in
the initiation of a person into the Christian faith.

The third participle, ‘teaching,’ capsulizes the continual obligation of the church to instruct the new
convert in the way of the Lord. Conversion is the introduction of a person to a personal relationship with Jesus
Christ as Savior and Lord. Teaching cultivates this relationship by assisting and encouraging the convert to know
Him in a deeper and more intimate way. This process of getting to know Him is life-long (cf. Philippians 3:10),
and instruction in the Scriptures is an essential element in this process.

‘Making disciples,’ then, does not refer to some formal structured program intended only for the su-
per-spiritual or an elite company of the committed. It is God’s imperative for every Christian. It involves the initia-
tion and the instruction of every believer into an ever deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. It seeks to make
every person a follower of Christ.

Whose Responsibility
Is This Commission to “Make Disciples”?

The assumption of contemporary Christianity is that discipleship (making disciples) is the individual re-
ponsibility of every Christian. To follow this assumption through to its logical conclusion we must end up by say-
ing that every Christian is to go, to evangelize, and to instruct. To some extent, of course, this is true. But when
seen in its full-blown implications, it means that I personally am responsible for the total life and spiritual growth
of certain persons. I should be evangelizing and edifying a certain number of individuals if I am really spiritual and
if I am really obedient to the Great Commission. It is my contention that what we expect of ourselves, the eleven
disciples themselves failed to do. It is now my task to defend this contention.

(1) Please note with me that the eleven did not go. Look at the words of the noted church historian,
Luke: “… and on that day (the day of Stephen’s stoning in which Saul played a part) a great persecution arose
against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria; except
the apostles” (Acts 8:1).

Now this is an amazing thing. The very ones who received the command to go forth with the gospel
stayed home in Jerusalem. This certainly was not because it was the path of least resistance. They, as leaders in the
Christian community, were the most likely targets for treatment similar to that of Stephen. Those who went forth to
the Gentiles were not the eleven.

(2) So far as we are told in Scripture, the eleven did not ‘make disciples’ in the same fashion as the
Lord worked with them. We know of no examples of the apostles attaching to themselves a select group of fol-
lowers, to carry on their work. Their work seemed to concentrate on a ministry to the masses, as the account in
Acts 6:1-6 implies. The apostles did devote themselves to the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Peter and John, Acts
3-4) and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:2,4).

(3) Discipleship is the corporate responsibility of the church. The bottom line is simply this: the Great
Commission was not given to the eleven as individuals, but to them as the church in embryo. We rightly recognize
that the Great Commission was not merely a command to the eleven apostles. It was a mandate to the church, of
which they were the foundation (Ephesians 2:20). More than this, it is not a command to every Christian to apply
independently so much as it is for the church corporately. Discipleship is the corporate responsibility of the church.
Although every Christian should give testimony of his faith, some are given the gift, the special, spirit-given abil-
ity, to evangelize (Ephesians 4:11, etc.) to teach (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11), to help, to lead (1 Corin-
thians 12:28), and so on.

The church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). What He began to do and to teach, the church is
to continue (Acts 1:iff). No Christian individually and independently can fully represent or reflect the person of
Christ. Only the church can do this corporately. Each and every Christian is a valuable member of His body, and
each has its unique function (1 Corinthians 12:20-30).

Then what should we do as individuals to carry out our part of this Great Commission? At last, we have
come to the heart of the matter. It all boils down to a matter of gifts and calling. The eleven ‘disciples’ were gifted
and called of God to serve as apostles. It was their task to lay down the terms of salvation. It was their calling to lay
down the foundation for the church (Matthew 16:18-20; Ephesians 2:19-22). They had a particular function and role to play in the carrying out of the Great Commission, but it was not their task alone. They did not feel compelled to go, but to stay, for they were not called, as was Paul, to preach to the Gentiles.

If you and I are to be responsible Christians and obedient to the Great Commission, we should look to our individual gifts and calling to determine what part we are to play in its outworking.

It is here that I find one of my haunting questions answered. Were the twelve (or the eleven if you would) disciples really more spiritual than the rest? I think not. There were no women among the eleven, and yet who were those last at His grave and first at the empty tomb? Why did Mary seem to sense our Lord’s imminent death, when the twelve were aloof to it (John 12:1-7)?

You see, we have made the eleven our pattern for discipleship. If we were really spiritual, we suppose, we, too, would leave our secular jobs and spend all our time preaching the gospel. We think that these ‘apostles’ were more spiritual because they didn’t have to live in the working world any more. When a young man becomes converted and shows real spiritual zeal and a hunger for the Word, we ask him if he has thought of going to seminary and going into ‘full-time’ service. Were the other disciples less spiritual for not following the lifestyle and ministries of the eleven? Are you less spiritual today because you have to work at a secular job? I find it very instructive to learn that those who constituted the first evangelistic thrust of the church were not full-time, ordained, theologically trained (formally), missionaries. (If you are reluctant to take my word for it, read Acts 8:1ff.)

To be spiritual, to be obedient to the Great Commission, is not necessarily to quit your job, leave your loved ones, and become a full-time foreign missionary. Even the eleven do not meet this requirement fully. To carry out your part in the Great Commission is to employ your spiritual gift and follow your calling in conjunction with the other members of the body of Christ, His church.

But What of Paul and Timothy?
(Acts 16:1-3; 2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Corinthians 11:1)

I suspect that what I have said sounds too ‘unspiritual,’ too unconventional to accept without considerable thought. And if what I have suggested does no more than stimulate your thinking and Bible study, I have accomplished my task.

No conclusions on the matter of discipleship will hold water which do not take into account the relationship of Paul and Timothy. Over and over I have heard, ‘I want to be discipled like Paul discipled Timothy.’

What then, was the relationship between Paul and Timothy, if not one of discipleship? Let me begin by mentioning the only New Testament passage I am aware of which uses the term disciple with respect to Paul and other men:

“And when many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. And they were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket” (Acts 9:23-25).

I would draw your attention to the expression ‘his disciples.’ Does this not prove that Paul had disciples, just as our Lord did? Not really. First of all, you should recognize that the King James Version, reflecting a different Greek textual family, renders this, “Then the disciples took him by night . . .” (Acts 9:25a, KJV).

Regardless of how one handles the textual matter, and granting the possibility that the reading ‘his disciples’ is correct, it makes little difference. The context of this verse is the first days after Paul’s conversion. It would be a number of years until Paul would be in a position to have ‘disciples’ like Timothy, even if he did have them.

3 The difference in the Greek text involves the order of words, but fundamentally the difference is that of one Greek letter. It is the difference between the word autou (his = his disciples) and auton (him = the disciples took him). If we follow the Greek text underlying the NASV, we must supply the pronoun ‘him,’ which would be wanting. Though this is possible, the text underlying the KJV is, in my mind, the more defendable.
The only disciples which Paul could have had would have been his disciples as an unbelieving Rabbi. Those would have been men faithful to Paul, who traveled with him on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:7-8).

Now to Paul and Timothy, some fifteen years or so after his conversion. We read in Acts of Paul’s first recorded contact with Timothy:

“And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:1-3).

Paul had disagreed with Barnabas so strongly over taking Mark on a second missionary journey that the two had separated (Acts 15:36-41). Paul took Silas and began traveling through Syria and Cilicia. When they (at least Paul, Silas, and shortly, Luke—note ‘we’ in verses 11ff.) arrived in Lystra a young convert named Timothy was highly recommended to him by those who knew him well (Acts 16:2). Paul invited him to join the group. Nothing here implies a relationship patterned precisely after that of Christ and His disciples. Timothy was invited to become a member of the team because he was proven faithful, not primarily to be taken along to be made useful.

Then what of Paul’s instruction to Timothy some time later? “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Here, again, we have come to the central issue. That Paul is not speaking of discipleship is obvious. Our Lord spoke universally of discipleship—that is, it was for men of every nation (Matthew 28:19), and not just for those who are spiritual, but every Christian. But Paul spoke in a restricted sense. Paul limits his command to Timothy to the matter of a particular gift and calling.

Timothy is to see to it that his ministry is multiplied in other men, whose faithfulness and gift have been evidenced (‘faithful men, teach’). That Timothy should have a more intimate relationship with a selective group of men I do not challenge. But the goal of this relationship is not discipleship but ministry. The issue is not spirituality, but sphere of service. It does not define godliness, but gift. Those who use this passage for discipleship programs, I believe, have missed the point.

We are not saying that one-to-one ministry is prohibited. We are saying that we must be selective concerning those in whom we invest significant portions of our life. We are saying that working intimately with men who have developing gifts similar to our own is biblical. But we are not saying that this is discipleship. We are not saying that anyone who was spiritual would have been clamoring to attach himself (or herself) to Paul, or Timothy, or any other Christian leader. Discipleship is a life-long process, beginning at the point of salvation, and participated in by a variety of individuals within the church, each in his or her unique way.

There is still one last gasp of contemporary thinking on discipleship. It is: But what of Paul’s frequent command to follow his example or imitate him. Colin Brown, under the title of ‘discipleship,’ includes Bauder’s article on the Greek term, mimeomai, to imitate.4

While we are to unreservedly and wholeheartedly devote ourselves to the imitation of Christ, such is not the case with any one individual. We are not to imitate Paul alone, nor are just a select few to do so. We are to imitate others who manifest Christian virtues (cf. Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:9). Elders are to lead, not by force, but by example (1 Peter 5:3).

To speak directly to those passages where Paul instructs Christians to follow his example or imitate him, he never commands unrestricted imitation. It is always imitation in a restricted sphere, in a particular aspect of Paul’s life and ministry. It is not a blanket command to duplicate Paul in our own lives.5

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Some discipleship efforts appear to me to be an attempt at spiritual cloning. Young men desire to duplicate the lives of those whom they respect and revere. We should always seek to imitate the godly qualities of those whose lives reflect our Lord. But invariably what happens is that we also tend to imitate the personality and their particular ministry. Here is where we get ourselves into great difficulties. This kind of discipleship is not biblical.

Conclusions

What does all of this boil down to? We can summarize this matter by listing several observations and conclusions:

(1) **Discipleship is not for the elite in Christianity, but for all Christians.**

(2) ** Salvation is the first step, commencing a life of discipleship.** Salvation should not be seen apart from discipleship.

(3) ** Some have neglected discipleship in evangelism, tending toward an easy believism.** They seem to be inviting men and women to have a kind of spiritual ‘affair’ with our Lord. They do not stress that the relationship is one of eternal commitment and far-reaching consequences. Others have over-stressed or over-programmed it, failing to realize that it is ultimately the work of God and a life-long process.

(4) **We have erroneously applied our Lord’s relationship with the twelve and Paul’s relationship with Timothy to discipleship.** We have confused discipleship with apostleship. We have overlooked the matter of gift and calling. We have confused spirituality with certain kinds of service.

(5) **We have made the matter of discipleship primarily an individual enterprise rather than a collective command to the corporate church.**

(6) **We have placed the emphasis upon finding a person to be our leader and guide, rather than developing a dependence on Christ Himself.**

Applications

The applications of the principles of discipleship are far too numerous to list. Essentially, we must restructure our thinking in terms of discipleship. We should challenge every formula, every practice, every program, no matter how spiritual or biblical it appears on the surface, to see if it can be substantiated by a careful handling of the Scriptures.

May God give us the desire to continue along the path of discipleship. May God deliver us from devotion to anything above the Savior, and from dependence on anyone save Him alone. May God use us, our gifts and calling, to encourage others on the same path.

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5 “In the NT mimeomai is found only 4 times (2 Thess. 3:7,9; Hebrews 13:7; 3 Jn. 11); mime"te"s six times (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; Hebrews 6:12); and symmin"te"s only once in Phil. 3:17. All are used with an ethical-imperative aim and are linked with a specific kind of conduct.” Ibid. p. 491.
Lesson 19:
The Method of the Master  
(Matthew 7:28-29; John 7:44-46)

Introduction

‘Who needs instruction in how to teach?’ That was the question I always asked when anyone mentioned ‘methods of teaching.’ When I went to college, I decided to become a school teacher. One of the requirements of my course of study was that I learn some methods of teaching. Nothing seemed more detestable to me. ‘Either you’ve got it or you don’t,’ I would protest. ‘If you’ve got what it takes, you don’t need any teaching in methods.’ ‘And if you don’t have it, no amount of instruction will help.’

Barely surviving the educational system, I did finally become a school teacher, but after two years of this, the Lord led us to Dallas Theological Seminary. There, again, I was confronted with methods. It didn’t take me long to find an ally in my cause. He and I both were convinced that all we needed was our Bibles and the Holy Spirit. This methods stuff, we agreed, was just the ‘arm of the flesh.’ Minutes later my faithful supporter and I went in to our preaching class, and he was to bring the message. I have heard some pathetic attempts at preaching, but my friend took the grand prize. It was miserable.

Some time (and many hard lessons) later, I discovered several passages of Scripture. Again and again, I found in the book of Proverbs that the one who is wise gives attention both to what he says and to how he says it:

“The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, But the mouth of fools spouts folly” (Proverbs 15:2).

“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, But the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things” (Proverbs 15:28).

“The wise in heart will be called discerning, And sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness” (Proverbs 16:21).

“The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, And adds persuasiveness to his lips” (Proverbs 16:23).

If this is not sufficient proof that we should devote ourselves to the improvement of our teaching methods, let us look at the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, the budding young teacher of the Scriptures: “And for this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you …” (2 Timothy 1:6).

Some would undoubtedly draw our attention to the fact that Timothy was to work at his teaching and preaching because that was his spiritual gift. I do not challenge this, but it in no way lets the rest of us off the hook. Gifted to teach or not, every Christian should seek to do his very best at teaching. If you will stay with me through my first point, I think we can dispense with any notions that excuse the non-gifted from their responsibility to teach.

Characteristics of Christ’s Teaching

As we reflect on the teaching methods of our Lord, there are several prominent characteristics which appear repeatedly. Our approach will be to observe the practice of our Lord, then to define the principle upon which this practice is based, and, finally, to explore the application of the principle to our lives.

(1) Spontaneity. When we think of teaching today, we think in terms of curriculum, class schedules, and designated meeting times. This is not necessarily bad, but it is a far cry from the life and ministry of our Lord. The only predictable teaching time of the Lord Jesus would be on the Sabbath at the Jewish synagogue. Beyond this, the teaching of Jesus was almost entirely spontaneous.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) was a spontaneous sermon given on the occasion of a large crowd who wanted to be taught (Matthew 5:1). When Jesus was invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee, and His feet were washed by a woman known to be sinful, Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach on the subject of for-
There is a principle behind the practice of our Lord in the Gospels: Biblical teaching responds and relates to the day to day problems and circumstances of life. It is not to be restricted only to certain formal occasions, but it is to occur continually.

In the Old Testament God told the Israelites,

“And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart, and you shall teach them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up, And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

The New Testament also teaches us:

“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person” (Colossians 4:5-6).

“… always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15).

Teaching is not just formal, but informal, not just an occasion in the classroom, but an opportunity to be capitalized upon by the person who has the Word of God deeply etched on their heart and mind.

The applications of this principle are numerous. For the one who teaches formally, they must recognize this ministry as only a small part of the total teaching process. It is perhaps the most difficult kind of teaching because it does not arise out of the urgency of a life-centered problem. When we teach formally, we must be continually conscious of the need to relate to life situations. Contacts outside the classroom and association with the student in his living environment are essential to good teaching.

As a teacher I am aware of the temptation to be content-oriented and not student-centered. I have a lesson I have worked hard to prepare. Since I have only 40 or 45 minutes I will preempt non-essentials such as time for discussion or questions and answers. All spontaneity is gone. If a student interrupts my teaching to ask a question or to make a comment, I view him as a threat to my planned presentation, so I politely silence him. I cannot recall one instance in the Gospels in which the Lord considered any circumstance an interruption to be ignored or to be brushed aside.

The implications of the principle of spontaneity are not restricted to those who consider their spiritual gift to be that of teaching. In Deuteronomy chapter six, Colossians chapter 4 and 1 Peter chapter 3, the principle of informal or spontaneous instruction is directed to every believer, not just to those gifted to teach. Teaching is to be spontaneous as well as structured. Those with the gift of teaching more formally will be responsible for the formal instruction, but all of us are to be ready for that which is spontaneous.

Our obligation is to be prepared to meet a variety of spontaneous and informal teaching situations. This preparation, I believe, is two-fold. First of all, there is the preparation of heart and mind which occurs as we become saturated with the Word of God. This is not simply a matter of attending classes and having our notebooks full of Biblical information. It is a personal encounter with the Word of God until we have a grasp of it, and, more importantly, it has a hold on us. As God said through Moses, “… these words … shall be in your heart …” (Deuteronomy 6:6).

Beyond this matter of being a student of Scripture, we must also be a student of those about us. All too often we have been accused of having all the answers, but not knowing what the questions are. Nothing is more lethal than making the Word of God appear irrelevant by our indifference to the issues which trouble men and women about us.
When you and I go to the doctor’s office, he asks us a number of questions. He does so, not to make polite conversation, but to isolate and identify symptoms of physical problems which he can remedy by treatment. Every question he asks is searching for symptoms of deeper need. How often our conversations are consumed by trivia, rather than seasoned with salt, probing for areas of need to which we can apply a Word from God. No wonder our Lord warned us that we will be judged for ‘every idle word’ (Matthew 12:36).

(2) Adaptability. Along with spontaneity comes adaptability and flexibility. When our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, He presented the Gospel in terms that were meaningful to her background and understanding, as well as pertinent to her present conduct. She sought water and Jesus spoke of ‘living water’ (John 4:10f). When Jesus was sought out by Nicodemus, a Jew, a religious leader and teacher, He spoke to Him in entirely different terms (John 3:lff.).

The principle I am stating might be phrased in this way: Although the truths of God are eternal and unchanging, those we are called to speak to with a Word from God are uniquely different, so we must adapt our methodology while holding fast to God’s unchanging message.

Surely this is one principle underlying the imperatives of Colossians 4:5-6 and 1 Peter 3:15. We are to communicate the Word of God as it is (without adding to it or taking away from it) to men where they are.

What troubles me here is that Christians do not really have the unchanging message so firmly imbedded in their hearts and minds that they can handle the threat of individualizing it. We want to reduce God’s truth into simple caspular forms and formulas which we indiscriminately apply to everyone, regardless of their background or needs and interests. How desperately we need to adapt the method without changing the message.

(3) Selectivity. I have said that our Lord’s teaching reflected a tremendous sensitivity toward the individual interests and needs of those about Him. Balanced with this sensitivity was also a selectivity. Our Lord was discriminating and discerning as to the proper time, and the proper subject matter for teaching. Let me suggest three specific areas of selectivity in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Selectivity in terms of time. Our Lord had many things to teach His followers. But He did not feel compelled to give them everything at once. We read in Mark’s Gospel: “And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them as they were able to hear it” (Mark 4:33).

Near the end of His earthly ministry, our Lord said to His disciples: “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12)

If we were only sensitive to this principle of selectivity. How frequently I see myself and others attempting to unload everything we have learned over the years on a Christian who is still ‘wet behind the ears.’ Our Lord was in no hurry to teach everything to His followers. He taught when the need was there and when the maturity to grasp it was evident.

There was also selectivity with regard to the people our Lord taught. He chose to take the disciples aside and explain certain truths to them alone, while these truths were not generally proclaimed (cf. Mark 4:34; John 14-16). With regard to some, our Lord chose to conceal the truth altogether, for they had already been given sufficient truth to trust in Him. Instead of repenting, they rejected Him and determined to put Him to death (cf. Mark 3:1-6, 20-30; 4:10-12).

As our Lord had told the disciples: ‘Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw pearls before swine …” (Matthew 7:6; cf. also John 2:23-25; 2 Timothy 2:2).

It is necessary for every teacher to determine how much time to devote to various opportunities and individuals. I believe that our Lord’s commitment to instruct individuals was proportionate to that individual’s response to what he had already been taught (cf. Mark 4:23-25).

I have found it necessary to be selective in counseling. From time to time I will encounter a couple who come for marriage counseling who do not want to work at solving their problems. Week after week we go over the same old problems, but they return without any preparation or study in the Scriptures. In such cases, I must politely suggest that they not bother to call for an appointment until they have completed their assignment for that session. We must be selective in the use of our time with people.
In addition, the Lord was selective in the doctrines which He taught. While the disciples had an intense interest in the timing of the coming of the Kingdom, Jesus persistently refused to disclose such truth because it was not to their best interest (cf. Acts 1:6-8).

The Lord Jesus never allowed Himself to be side-tracked on some peripheral matter, some intricate detail of doctrine, which had no great applicational value. Here is precisely where the scribes and Pharisees spent the bulk of their time. As our Lord said, they “… strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:24).

Paul warned Timothy about disproportionate emphasis upon matters of trivia or speculation (1 Timothy 1:3-7; 6:4; 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 23-26; Titus 1:10-11, 13-14; 2:1, etc.). Sad to say, many Christians seem to have become ‘trivia experts.’ How often today we are tempted to major on the minors, to emphasize our own hobby horses, to the detriment of sound doctrinal instruction.

(4) Simplicity. Although I have never been in the armed forces, I have a friend who was an Army instructor. The Army, in its unsophisticated way, told instructors to always remember the word KISS. KISS is an acrostic for: KEEP IT SIMPLE, STUPID.

Beauty and simplicity have, in my mind, a great deal in common. And so, also, do simplicity and truth. When our Lord intended men to grasp what He was saying, no one ever went away wondering what He meant. The simplicity of our Lord in His teaching had several dimensions.

First of all, there was a simplicity of motive. In Romans chapter 12, the apostle writes, “… he who gives, with simplicity” (margin, NASV) (Romans 12:8). The simplicity can be understood as liberality, as the textual reading of the NASV indicates. But it also can speak of simplicity or singleness of motive. By this Paul meant that one was not to give in order to receive the praise of God and the praise of men (as Ananias and Sapphira did, Acts 5:1-10). Our Lord’s motive in His teaching was not to please men and to receive their acclaim, but to please the Father (cf. Matthew 26:39; John 8:26; 12:49-50; 17:4).

The principle for the Christian is stated in the book of Colossians:

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord whom you serve” (Colossians 3:23-24, cf. 2 Timothy 4:24).

Second, there was evidenced in the teaching of our Lord a simplicity of method in His presentation. The scribes and Pharisees prided themselves in their ostentatious presentations, for it showed them to be erudite scholars. If many were left in the fog of $5 words and theological jargon, so much the better. More important than the communication of the message was the exaltation of the speaker.

Our Lord, on the contrary, spoke in the simplest language—so simple that even a child could not miss its meaning. But simplicity should not be thought of as dull and uninteresting. Jesus was a great story-teller. He had an insight and humor that gripped the attention of His audience. His down-to-earth illustrations brought abstract truths into very concrete terms.

There have always been those who have sought to replace the simplicity of speech with subtle persuasive techniques. The apostle Paul believed men were saved, not by the persuasive tactics of oratory genius, but by the simple (and foolish) method of preaching (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-21).

I am not at all criticizing the study of homiletics (the art and science of preaching). Homiletics does not seek to give men devices and gimmicks by which to persuade. Rather, it seeks to aid men in getting rid of those things which detract from the message. It seeks not to highlight the messenger, but to get him out of the way of his message.

Third, there was in the teaching of Jesus the simplicity of straightforwardness in preaching. Jesus illustrated simplicity of motive, simplicity of method, and simplicity in the message.

No one ever had to urge the Master Teacher to get to the point—it was always crystal clear. I am (at times) troubled by some who confuse obscurity with depth. Some time ago I attended the lectures of a man who was thought to be a great intellectual. I am probably revealing more about myself than about this speaker, but I
didn’t understand much of anything he said. After each lecture, people would rave about his intellectual depth of insight. Perhaps so. But, then again, perhaps his obscurity was misinterpreted for depth.

The simplicity and straightforwardness of our Lord was deeply rooted in His personal integrity. He would not obscure those portions of His teaching which would arouse anger and opposition. He let the chips fall where they must. Our Lord was even honest about that which He could not teach. When the disciples pressed Him for the time of the coming of the Kingdom, our Lord said that was not His to know (Matthew 24:36).

It is amazing to me how often teachers are dishonest in not revealing what is not theirs to know. People love an authoritative ring, a dogmatic word on every subject. But I must say to you (as you well know), I don’t have the answers to many questions. Worse yet, to many of these questions, neither does anyone else! You will recall the words of James when he says, “… Let your yes be yes, and your no, no” (James 5:12).

I have added one other factor, which, I believe, is implied in this instruction: ‘Let your maybe be maybe.’ How afraid we are of not knowing everything, and of letting people know that.

(5) Originality. One thing seems evident about the teaching method of the scribes and Pharisees, it must have been as dull and dry as dust. There was probably little originality and creativity. When they spoke, they merely quoted their ancient and shop-worn traditions.

The Lord was not confined to the traditions of the Pharisees, either in methodology or in content. The Lord taught much by His deeds; He underscored every major claim by miraculous signs. He not only claimed to be the ‘resurrection and the life,’ He raised the dead (John 11). When Jesus taught, things happened. His points were punctuated by a well-told story, a life-like illustration, or a sign. In His method of teaching, Jesus was original.

In the content of His messages, Jesus was original, too. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus frequently used the contrast: “You have heard it said … but I say” (cf. Matthew 5:21-48). The scribes and Pharisees merely touted the same old traditions. Our Lord did not reject the teachings of the Old Testament; He merely differentiated them from that of the scribes and Pharisees. His teaching was not original in the sense of overturning all previous revelation. Our Lord’s teaching was original in the sense that it went back to the original words of Scripture, rather than relying on the traditional interpretations of the fathers.

There is a great deal of difference between the originality and creativity of our Lord and the novelty of some today. Originality does not give a man license to engage in all kinds of bizarre and unorthodox gimmickry in order to get people’s attention. I hear of circuses, pony rides, parachutists and so on, drawing crowds by their unusual behavior.1 The presentation of the message must always be appropriate to the dignity of that message.

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1 Of this kind of novelty I can do no more than to quote C. S. Lewis: ‘To judge from their practice, very few Anglican clergymen take this view. It looks as if they believed people can be lured to go to church by incessant brightenings, lightenings, lengthenings, abridgements, simplifications, and complications of the service. And it is probably true that a new, keen vicar will usually be able to form within his parish a minority who are in favour of his innovations. The majority, I believe, never are. Those who remain—many give up churchgoing altogether—merely endure.

Is this simply because the majority are hide-bound? I think not. They have a good reason for their conservatism. Novelty, simply as such, can have only an entertainment value. And they don’t go to church to be entertained. They go to use the service, or, if you prefer, to enact it. Every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore. And it enables us to do these things best—if you like, it ‘works’ best,—when, through long familiarity, we don’t have to think about it. As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don’t notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God.

But every novelty presents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping. The important question about the Grail was ‘for what does it serve?’ “Tis mad idolatry that makes the service greater than the god.”
(6) Authority. If we were restricted to only one word by which we could describe the teaching of our Lord, it would be the word ‘authority.’ “The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at his teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28-29).

The ‘authority’ of the scribes was substantially different from that of Jesus. Theirs was the authority of prestigious training and position. Jesus was the mere ‘son of a carpenter,’ in their eyes (cf. Matthew 13:54ff.). The scribes derived their authority from Jewish tradition and from the fact that they reiterated the teachings of the fathers.

Jesus’ authority came from the Scriptures. Someone has wisely said that the Scriptures can speak for themselves and do not need our defense. In this, they are like a lion—all we need to do is to turn it loose. Jesus expounded the Scriptures in the light of their original meaning and intent, and when properly expounded they virtually rang out with authority.

Authority today is often equated with pulpit-pounding and arrogant dogmatism. Such should not be the case. There is a quiet confidence which the Lord manifested, and it was based upon His view of the Scriptures.

“... the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

In Mark 12:36 when our Lord quoted from Psalm 110, He did not mention David as the human instrument, but attributed the Scripture to the Holy Spirit.

It is no small wonder that much of the dynamic is missing in pulpits and classrooms across our nation. Many are no longer convinced that the Bible is the inerrant, inspired, infallible Word of God. There is an uncertainty and a lack of authority in the teaching of many because they do not view the Scriptures as Christ did.

This past week I have had the occasion to preach two funeral messages. As I sat looking out into those grief-stricken faces, I found myself thinking: If I do not have a word from God to speak to these people, who has anything of comfort to say? What consolation do the philosophers have, or the poets? Apart from divine revelation, no one has anything worth saying. There is a kind of compulsion to preaching a funeral when you know that the book you hold in your hands is God’s word to men, fully inspired, completely reliable and infallible. Here is where we get our authority.

I must also say that there is a way in which this authority can be abused. Sometimes we attempt to force the Scriptures into supporting our position or in sanctifying our pet peeves. Sometimes we go to the Bible in order to find a passage to justify our preconceived ideas. Sometimes we interweave our own ideas into a lesson when the text does not demand, or even support them (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6). Sometimes we rest on our reputations as Bible teachers when we express our own ideas. This is an abuse of biblical authority. Even Satan knows how to quote Scripture (cf. Matthew 4:6).

(7) Practicality. We have an expression that goes something like this: ‘Now you’ve left preaching and gone to meddling.’ What we mean by this is that mere preaching is abstract truth and meddling is instruction that demands personal application and changes in our life. If this is so, Jesus did not preach. He meddled. Whenever He taught a truth or a principle, He always brought it down to the bottom shelf of personal application. The truth which our Lord taught must be applied. In fact, not to use what we learn is to lose it:

A still worse thing may happen. Novelty may fix our attention not even on the service but on the celebrant. You know what I mean. Try as one may to exclude it, the question ‘What on earth is he up to now?’ will intrude. It lays one’s devotion waste. There is really some excuse for the man who said, ‘I wish they’d remember that the charge to Peter was feed my sheep; not try experiments on my rats, or even, teach my performing dogs new tricks.” C. S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), pp. 4-5.
“And He was saying to them, ‘Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you; and more shall be given besides. For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him’” (Mark 4:24-25).

In the teaching of our Lord, believing was never separated from doing:

“Therefore every one who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And every one who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall” (Matthew 7:24-27; cf. also Luke 3:7-14).

The principle here is this: ‘Truth is not possessed until it is practiced.’

If you and I are ever to be communicators of divine truth, we must be very conscious of application. And by application I mean very specific action. We often preach on the role of the husband and the wife. The husbands go away with the vague resolution, ‘I’m going to try to be a better husband this week.’ The wife says to herself ‘I will be more submissive.’ This is not enough. We must bring people to a commitment that is specific. I will love my wife by:

- Taking over the supervision of the children when I get home.
- Taking her out to dinner every week.
- Getting around to the repair jobs she has been asking about for months.

One reason why application is so vital is that many of the errors in Christianity are in the application of truth. Whenever Paul used the expression ‘God forbid’ in the book of Romans, it was an appalled response to the wrong application of a biblical truth. Grace always surpasses sin. This is a biblical principle. But an unbiblical application is that we should glorify God by living in sin so that grace may abound (cf. Romans 6:1ff.).

I believe wholeheartedly and unreservedly in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Many, however, have misapplied the so-called ‘once saved, always saved’ doctrine to mean that we can live in sin with no reservations. This, of course, is wrong.

Some have misapplied a truth in a certain area to some other area of life. For example, a good Calvinist would say (and rightly so) that we do not have a free will so far as salvation is concerned (cf. John 1:13; Ephesians 2:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Acts 16:14, etc.). If we were left to ourselves, we would never turn to Christ in salvation, for, by nature, we are children of wrath, enemies of God. As I have sometimes said, we have the same free will to accept Christ that a lion does to become a vegetarian. Our nature determines our decisions.

Now this is a doctrine which relates to one’s salvation. Some have wrongly applied it to the spiritual life. I have no freedom of choice, so God is responsible for whatever I do, and not me. Such application renders Paul’s words in Romans 7 useless and meaningless. This is an application of a truth, but in the wrong sphere. Many of our heresies are applicational. We have taught accurately only when the truth is applied specifically and soundly.

(8) Purpose. When I was a student in seminary, I remember our homiletics (preaching) class being visited one day by a well-known Bible teacher. In the question and answer period someone asked him if he had a particular goal in mind when he taught. He said that when he preached it was like the bowman in 1 Kings 22 (verse 34) whose arrow was sent indiscriminately into the opposing army, but which struck King Ahab a fatal blow.

Now this sounds very spiritual, and very pleasing to a sluggard such as myself, who dislikes the discipline of thinking through a message for a central purpose and theme. But the teaching ministry of our Lord clearly reveals that His teaching always had a clear-cut goal. Sometimes he taught to clarify the distinctions between His Kingdom and that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5-7). At other times he taught so as to arouse curiosity and interest in the minds of some, while clouding the truth from others (Mark 4). At other times, it was to comfort...
and encourage (John 14). Sometimes He deliberately aroused opposition, instigating His own execution (cf. Matthew 22,23).

God’s Word was not given merely to inform, but to transform. It speaks to men where they are, and demands of men that they act decisively on what they hear. No teacher of the Scriptures dares wander aimlessly about the truths of God’s Word. As we are told in 2 Timothy, the Bible is given in order to teach, to reprove, correct, and to train. If we are to teach the Scriptures, we should teach with these purposes in mind. Our best guideline here is to determine the mood and the purpose of the passage which we are teaching, and to endeavor to accurately communicate this in our teaching.

Principles: There was a significant difference in the way the scribes and Pharisees handled the Scriptures compared with that of the Master. They focused upon the precepts of the Old Testament; He upon the principles. They thought of the Bible as a book of rules; He, as a book of reasons.

This is especially transparent in the Sermon on the Mount (especially Matthew 5:21-48). Repeatedly, Jesus contrasted Jewish traditions with biblical principles. They said it was wrong to murder. Jesus said the principle behind the precept (or rule) was that we should not have conflicts with one another—not even malicious thoughts. While the prohibition to murder applies to a small minority, the forbidding of angry and hostile thoughts and actions applies to all of us. This one principle applies to us in countless ways.

So also, the prohibition of adultery (Matthew 5:27ff.). Jewish legalism forbade the outward act, but back-handedly incited sinful thoughts. Jesus went to the heart of the matter—the thought life of the individual. Sinful actions result from immoral thoughts. While legalism draws the lines and lingers as close to them as possible, Christian liberty gives the principle and flees from sin as far as possible (cf. Matthew 5:29-30).

You and I know that the favorite question of a child is ‘Why?’ God does not ignore this question. In fact, our Lord concentrated upon it. The reason why so many young people in legalistic churches turn their backs on their ‘religion’ is because they were given rules without reasons. When the principles are taught, the practice is the result of conviction and not compulsion or religious conformity.

Our tendency toward legalism is quickly caught by our young people. Over and over I am asked questions like these: ‘Can I dance?’ ‘Can I smoke?’ ‘Can I date a non-Christian?’ What distresses me is the motivation for such questions. They want to know the lines of what is forbidden so that they can get as close to the fence as possible.

For the one whose heart is close to God, the question should not be, ‘How far can I go,’ but rather, ‘What really pleases God, and how far from sin can I stay?’ Legalism never sanctifies. Principles give the broad guidelines, leaving the sincere Christian the decision-making process, led by the Spirit in accordance with the principles, and motivated by a desire to please Him.

Summary

We have merely scanned the forest in this message. There are many other characteristics of the teaching of our Lord. Each one is oozing with implications. Lest we miss the trees for the forest, let me summarize the teaching method of our Lord by using three words: Exposition, Example, and Experience.

Our Lord’s teaching was fundamentally an exposition of the Old Testament revelation. It was not its forsaking, but its fulfillment (cf. Matthew 5:17-20). His teaching did not conflict with the Law and the Prophets, but only with the traditional explanations of the scribes, and Pharisees. His exposition was in plain and simple terms, illustrated by real life-like stores and examples.

Second, our Lord’s teaching was underscored throughout by His own life and example. What He taught, He modeled.

Finally, our Lord’s teaching was always brought down to the level of experience. It was often motivated by situations which arose naturally and spontaneously. It was illustrated by life-like stories and real-life events. But, in the last analysis, it was concluded in the experience of those who learned at His feet. The principles He taught were brought home in the experience of His followers by practice.
In all of what has been said, I do not wish to be misinterpreted as though these are simple techniques which can be mechanically applied, and which guarantee success. We must teach in full dependence upon the Holy Spirit of God, and leave the results with Him (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6). May God help us to manifest the ‘Method of the Master’ as we teach.

What really makes a good teacher is good material. No better material, no greater message is there in the world than that of the Gospel. Every man is a sinner, a rebel (actively or passively) against God. Our waywardness has brought upon us the righteous wrath and condemnation of God. We stand condemned to an eternity from God’s power and presence. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ has died in the place of the sinner. All who trust in Him have forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life with God. That is the message we must communicate. That is the message men must believe to be saved.
Lesson 20:
The Fatal Failures of Religion: #1 Secularism
(Matthew 5:1-16)

Introduction

Several years ago Joseph Lupo, a Roman Catholic priest, did a market study which resulted in his placing a full-page ad for priests in the East Coast edition of Playboy Magazine. More than 600 young men responded, and at least 28 of these tested out as likely candidates for the priesthood. In previous years, the best he could hope for was as many as 10. The public response to his approach was also enlightening. Compliments outran complaints 7 to 1. But he was not troubled by the critics anyway. The main thing is, he got results.

Lest we be too quick to criticize, let me suggest that we who would be called fundamental, evangelical Protestants are guilty of the same kind of approach to Christian ministry. We package and promote Christianity no differently than Madison Avenue sells toothpaste or deodorant. We run our churches in such a way that if God had died 20 years ago, no one would have yet discovered it.

The evil of which I am speaking is called secularism. Christians are guilty of secularism when they think and act like the world about them. We fall into the evil of secularism when we attempt to go about doing the work of God in the world’s way. We have succumbed to secularism when we adopt the same attitudes, values, and goals as those who do not know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is to this matter of secularism that our Lord first directs His attention in the Sermon on the Mount.

A Broader Look at the Sermon on the Mount

Before we plunge into our Lord’s teaching on secularism, we need to deal with the interpretation and application of the Sermon on the Mount to us in the 20th century. Before we begin to interpret it or to make application, we must answer two questions: (1) What is the Sermon on the Mount? (2) How should it be interpreted?

What Is the Sermon on the Mount?

The occasion of the sermon is described by Matthew. John the Baptist had recently been arrested (4:12). Jesus had withdrawn from Galilee and established His headquarters in Capernaum (4:12,13). From this time on, Jesus preached openly concerning the Kingdom of God (4:17,23-25). After spending the night in prayer, our Lord called the twelve to be His apostles (Luke 6:12,13; cp. Matthew 4:18-22).

1 A less detailed parallel account is given by Luke (6:20-49). Although there are differences in the two accounts, I believe these underscore the authenticity and integrity of both. Any alleged discrepancies can be harmonized. For a fuller discussion of this matter, cf. John R. W. Stott, Christian Counter-Culture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), pp. 21-23.

2 “In fact, an analysis of 119 passages in the New Testament where the expression ‘Kingdom’ occurs, shows that it means the rule of God; which was manifested in and through Christ; is apparent in the Church; gradually develops amidst hindrances; is triumphant at the second coming of Christ (‘the end’); and, finally perfected in the world to come.” Alford Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, p. 270. The ‘Kingdom’ in the mind of the Jews of Jesus’ day was the Millennial Kingdom which God would establish at the coming of Messiah. (This Kingdom was offered to Israel by Jesus, her Messiah, but rejected.) The fulfillment of this 1000 year reign is still future, and God’s promise of this Kingdom is sure. While the Millennial reign is yet future, there is a sense in which the Kingdom of God is now present in the church. It is my conviction that the church is to reflect to the world the righteous rule of God in miniature (since only the Christians submit to it, and then imperfectly) and is a shadow of that which is yet to come universally and in perfection.
The circumstances of this sermon would imply that our Lord’s teaching was directed to those who would truly be His disciples. Our Lord sat down to teach, assuming the authoritative posture characteristic of the Rabbis of His day. When our Lord taught, He taught as one qualified to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures. Several features of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount emerge from these three chapters:

(1) **The Sermon on the Mount was a concentration of the teaching of Jesus during His life and ministry.** While Matthew and Luke both clearly state that this was a sermon preached on a certain occasion, it is possible that it could have extended over a period of several days, the topic of a kind of retreat.3 Having concluded that this was really a sermon (albeit a lengthy one), we must go on to say that this sermon presents us with a kind of distillation of our Lord’s teaching. Barclay has shown how the themes of this sermon (from Matthew’s account) are taken up through the entire account of Luke.4 Many of the major themes of our Lord’s teaching are found in this one sermon.

(2) **The sermon is a clarification of the teaching of our Lord on the Kingdom which He would establish.** Jesus had come forth taking up the theme of John the Baptist and proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:17-23). There were many exaggerated and erroneous conceptions of what this kingdom would be. Our Lord, in this sermon, clarified His teaching on this subject to those who would be His disciples.

(3) **The Sermon on the Mount contrasts the true religion of Jesus with the false religions of paganism, and especially of contemporary Judaism.** Perhaps the key verse of the entire sermon is Matthew 5:20, where Jesus said, “For I say unto you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The beatitudes describe the character of one who is truly righteous and who will experience the Millennial reign of Christ. It is a stark contrast with the character of the scribes and Pharisees. The teaching of our Lord and His interpretation of the Old Testament scriptures was radically different from Jewish traditions and the teachings of the Rabbis.5

(4) **The Sermon on the Mount was a word of comfort and consolation to the faithful remnant within Israel.** Those who were listening to this sermon were representatives of those within Israel who were true God-seekers and worshippers. While there is severe condemnation for the Jewish leaders, there is commendation and consolation to those who awaited ‘the consolation of Israel’ (cf. Luke 2:25). The first words of our Lord in this sermon are “Blessed are …”

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3 This is the position taken by Stott (p. 23) and William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), I, p. 80. Liberal scholars go so far as to say that it was never really one sermon, but merely a collection of some of Jesus’ sermons.

4 “In Matthew’s version there are 107 verses. Of these 107 verses 29 are found altogether in Luke 6:20-49; 47 have no parallel in Luke’s version and 34 are scattered all over Luke’s gospel in different contexts … That is to say, passages which are consecutive in Matthew’s gospel appear in widely separated chapters in Luke’s gospel … If we tabulate these things, the matter will become clear:

Matthew 5:13 = Luke 14:34,35
Matthew 5:15 = Luke 8:16
Matthew 5:18 = Luke 16:17
Matthew 7:7-12 = Luke 11:9-13”


5 Edersheim goes into considerable detail on this point. He entitles this section which deals with this subject as ‘The Kingdom of Christ and Rabbinic Teaching’ (I, p. 524, cf. pp. 524-541).
How Should It Be Interpreted?

I find it most interesting to consider the variety of ways that people have of interpreting and applying this best known sermon of our Lord. Strangely enough, it is the unbeliever who seems to apply it personally, while many Christians try to avoid its teaching.6

The unbeliever is often heard to say, “I try to live by the Sermon on the Mount.”

This seems to mean something like, “I try to live by the golden rule.” I doubt that most of those who say such things have even read the Sermon on the Mount through. Surely they would not set such high standards for themselves.

Liberal Christianity also makes much of the Sermon on the Mount. They look upon Christ’s words as the model for the ideal society. They long for and strive to establish the perfect society which can bring such conditions to pass.

Others view the sermon as a description of the kind of works one must strive to produce in order to attain to eternal life. The error here is that those who are called blessed by our Lord are assumed to be true believers. Their works are the result of God’s grace, and not the means of their earning God’s eternal salvation. As Dr. S. Lewis Johnson has said, when Paul was asked by the Philippian jailer, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Paul did not respond, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”7

In my opinion, the gospel is not given in this sermon for two primary reasons. First, our Lord was speaking to those who were a part of the righteous remnant. These were those who looked for God’s salvation through His Messiah. Second, Christ’s atoning work on the cross of Calvary was still future. Until this was accomplished, what more could our Lord say than that which was already spoken by the Old Testament writers (and believed by His audience)?

Some Christians have interpreted this sermon as applying directly to the church, ignoring the completely Jewish context in which it was delivered. Others have virtually set the entire sermon aside by dispensationalizing it. They believe that it was given as a kind of constitution for the Kingdom. Since it gives to Israel the Law of the Kingdom, we in the church age (they tell us) are not under its requirements. This view fails to come to grips with the fact that our Lord spoke of the Kingdom as yet future (“they shall inherit the earth,” Matthew 5:5), and that the present experience of those addressed would include persecution and rejection.

The bottom line, I believe, is that we do not wish to subject ourselves to Christ’s teaching. ‘Turning the other cheek’ is not what the old nature desires to do. I can remember one of my professors saying of Matthew 5:42 (“Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.”): “If a businessman were to follow this instruction today, he would go broke.”8

I would say several things in response to the dispensational type of evasion. First, God has called us to live a daring and impossible kind of life which necessitates faith in the kind of God Who does the impossible. The life of faith is unreasonable to the man of the world. Second, while this sermon was preached to the Jews, it has application for every Christian. If I am correct in assuming that the church is to reflect the kingdom of God in miniature, then we must take this sermon seriously. Finally, we should never interpret and apply any one verse apart

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6 “And there have been many other attempts to accommodate the Sermon on the Mount to the low levels of our moral attainment. In the fourth and fifth chapters of his book Understanding the Sermon on the Mount, Harvey McArthur first surveys and then evaluates no fewer than twelve different ways of interpreting the Sermon. He says he might well have subtitled this section ‘Versions and Evasions of the Sermon on the Mount,’ for all but one of the twelve interpretations offer prudential qualifications of its apparently absolute demands.” Stott, p. 27.


8 Likewise I have often heard it said by some who oppose running the church according to New Testament principles of ecclesiology (in favor of tradition), “You can’t run a church like that.” True enough, unless God is the head of His church, divinely providing for it and protecting it.
from the teaching of other Scripture. We cannot take the promise that if any two agree on a certain thing in prayer, we will have it (Matthew 18:19) in isolation, without considering all that the Scripture teaches about prayer. So also, we cannot take one verse in the Sermon on the Mount, interpret and apply it in isolation. Scripture always interprets Scripture.

While the Sermon on the Mount was addressed to Jews, it also speaks to Christians today. It tells us what our attitudes and actions should be. It challenges us to live an excitingly distinctive life, adding a savor to our society. It warns us of the evils of false religion which creep into Christian theology and practice. It instructs us as to how we should interpret and apply the Old Testament Scriptures. It places before us the measure of a man or woman of God.

The Relationship of the Believer to God and Man
(5:1-9)

The Ten Commandments prescribed Israel’s relationship to their God and also their relationship to their fellow man. Our Lord could thus summarize the commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind … and … you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37,39).

Likewise, in the beatitudes, our Lord gives us a description or characterization of the true believer in terms of his relationship to both God and man. Each beatitude is to characterize every true believer. Every beatitude is in striking contrast to the character and conduct of the scribes and Pharisees.

You will notice that each ascription is accompanied by the expression ‘blessed.’ Although this term can legitimately be translated (and J. B. Phillips does so) this is surely the wrong sense here. Happiness implies a rather fleeting feeling that usually is dependent upon favorable circumstances. The Greek word (markarios) was used to describe the celestial bliss of the gods, a life free from the work and worries of the world. Used of men, initially, it suggested the same kind of bliss, of being removed from the cares of life. Thus it was used of the dead who were thought to have passed to a better existence. More to the point, here ‘blessed’ refers to the blessing and joy of a man who is self-contained, independent of external circumstances. As Barclay reminds us, ‘happiness’ comes from the root ‘hap’ which means chance. Human happiness is by chance, when ‘everything’s going our way.’ Divine blessedness is the inner joy, serenity, and composure which comes from knowing that we are right with God, that our contentment and well being are not the product of chance but of infinite grace.

The Poor in Spirit (verse 3)

Of the two Greek words which are used to describe poverty, the one used here by our Lord (ptōchos) is the most dire and destitute. Literally, the root means to crouch or cower. This man’s poverty has beaten him to his knees. In the Old Testament, the word poor evolved through a progression of usage. First, it simply meant poor. Then, it implied having no influence, prestige, or, as we would say, clout. Since the poor man had no clout, he was abused and oppressed by men. Finally, as he could rely on no one else, he came to trust in God. Over and over the expression ‘poor’ spoke of the man who recognized his own inadequacy and who trusted only in God: “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles” (Psalm 34:6; cf. 9:18; 35:10; 68:10; 72:4; 107:41; 132:15).

Isaiah spoke often of this kind of poverty, and promised to these ‘poor’ the salvation of the Lord (Isaiah 41:17,18; 57:15; 61:1; 66:1,2).

Our Lord is not commending poverty, but that spirit of humility which it often engenders. Those who will inherit the Kingdom of heaven are those who are fully aware that they have nothing to commend them before God.

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9 Ibid., p. 84.
10 “As it has been said, ‘penēs’ describes the man who has nothing superfluous; ‘ptōchos’ describes the man who has nothing at all.” Barclay, p. 85.
11 Ibid., p. 86.
They recognize that they are spiritually destitute and they wait upon God for His deliverance and salvation. How different are the rich in this world’s goods who ‘trust in the deceitfulness of riches’ (1 Timothy 6:17).

How proud and pompous were the scribes and Pharisees who could pray, “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week, I pay tithes of all that I get” (Luke 18:11-12).

Those Who Mourn (verse 4)

This strong word for mourning often expressed the grief of one over the loss of a loved one (cf. Genesis 37:34 LXX). In addition, it was used of those who grieved over sin, both theirs and others. This surely is the primary sense of this term as it is used here. Not only must there be an admission of sin, but a genuine sense of remorse over it. There is little talk today, even in Christian churches, about remorse and sorrow for sins. To some we are simply to ‘fess up’ with God. We speak glibly of 1 John 1:9 as ‘God’s bar of soap.’ God spare us from this casual attitude toward sin (cf. Ezra 10:1; Psalm 119:135; Ezekiel 9:4; Philippians 3:18).

There is comfort for those who mourn. For those who mourn over physical death and the separation it brings, we can be comforted that Jesus Christ has won the victory over sin, death and the grave. Those whom we have left behind (or rather have left us behind) in the Lord, we shall see again (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

There is likewise comfort for those who mourn due to sin. The atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross has won for every Christian freedom from the penalty of sin (Romans 6:23; 8:1), from the power of sin (Romans 6:14), and ultimately from the presence of sin (Romans 8:18ff.).

Those Who Are Gentle (verse 5)

Meekness has never been a coveted quality. We usually think of meekness in terms of weakness. It is hardly the quality which a Burt Reynolds movie portrays (so they tell me). It is a Casper Milquetoast quality, or so we suppose.

We must remember that Moses was called ‘the meekest man on the face of the earth’ (Numbers 12:3). Our Lord Jesus also referred to Himself as meek (Matthew 11:29). Meekness often implied self-control; it was the gentleness of strength.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones stresses that the meekness of which our Lord spoke is prompted by an awareness of our own sinfulness. It is difficult to be harsh with others in an area where we ourselves fail. Once we have come to acknowledge our own sinfulness and waywardness, we will be less quick to criticize others. There is a proverb which says, “The poor man utters supplications, but the rich man answers roughly” (Proverbs 18:23).

Our own view of ourselves is reflected in our treatment of others. The rich can be rude, impolite, and insensitive. They can ride roughshod over others, because they can afford to. The poor man must deal gently with everyone. He is in no position to do otherwise.

I once worked for a man with an explosive and uncontrolled temper. His temper could erupt like a flaming volcano and all the hired help would brace up for his verbal attacks. But in front of a customer, he was soft and sweet.

I find Paul’s words in Galatians 6:1 very much to the point:

“Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

Do you see the point? One’s view of himself determines or modifies his relationship with others. A meek person is one who controls himself, fully aware that he is a sinner as well.

The other evening, I attended the Dallas Seminary Founders Banquet. It was a lovely event and Dr. Charles Swindoll gave an excellent message on servanthood. On the way home, I thought of an additional charac-

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teristic of a servant: the servant does not see it as his calling to criticize other servants. In Paul’s words, “Who are you to judge the servant of another?” (Romans 14:4).

Servants don’t pass judgments; lords do. If we see ourselves as servants, we concern ourselves with our service, not that of others. Meekness (shall I say servanthood?) stems from my attitude toward myself and my position before God and men.

Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness (verse 6)

Centuries before the coming of Christ to the earth in bodily form Isaiah the prophet had written, “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost” (Isaiah 55:1).

The righteous remnant within Israel had always longed for the establishment of righteousness and justice upon the earth. They cried out to God in their distress; they agonized over the prosperity of the wicked (cf. Psalm 37). The promise was always the same: “Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will do it. And He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your judgment as the noonday” (Psalm 37:5,6).

Those who have come to acknowledge their unworthiness and spiritual poverty (verse 3), and who are genuinely contrite over their sins and others (verse 4) look for the time when righteousness will be established upon the earth. This righteousness is part and parcel with the coming Messiah and His millennial Kingdom.

Few Americans have any concept of the intensity of the hunger and thirst referred to by the Lord Jesus in the beatitudes. We are conditioned to thirst, something like Pavlov’s dogs, by television and the advertising media, who produce thirst sensations to sell their products. The thirst and hunger mentioned here is an unquenchable one, the result of prolonged deprivation.

Those who truly desire righteousness will be satisfied. First of all, Christians are clothed in the personal righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ (Zechariah 3; Romans 3:21,22; 10:4; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Our filthy rags of self-righteous works are cast aside (Isaiah 64:6), and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us when we trust in Him. Also, when our Lord returns, righteousness will prevail. “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

Implied in this beatitude is the assumption that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness recognize it is something which they do not possess in themselves. It is rather something which they lack, but desperately desire. The scribes and Pharisees were convinced that they possessed all the righteousness necessary for entrance into the kingdom of God. Our Lord’s response to the self-righteous religious segment of Israel made this fact clear: “… it is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

Those Who Are Merciful (verse 7)

Another character trait of the true believer is that of mercy. Mercy as an attitude is closely related to pity. It is the painful response of a warm heart to tragedy and misery, pain and suffering. This attitude manifests itself in acts of kindness which are intended to relieve the suffering. Mercy sees the ugly and grotesque and reaches out to help rather than to look the other way and withdraw.

Mercy is one of the awe-inspiring attributes of God, whereby He looks upon man in his pitiful state of sin and rebellion and comes to his aid. The supreme act of mercy was the death of Christ upon Calvary’s cross. This mercy is therefore a characteristic of every true believer.

The scribes and Pharisees know nothing of genuine mercy. Any act of charity was simply an attempt to get public acclaim (cf. Matthew 6:2-4). In reality, the scribes and Pharisees looked upon the helpless and forsaken as potential prey: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers …” (Matthew 23:14).

Not only can the believer look back to God’s acts of mercy in the past, but he also can expect God to continue to deal with him in mercy. Thus every Christian can look forward to receiving mercy in the future. (We must
not forget that God’s supreme act of mercy, the substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross, was yet future to those to whom Jesus spoke this sermon.)

Those Who Are Pure in Heart (verse 8)

Inward purity is another facet of the character of a true believer. The scribes and Pharisees had occupied themselves with external, outward cleanliness. They were meticulous, for example, about the ceremonial washing of their hands, but at the same time they were corrupt within: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25).

Purity must begin inwardly, and then manifest itself by our overt acts (cf. Matthew 23:26). The people of God have always been marked by inner purity (Psalm 24:4; 51:10; 73:1).

It is they who have hoped to stand in the presence of the living God. And this is what our Lord has promised: “For they shall see God” (verse 8b).

This purity of heart, this absolute sincerity and openness before God and men is not the work of man. As David wrote, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). Purity of heart is the work of God Himself.

Those Who Are Peacemakers (verse 9)

There are many kinds of peace these days. There is the ‘cold war’ kind of peace which means the absence of blatant aggression of warfare. This exists within nations and is characteristic of many marriages. Someone has described these marriages as ‘unholy deadlock.’ There is the peace of apathy and acquiescence. This is what might be called ‘peace at any cost.’ This is the peace of those who say, “Better Red than dead.”

But this is not the kind of peace of which our Lord speaks. Those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ as their sin-bearer and Savior have experienced peace with God. This peace spoke of our reconciliation with God, but it also involves the reconciliation of man with man (cf. Ephesians 2). Those who have experienced this peace will prove to be reconcilers of men (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Although we are to be peacemakers, we are not appeasers of men. We do not seek peace at any price, but we seek to share the peace achieved through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. In spite of our efforts to pursue the path of peace (cf. Romans 12:18) our faith will inevitably bring reaction, persecution, and conflict. The disciples were foretold by our Lord that such was to be the result of His ministry also:

“Do not think that I come to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Matthew 10:34,35).

The proclamation of the gospel, combined with a life lived in accordance with the Word of God confronts men with a choice. They will either joyfully accept it, or vehemently reject it. Such are the natural (though not intentioned) consequences of Christian discipleship.

The Response of the World to Christian Living

(5:10-12)

We have already seen that although a true believer may live a model life (as our Lord Jesus did without sin), there will be rejection and even persecution. Jesus did not present persecution on the liabilities side of the ledger, but rather on that of the blessings of discipleship. Thus, He began, “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness …” (Matthew 5:10).

Persecution is a natural reaction to righteousness. Peter explained it this way,

“For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abomina-
blem idolatries. And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same ex-
cess of dissipation, and they malign you” (1 Peter 4:3,4).

The world is threatened by a Christian lifestyle. It convicts them of sin, and it condemns their way of life.
The natural response to a threat is retaliation. Here is the source of our persecution.

There are three reasons which our Lord gives which explain why this persecution can be perceived as a
blessing. First of all, it is suffering for His sake. It is a distinct privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ. “So they
went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame
for His name” (Acts 5:41, cf. Philippians 1:29; 3:10; Colossians 1:24-29).

Second, suffering in the present gives promise of future rewards: “Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in
heaven is great …” (Matthew 5:12).

The writer to the Hebrews said of Moses, “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the
son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing
pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:24-25). The divine order has always been suffering, then glory.

Third, we can rejoice because persecution for Christ’s sake places us in the company of the prophets of
old, who, for their testimony, were persecuted as well (Matthew 5:12b).

The Reason for Righteous Living
(5:13-16)

Realizing that a life lived according to the beatitudes will surely lead to rejection and persecution, some
Christians may be tempted to conceal themselves within their society. To counter this temptation our Lord ex-
plained the purpose for righteous attitudes and actions in verses 13-16. Essentially, the reason is that it is only by
being distinctive as a Christian that a true believer can glorify God and contribute positively to his society. To illus-
trate His point, the Lord Jesus used two illustrations or figures: salt and light.

Salt was as common a commodity in biblical times as it is today. In the Old Testament, salt was used as a
seasoning (Job 6:6), and it was to accompany many of the sacrifices which were offered (Leviticus 2:13). It was
also used by the Orientals to seal an agreement (as, I am told, is still practiced by the Arabs today) and was used
on covenants between God and Israel (Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5). Salt, then, was a seasoning ingredient,
a symbol of purity and perpetuation.

There were great quantities of salt on the shores of the Dead Sea, which was of the rock or fossil variety. Because of impurities and contamination, much of the outer layer of this salt was useless as a seasoning ingredient.

Our Lord’s reference to ‘salt’ in Matthew 5:13 may well refer to this contaminated ‘salt’ which was virtually use-
less. In this case, He is saying that the Christian who compromises with the world about him loses his purity and,
at the same time, his usefulness to God and society.

Light is also one of the fundamental needs of man. The world at large is in spiritual darkness (Psalm 82:5;
Proverbs 4:19; Ephesians 6:12, etc.). Our Lord Jesus came as the ‘light’ of this world (John 1:5ff, 8:12) and to call
men out of the darkness and into the light (Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5). We now reflect
the light of His glory to the world about our good works (which He performs in us). As lights we expose the evil
deeds of darkness and we illuminate the divine path which God has prescribed for men to walk in righteousness.
The purpose of light is to illuminate, to shine forth plainly in the darkness (Matthew 5:15); therefore, the Christian
can only fulfill his purpose by being conspicuous in his distinct lifestyle.

The Christian lifestyle is by its very nature a distinctive one. Anyone who attempts to live according to the
Sermon on the Mount will be able to do so only by the power of the Spirit of God. It is the life of the Christian for

13 “SALT.” J. H. Bratt, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Merrill C. Tenney, General
Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), V, p. 220.

14 “SALT.” R. K. Harrison, The New Bible Dictionary, J. D. Douglas organizing editor (Grand Rapids:
only the Christian desires to live thus, and only the Christian can live in this way. A conspicuous lifestyle will inevitably bring adverse reaction, and so we must prepare ourselves for persecution. Even in this we may rejoice, knowing it is for the sake of our Lord, that our reward awaits us in heaven, and that we are in the company of the prophets of old. Apart from a Christian lifestyle the Christian cannot glorify God or contribute to his society.

**Conclusion**

Several conclusions are hard to avoid as a result of our study in the beatitudes. First of all, I must underscore the fact that while these beatitudes constitute God’s measure of a man or woman of the world, they surely do not conform to the world’s standards. The model which our media portrays for men and women is not God’s. Humility, repentance, meekness, inner purity and so on are not what the world considers the marks of maturity, or of manhood. God help us to see this clearly and to respond to the situation as we should.

Second, I am impressed by the fact that the circumstances which bring some men to God’s blessing are identical with those which cause others to curse God. How can a good God allow hunger and poverty? Someone has said that we are either like a potato or an egg. Boiling water hardens eggs and softens potatoes. The very same circumstances result in opposite effects. If you are experiencing very humbling circumstances, it may well be that God is bringing you to the point of being ‘poor in spirit,’ and of being a true mourner who seeks the righteousness of God. Adversity brings some men to distrust self and to turn to God for eternal salvation. Have you yet realized your spiritual bankruptcy? Do you hate your sin and long for a righteousness which you cannot produce? Then you must turn to Jesus Christ in faith. He died for sinners. He offers you the righteousness which God requires to enter into His Kingdom.

Third, I fear that many Christians are desperately trying to camouflage their convictions and calling as disciples to avoid rejection and persecution. Secularism has crept into the church in an appalling way. Christians have come to think and act like the world about them. We even seek to evangelize with the world’s methodology and appeal to a secular mentality.

Often our conformity is backhanded. When the world decides it is time to wear dresses with the hemline at the hips, the church raises their hems to above the knee. When the world decides to go ‘topless,’ Christians decide to go to a two-piece swim suit. On and on it goes. The church is not setting the pace or the standards; they wait for the world to act and fall in two paces behind. How pitiful!

Our children desperately desire the acceptance of their peers. They wish to be ‘Joe Cool.’ They will do nearly anything to avoid being different. And we adults are no different. We cut corners on our income taxes and exceed the speed limit because ‘everyone else is doing it.’ Even divorce is becoming rampant among Christians and Christian leaders. We are much too similar to the church at Laodicea, which was ‘neither hot nor cold’ (Revelation 3:14ff.). How God hates such mediocrity! May God enable us to live distinctively to His glory, and to the benefit of our society.
Lesson 21:
The Fatal Failures of Religion: #2 Legalism
(Matthew 5:17-48)

Introduction

This week I was reminded of the story of a little girl who went to visit her grandparents. It seems as though they held Sunday as the Lord’s day, and holy. They thought it should be a day of quietness, to walk, not run in it, and that the Bible was the only book that should be read. The granddaughter could not swing nor gather the flowers that grew in the pasture. While grandpa was taking his nap, she asked for permission to walk to the gate, and received it. Along the fence she stopped to watch the old mule, standing with his head bowed and his eyes closed. Reaching through the fence, she said, “Poor old fellow, have you got religion, too?”

I fear that is how many view Christianity. They are completely turned off by the legalism which has crept in unawares. Worst of all, perhaps, is the fact that we Christians are guilty of thinking of it as a virtue, rather than a vice. It is this evil of legalism that our Lord attacked in the remaining portion of Matthew chapter five.

History knows none to be better masters in the art of legalism than the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day. The scribes were the professionals, the clergymen who worked out the various rules and regulations binding on all devout Jews. The Pharisees as a rule were a rather select group of laymen committed to the keeping of these “laws.”

Although the expression, “the law” was used of the five books of Moses, of the Ten Commandments, and of the entire Old Testament, it came especially to be equated with the interpretations and traditions of the scribes. In the third century A.D., a written compilation of these oral traditions was completed known as the Mishnah, which contained 63 tractates on various subjects of the Law. In English it makes a book of about 800 pages.1 Later Judaism set itself to the task of interpreting these interpretations. These commentaries on the Mishnah are called Talmuds. “Of the Jerusalem Talmud there are 12 printed volumes; and of the Babylonian Talmud there are 60 printed volumes.”2

“The Law lays it down that the Sabbath Day is to be kept holy, and that on it no work is to be done. That is a great principle. But these Jewish legalists had a passion for definition. So they asked: What is work? All kinds of things were classified as work. For instance, to carry a burden on the Sabbath Day is to work. But next a burden has to be defined. So the Scribal Law lays it down that a burden is ‘food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a customs house notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen’—and so on endlessly. So they spent endless hours arguing whether a man could or could not lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out with a needle in his robe, whether a woman might wear a brooch or false hair, even if a man might go out on the Sabbath with artificial teeth or an artificial limb, if a man might lift his child on the Sabbath Day. These things to them were the essence of religion. Their religion was a legalism of petty rules and regulations.”3

Our Lord persistently and publicly chose to violate these traditions and to preach against them (cf. Mark 7:1-13). As a result of His refusal to comply to scribal regulations and traditions, the Lord Jesus earned the reputation of one who had no regard for the Law. In fact He was accused of setting aside the Law in deference to His own

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., pp. 124-125. Barclay goes into considerable detail here, which would prove interesting reading for the searching student.
new) teachings. The scribes and Pharisees who were regarded (at least among their own ranks) as the guardians of
the Law were condemned by Jesus as hypocrites (Matthew 6:1,2,5,16; cf. 15:1-9; chapter 23). It was necessary for
our Lord to make His attitude toward the Old Testament very clear, and this He did as recorded by Matthew in
verses 17-20.

Our Lord’s Position on the
Old Testament Law: Orthodoxy Versus Hypocrisy
(5:17-20)

Our Lord’s position on the Old Testament Scriptures is even more orthodox and uncompromising than
that of the scribes. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but
to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away
from the Law, until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

Our Lord never intended to set aside the Old Testament Scriptures; He came to fulfill them. This fulfill-
ment occurred in several ways. He came to fulfill those prophecies and types which promised His first coming to
the earth as the Lamb of God, the Sin-bearer. He fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures by living a life completely
conformed to their requirements. Finally, He fulfilled the Old Testament writings by bringing their teachings and
doctrines into clear focus. As Chrysostom expressed it: “His (Christ’s) sayings were no repeal of the former, but a
drawing out and filling up of them.”

Not even the most insignificant change in the sacred Scriptures was permissible, according to the Savior.
The Hebrew ‘jot’ (in Greek it is the iota) was the smallest Hebrew letter. The ‘tittle’ was the small projection on
the stroke of a letter which distinguished one Hebrew letter from another. Here is reflected our Lord’s view of
Scripture. It was the Word of God, inspired, inerrant, infallible. Whatever He might be accused of, it could not be
an irreverence for the Old Testament Scriptures.

Turning the tables on those who would challenge Him on this point, Jesus brings our focus upon His crit-
cics. Could they make the same claims as He? “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and
so teaches others, shall be called least in the Kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be
called great in the Kingdom of heaven” (verse 19).

The stage is now being set for the contrast Jesus made between Himself and the scribes and Pharisees. The
real culprits were the scribes and Pharisees. They did not regard the Old Testament Law highly enough. They had
set it aside, preferring their own rules, regulations and traditions (Mark 7:7-9). The one who was truly great in the
Kingdom was he who would both teach the Old Testament faithfully (without watering it down), and who would
live in accordance with this teaching. In the remaining verses, Jesus demonstrated how it was the scribes and
Pharisees who failed to take the Law far enough, thus loosening and lowering its requirements. Worse still, they
did not practice what they preached. “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes
and Pharisees, you shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven” (verse 20).

It is almost impossible to convey the force of what our Lord has said here. He virtually has thrown a bomb
into the laps of his opponents (though they are not present here in my estimation). How this charge must have
stunned His audience. You see, the scribes and Pharisees were viewed as the very pillars of Jewish society and re-
ligion. They were considered the most moral, upright, influential people of their day. As one of my seminary pro-
fessors once said, they were the kind of person you would want your daughter to marry. They were Israel’s best, the
cream of the crop. But Jesus said their righteousness wasn’t satisfactory to God. His listeners would have to do bet-
ter than them if they wanted to enter into God’s Kingdom.

Let me digress for a moment and simply remind you that if the best within Judaism could not merit en-
trance into God’s heaven, neither can you or I. Legalism seeks to win God’s heaven by the keeping of some code of
conduct. If the scribes and Pharisees failed, my friend, so must you and I. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did
not lower the requirements of Judaism (which were thought to enable Israel to enter into the Kingdom). He showed

them to be infinitely higher. The Old Testament Law was given to men as a standard of holiness. By its keeping, none of us would ever enter into eternal life, for it only condemns us. But by failing to keep it, we are drawn to depend upon the righteousness which God has provided in His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Errors of Jewish Interpretation Exposed
(Six Specific Examples)

5:21-48

What our Lord charged in the preceding verses, He now proceeds to demonstrate in the remaining verses of chapter five. Here He gave six specific instances in which the scribal interpretations departed from the Old Testament Scriptures.

Before we begin to expound these verses we must be careful to avoid an error common in Christianity today. It is the error of thinking that Jesus was giving to men a ‘new law,’ opposed to that of the Old Testament. This is especially tempting to dispensationalists, who emphasize the distinctions between the dispensation of law and that of grace. This error stems, in part, from the formula: “You have heard that the ancients were told … But I say” (verses 21-22; 27-28; 31-32; 33-34; 38-39; 43-44). Some believe that ‘You have heard’ refers to the Old Testament teaching, and that ‘But I say’ introduces the ‘new’ teaching of our Lord which supercedes the old. Such is not the case. ‘You have heard’ introduces the erroneous or incomplete teaching of scribalism, while ‘But I say’ is followed by the true teaching of the Old Testament, which is also that of our Lord.  

First Example: The Old Testament Law and Murder (21-26)

While the scribes went to senseless extremes on the matter of the Sabbath, they did not go nearly far enough with the prohibition of murder.

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22).

Within Jewish orthodoxy, one would keep the sixth commandment so long as he did not commit murder. Jesus went beyond the prohibition of the act of murder to the attitude of anger which prompts it. To hold a bitter resentment toward another is to be guilty of violating God’s prohibition of murder. We sometimes say, “If looks could kill, I’d be dead.” We mean that the anger (which can result in murder) is written on one’s face. That slow-burning, long-harbored anger is sin, and so is that explosive anger which has a hair-trigger.

The expression ‘Raca,’ 7 (verse 22) is probably of Aramaic origin and one which reflects on the intelligence of the one so called. It could mean something like ‘blockhead’ or ‘empty-head.’ In our idiom, it might come

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6 The anger here described is obviously not ‘righteous indignation.’ There is a place and a time for it (cf. John 2:14-17), but we too seldom discern it. Barclay explains the anger here condemned by the Lord:

“There is first the man who is angry with his brother. The verb here used is orgizesthai. In Greek there are two words for anger. There is thumos, which was described as being like the flames which come from dried straw. It is the anger which quickly blazes up and which just as quickly dies down. It is an anger which rises speedily and which just as speedily passes. There is orgê, which was described as anger become invertebrate. It is the long-lived anger; it is the anger of the man who nurses his wrath to keep it warm; it is the anger over which a person broods, and which he will not allow to die.” Barclay, p. 135.

7 Barclay illustrates the ancient use of this term:

“There is a Rabbinic tale of a certain Rabbi, Simon ben Eleazar. He was coming from his teacher’s house, and he was feeling uplifted at the thought of his own scholarship and erudition and goodness. A very ill-favoured passer-by gave him a greeting. The Rabbi did not return the greeting, but said, ‘You Racca! How ugly you are! Are
out ‘idiot,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘lame brain,’ or some similar expression. These are the kind of outbursts which you or I (I don’t know about you, but I am certain of myself) could come up with as we are driving along and someone makes a foolish decision that affects (and angers) us. ‘You fool’ does not belittle a man’s intelligence so much as it challenges his moral character. Such a fool was described in Psalm 14:1: He is the kind of man who says, “There is no God.”

Having established the principle that anger is as much a sin as murder, the one being the source and the other the symptom, Jesus gave two very practical applications relevant to nearly everyone.

“If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matthew 5:23-24).

If anger is sin, and if sin affects one’s relationship with God, then one cannot truly worship God while harboring anger in his heart. The one who remembers a grievance between himself and another should deal with it immediately, even before his acts of worship and devotion. What is interesting in this passage is that the assumption is that someone else has a grievance with us. Even though we may harbor no ill feelings toward this brother, he has hard feelings against me. If I am to take the initiative in healing this situation, surely I must act to bring reconciliation and restoration in situations where I am the one who feels wronged.

A second application is made in the area of civil law. If there is a legal dispute pending against us, we should make every effort to, as we say, settle out of court. Again the emphasis falls upon dealing with anger quickly and decisively. The longer anger is allowed to go untended, it will grow. Legalism looks to the law to settle disputes; our Lord says that love should arbitrate our differences. When we choose to reconcile in love, we remain friends, and the matter is settled much more simply. When we rely on the Law to arbitrate, we are subject to the severest penalties. I have never seen a dispute between two parties settled in the law courts where they left as friends and they felt as though they had come out ahead.

Second Example: The Old Testament Law and Adultery (27-30)

The Jewish interpretation of the seventh commandment was that one was guilty of adultery only if he or she had committed the physical act. This was a very narrow and external interpretation of the Law and ignored the clear teaching of the tenth commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or female servant or his ox or his donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17).

Adultery is an act conceived in the heart, before it is culminated in the bedroom. It is sin to look at a woman with the intention of contemplating her potential as a sexual partner.

In a day when sex is exploited to sell toothpaste and toilet paper, candy bars and cars, it is hard not to fall into this particular sin. Movies and television deliberately appeal to the lusts of the eye. Outright pornography is not in a dark corner anymore; it is at the checkout stand at the grocery store. We virtually cannot avoid it.

The Lord Jesus spoke very strongly on this particular sin, for He instructed us that “… if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out …” (Matthew 5:29a). These are very stern words. Are we to take them literally? Very few would say “Yes.” Although we should take them seriously, we need not take them literally we are told. Several observations must be noted here.

(1) It is not just our right eye, or our right hand which causes us to fall into this sin. If we were to remove one eye, the other would carry on very well. This might inform us that it is not just one eye, one member, that is the problem.

(2) Ultimately, the sin begins in the heart, and it cannot be plucked out.

all the men of your town as ugly as you?’ ‘That,’ said the passer-by, ‘I do not know. Go and tell the Maker who created me how ugly is the creature He has made.’ So there the sin of contempt was rebuked.” Barclay, Matthew, I, pp. 136-137.
The point of this teaching is that we must deal quickly, decisively, and severely with this temptation. It is no small matter. It has been the cause of countless divorces; the lives of many have been wrecked because of it. Legalism condemned the outward symptom, but failed to deal with the source. Our Lord’s position was clear and decisive.

In this confrontation between legalism and our Lord, I find an interesting insight into the difference between legalism and responsible Christian liberty. Legalism draws a line and then tries to get as close to the line as possible. Because of this, it doesn’t work. John Warwick Montgomery has written, “The fundamentalist church in the town in which I grew up, by effectively keeping its young people from all forms of mixed entertainment, succeeded in having the highest illegitimate birth rate of any church in the community.”

Christian liberty discerns what is offensive to God and stays as far away as possible.

I am not certain that Christians have taken the words of verses 29 and 30 seriously enough. Is there never an occasion where a sincere Christian man might undergo surgery to become a eunuch for the sake of the Gospel? When, then, did our Lord tell His disciples, “… there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven …” (Matthew 19:12). It may not be often that a Christian would need to consider surgery, but I would not dare to say that such a time could never come.

Getting to the heart of the matter, I believe what our Lord is saying here is that unless we view the sin of adultery (including immoral thoughts) so offensive to God that we would be willing to undergo sexual surgery to solve the problem (if it would), we do not see this sin from our Lord’s perspective. I personally feel that much of the immorality within the Christian community can be directly related to a casual attitude toward sexual sin.

Third Example: The Old Testament Law and Divorce (31-32)

Closely related to the prohibition of adultery is the biblical position on divorce. The scribes and Pharisees assumed that divorce was a biblical option. They only quibbled over the grounds for divorce. Some felt a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason; others only for marital impurity. Their interest was entirely procedural. But Jesus refused to speak on this issue. Instead, He went back to the divine intention for marriage. Granted, God had permitted divorce (not commanded it, as the scribes maintained, Matthew 19:7-8), but He did so only due to the hardness of men’s hearts (Matthew 19:8). The divine purpose, as described in Genesis was that one man and one woman should be permanently united until separated by death. In the light of this purpose, our Lord made a statement which was designed to discourage any divorce: “But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:32).

One must recognize by the brevity of our Lord’s teaching on the subject of divorce here, that this is not the full revelation on divorce. Because the scribes had focused on the exception (some ‘indecency,’ Deuteronomy 24:1, which varied in Jewish interpretation from adultery to burning the breakfast eggs) and made it the rule, Jesus here refused to expound on the exception, only to mention it. He stressed the principle, God’s attitude toward all (unbiblical) divorce. Unbiblical divorce leads to the sin of adultery on the part of the initiator of it (usually the husband in Jesus’ day, Matthew 19:9), it puts the ‘innocent,’ or at least passive party in a position where she will

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9 “We know that a current controversy about divorce was being conducted between the rival rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai. Rabbi Shammai took a rigorist line, and taught from Deuteronomy 24:1 that the sole ground for divorce was some grave matrimonial offence, something evidently ‘unseemly,’ or ‘indecent.’ Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, held a very lax view. If we can trust the Jewish historian Josephus, this was the common attitude, for he applied the Mosiac provision to a man who ‘desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever.’ Similarly Hillel, arguing that the ground for divorce was something ‘unseemly,’ interpreted this term in the widest possible way to include a wife’s most trivial offences. If she proved to be an incompetent cook and burnt her husband’s food, or if he lost interest in her because of her plain looks and because he became enamoured of some other more beautiful woman, these things were ‘unseemly’ and justified him in divorcing her.” Stott, p. 93.
Jesus’ day, Matthew 19:9), it puts the ‘innocent,’ or at least passive party in a position where she will seek marriage to another, thereby committing adultery (Matthew 5:32).

Here is yet another insight into the matter of legalism. Legalism looks only at the rules, Christian liberty at the reason behind the rules. While the Law permitted divorce, God hates it, and we should avoid it at all costs (cf. Malachi 2:16).

I may say to one of my children who asks to go to the store with their friend, Sally, “No, I don’t want you to go to the store with Sally.” Being the legalist and literalist that all children are, they would probably call up another friend and go with her. When called on the carpet, my child would probably respond, “But you said not to go with Sally, and I went with Jane.”

If they knew my intention was that they should not go to the store with any child, then this disobedience could have been avoided. Such is the danger of legalism—it lends itself to stark literalism.

Fourth Example: The Old Testament Law and Oaths (33-37)

The Old Testament has much to say about the taking of oaths:

“You shall not swear by My name falsely” (Leviticus 19:12).

“When a man makes a vow to Jehovah or swears an oath … he shall not break his word” (Numbers 30:2).

“When you shall make a vow to Jehovah your God, you shall not be slack to pay it” (Deuteronomy 23:21).

God had not forbidden the taking of an oath, but had cautioned the one who makes a vow to keep his word.

There were two abuses of the oath in the days of our Lord. One might be called frivolous swearing. It was common practice to dress up an ordinary statement by attaching some kind of oath, such as “By thy Life,” or, “May I never see the comfort of Israel if …” The same practice is common today, particularly in the use of profan-
ity. Men use oaths (or profanity) in order to give emphasis to their words—words of no real consequence. This is the kind of oath-taking forbidden by the Old Testament commandment, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain…” (Exodus 20:7). Technically speaking, profanity is the common or indiscriminate use of God’s name. And this God has forbidden.

The second abuse of an oath was more deliberate and malicious. It was the use of evasive swearing. Here the emphasis of the Old Testament revelation was shifted from what might be called substantive righteousness to procedural or technical righteousness. God had said, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” They shifted the emphasis: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” There is a substantial difference. An oath was not so much a matter of keeping your word, but of phrasing your vow in such a way that you evaded your commitment. Any vow which included the name of God was considered a solemn oath which must be kept. But any vow which carefully avoided the name of God was not technically binding. One could thus swear by heaven, or Jerusalem, or the temple, or his head, and not feel bound to his oath. The effect was that people would be deceived in taking a man at his word (or vow), but the man himself felt no obligation to live by his word.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew our Lord had scathing words of rebuke for those who practiced this kind of casuistry:

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.’ You fools and blind men; which is more important? the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it” (Matthew 23:16-22).

Jesus is saying that no matter what I do as a Christian, I make God a partner in my actions and commitments (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:12-20). Whether I vow using God’s name, or some part of God’s creation (my head, Jerusalem, etc.), I have still involved God in my oath. It is shallow thinking to suppose that the avoidance of the name of God divorces Him from an interest in my commitments.

Our Lord’s interpretation of the Old Testament revelation restored proper emphasis in this matter. When you give your word, keep it. Vows are only needed when one’s integrity is in question. Live an honest and reputable life and avoid having to emphasize the truthfulness of your statements or commitments. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Does this mean that a Christian should never take an oath of any kind? I think not, although there are many sincere Christians who would disagree with me. God Himself used oaths in Scripture (e.g. Genesis 22:16,17; cf. Hebrews 6:13-18). Likewise, our Lord took an oath at His trial (Matthew 26:63-64). Although honest men should not need to take oaths, we live in a dishonest society where we may have to do so anyway, especially if required of us.

From this example of legalism as revealed in the matter of oaths, I arrive at two more insights into the evils of legalism. First of all, legalism often places the emphasis upon form rather than substance. It ‘focuses upon the individual trees and overlooks the forest’. When I was in college, I very much enjoyed the study of constitutional law. I recall the fact that in the matter of racial equality (as in other matters), the Supreme Court insisted upon substantive justice as well as procedural justice. We may follow the rules with absolute meticulousness, and yet the outcome may be grossly unjust. So legalism looks mainly at keeping the right forms, while overlooking the major issues. In the words of our Lord, the legalists “strained gnats and swallowed camels” (Matthew 23:23-24).

Second, there is in legalism the particular tendency toward compartmentalization. They sought to distinguish between secular and spiritual. Their oaths reflected this bent. Our Lord swept away these distinctions as arbitrary and evil. All too often Christians continue to make these distinctions. They have business ethics and biblical ethics, but they are not the same.
Fifth Example: The Old Testament and Retaliation (38-42)

Perhaps no standard of justice is better known than this one: “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). Jewish interpretation took this instruction as biblical support for retaliation and revenge. If someone says something against me, I have every right to do so against him. If you hit me in the face, you’d better expect the same from me.

Jesus reminded His listeners that this was never intended as a proof-text for revenge, but as a principle of justice. This is especially clear in the passage in Deuteronomy (19:16-18). This is an administration principle of justice, given as a guideline for the judges who arbitrate a dispute or a claim. The very purpose of this system was to avoid personal revenge and vigilante law. Whenever we begin to retaliate we always do so to a greater degree than we were injured. No one has put this more plainly than Nikita Krushchev:

“We Communists have many things in common with the teachings of Christ. My sole difference with Christ is that when someone hits me on the right cheek, I hit him on the left so hard that his head falls off.”

The principle of both the Old and New Testaments is that we are not to retaliate against those who wrongfully use us, instead we are to go beyond the minimum required of us, and in a cheerful spirit (Leviticus 19:18; Proverbs 25:21; 24:29; Lamentations 3:30). Four specific examples of our response to distasteful situations are given.

The first comes out of a direct personal insult. What is described is not a right cross, or fatal knife wound. It is an insulting slap on the right cheek, given by the back of the hand. It was not so much an attempt to do bodily harm, but a deliberate effort to insult, and perhaps provoke retaliation. To such an encounter, we should ‘go the extra mile’ by giving opportunity to strike the other cheek. Here is a willingness to accept insult without revenge.

The second comes from the law courts. If someone should sue you for your shirt, you should be willing to go beyond this demand and give your outer garment as well. This is very interesting because the Old Testament forbade the keeping of one’s outer garment overnight since it was that person’s source of warmth and protection (Exodus 22:26,27; Deuteronomy 24:12,13; etc.). It was, in effect, his blanket. What a man had every right to keep, he was to willingly give up in order to maintain harmony and unity (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, esp. verse 7).

The third illustration comes from the context of an occupied territory, under the military rule of Rome. Under such conditions, one might expect to find himself impressed into service (cf. Matthew 27:32). In such a case service ought to be rendered with an attitude of willingness to do even beyond what was demanded. A spirit of cooperation is evidenced rather than one of begrudging service and rebellion.

Fourth, we are not to turn aside one who asks to borrow from us (verse 42). True Christian charity cheerfully responds to the needs of others. This was taught in the Old Testament Law (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Proverbs 19:17; 28:27; 31:20, etc.). Generous, cheerful giving to the one in need was God’s way for His people.

Does this mean that we should ‘give a dime (now 30 cents) for a cup of coffee’ to a skid road beggar? Not if he will use it to buy a drink and thereby dig his own grave. But it may mean that we should actually buy him a breakfast. What about the man who wants a handout? The Scriptures say that if one will not work he should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). It is my personal conviction that we as a church should always have a few odd jobs to do around the building, and if a man is willing to work, he should be paid on the spot before he goes his way.

In the Old Testament the poor were provided for by gleaning from the fields. I am not in favor of the kind of welfare which does all the work for the needy and robs them of their dignity and incentive (Proverbs 16:26).

While the Bible instructs us not to retaliate, I do not believe that it teaches pacifism. I believe that God would not be pleased if I were to stand idly by while my family were mistreated or injured. I see a difference between what is called self-defense and revenge. It is revenge that the Bible condemns.

Legalism has a decided inclination toward one’s ‘standing on his rights.’ That is what our Lord is getting at here. We are not to be those who demand our rights. So often marriage is conducted on this level. The husband and the wife think only of their rights, but Paul speaks only of responsibilities (cf. Ephesians 5:22ff.). Christians are those who have surrendered all their rights to the Savior.

There is one final word which must be said. There is a great deal of difference between standing up for our rights and standing up for what is right. While we may (and should) be willing to suffer innocently for the cause of Christ, we have a responsibility as Christian citizens to stand up for law and order and justice. This is the reason, I believe, that Paul refused to be quietly let out of jail and sent out of town (Acts 16:35-39). Had he allowed this injustice to have gone unchallenged, the entire Christian community would have been subject to the continual illegal harassment of the legal authorities. May God help us to differentiate between our rights and what is right.

Sixth Example: Who Is My Neighbor? (43-48)

Nowhere is the abuse of the Old Testament Scripture by the scribes more evident than it is here: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy’” (Matthew 5:43). Here is a statement which finds no support in the Scriptures at all. The narrowness and sectarianism of Judaism looked only within the ranks of their own to find their neighbor. It was no accident that the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). This was a crucial question to the Jews.

The Jews could easily proof-text their hatred of the Gentiles. After all, God ordered Israel to kill all the Canaanites. The Psalmist prayed for the downfall of the wicked, who were his enemies. God brought death and destruction to the Egyptians at the Exodus. Should not the Jew show love toward his fellow-Jews (the upstanding ones) and hate toward the rest?

The Old Testament instructed the Israelites to show kindness toward the foreigner, and even to their enemies (Exodus 23:4,5; Proverbs 25:21-22). One’s neighbor, as Jesus clearly taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan, was anyone in need. It was not enough to cease from retaliation. Christianity goes even further than this—we are to return good for evil. This is the distinctiveness of true believers.

In any group of people they will tend to respond warmly to their own kind. Gentiles love Gentiles; Jews love Jews. The kind of love we must reflect is love for our enemies. In common grace, God gives blessings (rain and sun) to all men without distinction. If we are to reflect Him, we must be indiscriminate in our acts of goodness also.

Narrowness is often one of the criticisms against Christians. Oftentimes this criticism is justified. According to God’s Word, it has no place among Christians.

Conclusions

Our Lord has demonstrated in these six specific areas that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is of a different (and inferior) kind, than that which He offers, and which God requires to enter into His heaven. My friend, this righteousness can never be produced by human effort—only by the spirit of God living out the life of Jesus Christ in the true believer. Do you have His righteousness? You must, if you would be in His heaven.

Having spent considerable time on this danger of legalism, let me give you my definition of it. Legalism is an attitude which equates righteousness with external compliance with a code of conduct. This code may be correct or incorrect. Our conduct may or may not measure up to the standard. The reasons why it is so devastating are:

- it ignores or underestimates the role of inner attitude and motivation;
- it focuses upon self-effort rather than on divine enablement;
- it encourages pride rather than humble dependence upon God;
- it tends to ‘use’ the Scriptures to reinforce our own preconceived ideas and preferences;
- it tends to conceive of our acceptance with God as performance oriented;
• it arouses the flesh and incites us to sin, rather than the avoidance of sin;
• it tends to impose one’s personal convictions on others, and to condemn them if they fail to live up to our rules.

Legalism cannot save you, my friend, and neither can it sanctify. Praise God!
Lesson 22:
The Fatal Failures of Religion: #3 Externalism
(Matthew 6:1-18)

Introduction

Not too many years ago, a well-known evangelist was holding revival services in a great American city. As I recall the story, the Spirit of God moved in a mighty way and thousands were converted. After one particularly effective sermon, this great evangelist went to his hotel room, and as one report had it, he spent much of the night in fervent prayer. One report made much of this night of prayer, even quoting portions of it.

Some time later a Christian who had heard this report had the opportunity to be with the companion of this great evangelist. He had been said to have witnessed the soul-stirring prayer of the evangelist the night of the great revival. The curious Christian couldn’t resist asking the evangelist’s companion about the events of that famed evening. “Tell me,” he inquired, “was it really as it was reported?” “Well, not really,” the man responded. “When we arrived back at our room, he threw himself upon the bed with these words: ‘Good night, Lord, I’m tired.’”

Now this may not sound very ‘spiritual,’ but it does have the ring of authenticity. I am going to suggest from this text in Matthew chapter 6 that one of the greatest failures within Christianity is an over-zealous desire to be ‘spiritual.’ If nothing else causes you to pay attention to what I am about to say, this surely should. My advice to many Christians from the teaching of Jesus Christ in this passage is that you should quit being so concerned about being ‘spiritual.’ This seemingly pious desire is the downfall of many Christians, just as it was for many Jews in the days of our Lord.

In the so-called Sermon on the Mount, our Lord has been contrasting true religion with that popularly held and practiced within Judaism. In verses 17-48 of chapter 5, our Lord demonstrated that contemporary Jewish teaching and tradition was a far cry from a correct interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures. Sometimes Judaism went far beyond the teaching of the ‘Law’ of the Old Testament (as with the matter of the Sabbath). Most often scribal teaching did not go nearly far enough. It dealt only with the outward acts, such as murder and adultery, rather than the inward attitudes and motives which caused them. This emphasis on the outward requirements of the Law encouraged an externalism in matters of religious activity—a kind of formalism or ceremonialism. Our Lord exposed this error in chapter 6 verse 1 and then went on to give three specific examples of it in the most common religious activities of his day: almsgiving (verses 2-4); prayer (verses 5-15); and fasting (verses 16-18).

The Error Exposed: Externalism or Formalism
(6:1)

The subject of externalism is introduced as a word of warning. In this warning our Lord sets before His followers a principle which underlies the entire section: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 6:1).

The principle laid down by our Lord is simply this: You cannot seek to please both God and man simultaneously. No one can effectively play to two audiences. Either you will please one or the other, but not both.

The error of Judaism, (and I must say the error of 20th century Christianity) is much more subtle than it may seem on the surface. No devout Jew would determine to please God and to disregard God. The problem of externalism resulted from an illogical and unbiblical equating of man’s applause with God’s approval. The Jews supposed that the measure of a man’s spirituality was the approval and esteem granted by his peers. If you wished to evaluate your spirituality, simply listen to the evaluation of your associates.

On the basis of this erroneous premise (that God’s approval can be measured by man’s applause), the Jew made no apologies for his deliberate efforts to draw attention to his religious rituals and formal acts of righteousness.
Jesus exploded this myth by establishing the principle that one cannot seek God’s approval and man’s simultaneously. To deliberately externalize one’s righteous acts before men in order to gain their approval and admiration is to forfeit any possibility of divine reward. We are confronted with a choice, if you would, an ‘either/or’ situation—either God’s approval or man’s, but not both.

Examples of the Error of Externalism
(6:18)

Having established the principle which condemned religious externalism, our Lord went on to give specific examples of its practice. Perhaps the three most common activities which were thought to demonstrate one’s righteousness were almsgiving, prayer and fasting. It is the misuse of these three practices which Jesus chose to illustrate the principle just laid down.

The Error in Almsgiving (2-4)

Responding to the needs of the poor was a divine command (cf. Exodus 23:11; 30:15; Deuteronomy 15:7-11) and was considered a vital element of Jewish religion. Some within Israel regarded it as an act which was rewarded by eternal life, as is suggested by the statement: “For one farthing given to the poor, a man will receive heaven.” More noble Israelites knew that such acts of kindness could be done with the wrong motives.

We do not know whether some actually sounded the trumpet to announce their giving. It does not really matter that much. What we do know is that some went to great efforts to see to it that their deeds of charity were observed.

The corrective is really two-fold. First of all we must take care that our acts of charity be done as privately as possible. Just as a dispute or disagreement must be kept at the lowest possible profile (cf. Matthew 18:15-17), so also must our acts of kindness.

How sad it is that Christian churches and organizations actually appeal to one’s vanity in the matter of giving. We have marathons (I call them begathons) where the name of the donor (and the amount of the contribution or pledge) is publicly announced. We offer to engrave one’s name on a bronze plaque and place it in a prominent place for all to see. We name buildings after those who give toward its construction. More subtly, we send letters of thanks from those who are highly esteemed and whose word of personal praise is considered worth the gift. God forgive us for encouraging what He forbids!

The second corrective is personal. Not only should we strive to keep our acts of charity private, we also should be careful not to take ourselves too seriously. We may never let anyone know of our generosity, but we may

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1 “To the Jew almsgiving was the most sacred of all religious duties. How sacred it was may be seen from the fact that the Jews used the same word—tzedakah—both for righteousness and almsgiving. To give alms and to be righteous were one and the same thing. To give alms was to gain merit in the sight of God, and was even to win atonement and forgiveness for past sins. ‘It is better to give alms than to lay up gold; almsgiving doth deliver from death, and it purges away all sin’ (Tobit 12:8).

“Almsgiving to a father shall not be blotted out, and as a substitute for sins it shall stand firmly planted. In the day of affliction it shall be remembered to thy credit. It shall obliterate thine iniquities as the heat, the hoar-frost (Ecclesiasticus 3:14,15). There was a rabbinic saying: ‘Greater is He who gives alms than he who offers all sacrifices.’ Almsgiving stood first in the catalogue of good works.” William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), I, p. 136.


3 “The highest teaching of the Rabbis was exactly the same as the teaching of Jesus. They too forbade ostentatious almsgiving. “He who gives alms in secret,” they said, “is greater than Moses.” The almsgiving which saves from death is that ‘when the recipient does not know from whom he gets it, and when the giver does not know to whom he gives it.’ There was a Rabbi who, when he wished to give alms, dropped money behind him, so that he would not see who picked it up.” Barclay, Matthew, I, pp. 186-187.
nonetheless be very impressed with our own generosity. Because of this we are not to “let our left hand know what our right hand is doing” (verse 3). This verse has been used as a proof text for shoddy business practice and poor record-keeping in the church. This is not a valid application. Just as true love is to be forgetful of wrongs committed against it (1 Corinthians 13:5), so Christian charity is forgetful of the good deeds done for others. We catch a glimpse of this kind of forgetfulness in the teaching of Christ in Matthew 25:31ff. When the Son of Man returns to take His throne on the earth, He reminds His faithful ones of their kindness to Him:

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in …’” (Matthew 25:34-35).

But those who are thus commended respond: “… Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink?” (verse 37). This is the kind of forgetfulness we all need to have.

The Error in Prayer (5-15)

Prayer, too, had a significant role to play in the religion of the Jews. There were established times of prayer. Daniel, we know, prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). The apostles apparently continued to observe these established times of prayer (Acts 3:1). The Jews eventually had a prayer for nearly every occasion. In spite of what no doubt began with noble aspirations, prayer deteriorated to a mere ritual (lest we become too critical, let us think of some of our meal-time prayers). In spite of efforts to the contrary, prayer in Israel fell into the deadly throes of formalism. It is for this reason that our Lord pointed to the practice of prayer as an example of externalism in verses 5-15.

There were two principle errors current at the time of our Lord’s earthly appearance. The first error is described in verses 5 and 6. It is that of ostentation.

“And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full” (Matthew 6:5).

4 “There were two things the daily use of which was prescribed for every Jew. The first was the Shema, which consists of three short passages of scripture—Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41. Shema is the imperative of the Hebrew word to hear, and the Shema takes its name from the verse which was the essence and centre of the whole matter: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” The full Shema had to be recited by every Jew every morning and every evening. It had to be said as early as possible. It had to be said as soon as the light was strong enough to enable a man to distinguish between blue and white, or, as Rabbi Eliezer said, between blue and green. In any event it had to be said before the third hour, that is, 9 a.m.; and in the evening it had to be said before 9 p.m. If the last possible moment for the saying of the Shema had come, no matter where a man found himself, at home, in the street, at work, in the synagogue, he must stop and say it.” Barclay, Matthew, I, p. 191.

5 “The second thing which every Jew must daily repeat was called the Shemoneh ’esreh, which means The Eighteen. It consisted of eighteen prayers, and was, and still is, an essential part of the synagogue service. In time the prayers became nineteen, but the old name remains. Most of these prayers are quite short, and nearly all of them are very lovely. The twelfth runs:

“Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be showed upon the upright, the humble, the elders of Thy people Israel, and the rest of its teachers; be favourable to the pious strangers amongst us, and to us all. Give Thou a good reward to those who sincerely trust in Thy name, that our lot may be cast among them in the world to come, that our hope be not deceived. Praised be Thou, O Lord, who art the hope and confidence of the faithful.” Ibid., p. 192.

6 “There was hardly an event or a sight in life which had not its stated formula of prayer. There was prayer before and after each meal; there were prayers in connection with the light, the fire, the lightning, on seeing the new moon, comets, rain, tempest, at the sight of the sea, lakes, rivers, on receiving good news, on using new furniture, on entering or leaving a city. Everything had its prayer.” Ibid., p. 193.
Ostentation was easily fallen into, without even sensing its existence. One would be about his affairs and suddenly realize that the time of prayer was at hand. Either he would fail to fulfill this obligation or he must do it where he was. If he was in the marketplace or on the street corner, he would simply stand there and commence his prayers. Of course, this was obvious to the passers-by who would nod to one another, noting this man’s devotion to his religious duty. One could easily accept public commendation and even seek it further. More and more one would find himself in a public place at the appointed times of prayer.

In accordance with the principle established in verse 1, such public acts of worship would gain men’s praise, but not God’s. They had, in the words of the Lord Jesus, already received all the praise they would get. The expression “they have their reward in full” is interesting. The Greek term employed (apechein) as a technical business and commercial word for receiving payment in full. Those who pray in order to impress men have no further hope of reward from God.

The solution to this problem of ostentation is suggested in verse 6: “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matthew 6:6).

In contrast to the public exhibition of ‘piety’ by the hypocrites, true disciples are to seek the face of God in private. Public prayer is not here forbidden, nor are we to pray only in our closets. It is our motives which the Savior is speaking to here. We are not to seek the approving nod of men, but to desire intimate fellowship with God.

I will sometimes observe a couple who are making every effort to carry on their romance in public. They kiss and carry on, seemingly oblivious to the crowds, but, in reality, they are playing to them. Both the young man and the young woman are attempting to demonstrate that they are appealing and knowledgeable on matters of romance. They have no desire to be alone, for there is no audience there. In contrast is the husband and wife who deeply love each other. They do not care to prove their sophistication or sexual savoir-faire to anyone. They do not (often) express themselves physically in public, but choose the intimacy which is found behind closed doors.

This is the kind of intimacy which God seeks from men in prayer. They do not wish to have witnesses to their prayers. Their great desire is to be alone with God. They choose to meet Him in the secret place. They are assured of two things about God: He is in secret and He sees in secret (verse 6). God, by His character, is not One given to spectacularism. He does not care to play to His audience. This is why our Lord refused to manifest Himself to Israel as her Messiah by spectacularism (cf. Matthew 4:6). Our Lord at times preferred to accomplish His miraculous works in private (Mark 7:33). Just as God does not display Himself in spectacular fashion, neither should the saint make a public spectacle of Himself.

Also, God is One Who ‘sees in secret.’ There is no need to publicly display our righteous deeds. If we seek the praise of God, we should understand that ‘God does not look upon the outward appearance, but on the heart’ (1 Samuel 16:7). If God can know our hearts and our motives, we need not prove ourselves to Him by public displays before men.

The second prevalent error in the matter of prayer is that of verbosity. We have all probably heard the story of the individual, who, when meeting the pastor at the door after the service, commented, “Pastor, I really enjoyed both messages this morning.” “But,” the pastor objected, “I only preached once.” “I meant the one you preached and the one you prayed,” returned the observant member.

7 “It was the word which was used on receipted accounts. For instance, one man signs a receipt given to another man: ‘I have received (apecho) from you the rent of the olive press which you have on hire.’ A tax collector gives a receipt, saying, ‘I have received (apecho) from you the tax which is due.’ A man sells a slave and gives a receipt, saying, ‘I have received (apechō) the whole price due to me.’” Ibid., p. 185.

8 “The Greek word tameion was used for the store-room where treasures might be kept. So the implication may be that in the inner room where the Christian regularly prays there are treasures already awaiting him which he can draw upon and add to.” R. V. G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 73.
Two kinds of needless verbosity are common. The first is senseless, thoughtless repetition. We all know of the prayer wheels employed by the heathen. And we know of much prayer that is rattled off without touching either the mind or the heart of the one praying. All of us are aware of prayers of our own of this type. Oftentimes my ‘spontaneous’ prayers sound strangely familiar and lack life and urgency. Ironically, the Lord’s prayer is often ‘prayed’ in this mindless repetition.

Another variety of verbosity was that of needless longevity. The Greek term (battologēō) “meaningless repetition” (verse 7) is an unusual one. While most commentators take it in the sense of babbling or senseless utterances repeated over and over, Moulton and Milligan remind us that it was an expression employed as a nickname for Demosthenes.9 If he was a man who had many words for any occasion, we can readily see the relationship to this abuse of verbosity in the matter of prayer.

Dr. W. D. Maxwell writes, “The efficacy of prayer was measured by its ardour and its fluency, and not least by its fervid lengthiness.’ Rabbi Levi said, ‘Whoever is long in prayer is heard.’ Another saying has it: ‘Whenever the righteous make their prayer long, their prayer is heard.’”10

Men actually believed that the effectiveness of their prayers was to be directly related to their length. And lest we be too quick to condemn, let us beware of this same error. I have read several times a little booklet on the subject of prayer. It is a fine booklet and much of its exhortation is desperately needed today. Nevertheless, I have never left that book without feeling guilty because my floor does not have grooves in it as has been the case with a few prayer warriors. Were these men great because they prayed long? Were their prayers answered because they prayed longer than we? This was the mentality of Judaism.

In contrast to the oratory of the hypocrites, Jesus gave His followers a simple pattern for prayer. Normally, we refer to it as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ but in reality it is the disciples’ prayer. Several observations must be made concerning this prayer before we look at it more closely.

(1) It is both a pattern for prayer and a prayer to be recited. Matthew introduces it, “Pray, then, in this way …” (verse 9). We see that this prayer is cited by Matthew more as an example of prayer that pleases God. How sad that countless Christians have ‘vainly repeated’ it without ever really grasping the meaning of its words. But Luke begins, “When you pray, say …” (Luke 11:2). We must therefore be careful about condemning those who choose to repeat it, for our Lord has not forbade its repetition, only its meaningless, thoughtless parroting.

(2) Its main thrust in the context of our Lord’s teaching this prayer is given as a model prayer in contrast to that which He has just condemned, namely, lengthy prayers which sought either to impress the onlooker or to wear down the defenses of God. For those who are tempted to practice long public prayers, I must encourage you to observe not only the brevity of this prayer, but of all our Lord’s public prayers (and those of other saints, too!). If we wished to catch the major thrust of this prayer as a sample prayer, it would be something like this: “When you pray publicly, make it short and sweet.”

(3) It is comprehensive. While the prayer itself is short, the subject matter is very broad. It deals both with God’s program and with man’s needs. It seeks divine forgiveness for past sins, provision for present needs, and the future establishment of God’s Kingdom on the earth. There is a balance between God’s purpose and man’s needs. There is also a priority given to God’s purpose above our pressing needs.

As we look at this prayer in more detail, we find it begins with the statement: “Our Father Who art in heaven” (verse 9). Although I will deal with this concept of God as our heavenly Father later, I must say that I believe it is the key to the entire sixth chapter of Matthew.11

9 “If the great orator was thus nicknamed because of the torrent of words at his command, which made envious rivals call him ‘the gabbler,’ it will fit his case better than the highly improbable ‘stammering’ connection ...” James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 107.
10 Barclay, Matthew, I, p. 195.
“Hallowed be Thy name” expresses our agreement with God’s ultimate and primary purpose of bringing praise to His name. The glory of God is the supreme purpose in the universe, I believe. That is what the prayer expresses—a desire to see the name of God exalted.

Verse 10 is really an extension or amplification of the expression of desire for God’s name to be held in esteem. That will occur most completely and finally when the Kingdom of God is established on the earth and the reign of Messiah is commenced. By the use of Hebrew parallelism, the Kingdom is further defined as the time when the righteous reign of God upon the earth is as comprehensive and complete as it now is in heaven.

Having given priority to God’s purposes in the world, we should also express in our prayers the needs which we have as well. The first which is mentioned is that of daily sustenance (bread). I do not believe it is mentioned first because it is most important, but because to us it is often the most pressing. When we have laid the matter of our material needs at the feet of the Father, we may devote ourselves to other vital issues.

Although we can most readily understand what is in mind in this petition for ‘daily bread,’ there has been much difference of opinion among Bible students as to what is meant. Now we generally understand the petition to be a request for our material necessities.

Most unusual is the adjective ‘daily’ (epiousios) in ‘our daily bread.’ It was completely unknown to the ancients, and men for some time assumed that it was a term coined by Matthew. Not long ago a papyrus fragment was discovered which contained this very word. Strangely enough, it was some ancient woman’s shopping list. It was a list of the items she needed for that day, or perhaps for the following day. What a beautiful and practical instruction for our prayer life! What an antidote for worry! We need to simply express to the Father what our immediate needs are, and then trust Him to supply them. Perhaps this will be through ordinary means (such as by our holding down a job), or perhaps through more unusual ways when our needs are beyond our ability to supply.

In addition to physical needs, there are spiritual necessities. First is our need for forgiveness. No matter how great our faith, we will continually fail and need forgiveness. Although forgiveness for all sins, past, present and future, has been accomplished once for all on the cross, we experience that forgiveness as we confess our sins to the Father (e.g. 1 John 1:9).

On the surface it would appear that we experience this forgiveness only in return for our forgiveness of those who have wronged us. God’s forgiveness is not in exchange for ours. Far from it. Rather we are forgiven only when our request for forgiveness is sincere. He who asks for forgiveness but refuses to grant it to others is not sincere in his request. He who refuses to forgive fails to sense the magnitude of his own sin, and the magnitude of God’s forgiveness. Such a spirit of unforgiveness reveals an insincerity in asking for divine forgiveness. As such this (hypocritical) request is denied. Such is the parenthetical explanation of verses 14 and 15.

12 “Some early commentators could not believe that Jesus intended our first request to be for literal bread, bread for the body. It seemed to them improper, especially after the noble three opening petitions relating to God’s glory, that we should abruptly descend to so mundane and material a concern. So they allegorized the petition. The bread he meant must be spiritual, they said. Early church fathers like Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine thought the reference was either to ‘the invisible bread of the Word of God’ or to the Lord’s Supper. Jerome in the Vulgate translated the Greek word for ‘daily’ by the monstrous adjective ‘supersubstantial’; he also meant the Holy Communion. We should be thankful for the greater, down-to-earth, biblical understanding of the Reformers. Calvin’s comment on the spiritualizing of the fathers was: ‘This is exceedingly absurd.’ Luther had the wisdom to see that ‘bread’ was a symbol for ‘everything necessary for the preservation of this life, like food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government and peace, and probably we should add that by ‘bread’ Jesus meant the necessities rather than the luxuries of life.” John R. W. Stott, Christian Counter-Culture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), pp. 148-149.


14 One could apply this same kind of analogy to the relationship between faith and salvation, as indeed James has done in the second chapter of his epistle. If our faith is of the type that produces no works, it is a ‘dead faith’ and thus not a saving faith. A request for forgiveness which refuses to forgive others is a hypocritical request as well.
The last petition is the most difficult of all for most Christians. How can one pray to be kept from temptation when the Bible says that God does not ‘tempt’ the Christian (James 1:13)? Some have tried to explain this by stressing the fact that the Greek word (peirazo) can mean either to solicit one to sin (as Satan does), or to test, so as to approve (as God does, James 1). They would say that we are to pray not to be tested, but this would be to request God not to do what we are told He continually does (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:7; 4:12-13, etc.).

A better solution, in my mind, is that which gives the Greek expression the force of ‘let us not be led into temptation.’ This is particularly appropriate if we understand the second half of the petition (‘but deliver us from evil’) as a reference to the person of Satan. Therefore, we should understand verse 13 in this way: “And do not let us be led into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (my translation).

There is nothing unusual about the Christian praying for what God has promised. The promises of God are our assurance and basis for the prayer of faith. Daniel prayed for the return of the Jews to the promised land, knowing Jeremiah had predicted its happening (Daniel 9).

Perhaps someone is inclined to ask the questions, “What is the use of prayer, anyway?” “God knows our needs, before we ask (6:8).” “He does not need to be badgered into granting our request.” “If God has really determined the outcome, why pray?” The biblical answer is several-fold. First of all, we are commanded to pray (Matthew 5:44; 9:38; Mark 13:33, Luke 18:1 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17), and therefore it is a simple matter of obedience. Second, prayer is communion with God. It strengthens our faith, it expresses our dependence and devotion. Finally, prayer is God’s way of allowing men to participate in His program. While God could have purposed to accomplish His work without man’s participation, He has ordained to use prayer as a means to accomplish His pre-determined ends.

The final portion of verse 13 is absent from some of the ancient manuscripts, as well as from the same prayer in Luke’s account. Regardless of this, it is a most fitting benediction, totally in keeping with the spirit and theology of our Lord. It also concludes with the same note and emphasis with which the prayer began. It inspires faith and confidence that our prayers will be heard and answered.

The Error in Fasting (16-18)

A fast was a voluntary abstinence from food observed as a religious exercise. It was frequently accompanied by prayer in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 7:5,6; 2 Chronicles 20:3-4; Ezra 8:21-23, etc.). It expressed genuine repentance for sin (Jonah 3:5), lamentation over calamity (Judges 20:26) or the death of a loved one (2 Samuel 15).

15 “On the basis of conducting a nationwide program entitled, “National Vespers” from 1927-1946 and each year receiving 100,000 letters from members of his vast audience, many of which told of their religious difficulties, Dr. Fosdick said, “No verse in the Bible puzzles more people than the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Lead us not into temptation.’ ‘Is it not a shocking idea’ many say, ‘that God leads men into temptation and that we must beg him to stop doing it?’” (On being fit to live with, p. 151.) Harry Emerson Fosdick, as quoted in “Does God Lead Us Into Temptation?” Christianity Today, July 4, 1969, p. 13.

16 This seems to be the approach of C. S. Lewis:

“I was never worried myself by the words ‘lead us not into temptation’ but a great many of my correspondents are. The words suggest to them what someone has called ‘a fiend-like conception of God,’ as one who first forbids us certain fruits and then lures us to taste them. But the Greek word means “trial”—“trying circumstances”—of every sort; a far larger word than English “temptation.” So that the petition essentially is “Make straight our paths. Spare us, where possible, from all crises, whether of temptation or affliction.” C. S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964 ), p. 23.

17 Here we have a ‘Permissive imperative’ as grammarians term it. The idea is then: ‘Do not allow us to be led into temptation.’” A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), I, p. 54.

In addition, fasting was observed as an aid to religious concentration and the preparation for divine revelation (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9,18).

The Law required only one fast, and this on the day of atonement (Leviticus 16:29,31; 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7). After the exile, four other annual fasts were added (Zechariah 8:19). According to the Talmud, each of these commemorated a disaster in Jewish history. Devout Jews in Jesus’ day seemingly fasted twice a week (cf. Luke 18:12).

In Old Testament days too much value was placed on the external rite of fasting, as opposed to the proper condition of the heart (cf. Isaiah 58). In the days of our Lord there was this same kind of error prevalent. According to Barclay the two Jewish days of weekly fasting were on Monday and Thursday. It was probably no coincidence that these were also the market days when people from the countryside crowded into the city to buy and sell. It was a golden opportunity for the public display of piety. The Jews knew how to wring every drop of self-gratification out of this practice. They left their hair unkempt, their faces dirty, and they wore a gaunt look on their faces that worked upon the sympathy and admiration of the less committed.

The condemnation of such ostentation can be seen in our Lord’s remarks in verses 16-18. They have received all the reward they can expect—the commendation of their fellowmen. But in order to please God they must carry out their acts of devotion in private. Their hair should be combed, they should wash their faces (wear deodorant and perhaps some after shave lotion?) and conceal the fact that they have chosen to abstain from food for a time. The God Who knows the secret intentions and motives of men, the God Who observes our every deed, will surely reward true piety (verse 18).

Instruction concerning fasting seems like an anachronism to those of us who know little of deprivation, especially voluntary deprivation. We would rather focus upon the principle and pass over the practice hastily. But I would be honest with the entire text of Scripture only if I made several additional comments.

First, our Lord Himself fasted (Matthew 4:2). His disciples did not fast, but only because it would be inappropriate while the Messiah was with them (Matthew 9:14-15). The New Testament church observed the practice of fasting (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23), and Paul spoke of it also (2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27).

Second, although fasting is not compulsory, it is an option for Christians to consider, and it has real value. Far from being detrimental to one’s health, it is likely beneficial. Most Americans eat far more than we need. Fasting develops and practices the little-known art of self-discipline. Paul said that a man should learn to rule over his body, and not give into its every appetite (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Fasting also teaches us to do without things which are not really essential. In a day of luxuries which are considered necessities, it is beneficial to remind oneself of what is really vital to our existence and what is simply desirable. Finally, abstinence intensifies our pleasure and satisfaction of the good things in life. It helps us to really enjoy the special ‘treats’ in life.

When I was going through college, I worked at a meat market. One of the fringe benefits was getting good meat at very reasonable prices. Consequently, we had steak more often than I have ever seen since. It was not really a special treat then. At today’s prices it is a rare but delightful pleasure. I think you know what I mean.

The Heart of the Matter—The Root of the Evil

The evil of which our Lord has spoken is that of externalism. By this I refer to the effort of religious people to demonstrate their righteousness before men in order to earn their praise. Externalism is based upon the faulty premise that God’s approval can be measured by men’s applause. This is exactly the opposite of the truth as Jesus made clear in verse 1. We must either seek God’s approval (and therefore man’s disdain, Matthew 5:10-12) or man’s (and thereby lose all hope of divine reward, 6:1).

As I have considered the root error behind externalism, it comes down to a basic misconception of God, and of spirituality. This is why our Lord so frequently referred to God as ‘your heavenly Father’ or some similar

19 “The Jewish scribal law lays it down: ‘On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, or to drink, or to bathe, or to anoint oneself, or to wear sandals, or to indulge in conjugal intercourse.’” Barclay, Matthew, I, p. 235.
title. The Jews had no appreciation for God as their Father, nor did they conceive of themselves as sons of God (cf. 5:9). This is partly why they reacted so strongly against Jesus calling God His Father, and Himself the Son of God. Of course, the Jews could not call God their Father because they had not come to know Him through the Son (John 6:41ff.; 3:19,37ff., etc.)

My friend, have you come to know God as your heavenly Father? In a very restricted sense, God is the Father of all men by virtue of being their Creator. But men come to know God as their spiritual Father only by salvation. As John has said it, “But as many as received Him (Jesus Christ) to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe on His name” (John 1:12). It is my prayer that you can rightfully call God your Father.

As I said, the Jews did not (and could not) regard God as their heavenly Father. Their misconception of God is evident in their externalism. From the instruction of the Savior in this portion of John chapter 6 we can arrive at several truths about God which can revolutionize our Christian lifestyles:

(1) **The Father Knows.** Externalism betrays a subtle doubting of the omniscience of God. If one feels compelled to practice his righteousness publicly there must be some question of God’s ability to observe the deeds of men done in secrecy. The same misconception can be observed in the repetitious prayers of men. It was as though God had to be informed over and over for Him to be cognizant of man’s needs. To this our Lord responded, “Therefore do not be like them—for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:8). The Father knows all. He observes all of our acts, whether done openly or in secret (6:4,18). But beyond this God knows the motives for our actions.

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’” (1 Samuel 16:7).

As our Lord observed those who contributed to the temple treasury, He knew that the large contributions were given out of plenty, while the widow’s mites were from her poverty (Mark 12:42). While one man may give $50,000, it may be on December 31st in order to get a tax break. Another may give $5 at a time of real personal need. Only God can know our hearts and our true motives for giving. It is for this reason that we do well to resist judging the actions of others (cf. Matthew 7:1).

(2) **The Father Is Able.** Because God is our heavenly Father He is omnipotent, all powerful. There are times when I see needs that I am incapable of meeting. God is never so restricted. The God Who created this universe and sustains it by the Word of His power is able to meet my every need. What an incentive to prayer.

(3) **The Father Is Willing.** Implied in the repetitious prayers of men is the suspicion that God is reluctant to act on men’s behalf. Surely this attitude toward God is ignorant of the privilege of divine sonship. God is not too busy, too preoccupied to act on His children’s behalf. Neither is He perturbed by our bringing to Him matters of apparent insignificance.

I heard the story of an incident in ancient Rome which illustrates this truth. A great Roman war hero was returning home to a kind of tickertape parade. The streets were packed with cheering crowds. Soldiers were lined along the streets to keep the masses from pushing into the path of the approaching chariots. A little boy darted into the street but was caught in the iron grip of one of the soldiers. “You ought not get in the way of your emperor, lad,” the soldier chided. “He may be your emperor,” the boy replied, “but he is my father.” This is the spirit with which we should approach God in worship and prayer. It is the spirit of sonship.

Here is one of the great errors of externalism or formalism—it does not look upon God as a loving, knowing, powerful God, but upon a divinity who neither knows nor cares, and who must be bluntly and publicly informed of righteous acts and badgered into action on behalf of men.

There is yet another error behind the practice of externalism. It is a false conception of spirituality. True spirituality grasps the truth of divine sonship and seeks to live like a true son, bringing honor to the family name and to the Father. True spirituality begins with a grasp of one’s exalted position in Christ and seeks to live up to it by the power of God. False spirituality is founded upon the praise of our fellow-men and strives in the power of the flesh to encourage it. It strives not for the glory of God, but of self.
At the outset of this message I suggested that the problem of many Christians is that they are far too concerned about being spiritual. By this I mean we are too eager to be thought spiritual by our peers. We equate our own spirituality by what others say. And others evaluate our spirituality not by divine standards but by their own preconceived ideas of righteousness (legalism). If spiritual people have daily devotions then we must. If pious folk witness daily, then we shall.

Now you see it is not wrong to read your Bible, to pray, to witness, or whatever, but it is wrong to do so because others say we must to be spiritual. We may well be guilty of doing the right things for the wrong reasons. One man may pray two hours daily simply because he desires to be with God. Another does so because he would be considered spiritual by himself and others.

Perhaps worst of all, in the final outcome we have become so obsessed with godliness that we have neglected God. Paul’s supreme desire was to ‘know God’ (Philippians 3:10) and to live a life which was pleasing in His sight. All too often we are concerned with being ‘spiritual’ in the eyes of men around us. That, my friend, is externalism. And that, I must add, is sin.

May God enable us to become so overwhelmed with being His sons that we have no care about what others think of our spirituality (by human standards). We must seek to do that which is right in the sight of all men, but not with the goal of receiving their praise. We should seek to live righteously to the praise of God (Matthew 5:16):

“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”
Lesson 23:
The Fatal Failures of Religion: #4 Materialism
(Matthew 6:19-34)

Introduction

Jay Adams tells the story of a man named Joe who was particularly given to worry. Whenever anyone saw him, his face was drawn and downcast, for he seemingly carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. On one particular occasion, however, Joe was the picture of optimism. He was radiant and buoyant. Everyone noticed the change. Finally, Bill asked him what had happened to him. “Well,” he confided, “as you know I have always been one to worry. I have decided that this is both unwise and unhealthy, so I have hired someone to do my worrying for me.” “But how much does this cost you?” Bill questioned. “Oh, about $1,000 a week,” Joe replied. “But how can you afford to pay him?” was the astonished response. Joe answered calmly, “That’s his worry!”

We can all smile at a story like this, but all of us know that worry is one of the besetting sins of the Christian. I am personally convinced that there are two major areas of defeat for most Christians. The first is the unprofitable reliving of the past, nursing either wrongs committed against us or regrets for sins we have committed. The second is unwarranted preoccupation with the future.

It is this second ailment that our Lord spoke to in the last half of Matthew, chapter 6. What we may be surprised to discover is that the Lord Jesus identified worry as one strain of the common virus of materialism. Most of us are a bit uneasy about this matter of materialism, especially when we are compared to those who live in the underdeveloped nations. But since the vast majority of us can look at many about us who are more prosperous than we, we can rather easily convince ourselves that any message on materialism must apply to someone else.

Materialism, however, has nothing to do with how much money you or I have in the bank. It has little to do with whether you drive a Rolls Royce or a Rambler. Materialism is primarily an attitude toward money and its importance. Materialism is an attitude which attaches to money and material goods more importance than they deserve. To go one step further, materialism is primarily a matter of reversed priorities. You cannot identify a materialist by an audit, but only by exposing his attitudes.

Because materialism is more a matter of attitude than of affluence, many of us who consider ourselves to be a part of the middle class are more susceptible to this ailment than the rich. We may suppose that materialism is an undue desire for luxuries, but our Lord identifies it with undue concern over necessities, such as food and clothing. As such we are all materialists.

Since materialism (and its offspring, worry) are such a debilitating force in men’s lives, our Lord has ranked it among the leading failures in religion. I have chosen to characterize the Sermon on the Mount as an exposition of the fatal failures of religion, and as such, materialism rightfully finds its place among them. Here we will touch a nerve which is very sensitive to the probing of the Word of God. It is the Scriptures which penetrate beyond the outer facade of our spirituality to expose the motivations of the heart:

“For the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

In verses 19-24 principles are laid down which condemn materialism and promote the priority of spiritual matters. In verses 25-32 the practice of these biblical principles is emphasized, focusing upon the futility of worry in the Christian life.

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The Principles Set Forth
(6:19-24)

The Lord Jesus gave a precept before laying down the principles: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Matthew 6:19-20).

If you are like me you probably give a good deal of thought to the things you buy. If you are thinking of buying a car you may consult Consumers Reports to see how it is rated, its strengths and deficiencies, its fuel consumption and frequency of repair. When you buy a car, or a coat or a dining room table your intention is to buy something which has quality and durability.

It only makes sense to consider the use of our money in this light. A preoccupation with hoarding earthly treasure makes little practical sense. Eternal investments, investments in the kingdom of heaven, are far more profitable. They are certain, and the benefits long-lasting. Earthly investments are fickle and short-lived.

There are, as we know, various kinds of wealth, and the Master Teacher reminded His audience how each form of wealth was subject to loss of value. Clothing was considered one form of wealth in the near East (cf. Joshua 7:21; 2 Kings 5:22). In some cultures today clothing is a form of wealth, or at least a symbol of wealth. But such wealth is short-lived. Just one of the destructive forces at work in this area is the moth. No matter how hard we try to avoid it, the moth gets into our most precious and valuable clothing and eats holes in it.

Rust can and does consume any metal forms of wealth. That is one reason why you and I have to keep buying new cars from time to time. It is doubtful, however, that rust is the primary image in our Lord’s mind. ‘Rust’ is literally that which ‘eats’ or ‘corrodes.’ More likely one’s wealth would be, in those days, in the form of grain which would be stored until the price were high enough to make a good profit. Any foodstuff would be the target for vermin to get into and to contaminate or consume.

I was reading just the other day of money that was mysteriously disappearing from a cash register. Finally, someone was assigned to guard the register all night. Even then the money (but not the coins) disappeared. At last it was discovered that a small hole had been chewed in the back of the till. A small mouse had chewed up the money and carried it off to make a place for her young.

The more indestructible forms of wealth such as jewels or silver or gold are not so secure either. Burglars and thieves could, in those days, quite easily ‘break in’ (verses 19,20) and steal them. Literally, this expression, ‘break in’ (diorussousin) meant to dig through. This was easily accomplished when walls were made of sun-dried bricks or mud. Even today our most secure depositories are not burglar-proof.

The first principle undergirding the precept just put forth is found in verse 21: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Generally we are inclined to think just the reverse of this. We suppose that a man will first fix his heart on something and then his money naturally follows. But our Lord says that our heart follows our pocketbook. If I were to buy an old broken down car it would not at that point be a great object of my affection. But after I had spent countless hours in restoring it, not to mention a good deal of money, it would be the ‘apple of my eye.’

Where we spend our money, where we appropriate our material goods and our personal time, is where our heart will be. I might go so far as to apply this principle to marriage. To the extent that we invest heavily, both in time and money, we will find our affections more and more developed and committed.

The implications are rather evident. We are to ‘set our affections on things above’ (Colossians 3:2, KJV). To lay up treasures on earth is to set our heart on earthly things. It is difficult, even impossible, to desire the return

2 The word brōsis translated rust, means literally ‘devouring,’ and it might be used here for ‘devouring by vermin.’ Some commentators prefer this interpretation on the ground the ‘stores’ in question would be more likely to consist of grain, etc. than of material liable to corrosion.” R. V. G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 78.

of our Lord (the coming of His Kingdom) when we have made all of our investments in earthly things. Not only this but we also tend to put our trust, our confidence and hope in our ‘investments.’ The great difficulty of the rich is that they are deceived into ‘fixing their hope on the uncertainty of riches’ (1 Timothy 6:17).

We all are faced with choices in life. We must make the choice between immediate and short-lived, pleasures and greater, more permanent pleasures. We encourage our children to choose to do without candy and bubble gum in order to save for a trip or some item of clothing. A person must decide to discipline himself to practice daily on the piano in order to have the longer range pleasure and satisfaction of producing music which is beautiful and enriching to others.

The Christian life confronts men and women with this same set of choices. It is not that we are forbidden to enjoy many of life’s pleasures, but that we view them as temporary and, in the long term, unsatisfying. Consequently, we choose to deny ourselves of some things in order to gain that which is greater (cf. Moses, Hebrews 11:25-26).

When we took our children to the State Fair a couple of years ago, I came away with a good illustration of life’s passing pleasures. I likened them to the rides in the amusement park: the price is high and the ride is short. So also, investments in earthly, material ‘things’ are not wise for the Christian. As Bunyan’s Christian passed hurriedly through the streets of Vanity Fair, so we must also remember that we are strangers and pilgrims who dare not establish roots in the world.

There is yet another principle in verses 22 and 23: “The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”

The imagery here has been quite difficult for some to grasp. To the ancient mind, the eye was like a window that let light into the body. The condition or health of the eye determined the amount of light which entered the body. An unhealthy eye clouded or dimmed the entering light, subjecting the body to darkness.

In the Bible the ‘eye’ is reflective of a man’s character (cf. Deuteronomy 25:12; 28:54,56, etc.). A man with an ‘evil eye’ is explained to be one who is greedy and miserly when confronted with the need of another:

“If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. Beware, lest there is a base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you” (Deuteronomy 15:7-9).

The book of Proverbs gives us the background to rightly understand the words of our Lord:

“A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth, and does not know that want will come upon him” (Proverbs 28:22).

“Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration when you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For wealth certainly makes itself wings, like an eagle that flies toward the heavens. Do not eat the bread of a selfish man (literally an evil eye) …” (Proverbs 23:4-6a).

“He who is generous (literally has a good eye) will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor” (Proverbs 22:9).

From these Old Testament passages we can quickly determine what our Lord meant. The one whose heart is set on worldly riches has an evil eye. In looking out for himself he neglects the needs of others. The one who is generous with others has a healthy eye. His vision of the needs about him is not distorted. He views his material wealth as belonging to God, and he quickly and willingly employs it to help those in need.

The principle behind verses 22 and 23 is simply this: **Materialism is a disease which affects the whole body** (note: ‘your whole body’ verses 22 and 23). Like a drop of poison contaminates the entire glass of water, so materialism corrupts the whole man (and affects the entire body of Christ, cf. Achan’s sin and its consequences,
It dims his vision and makes him short-sighted. He can neither envision heaven clearly, nor can he perceive needs about him.

The point of this principle is that materialism is not some minor flaw in one’s thinking. It is like a virus which has entered into one’s bloodstream. It detrimentally affects one’s whole person. As such, it must be taken seriously.

The divine precept is that we are to lay up treasures in heaven, rather than upon the earth. The first principle upon which this precept is based is that our heart is drawn to that in which we invest most heavily. The second principle is that materialism is an ailment which has far-reaching effects. The final principle is given in verse 24: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Put in its simplest form, the principle could be stated: ‘Money is either your slave or your master.’ Money is like the flesh (our bodily appetites). Either we will master it, or it will be our master. One may try to deceive himself into believing that he can pursue both goals simultaneously, God and money. But our Lord said only one will be our Master.

It is difficult for the Western mind to grasp the meaning of our Lord’s words. Many of us have second jobs. We may leave one job in the evening and go on to another at night. A man may work in a factory to earn a living and find his real fulfillment in playing in an orchestra. But the language our Lord used was that of slave and master. A slave was the exclusive property of his (one) master. He had no ‘time of his own.’ His master could dispose of him as he wished.

Perhaps an analogy which might be easier to grasp is that of drug addiction. Materialism is very similar to dependence upon drugs. At first, a man begins to use drugs, but eventually they use him. His body builds up a tolerance for a certain quantity of a drug and he finds he must have more and more. Finally the drug is his master and he is its slave. The more money one gets, the more one desires. The more one is dominated by a desire for money, the more one is mastered by it, and its slave. This is what our Lord is saying. Materialism is dangerous, indeed destructive, because it, like communism, is not content until its control over men is total.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).

Job’s friends immediately concluded that it must have been sin that led to his disaster (cf. Job 4:7). Suffering and poverty were thought to be the immediate result of sin.

You will recall that it was largely for economic (and political) reasons that the Jewish leadership rejected Jesus as their Messiah (cf. John 11:47-48). We are told that it was the high priest who actually owned the business venture operating within the temple precincts. For the Jew the pursuit of financial gain and the practice of righteousness were thought to be synonymous. Our Lord said they were antithetical. One must serve either God or money. One will ultimately become your master, the other your slave. They used ‘religion’ to further their own personal and economic interests. Such, also, was the case of Judas, the betrayer (John 12:4-6).

On the basis of these three principles, Christians have been cautioned about viewing their material possessions as a means of ensuring comfort and security in this earthly life. Instead, we should invest in eternal things, for such an investment is secure and the benefits everlasting.

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4 “Jesus goes on to say, ‘You cannot serve God and mammon.’ The correct spelling is with one m. Mammon was a Hebrew word for material possessions. Originally it was not a bad word at all. The Rabbis, for instance, had a saying, ‘Let the mammon of thy neighbour be as dear to thee as thine own.’ That is to say, a man should regard his neighbour’s material possessions as being as sacrosanct as his own. But the word mammon had a most curious and a most revealing history. It comes from a root which means to entrust; and mammon was that which a man entrusted to a banker or to a safe deposit of some kind. Mammon was the wealth which a man entrusted to someone to keep safe for him. But as the years went on mammon came to mean, not that which is entrusted, but that in which a man puts his trust. The end of the process was that mammon came to be spelled with a capital M and came to be regarded as nothing less than a god.” William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), I, p. 252.
The question which is not answered here is, "How?" How do you lay up treasure in heaven? We need to realize that our Lord, here in this sermon, is probing into men’s motives, rather than prescribing specific practices. This is only natural since He is attempting to refute legalism and externalism. From other portions of Scripture (e.g. Luke 16) and our text in Matthew, I would suggest that this involves supporting the proclamation of the gospel, the work of the church (which is the earthly expression of Christ, His body), and caring for the physical needs of the helpless (cf. Matthew 19:21, Acts 2:45; 4:32-35).

The Practical Implication: Don’t Worry
(6:25-32)

As I read this particular section of the Sermon on the Mount, I get the distinct impression that our Lord has come up on our blind side. Most of us are inclined to think of materialism as the inordinate desire to become wealthy for our own selfish ends. In other words, materialism is equated with financial ambition and prosperity. We who do not consider ourselves affluent do not think that materialism is a great problem to us. But materialism has two distinct forms. The first and most obvious is that dealt with in verses 19-24, the love of money which becomes the dominant and all-consuming passion of our lives. Most of us are not so close to the fire of this temptations as we are its converse side. Rather than being absorbed in the hoarding of wealth which we do have, we are consumed with concern about that which we don’t have. The ‘have-nots’ are often more obsessed over material things than the ‘haves.’

Again, we think of materialism as a preoccupation or insatiable desire for more and more luxuries. We get a big house, and we want a bigger one. We get a television and we are not content until we have it in color. Then we want the giant screen and the video tape recorder. This is what we like to think of as materialism. And so it can be.

But the kind of materialism which haunts many Christians is often that variety which dwells upon those things which are not optional, but mandatory; not the luxuries, but the necessities. Notice what Jesus told us not to worry about: food and clothing. Not steak and ale, maybe not even meat and potatoes. Perhaps even a meager bowl of soup, or a second-hand suit for work.

One does not need to look far to see many opportunities for worry. How many of us have given thought to the implications of the possibility of fuel shortages? Have you thought about selling that ‘gas guzzler’ and buying a smaller car with a smaller appetite for gas? Have you considered going to diesel power or avoiding the need for unleaded gas? Well, I have. Those are potential areas for worry. I have observed the price of hamburger, too. And yet, it is here that we find out materialism raising its ugly head. Undue concern about material things. Distracting and devastating worry which undermines our faith and diverts our spiritual energy. This is what our Lord identified as materialism. This is what He called sin.

Due to the unfortunate rendering of the King James Version (‘Take no thought,’ verse 25), it would be well to begin by defining what we mean by ‘worry.’ Our Lord is not discouraging the use of our minds here. Faith is not contrary to sound thinking; rather it is to be rooted in thought.

5 “Why does the man of little faith allow things to master him and to get him down? The answer to that question is that, in a sense, the real trouble with ‘little faith’ is that it does not think. In other words, we have to be right in our whole conception of faith. Faith, according to our Lord’s teaching in this paragraph, is primarily thinking; and the whole trouble with a man of little faith is that he does not think. He allows circumstances to bludgeon him. That is the real difficulty in life. Life comes to us with a club in its hand and strikes us upon the head, and we become incapable of thought, helpless and defeated. The way to avoid that, according to our Lord, is to think. We must spend more time in studying our Lord’s lessons in observation and deduction. The Bible is full of logic, and we must never think of faith as something purely mystical. We do not just sit down in an armchair and expect marvellous things to happen to us. That is not Christian faith. Christian faith is essentially thinking. Look at the bird, think about them, and draw your deductions. Look at the grass, look at the lilies of the field, consider them.

The trouble with most people, however, is that they will not think. Instead of doing this, they sit down and ask, What is going to happen to me? What can I do? That is the absence of thought; it is surrender, it is defeat. Our
heads and not to panic. We are to consider the birds of the air (verse 26) and the flowers of the field (verse 28). We are shown that worry is both illogical and unprofitable.

Worry is not to be confused with thinking and planning to meet future needs. Worry is not to be confused with genuine concern. Rather, worry is the preoccupation and dissipation of our mental and physical powers with things that are future, hypothetical, and beyond our control. Worry is the antithesis of faith. Faith perceives potential problems with a view to the infinite power and fatherly concern of the God Who has saved us. Worry sees only the obstacles (actual or imaginary) and meditates on all the possible disastrous possibilities, while neglecting the fact of God’s divine care and control in our lives. In verses 25-32 our Lord outlined the reasons why worry is both foolish and faithless.

(1) Worry is a distortion of values and a reversal of priorities, verse 25. “Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25b).

Most scholars inform us that this is an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God is our Creator and He has given us life, will He not also provide the incidentals such as food and clothing. This is the kind of argument Paul employed in Romans chapter 8: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32; cf. 5:10).

Certainly this is a valid type of argument, but I am not convinced that this is the main thrust of our Lord’s words. It seems to me that Jesus is focusing upon the issue of priorities. Materialism, at its base, is a reversal of priorities. It places the temporal above eternal things. It is short-sighted, and misses the long view of matters. It is ‘this world’ centered.

Jesus simply calls upon us to rethink our priorities. Which is more important, life itself, or the food we put in our mouth? Which is of higher value, our body or the clothing we put on it? Worry is preoccupation with matters of lowest priority (as is materialism).

I do not believe that the meal over which we are so distressed is the difference between life and death. It is not our ‘last meal.’ If we were to miss that meal, so what? Our life is not ‘on the line.’ If we do not get that suit or a dress, will our bodies suffer for it? In the vast majority of cases, I think not. Paul gladly suffered deprivation for the sake of the gospel (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:24-27). Worry is a symptom of reversed priorities, and our Lord calls this to our attention.

Lord here is urging us to think and to think in a Christian manner. That is the very essence of faith. Faith, if you like, can be defined like this: It is a man insisting upon thinking when everything seems determined to bludgeon and knock him down in an intellectual sense. The trouble with a person of little faith is that, instead of controlling his own thought, his thought is being controlled by something else, and as we put it, he goes round and round in circles. That is the essence of worry. If you lie awake at night for hours I can tell you what you have been doing; you have been going round in circles. You just go over the same old miserable details about some person or some thing. That is not thought; that is the absence of thought, a failure to think. That means that something else is controlling your thought and governing it, and it leads to that wretched, unhappy state called worry. So we are entitled to define ‘little faith’ in the second place as being a failure to think, or of allowing life to master our thought instead of thinking clearly about it, instead of ‘seeing life steadily and seeing it whole.’”


“...The word which is used is the word merimnan, which means to worry anxiously. Its corresponding noun is merimma, which means worry. In a papyrus letter a wife writes to her absent husband: “I cannot sleep at night or by day, because of the worry (merimma) I have about your welfare.” A mother, on hearing of her sons’ good health and prosperity writes back: “That is all my prayer and all my anxiety (merimna).” Anacreon, the poet, writes: “When I drink wine, my worries (merimnai) go to sleep.” In Greek the word is the characteristic word for anxiety, and worry, and care.”

Barclay, Matthew, I, pp. 258-259.

“The verb merimnaō is from meris, merizō, because care of anxiety distracts and divides. It occurs in Christ’s rebuke to Martha for her excessive solicitude about something to eat (Luke 10:41). The notion of proper care and forethought appears in 1 Cor. 7:32; 12:25; Phil. 2:20.” A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures, I, p. 58.
(2) **Worry is a failure to see things as they really are, verse 26.** You will remember that in verses 22 and 23 materialism was described in terms of bad eyesight. Such is really true, for it fails to see things as they really are. That is what the Master taught in verse 26:

> “Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?”

Worry flies in the face of everyday life. Simply look about you. Look up in the skies and look at the birds. Have you ever seen a skinny sparrow? Do they spend hours in worry and anxiety? No, even by instinct they live their lives in thoughtless dependence upon God. Has God failed to care for insignificant birds? If He cares for birds, which are creatures of much less value than man, will He not care for you? To the birds, God is both Creator and Sustainer. To the Christian, God is our Heavenly Father. Dare we doubt His care? Worry does not see matters clearly. It allows our vision of our Heavenly Father to be obscured. It overlooks the providential care of God for insignificant creatures, such as the birds.

(3) **Worry is a waste of energy, verse 27.** Worry is the most unproductive use of one’s time possible. It accomplishes nothing but unbelief, doubt and fear. It distracts our attention from matters of higher priority and paralyzes us from doing what is needful at the moment. It fears what ‘could be’ rather than follow what should be done at the moment.

We cannot, by worry, add so much as a cubit to our life’s span. In fact, all the evidence would indicate that all we can do by worry is to shorten life and undermine our health.

(4) **Worry is an act of unbelief, verses 28-30.** Leaving the matter of food the Master proceeded to that of clothing. Such anxiety over what we will wear is surely unfounded. Look around, consider the wild flowers of the field, and look at the birds. Have you ever seen a skinny sparrow? Do they spend hours in worry and anxiety? No, even by instinct they live their lives in thoughtless dependence upon God. Has God failed to care for insignificant birds? If He cares for birds, which are creatures of much less value than man, will He not care for you? To the birds, God is both Creator and Sustainer. To the Christian, God is our Heavenly Father. Dare we doubt His care? Worry does not see matters clearly. It allows our vision of our Heavenly Father to be obscured. It overlooks the providential care of God for insignificant creatures, such as the birds.

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7 “For a complete list and description of the birds mentioned in Scripture one should turn to the delightfully interesting work by A. Parmelee, *All the Birds of the Bible* (New York, 1959). That author calls the country in which the Sermon on the Mount was delivered ‘the cross-roads of bird migrations’ (p. 183).” Quoted by William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), p. 350.

8 “By worrying, He insists, a man cannot add a single hour to his life, though, as we understand today, he may very well shorten it. This is the probable meaning of the words here recorded; for, though pechus translated cubit, is literally a measure of space, and helikia often means stature (as in Lk. xix. 3), yet the former word can also be used metaphorically of a measure of time and the latter often indicates ‘age’ (as in Jn. ix. 21). Men worry more perhaps over their length of life than over their physical height!” Tasker, *Matthew*, p. 77.

9 “Worry is now recognized by physicians as a disease (sometimes even a contagious disease). Dr. James W. Barton said recently, “It is known that about one half of the patients consulting a physician have no organic disease. In about one-fourth of the cases, the cause of the symptoms is tension or worry, strain, and fatigue ... prolonged shock or fear (which is really worry) can affect the workings of all the organs of the body.”

Dr. Alverez (formerly of Mayo Clinic) said, “Worry is the cause of most stomach trouble.”

Dr. Han Selye, writing about the stress theory of disease, said, “Stress is the trigger which causes disease.”

Dr. Emerson, an outstanding Christian psychologist, stated there are five underlying causes of mental illness and frustration (often caused by worry and often the cause of physical illness): fear, hate, guilt, inferiority, and insecurity.

These may be analyzed as follows: (1) A supersensitivity to criticism. (2) An excessive awareness of our weaknesses. (3) An abnormal pride of our achievements. (4) An unattainable ambition beyond our abilities. (5) An absorbing jealousy over the success of others. (6) A sinful covetousness of things beyond our reach (or financial means). “The Disease,” *Comfort for Troubled Christians*, J. C. Brumfield, (Chicago: Moody Press), pp. 16-17.

10 “Exactly what kind of flower the Lord had in mind when he said ‘field-lilies’ cannot be determined. Some guesses are: irises, narcissi, Turk’s cap lilies, and gladioli. Goodspeed translates ‘wild flowers’ (See how the wild flowers grow”). In the light of the context (note “the grass of the field....”) it is very well possible that Jesus, instead of referring to any particular kind of flower, was thinking of all the beautiful flowers that were adding their splendor to the landscape at this time of the year.” Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 352.
field. Do they fret and fume? And yet look at their beauty. Even Solomon’s clothing was no match. Indeed, good clothing can do little but to attempt to imitate nature’s beauty.

And the beauty which God has given these wild flowers is all the more impressive when you realize how temporary and expendable such flowers are. They are magnificent in their beauty for a short while and then they are gone. Men value them so little that they gather handfuls of the dried grass to throw into the ovens to increase their heat. 11 If these flowers are so insignificant and yet God gives them such beauty, will He not care for His own?

The issue, then, is more than one of mere lack of knowledge; it is lack of faith: “… will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?” (Matthew 6:30). Worry is a serious sin because it doubts the goodness and the integrity of God. In effect, we disregard the word of God and call Him a liar when we worry. We question His sovereignty, His omniscience, His omnipotence, His tender love and care for His own. Worry is a kind of back-handed blasphemy, totally unbecoming to the child of God. It completely forgets that God is our Heavenly Father.

(5) Preoccupation with food and clothing is the characteristic of the Gentile, verse 32. There is a very shocking statement in verses 31 and 32, “Do not be anxious then, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘With what shall we clothe ourselves?’ For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matthew 6:31-32).

Jesus said that when we worry about what we will eat or drink or wear we are acting just as the pagans do. These are the things which dominate the thinking and the striving of the pagans. And if you don’t believe this just look at the media and its advertising. They try to sell us deodorant to cover our body odor, after shave lotion to make us irresistible, tooth paste which gives our mouth sex appeal, and clothing which makes us look suave and sophisticated. Food, drink and clothing. That’s what the world is into. And when we become preoccupied with these things we are just like unbelievers. We have departed from our distinctives when we allow ourselves to worry and fret over these things.

The Prescription
(6:33-34)

Verses 33 and 34 serve as a conclusion to this section, but they also give some specific clues as to how you and I can deal with the sin of worry. Let me draw from these verses and the entire passage several suggestions.

(1) Recognize worry as a sin. Our text makes it clear that worry is no mere human failing; it is willful sin. It is a seldom recognized form of materialism. It doubts God and dims our view of things as they really are. When you fall into worry confess it as sin and ask for forgiveness and victory.

(2) Review your theology. Worry can only co-exist with an unbiblical theology. It cannot tolerate a Sovereign God Who is all-knowing and all-powerful. It refuses to acknowledge God as a loving Father Who knows our every need, and Who brings about every situation to strengthen our faith.

(3) Rearrange your priorities. Worry is a form of materialism, and materialism involves (among other things) the reversal of our priorities involving heavenly and earthly things. Jesus did not say, seek only the Kingdom of God, but rather, “seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

Heavenly things must come first in our priorities. We must see our spiritual lives as of primary importance and our material well-being as secondary. Once we have our priorities in order we shall not be so concerned (i.e. worried) about material things.

(4) Redirect your energies. Every one of us is actively pursuing some goal in life. We are all devoted to one thing or another. If we have made our goal the quest for material prosperity then we must redirect our efforts. The Christian life is not a matter of passivity—not at all. We are to be active in the carrying out of God’s will. So

11 “The Palestinian oven was made of clay. It was like a clay box set on bricks over the fire. When it was desired to raise the temperature of it especially quickly, some handfuls of dried grasses and wild flowers were flung inside the oven and set alight.” Barclay, Matthew, I, pp. 260-261.
when it comes to the matter of worry we must deliberately and purposefully determine that we shall not waste our energies on worry, but that we shall lay our hands on the task immediately before us. It is not wrong to be ambitious and aggressive. It is only wrong to pursue the wrong goals.

(5) Refuse to borrow on tomorrow’s troubles. The Bible teaches us that we must live ‘one day at a time.’ Christians who live godly lives will have trials and testing. That is a normal part of our Christian experience (Matthew 5:3-12; John 15:20; 2 Corinthians 1:3ff; Philippians 1:29-30; James 1:2ff.; 1 Peter 1:6ff.). There will be trials and trouble tomorrow, but these things are beyond our control. God gives us grace and comfort in the time of need. Let us not seek an advance on adversity. We have sufficient troubles today. Let us see to it that we deal with them in such a way that God is glorified.

Clarification:
Putting Things in Perspective

It is a difficult thing to come to a balanced biblical outlook on money. In this passage, the Lord has been dealing with our priorities as they relate to material possessions. Our security is in the Lord, not in our bank account or investment portfolio. Our preoccupation should not be with ‘getting ahead’ but with glorifying God and seeking to further His righteous rule on earth.

It is not wrong to have money, but with riches comes responsibility—to whom much is given, much is required. Those who have riches are inclined to find in them a false sense of security (1 Timothy 6:17). There is no particular virtue in being poor either. In such a condition we are sometimes tempted to distrust God or to be dishonest. The right balance is probably best stated by Agur in Proverbs: “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion, lest I be full and deny Thee and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or lest I be in want and steal, and profane the name of the Lord” (Proverbs 30:8b-9).

While we are to be free from worry, we are not exempt from work. As a result of the fall, man is to earn a living ‘by the sweat of his brow’ (Genesis 3:17-19). If a man does not work, he should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Many Christians are troubled by the fact that so many of their working hours are consumed by their jobs. How can I have God’s Kingdom as a first priority if I spend so much of my time in secular employment. So many times I hear people distinguish between their jobs and their ministry. Such distinctions between spiritual and secular are not biblical. Our work is, to a great extent, our ministry. Working is not (or should not be) the neglecting of our responsibilities to our family, it is meeting our obligation to provide for them (cf. 1 Timothy 5:8), and not a denial of the faith.

To ‘seek first the Kingdom’ is further explained by the phrase ‘and His righteousness,’ In other words, seeking the Kingdom of God is striving to extend and exemplify the righteousness of God on earth. There is no place more needy of righteousness than the world of work. Your work is not in competition with ‘ministry,’ it is the cornerstone of your ministry.

While hoarding money and material goods is sin, saving for future needs is not. Joseph was demonstrating spiritual wisdom and maturity when he recommended the storing up of Egypt’s grain (Genesis 41:33-36, note verse 38). The sluggard is instructed to study the ant, which prepares for the future (Proverbs 6:6ff.). The virtuous woman is commended for preparing for the future (Proverbs 31:21,25). Christians are encouraged to set money aside to minister to the needs of others (1 Corinthians 16:2). The man who fails to provide for his family has denied the faith (1 Timothy 5:8). It is not the method of saving for the future which is condemned by our Lord, but the materialistic motive.

Perhaps one of the most deceitful errors among Christians concerning money and material blessings is the false mentality that we are not to enjoy earthly pleasures. This attitude does not originate from God, but from Satan:

“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.
For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:1-5).

As Paul later says, “God … richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.” It is only when immediate, short-term pleasures detract us from lasting pleasures that they are evil.

Finally, although money is really an insignificant thing, a matter of low priority, the way we handle this ‘little thing’ is indicative of our faithfulness. Our proper handling of money shows us to be qualified for greater responsibilities.

“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous in much. If therefore you have been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you?” (Luke 16:10-11).

May God help us to be faithful in the use of money.
Lesson 24:
The Fatal Failures of Religion: # 5 Misdirected Effort
(Matthew 7:1-12)

Introduction

A while back I read the very distressing account of an incident in the life of a young bachelor. He worked in an office where every year the boss gave each employee a turkey as a bonus for the holiday season. Of course, the bachelor could never figure out what to do with his ‘turkey.’ One year the other fellows in the office decided to play a little practical joke on their friend. They exchanged the genuine item for one made of plaster. They could hardly wait to hear his report after the holidays.

On the way home on the bus that evening the young man was contemplating how he could dispose of his turkey. About this time a man in tattered clothing, obviously ‘down in his luck,’ sat in the seat beside him. In the course of their conversation, the young man began to perceive the solution to his problem—he would give this poor fellow his turkey. It would meet a real need for this fellow and his family, and it would solve his problem, too.

In order to avoid humiliating the man he decided that rather than give the turkey to him as charity, he would sell it to him for whatever he could pay. The man gladly produced the last of his money and the exchange was made. Both men parted rejoicing. But when the bachelor returned to the office, he was horrified to learn of the trick which had been played on him, and the terrible deed unknowingly done to the poor man on the bus. For days, the young attorney and his friends rode that same bus to rectify their error, but no one ever saw the man again.

This story (which I believe to be true†), illustrates the principle laid down by our Lord that we are not qualified to pass judgment on the deeds of others. If we were to judge this young bachelor by the act itself, we would conclude that he was a scoundrel. If we were to judge him by his motives, we would have to regard him as a wise and benevolent individual.

While such distressing dilemmas do not occur to us routinely, we commonly err in condemning and criticizing on the basis of outward appearances. I remember when I was a teenager a man stumbled by those of us who were standing in front of our church. I immediately concluded he was drunk and began to mimic him to the delight of my peers. I was horrified when it suddenly dawned on me that this man was not drunk at all, but had some pathetic physical problem.

Because of our tendency to pass quick and critical judgment on others, our Lord has chosen to speak to this issue. As I presently understand verses 1-12 of chapter 7, they all speak to the matter plaguing the religion of Jesus’ day and of ours, that of misdirected effort. Much of that which is done in the name of Christianity is unprofitable and detrimental because it is misdirected and misguided. Verses 1-5 warn us of one type of misguided effort, criticism. Verse 6 cautions us not to carry this to the opposite extreme by insisting that we discriminate between receptive listeners and hardened rejecters. Verses 7-11 instruct us to redirect our efforts in the practice of persistent prayer. Verse 12 concludes with a principle which ties together the entire section and guides us in our relationships with our fellow man.

Judging Forbidden
(7:1-5)

Few sayings of our Lord are better known or more often quoted than these words: “Do not judge lest you be judged yourselves” (Matthew 7:1). Likewise, few sayings are more misunderstood and misapplied. For this reason we must begin by dealing with what our Lord did not mean by this warning.

† This story is told by David Roper in his sermon on James 2:1-13 entitled “The Case of the Near-Sighted Usher.” A Belief That Behaves, Message Number 3, 1971, Available from Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, California, 94306.
(1) **Jesus did not mean that it is wrong to have law courts and law enforcement.** Such was the understanding of Tolstoy. Other Scriptures clearly teach that government is a divinely appointed instrument to mete out punishment (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14). Jesus did not dispute Pilate’s authority to execute capital punishment. Indeed, He stated that this authority came from God (John 19:10-11).

(2) **It is not wrong to think critically.** Some would have us believe that godliness is closely akin to gullibility. This is really an extension of the error some have made concerning Matthew 6:25 (“… Take no thought …” KJV). We should accept every statement of men on its face value, and in no way should we ponder or weigh it as to its veracity (we are told). That is not the teaching of Scripture (cf. Acts 17:10-11; 1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

(3) **Neither is our Lord forbidding taking a decisive stand on doctrinal and moral issues.** So often whenever a Christian takes what might be regarded as a negative position, the response is, “Judge not …” But the very context of our passage indicates that we must make decisions and take a stand. If we are not to ‘give what is holy to dogs’ (verse 6), then we must decide who are dogs, or hogs. If we are to “beware of false prophets” (verse 15), then we must determine who such men are. Paul took a public stand on the issue of immorality within the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). Timothy was instructed to take a stand in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3-7). We are to refuse to invite false teachers into our homes (2 John 8-11). We are also instructed to “contend earnestly for the faith …” (Jude 3).

(4) **It is not wrong to correct those in error.** In the 18th chapter of this same Gospel, Matthew recorded our Lord’s instructions concerning church discipline (verses 15ff). In Galatians 6:1, Christians are instructed to restore a sinning brother. Paul corrected Peter face to face (Galatians 2:11). Even the elders of a church are not above correction (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Good friends sharpen each other with constructive criticism (Proverbs 27:7,17).

What, then, did our Lord intend for us to understand by these words, “Judge not”? Since the Lord Jesus has all along been dealing more with attitudes and motives in the Sermon on the Mount, we are safe in concluding that the problem here has to do primarily with a critical, condemning spirit.

I have very little trouble identifying what our Lord has forbidden for there is much of this spirit in me. Often times I deceive myself by supposing that I am just being a critical thinker, when in fact, I am only a critical person. We all love to be critics. It is amusing to observe this during football season. We criticize the football coach for sending in such a ‘foolish’ play. We criticize the quarterback for throwing such a poor pass. We boo the referee for making such a bad call. No doubt we criticize the preacher for such a miserable message.

The criticism of which we are speaking is that which seeks to put others down, while elevating ourselves. It is the kind of smug disdain of those who feel superior to others.

“And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt” (Luke 18:9).

The contempt of the scribes and Pharisees was more than just the smugness of superiority. It was a snobbery based upon legalism. The Jews had a neatly packaged system of rules and regulations which prescribed an external kind of righteousness. Those who judged (condemned, despised) the hoi polloi, the masses, did so on the basis that those who were righteous kept their rules, but the rest failed to do so, and, indeed, were ignorant of those rules and regulations (John 7:49).

The underlying issue is that these self-appointed judges set themselves up as those who were qualified to pronounce upon a person’s spirituality by the standards of his own system of rules. They perceived righteousness to be achieved by the keeping of human rules. They supposed that men would conform to these rules by the external pressure of those religious leaders who judged their performance by their man-made laws.

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This error is more prominently exposed in Luke’s account in chapter 6. Immediately after speaking of the folly of attempting to remove a small speck from our brother’s eye while we have a beam3 in our own (verse 41-42), our Lord went on to say:

“For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit; nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a brier bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth which is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:43-45).

Here was the problem within Judaism in the days of the Savior. Here is the problem within Christianity today. Men are directing their efforts toward producing righteousness through external acts. Worse yet, they are attempting to force this error on others by pressuring men to be righteous by keeping man-made rules and regulations and rituals. These efforts are futile and doomed to failure because they do not change a man’s heart. True righteousness cannot be imposed from without, but must be exposed from within. No man can be made righteous until his heart is radically changed by God. Religion today is trying to reform men, but only Christ can transform men by giving them a new heart.

I must digress for one moment, my friend, and ask if you have received a new heart by genuine conversion, or are you still trying to patch up your old sinful self. God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to qualify as your sin-bearer by living a perfect life. He has died on the cross of Calvary to bear the penalty of your sins. He has been raised from the dead that you might live a victorious life and reflect God’s righteousness (though imperfectly) in your life. Religion and reform will never save you, only a renewal of heart can do that (cf. Titus 3:5-7).

Now that we understand what the Master has forbidden, let us concentrate for a moment on why such criticism is wrong.

(1) Criticism is wrong because it usurps divine prerogatives and therefore invites divine judgment, verse 1. “Do not judge lest you be judged yourselves.” Although it is not directly stated in this passage I believe it is to be inferred that when one appoints himself a judge of others he usurps a divine prerogative. In the Scriptures there are several passages which speak to this same evil (e.g. Romans 14, James 4:11-12). From these passages, we receive much helpful commentary on the meaning of Christ’s teaching. James wrote: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12).

Paul wrote in Romans 14:4: “Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls …” (cf. also verse 10). Judging is a divine prerogative. We take too much upon ourselves if we set ourselves over others to judge them. It is not the privilege or the position of a slave to judge other slaves. That is the responsibility of their master. We make ourselves masters (and not slaves) when we judge others.

(2) Criticism is wrong because it arises out of impure motives. The judging which is here condemned by the Master is wrong because it is criticism arising from impure motives. It attempts to emphasize one’s own righteousness at the expense of a brother’s reputation. On the surface such criticism may be done in a spirit of helpfulness, but this is only a shame. “I really love you, but…” “You’re a wonderful person, but…” “I’m saying this for your own good…” “This hurts me more than it does you, but…”

The only criticism or correction which is praiseworthy is that which is prompted by genuine love. Love does not seek a brother’s downfall, but his edification (cf. Romans 14:13,19). Love is reluctant to believe the worse and hopeful of the best:

“Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

“Love seeks to conceal unrighteousness, not to expose it” (1 Peter 4:8).

(3) Criticism is wrong because it sets its own standards and judges other men by them. We have already suggested that it was the legalistic rules and regulations of Pharisaism by which men judged others, rather than by God’s law (cf. James 4:11-12). The judging forbidden by Paul in Romans chapter 14 was that concerning ‘doubtful things’ (verse 1). Of these things men were to be ‘fully convinced in their own minds’ (verse 5), but since their observance was ‘to the Lord’ (verse 6), we are not to condemn.

This tendency to go beyond the requirements of scripture is clearly implied by the Savior when He warned that the standard by which we judge men is the standard by which we will be judged ourselves (Matthew 7:2). If we wish to be overly demanding on others, we must accept this same standard for our own conduct (cf. Romans 2:1-2).

It is so easy for Christians to confuse biblical principles and personal preferences, convictions and commandments. We then try to impose these upon others, and we judge men’s spirituality by how well they live up to our preconceived ideas of righteousness.

(4) Criticism is wrong because it turns the focus of our attention outward rather than inward. Personal convictions are to be kept to ourselves, not crammed down the throats of others (Romans 14:22). The entire focus of criticism is upon the lives and conduct of others, but this is none of our business, for each man must give account of himself before God (Romans 14:10). Here we are trying to correct the flaws in others, rather than concentrating upon ourselves. Criticism is minding other people’s business. We listen to a sermon and remark how we wished that Sister Smith were here to hear it. How we deceive ourselves!

(5) Criticism is wrong because our knowledge is limited. Although our text does not specify this error, criticism is wrong because we are not in a position to know all the facts. If we judged the young bachelor’s gift of a phony turkey from the perspective of the man whose ‘luck was down’ we would judge wrongly. You and I cannot judge without full knowledge of the facts.

Furthermore, we cannot know the motives of a man. In doubtful things (not in matters clearly forbidden, as the situationalist would tell us), it is one’s motives that make all the difference. If a man drinks wine or eats meat, doubting his freedom to do so, he sins (Romans 14:22,23). Since we cannot know a man’s heart, his motivation for his deeds, we cannot judge him.

(6) Criticism is wrong because our perspective is distorted. You can imagine the smiles which began to work their way across the faces of our Lord’s audience as they saw the humor in what He was saying in verses 3-5. Here is the picture of a man with a large beam in his own eye attempting to remove a minute particle from the eye of another. The irony is that we often try to correct others while our own problems far surpass the errors of those we criticize and attempt to correct. This problem is emphasized in Luke’s account where he includes this statement of the Lord Jesus as an introduction to the paragraph on judging others while you have a beam in your eye: “And He also spoke a parable to them: ‘A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?’” (Luke 6:39).

The scribes and Pharisees looked upon themselves as the leadership of Judaism. They felt that as such they were obligated to judge those under their authority, and to impose upon their inferiors the full requirements of Jewish traditionalism (which they called ‘the Law’). Jesus clearly implied in Matthew 7:3-5 (and plainly stated in Luke 6:39-45) that those with the greatest problems were the leaders themselves. How often we project our own failures (sins) upon others, while neglecting our own responsibilities.

(7) Criticism is wrong because it is hypocritical. Finally, the kind of criticism condemned by our Lord is wrong because at its base it is hypocritical. “You hypocrite …” (verse 5). Criticism is hypocritical because it holds a double standard. I often hold to a very rigid standard when I condemn others, but I am most tolerant when I commit the same sin. This process is called rationalizing. What we call ‘losing your temper’ in others we redefine as ‘righteous indignation’ in ourselves. Often, by the way, we use the most pious terms for our own transgressions. We call income tax evasion ‘stealing’ when others do it, ‘good stewardship’ when we are guilty. We call exceeding the speed limit ‘speeding’ when others are doing it, ‘redeeming the time’ when we are guilty of it. If only we were as tolerant, understanding, and merciful with others as we are with ourselves. This is precisely the principle which is laid down in verse 12.
The Need for Discernment

There is a great danger of imbalance in the application of what the Savior has taught in verses 1-5. If not counter-balanced, this prohibition of criticism (of condemning others while elevating ourselves) would be carried to illogical extremes. Thus the need for these words: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces” (Matthew 7:6).

Following through with the theme of ‘misdirected efforts,’ we have just learned that one such profitless practice is that of expending our energy in the fruitless venture of judging others. It fails to edify and build up our brother, it increases our own pride and sets the standard for our own condemnation. Worst of all, it does not produce righteousness in us or in others.

But there is an opposite and equal error, and that is the profitless expenditure of our time in persisting to proclaim the gospel to those who have clearly rejected it. We know from the Scriptures that Jesus Christ virtually divided the nation by His teaching and claims (cf. John 7:40-44; 9:16; 10:19-21). No doubt one member of a family would tirelessly work to convince the rest of his family that Jesus was the Christ, but often to no avail. Many there were who attempted to remain within the mainstream of Judaism and to work from the inside to change the system (cf. John 7:45-52; 12:42-43). Today there are Christians who are saved and yet have spent their lives in apostate churches. They often attempt to stay in the church and to bring about its revival and reform. These words of Jesus have direct bearing on such efforts.

We are not told specifically what that which is holy is, nor what pearls signify, but it is not difficult to figure out. Surely that which is holy pertains to spiritual things, matters which Christians would consider of great value and sacred in nature. We would conclude that foremost in our Lord’s mind is the Gospel of salvation. Other spiritual truths could surely be included.

But who are the ‘dogs’ and the ‘hogs’? Both dogs and hogs were considered unclean by Judaism. Consequently, they were expressions which could be employed with reference to the heathen or the Gentiles (cf. Matthew 15:27; Mark 7:28). Within Israel the term dog was an expression of disdain (cf. 2 Samuel 9:8; Proverbs 26:11). In Deuteronomy 23:18 ‘dog’ is a euphemism for a male prostitute. More to the point, I believe, is Paul’s warning: “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision” (Philippians 3:2).

Peter wrote of those who were apostates and rejecters of the truth:

“But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed … For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire’” (2 Peter 2:12, 21-22).

Dogs and hogs are not merely unbelievers, but rather are those who have ample information concerning the way of righteousness and who have stubbornly rejected it. They are hardened in their rebellion and unbelief. To persist in witnessing to such people is wasted energy.

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4 The ancient church applied this to the ordinance of the Lord’s Table. Hendriksen agrees with this application when he quotes from the Didache:

“As to specific reference, the terms “what is holy” and “pearls” are rather indefinite. They undoubtedly apply to other things besides the gospel message. The office of the ministry, the eldership, and the diaconate must not be entrusted to the unqualified. The Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (IX.5) makes still another—I believe legitimate—application, as follows, “But let no one eat or drink of your eucharist (Lord’s Supper) except those who have been baptized in the Lord’s name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, ‘Do not give what is holy to the dogs.’” William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 360. Although some might see this as an application of this principle, it is not in my mind, our Lord’s primary intent.

5 Of special interest and import are Calvin’s comments on this text: “But here a question arises: for he afterwards commanded to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark xvi. 15); and Paul says, that the preaching of
The dogs of Jesus’ day were not well-mannered lap dogs, but wild dogs that lived on the streets, eating that which was discarded and unclean. At times this included dead bodies (1 Kings 14:11; 21:19-24). In offering meat to an unclean dog one might well get bitten in the process. They were not so well-mannered as to avoid ‘biting the hand that fed them.’ Were one to cast pearls before swine, they might at first think them to be food, and then, not valuing pearls, might trample them under foot and even turn on the one who offered them.

And so although one dare not be overly critical of others (verses 1-5), neither is he to be so naive as to not distinguish between those who are open to the truth and those who oppose it. Jesus followed His own counsel when He ceased speaking openly to those who accused Him of using demonic power (Mark 3:22ff.). When Christ sent out His disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God He instructed them, “And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet” (Matthew 10:14). Likewise, this was the practice of the apostle Paul (Acts 13:44-51; 18:5,6; 28:17-28).

Thus, while we must initially proclaim the gospel universally and indiscriminately, there comes a time when we must mark those who are hardened to the truth and cease our efforts to convert them and press on. This does not necessarily mean that such persons may not be saved in the future. The apostle Paul may well have been in the category of a dog (or a hog) before his conversion. Only the power of the Spirit of God can transform scoffers into saints.

It is a deadly savour to wicked men (2 Cor. ii. 16); and nothing is more certain than that it is every day held out to unbelievers, by the command of God, for a testimony, that they may be rendered the more inexcusable. I reply: As the ministers of the Gospel, and those who are called to the office of teaching, cannot distinguish between the children of God and swine, it is their duty to present the doctrine of salvation indiscriminately to all. Though many may appear to them, at first, to be hardened and unyielding, yet charity forbids that such persons should be immediately pronounced to be desperate. It ought to be understood, that dogs and swine are names given not to every kind of debauched men, or to those who are destitute of the fear of God and of true godliness, but to those who, by clear evidences, have manifested a hardened contempt of God, so that their disease appears to be incurable. In another passage, Christ places the dogs in contrast with the elect people of God and the household of faith.

It is not proper to take the children’s bread, and give it to dogs (Matth. xv. 27). But by dogs and swine he means here those who are so thoroughly imbued with a wicked contempt of God, that they refuse to accept any remedy.”


6 To determine that someone meets the qualifications of a ‘dog’ and to thereby cease from persisting with the claims of the gospel is not, in and of itself, to sentence one to eternal doom. In fact, it is altogether possible that God would, at a later time, open this person’s eyes to perceive the truth. It is a practical decision at the present moment in time dictated by the imperative to preach the gospel to all the nations. We cannot linger where efforts are unfruitful.

I believe this is a principle that is to be applied to individuals, and not to be misapplied nationally. Some have suggested that missions be supported mainly where the response is the greatest. Should we neglect missionary endeavors in the Moslem nations because the response has been exceedingly small? Personally, I think we must not fail to take the gospel to every nation. We must present the gospel to every man, turning from them only when they reject a clear-cut gospel. God is honored by the proclamation of His Word, and its proclamation is never without achieving God’s purpose (Isaiah 55:11). Isaiah was commissioned to preach to a stiffnecked and rebellious nation. His message was purposed to harden the hearts of the people, not to save them (Isaiah 6:8-10).

7 “Pearls look a bit like peas or acorns and would deceive the hogs until they discovered the deception.” A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures, I, p. 61.

8 Stott beautifully sums up the matter: “To sum up, the command to judge not is not a requirement to be blind, but rather a plea to be generous. Jesus does not tell us to cease to be men (by suspending our critical powers which help to distinguish us from animals) but to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges).” John R. W. Stott, Christian Counter-Culture, p. 177.
Profitable Persistence: Prayer  
(7:7-11)

While the first six verses of chapter 7 have informed us of unproductive activities for the Christian, verses 7 through 11 provide us with a creative (and profitable) alternative, namely prayer. A number of Bible students have concluded that these verses have little or nothing to do with the preceding verses, but this seems very unlikely.

First, we are confronted with the word ‘therefore’ in verse 12, which implies that this verse directly and logically relates to what has come before. In this ‘Golden rule,’ it is easy to see direct application to the matter of criticism. I, at least, am compelled by this to see verse 12 as the concluding principle for the entire section composed of verses 1-12.

In addition to the grammatical connection just mentioned, there is a decided logical connection. Our Lord is challenging us to redirect our destructive energies to that of productive prayer. More than this, nothing neutralizes a critical spirit more than prayer. You cannot long be angry at those for whom you are praying, seeking their salvation and best interest. This, no doubt, is why Jesus tells us in this sermon to pray for our enemies (cf. Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28).

I see yet another connection between verses 1-6 and 7-11. We have just been taught by the Lord that we are not to be critical of others, standing over them as their judge. We have also been told that we are to discern between good and evil, truth and falsehood, sheep and wolves (or dogs). The question which immediately comes to my mind is “How can I possibly walk this tightrope?” “How can I distinguish between destructive criticism and discernment?” It is a difficult, even impossible, assignment. I must have divine enablement.

I see verses 7-11 as an encouragement to pray for the wisdom and enablement demanded by verses 1-6. When our Lord says, “Ask, and it shall be given you, …” what are we to ask for? Daily bread? I think not, at least not primarily. What about wisdom? James tells us, “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God …” (James 1:5). Surely the instruction of verses 1-6 demands divine wisdom.

‘Seeking’ and ‘knocking’ suggest most aggressive and intensive prayer. I would think that we would be continually seeking to know to whom we should speak and what we should say in the light of the first 6 verses. Knocking may involve the matter of looking for opportunities to share our faith in such a way as to stimulate one’s interest in spiritual things.

The suggestion that the subject of the prayer which is encouraged in verses 7-11 is for wisdom and enablement is strongly supported by Luke’s additional statement: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13).

If we ask the Father to grant us wisdom, discernment and enablement in the proclamation of the gospel, it is through the gift of the Holy Spirit (already given to the church at Pentecost, and to us at conversion) that God grants the answer to our requests. The prayer life which we are encouraged to cultivate here is not the prayer for things, but the prayer for enablement.

In all probability we dare not get too carried away with finding specific applications for each of these terms: ask, seek and knock. They are all present imperatives which would suggest continual and persistent activity. Rather than persisting at criticism or fruitless evangelism among the hardened, let us pour our efforts into prayer, for God is always willing to help us search our hearts. He is always ready to give us His best.

Here is the underlying theme, I believe, of these five verses on prayer—God’s willingness to give His children good things. Even earthly parents, who are evil by nature, are eager to do what is best for their children. If

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9 As someone has kindly pointed out to me, however, the three illustrations (two in Matthew and one additional one in Luke 11:12) our Lord employed (bread, fish, egg) were all items of food.

10 We are greatly enriched by this statement of the Savior with respect to the inborn sinfulness of man. Verse 13 assumes that men are evil by nature, all men. But the concept of total depravity does not mean that evil
If we take verse 8 seriously we must conclude that there is no unanswered prayer for the Christian, for Jesus has said, “For everyone who asks receives ...” Would an earthly father give his child a rock when he has asked for bread? Would he give him a snake (or perhaps an eel) when he asked for a fish?

If men, evil by nature, desire to give good things to their children, are we not to be assured of God’s answer to our prayers? Now we should also remark that while God’s willingness and goodness are here emphasized, no where are we told that God is going to give us all we ask for. Jesus has said that God does not play dirty tricks on His children, giving them useless or dangerous things in response. Thank God He has not given me everything for which I have asked.

What is here stressed is that God will always answer our prayers. That, as a concerned and loving Father, He will never overlook a request, nor will He respond in a way which is harmful to His child. But just because we ask for a fish (or a fancy sports car, or a wife who is a beauty contest winner, or acceptance at a prestigious university) does not guarantee that we will receive exactly what we request. God will never give us that which is not for our good. And what God does give us is just what we really need.

We should greatly rejoice that our loving heavenly Father reserves the right to substitute something better in place of our request. One time my wife ordered a new electric drill for me from Sears and Roebuck. When the drill arrived, it had a note which explained that since they were out of the drill we had ordered, they had substi-

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11 “The point is that in each case the two things cited bear a close resemblance. The little, round, limestone stones on the seashore were exactly the shape and the colour of little loaves. If a son asks bread will his father mock him by offering him a stone, which looks like bread but which is impossible to eat? If a son asks a fish, will his father give him a serpent? Almost certainly the serpent is an eel. According to the Jewish food laws an eel could not be eaten, because an eel was an unclean fish. ‘Whatsoever has no fins or scales in the water, that is an abomination unto you’ (Leviticus 11:12). That regulation ruled out the eel as an article of diet. If a son asks for a fish, will his father indeed give him a fish, but a fish which it is forbidden to eat, and which is useless to eat? Would a father mock his son’s hunger like that? If the son asks for an egg, will his father give him a scorpion? The scorpion is a dangerous little animal. In action it is rather like a small lobster, with claws with which it clutches its victim. Its sting is in its tail, and it brings its tail up over its back to strike its victim. The sting can be exceedingly painful, and sometimes even fatal. When the scorpion is at rest its claws and tail are folded in, and there is a pale kind of scorpion, which, when folded up, would look exactly like an egg. If a son asks for an egg, will his father mock him by handing him a biting scorpion?” William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), I, pp. 274-275.

12 This is in contrast to the gods of the ancient Greeks: “God will never refuse our prayers; and God will never mock our prayers. The Greeks had their stories about the gods who answered men’s prayers, but the answer was an answer with a barb in it, a double-edged gift. Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, fell in love with Tithonus a mortal youth, so the Greek story ran. Zeus, the king of the gods, offered her any gift that she might choose for her mortal lover. Aurora very naturally chose that Tithonus might live for ever; but she had forgotten to ask that Tithonus might remain for ever young; and so Tithonus grew older and older and older, and could never die, and the gift became a curse.” Barclay, *Matthew*, I, p. 275.

13 “There is no doubt that our prayers are transformed when we remember that the God we are coming to is ‘Abba, Father,’ and infinitely good and kind.

Professor Jeremias has demonstrated the novelty of this teaching of Jesus. He writes that, with the help of his assistants, he has carefully examined ‘the prayer literature of ancient Judah—a large, rich literature, all too little explored,’ but that ‘in no place in this immense literature is this invocation of God as Abba to be found ... Abba was an everyday word, a homely family word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner. Jesus did it always ... and authorizes his disciples to repeat the word Abba after him.’ What could be simpler than this concept of prayer? If we belong to Christ, God is our Father, we are his children, and prayer is coming to him with our requests.” Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 185.
tuted one in its place that was more expensive. We should never hesitate to allow God to substitute what He knows to be better for us than that for which we pray.

Now here, my friend, is good reason for prayer. If there were ever motivation for prayer, it is in this fact. God is our Father (if we, by faith, have become His sons through Jesus Christ, His Son, John 1:12), and we are the objects of His intimate and infinite care. No request of ours is insignificant to Him, and no request is ignored.

A Rule for All Seasons
(7:12)

Perhaps without our realizing it, the Lord Jesus, in these few verses has succinctly summarized the Law and the Prophets. Implied by our prayer life (as prescribed in verses 7-11) is the fact that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; cf. Matthew 22:37). Explicitly stated is the second great command, that we love our neighbor as ourself.

It is this second summary principle of the Old Testament revelation which is put in coveralls in verse 12: “Therefore whatever you want others to do for you, do so to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

To love my neighbor as myself is an abstract concept, a little difficult to translate into everyday life. But this restatement in verse 12 is really where the ‘rubber meets the road.’ How do I love my neighbor as myself? By treating him as I would wish him to treat me.

This principle governing human relationships was not new to the ears of Jesus’ listeners. The ancient world had produced numerous parallels to it, yet all with one notable exception: they were expressed in the negative. The essence of these sayings was: ‘Don’t do to others what you don’t want done to you.’

Now let us take this summary principle and apply it specifically to the preceding verses. How would I want others to treat me in view of my sinfulness and obvious flaws? I would not want to be harshly criticized or smugly condemned. I would want to be treated with consideration, with an evident spirit of love, encouragement, and a desire to build me up rather than to tear me down. I would not want my sins to be overlooked or excused, but lovingly to be confronted and corrected.

If I were one who had heard the gospel and concluded that I wanted no part of it, I would hope that once I had made my disinterest and rejection known my feelings and decisions would be respected. I would desire that the same points not be raised over and over again, and that I would not have to avoid contact with the Christian or to terminate our friendship in order to avoid arguing the same points over and over again.

I would greatly appreciate having my critics spend their efforts in persistent prayer, reporting my faults to God alone, and asking him to strengthen and sanctify me. Were I an unbeliever I would prefer for the Christian to prevail upon God for my conversion rather than to pester me.

Conclusions and Application

There are several things which come to mind as I look back upon this lesson.

(1) **The Christian life is, to a great extent, walking the tight rope between opposite and equally erroneous extremes.** The key word is that of balance; not the balancing of truth with error, but the balancing of truth with truth. The more I read the Bible, the more need I see for balance.

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14 “Much has been made by various commentators of the fact that the Golden Rule is found in a similar—but always negative—form elsewhere. Confucius, for example, is credited with having said, ‘Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself’; and the Stoics had an almost identical maxim. In the Old Testament Apocrypha we find: ‘Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate,’ and this, it seems, is what the famous Rabbi Hillel quoted in c. 20 BC when asked by a would-be proselyte to teach him the whole law while standing on one leg. His rival Rabbi Shammai had been unable or unwilling to answer, and had driven the enquirer away, but Rabbi Hillel said: ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary.’” (Recorded in the Talmud: Shabbath 31a), Ibid., P. 190.
Christians prefer things to be all nicely packaged, cut and dried. That is the great appeal of legalism. A law for every possible circumstance. But Christian liberty is not that easy. We are to live a life of faith, and this is to be exercised by keeping two opposite extremes in tension. The example given here is that of judging versus discerning. Only by God’s divine enablement can we walk the tightrope between these extremes.

The tension between criticism and discernment is not unique, but typical. So also the issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is not a hypothetical problem posed by the theologian, but a practical problem raised by the fact that both truths are taught side by side (cf. Romans 9, 10; Philippians 2:12,13).

(2) Also we see the contrast between two opposing approaches to spirituality, legalism and liberty. Legalism attempts to avoid thinking and faith by drafting a rule for every conceivable circumstance and situation. Compliance is enforced by external pressure through fleshly effort.

Liberty lives by principles which apply to a broad diversity of situations. These principles are applied by faith through the power of the Spirit. They are applied individually as matters of personal conviction.

Legalism concentrates upon others, seeking to get men to live according to my personal preferences and prejudices. Liberty looks to my own responsibilities, living my life before God in the light of personal convictions and biblical principles.

(3) While prevailing upon men is unprofitable as a Christian exercise, prevailing in prayer with God is invaluable. The prayer of one of God’s children is always profitable because we have a heavenly Father Who answers every prayer. He never fails to hear or to respond, although He may choose to give us a better answer than we thought to ask for. Prayer dissolves a critical spirit and it is instrumental in obtaining wisdom and discernment.

(4) While the world talks much about love, it knows little about it. True love is not blind to the truth. Love sees things as they are and loves in spite of them. True love does not criticize, but neither does it fail to make necessary distinctions. As the apostle wrote to the Philippians long ago, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment; so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ” (Philippians 1:9-10).
Lesson 25:
The Fatal Failures of Religion: #6 Mistaken Identity
(Matthew 7:13-27)

Introduction

There is a true story (which I trust will be taken in the right spirit) of an evangelist who was holding a series of revival meetings in a small town. In preparation for this evangelistic effort attempts were made to call on many of the townspeople to invite them to attend. In the course of these personal invitations one individual was urged to attend, but he was reluctant because of the possibility of having an epileptic seizure.

Sympathetic with this man’s apprehensions and yet earnestly desiring him to attend, the evangelist assured the man that every effort would be made to avoid possible injury or embarrassment. The ushers would be forewarned of his condition and instructed in how to deal with the situation should he suffer from a seizure during the meeting. To be absolutely certain they would reserve the chair closest to the door for him to sit in. Then all of the ushers would know to be especially alert to any possible problem. With these assurances the man promised he would try to attend that night.

When the meeting began the ushers were all prepared as had been promised. One chair at the back was conspicuously empty, and the ushers waited for the special guest to arrive. The singing had already begun when a man timidly entered the meeting place and as inconspicuously as possible sat in the designated chair. The ushers each nodded to one another and mentally refreshed their minds of their responsibility should the unusual occur. As the song service continued, the audience was asked to stand for a particular hymn. When the congregation stood, this one man’s chair was accidentally pushed aside. At the conclusion of the hymn everyone was told to be seated. The man at the back sat down, but without a chair beneath him, and with a great clatter and commotion, he fell to the floor.

To the ushers, this was the signal they had hoped they would not be given, but with all due haste they went into action. Four stocky ushers pinned the fellow to the floor and a fifth man began attempting to force something into the mouth of their victim. A great struggle ensued, but the ushers prevailed, with as much dignity as such a commotion would allow. Suddenly the man overcame his captors, leapt to his feet, and leaving his coat behind, ran from the building.

When an effort was made to return the coat to the house of the man, they discovered to their horror that he had not been able to attend the meeting after all. It was a simple case of mistaken identity.1

As I said, to the best of my information this story is true. The outcome of it all was somewhat humorous, except, perhaps for the man who lost his coat. He would probably never again darken the door of a church. He had heard of strange goings on, of course, but never did he dream they would actually try to cram their religion down his throat.

We could probably go on and on with humorous stories involving mistaken identification. There is a tragic kind of mistaken identity described in the Bible, which is also one of the most common. It is the mistaken assumption that all religious roads lead to heaven. I have made the statement before, and I believe it to be true, that hell will be populated by religious people, and not just by atheists or agnostics. It was the smug self-confidence of the scribes and Pharisees which inclined them to believe that when it came to God’s Kingdom, they had a corner on the market. And yet, it was for these men that our Lord had the harshest words of condemnation (cf. Matthew 23).

It is indeed a sad thing when someone takes a stand against any religion and refuses to believe in any god whatsoever. But to me it is even more tragic when a man or woman is lulled into a kind of spiritual slumber, resting in some kind of religion that will never solve the problem of sin or gain entrance into God’s heaven.

1 Cf. Romans 10:1-10.
The Lord Jesus Christ, in this great Sermon on the Mount, has distinguished His Kingdom from that of contemporary Judaism, while identifying it with that spoken of in the Old Testament. As He concludes this sermon, we come to the bottom line, the destiny deciding hour of decision. It is not just enough to hear His words; they must be acted upon. In this concluding section, Jesus put before His audience the choice which every man must make, the choice between mere religion and Christianity. In verses 13 and 14 we have the two gates, in verses 15-23 we are encouraged to distinguish between the two kinds of guides, and in verses 24-27 we see the two foundations upon which men build their lives.

The Two Gates
(7:13-14)

Many people today suppose that God’s Kingdom is governed on the same basis as our nation—democracy. If this were the case (which it is not), then the right way to heaven would be that of the majority. Although the nation Israel knew nothing of democracy as we have it, they, too, were inclined to follow the majority in spiritual matters.

When the Savior concluded His message, He began by ‘cautioning His listeners that if they were to enter into His Kingdom, they must turn aside from the mainstream of Judaism. “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

I recall talking with a couple about the church they were attending. I will never forget their words, because they were so honest and yet so wrong. They said, “We love to attend this church because the preacher teaches the way we like to hear it.” To me that is like saying of a certain doctor, “I love to go to him because I know he will always tell me what I want to hear.”

From the very outset of this sermon the Lord made it clear that those who were citizens of His Kingdom were cut from a different piece of cloth than those who were without. John R. W. Stott has rightly conveyed the tone of the Sermon on the Mount in the title of his book, Christian Counter-Culture.

There are only two gates, only two paths, only two destinies before every man, and each of us must choose one or the other. This may seem surprising to some. Many would suppose that men are confronted with an almost infinite number of alternatives to them. It is not a choice between only two options, but of many. Among so many alternatives how can a man choose the right one? Because of this dilemma, many have concluded that ‘all roads lead to Rome’ and that it matters little which one we would choose.

But the Lord Jesus narrows our choices to only two: religion and Christianity. Religion, in brief, can be defined as man’s efforts to reach God, while Christianity is God reaching down to man. Religion rests upon man’s work for God; Christianity on God’s work on behalf of men.

The small gate is the entrance to the narrow way, the way which leads to eternal life. That gate is our Lord Jesus Himself. In the words of the Savior: “… Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep… I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture… I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:7,9,11).

In another place, Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). God’s only provision for man’s salvation and entrance to the Kingdom is through faith in Jesus Christ as God’s Messiah and our Savior.

But why is the gate small and the way narrow? Simply because it is restrictive. It is not that the gate is poorly marked, for Jesus publicly pointed out that He was God’s provision for the forgiveness of sins and entrance into eternal life. The gate is narrow only because it is exclusive and restrictive. Men can approach God only through the shed blood of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 9:11ff.). Furthermore, men enter into the Kingdom one at a time, as through a turn-style. This is because men must be saved by a personal act of faith. We are never saved in clusters, but individually. To be saved men cannot add to or take away from God’s one way of salvation. As a friend of mine says, “You can go to heaven God’s way, or you can go to Hell any way you want.”
There is a chain of hamburger stands which advertise on television, “Have it your way.” This may be a good thing when buying a hamburger, but it is heresy in terms of entering God’s heaven. God is totally inflexible on this point. As I have often said, God is only concerned with what you and I do concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. If you were God and you had sent your Son to die the kind of death He died, how would you feel about someone trying to gain entrance into heaven by rejecting your Son and offering in His place filthy rags of self-righteous deeds (cf. Isaiah 64:6)?

While God’s way of salvation is exclusive and restrictive, the gate to hell is broad and inviting. You can go to Hell as an atheist or an agnostic. You can go there as a Baptist, Presbyterian, or under any denominational label. You can go as a preacher, priest, rabbi or layman. The contemporary song sums it up about as well as anything I have heard, and I believe it will be the theme song of hell: “I did it my way.”

If you would enter God’s heaven, do not follow the crowds, but trust in the Son of God Who died for your sins and Who offers to give you His righteousness. Do not attempt to innovate upon or modify His means of salvation, for in this God is rigid and unbending. God has not left men without a means of salvation. God will not tolerate or accept any other means of salvation, for He must receive all the glory and the praise. “Salvation is of the Lord,” the Scriptures tell us (Psalm 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

Now this is precisely what really irritates unbelievers: “Why do you Christians think you have the only way?” My answer to those who protest against the Christian insistence that there is only one way of salvation is this. I must confess that we Christians often convey the impression that we are right while everyone else is wrong. In this attitude we err. But God has declared in His word that there is no other way of salvation than through faith in His Son. While Christians may wrongly convey an exclusive and superior attitude, God has declared that there is only one way to heaven. Men would gladly choose any other way than God’s because all other ‘ways’ allow men to keep their pride, their possessions, and their preferences. God will have none of that. Men are not perturbed at the fact that there is really only one answer, but over the realization that this way is not one that appeals to them in their sinful state.

My wife and I have at times found ourselves at social functions where there are two bowls of punch, one ‘with’ the other ‘without’ (alcohol). Since we do not prefer alcohol we find ourselves at the ‘without’ bowl. It is never difficult to tell the one from the other. One has a large crowd about it, while the other has no line at all. Such is the case with the choice confronting every individual. There are two gates. The one is wide and popular. The other is narrow and seldom entered. The way of our Lord is not that of the majority.

Your eternal destiny hangs upon your choice between two alternatives. You may go the tolerant and accommodating way which is well-traveled and on which you will have a great deal of company. But in the final analysis you will find this is the way of destruction. Or you may take the narrow and restrictive way of faith in Jesus Christ. This is the way which leads to life. You will never walk alone, but neither will you be with the majority. Your path may be narrow, but your destiny is sure. This is the choice with which Jesus Christ confronts every man.

The Two Guides
(7:15-23)

The decision which every man must make is not an easy one, for there are many godless guides who would lead us to the wide gate and the way which leads to destruction. These false prophets are not only blind themselves, but they lead others to destruction with them.  

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2 It is for this reason that I resist certain techniques employed by some evangelists. At mass rallies, counselors are encouraged to get up and en masse move forward toward the altar. The impression given is, in my estimation, deceptive. People are inclined to conclude that these are people coming forward to accept Christ. The resulting impression is that everyone is going forward. The one who is wavering about his decision for Christ is thereby gently encouraged to join the crowd in taking a stand for Christ. This, to me, is deceptive in the first place. Second, it encourages the new Christian to take his first steps in the wrong direction. Rather than taking a distinctive stand for Christ, he is urged to do what everyone else is doing. Now this is never stated, but it is a very subtle and subconscious psychological suggestion, I fear.
“And He also spoke a parable to them: ‘A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?’ (Luke 6:39).

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of Hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15).

Those who submitted to the religious leaders of their day would follow them on the path which led to destruction. Above all else it was the Jewish leadership which rejected Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and put Him to death. No wonder we find our Lord warning His listeners about false prophets: “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

False prophets are particularly dangerous because they appear to be genuine. They seemingly have the credentials of authority. What are these credentials? Jesus calls them ‘sheep’s clothing’ (verse 15). The outward forms would incline one to believe these false prophets to be reliable guides. They may wear a distinctive garb which sets them apart as leaders. They may have the title ‘reverend.’ They may be men who hold positions of religious leadership. They may well have graduated from a divinity school. Indeed, they might even be seminary professors. Judging on the basis of external indications we might wrongly assume them to be reliable guides, but we cannot evaluate on such external evidence.

These false prophets can be detected by their fruits. Judging by external forms is risky; judging (if you prefer, discerning) on the basis of fruits is absolutely accurate. ‘The proof of the root is in the fruit.’ Good trees produce good fruit, and rotten trees, bad fruit. A dependable assessment of those who would be guides is that of their fruits (verse 20).

What are these fruits? One must be very careful here, for false prophets are not without religious activities. A false prophet is often accompanied by deceptive signs and by seeming wonders. Some of these are suggested in verse 22: “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” We should expect false prophets to engage in acts of kindness and charity. We should expect them to perform deeds which suggest miraculous power. And we should expect that these deeds be performed under the pretext of being done by God’s power and to His glory.

“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

We should expect false prophets to be accompanied by religious works, often unusual and spectacular, done ostensibly in the name of God. Satan willingly gives the glory to God in such cases, so long as men give their allegiance and obedience him.

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3 “He said that the false prophets were like wolves in sheep’s clothing. When the shepherd watched his flocks upon the hillside, his garment was a sheepskin, worn with the skin outside and the fleece inside. But a man might wear a shepherd’s dress and still not be a shepherd. The prophets had acquired a conventional dress. Elijah had a mantle (1 Kings 19:13,19), and that mantle had been a hairy cloak (2 Kings 1:8). That sheepskin mantle had become the uniform of the prophets, just as the Greek philosophers had worn the philosopher’s robe. It was by that mantle that the prophet could be distinguished from other men. But sometimes that garb was worn by those who had no right to wear it, for Zechariah in his picture of the great days to come says, “Neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive” (Zechariah 13:4). There were those who wore a prophet’s cloak, but who lived anything but a prophet’s life.” William Barclay, _The Gospel of Matthew_ (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), I, p. 286.
If these religious activities are not the fruits of which the Master spoke, what are they? The Scriptures frequently describe the fruits of the false prophets, so that we are left with little doubt as to what we should look for. I believe we can see the fruits of the false prophets falling into three categories.

(1) The first category of the fruits of the false prophet is their doctrine. False prophets speak from their own delusion, not by divine command (Jeremiah 23:16,21,25; Ezekiel 13:2). They do not proclaim or defend God’s word, but deny it (Jeremiah 23:17). In particular they deny unpleasant subjects such as impending judgment (Jeremiah 6:14; 28:17; Ezekiel 13:10). They offer temporary and partial relief to pressing problems (Jeremiah 8:11). Mainly, they tell people precisely what they want to hear (1 Kings 22:8,13; 2 Timothy 4:3-4). Concerning the way of salvation they deny the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and they reject the work of Christ on the cross (2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:2-3).

(2) The second category of the fruits of the false prophets is the effect of their teaching in the lives of men. Invariably it leads to a rejection of God’s word, a rejection of biblical authority, a division among the saints (Jeremiah 23:2,14) and a life of sensuality (2 Peter 2:2). They attempt to lead men away from the truth of the gospel (Acts 13:8), and to deceive genuine Christians (Mark 13:22).

(3) Finally, there is the fruit of the false teachers as evidenced in their own moral character. They are easily distinguished by their pride (2 Peter 2:10), their greed (Jeremiah 8:10; Titus 1:11; 2 Peter 2:3,14) and immorality (Jeremiah 23:11,14; 2 Peter 2:14). They are men dominated by the flesh (2 Peter 2:10,12; 3:3). They prey upon the weak and the guilt-ridden (2 Timothy 3:6-7; 2 Peter 2:14,13). While they profess to know God, by their deeds they deny Him (Matthew 22:23; 2 Timothy 3:5; Titus 1:16). While they delight in authority, they refuse to submit to it (2 Peter 2:10).

It is not hard to determine that Jesus was speaking of many of the Jewish leaders as false prophets. Jesus distinguished the teachings of Judaism from His interpretation of the Old Testament Law (Matthew 5:17-48). He taught that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was insufficient to enter into His Kingdom (Matthew 5:20). He singled out the Jewish leaders as blind hypocrites (Matthew 23:13-14; Luke 6:39-40). He accused the Pharisees of externalism (Matthew 23:26; Luke 11:37-41). He pointed out their pride and arrogance (Luke 11:43, etc.). He exposed their greed and abuse of the afflicted (Matthew 23:14). They were men controlled by their appetites (Matthew 23:25).

I want you to get the full impact of our Lord’s words in verses 21-23. The implications here were absolutely amazing to our Lord’s audience. We hardly perceive it as we look back from our present comprehension of the person and work of Christ. Jesus clearly identified Himself as God, the Judge before Whom men must stand in the final judgment.

“Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” (verse 22).

It is He Who will pronounce the final verdict and Who will sentence the false prophets to everlasting torment. There could be no clearer statement of the deity of Christ than is found in these verses.

The Two Foundations
(7:24-27)

Verses 24-27 constitute the conclusion of this section as well as the entire Sermon on the Mount. For a long time I felt that the primary and exclusive interpretation of these verses was an exhortation to put into practice, to apply the teaching of Jesus Christ in a personal way. As James put it, “to be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

Surely this is one aspect of what the Savior is teaching us here. The wise man is he who hears the teaching of Jesus and makes it his own by personal application. First and foremost, one must apply His teaching to the

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matter of his personal salvation. We must take the step of entrusting our eternal destiny to Jesus Christ on the basis of His word and His work. Beyond this, we must continue to endeavor to apply His teaching in our everyday lives.

But as I look again at these words, I sense that underlying them is the contrast between the two foundations. The reason why one house fell and the other stood is that one had a sure foundation, while the other did not. The solid foundation, as I see it, is the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. “… therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man …” (verse 24).

You see, both men built a house. These houses are not said to differ in any respect except one, its foundation. One was built upon rock, and the other on sand. The one house was built upon our Lord’s teaching, while the other was built apart from it.

The sad fact of life is that men and women are building their entire lives, they are staking their eternal destiny, not upon the Word of God, but on their own pre-conceived notions and preferences. “Well, I like to think of God as …” Here is the bottom line. Here is what distinguishes true Christianity from every other religion—its foundation, its ultimate source of authority.

I was talking with someone this past week concerning someone who is contemplating the claims of a certain cult. We talked for a while and concluded that there is, in the final analysis, one basic issue, and that is the matter of authority. Some have chosen to believe other supposedly inspired books. We can show them how their revelation differs from Scripture, but they have made a choice as to what they will believe and upon what they will stake their eternal well-being.

Although I am grieved when someone chooses to join a cult on the basis of some revelation other than the Bible, I am most distressed by those who foolishly rely upon their own reason and evaluation of things which are spiritual. That is a mighty shaky foundation.

And you see men have to live (or should I say, die?) with these choices. When one enters either the narrow gate or the wide one the end of each pathway is still well out of sight. In the case of the false prophets, their ultimate identity is not certain until they are judged by our Lord in the day of judgment. So also the foundation upon which one builds his life is not tested until the great storm comes. We will not learn the folly of choosing the wrong gate, the wrong guide, or the wrong foundation until it is too late to reverse our destiny.

**Conclusion**

May I ask you, my friend, what gate you have chosen? You must choose one, you know. And your choices are limited to the narrow gate of salvation through faith in Christ or the wide gate which leads to destruction by trusting in whatever you choose.

Just as there are two gates, there are two guides. On the basis of surface appearances, one cannot tell the difference. But when their fruits are scrutinized the false can always be identified. Their doctrine does not conform to the Word of God. Their moral lives are condemned by the Scriptures. The impact of their ministry to others is devastating and destructive.

Our Lord did not leave us this sermon to satisfy our curiosities. What He taught demands decision. His Word points out the narrow gate as the way of salvation. It also exposes false guides who would lead us astray. Finally, it provides us with a sure foundation on which to build our lives.

Have you passed through that narrow gate? Have you trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ as the door of salvation? Do you believe in Him as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)? Is the Word of God your foundation and your guide?

Someday we must all stand before the One Who uttered these words and give account to Him as the God and Judge of the universe. May it be that He shall say, “Well done, good and faithful slave;…enter into the joy of your Master” (Matthew 25:21).
Lesson 26:  
A Crucial Change of Course 
(Mark 3:1–4:25)

Introduction

James Stewart¹ reminds us of the famous painting of Holman Hunt, “The Shadow of Death,” which depicts Jesus in the carpenter’s workshop in Nazareth. It was the end of a long, tiring day and as the sun was beginning to set with its rays streaming through the door, Jesus stepped back from His workbench and stretched out His arms. The rays of the setting sun shone on His outstretched hands and cast a shadow on the wall behind Him in the form of a cross. Even in the carpenter shop, as the artist reminds us, the cross was in view.

Many think of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ as a kind of tragic mistake unthinkingly precipitated by the fervent religious and political climate surrounding the Jewish Passover season. This view simply does not fit the facts. The death of the Son of God had long been planned by the Jewish religious leaders. More than this, the death of the Messiah had been purposed in eternity past (Acts 2:23) and the Savior had, from the outset of His ministry, lived in view of the cross.

Our Lord was not an unsuspecting victim. His life was not snatched from Him; He willingly and deliberately gave it up for the sins of lost men (John 10:17,18). In coming messages we shall see how the death of Christ was a death by design. Our Lord masterfully lived out His last days in such a way as to provoke opposition to Himself and thus to precipitate His own death in perfect fulfillment of prophecy.² One of the evidences of our Lord’s sovereign control of His destiny is that found in the early chapters of the gospel of Mark³ where He made a crucial change of course and began to veil His teaching by the use of parables. In so doing, the establishment of the Kingdom was delayed until a future time, while at the same time its certainty was assured by the Lord’s setting His face toward Jerusalem, deliberately setting His course toward the cross to die for the sins of man.

Background:  
The Jewish Leaders Make Their Decision 
(2:1–3:35)

While it is very early in the pages of Mark’s gospel, the ministry of our Lord is nearly half over.⁴ The execution of Jesus comes much later, but the expressed purpose of the Pharisees and the Herodians was already to put Him to death (Mark 3:6). The reasons for the opposition of the Jewish leaders to Jesus can be summarized by

| PUBLIC MINISTRY |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **First Year** | **Second Year** | **Third Year** |
| **Obscurity** | **Popularity** | **Opposition** |
| 14 months | Extended Ministries | |
| 4 months Opening Events | 8 months Early Ministries | Early Galilean |
| | | Middle Galilean |
| | | 6 months Specialized Ministry |
| | | 6 months Concluding Ministries |

³ Mark’s account is paralleled by Matthew in chapter 13, and by Luke in chapter 8, verses 4-10.
⁴ The following chart is adapted from the self-study guide of Irving Jensen, The Life of Christ (Moody Bible Institute, 1969), p. 38. “Middle Galilean” indicates the approximate point in the ministry of Christ where the incident in Mark 4 took place.
Him to death (Mark 3:6). The reasons for the opposition of the Jewish leaders to Jesus can be summarized by the four questions of the scribes and Pharisees of chapter 2.

1. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). In Capernaum, Jesus was speaking in a house when four men lowered a paralyzed man through the roof. Before dealing with this man’s physical problem, He spoke to his spiritual need, saying, “My son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). The scribes immediately grasped the theological implications of our Lord’s statement. No one can forgive sins but God alone. How, then, can this man claim to forgive sins without also claiming to be God as well? Jesus clearly claimed to be God and thus the scribes were unwilling to accept Him. Throughout His earthly ministry He was challenged as to His authority.

2. “Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners?” (Mark 2:16). Someone has said that you never pay any attention to a person’s first reason for anything, but that the real reason is the second thing one says. I cannot help but think this rule of thumb applies here. The real question was not so much, “How can He claim to be God?” but “How can He claim to be the Messiah and yet shun us, while socializing with the scum?” The Jewish leaders were obviously snubbed. Jesus simply pointed out that His mission was to heal and to save, and only the sick needed His attention. A doctor cannot spend his time at the country club, while men and women are sick and dying.

3. “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (Mark 2:18). The third question has to do with Jesus’ ignoring the ceremonial observances of those who were considered (or at least who considered themselves) spiritual. This fasting was not mandatory among the masses, but optional. But John’s disciples observed this practice, as did the Pharisees. Why, then, did Jesus not conform to it also? Jesus gave two reasons for His neglect of this rite. First, fasting was usually conducted at a time of difficulty or disaster. This was the day of His visitation. Only after His departure and in His absence would fasting be appropriate for His followers. Secondly, Jesus did not come to patch up the old system of Judaism (as prescribed and practiced by the scribes and Pharisees). He came to bring something entirely new; new not in the sense of being unpredicted by the Old Testament, but different, in contrast with the Judaism of that day. Jesus did not desire to identify closely with their religious system. This, of course, was another rejection of their leadership, another reason for the rift between Jesus and Judaism.

4. “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” (Mark 2:24). Here, it would seem was Judaism’s strongest argument. Jesus allowed His followers to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath and this, according to their interpretation of the Old Testament Law, was work, a violation of God’s law. It was Jesus’ seeming disregard of the Sabbath laws (as interpreted by the scribes and Pharisees) which most angered the Jewish leaders. He frequently healed men on the Sabbath (cf. 3:1-6).

The Lord’s response to this challenge was that their interpretation of the Sabbath was inconsistent with God’s intent in giving it. The Sabbath was intended for man’s benefit and blessing. The Jewish interpretation made it a burden (cf. Matthew 11:28-30; 23:4). David, whom they greatly revered, went into the house of God and took some of the consecrated bread for himself and his men. This was bread ‘set apart for a special purpose,’ just as the Sabbath was to be set apart. But David’s need was of greater importance, just as the hunger of the disciples needed to be satisfied. The Sabbath exists for man’s highest good, not man for the Sabbath. If David could overrule in the matter of this bread, how much more can the Son of Man be Lord even of the Sabbath (verse 28)?

But the scribes and Pharisees were not satisfied with this explanation. The incident of the man with the withered hand was their golden opportunity to catch Jesus in a clear violation of their law. If they could prove Him to be a law-breaker, then all of His claims could be set aside. Jesus perceived the issue and the incident as a trap. He raised the greater question, “Is it lawful to do good, to save a life, on the Sabbath?” They refused to answer. Angered by their hardness of heart, Jesus healed the man regardless of the outcome.

What is critical to our understanding of this portion of Scripture is the response of the Pharisees and the Herodians. They determined that the only way to deal with Jesus was to put Him to death: “And the Pharisees
went out and immediately began taking counsel with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him” (Mark 3:6).

The verdict to do away with Jesus was decided here, and not in Jerusalem, many months later. From now on, it was not a matter of legality (other than the maintaining of some semblance of legal procedures) but of logistics. Judas provided the inroad that was necessary to arrest and try Jesus apart from the masses.

I find it interesting also to note the sequence of the decision in chapter three, verse 6, to destroy Jesus, with the theological explanation given in chapter three, verse 22. The Jewish leaders determined to destroy Jesus before they had come up with a good reason for doing so. Here is another illustration of the truth that our morality often dictates our theology.

The great problem facing the Jewish leaders was how they could reject the claims of Christ in the face of His mighty acts. The claims of Christ were given credence and authority by His miracles. How, then, could the scribes and Pharisees substantiate their rejection of Christ as Messiah? They could not deny His miracles for they were too frequent, too varied, and too well attested. They were driven to the conclusion that they were both genuine and supernatural. In desperation they resorted to attributing the source of Jesus’ power to demonic influence. That is how He can cast out demons, they reasoned. He must be the servant of the prince of demons, Beelzebub. “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebub,’ and ‘He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons’” (Mark 3:22).

I take it that this is not merely one thoughtless statement but the long-discussed, well thought-out position taken by the leadership who had already rejected Jesus as Messiah.6

Without realizing it, the opposition party had gone one step too far, for in attributing the miracles of Christ through the Holy Spirit to Satan, they had committed the unpardonable sin.7 While other sins would be forgiven, this sin was irreversible. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit made salvation impossible (verses 28-30). Our Lord’s speaking in parables was, I believe, the direct and immediate result of this stand taken by the scribes and Pharisees.

**Christ’s Explanation of the Parabolic Method (4:10-12)**

It would appear from Matthew’s account (Matthew 13:1, “on that day …) that Jesus immediately began to teach by means of parables.8 Clearly, Jesus had made a decisive change in His teaching method (cf. Mark 6:2-6). For with the rise of the Herodian kingdom, the political pressure resulting from the Jewish-Roman conflict had increased the possibility of making the most of the situation by collaborating with Rome. In Matthew 22:15-16 we see their unholy alliance to execute Jesus as a common enemy.

6 This seems to me to be the force of the imperfect tense of the verb here (‘they were saying,’ Mark 3:22).

7 This passage deals with what has been called ‘the unpardonable sin.’ Much has been said about this sin, and there is considerable confusion. This sin was committed by unbelievers, and its result was that having committed this sin, their salvation was now impossible (Mark 3:29). The sin was that of blaspheming the Holy Spirit by attributing His power in the life and ministry of Christ to Beelzebub, the prince of demons. The unpardonable sin, then, is the sin of an unbeliever who attributes the power of the Holy Spirit to Satan, and thereby seals his own spiritual doom.

8 “It has been estimated that roughly one third of the recorded teaching of Jesus consists of parables and parabolic statements, and that there are some forty of the former and twenty of the latter (A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* 1960) 10ff.; ... In its broadest sense a parable is a form of speech used to illustrate and persuade by the help of a picture. In ancient writing, including the Bible, the use of figurative speech was widespread in giving concrete, pictorial and challenging expression to religious ideas for which there were no corresponding abstract concepts. Figurative speech is still part and parcel of every day life. On a philosophical and theoretical level religious language is interpreted in terms of abstractions and concepts relative to a contemporary world view. But this is merely to translate one set of thought forms from one conceptual scheme into those of another. In so doing care must be taken to avoid losing the original content of the picture and also the challenge which was an essential feature of the language. In discussing the character of the parable, scholars distinguish the...
The disciples could not wait to get Jesus alone to ask why this change had taken place. Jesus first explained the reason for His change in teaching technique, and then He explained the parable of the soils to His disciples.

We know that the disciples asked pointedly why Jesus had begun teaching publicly only by means of parables: “And as soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables” (Mark 4:10). The answer to this question is hardly what we would have expected. While Jesus revealed truths pertaining to the ‘mystery of the Kingdom’ to His intimates, He deliberately concealed these truths from those who were ‘outside’ (verse 11) by the use of parables.

This decisive change of course on the part of our Lord was not something new or unexpected. Indeed, it was consistent with the principle revealed in the book of Isaiah: “in order that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; and while hearing, they may hear and not understand lest they return again and be forgiven” (Isaiah 6:9; Mark 4:12).

Isaiah had been commissioned by God to go forth and proclaim the Word of God (Isaiah 6:8), but it was not for the purpose of turning the nation back to God. It was rather to harden their hearts and to bring upon them the judgment of God. Just as Israel had turned from the Word of God in Isaiah’s day, so they had in the days of Jesus. Jesus had claimed to be God’s Messiah and Israel’s Savior, but, as we have seen from chapters two and three of Mark’s gospel, this message was rejected by the leadership of the nation. They were already plotting to kill Him.

Our Lord saw His teaching ministry not as one which would result in hearing and heeding, but in hardening. He, like Isaiah, was to prepare the nation for judgment.

I understand these words of the Savior as best explained in the light of the preceding context. Jesus had presented Himself as the Messiah. The Jewish leaders had resisted this claim and rejected Jesus. They had purposed to kill Him. Finally, they went so far as to accuse Him of working as the servant of Satan. In the light of their committing ‘the unpardonable sin,’ Jesus now spoke in such a way as to conceal further revelation of His Kingdom from them. He would not cast His pearls before swine. This new course of concealing the truth was more for the benefit of the Jewish leaders than for the masses. It was a little later (John 6) that Jesus thinned out the ranks of the masses by straightforwardly telling them of His impending sacrificial death. They departed, not because they did not grasp what He was saying, but because they all too clearly understood His meaning (John 6:60ff.).

It should also be observed that while Mark quotes Jesus’ reference to the sixth chapter of Isaiah as explaining His purpose of clouding the truth (‘in order that’) from some of His listeners (verse 12), Matthew cites this quotation as the reason why the truth was concealed (‘For the heart of this people has become dull,’ Matthew 13:15). Both aspects are true. Jesus spoke in parables in order to conceal the truth and because Israel had already turned a dull ear to the truth. Pharaoh hardened his heart against God (Exodus 8:15,32; 9:34), and likewise God caused his heart to become hard (Exodus 4:21; 10:1, etc.).

We should not conclude that the only purpose of the parables was to conceal. Jesus on the one hand was concealing the truth from some (Mark 4:10-12), while revealing it to others (4:32-34). The parables incited curiosity and deeper thought on the part of true seekers (cf. Proverbs 25:2; Mark 4:10,34). The parables enabled Jesus to teach publicly, and yet not give His opponents evidence to use against Him. While the scribes and Pharisees were able to understand that the parables were, at times, directed against them, they could not gain from them the hard evidence they needed to dispose of Jesus (Matthew 21:45,46).


In addition to this, Matthew informs us that Christ’s speaking in parables was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Psalm 78:2: “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world” (Matthew 13:35).
The Parable of the Soils
(4:1-20)

The parable of the soils comes first in each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). This is because it is the key to our understanding of all of the parables: "And He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables?’" (Mark 4:13).

This parable was given in terms of the everyday agricultural life of those to whom Jesus spoke. The seed is that of the gospel or the ‘word’ (verse 14). In each instance the seed is the same, it is only the condition of the soil that is variable. Here the sower would be the Savior Himself, but also we could include anyone proclaiming the Word.

The first type of ground is the hardened soil (verses 4,15). It is the packed down soil of the pathway, trodden over by those who passed by. This soil was not at all receptive to the seed, but the birds of the air simply ate the seed before it could be worked into the soil. This kind of soil represented those with hardened hearts, such as the scribes and Pharisees. They did not really grasp the message of Jesus, nor did they care to give it any consideration. So far as the gospel records inform us, the scribes and Pharisees never had a positive response toward the message of the Lord Jesus.

The second type of ground is the shallow soil (verses 5,16,17). When we think of rocky ground, we should not think of that which is plagued with many stones, large and small. Rocky soil is the soil like we have a bit of in Texas: a shallow layer of earth covering a solid shelf of underlying rock. Several years ago I agreed to help a friend plant a couple hundred large shrubs. He had bid this job on the basis of several test holes. Unfortunately, much of the ground was that of the type described by our Lord—thin soil, solid rock beneath. That was hard work!

The very shallowness of the soil (and the warmth retained by the rock, I suppose) encouraged a quick germination of the seed. The only problem was that this soil could not sustain life because of its shallowness. The roots of the plant could not sink deeply, and when the heat of the sun beat upon it, it withered and died.

Such is the case with those who make a hasty and shallow ‘decision for Christ.’ It is not a well thought-out decision, but a hasty one (‘immediately,’ verse 5). The real issues of the gospel are not grasped, and the decision is so quick because it is so shallow. Many thronged after Jesus as the great miracle worker and possible Messiah Who would deliver them from adversity, suffering and the difficulties of life. Many there were such as the masses who wanted Jesus to ‘feed them evermore of this bread’ (John 6:34). They did not really want a Messiah, but a meal ticket. It was only when the real reason for Christ’s coming was made clear that these hasty followers went away, never again to follow Jesus (John 6:60-66). It is only when ‘the heat is on’ that the sincerity of one’s profession can be known.

While the first kind of soil did not give the Word a moment’s thought, the second type of soil gave it only a moment’s thought and therefore misunderstood it. Thinking the life of a disciple to be easy and trouble-free, they quickly followed Jesus. As soon as they saw the full implications of discipleship, they withered up and withdrew.

10 "The parable of the sower is faithful to the life situation of Palestinian agriculture, in which plowing follows sowing. The sower is not careless when he scatters the seed on the path or among the thorns or on ground which has no depth of soil. He does so intentionally, for the path on which the villagers have trodden over the stubble and the thorns which lie withered among the fallow ground will be plowed up to receive the seed. The seed that fell upon the rocky ground was scattered intentionally also, for the underlying limestone thinly covered with topsoil does not show above the surface until the plowing exposes it. The detail that plowing follows sowing is important for the correct interpretation of the parable; it serves to caution the interpreter that less attention is to be given to the various types of soils, and more to the central act of sowing. The feature of the parable which provides the key to its understanding is the act of sowing. This element is essential to the comparison being developed: the Kingdom of God breaks into the world even as seed which is sown upon the ground. In the details about the soils there is reflection on the diversity of response to the proclamation of the Word of God, but this is not the primary consideration. The central point concerns the coming of the Kingdom of God. God is in the center of the action." William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 153-154.
While the second soil fails to immediately grasp the implications of the gospel, the third kind of soil perceives the issues, grasps the implications of the gospel, and counts the cost too high.

**The third type of ground is the crowded soil (verses 7, 18, 19).** The seed is sown, but there are competing plants such as thistles and thorns. They take up the nutrition and sap the life from the grain. While the gospel is heard and grasped, so are its implications. Man cannot serve God and money. When the matter gets down to the hard choice of one master, God or money, money wins out. Such was the case with the rich young ruler. He heard the message, understood its implications and went away sad because the cost of discipleship was too high (Matthew 19:16-22, esp. verse 22).

**The fourth type of ground was the fertile soil (verses 8, 20).** This soil was receptive to the seed and brought it to maturity and fruitfulness. It represents those whose hearts are truly receptive to the Word of God. They hear the gospel, understand it, count the cost, and intelligently determine to follow the path of faith and discipleship. These Christians are all fruitful, but to varying degrees (verse 20).

Now everyone always asks the question, “Which of the people represented by these four soils are truly saved?” My answer, of which I am fully convinced, is, only the fourth soil. Let me suggest several compelling arguments for my conclusion.

1. We often err in trying to make the parable ‘walk on all fours.’ We mistakenly equate the germination of the seed with the conversion of the individual. This is neither necessary nor accurate in the case of this parable.

2. While the word ‘receive’ is used with reference to the second type of soil (verse 16), it is a different (and weaker) word than that used of the fourth soil, ‘accept’ (verse 20). The word in verse 16 would best be translated ‘welcome.’ The word ‘accept’ of verse 20 is more emphatic, stressing the fact that the individual receives the Word by making it his own, possessing the truth by acting upon it in faith.11

3. Only the fourth type of soil actually bears fruit (cf. John 15:2, 5), and yet the diversity in fruitfulness is sufficient to cover all Christians.

4. The biblical illustrations of those in the first three categories are all identified as unbelievers in the Scriptures. The hardened scribes and Pharisees refused to believe (cf. Mark 2 and 3), so also those in John 6:60-66 were unbelievers. The rich young ruler, likewise, went away in unbelief.

5. My final argument is by far the most compelling. The Greek text clearly sets the fourth kind of soil apart from the other three. Now here we must employ a very literal (and accurate) translation of the Greek text, the New American Standard Version. Other translations carelessly pass over the minute but crucial distinction in the original text. Notice that in verses 4, 5, and 7 the little word ‘seed’ is supplied by the translators, as indicated by the fact that it is italicized. In each case, the word ‘seed’ is singular in the description of the first three soils. Now notice the fourth soil in verse 8. The word ‘seeds’ (plural) is supplied by the translators. This is a clue, given to us by the translators, that the pronoun referring to the first three soils differs from the pronoun referring to the fourth in that the pronoun used for the first three soils is singular, while the last is plural.

Now I can already hear the protests. Isn’t this rather thin evidence? Let us look, then, to our Lord’s interpretation of this parable in verses 14-20. Would a careful distinction of the fourth soil from the first three be very suggestive to us? I would hope so. And this is precisely what we find to be the case. In verses 15, 16 and 18, the first three kinds of soil are referred to by the pronoun ‘these.’ Now look at verse 20, where we find the change to ‘those,’ revealing the fact that in the original text it is a different pronoun employed for the fourth soil. Our Lord carefully distinguished the first three soils from the fourth, I believe, because only the fourth soil represents true Christians.

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11 The word translated ‘receive’ in verse 16 is the Greek term, *lambanō*. In verse 20 the word translated ‘accept’ is *paradekomai*. *Lambanō* seems to have the sense of ‘to welcome,’ while *paradekomai* seems to mean ‘to make one’s own,’ or ‘to possess.’ Both terms are capable of several definitions, and thus the context must indicate which definition is best.
Now I will not for one moment deny the fact that many applications of these soils to the Christian could be made, but this was not the intent of the Savior. His purpose was to explain why so many people could hear His preaching (and that of the disciples, or us) and not come to personal faith. The response of men to the gospel (humanly speaking) here is determined not by the potency of the seed or the persuasiveness of the sower, but by the receptivity of the heart of the hearer.

This parable, and its interpretation, is critical to our understanding of Christ’s use of the parabolic method of teaching. The condition of men’s hearts determines their response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. All those who heard the Word preached by the Lord would fall rather neatly into one of these categories. Into which of these categories do you fall, my friend?

The Principle Behind the Parable

(4:21-25)

While this parable helps to explain why so few actually come to faith in Christ, it does not yet relate directly enough to the disciples nor to us. All of this changes when the principle underlying the parable of the soils is expanded upon by the Master.

No doubt the disciples felt pretty smug hearing the Lord tell them that He was hiding His truth from the masses, while privately helping the disciples to understand it (verse 11). How cozy it is to be on the inside group, to have knowledge which is withheld from others. But knowledge brings with it responsibility, and this is what Jesus dwelt upon with His intimates.

God’s truth is not for the purpose of satisfying our curiosity, nor of filling our notebooks. God’s truth, though temporarily withheld from public proclamation, is shortly to be broadcast from the housetops (Luke 12:3). We do not light a lamp in order to hide that light (Mark 4:21). Neither does God reveal Himself and His truth so that men can keep it to themselves. Nothing which was then conveyed in secret was to stay that way for long (verse 22).

Let those who hear God’s Word listen carefully. In Jesus’ words: “If any man has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:23; also verse 9). Added knowledge brings added responsibility. Lest one pride himself in what he knows, let him be humbled by the responsibility which this knowledge has brought upon him. God’s truth was meant to be practiced and proclaimed. Not only must we proclaim what God has given to us, but we must put it to work in our own lives.

The principle behind this parable is this: “The truth you fail to use, you lose,” or “You only truly possess the truth you practice.” This is the meaning of our Lord when He said, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you; and more shall be given you besides. For whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him” (Mark 4:24-25). Lest the disciples (or we) become proud over the knowledge we have, while others remain in ignorance, let us ponder the awesome obligation that falls upon us who know better.

The scribes and Pharisees heard the Word of the gospel from the lips of the Savior. They saw His attesting signs and wonders. And yet they rejected this revelation. On the basis of previous revelation, our Lord concealed further truth from them.

While the disciples might glory in the fact that they knew what others did not, they must also be humbled by the principle that God will reveal further truth only when that which we know has been implemented (or should we say, possessed) by practicing it.

Application

Historically, this parable and the principle behind it explains the change of course of our Lord. The gospel has been clearly proclaimed and bluntly rejected by the Jewish leadership. In order to conceal further truth yet unrevealed (‘mystery,’ verse 11), Jesus spoke publicly only by the use of parables. This concealed the truth from those who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. And yet, on the same hand, the parables incited the curiosity of those who truly possessed the truths of God and desired to know more.
This was a major turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. While Jesus initially presented Himself as Israel’s Messiah, the handwriting is already on the wall, just as God had purposed it. The nation will reject its Messiah. They will lift Him up on a cross, rather than upon a throne. By virtue of Messiah’s death, the forgiveness of men’s sins will be made possible. The change to teaching in parables signaled a crucial change in course purposed from eternity past. Henceforth, Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem to die on a cross. He spoke less frequently of the earthly Kingdom (and less publicly) and more of His atoning work upon the cross (cf. John 6). While the Kingdom was still future and still certain, it was a mystery to be misunderstood by many. It would come to pass only after atonement was made on the cross.

What implications this text has for those of us who are Christians. Those who may be so fortunate to be well-taught are obliged to practice what they know and also to proclaim it to others. To fail to do so is to nullify any benefit of biblical teaching, and to restrict additional biblical insight. What a sobering thought.

In the matter of evangelism we should consider several implications of this text. First of all, we should expect a variety of responses to the proclamation of the gospel. A failure to respond positively to the gospel is not a reflection on God’s Word, or necessarily upon His messenger. It is the condition of the soil which ultimately determines the response to the seed. If Christ had such a wide range of response, so should we.

Also, I believe that we should find here a word of caution to those who would proclaim the gospel in glittering generalities, suggesting that following Jesus guarantees the ‘good life,’ a life of freedom from the pressures and problems and pain. We must strive to make the issues clear to men. So, too, we should resist the temptation to press men, women and children to hasty decisions or professions of faith. It was those who were the first to cleave to Christ as His followers who were the first to leave. Let us refrain from hasty conversions.
Lesson 27:
The Triumphal Tragedy
(Mark 11:1-25)

Introduction

Several years ago, Jerry, one of my closest friends, went out to the lake with his wife and parents for a day of recreation on the water. As things worked out, my friend Jerry was water skiing behind one boat while his wife and parents were in another. The ski boat pulling Jerry made a loop close to his parent’s boat, and as he passed by them, his wife and mother waved excitedly. Jerry waved back, thinking nothing of it.

As Jerry skied off into the distance, he left behind a tragedy he knew nothing about. His father had been operating their craft and in the manipulation of a turn one of Jerry’s younger sisters had fallen overboard. The father quickly turned around headed the craft close to her, killed the engine, and as the boat drifted alongside, Jerry’s dad jumped into the water to save his daughter.

Unexplainably, both the father and the daughter began to go under. And as they did so, the boat with Jerry’s wife and mother drifted further and further away, and neither of the women knew how to operate the craft. It was just at this moment that Jerry skied close by. Their waves were not just a casual, friendly gesture, but a desperate plea for help. It was not until some time later that Jerry learned that his father and sister had drowned, almost before his eyes, and yet unknown.

Things are not always what they seem. Such was the case with the so-called Triumphal Entry of our Lord Jesus as described by each of the four gospels. On the surface, it was a time of rejoicing and celebration but as that week drew to a close, it was seen in full view as the great tragedy of recorded history.

I have chosen to call this unusual entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem the Triumphal Tragedy, for it was not really a triumph at all. When we study all of the gospel accounts we learn that no one but our Lord grasped the full significance of His actions. The scribes and Pharisees perceived it at the moment as a devastating defeat of their efforts to turn the crowds against Jesus (John 12:19). The multitudes grasped the event as a possible entrance into the Kingdom age, but failed to comprehend the kind of King the Messiah was to be at His first coming, and the nature of His Kingdom (Luke 19:11). The disciples did not understand the meaning of these events either (John 12:16).

The Lord Jesus fully perceived the significance of His actions. While the crowds cheered and lauded Him, Jesus loudly wept as He approached the Holy city (Luke 19:41-44). He knew that He was going to His death (cf. Mark 10:32-34; John 12:7-8), but this was not the reason for His tears. He alone grasped the fact that while the momentary appearance was that Jerusalem was hailing Him as their Messiah-King, He was really being rejected, and that this turning of the nation against Him would lead to their destruction and defeat within a few short years (Luke 19:43-44).

Things are not always what they seem to be. What appears on the surface to be a hearty welcome is, in fact, a harbinger of warning. More than this, the triumphal entry (so-called) was not thrust upon Jesus by His disciples or the crowds; it was a deliberate act of His volition to precipitate the final events of His earthly life, as foreordained from eternity past. He was advancing into the jaws of the lion.

The Background to the Triumphal Entry

John informs us that the triumphal entry occurs a week before the Passover (John 12:1), probably on Sunday.¹ This was a festive occasion and the holiday excitement gripped the Holy city. Many preparations had been

made, and a great many foreigners had made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Perhaps as many as 110,000 were in the city or its suburbs, six times the normal population.

On this particular Passover, one name was on the lips of every person—Jesus.

“Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover, to purify themselves. Therefore they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, ‘What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?’ Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if any one knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him” (John 11:55-57).

One event in recent days, more than any other, brought the focus of attention on Jesus. He had just recently raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, not two miles from Jerusalem, the citadel of opposition to Him. The scribes and Pharisees not only denounced Him, but determined to put both He and Lazarus to death (John 11:46-50; 12:10). Word had gone out that anyone who knew the whereabouts of Jesus should report it to them (John 11:57). Many of those who thronged the way to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem did so because of the report of the raising of Lazarus (John 12:17-18). In such an atmosphere, electric with excitement and expectation (and danger), the highly symbolic act of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem riding on the back of a young donkey could not be taken lightly. After the feeding of the 5,000, the Savior had to send His disciples away and strongly resist the efforts of men to make Him their King (Mark 6:45-46; John 6:15). Here these efforts are not refused; indeed, Jesus encouraged them.

The Triumphal Entry
(11:1-10)

During His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus revealed a precise sense of timing. Earlier in His ministry, His brothers had, with tongue in cheek, urged Jesus to prove Himself in Jerusalem (John 7:2-5). Jesus refused such a public act for it was not ‘His time’ (John 7:6). Finally, at the triumphal entry, His time had come. It was not just any day, but ‘His day,’ the day predicted long before by the prophet, Daniel.

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2 “A month before the feast (on the 15th Adar) bridges and roads were put in repair, and sepulchres whitened, to prevent accidental pollution to the pilgrims. Then, some would select this out of the three great annual feasts for the tithing of their flocks and herds, which, in such case, had to be done two weeks before the Passover; while others would fix on it as the time for going up to Jerusalem before the feast ‘to purify themselves’—that is, to undergo the prescribed purification in any case of levitical defilement.” Alford Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, p. 367.

3 “The Passover festival at Jerusalem in the days before the temple was destroyed was an impressive occasion. Perhaps the only comparable event in the modern world is the annual Haj to Mecca. From all over the Eastern Mediterranean world, wherever Jews had settled or foreigners had embraced the Jewish religion, they came each year. Nobody knows exactly how many came. Ancient reports range from half a million to twelve million! A more conservative modern estimate reckons that Jerusalem, quite a small town by modern standards (perhaps 30,000 inhabitants), was swollen to six times its normal population at Passover time. The city itself could not hold them, and they filled the surrounding villages, while large numbers set up tents outside the city.” R. T. France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 126. It should be noted, however, that Joachim Jeremias (on whose calculations France rests his estimate of 180,000 people) later suggested that this estimate might still be a bit too high. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 84.

4 Sir Robert Anderson by a careful analysis of the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27 calculated that Jesus, to the very day, fulfilled Daniel’s prophecy concerning the appearance of the Messiah. Dr. Alva McClain has written, “April 6, 32 A.D., therefore, is fixed definitely as the end of the era of the first 69 Weeks; and according to Daniel’s prophecy, it should mark the very day of Messiah’s manifestation as the Prince of Israel. Without attempting to enter into the clear but intricate chronological calculations set forth by Anderson in his book, The Coming Prince (Pages 95-105), I shall simply state his conclusion that April 6, 32 A.D., was the tenth of Nisan, that momentous day on which our Lord, in fulfilment of Messianic prophecy, rode up to Jerusalem on the “foal of
The Master sent two of His disciples to a nearby village to bring the donkey and her colt. It may well be that Jesus knew the owner of these animals. The disciples found the animals just as they had been told, and when they gave the explanation given by the Master, they were allowed to borrow them. Mark, more than any of the other Gospel writers, makes much of the matter of the borrowing of the two animals.

On the other hand, Mark does not emphasize the fact that this act of the Lord Jesus was a deliberate fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Matthew (21:4-5) and John (12:14-15) tell us that this is a precise fulfillment of this portion of the book of Zechariah:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9).

Gentile readers would not be as impressed with this prophetic fulfillment as would those of Jewish descent.

Mark does draw our attention to the response of the crowds to this dramatic entrance of Jesus into the Holy City. We would gather from the combined information of the gospel accounts that there was the converging of two crowds. One was the crowd that came into the city of Jerusalem with Jesus from Bethany (John 12:9). The other, the multitudes who streamed out of the city of Jerusalem to meet Him as He came (John 12:12-13).

Some placed their garments on the back of the colt, for Jesus to sit upon, while others placed theirs in the path for the animals to walk upon (Mark 11:8). Branches were cut or torn off of the surrounding trees to spread on the path (Mark 11:8) and possibly to be waved in the air.

It seems almost incredible that anyone could suggest that this had no messianic significance. Jehu was proclaimed King accompanied with men placing their clothes under him (2 Kings 9:13). The welcome given the Lord Jesus parallels that given to military heroes of ancient times.

an ass” and offered Himself as the Prince and King of Israel.” Alva J. McClain, Daniel’s Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p. 20.

5 “The houses were usually built around an open court, which was connected with the street by a tunnel passageway. The ass and colt were tied at this tunnel-door on the street which crooked around the house. They would recognize immediately, without difficulty, the place and the animals, designed to reveal a knowledge more than human in Jesus.” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 479.

6 Because of this, some suggest that Peter may have been one of the two sent for the donkey and her colt. Cf. Shepard, p. 479.

Lane feels that the account of the untying of the colt is an allusion to the prophecy of Genesis 49:11: “The apparently disproportionate length at which the incident of the untying of the colt is related (verses 1-6) suggests that far more is involved than merely the preparation for the entry. The attention given to this phase of the action and, the explicit reference to “a colt untied,” with its allusion to Gen. 49:11, points to a deeper significance supplied by the Oracle of Judah, Gen. 49:8-12. The allusion to Gen. 49:11 confirms the messianic character which the animal bears in Ch. 11:1-10. It also indicates that the untying of the colt was itself a messianic sign, although it was not recognized as such at that time.” William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 395.

7 “The use of palm branches (Jn. 12:13) may have a special message, for these were not only a token of rejoicing (Lev. 23:40; Neh. 8:15; Rev. 7:9), but they may have carried political significance, since they had been used at the feast of tabernacles when Judas Maccabaeus’ recapture of the temple from the Syrians was celebrated (2 Macc. 10:7).” Everett F. Harrison, A Short Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 168.

8 “At Tabernacles the pilgrims carried bundles of palm, myrtle and willow, which were shaken whenever the word ‘Hosanna’ occurred in the liturgy (M. Sukkah 3:9).” Lane, Mark, pp. 397, fn. 17.

9 “A note of jubilation and excitement is evident in the text. Yet the action described does not appear to possess messianic significance, for there is no explicit acknowledgment of Jesus’ majesty in the acclamation of verses 9-10. It was a brief moment of enthusiasm outside the city walls which would have been appropriate to a
In addition to these things, Jesus was heralded in terms that could only be called messianic. He was greeted with what was in essence a Hallel Psalm, one of the series (Psalm 113-118) sung at Passover. Mark makes specific reference to Psalm 118:25.11 This Psalm is one of the six Psalms most often quoted or made reference to in the New Testament.

Hosanna means ‘help’ or ‘save, I pray.’12 While on the one hand, this is a cry for help, it is also apparent that it is also employed as a term of adoration and praise.13

In the expression “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (verse 9), we find that Jesus is hailed as One Who has come as a divine representative (at the least), and in the following statement, “Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our father David,” we see that it is the establishment of the Kingdom which is foremost in the minds of the multitude. ‘Hosanna in the highest’ reflects the angelic announcement of the Messiah’s birth (Luke 2:13-14).

I must conclude that the crowds understood the actions of Jesus as a symbolic statement of His identity as Israel’s Messiah. They hailed Him as the coming One, the King of Israel (Luke 19:38). While the crowds were correct to hail Christ as their Messiah, they were wrong in their conception of the mission of His first appearance and of their concept of the nature and timing of the Kingdom. They were correct to hail Him as the coming King as Zechariah 9:9 promised, but they failed to appreciate the significance of His riding upon the donkey, symbolic of a non-military and humble mission. Here, as in John chapter six, they wish to make Jesus King because of their mistaken hopes of what that Kingdom will be like.

To be more precise, the error of the crowds was at least three-fold. First of all, their acclaim was almost totally based upon and motivated by the miracles which He had performed (Luke 19:37; John 12:9). It was not His words (His teaching and doctrine), but His works that motivated many to receive Jesus as Messiah.

Second, they failed to grasp the proper priorities for the coming Kingdom. Ultimately, the Messiah would establish a physical, earthly Kingdom, but primarily this Kingdom was based upon a spiritual renewal. The cheering crowds thought only of the material dimensions of the Kingdom to the exclusion of the spiritual; only the external aspects and not the internal.

Third, they were completely in error as to how the Kingdom was to be established. They thought it would be accomplished by military might and revolution, rather than by rejection, suffering, and a humiliating death for the Messiah, Who was to die as the Lamb of God for the sins of His people (cf. Isaiah 52:13–53:12).

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10 “The spreading of the garment upon the way is similar to the royal salute given to Jehu (2 Kings 9:12f.), or the gesture of profound respect shown to Cato of Utica when he was about to leave his soldiers (Plutarch, Cato Minor 7). The reference to the branches of green and the antiphonal singing recalls the entry into Jerusalem of Simon, the last of the five Hasmonean brothers, on a triumphal occasion (1 Macc. 13:51).” Ibid., p. 396.

11 “The rabbis interpreted Ps. 118:25f. with reference to David or to the final redemption, and this understanding appears to explain the reference to “the kingdom of our father David” in verse 10. The substance of the antiphonal response is provided in the fourteenth of the Eighteen Benedictions (Palestinian recension) when prayer was offered daily for the restoration of the kingdom of David. The final Hosanna (Save us, thou who dwellest in the highest) is an appeal for God to inaugurate the era of salvation.” Ibid., pp. 397-398.


13 “… although it is true that “Hosanna!” was originally a cry for heip, it was later on used as a “cry of rejoicing with which a sovereign was honoured” (Van Leewen, at Mark xi. 8-11). Major correctly explains as follows: “The cry Hosanna is the equivalent of our English ‘God save the King’ … It could only be used in saluting a sovereign or his vice-gerent” (op. cit. p. 139). Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 486.
Why then did Jesus carry through with this mission? Let me suggest several reasons.

(1) **To fulfill prophecy concerning Himself.** The gospel accounts stress that this act was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, such as those in Zechariah 9:9 and Malachi 3:1.

(2) **To safely enter the city of Jerusalem.** It may not seem necessary, but the word was out to disclose the location of Jesus as soon as He appeared (John 11:57). Had Jesus attempted to enter Jerusalem secretly, He could have been quietly disposed of. Entering as He did, the religious leaders could not so much as lift a finger against Him (John 12:19).

(3) **To publicly and symbolically give testimony to His identity as Messiah.** Neither the crowds nor the religious leaders missed the implications of His triumphal entry.

(4) **A proclamation of the kind of Kingdom which He was to establish.** Jesus did not march proudly into the city of Jerusalem as a strutting military figure, nor did He ride on a spirited stallion. He rode on a donkey, symbolic of his humble peace-making assignment. This aspect of the triumphal entry was totally overlooked. Only the later events of the week would make this clear, and then the cheering crowds would turn their backs on the Messiah.

(5) **To provoke the opposition and precipitate His own execution on the appointed day.** Nothing could have been more of a catalyst to the opposing forces than this bold public proclamation. Now something had to be done, and fast!

### The Cleansing of the Temple

(11:11,15-18)

The irony of the sequence of events in the last week of our Lord’s earthly ministry is striking. The grandiose expectations of the multitudes would have inclined them to expect Jesus to muster His forces and launch an all-out attack on the military garrison in Jerusalem. Instead, Jesus marched into the temple and launched a surprise attack against the religious establishment. The Jews hoped for an attack against Rome. Jesus waged war against ‘religion.’

Mark alone informs us that Jesus’ attack upon the religious system was not spontaneous, but highly calculated, just as His triumphal entry. In verse 11 we are told that upon His arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus went immediately to the temple. There He looked about and, since the hour was already late, He returned to Bethany with the twelve. While an attack upon the money changers was possible on this occasion, it would not have the impact that it would have on the following day during peak ‘business hours.’

Returning the next day, He went into the temple and single-handedly14 purged it, just as at the outset of His ministry. There is little doubt that Jesus is attacking the highest religious authorities in the most sensitive spot—their pocketbooks. Annas and Caiaphas certainly were at the bottom of this corrupt operation.15

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14 “If it be asked how he could possibly succeed in clearing out such a huge nest of commercialism unaided, several things need to be borne in mind. His reputation as a performer of signs and wonders made men cautious about opposing him. Further, with right on his side, it was difficult to resist the indignation that flamed from his eyes and sounded from a voice that brooked no opposition or delay. Zeal for God’s house was consuming him. Again, this figure had just elicited a tremendous demonstration of enthusiasm from the masses as he entered the city. This would make even the authorities hesitant to oppose him.” Ibid., p. 171.

15 “On the other hand, there can be little doubt, that this market was what in Rabbinic writings is styled ‘the Bazaars of the sons of Annas’ (Chanuyoth beney Chanan), the sons of that High-Priest Annas, who is so infamous in New Testament history. When we read that the Sanhedrin, forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem, transferred its meeting place from ‘the Hall of Hewn Stones’ (on the south side of the Court of the Priests, and therefore partly within the Sanctuary itself) to ‘the Bazaars,’ and then afterwards to the City, the inference is plain, that these Bazaars were those of the sons of Annas the High-Priest, and that they occupied part of the Temple-court; in short, that the Temple-market and the Bazaars of the sons of Annas are identical.”
As I understand this decisive attack of the Savior, it was against three evils. First, it was an attack against a den of thieves (verse 17). Here our Lord reveals divine displeasure at the way men were making religion a front for money-making. It was necessary, of course, for the pilgrims and sojourners who had traveled from afar to Jerusalem to purchase sacrificial animals and to exchange foreign currency into coinage for the temple tax. It was not necessary to do this in the temple precincts and surely not at prices which were exorbitant.

Edersheim\(^{16}\) informs us that on the Mount of Olives there were four shops, especially for the sale of sacrificial animals and related needs. But if one bought an animal there he would have to pay a fee at the temple to have his animal inspected. In addition it is likely that there was collusion between the owners of the temple bazaar and the inspectors so that many of the animals purchased outside of the temple were rejected as unfit. When all was said and done, it was easier, if not cheaper, to purchase animals at the temple bazaar which were assured to have been already inspected and found acceptable for sacrificial offerings. It would appear that these animals were sold at an inflated price, the profits being divided between its high priestly owners and the market proprietors.

Also there was the need to exchange foreign currency into Tyrian coinage in order to pay the annual temple tax (Exodus 30:13-16). The Tyrian shekel was the closest available equivalent to the old Hebrew shekel. Duly certified places of currency exchange were provided throughout the provinces and regulated by Law. A certain margin of profit was allowed. But as the Passover drew near, these provincial places of exchange were closed down, perhaps two weeks prior to Passover.\(^17\) After this, the only convenient place of exchange was at the temple bazaar in the temple precincts.

Jesus’ objection to this practice was that it was a profiteering enterprise often at the expense of those least able to afford it. Religious activity was a pretext for profit-making. This was not the justice and mercy which God desired of His people.

The second objection was to the desecration of the holy place. The sight, sound and smell of sheep and cattle filled the air. Such was not the atmosphere for worship. The bickering and bartering which could be heard was a far cry from the praises and adoration in which God delighted.

This desecration was not only the fault of the religious leaders, but of the masses. The rebuke of Jesus was fully in accord with existing Jewish regulations which restricted the use of this part of the temple. Specifically, people were forbidden to pass this way, using it as a shortcut.\(^18\) No doubt, this is why Jesus forbade people to carry


\(^{17}\) “In a country where the circulating currency consisted primarily of Roman money, provision had to be made for the Jews to pay the annual Temple tax “after the shekel of the Sanctuary” as commanded in Ex. 30:13-16. In the first century all Temple dues had to be paid in Tyrian coinage, since the Tyrian shekel was the closest available equivalent to the old Hebrew shekel. To make the necessary exchange the tables of the money changers were set up in the provinces on Adar 15, and in the Temple forecourt on Adar 25 (M. Shekalim 1. 3), five days before the first of Nisan, when the tax was due. The slight surcharge permitted in the exchange (1/24 of a shekel) was intended to cover loss resulting from the wear of coins in circulation (M. Shekalim 1. 7).” Lane, *Mark*, p. 405.

\(^{18}\) “Ironically, Jesus’ spirited protest entailed a rigorous application of existing provisions, which prohibited anyone from entering the Temple Mount with a staff, sandals or his wallet, and which specifically denied the right to make of the forecourt “a short by-path” (M. Berachoth IX. 5; TB Berachoth 54a). The reference to the vessels of the Temple in verse 16, in conjunction with the expulsion of the merchants in verse 15, indicates that Jesus was acting in fulfillment of the obligation laid upon him by Zech. 14:21: “and every vessel in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts and there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.” Ibid., p. 406.
goods through the temple (Mark 11:16). The Lord was acting fully in accord with the Old Testament revelation as well (cf. Zechariah 14:21; Hosea 9:15).

The third objection (and one clearly pointed out only by Mark) was that the temple bazaar denied the worship of the Gentiles:

“And He began to teach and say to them, ‘Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a robber’s den’?’ (Mark 11:17).

This quotation is taken from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. The context of Isaiah’s words specifically refers to the worship of the Gentiles which will occur in the future (Isaiah 56:6-8). And yet the place in the temple precincts where the bazaar was set up was the only place where the Gentiles were permitted. How could the nations worship God in this circus?

What was the meaning of this temple cleansing?

(1) It revealed that God was more angered by the religion of Israel, His people, than the political damnation of Rome. He did not attack the Roman garrison, but the religious abomination in the temple. By this He revealed the true purpose of His first coming. It was not to throw off the shackles of Rome, but to restore true religion to the nation Israel. To put it in other terms, it was not to bring about political and social reform, but spiritual renewal and restoration.

Our Lord’s actions in cleansing the temple were intended to reveal to all Israel that the real enemy was within and not without. The implications of the triumphal entry are further pressed upon the multitudes within Israel. His Kingdom is not the kind which they supposed. He has come, not to deal with the oppressors of Rome, but the opponents of true religion.

(2) It was designed to further precipitate the final conflict and crises between Himself and the religious system of His day. The scribes and Pharisees were white hot with anger and were ready to attempt any plan that might rid the nation of this ‘menace’ (Mark 11:18).

It is only Matthew who contrasts the sham of superficial religiosity in the bazaar with the realization of God’s purpose for the temple (Matthew 21:14-17). Here we see, in part, what true religion should be like. In place of the sound of bartering voices there was the chorus of children’s voices singing praises to God in the person of Jesus Christ (verse 15). Instead of profiteering there is the physical ministry of healing at the hands of the Savior (verse 14). Rather than the sound of sheep and cattle, there is the voice of the Savior teaching men truths about God (Luke 19:47-48).

The Cursing of the Fig Tree

(11:12-14, 20-25)

The whole matter of the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple can best be summarized in the symbolic lesson of the cursing of the fig tree. It is deliberately woven into the fabric of the account of the temple cleansing, to show us that this narrative is but one piece of cloth.

Granted, the emphasis of this incident (as discussed between Jesus and His disciples in verses 20-25) is upon the power of the prayer of faith. But this is only because the disciples were not able to grasp its deepest significance until after the Savior’s death and resurrection (cf. John 12:16).

The barren fig tree strikingly portrayed the condition of the nation Israel as Jesus saw it. There was the outward profession and the promise of fruit (as indicated by the presence of leaves on the fig tree19), but upon closer evaluation this promise was empty.

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19 “In the region referred to here in Matthew, the early or smaller figs, growing from the sprouts of the previous year, begin to appear at the end of March and are ripe in May or June. The later and much larger figs that develop on the new or spring shoots are gathered from August to October. It is important to point out that the earlier figs, with which we are here concerned, begin to appear simultaneously with the leaves. Sometimes, in fact, they even precede the leaves.” Hendriksen, Matthew, p. 774.
Like the leaves of the fig tree, the nation appeared to hunger and thirst after righteousness and the coming of the Kingdom of God. But behind all of this religious flurry of acclaim and activity, there was no real fruit or repentance. There was only the selfish hope of the military rout of Rome and the establishment of a Kingdom that meant the absence of worry and work (cf. John 6:26,34, etc.).

Again, like the barren fig tree, there was at the temple a great deal of religious activity. But it was not centered upon the worship of God, but upon the self-enhancement at some of the expense of others.

This triumphal tragedy contrasted God’s Kingdom (and His King) against the backdrop of the religious exercises and expectations of the nation. It was a tragic misunderstanding that only our Lord grasped. It was our Lord setting His face toward Jerusalem, walking in the path of the cross, sovereignly exposing more and more of Himself, and in the process, bringing about His own execution because men will not have salvation God’s way, but their own.

Application

There is no better word than ‘tragedy’ to describe this ‘triumphal entry’ of Jesus Christ into the Holy city. What has every appearance of bringing joy and blessing is, in fact, the beginning of the end, the promise of certain judgment and destruction.

As I have considered this passage, several distressing conclusions have occurred to me. Let me share them with you. It was not pagan Rome (ultimately) that rejected and put the Savior to death, but the pious religion of Jesus’ day. Without any hesitation, I will agree that Rome had a hand in the death of the Savior, but it did not instigate His death; it only apathetically went along with it (cf. John 19:12).

All too often we concern ourselves with loudmouth atheists who boldly refute the truths of Christianity. These people are a problem, but the most dangerous of all is the religious deceiver. Religion is the opiate of the people—the kind of religion displayed at the triumphal entry. Christianity and religion are diametrically opposed to each other.

While true religion (Christianity) must express itself in social concerns, that is not its essence. Today, even as 2,000 years ago, religious leaders are deceiving countless religious people into supposing that religion is to focus upon revolution and reform, upon political activism, rather than upon repentance and renewal.

My friend, may I ask you this question with all sincerity? Are you a Christian, or are you just religious? A Christian recognizes that God has shown every man (and me, in particular) to be a sinner. A Christian trusts not in his own religious activity or good deeds, but in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He was bruised for our iniquities; He bore the penalty of our sins. His righteousness makes us acceptable to God. May God spare us from religion.

I am now convinced that Jesus was not put to death only by the religious leaders of His day. It has finally occurred to me that it was not just the religious leaders of Israel, but the multitudes who were responsible for the death of Messiah. Over and over we have seen in the gospels that the religious leaders desired to put Jesus to death but were helpless because of the popular support of the masses. That support appears to be greater than ever in the ‘triumphal entry,’ but in fact, it is shown to be ill-founded, temporary, and illusory. As the real character of the King and His Kingdom become clear in this last week of the Savior’s life and public ministry the support of the crowd begins to diminish and disappear. Their support was based upon their own pre-conceived conceptions of the Kingdom. They wanted nothing to do with His Kingdom. When it becomes apparent that He will not rise up against Rome; when it is evident that Jesus is angered more at their religion than with Rome, they will stand aside and let the religious leaders have their way with Him.

I am convinced that this is also characteristic of our own time. Yes, there are many false prophets with false messages, but the sad reality is that people are attracted to them because they proclaim what the masses want to hear:

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).
(3) Finally, be on guard to any religion that receives the acclaim of the masses. The multitudes heralded Jesus as Messiah, but they did not receive Him as God’s Messiah in the final analysis. My friend, there are many today who have nice words for Jesus, a good man, a great teacher, a wonderful example, a social reformer, but the masses do not regard themselves as sinners, nor the Lord Jesus as the suffering Savior. Here is what separates the men from the boys, the sheep from the goats, the saints from the synthetic: our response to the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ.

I have been interested to observe in the newspaper these past several weeks the dispute between the Methodist church and one of its few evangelical fundamental pastors. Isn’t it interesting that the Methodist church can be so tolerant on the issue of homosexuality, so liberated in the matter of ordaining women to the ministry, and so opposed to orthodoxy in the matter of salvation. Beware, I say, of popular Christianity, so called, for “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).
Lesson 28: 
The Great Debate
(Mark 11:27–12:37)

Introduction

After my first year of seminary, I spent my summer vacation teaching psychology and world history in a medium security prison in Washington State. One of my fellow-teachers had a rather embarrassing experience. In his English classes, he used an individualized teaching program that employed tests which the student would correct himself. At the end of each class period the teacher would carefully check the materials to be sure that none of the test answer booklets were missing.

On one occasion he dismissed the class without his usual check. As the last student was walking out the door, it occurred to him that he had not counted the test answer books. Hurriedly, he made a tally and found, to his dismay, that one was missing. Frantically he tried to remember who might have last been using the answer book. One student came to his mind. Running out into the hall, he caught a glimpse of him and called for him to wait. As he approached the young prisoner, the teacher felt a surge of hope as the young man looked most uncomfortable at being stopped.

The young man earnestly pled to be allowed to go his way, or to at least be allowed to stop at the rest room, but the teacher, with hope ever increasing, led him to the shakedown room and called for a guard to assist in the search. When the prisoner was thoroughly searched, he was found to have a stolen set of test answers, not for the English class, but for the math class taught by an associate. Only when my colleague returned to his class did he discover that he had made a mistake and that the answer book he sought was merely misplaced in the classroom.

The moral to this story (if, indeed, it has one) is that one should be very careful in seeking the answers to certain questions. You may well receive answers that you didn’t expect.

The religious leaders learned this lesson the hard way. Having stood helplessly by while Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the King of Israel and when He cleansed the temple for the second time, they were forced to take aggressive action to put an end to His popularity and power. The ‘great debate’ was the scheme of a coalition of differing religious and political viewpoints to publicly embarrass Jesus by asking him for answers to seemingly unanswerable questions. These questions were calculated to have only two possible answers, either of which would cause Jesus to lose credibility and popularity. One example of the kind of questions He was asked might be, “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” If I say yes, then I have admitted to doing so; if I say no, I confess to persisting at it. Either way, you see, I am caught in my own answer.

The religious leaders, like my teacher friend, sought the answers to their questions, but they never anticipated the answers they would receive. The result of the ‘great debate’ was the ridiculing laughter of the crowds and the public humiliation of the critics of our Lord. Their final response would no longer be with words of examination and debate but with works which resulted in execution and death.

Lest we approach this event merely as an exercise in historical study, let me suggest that there is much for us to learn here. The questions which our Lord was asked are the most important questions which any man will ever answer in life, and the answers which the Master gives are the key to life. Let us listen well to what He has said.

The Question of Jesus’ Authority
(11:27-33)

If there was one word which summarized the teaching of our Lord, it might well be authority (cf. Matthew 7:28-29). But where did Jesus receive this authority to act and teach as He did? This question is raised immediately after the triumphal entry and the temple cleansing. It may not have been as calculated as those occurring later. That is, I am not certain that it was necessarily a trick question, so much as a challenge to the authorization to
teach and act as He did. Now if Jesus had made a clear public statement concerning His deity this may well have played into the hands of the opposition, who could accuse Him of outright blasphemy (as they later did, Luke 22:67-71; John 19:7).

The scribes and Pharisees had a rather well-defined process of ordination in the days of the Savior’s earthly ministry. There is little question but what the religious elite regarded Jesus as little more than a ‘country boy,’ whose teaching was to be lightly regarded.

The question of authority is a crucial one, however, and cannot be brushed aside. The response of the Master is not an evasion of the question, but the exposure of the denial and rejection of those who were the leaders of the nation.

What might the Lord Jesus have answered in His defense? He could surely have claimed that His authority came from the Old Testament Scriptures, especially those which prophesied His first coming (John 5:39,46). The Father also had given witness to Jesus as His Son (John 8:16-18). If for no other reason men should listen because of His works (John 5:36). In what Jesus said and taught, there was intrinsic authority. Men could not disregard what He taught (cf. John 7:45-46).

The real issue was not really a lack of evidence which would accredit His authority, but a stubborn refusal to draw the conclusion which that evidence demanded. Because of this, Jesus sought to expose their willful rejection of the truth. This He did by posing a question to His opponents. “Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me” (Mark 11:30).

One of the primary witnesses to the identity and authority of Jesus was John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way for Messiah (cf. Mark 1:1-11). How did the chief priests, scribes and elders regard John and his claim? Did they accept his testimony?

The truth was they did not. But they were very discreet to keep their verdict to themselves, for they knew the masses accepted him as a messenger of God, a true prophet (Mark 11:32). If they parroted the position of the majority, they would play into the hands of Jesus. If John were a prophet, indeed, then why did they not consider John’s testimony sufficient authority for Jesus’ teaching and ministry? If, on the other hand, they revealed their true appraisal of John (which probably was that he was some kind of religious ‘nut’) they would lose whatever esteem the multitudes had for them.

I marvel at the gospel accounts of the religious hierarchy’s private discussion, for not once did they consider the issue theologically (in terms of what the truth was), but only politically and pragmatically (what will the

1 “But authoritatively to teach, required other warrant. In fact there was regular ordination (Semikhah) to the office of Rabbi, Elder, and Judge, for the three functions were combined in one. According to the Mishnah, the ‘disciples’ sat before the Sanhedrin in three rows, the members of the Sanhedrin being recruited successively from the front-rank of the Scholars. At first the practice is said to have been for every Rabbi to accredit his own disciples. But afterwards this right was transferred to the Sanhedrin, with the proviso that this body might not ordain without the consent of its Chief, though the latter might do so without consent of the Sanhedrin. But this privilege was afterwards withdrawn on account of abuses. Although we have not any description of the earliest mode of ordination, the very name—Semikhah—implies the imposition of hands. Again, in the oldest record, reaching up, no doubt, to the time of Christ, the presence of at least three ordained persons was required for ordination. At a later period, the presence of an ordained Rabbi, with the assessorship of two others, even if unordained, was deemed sufficient. In the course of time certain formalities were added. The person to be ordained had to deliver a Discourse; hymns and poems were recited; the title ‘Rabbi’ was formally bestowed on the candidate, and authority given him to teach and to act as Judge (to bind and loose, to declare guilty or free). Nay, there seem to have been even different orders, according to the authority bestowed on the person ordained. The formula in bestowing full orders was: ‘Let him teach; let him teach; let him judge; let him decide on questions of first-born; let him decide; let him judge!’ At one time it was held that ordination could only take place in the Holy Land. Those who went abroad took with them their ‘letters of orders.’” Alford Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), II, p. 382.
crowds think?). Their theology seemingly was only a facade, a high-sounding explanation for their moral wickedness.

The principle underlying the answer of our Lord to His critics is this: “Your response to the claims of Jesus is determined by your ultimate source of authority.”

The scribes and Pharisees considered themselves to be the ultimate authority. They were those who ordained and accredited religious leaders. They set aside scripture and made it subservient to their traditions (Matthew 15:6). They rejected the witness of the Law and the prophets. They refused to hearken to the preparatory announcement of John the Baptist. They made themselves the authority.

That, my friend, is precisely what men and women do today. The reason that many reject Jesus as their Messiah and Savior is that they place themselves above the authority of the Word of God. They trust in their own reasonings rather than in divine revelation. The fundamental question one must face in deciding about Jesus Christ is “What is my ultimate authority?” How sad it is that many spend more time and effort in choosing a laundry detergent (or a television) than in considering the claims made by the Scriptures concerning the Christ.

The Parable of the Vineyard
(12:1-12)

Mark informs us that Jesus’ response to the challenge of His authority consisted of a number of parables (Mark 12:1), of which Matthew records three. Mark preserves only one of these, but each of them displays the same truth from a slightly different perspective.

The parable of the vineyard dramatically depicts the willful rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the religious leaders of Israel. The backdrop to this parable, and the key to its interpretation is the analogy of Israel to a vineyard in the prophecy of Isaiah 5:1-7. The vineyard is the nation Israel and the owner is God the Father. The vine-growers to whom the vineyard had been rented were the religious leaders of the nation Israel. The slaves who were sent to the vine-growers to collect what was due the owner were the prophets, who were rejected by the nation throughout its history. The son of the owner is, of course, the Lord Jesus, God’s final messenger to the nation.

Seeking to take the property as their own, they premeditated the death of the Son, thinking that in His absence, there would be no further interference with them. Matthew, in his account (21:40-41), indicates that this (perhaps rhetorical) question was answered by those who heard. Like David before Nathan, by their own lips they condemned themselves.

As the scribes and Pharisees quickly perceived (Mark 12:12), Jesus was not just spinning a yarn. He was still answering their challenge to His authority by this parable. They had refused to accept the credentials of Jesus, the fulfilled prophecies, the testimony of John, the accreditation of the words and works of Jesus. This rejection was, in and of itself, a witness to Jesus’ identity and authority, for the Scriptures had foretold of Messiah’s rejection by the religious leaders of the nation.

“The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Mark 12:10-11).

The stone, frequently regarded as a reference to Messiah in Jewish writings, was to be rejected. The rejection of Jesus by the leaders of the nation was no shock, but simple fulfillment of Scripture. This rejection was no

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2 Here, as I understand it, the Lord is speaking of the religious leaders’ desperate attempt to maintain their position of prestige and power in the face of the challenge put to them by Jesus. It looked as if all Israel were about to follow Jesus (John 11:47-48; 12:19). They must be rid of Jesus to regain their dominant role in Jewish society.

3 It is hard to know to what extent the religious leaders grasped the implications of this statement. Nothing could be more abhorrent to a devout son of Israel than the thought of Jewish blessings being given to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 22:21-22).
impulse or momentary decision; it was the final act of rebellion in a steady sequence of acts of disobedience and denial. Had they rejected Jesus’ authority? So they had refused John’s testimony? Had they disregarded John? So had all the prophets been ignored or ill-treated.

But not only does the quotation of Psalm 118:22-23 contain the element of fulfilled prophecy, it also includes unfulfilled prophecy—the promise of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus after His death. The stone which was to be rejected by the builders was also destined to become the chief cornerstone. Would they put Messiah to death? God would raise Him from the dead and install Him as Israel’s King.

Here, then, is the answer of Jesus to the question of His authority. While they practiced human accreditation and ordination, they rejected divine authentication. Jesus would not reaffirm His authority because no matter how impressive or compelling it was, they would reject it. They had rejected John, as all the Old Testament prophets. This human rejection is not detrimental to the cause of Jesus the Messiah but is rather a declaration that the Old Testament prophecy of His rejection is fulfilled.

**Man’s Obligation to His God and His Government**

*(12:13-17)*

Now the fat is really in the fire. Though not intended to humiliate, Jesus’ defense has greatly angered His religious opponents. Would He make them look like fools before the people? Would He ask a question that they dare not answer? They would do so to Him, and more!

The public attack upon Jesus was well planned, I believe. It was the concerted effort of several distinct (and opposing) segments of Israel’s religious and political leadership. They strike with a barrage of verbal attacks, each following upon one another like waves against a rock. Each attack is couched in the form of a smashing question, seemingly innocent and innocuous, but carefully put so as to give the Lord Jesus only two possible answers, either of which would prove devastating. The order in which these questions have been recorded may also be significant.  

Strange bedfellows, these Pharisees and Herodians! The Pharisees were the purists, who wanted to stand aloof as much as possible from the contamination of Roman rule. The Herodians, on the other hand, seem to have determined to make the most of the situation. Nevertheless their common hatred of Jesus outweighed their dislike for one another.

The question was a simple one: “Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” (Mark 12:14b). Taxes were no more popular in Jesus’ day than they are today. In those times there were both religious and political taxes, which could amount to as much as 40% of one’s income. Essentially there were three taxes imposed by the Roman

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4 “In rabbinic literature the rejected stone of Ps. 118:22 was understood with reference to Abraham, David, or the Messiah, while the expression ‘the builders’ was sometimes used of the doctors of the Law.” William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 420.

5 “D. Daube, however, has suggested that the four accounts which follow show an awareness of the traditional structure of the early Passover liturgy. The sequence of questions proposed corresponds to four types of questions recognized by the rabbis: questions of wisdom, which concern a point of law (cf. Ch. 12:13-17); of mockery, which frequently bear on the resurrection (cf. Ch. 12:18-27); of conduct, which center in relationship to God and men (cf. Ch. 12:28-34); and of biblical exegesis, which often concern the resolving of an apparent contradiction between two passages of Scripture (cf. Ch. 12:35-37). It is only in the Passover eve liturgy that the four types of questions appear in this particular order, and there the first three questions are posed by a wise son, a wicked son and a son of simple piety. The fourth is posed by the head of the family himself. This arrangement sheds light on the sequence of questions in Ch. 12:13-37.” Ibid., p. 421.

6 “To the psychological and ideological irritant of Roman rule must be added the much more practical grievance of Roman economic policy. The Jews had their own temple tax and other religious dues to pay, but the pax Romana was not a free gift either. There were dues on land and cattle, duties on trade and transport of goods, but above all a considerable poll-tax, rigorously enforced through periodic censuses, which was a perennial cause of unrest. It has been calculated that the total taxation, Jewish and Roman together, may have exceeded 40% of an
government. The tax here in question is the poll tax. Not more than 25 years previous to this, a revolt had taken place over this very question. Out of this insurrection, one party of the Zealots had been born.

No one likes to pay taxes, but the issue was not just a political issue. The coin typically used to pay the poll-tax was the denarius. This small silver coin "portrayed the emperor as the semi-divine son of the god Augustus and the goddess Livia and bore the (abbreviated) inscription ‘Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus’ on the obverse and ‘Pontifex Maximus’ on the reverse. Both the representations and inscriptions were rooted in the imperial cult and constituted a claim to divine honors." One could easily conceive of tax paying with such coins a religious sacrilege.

This question was not posed out of genuine concern for spiritual purity, but as a trap by which to discredit Jesus. It was an act of hypocrisy (Mark 12:15). This was evident by the words of flattery which introduced the question. In effect the questioners said, “We know that you are a man who says what he thinks, who lets the chips fall where they may.” Thus they are encouraging Jesus to speak freely, even if the matter was controversial. They encouraged a hasty and careless reply.

When I was considerably younger, I supported Senator Barry Goldwater in his bid for the presidency in 1964. I was the only school teacher in the entire faculty parking lot with a Goldwater bumper sticker. I can still remember my embarrassment at the answers he gave the press on crucial issues. I finally removed my bumper sticker. That is the kind of thing the would-be seekers of the truth hoped for from Jesus, but it didn’t work.

It may well be that when Jesus asked for a denarius and it was presented the battle was partially won, for if having such a coin was a sacrilege, why did they have one in their possession? The Savior then asked whose name was on the coin. “Caesar’s,” they replied. The inference was then drawn. If Caesar minted the coins, if they ordinary man’s income.” R. T. France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), pp. 19-20.

7 “There were, in fact, three regular taxes which the Roman government exacted. There was a ground tax; a man must pay to the government one tenth of the grain; and one fifth of the oil and wine which he produced; this tax was paid partly in kind, and partly in a money equivalent. There was income tax, which was one per cent of a man’s income. There was a poll tax; this tax had to be paid by every male person from the age of fourteenth to the age of sixty-five, and by every female person from the age of twelve to sixty-five; it amounted to one denarius—that is what Jesus called the tribute coin—and was the equivalent of about ninepence, a sum which is to be evaluated in the memory that eightpence was the usual day’s wage for a working-man. The tax in question here is the poll tax.” William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), II, pp. 300-301.

8 “After A.D. 6, when Archelaus was deposed from his rule and Idumaea, Samaria and Judaea became Roman provinces under a procurator Caesaris, this tax was levied on the Jews (cf. Rawlinson, St. Mark, in loc.) The tax was extremely unpopular, and when it was levied the first time provoked the rebellion of Judas the Galilean (cf. Acts v. 37 and Josephus, Antiquities, xviii, I,1). The rebellion was suppressed, but the ideas for which Judas died continued to live, especially among the zealots. These extremists (who had tremendous influence among the whole nation) regarded the payment of the tribute as a punishable national infidelity towards God and ascribed all the misery of their country and people to this. Their view was that the Roman yoke should be thrown off by force of arms. Among the masses, however (probably through the influence of the Pharisees), the current view was that God would Himself remove the foreign overlordship and would do so through the actions of the Messiah (cf. Friedrich Hauch in loc., and also Rengstorff and Buchsel, in loc.).” Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), pp. 506-507.

9 Lane, Mark, p. 424. It should be stressed, however, that contrary to Lane’s statement that this was the only coin accepted for payment of taxes (p. 424), this was not necessarily the case.

“Herod had never had the right to strike silver coins. The Romans reserved this privilege for themselves. For current use they struck bronze coins, and to spare the scruples of the Jews at seeing human portraits which had for them an idolatrous savour, these little local coins had emblems imprinted on them from the world of nature, ears of corn, palms, vine-leaves, or other objects. But the denarii, Roman money ‘par excellence,’ bore the emperor’s portrait” (cf. Luce, in loc.).” Geldenhuys, Luke, p. 507, fn. 8.
bear his image, then they must ultimately belong to him. One does not do wrong in giving to another what right-
fully belongs to him.\textsuperscript{10}

Here, then, is the principle regulating one’s responsibilities to God and government: “‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’” (Mark 12:17). Government is not intrinsically opposed to God. Indeed the epistles inform us that government is a servant of God to punish evil-doers and to re-
ward those who do what is right (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17, etc.). The many benefits of Roman rule must be
paid for, and taxation is a means of doing this.

The answer to the question is a limited ‘yes,’ but it must be qualified. It is good and right to give to Caesar
that which rightfully belongs to him. But this suggests that there is a sphere of rightful claim as well as a sphere in
which he has no claim at all. If you would, our Lord is laying down, in part, the principle of separation of church
(or religion) and state (or government). Each has its rightful place. To render to Rome its due is to also serve God.
But Rome has no rights in certain areas.

Government, in my opinion, has no right either to establish and support religious endeavors, nor to re-
strict and prohibit them. In principle, I believe that the church has the right to operate schools and children’s
homes without governmental harassment. When a country like Sweden can pass a law that a parent cannot spank
their child I believe they have gone beyond their rightful authority. Where this line is to be drawn is the individual
decision of every Christian. The principle of our Lord is timeless and universal. Its application is the responsibil-
ity of each Christian.

Note also that our Lord carefully distinguished between God and government. In Rome this distinction
was clouded by claims to deity by Roman emperors. Such claims were carefully and discreetly denied by the Mas-
ter. I believe that Communism in our day in effect deifies government, making it the highest and ultimate good,
and man its virtual slave. We must distinguish between God and government. They are distinct and each has its
rightful role to play. Each has its rightful claim on men. Perhaps I should go on to say that whenever the demands
of God and government clash, we must obey God, rather than men (Acts 5:29).

The Question Concerning Life After Death
(12:18-27)

The Pharisees and Herodians having utterly failed at their mission of humiliating Jesus, the Sadducees\textsuperscript{11}
make their bid in verses 18-27. The issue here is that of life after death. The Sadducees were the religious liberals
of their day, believing neither in resurrection or angels. They tended also to reject the inspiration and authority
of the Old Testament books other than the five books of the Law. Their approach was to discredit Jesus by posing a

\textsuperscript{10} “This fact proved that they tacitly accepted Caesar’s rule, for “it was regarded as a generally
acknowledged principle that a king’s domain extended as far as the limits within which his coins were valid”
(Strack-Billerbeck, das Evangelium nach Matthaus, p. 884). See also Fr. Hauch, in loc, and cf. the words of the
Jewish scholar Maimonides: “Wherever the coinage of any king is current, there the inhabitants acknowledge that
king as their ruler” (cf. Godet, \textit{in loc.}).” Ibid., fn. 9.

\textsuperscript{11} “The Sadducees were the priestly aristocracy among the Jews by whom the political life of the people
was largely controlled from the time of Alexander the Great onwards. They tried to live in close contact with the
Roman rulers after 63 B.C. so that they might as far as possible promote the secular interests of their people.
Consequently they took little interest in religious matters and in many respects clashed with the Pharisees,
especially as regards the Pharisees’ attachment to the “traditions of the elders” which made Jewish religious life so
intricate. Everything which, according to their views, was not taught by “the Law of Moses” (the first five books of
the Old Testament) was rejected by the Sadducees as forbidden innovations. So, as the Jewish scholar Montefiore
puts it: “They were in a sense conservative. The letter of the Law was enough for them; they did not want the
developments of the rabbis. In doctrine, too, they were against innovation. … Many of these priests, and many of
the nobles and ‘rulers,’ possessed, I should think, but a very formal and outward religion. We may compare them
with many of the bishops, barons and rulers of the middle ages” (\textit{Synoptic Gospels} part i. p. 102).” Ibid., p. 513,
fn. 1.
ludicrous hypothetical situation based upon the overly physical and materialistic interpretation of the Scriptures and the injunction of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-6).

The hypothetical question is based upon two premises. First, that men will be raised from the dead. (Remember that the Pharisees didn’t believe this, verse 18.) The second was that the necessity of levirate marriage was still binding. (This, too, had largely been explained away by contemporary Judaism.) It is little wonder that the Sadducees could not accept the proofs posited for the resurrection of men by the Pharisees, for they were, indeed, difficult to defend.

With tongue in cheek, the Sadducees posited a hypothetical dilemma. A woman by levirate marriage was married to seven husbands, but bore children by none. Whose wife would this woman be in the resurrection? Jesus’ response was that both the Sadducees and the Pharisees were greatly in error, as revealed by such a question (verse 24). There were two fundamental misconceptions which must be corrected.

The first error was concerning their understanding of Scriptures. The Pharisees viewed life in the resurrection as virtually a continuation of things as they presently are. While the Pharisees were correct in their conviction that men would rise from the dead, they were very wrong in their estimations of what this life would be like. There would be no need of physical procreation, and therefore, no need for marriage as a means of child-bearing. To be ‘like the angels’ does not necessarily mean to be sexless (cf. Genesis 6:1-2; 19:1-11), but rather not to be in need of earthly relationships or in institutions such as marriage.

The problem of the Pharisees was too earthly a view of heaven. The error of the Sadducees was a failure to believe in the power of God, as disclosed by their disdain of the Supernatural, and, in particular, the resurrection of the dead. While the Pharisees had been ineffective in their efforts to biblically defend the resurrection from the Old Testament, our Lord beautifully expounded it from a portion of the books of the Law (which the Pharisees held to be authoritative).

In Exodus chapter three, God had said, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Even when God made this statement Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were dead. How could God be the God of dead men? God had made specific promises to these men which, until the present, have not been fulfilled. No self-respecting Jew could believe this statement, regarded as one of the cornerstones of the Jewish faith, without grasping the implications it had toward the resurrection of the dead. By their rejection of the doctrine of the resurrection the Sadducees greatly erred and failed to grasp the power of God, the power over death and the grave.

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13 “The Sadducees insisted that the doctrine of life after death could not be proved from the Pentateuch. The Pharisees said that it could be so proved. It is interesting to look at the proofs which the Pharisees adduced. The Pharisees cited Numbers 18:28 which says, ‘Ye shall give thereof the Lord’s heave-offering to Aaron the priest.’ That is a permanent regulation; the verb is in the present tense; therefore Aaron is still alive! They cited Deuteronomy 31:16: ‘This people shall rise up,’ a peculiarly unconvincing citation for the second half of the verse goes on, ‘and go a-whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land!’ They cited Deuteronomy 32:39: ‘I kill and I make alive.’ Outside the Pentateuch they cited Isaiah 26:19: ‘Thy dead men shall live.’ They cited the Song of Solomon 7:9 which speaks of ‘causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak.’ It cannot be said that any of the citations of the Pharisees are really convincing; and no real argument for the resurrection of the dead had ever been produced from the Pentateuch.” Barclay, *Matthew*, II, pp. 304-305.
14 “The story may have been adapted from a popular version of the book of Tobit (for a woman married to seven husbands, all of whom died childless, cf. Tobit 3:8,15; 6:13; 7:11; for levirate marriage, cf. Tobit 4:12; 6:9-12; 7:12f.).” Lane, *Mark*, p. 427.
15 “A firm belief in the resurrection was an integral element in popular Jewish piety as expressed in the second benediction of the Shemoneh ‘Esreh’ (“Blessed be thou, O Lord, who raises the dead”) or in the doxology to be pronounced in a cemetery, “He will cause you to arise. Blessed be he who keeps his word and raises the dead!” (Tos. *Berachoth* VII, 5.).” Ibid.
Here is a truth fundamental to all men concerning life after death. All men will be raised from the dead; some to everlasting life, and others to everlasting torment (Daniel 12:2; John 5:28-29; Revelation 20:4-15). The nature of our resurrection life has not been (and, in fact, cannot be) fully defined, but we are safe in assuming that it will not be a mere continuation of life as we presently know it.

The Greatest Commandment
(12:28-34)

It would seem that there was one exception to the rule of rejection by the religious leaders confronting our Lord. Almost in spite of himself he applauds the wisdom of Jesus’ reply. This, in turn, evokes a question, although perhaps initially intended as a test (Matthew 22:35), it results in a positive influence upon this student of Scripture.

The Jews loved to discuss which parts of the Law were weightier than others. This may have suggested another question to this lawyer, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” (Mark 12:23). Jesus began with the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4, followed by the commandment to love God with all your heart, self, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. If the whole Old Testament Law were to be condensed to its simplest terms, this is what it must be.

The lawyer could not help himself. What Jesus replied could not have been said better. While this scribe agreed with our Lord’s statement, I cannot help but get the impression that this religious authority is giving his approval as a superior to an inferior, such as a professor would respond to one of his students. He virtually repeats Jesus’ words with a few additional comments. While he has accepted the truth of His teaching, he has not yet acknowledged His sovereign authority, otherwise he should have fallen at the feet of Jesus.

The answer of the Savior must have been shocking. If the scribe had commended Jesus with an evaluation roughly equivalent to ‘not bad, not bad at all,’ Jesus appraises this man’s position as ‘not far from the Kingdom’ (Mark 12:34). That is tantamount to saying to a man like Billy Graham, “That was a fairly good sermon,” or to John Calvin, “Your theology is coming right along, so stay with it.” If the best word Jesus can give to this somewhat receptive scribe is ‘not far,’ what can His evaluation of the rest be? Matthew chapter 23 tells us, with these words no one else dared to ask anything further (Mark 12:34).

The Meaning of Messiah
(12:35-37)

But Jesus was not quite finished. He had been asked many difficult questions; now it was His turn to ask one final question, for it was on this one final question that the whole issue hinged: “How can Messiah be both

16 “The Scribes had declared that there were six hundred and thirteen commandments: two hundred forty-eight affirmative precepts—as many as the members of the human body—and three hundred sixty-five negative, as many as the days of the year (Vincent). There was a great discussion between the opposing theological schools of Shamai and Hillel as to which were the “light” and which were the “heavy” commandments. They discussed the distinction between the ritual and the ethical, or the positive and the moral, the prevalent tendency being to attach more importance and greater weight to the positive commandments relating to circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and other ritual requirements (Lightfoot). The result was the “exaltation of the ceremonial element, the curse of later Judaism.” The words of the Rabbis were to be prized above the words of the Law. It was commonly agreed that the positive commandments about the minutest details of the ceremonial law were as binding as the fundamental moral code. The heavy commandments were the ones to which the death penalty was attached, such as the Sabbath-keeping laws, sacrifices, and purifications. If the Pharisees could get Jesus entangled in the web of current theological, hair-splitting controversy, they would bring the unlettered Nazarene Rabbi into disrepute. They hoped He would take the fatal step of asserting again His divine supremacy. This would precipitate a reaction of violence against Him such as had almost swept Him away on various previous occasions.” J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), pp. 501-502.

17 “Among the scribes this would be recognized as a Haggada-question, a question of exegesis concerned with the reconciliation of two seemingly contradictory points of view expressed in Scripture. The unity of different biblical passages was stressed by demonstrating their harmony, which depends upon bringing them into a correct
David’s son and David’s Lord?” That the Messiah would be the ‘Son of David’ was nearly universally accepted in Judaism. From this supposition it was easy to regard Messiah as a man, a mere man, and one who would be a military leader like His father, David.

Jesus had claimed to be more than man. His authority was not that of men, but of God. The religious leaders could not tolerate Jesus largely because He claimed to be more than a mere man. This was the bone of contention underlying all of the questions of the day. Jesus would not depart from His interrogators until the real issue was clearly in view.

The Messiah was to be the seed of David. This was without dispute. It was also widely held that Psalm 110:1 was a Messianic Psalm. How could David refer to the Messiah as his son on the one hand, and his Lord on the other? Here was a real dilemma. Here was a question for His questioners to ponder. For in the answer to this question is the key to the identity and authority of Jesus. Jesus was, at one and the same time, the Son of David and the Son of God. He was the God-man. This is where He derived His authority. And this is what the religious leaders refused to acknowledge.

Many today, like those in Jesus’ day, were willing to accept Jesus as a good man, an impressive teacher, a noble example for men to follow. But they stop short at the crucial point of His divinity. This is what sets Him apart from all men, and what qualified Him to be the Savior of the world.

Conclusion

The historical implications of the great debate are unmistakable. This is the last verbal confrontation between Jesus and His opponents. They have tried to resist Him with words, now their last hope is some kind of quiet arrest and execution. In this final debate, all of the most powerful and influential segments of Jewish religious and political life have formed a coalition of conspiracy against the Messiah.

While the Lord Jesus did not deliberately or with malice seek to make the religious elite look like fools, it could not be avoided. While they tried to humiliate Him with debating tactics, He confronted them with the truth. In their blind rejection of Him as Messiah, they could not see the futility of their efforts, nor the fact that all the while the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Christ were being fulfilled. From here on, there is no turning back for the nation and its leaders. Their course is set on the cross.

In addition to its historical significance this text has a great deal to say to men today. It is noteworthy to observe that the entire section can be summarized by a question mark. The entire debate centers around crucial or critical questions.

I would like to suggest that questions can often be an indication of unbelief and rebellion. Questions frequently disclose an argumentative spirit. The book of Malachi illustrates the same kind of stubborn independence as was shown by the religious leaders (cf. 1:2,6; 2:14, etc.). Job revealed a rebellious and unsubmissive spirit when he began to question God’s working in his life, and for this he was rebuked.
Besides being an indication of our own rebelliousness or unbelief, questions are also one of Satan’s most effective means of destroying the faith of men. It is no surprise that the fall of Adam (and, thus, of all mankind) began with a question, a challenge to the goodness of God (cf. Genesis 3:1).

Over and over young Christians have floundered in their faith due to the scoffing questions posed by an arrogant and unbelieving professor. And one reason why questions prove so effective is that the scoffer does not have to have any answers of his own; he need only be skilled with his questions. This is probably part of the reason why the Lord Jesus turned the question of His authority back to His interrogators. They had many questions, but one’s authority should never be based upon his ability to ask, but rather to answer the basic questions of life.

There are two particularly destructive types of question which are employed in this portion of Scripture. The first type of question is purely hypothetical. Such is the case of the question about marriage in the life after death. Remember that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, yet their whole question hangs upon its premise. So also was the possibility that a woman could be married to seven brothers, all of whom died without a son.

Hypothetical questions are the favorite food of the situationalist. He will pose a question in which only two alternatives are possible, both of which are sin. It would appear that the Christian must sin, taking the ‘lesser of two evils.’ This is an absolute denial of 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.”

The Bible tells us that God never puts us in a position where we must sin. The situationalist poses questions about situations in which sin seems unavoidable, but remember that these ‘situations’ are always hypothetical, and so they must be according to God’s Word. Unbelievers and skeptics love hypothetical questions because they ‘tempt’ the Christian to anticipate his actions in circumstances which God has promised we will never be found.

The second type of question which is employed here is that of asking a question but limiting the answers to two, both of which are wrong. 19 “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” There is only a yes or no answer allowed, and both answers might well be wrong. I greatly respect those who hold a strongly Calvinistic understanding of the Scriptures. While I do not fully agree with those who tell us that the only purpose of Christ’s death was to accomplish the salvation of the elect, 20 I disagree strongly with the kind of question which is often raised to support their view of the atonement: “For whom did Christ die: To make all men savable, or to save the elect?” Such a question in my opinion does not do justice to those who hold this doctrinal position. One need not resort to debating type tactics to prove one’s doctrinal position. Let us ask the question, “For whom did Christ die?” and then let the Scriptures answer as they will. We need not restrict the answers to our questions.

19 This method must be distinguished from that of the Savior in Mark 11:30, for in His question one answer was right and the other wrong.

20 My understanding of the doctrine of the atonement is that Christ died to save only the elect, not that Christ died only to save the elect. This is a very fine distinction. By it I mean that Christ died to pay the price for the sins of the whole world, and in this sense He is the Savior of all men (1 Timothy 4:10, 2 Peter 2:1). In the broadest sense, Christ’s death had a universal scope in that it paid the penalty of all men’s sins. However men’s sins are forgiven on the condition that the price is paid (which it is) and on the basis that men turn to God in faith for the benefits of the work accomplished by Christ. Only those who are the elect will turn to Christ as Savior. In the mind of God then the death of Christ from eternity past was purposed to pay the price for all men’s sins but to actually save only the elect. The best analogy is that parable recorded by Matthew (13:45-46) wherein the man finds a pearl of great value in the field. He purchased the field in order to possess the pearl. So, also, Christ died for the whole world to save the elect. We do no injustice to the sovereignty of God to acknowledge both truths. Yet the most rigid Calvinists maintain that He either died for all men or just the elect. Christ did not die to save all men; He died to save the elect. But He died to pay the penalty of sin for all men.
It is interesting to note that in our world, our entire reasoning process is founded upon the question. This is the scientific method. The difficulty is that such a mentality can never accept a question as authoritatively answered. No wonder we live in a day of skeptics and agnostics. It is the spirit of our age. Beware of questions!\[21\]

In this questioning age, even though the questions may be asked by scoffers (as they were asked of Jesus), let us always be ready to give a reasoned answer, “... always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15). As we give answers to the questions let us remember that even though we perfectly answer, convincing and converting men is God’s work at His discretion. Even the Lord did not convince His enemies.

Finally, let me say that while the motives of our Lord’s interrogators were wrong, and their methods despicable, nevertheless their questions touched upon the greatest issues of their day and ours: the source of our authority, the responsibility of men to God and government (we call it separation of church and state), the question of life after death, and the matter of Christ’s deity and humanity. These are the great questions of our day, and our Lord had answered them well. His answers may not be sufficient for the critic, but they are enough for the Christian.

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\[21\] By this I do not mean that we should not have an inquiring and critical thinking. We should leave our theology open to refinement and revision, but we must be able to say, “This one thing I know.” There are verities and certainties which constitute the foundation of our faith (cf. 1 Corinthians 15). Let us not be like those who are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).
Lesson 29:
The Biography of the Betrayer
(Matthew 26:1-16)

Introduction

I have thought much as to what the title of this message should be. One title that I find rather promising is this: “Great Falls from Little Flaws Grow.” This title suggests one of the principle lessons which a study of the fall of Judas should teach us; namely, that most falls are the predictable consequence of flaws left unattended, or perhaps even nurtured.

This was the case, for example, with David’s fall in his romantic encounter with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Contrary to what we might think, David’s problem began in the bedroom, not on the balcony. The Scriptures tell us that David had been lying in bed all day long, that he got up in the evening and went out on his roof. David stayed home in bed while his army was fighting a war (2 Samuel 11:1-2). David’s fall, like countless others, was not one wrong step, but the conclusion of a series of steps in the wrong direction. It was not an explosion, but an extended fizzle.

Today men are often excused for the most heinous crimes on the basis of what is called ‘temporary insanity.’ By this is implied that the guilty person would never have committed such a crime, but that for a brief moment in time, ‘he was not himself.’ Such an attitude is especially appealing to one guilty of that which is totally unacceptable and deplorable to society.

When I come to the treachery of Judas Iscariot in the betrayal of our Lord, I find the same mentality exhibited by many Christians—even biblical scholars. They seem to look upon the detestable act of Judas as some kind of momentary departure from his normal self, thereby lessening (in their minds) the guilt which he must bear for his betrayal of the Master. By this kind of thinking we not only distort the biblical account of his sin, but we also deceive ourselves as to the way we frequently fall into sin and bring reproach on the name of Christ.

As we look into the betrayal of the Savior by Judas Iscariot, it is my intention to define his act as the logical outcome of several basic flaws in his character, and to defend my contention that the Scriptures describe his traitorous intentions as premeditated and carefully deliberated.

The Biblical Necessity of the Betrayal

We must begin by stating unequivocally that the betrayal of Jesus by Judas was no accident, no unplanned event. It was an event decreed from the beginning of time. In fact, to be correct we should say before time began. “For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man through whom He is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22: cf. Acts 2:23, emphasis mine).

Not only was the death of the Lord Jesus decreed in eternity past, it was declared by the Old Testament prophets as well: “The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man through whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matthew 26:24). “I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me’” (John 13:18; cf. Acts 1:16-20).

I find it significant that in each gospel (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16; John 6:70-71) Judas is introduced for the first time by the author as the betrayer of Jesus. His character and ultimate destiny were known by our Lord from the start and revealed in the gospels at the very outset of his appearance.¹

¹ While Stewart’s motives may well be commendable, his theology leaves much to question in this statement as to our Lord’s choice of Judas:

“Even more important is the fact of Jesus’ estimate of Judas. The Master’s eye, accustomed to read all kinds of men, detected in Judas the makings of a real apostle; here was a man who had it in him to do splendid..."
The Biblical Reasons for the Betrayal

Some biblical scholars seem strangely reluctant to pursue the reasons for Judas’ betrayal of our Lord. On the other hand, some theories have little or no biblical support and must definitely be questioned. The Scriptures do suggest several reasons why Judas betrayed the Master, and these I believe to be sufficient.

First of all, we must grasp the fact that Judas, distinct from the eleven, was never a true believer. We know that the ‘Bread of Life’ discourse (John 6:22-71) caused many ‘followers’ of Jesus to turn aside, refusing His teaching of a Savior Who was a suffering substitute for men (John 6:60ff.). As an explanation for the turning away of the crowds, Jesus told His disciples that these unbelievers were not unknown or unexpected. One of them, known to Jesus, but not yet comprehended by the eleven, was Judas, the betrayer: “‘But there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him” (John 6:64).

Moments later Jesus said, “‘Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?’ Now He meant Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him” (John 6:70-71).

In the upper room, when Jesus washed the feet of the twelve, He distinguished between the need for what might be called daily cleansing and the once for all washing of regeneration. In addition, Jesus also differentiated between the eleven who were ‘clean,’ that is saved, and Judas, who was not:

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service for the Kingdom. Sometimes, indeed, it has been suggested that Jesus gave Judas a place near himself simply because it was necessary for God’s predestined plans that there should be a traitor in the disciple band. It cannot be too strongly insisted that any such theory is both absurd and irreligious. It turns predestination into fatalism. It is a slander on providence and on God’s ordering of the world. It degrades the sacred narrative to the level of solemn play acting. No, Jesus called Judas to be a disciple for the same reason for which he called the other eleven. He saw in him a man of noble promise and boundless possibilities. No doubt he saw other things as well—moral contradictions jostling one another in the man’s secret soul, strange conflicts of light and darkness, courage and cowardice, self-surrender and self-love. But that simply meant that he was a man of human passions, and it was out of such materials that Jesus fashioned his saints. He hoped to do it here. Judas, when he first became a disciple, was a potential man of God.” James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), pp. 189-190.

In my opinion, many well-intentioned efforts to protect God’s reputation in the matter of His responsibility for sin are achieved at the expense of His sovereignty.


“DeQuincey made the famous suggestion that Judas played the traitor in order to force Jesus’ hand. Writhing with impatience as he watched his master apparently squandering one opportunity after another of asserting himself and claiming the throne, Judas at last decided that if Jesus would not take action of his own accord, he would have to be compelled to act. But how? Obviously the way to do it would be to get Jesus into a compromising situation. Then he would be forced to bestir himself and manifest his power. Then the Kingdom would come. It is an ingenious theory; and if accepted, it would go far to rehabilitate the worst reputation in history. But it will not hold water. It represents Jesus as an irresolute, procrastinating Hamlet. In place of Judas the traitor it gives us Judas the misguided saint. Instead of a deep-dyed crime it speaks of an error of judgment. There is not a scrap of evidence for this in the Gospels. It is quite inconsistent with the words of stern condemnation which Jesus himself used about his disciple’s deed. An error of judgment, the rashness of a too enthusiastic follower, Jesus would certainly have pardoned. But of Judas he could only say—‘Woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! Good were it for that man if he had never been born’” (Mark 14:21). No, this explanation must be set aside.” Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ*, pp. 191-192.

3 There are two Greek words used by John in this passage, *louo*, ‘to bathe,’ and *nipto*, ‘to wash up.’ Trench says of the difference between these terms: “… *niptō* almost always express(es) the washing of a part of the body… while *louēin*, which is not so much ‘to wash’ as ‘to bathe’… implies always, not the washing of a part of
“Jesus said to him (Peter), ‘He who has bathed (louo) needs only to wash (nipto) his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.’ For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, ‘Not all of you are clean’” (John 13:10-11).

From these Scriptures we conclude that Judas was an unbeliever, a son of perdition (John 17:12). As an unbeliever, Judas failed to grasp who Jesus really was. Like Satan, who progressively came to control Judas, there was a stubborn refusal to submit to Jesus as Lord of all. This insubordination may have been carefully concealed, but Judas’ own words betrayed his condition. When Jesus announced during the Passover meal that one of the twelve would betray him, the eleven all responded, “Surely not I, Lord?” (Matthew 26:22). But when Judas spoke to the Savior, he said, “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” (Matthew 26:25). Granted, this is a subtle slip of the tongue, but nonetheless an indication of the condition of the heart of Judas.

The second reason given for the betrayal of Jesus is that of greed. This condition is most obvious from several evidences. John is careful to inform us that Judas functioned as the treasurer of this little band (John 12:6). Judas was especially irritated by Mary’s seemingly wasteful use of her expensive perfume to anoint Jesus. While the formal reason for his protest was that this could have been sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor, the truth was that he resented not being able to steal from the proceeds which he would have had in his keeping.

Another evidence of Judas’ greed is to be found in his dealings with the religious leaders. His first recorded words with them were, “What are you willing to give me to deliver Him up to you?” (Matthew 26:15). Many scholars find it difficult to believe that a desire for money, especially a sum as insignificant as thirty pieces of silver, could compel him to sell out the Savior. But Jesus was not the master of Judas; money was. It is amazing what men will do, even for a small amount of money.

The third reason for Judas’ ignominious act was that of ambition and self-seeking. This I arrive at by inference and thus some may not consider the evidence compelling. Several things suggest ambition to me. Judas was, in the final analysis, possessed by Satan to do this dastardly deed (John 6:70; 13:2,27). We should expect Judas to manifest the character traits of Satan, one of which was ambition and self-seeking (cf. Isaiah 14:13-15; 1 Timothy 3:7). I would expect that Judas initially joined this intimate group that followed the Savior expecting to further his own position (not unlike the ambitions of some of the other disciples, cf. Luke 22:24).

Some Bible students have determined by careful study that Judas was sitting in the place of honor, second only to Jesus, during the last supper. Many have gone on to suggest from this that Jesus placed Judas here as a symbol...” R. W. Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Marshallton, Delaware: The National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.) p. 151.


5 “The costly perfume is identified as nard, the aromatic oil extracted from a root native to India. To retain the fragrance of nard, enough ointment for one application was sealed in small alabaster flasks. The long neck of the flask had to be broken to release the aroma. Early in the first century Pliny the Elder (Natural History XIII. iii. 19) remarked that “the best ointment is preserved in alabaster.” The value of the perfume, and its identification as nard, suggests that it was a family heirloom that was passed on from one generation to another, from mother to daughter.” William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 492.

6 “John characterizes him (Judas) as ‘a thief,’ his word indicating something like a sneak-thief.” Morris, John, p. 578. (The actual term employed is kleptēs, from which we derive the word kleptomaniac.)

7 “Yet none the less do we mark the deep symbolic significance of it all, in that the Lord was, so to speak, paid for out of the Temple money which was destined for the purchase of sacrifices, and that He, Who took on Him the form of a servant, was sold and bought at the legal price of a slave (Exodus 21:32).” Alford Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), II, p. 477.

8 “Around a low Eastern table, oval or rather elongated, two parts covered with a cloth, and standing or else suspended, the single divans or pillows are ranged in the form of an elongated horseshoe, leaving free one end of the table, somewhat as in the accompanying woodcut. A represents the table, B B respectively the ends of the...”
kind of last appeal to him to change his mind. But the text gives us nothing to support this conjecture. Indeed, the text (John 13) implies that when the disciples entered the banquet room, they jockeyed for the best positions and the seat of honor. They ignored the basin placed by the door which would have been used by the most humble servant to wash the feet of those entering. This is what Jesus did as an example of humility. So it would seem that Judas had the seat of honor because he asserted himself most to get it.9

The fourth and perhaps final reason for the betrayal of Jesus by Judas was that he had long contemplated it, and for some time, intended to do it. I must confess that I was not prepared for this reason as I began my study.

Then I came across this verse in John: “But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, ‘Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii, and given to the poor people?’” (John 12:4-5). This passage seems to indicate that Judas’ act was the result of considerable deliberation and a rather long-standing decision.10 Then, as I began to investigate the Greek term used here (mello) I found it was often em-

two rows of single divans on which each guest reclines on his left side, with his head (C) nearest the table, and his feet (D) stretching back towards the ground.

So far for the arrangement of the table. Jewish documents are equally explicit as to that of the guests. It seems to have been quite an established rule that, in a company of more than two, say of three, the chief personage or Head—in this instance, of course, Christ—reclined on the middle divan. We know from the Gospel narrative that John occupied the place on His right, at that end of the divans—as we may call it—at the head of the table. But the chief place next to the Master would be that to His left, or above Him. In the strife of the disciples, which should be accounted the greatest, this had been claimed, and we believe it to have been actually occupied, by Judas. This explains how, when Christ whispered to John by what sign to recognise the traitor, none of the other disciples heard it. It also explains, how Christ would first hand to Judas the sop, which formed part of the Paschal ritual, beginning with him as the chief guest at the table, without thereby exciting special notice. Lastly, it accounts for the circumstance that, when Judas, desirous of ascertaining whether his treachery was known, dared to ask whether it was he, and received the affirmative answer, no one at the table knew what had passed.” Edersheim, Life and Times, II, p. 494.

9 “There is, we believe, ample evidence that he not only claimed, but actually obtained, the chief seat at the table next to the Lord. This, as previously explained, was not, as is generally believed, at the right, but at the left of Christ, not below, but above Him, on the couches or pillows on which they reclined.” Ibid., p. 493.

10 Significantly, Lane quotes this remark by Stauffer: “It may be that Judas, the non-Galilean, had for months been a secret agent of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin assigned to work among the Galilean’s disciples. At any rate, he regarded the capture of the man who had been proclaimed a blasphemer and pseudo-prophet (John 11:57) as his bounden duty. For he took an oath pledging himself to commit the betrayal—an oath that may well have included a curse upon himself should he fail to carry out the task he had undertaken.” Lane, Mark, p. 496, fn. 27.
ployed by John, and sometimes with the sense of intention or volition.11 “And this He was saying to test him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do” (John 6:6; cf. 7:35; Acts 20:7,13; 27:30).

Finally, I discovered this marginal rendering for John 6:71: “Now He meant Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was intending to betray Him” (John 6:71 NASV, marginal rendering). Judas’ actions were no impulse, no quick decision. I believe that he had at least toyed with the idea of a betrayal for months.

Putting all of these factors together, let me attempt to construct the process by which Judas came to his fateful decision to betray the Lord Jesus. I must caution you that there is a good deal of conjecture here, but at least we may gain a better grasp of what may have happened and why.

Distinct from the eleven,12 Judas joined Jesus in a state of unbelief. The faith of the eleven was limited, but real. Not so with Judas. Judas had some other reason(s), then, for joining this band of disciples. I would suspect that he at least regarded Jesus as a messianic hopeful who had charismatic appeal and the ability to attract and motivate the masses. He perhaps perceived of Jesus as a man who was putting together an organization to revolt against Rome and to physically restore Israel to its rightful place in the sun.

These hopes were often threatened by what Judas heard Jesus teach. He spoke more of spiritual reform than of social and political action and revolution. A real crises must have come to head in the ‘bread of life discourse’ of Jesus in John chapter six, for there, when the crowds were ready to forcibly make Jesus their King (as Judas had hoped for) Jesus declined and began to teach of His self-sacrifice and atoning death. The crowds departed, never again to follow Jesus (John 6:66), and, in my mind, Judas mentally departed as well, but for some strange reason he still followed as a disciple.

Judas, like the others, had left all to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:27), but he had expected a little return on his investment by now. Any enterprising businessman is willing to deny himself of some luxuries in the hope of making a profit, but too much time had passed and no hope of advantage was on the horizon. Jesus began to talk more and more of death, not of defeat for the Romans, and glory for Israel, Himself, and especially the disciples. He had charge of the money bag. He would help himself from time to time. After all, he deserved it for all the sacrifices he had made. A man should see a little fruit from his labors.

Perhaps, too, Judas gave thought to taking over the organization. He, no doubt, was a man of many capabilities (which may have earned him the job of treasurer for the group). If Jesus would not use the organization that was beginning to take shape under His ministry, why not remove Jesus and take over himself? Such thoughts, I would suggest, may well have been entertained in the mind of Judas over the months approaching the final assault on Jerusalem.

With the triumphal entry, the hopes of the betrayer may well have been rekindled one final time. But it was not long until the inevitable became obvious. Jesus seemed to almost deliberately antagonize the opposition and to alienate those who could have offered their support to the cause of the Kingdom.

The last straw for Judas was what occurred at the dinner party in Jesus’ honor at the home of Simon the Leper (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8). Mary foolishly squandered (in Judas’ mind, at least) an expensive perfume on Jesus.13 Should this not have been sold and the money given to the poor?14 Even the other dis-

12 “The one non-Galilean, probably, was Judas Iscariot. His name has usually been interpreted, following several early Greek manuscripts, as meaning ‘man of Kerioth.’ If so, he was from either Kerioth in Moab, on the east of the Dead Sea, or, more likely, Kerioth-Hezron in the deep south of Judaea. In view of his eventual treachery, it is no wonder that the Gospels always portray him as the odd man out; but it may well be that he never really felt at home among this motley crowd of Galileans. Many motives for his volte-face have been suggested, but it is possible that a Judaean disdain for an essentially Galilean movement was among them.” R. T. France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), pp. 53-54.
13 “Such gifts were given to kings. Only such a gift would be a worthy expression of her deep devotion and profound love for the Master. It was customary to anoint the heads of Rabbis and special guests at marriage feasts,
ciples agreed. But the waste of money was perhaps only secondary to Judas. The real irritation may have been Je-
sus’ words of commendation and His explanation that Mary’s anointing was in preparation for His burial. Here He
was, heralded and welcomed by those in Jerusalem. Here was the day of opportunity for Jesus, and He can talk only
of death. How could anyone (so thought Judas) be so shortsighted?15

The betrayal of Jesus would do several things, Judas may have reasoned. First, it would give Jesus the
death which He seemed determined to have. Also, it would remove Jesus as the leader of this movement and give
Judas the opportunity to take over and do it right. Finally, it would provide an opportunity to recover a few dollars
that he had every right to expect.

And so, it would seem, a lethal combination of greed, ambition and rebellion met in this man Judas. For
years he played the role, but always looking out for his own interests. Such sin cannot be brooded upon and con-
cealed forever.

The Biblical Responsibility for the Betrayal

Perhaps we have gained some insight into the reasons why Judas could ever contemplate such a heinous
crime. But many are not content to leave the matter here. Who was ultimately responsible for this inconceivable
crime against the Christ?

While it is clear that God ordained the betrayal, it is just as evident that He did not implant the idea of be-
trayal in the mind of Judas nor did He compel this disciple to sin. In the words of our Lord, “For indeed, the Son of
Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man through whom He is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22).

Not only was the betrayal purposed by God, but it was also promoted by Satan. The thought of betrayal
was, in some way, suggested by satanic influence (John 13:2). Having succumbed to this suggestion, Satan finally
entered Judas during the Passover meal, and empowered him to carry out his own initiative, in harmony with the
purpose of God and the prompting of Satan (John 13:27).

In the final analysis we must place the responsibility for the sin of Judas where the Scripture puts it—
squarely on Judas himself. While God is sovereign and He utilizes the sins of men to accomplish His own purposes
(cf. Psalm 76:10), He does not make men sin.16 Also, Judas can never say, “The Devil made me do it.” The text is
clear that Satan did not enter into Judas until the agreement had already been made with the religious leaders. Sa-
tan gained more and more control of Judas as he progressively gave in to his sinful intentions.

While we may never be able to solve the mystery of the relationship between the sovereignty of God and
the responsibility of man, the Scripture says that both are true: “This man, delivered up by the predetermined plan
and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23).

but Mary anointed with the most expensive perfume both the head and the feet of her Lord.” J. W. Shepard, The

14 “It was natural for them to think in terms of provision for the poor, for it was customary on the evening
of Passover to remember the poor with gifts (M. Pesachim IX. 11; X. 1; cf. John 13:29). It was also the practice to
give as charity one part of the second tithe normally spent in Jerusalem during the feast.” Lane, Mark, p. 493.

15 The actual chronology of events would seem to be: (1) the dinner party at which Jesus was anointed by
Mary (John 12:2-3); (2) the triumphal entry (John 12:12f.); (3) the meeting of the Sanhedrin two days before the
Passover (Matthew 26:1-5); (4) Judas’ meeting with the Jewish leaders and agreeing on the price of His betrayal
(Matthew 26:14-16).

16 Morris aptly quotes Calvin: “It would be wrong for anyone to infer from this that Judas’ fall should be
imputed to God rather than to himself, in that necessity was laid on him by the prophecy.” Morris, John, p. 728, fn.
43.
The Two Roads to Renown
(26:6-13)

One cannot help but be deeply impressed with the contrast in Matthew 26:6-13 between Judas and Mary. Both are destined for renown, but by two completely different roads. Mary will earn fame, Judas infamy. And in the process we will learn some of the critical contrasts between those whose memory will become a blemish and those who will be a blessing. Of Judas our Lord can only say, “It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matthew 26:24).

But of Mary, we read, “Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her” (Matthew 26:13).

Let us give careful thought to the contrast of these two figures.

Both, I believe, were more sensitive and alert to our Lord’s predictions of His coming death. The others still seemed to fail to grasp the urgency of the moment. But Judas perceived of the death of Christ as the burial of all that he had hoped for. Mary sensed that the death of Christ was the basis of hope.

Judas, save his last hypocritical act of devotion, had little affection for Jesus. He was not his Lord, but only a Rabbi. Jesus was more an opportunity to get ahead than the object of affection and worship. Not so with Mary. Jesus was her beloved Lord. Her anointing of Jesus was the abandon of deep affection and devotion. While Judas begrudged Jesus for His failure to seize His opportunity, Mary was filled only with gratitude.

To Judas money was something to be gained and grasped, even if it were done deceitfully. Money spent on Jesus was considered wasted (Matthew 26:8).

To Mary, money was simply one means of expressing her devotion and adoration of the Savior. She gladly gave of that which was her best.

The whole matter boils down to one simple issue, “What do you think of Jesus?” Judas did not value Him at all. He would dispose of Him for the price of a slave. Mary loved Him as no one else in her life. She would gladly dispose of what was most precious if it would bring pleasure to Him.

Men today frequently give Jesus a polite and dutiful tip of the hat, but are they willing to lay those things which mean the most to them at His feet? My friend, do you view the generous giving of some as foolishness? Do you look at those who give their lives in the service of the Savior as a tragic waste? That is the attitude of Judas.

Conclusion:

Biblical Lessons From the Betrayal

Historically the last piece of the puzzle (of religious resistance) is in place. The religious leaders were in desperate straits. They must find a way to be rid of Jesus, but they are forced to make their move out of the sight of the masses (Matthew 26:3-5). Judas must have seemed like the answer to their prayers. He offered the assistance of one on the inside, one who could lead a task force to arrest the Savior at one of Jesus’ secluded nighttime retreats.

For us the person of Judas is a warning of the danger and the destruction of unbelief. The unbelief of Judas did not hinder the purposes of God, but it brought this man to his own destruction. May I say to you, my

17 “When Judas told the armed mob that he would indicate the man whom they had come to arrest by a kiss, the word he uses is the Greek word philein which is the normal word for a kiss; but when it is said that Judas actually did kiss Jesus, the word that is used is kataphilein, which is the word for a lover’s kiss, and which means to kiss repeatedly, passionately, fervently.” William Barclay, Matthew, II, p. 370.

18 “Ordinarily it was considered immodest for a woman to wear her hair loose, this fact giving rise to the supposition by some that Mary of Bethany was rescued by Jesus from a life of shame early in His ministry. This act, however, does not brand Mary as a woman of loose character, nor does it identify her with Mary of Magdala, the woman from whom Jesus cast out seven devils. In Mary’s complete devotion, she threw all mere custom to the winds, in a love of absolute abandon.” Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels, p. 531.
unsaved friend, you can reject and resist the Savior, but you cannot defeat Him. Your rejection and rebellion are not only futile, but fatal.

Judas warns us that it is possible to be in very close proximity to the Savior without possessing salvation. You cannot judge one’s spiritual state by his associations. Neither can you determine a man’s eternal destiny on the basis of his activities. Judas was with the Lord Jesus, and he (I assume) performed the same signs and miracles that the other eleven did, but that did not make him a Christian. One’s true spiritual condition is revealed by his affection and devotion for the Lord Jesus Christ, and by his estimate of His worth and the value of His atoning death. For the Christian Jesus is no mere teacher. He is his Lord and his God (John 20:28).

For the Christian I believe we find both a warning and an encouragement in the betrayal of Judas. We are warned of the danger of incubating sin in our lives. We are reminded that in spiritual things many (by human analogy) of our ‘flat tires’ are not blowouts, but slow leaks. Many of the sins which appear to occur so spontaneously, so unexpectedly, are really matters which we have long deliberated. Such was the case with Judas, and with David, and many other biblical personalities.

The encouragement to me is found in the contrast between Judas and Peter. It is the difference between betrayal and denial. Satan wanted Judas and he got him. This was because Judas had rejected Jesus as Messiah and was ‘on his own’ with no divine enablement to resist Satan. Second, Judas’ goals, attitudes, and desires were nearly synonymous with Satan’s. Satan also desired Peter (Luke 22:31), but he could not have him. While Peter sometimes lapsed into thinking the thoughts of the world and of Satan (Matthew 16:23), he was one who belonged to the Savior, Who kept His own (John 17:12) and Who prays for His own (Luke 22:32). Judas was an unbeliever whose betrayal led to everlasting torment, while Peter, as a believer, fell only for a time, and was restored so that he could strengthen others by the grace he received (Luke 22:32). While the difference between a Judas and Peter at times seems hard for us to distinguish (cf. Matthew 26:8, John 12:4-5), the Lord knows His own and is able to keep them. What a comfort there is in this truth as revealed in this prayer of our Lord Jesus: “Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are” (John 17:11b).
Lesson 30:
The Last Supper
(Luke 22:1-23)

Introduction

Those of you who know me rather well realize that I am, at heart and in fact, a country boy. Well, I had a rather embarrassing thing happen to me while I was driving through some cattle country in east Texas a few weeks ago. I saw an animal standing by a water tank, but I could not tell for certain whether it was a horse or a cow. You must believe that this is normally not a difficult decision for me. Since I was driving with a fellow even older and wiser in the ways of rural life, I asked him what it was. With a glitter in his eye, he responded, “Well, I’d guess that it was about the longest-necked cow I ever did see, but if you told me it was a big-bellied horse I shore wouldn’t call you a liar!” Regardless of what you might be thinking, that animal had what seemed to be the characteristics of both a cow and a horse.

I know you are beginning to wonder what all of this has to do with the biblical account of the Last Supper, recorded in the gospel of Luke, chapter 22. Quite frankly, it is a problem similar to that which I faced with that animal standing by that water tank. The Last Supper is a kind of hybrid, a mixture of an Old Testament Passover celebration, along with the institution of a New Testament Lord’s Table (or communion) celebration.

An accurate exposition of this passage is crucial to us for several reasons. First of all it deals with one of the two ordinances of the church established by our Lord. If this celebration described in Luke 22 is not a typical observance of the Lord’s table (as I will endeavor to prove), then we are in danger of error when we use it as a pattern for our communion remembrances today.

Also, this passage is the source of three difficult problems to which the careful student of Scripture should have some kind of answer.

The first major problem which we face in this passage is a textual one. One of the Greek manuscripts omits the last half of verse 19 and all of verse 20. It would appear that this deletion was an attempt to solve the problem raised by the reference to two different cups of wine in the passage. Such a change in the text seems completely unnecessary to me.

The second problem is one of harmony and chronology. It hinges on an apparent discrepancy between the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the gospel of John. It is a significant problem because of its

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1 “There is a textual problem here of great difficulty. In the ‘shorter’ text, followed by NEB, Goodspeed, where verses 19b-20 are omitted, the cup is given before the bread. In the ‘longer’ text (RSV, TEV, JB, Common Bible) the cup is mentioned twice. The shorter text is favoured by many on the grounds that the words are not likely to have been omitted if original and that they look like an insertion from I Corinthians 11:24f. to bring the passage into line with current liturgical practice. It is countered that the disputed words are found in all Greek MSS save one (Codex D) that Justin Martyr accepted them c. AD 150 (Apology i. 66; this is older than our oldest Greek MS) and that they may have been omitted by scribes who could not understand two references to the cup. On the whole it seems that the longer text is to be preferred.” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to St. Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 305.

2 The problem, simply stated, is this. John’s gospel clearly sets the time of the death of Christ at the same hour in which the Passover lambs were being slain (John 18:28; 19:14,36). In apparent contradiction to this, the synoptic gospels speak of the last supper as though it were the observance of the actual Passover. There is therefore an apparent 24-hour discrepancy in the gospels. In the synoptics, Jesus observed the Passover with His disciples; in John, Jesus was the Passover Lamb, put to death at the time of the slaughter of the Passover lamb, before the Passover meal was eaten.
implications, first with regard to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures, then for the interpretation of the Last Supper, and finally for a determination of the day on which our Lord was put to death. A casual reading of the synoptic gospels would seem to indicate that Jesus observed the Passover with His disciples, while John’s account would have Him put to death before its enactment (cf. John 18:28). While the explanations of this problem may differ, conservative scholars would agree that there is a solution.

The third problem relates to the great controversy over the precise meaning of the words of Jesus, “This is My body.” Roman Catholicism believes that each remembrance of the Lord’s death is a reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ, and that the elements actually become the literal flesh and blood of the Savior. Others hold that while such a miraculous transformation is not necessary, the Lord is somehow present with, but not in, the elements as they are partaken. In either of these cases, the observance is regarded as a sacrament, the actual conveyance of grace to the participant. The preferable interpretation, that this is the symbolic remembrance of our Lord’s death, avoids this error, while stressing the significance and symbolic meaning of this ordinance.

Liberal ‘scholars’ have little difficulty here. They delight in pointing out this ‘error’ to the conservative, who holds to biblical inerrancy. They are free to accept John’s account and discard the synoptics as inaccurate, or to regard the synoptics as correct, and John to be in error.

Conservative scholarship has posed several possible harmonizations of the gospel records, three of which are currently most popular: (1) On the basis of some historical data, it is known that there was a division within the nation as to when the month of Nisan was to commence. Because of this confusion over the calendar, there ended up being two days on which the passover lambs were slaughtered and two days on which Passover was observed, one, a day earlier than the other. Jesus could then have observed the (first) Passover with the disciples, while He died as the true Passover Lamb on the second, a day later. (2) There is also evidence that some (perhaps the Galilean Jews) commenced the new day in the morning, at daybreak, while the Judean Jews began the new day in the evening at six o’clock. If such were the case, the synoptics were reckoning from the Galilean time frame, and John from the Judean.


This view is usually called ‘transubstantiation’ by the theologians: “The theory of transubstantiation, accepted by Rome as a dogma in 1215, is an attempt to explain the statements of Christ: ‘This is my body,’ and ‘This is my blood’ (Mark 14:22,24) as applied to the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. It is insisted that the ‘is’ must be taken with the strictest literalism. But to our senses the bread and wine seem to remain exactly as they were even when consecrated. There is no perceptible miracle of transformation. The explanation is found in terms of a distinction between the so-called ‘substance’ (or true reality) and the ‘accidents’ (the specific, perceptible characteristics). The latter remain, but the former, i.e., the substance of bread and wine, is changed into that of the body and blood of Christ.” Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Transubstantiation,” Baker’s Dictionary of Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 530.

This theory is labeled ‘consubstantiation.’ It is the view of Lutheran theologians: “In Luther’s own language, the actual body and blood of Christ exist ‘in, with, or under’ the elements of bread and wine. No permanent association is postulated: the relationship is confined to the sacramental action. The transformation is effected by the Word of God, not by priestly consecration.” A. Skevington Wood, “Consubstantiation,” Ibid., p. 138.

“The taking, breaking and distribution of bread were regular features of the Passover observance and would cause no surprise. But as He gave it to His followers Jesus said, This is my body. These words have caused tremendous controversy in the church. The critical point is the meaning of is. Some argue for a change of the bread into the body of Christ, but the verb can mean very various kinds of identification, as we see from such statements as ‘I am the door,’ ‘I am the bread of life,’ ‘that rock was Christ.’ In this case identity cannot be in mind, for Jesus’ body was physically present at the time. It must be used in some such sense as ‘represents,’ ‘signifies,’ or, perhaps,
It should be safe to assume that this event of the Last Supper is significant for every Christian to rightly understand and apply.

The Setting of the Last Supper

It is very difficult for the western mind to grasp what took place on this night without considerable preparation of mind. There is little in our own culture and experience that we can relate to this event. We shall assume, on much evidence, that this meal was, indeed, a Passover celebration.

The Passover feast commenced the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was a week-long celebration. Preparations for the Passover meal began on Thursday morning with a diligent search for any leaven which might be in the house. Leaven was not to be used in the bread which was baked in preparation for the original exodus from Egypt because there would not be time to bake bread that would have to rise (Exodus 12:34). Also, leaven was a symbol of evil, and was therefore not to be present (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Also, on Thursday morning the unleavened bread would be prepared for the feast. In the afternoon, the Passover lamb would be taken to the temple and slain. After sunset the actual Passover meal was observed. Normally, this was a family gathering, with not less than ten, nor usually more than twenty at the table.

The Passover liturgy related to the meal as it was observed in the days of our Lord has been preserved:

“(1) Preliminary course. The head of the household pronounced the prayer of sanctification (qiddus), comprising the benediction for the festival and the first cup (the qiddus cup). The preliminary course (karpas), consisting of green herbs, bitter herbs and a sauce of fruit juice was eaten without bread. The meal was brought in but not yet eaten, the second cup was mixed with water and placed on the table, but not yet drunk.

(2) The Passover liturgy. The Passover service, in which the head of the household explained the special features of the Passover meal (Exod. 12:26) and proclaimed the outline of the story, the haggadah; the first part of the Passover Hallel (Psa. 113f.) was sung and the second cup (haggadah cup) was drunk.

(3) The main meal. The head of the household pronounced a benediction over the unleavened bread, which was distributed and the meal eaten which consisted of the Passover Lamb, mazzoth.

‘conveys’ (cf. Moffatt, ‘This means...’). The statement is a strong one and should not be watered down, but neither should it be overpressed.” Morris, p. 306.

Hoehner summarizes the evidence for this Last Supper being a Passover: “(1) the Synoptics explicitly state that the Last Supper was a Passover (Matth. 26:2,17,18,19; Mark 14:1,12,14,16; Luke 22:1,7,8,13,15). (2) It took place, as required by the Law (Deut. 16:7), within the gates of Jerusalem even though it was so crowded at the time. (3) The Upper Room was made available without difficulty in keeping with the Passover custom. (4) The Last Supper was eaten at night (Matt. 26:20; Mark 14:17; John 13:30; 1 Cor. 11:23) which was an unusual time for a meal. (5) Jesus limited Himself to the twelve rather than eating with the large circle of followers (which corresponds to the Passover custom). (6) A reclining posture at the table was for special occasions only. (7) The meal was eaten in levitical purity (John 13:10). (8) Jesus broke the bread during the meal (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22) rather than as customarily done at the beginning of the meal. (9) Red wine was drunk which was only for special occasions. (10) Some of the disciples thought that Judas left (John 13:29) to purchase items for the feast which would not have been necessary if the Last Supper was a day before the Passover since he would have had the whole next day (Nisan 14) available for this purpose. (11) Some of the disciples thought that Judas left to give to the poor (John 13:29) which was customary on Passover night. (12) The Last Supper ends with the singing of a hymn which would have been the second half of the Passover hallel. (13) Jesus did not return to Bethany which was outside of Jerusalem’s limit but went to spend the night on the Mount of Olives which was within the enlarged city limits for the purpose of the Passover feast. (14) The interpretation of specific elements of the meal was a part of the Passover ritual.” Harold W. Hoehner, Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 76-77.
bitter herbs (Exod. 12:8) and wine (optional). After grace the third cup (cup of blessing) was drunk.

(4) Conclusion. The second part of the *Hallel* (Pss. 115-118) was sung and a benediction pronounced over the fourth cup (*Hallel* cup).”

The biblical text gives us other significant backdrop to the Last Supper. In verses 7-13 Luke told of the preparations that were made for the supper. It is obvious that the location and details of the Last Supper were a closely guarded secret. The disciples did not know where the Passover was to be held nor what preparations had been made. Luke alone tells us that Peter and John (two of the most intimate of the disciples) were sent to handle the preparations. They were not told the location of the house where they were to gather, but were to discern that by a set of circumstances, all of which were out of the ordinary. They would see a man carrying a clay water vessel. This was unusual because normally these pots were borne by the women, while men carried water in skins. When they followed this man to his destination they were to ask the owner of the house for a room for the Teacher to use to keep the Passover (verse 11). He would then show them where they were to make their preparations.

All of this shroud of secrecy was on account of Judas, who had already agreed to betray the whereabouts of the Lord, and who waited for an opportune time, out of the sight of the crowds (verses 3-6). So far as Judas was concerned there would have been no better time than during the meal itself. Jesus carefully removed this option by keeping Judas ‘in the dark’ until it was too late for him to notify the officials as to their exact place of meeting. Judas, you will recall (John 13:27-30), left sometime during the meal to disclose the location where Jesus could be apprehended. I suspect that he led the temple guard first to the upper room, and, then, finding Him already gone, began to search for Him at some of His most frequently used places of refuge and privacy.

John includes the account of the washing of the feet of the disciples by our Lord (John 13:1-11). It was customary for the feet of the guests of a house to be washed as they entered. This would usually be done by the lowest slave. When the disciples entered the upper room it seems as though no one saw the basin and the water and towel awaiting at the entrance to the upper room. Personally, I suspect that they were all too preoccupied with their efforts to be seated in the place of honor at the table. We do know that there was a spirit of self-assertion and the disciples, at this very meal, disputed over who was regarded as the greatest (verse 24).

Early in the Passover observance, Jesus removed his garments, girded Himself with a towel, and began to wash the feet of the disciples. It is probable that He began with Peter, who seems to have been reclining across

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8 It is possible that this house belonged to Mary, the mother of Mark, and that this upper room was frequently used by Jesus and the apostles, though there is no way to conclusively prove this (cf. Acts 1:13; 12:12).

9 Edersheim believes that this footwashing was an adaptation of the customary handwashing which was a part of the Passover ceremony:

‘The next part of the ceremonial was for the Head of the Company to rise and ‘wash hands.’ It is this part of the ritual of which St. John records the adaptation and transformation on the part of Christ. The washing of the disciples’ feet is evidently connected with the ritual of ‘handwashing.’ Now this was done twice during the Paschal Supper: the first time by the Head of the Company alone, immediately after the first cup; the second time by all present, at a much later part of the service, immediately before the actual meal (on the Lamb &c.). If the footwashing had taken place on the latter occasion, it is natural to suppose that, when the Lord rose, all the disciples would have followed His example, and so the washing of their feet would have been impossible. Again, the footwashing, which was intended both as a lesson and as an example of humility and service, was evidently connected with the dispute ‘which of them should be appointed to be greatest.’ If so, the symbolical act of our Lord must have followed close on the strife of the disciples, and on our Lord’s teaching what in the Church constituted rule and greatness. Hence the act must have been connected with the first handwashing—that by the Head of the Company—immediately after the first cup, and not with that at a later period, when much else had intervened.” Alford Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), II, p. 497.
from Jesus at the end of the table. Peter absolutely recoiled at the implications of this action by His Lord. They may have been wrong to have failed to wash one another’s feet, but Peter was not about to allow Jesus to undertake such a humble task.

What seemed such a magnanimous reticence and refusal on Peter’s part was met with a strong rebuke, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (John 13:8). Peter failed to grasp the fact that this matter of footwashing by our Lord symbolized the underlying purpose and spirit of our Lord’s coming. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). In the laying aside of His garments and assuming the role and work of a slave, Jesus beautifully portrayed what has been called the ‘kenosis’ (emptying) of Jesus Christ, described by Paul in Philippians chapter two. In order to bring redemption and salvation to men, Jesus willingly set aside His rightful claims to submission and service as God; He veiled His splendor and visible glory in human flesh, and came to die as a transgressor in the place of sinful man.

For Peter to refuse to allow Jesus to wash his feet was to reject the underlying principle upon which the mission of Jesus was based. More than this, to reject the principle of servanthood was to refuse one of the primary prerequisites of discipleship. No wonder Peter could have no part with Jesus and deny servanthood.

Peter characteristically overreacted. If this were the case, he would not be content with a mere footwashing; he would like a complete bath. Such enthusiasm, while commendable, was not necessary. Those who have been bathed (once for all) by regeneration (cf. Titus 3:5) need not have another bath, but only such daily washing as daily contact with the world requires.

We have spent considerable time in considering the scene of the Last Supper. Only one matter yet remains to be described, and that is the underlying mood(s) of this gathering. This is very important, I believe, because so many go back to this supper as the pattern for our observance of the Lord’s Table, and therefore, to be consistent, we should by all rights reproduce the mood as well. What, then, was the prevailing mood of this meal?

Surely it was one of expectation and anticipation. The events of the past week had risen popular messianic expectations to a crescendo. Something had to happen. Was the kingdom about to be ushered in? Mixed with this excitement and expectation was a kind of dread, for Jesus had clearly said to His disciples that He was going up to Jerusalem to die (Matthew 20:17-19), and to some extent the disciples sensed that death awaited Him and them in Jerusalem (John 11:16).

There was also an atmosphere of contention and strife, and personal attitudes of self-aggrandizement. Each man argued with the rest about who was the greatest (Luke 22:24). There was also a distinct mood of grief concerning our Lord’s disclosure of the fact that He would die and that this would be achieved by a betrayer, who was one of the twelve.

All in all, it was not the ideal mood for a remembrance of the Passover, nor for the institution of the Lord’s Table. While we may wish it to have been some other way, we know our own hearts well enough to believe that such an atmosphere is realistic. It may not have been a lovely scene, but it was a likely one.

The Last Supper
(22:14-23)

Several observations are crucial to our understanding of this event. First of all, let me remind you of my assumption that this meal was, indeed, a Passover celebration. It is significant that while the other gospels refer to the twelve as ‘the twelve’ or ‘the disciples,’ Luke here uses the term ‘apostles’ (verse 14). I believe this is significant. Normally the Passover meal was a family celebration, and not just a gathering of men. The fact that the Edersheim then goes on to point out the significance of this adaptation: “The act of externalism and self-righteousness represented by the washing of hands, and by which the Head of the Company was to be distinguished from all others and consecrated, He changed into a footwashing, in which the Lord and Master was to be distinguished, indeed, from the others—but by the humblest service of love, and in which He showed by His example what characterised greatness in the Kingdom, and that service was evidence of rule.” Ibid., p. 499

10 Cf. fn. 5, Morris, p. 306.
‘apostles’ were alone with Jesus suggests that this event had particular significance for the church, of which the apostles were the foundation (Ephesians 2:20). Here is one of the evidences that while this meal had implications for the Jews, it was designed also for the church.

Second, I would underscore the intense desire of our Lord to gather with the twelve for this meal: “And He said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15).

I suspect that this statement is pregnant with meaning. To begin with, let me suggest that it is hard to conceive that Jesus earnestly desired to eat this meal with the twelve because of the sympathetic understanding He would receive from them. While He knew that all but one truly loved Him, they had no real grasp of what shape His mission was about to take. While He thought of the cross, they argued about their crowns (verse 24).

I believe that from the viewpoint of God this Passover meal was the final observance of this feast, for all that it had memorialized was about to be greatly overshadowed by the work of the cross. Also, all that it anticipated was, in fact, achieved or made certain. Jesus was the Passover Lamb. There was no longer any need to put a lamb to death for the type had been superceded by its antitype, its fulfillment. The old covenant, being fulfilled in Christ, was to be set aside. The Kingdom, while still future, was certain to be established, because Messiah, at His first advent, had laid its foundation by His sacrificial death (cf. Isaiah 52:13–53:12). When Jesus once again takes up the cup, it will be in His Kingdom (verses 16,18). The eager anticipation of our Lord relates largely to the achievement of God’s purposes, and also to the association He has with God’s people at this meal.

There is, in my estimation, a distinct break between verses 18 and 19. Verses 15-18 describe the final observance of the Passover, now obsolete, so to speak, because of its supercession by the institution of the Lord’s Table. We should not at all be disturbed by the presence of the first cup, for it was simply one of the four cups associated with the Passover celebration. This cup was to be taken one final time, not to be taken up again until the establishment of the Kingdom.

In verses 19 and 20 our attention is turned from culmination and termination of the Passover celebration to the initiation of the Lord’s Table. Here, the symbols on the table which were a part of the Passover were reinvested with new meaning in the light of the work which the Lord Jesus was about to undertake. More than this, they symbolize the establishment of a new covenant between God and men. This is the new covenant which was prophesied by Jeremiah of old (Jeremiah 31:31-34). While the blood of the Passover lamb sufficed to withhold the judgment of God for a time, the blood of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus, actually took away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

The unleavened bread symbolizes the incarnation of God in human flesh. One Who had no sin in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). While the bread pertains to the earthly body and sinless life of the Lord Jesus, the wine is a visual symbol of His shed blood and violent death as the divine provision for men’s forgiveness of sin.

As I understand Luke’s account of the Last Supper, it is a subtle blending of two great symbolic remembrances, that of the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. As such, this is a unique event, never again to be repeated in the form (or with the mood) that it was in that upper room hours before the death of the Savior. While the two events, the Passover and the Lord’s Table, are related, they are not to be equated, nor to be remembered simultaneously, for the greater has made unnecessary the lesser.

The Last Supper, then, is never again to be reenacted. It was a unique event, intended to terminate one ceremony and to institute another. The Lord’s Supper is to be understood as having some similarities to both the Passover celebration of the Old Testament, and the Last Supper of the gospels, but yet fully unique, and exclusive so far as our present-day obligation to continue its observance. We are no more to equate our remembrance of the Lord’s Table with the Last Supper than we are to identify our baptism with the baptism of the Lord Jesus by John, for they are not the same at all. Related, yes; but completely distinct.

Application

What does all this mean in practical terms? First of all, it does not mean that we have no obligation to remember the Lord’s Supper. I have suggested that our obligation does not come from the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, nor does the pattern for our remembrance of the Lord. Our authority comes, I believe, from apostolic precept and apostolic practice. Paul’s instruction concerning the Lord’s Table was that which he received from the
Lord (1 Corinthians 11:23). What was taught by Paul in the epistles was practiced by the churches in Acts. It would appear that while the Lord’s Table was daily observed in the first days of the church (Acts 2:46), the settled practice was that it was done on the first day of each week during the assembly of the whole church (cf. Acts 20:7).

This passage in Luke suggests that we are wrong when we pattern our observance of this ordinance after that in the gospels. We must remember that while the Last Supper anticipated the death of the Lord Jesus, the Lord’s Supper memorializes it. While the atmosphere at the Last Supper was more akin to that of a funeral, the Lord’s Supper, while a solemn remembrance is a joyful one, more in the spirit of that meal recorded later by Luke in chapter 24, after the Lord had been raised from the dead.

I am greatly puzzled and perplexed by those who seem so lackadaisical about the remembrance of our Lord. Some seem to think that it makes little difference whether one does so weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually. Our Lord greatly desired this meal with the twelve, and I believe that our remembrance of Him is pleasing to Him. While the New Testament nowhere commands that we remember our Lord weekly, it would seem that this was the practice of the New Testament churches (Acts 20:7). The only two options which the Scriptures reveal is that of daily and weekly observance.

“But such frequent repetition can become dull and monotonous,” people protest. You must excuse me for being so frank, but I have yet to hear a couple deeply in love with each other protesting frequent physical expression of their love for each other. (And personally, I believe that our physical relationship with our mates is illustrative and instructive concerning our spiritual intimacy with Christ.) You see, when we observe the Lord’s Supper each week we do not remember an institution or an ordinance, we remember our Lord Himself. “Keep on doing this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19b, my translation).

The waning of our desire to express spiritual intimacy with our Lord is indicative, all too often, of a coldness of heart. Only Judas (as I understand it) chose not to be at the table with our Lord as this Last Supper was concluded and the Lord’s Supper was instituted.

While impressed with the significance of this Last Supper, I cannot overlook its simplicity. It is described in the most ordinary term. There is no elaborate ceremony given in explicit detail as, for example, we would find in the Old Testament. It is amazing how ceremony can often overshadow the symbolism of such an event. If there were ceremony detailed for us we would concentrate our attention and our energies on reproducing these same ritualistic forms. Spirituality, like beauty, is closely related to simplicity. Where deadness occurs, ceremony shortly follows. We are prone to substitute ritual for reality, details for devotion.

“But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him, and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.’ But the Lord answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:40-42).

Finally, I see in this event an excellent example of the way in which we must deal with the events and instructions of the Old Testament. Over and over people ponder how they should interpret and apply the Old Testament. One of my Hebrew professors, Dr. Bruce Waltke, once wisely advised, “When interpreting the Old Testament always ask the question, ‘Does the New Testament ratify, modify, or abrogate (nullify) this Old Testament teaching?’” As I understand the Last Supper, it does a little of each.11

11 “He spoke the words of institution in the setting of his last celebration of the Passover and “clearly referred to many features of the feast, assimilating some and changing others....” W. Marxsen, as quoted by Klappert, “The Lord’s Supper,” New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, II, p. 529.
Lesson 31:
Failure Lapse, Not Collapse—
A Biblical View of Failure
(Luke 22:24-33; 54-62)

Introduction

I have always wondered what it would be like to speak on a subject concerning which my training and experience has made me an expert. At last it has happened, for I would like to address the subject of failure.

While failure is not necessarily the most popular subject, it is one that is absolutely mandatory for all of us because failure is one of the few things all of us do frequently and skillfully.

The complexity of American life offers an abundance of opportunities to fail. Many grapple with an overwhelming sense of failure as an aftermath of divorce. Others may sense failure at the loss of a job or on the occasion of being passed over for a raise or a promotion. Failure can also be experienced at the heartbreaking disappointment of a wayward child. For the sincere Christian failure is a certainty when one focuses upon the rigorous requirements of discipleship given in the Scriptures. Even for those who may appear to be a success, there is the haunting fear of failure in the future.

This week I came across the results of a most interesting study:

“In 1928 a group of the world’s most successful financiers met at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. Present were:

- The president of the largest utility company.
- The greatest wheat speculator.
- The president of the New York Stock Exchange.
- A number of the President’s Cabinet.
- The greatest “bear” in Wall Street.
- The president of the Bank of International Settlements.
- The head of the world’s greatest monopoly.

Collectively, these tycoons controlled more wealth than there was in the United States Treasury, and for years newspapers and magazines had been printing their success stories and urging the youth of the nation to follow their examples. Twenty-five years later, let’s see what happened to these men.

- The president of the largest independent steel company, Charles Schwab, lived on borrowed money the last five years of his life, and died broke.
- The greatest wheat speculator, Arthur Cutten, died abroad, insolvent.
- The president of the New York Stock Exchange, Richard Whitney, was recently released from Sing Sing.
- The member of the President’s Cabinet, Albert Fall, was pardoned from prison so he could die at home.
- The greatest “bear” in Wall Street, Jesse Livermore, committed suicide.
- The president of the Bank of International Settlements, Leon Fraser, committed suicide.
- The head of the world’s greatest monopoly, Ivar Krueger, committed suicide.

As I said all of us need to give our attention to the subject of failure.”

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1 Anonymous, quoted by Pulpit Helps, November, 1976, p. 12.
Now, before we begin to deal with the failure of Peter in the denial of our Lord, let us be sure we agree on what we mean by failure. Failure may be either real or imaginary. Many times as I finish preaching a sermon on Sunday and then begin to think back over it, I am greatly distressed at how poorly I fulfilled my obligation as a preacher. Now you know that this kind of failure is … real, right?

Furthermore, some failures are our responsibility, while others are completely beyond our control. Some failures are not deliberate or intentional, while others are a result of willfulness and disobedience. In other words, not all failure is sin.

Peter’s failure is of the worst type. In a sense, it was premeditated, for our Lord warned him that it would happen. Peter’s denial was a deliberate, worse yet, a repetitious error. To put it bluntly, it was sin.

It is important to grasp the fact that Peter’s failure was of the worst type, for if God can forgive this kind of failure—if God can somehow use the failures of willfulness and sin to strengthen our faith and deepen our commitment, then He can surely use the other less dramatic kinds of failure which are common to our experience as well.

**A Prediction of Peter’s Failure**
*(22:31-34)*

Luke, not by chance but by design, precedes the prediction of Peter’s denial by informing us that during this Last Supper the disciples had been disputing with one another. “And there arose also a dispute among them as to which of them was regarded to be greatest” (Luke 22:24).

Personally, I believe that this dispute was the outgrowth of a struggle to get the place of honor at the table as they entered the upper room. Fortunately for me, some scholars agree with this suggestion.²

When our Lord washed the feet of the disciples, He was, I think, teaching them a visible lesson in humility, something which they all lacked at the moment.

Rather than pattern their lives after the Gentiles (Luke 22:25), the disciples should follow the example of their Lord (Luke 22:26-27). In our Lord’s service the eldest, rather than claim his status as the senior member, should think of himself as the youngest and serve the others. Position is not the pretext for status, but a platform for service. It is not without significance that Peter is thought to be the eldest of the twelve.³ If such is the case, Peter would have been more inclined to have claimed seniority, and our Lord’s words would have been especially directed toward him.

I am not at all surprised, then, when the prediction of Peter’s denial flows out of verses 24-30 with no apparent break: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32).

While we shall not dwell upon verses 35-38, it would seem that they also relate directly to the prediction of the imminent denial of the Lord by Peter. A decisive change was taking place within the nation Israel. When the disciples were first sent out to herald the good news of the Kingdom (Luke 9:1ff.; 10:1ff.), they did not need any provisions or means of protection. This was because they were riding on the crest of the wave of Jesus’ popularity. They would generally be warmly welcomed and given a home and hospitality.

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² “More probably the dispute arose respecting the places at the paschal meal— who was to be nearest to the Master; and the feet-washing was a symbolical rebuke to this contention.” Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1969), p. 500.

³ “It is assumed that Peter was the eldest: he already possessed his own house and was married, iv.38, when he joined Jesus as a disciple, and about A.D. 63 he described himself as an ‘elder’ (1 Pet. v. 1). John was the youngest (this is taught by tradition and also follows from the fact that he long survived his fellow-disciples and died only about A.D. 100).” Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).
But from now on Jesus was not to be regarded as a possible Messiah nor as a national hero. Being rejected as the wrong kind of Messiah, Jesus was to be regarded and executed as a common criminal. When the disciples went out again to preach the Gospel, they must be prepared to face a hostile world. For this reason they must give heed to their personal provisions and protection.

This is precisely what Peter did not perceive and did not consider carefully enough in his hasty and emphatic expression of loyalty and devotion. Discipleship had been a relatively easy way of life during the period of Jesus’ rising popularity. But from now on discipleship would carry with it disdain, rejection and persecution for the cause of Christ.

Several observations should be made concerning these unsettling words of the Master.

(1) **It was a word of warning.** Jesus warned not only Peter, but all of the disciples here that Satan had requested, and evidently obtained, permission to test them and to attempt to destroy their faith. Although these words were not heeded, they were, nonetheless, a clear warning to the disciples.

(2) **Verses 31 and 32 constitute a specific prophecy.** Peter was predicted to deny Jesus three times, and that before the sun rose in the morning. While a warning focuses upon what might happen, the prophecy predicted very specifically what was going to happen. Peter’s denial was no mere possibility. It was a certainty.

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4 Many translations of verse 31 fail to reflect the fact that the ‘you’ is not singular, as we would be inclined to expect, but plural. It was not just Peter whom Satan had demanded permission to sift like wheat, but all of the disciples. Peter, as the spokesman and potential leader of the twelve was, of course, the prime target, and thus the singular ‘you’ in verse 32. A literal translation of verses 31 and 32 would be, “Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded all of you, in order to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed on your behalf (Peter) that your faith will not (ultimately) fail. And you (Peter), when you have returned, strengthen your brethren” (my translation).

5 “The Romans and the Jews divided the night into four watches—6 p.m. to 9 p.m.; 9 p.m. to midnight; midnight to 3 a.m.; 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. It was between the third and fourth watch that the cock was supposed to crow. What Jesus is saying to Peter is that before the dawn comes Peter will deny Him three times.” William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), II, p. 380.

6 Here we come upon a great problem to many. How is it possible for God to speak with such certainty concerning a sin that is yet future, and yet not be responsible for making it happen? Is God certain that a particular sin will occur because He is causing it to happen? If so, God makes men to sin, does He not?

In the Old Testament book of 2 Kings we find what, in my estimation, is the key to the solution of this dilemma. In chapter 8 Ben-hadad, king of Syria, was seriously ill. He sent his servant Hazael with a generous gift to the prophet Elisha, to learn if his illness was fatal. When Hazael put this question to Elisha, the answer given was ‘no,’ and yet Elisha went on to tell Hazael that he knew that Ben-hadad would die by his very hand. The result would be the suffering and death of many Israelites.

Wasn’t Elisha lying to king Ben-hadad? Not at all. Ben-hadad wanted to know if his illness was terminal. The answer to this question was no. Then Elisha went beyond the question posed by the king and revealed that although Ben-hadad would not die of this illness, he would be murdered by his own trusted servant.

You see, God, in His omniscience (knowing all things) is fully aware not only of what will actually take place (that Ben-hadad would be murdered), but also of what could take place (that Ben-hadad would have recovered had he not been murdered). In other words, God knows both all things actual and all things possible.

God knows precisely what you and I would do in any given set of circumstances. Our Lord knew that Peter, given his circumstances, would deny Him three times. God is in control and intimately involved in the affairs of men and the course of history to such a degree that what will happen is a certainty. Since what will happen is certain, and since God knows what we will do under those circumstances, God can predict our behavior without error, and yet not be accused of compelling us to sin when we do.

The police may set up a decoy in order to catch a criminal, but when that person is arrested and tried, he cannot blame the police for making him commit the crime. The circumstances in which the criminal found himself were simply such that they revealed the character of the culprit. So it is with God and man.
These unsettling words contained not only a prophecy, but a promise. Just as it was certain that Peter would fail, so it was also sure that he would be restored. Let us never lose sight of the assurance of verse 32: “But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

In these verses the error of sinless perfectionism propagated in Christian circles is dispelled as mere myth. This is the view that believes that once a person is saved he cannot sin any longer. Well, Peter did sin, and you and I know ourselves well enough to admit that we are no different than Peter. Both experience and Scripture refute this doctrine (cf. Romans 7, 1 John 2:1).

I believe that it is vital for the Christian to grasp the fact that he is capable of sinning, indeed, that he is pre-disposed toward it. More than this, we must grasp the fact that sin is virtually inevitable. I have not said (nor will I ever do so) that sin is unavoidable, nor that it is excusable. For Peter the sin of denial was inevitable, and for you and me some sins (though we know them not) are inevitable, simply because God has ordained to use them in our lives, to overrule them for our good and His glory (Romans 8:28).

A Description of Peter’s Failure

Because Peter’s denial has been so frequently misinterpreted and badly abused, we should attempt to clear the air by carefully defining what was the nature of this denial.

1. It was not just an individual act of denial. To put it in other words, Peter’s sin was no solo. Jesus had said that Satan had demanded permission to sift all of the disciples as wheat. In Matthew’s account, Jesus said, “… You will all fall away because of Me this night …” (Matthew 26:31). Peter, as usual, may have served as the spokesman, but he did not fail alone.

2. Peter’s denial was no mere act of cowardice. Unlike most of the other disciples, Peter followed his Lord after the arrest. Granted, it was ‘from a distance’ (Matthew 26:58), but that was far more than most of the others were willing to chance. Also, let us not forget that Peter was willing to die for his Lord. When Peter pulled out his sword and cut off the ear of the high Priest’s servant, Malcus (John 18:10), he undoubtedly failed to accomplish his objective, which was to cut off his head! Peter was willing to go down fighting in a blaze of glory; he simply couldn’t tolerate passive acceptance of suffering and injustice—yet.

3. Peter’s denial evidenced a temporary failure of his faith, but not a denial of his faith. We must make this distinction if we are to take the words of the Lord Jesus seriously (and literally!): “… But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail …” (Luke 22:32). We must come to one of two conclusions here. Either the prayer of Jesus was unanswered (and so Peter’s faith really did fail), or Jesus’ request was granted and Peter’s faith merely faltered, but did not completely fail.

Peter denied knowing his Lord, but his statement cannot mean that his love of Jesus, which had grown over those years together with the Savior, suddenly died. There was still faith, hope, and love, though momentarily overshadowed by doubts and fears. Who of us can deny that such doubts and fears have troubled our hearts and challenged our faith?

If I may attempt to draw a feeble analogy, I do not believe that an act of adultery on the part of either a husband or a wife is sufficient basis for dissolving the marriage relationship. This is why I do not advise the so-called “innocent party” to initiate divorce when their partner has been unfaithful. An act of immorality, in my opinion, does not necessarily prove that all love and commitment has been cast aside. Such was the case, I maintain, with Peter and his relationship to his Lord.

Usually it will be said by those who are perfectionists that when a Christian sins he loses his salvation. Such cannot be the case, for if Hebrews 6:4-6 teaches us that a Christian can sin and lose his salvation, it also teaches that once we have lost such a salvation, it cannot be regained.

Cf. footnote 4.
The Reason and Responsibility for Peter’s Failure

Seldom do we find a text that gives us such a clear picture of the underlying factors and forces behind man’s sin. To fully understand human failure we must consider divine sovereignty, satanic activity and human responsibility.

The question of the existence of evil in the sovereign will of an all-wise, all-powerful God is a difficult one, one that has troubled men through the ages (cf. Psalm 37,73). (If we were to conclude that God is in control only when good prevails we would wonder, as many do today, if there is a God at all.)

If there is a God and He is omniscient (knowing all) and omnipotent (all-powerful), Who is sovereign, in complete control of His universe (Psalm 75:7; Daniel 2:20-21), then nothing can take place apart from His knowledge and permission. We know this has to be the case with Peter’s denial.

It is stated in our text that Jesus was fully aware of the specifics concerning Peter’s imminent denial. More than this, Satan had asked and obtained permission to ‘sift the disciples like wheat’ (Luke 22:31). We must conclude that this sin of Peter was a part of God’s plan and purpose for his life.

Theologians would say that Peter’s denial was included in the eternal decree of God, purposed before the beginning of time. When Peter failed, he did not thrust himself outside of the purpose (or decree) of God, but continued within it. God’s program for man’s redemption, His purposes for the church, for the apostles, and especially for Peter were not suddenly set aside by Peter’s sin. God’s plans for Peter were realized both in spite of and because of Peter’s sin.

(1) God not only permits sin, He purposes to include it in His eternal plan in such a way as to perfectly achieve His will, and yet without Himself being the originator of it (cf. Genesis 50:20).

The significance of this cannot be underestimated. So often today Christians suppose that God’s will and His sovereign control includes only that which is sinless and perfect. When the Christian commits some sin, he feels as though he has suddenly been swept from the purposes of God for his life. He supposes that God has not only crossed out that sentence in his life, but He has torn out the page and thrown away the book. The rest of his life, in his mind, must be wasted, in the words of one song, ‘taking laps around Mt. Sinai.’

It is only when we come to realize that God’s control and His purposes for us include our sins as well as our acts of obedience that we have done justice to His sovereignty. It is only when we grasp the fact that we are never beyond hope, never beyond restoration, that we will have the hope which is necessary to go on. We know that we will fall and we will fail, but that God will use that sin and failure to build us up and make us useful instruments.

(2) Luke reveals to us that Satan had a hand in Peter’s sin of denial (Luke 22:31). By this we are reminded of Satan’s involvement in the purifying of Job’s faith (Job 1:6f.). We should be encouraged about several things with respect to this satanic attack on Peter.

a. Satan had to ask permission in order to attack Peter, just as he did with Job. The demons had to get permission from our Lord even to possess pigs (Mark 5:12). Satan’s subversive activities are always subject to divine permission.

b. While Satan seeks to bring about our destruction, God allows him to oppose us for our strengthening and advancement in the faith (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Satan’s thinking is so twisted by sin that he achieves the will of God while he supposes that he is opposing it. His apparent victory at the cross of Calvary is just one example.

9 A number of translations render verse 31 in such a way as to indicate that Satan ‘demanded’ permission to sift the disciples like wheat. This may well be the sense of the original term, and if so, it only serves to illustrate the pride, arrogance, and audacity of Satan. Nevertheless, permission was still necessary for Satan to go about his task.
c. While Satan entices men to sin, he does not and he cannot compel men to follow his suggestions. The stock excuse ‘the devil made me do it’ may be popular, but it is not biblical. Satan can shake us and sift us, but he can never keep us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

(3) We come to the real source of Peter’s failure—self. While God purposed Peter’s failure and Satan promoted it, it was Peter who perpetuated the denial of his Lord. While much has been made of the process by which Peter failed, the text clearly implies that the whole matter can be summed up by one word, self. Here is the source of our sins as well.

When the Savior began to wash the feet of the disciples Peter vigorously protested because such an act was unbecoming to one in His position. Peter was not just concerned over the incident of the foot washing, but with its implications for him as a disciple. How could he use his office as a means of securing status and the services of others if Jesus would not?

When Jesus foretold Peter’s denial, again, he strenuously resisted such a possibility. No chance! No way! Such is the confidence of the flesh. Self-confidence kept Peter from praying as he should have when with his Lord in the garden of Gethsemane.

In the final analysis self is at the center of all sin. Self-assertion and smug self-confidence are at the heart of man’s sin and rebellion against God. As it was with Peter, so it is with us.

Let us be clear on this matter of responsibility for sin. God in His sovereignty purposes to use sin to demonstrate His glory and to bring about our good. Satan, in his perversity, solicits men to do that which is evil, hoping to thwart God’s purposes. But in the final analysis it is neither God nor Satan who can be blamed for our sin; it is self which must accept moral responsibility.

The Purpose for Peter’s Failure

Much confusion in Christian thinking could be cleared up by a firm belief in this biblical principle: The Christian’s failure is never purposed for his destruction, but for his development. I have not made this up in my own mind, it is clearly stated in the Word of God,

10 In dealing with man’s failure and inherent tendency toward sin, we intersect the doctrine of man’s total depravity. Since some may react strongly to the implications of what I have said thus far concerning man’s waywardness, alleging that it is destructive to his self-image, let me say a few words about the relationship of man’s total depravity to his self image.

Every man, saved or unsaved, should find great significance and security in the fact that God has created him just as he is, divinely fashioned to the minutest detail while still in the womb (Psalm 139:13-16). We are God’s unique creation, created in His image (Genesis 1:26). The doctrine of total depravity does not imply that we are totally worthless as sinners. Rather, it contends that fallen man is affected by sin in every aspect of his personhood (intellect, emotion, will). A glass of water with one drop of poison added to it is completely poisoned, though it is not 100% poison. Total depravity does not mean that fallen man is worthless to God or other men; it simply means that he has nothing to commend him before God. He cannot earn God’s favor (which, incidentally, modern psychology rejects as establishing performance orientation—a person can be accepted only if he performs according to expectations).

The awesome truth of Christianity is that God loves man as he is—sinful and rebellious. God has placed infinite value on fallen man, having given His Son for man, while he was yet fallen and sinful (Romans 5:6-8). More than this, once man has accepted God’s free gift of salvation, he becomes a son of God (John 1:12; Romans 8:15-17). How could any man, woman, or child ask for more than this—to be a child of God? And beyond this, every child of God is endowed with unique spiritual capacities for service and ministry, and each is assigned a particular function within the body of Christ, which no one else can perform (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12).

Self-image, when divorced from a vital relationship with the Creator and Savior of men is simply a veiled form of vanity and pride. Self-image, when viewed from the divine perspective is to see oneself as he truly is, the object of divine grace, a child of God!
“The steps of a man are established by the Lord; and He delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; because the Lord is the One who holds his hand” (Psalm 37:23-24).

“The Lord sustains all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down” (Psalm 145:14).

“For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, but the wicked stumble in time of calamity” (Proverbs 24:16).

This is why Satan can achieve God’s purposes without knowing what he is doing. Satan thinks that causing a Christian to sin brings about his destruction. God allows Satan to promote sin and failure, purposing it as a means of our development and strengthening.

Look at the great men of the Bible and you will see men with feet of clay. Abraham not once, but twice, sought to preserve his own life while jeopardizing the purity of his wife (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-7). David fell into immorality and committed murder in an effort to cover up his iniquity (2 Samuel 11). While the sins of these men brought painful consequences, they also resulted in a deepening faith and greater commitment.

Such was the case with the denial of Peter. It deepened his love for the Savior and developed faith and humility. Peter was destined to the role of a leader within the church, and even among the apostles (cf. Matthew 16:18-19; Acts 2:14ff.; 5:ff.; 9:32-12:17). He was, as a result of his fall and restoration, to be a source of strength to the others (Luke 22:32). This was accomplished by the lessons he learned in his fall. Let us consider several of these lessons.

(1) **Peter learned he could not trust himself.** All of the bravado of his boast, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away” (Matthew 26:33) was swept away by his humiliating failure. In the power of the flesh we can do nothing well, except to fail (Romans 7:14 ff.).

Failure is neither accidental nor incidental to Christian growth; it is essential. Erwin Lutzer has written a book entitled, *Failure: The Back Door to Success.*\(^\text{11}\) It is an excellent book, but personally I would change the title to “Failure: The Only Door to Success.”

There is irresistible logic behind the order of Romans 6, 7 and 8. In chapter 6, Paul informs us of the necessity of holy living. We have (positionally) died to sin and have been raised to new life in Christ. We must, therefore, live differently if we are to practice our position and our profession. To fail to live a holy life is to deny our possession of eternal life.

In chapter 7 we are reminded of the impossibility of godly living in our own strength. While we are desirous of a Christian walk and know what is right and what is forbidden, nevertheless we persist in doing wrong and evading the right. This is because the flesh is weak, unable to do what the law commands.

In chapter 8, Paul informs us that we are no longer under condemnation for our sins and that God has given us His Spirit to bring about in us what the law demands and what we, in the flesh, cannot accomplish.

It is only when we come to the point of absolute failure that we give up trying to live the Christian life in the power of the flesh. God’s power is appropriated in our weakness and death. That is the inviolable law of the spiritual life.

When Peter failed at his denial of the Lord, he learned the difficult lesson that God’s work cannot be accomplished by resolution, determination or self-effort—not even by a positive mental attitude. God’s work can only be done in God’s way—by distrusting self and depending upon His enablement. That is what must happen in our lives also. Have you come to the point of despair yet? If so, that is God’s way of showing you the futility of self-effort in the Christian life. Reckon yourself to be dead to sin and alive unto righteousness through the marvelous grace of God. Here is our strength.

“And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ … Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions,

with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).

(2) Peter’s fall was a death blow to his pride and arrogance. “A man’s pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor” (Proverbs 29:23). “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:65).

There is no cure for pride quite so effective as that humiliation of failure. There is no quality more necessary for leadership than that of humility. There is ample evidence of a meek and gentle spirit in Peter’s words of counsel to his fellow-elders in his first epistle: “Therefore, I exhort … at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:1-6).

(3) Peter gained a deeper appreciation of the depths of the grace of God. Human failure opens wide the door through which grace alone can enter. In the midst of shameful failure, Peter found forgiveness and restoration. God’s favor was not granted as a reward for faithfulness, but because of failure. Here is grace greater than all our sins.

When we experience the grace of God at times of failing, there is no other response than love and gratitude. Guilt is never a proper motive for service, but grace occasions love, the strongest motive of all. This was the thrust of our Lord’s words to Peter in the twenty-first chapter of John: “Simon, son of John, do you love Me? … Shepherd My sheep” (John 21:16).

(4) Finally, Peter’s failure enabled him to be much more understanding and gentle with those under his authority who would fail also. It is difficult to be hard on those who have the same weaknesses with which we struggle.

In short, Peter’s sin did not impair his ministry; it prepared him for ministry, by teaching him not to trust in self, but in God. It gave him even greater motivation for service.

The Painfulness of Peter’s Failure

There is a tightrope in this message which I have been trying to walk very carefully. There are two extremes which must be avoided. The first is an overwhelming sense of guilt and failure and the misconception that sin forever removes us from the will of God and that we must resign ourselves to a life of uselessness and futility. In effect, we simply give up out of guilt and despair.

The second error is that of fatalism. “What will be, will be.” Since God has included my sin in His perfect plan, why fight it—it’s bigger than any of us.12 While the reasoning may differ from that above, the outcome is nearly identical—a casual acceptance and resignation toward sin.

God does incorporate our sin into His perfect plan. God does use our sin to glorify Himself and to produce what is good for His children (Romans 8:28). But lest we take a carefree attitude toward sin, let us ponder the painful consequences of sin.

There is a vast difference between punishment for sin and the consequences of sin. We need only look at the case of David. David’s sin of adultery and murder were forgiven, and God removed his guilt (Psalm 51:32). Nevertheless, there were painful consequences for his sin. His son, the product of an illicit union, died (2 Samuel 12:14), and David’s house was continually plagued with violence (2 Samuel 12:10-12).

So also for Peter there was forgiveness, but there were unpleasant consequences. The most painful of all was to look into the face of his dearest friend, whom he deeply loved, and behold His grief:

“But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about.’ And immediately while he was still speaking, a cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered

12 This is, in effect, the erroneous conclusion dealt with in Romans 6:1ff. Notice that while the premise is correct, “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20), the application is completely unbiblical. Here is where much error comes from in Christian circles—taking biblical principles to unbiblical and sinful conclusions. Sin is thereby committed in the name of orthodoxy.
the word of the Lord, how He had told him, 'Before a cock crows today, you will deny Me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:60-62).

There is no thought more distressing to me than that of facing my Lord and knowing how deeply my sin has grieved Him.

When I was an elementary school teacher, I was very upset to see a child who had been sent to the principal’s office for discipline, come back with a smile on his face. I determined that no child would ever come back into the room with me with a smile on his face. I took him out for discipline. No one who is a Christian will ultimately have a smile upon his face. Sin is never worth the price—never!

The Restoration of Peter

Nothing is more comforting and beautiful than the work of the Savior in restoring Peter. It began before the denial with a word of warning, a prediction, and a promise of recovery and renewal. It commenced with the intercessory prayers of the Lord Jesus on behalf of Peter, for the upholding of his faith and his repentance and restoration.

Perhaps most beautiful of all is the silence of the Scriptures concerning the first appearance of the Savior to Peter. What beauty there is in this brevity, “And that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:5).

What our Lord said to Peter we will never know. It is none of our business. And just as Jesus dealt personally and intimately with Peter, speaking words of forgiveness, comfort, and encouragement, so also He seeks us out in our times of failure and guilt. What a wonderful Savior!

Lessons of Life From the Failure of Peter

This passage is undergirded by a number of principles pertaining to sin and failure.

1) **Our every step, even our stumbling and sin, is included in the purpose and plan of God for our lives.** While our motives may be wrong, and our actions displeasing to God, nevertheless God has included them in His plan to display His glory and to bring about what is for our ultimate good (Genesis 50:20; Psalm 37:23-24; Romans 8:28).

2) **Sin, for the Christian, is inevitable in that we will never in this life completely overcome it** (Romans 7; 1 John 1:8-10; 2:1-2, etc.).

3) **While sin is, in a sense, inevitable, it is always avoidable and it is never excusable.** God never makes us sin (James 1:13). Satan cannot make us sin, though he may tempt us (Luke 22:31-32). Neither do circumstances compel us to sin (1 Corinthians 10:13). We are always morally responsible for sin.

4) **For the Christian, all sins are forgiven, but there are still painful consequences** (2 Samuel 11-12; Luke 22:61, etc.).

5) **Sin, while painful, is also profitable,** “God causes all things (even our sin) to work together for good to those who love God …” (Romans 8:28). No man’s sin has ever kept God from realizing His purposes for that man’s life (cf. Jonah, Abraham, David, Peter, etc.).

Negatively, sin results in painful experiences which instruct us to avoid further unpleasant consequences. Positively, it deepens our grasp of the grace of God and our gratitude for it.

No book ever written is more candid in dealing realistically with the sins and failures of men than the Bible. Modern novelists and film-makers have made much of sin, but their efforts tend only to stimulate our own illicit impulses and passions. The Bible deals much with man’s sinfulness because we are so sinful.

Oftentimes we learn much more from our failures than we do from success. It is no surprise that the success of Jonah is mentioned almost incidentally in one verse (2 Kings 14:25), while an entire book is devoted to an account of his failure. That has to tell us something about the importance and relevance of the subject of failure for men today.
From what we have learned, we should give serious thought to several implications from the denial of Peter as it forces us to come to a biblical perspective on failure.

**First, we should expect failure.** I do not mean by this the kind of negative outlook expressed by the little boy at the door who says, “You don’t want to buy these cookies, do you?” We should neither seek failure, nor succumb to it, but in spite of our most noble efforts, it will come. The realization that we are, in the words of the song writer ‘prone to wander’ is a strong defense against the wiles of the devil. It was Peter’s smug self-confidence which was his greatest pitfall.

**Second, we must learn to view failure as God does.** It is often sin, and therefore an abomination to God. But it is also the focal point of the death of Christ. Christ died for sin. For the Christian, all sin has been dealt with by the blood of our Savior. We need not fear the penalty of sin, for that has been borne by our Lord. So we can rejoice in these words of Paul, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Sin is an offense to God, and yet God allows us to fall and to fail so that our faith might be strengthened. Few people are able to minister effectively to others who have not experienced God’s strength in their weakness.

Not only should we learn to accept failure as a part of God’s purpose for our lives, but we should be willing to accept the failures of others. So often we are dishonest in the impressions we give to others. We come to church with a smile on our face and we tout the popular phrases ‘fantastic,’ ‘praise the Lord’ and so on, but inwardly we are miserable. This kind of hypocrisy is nothing less than a lie (cf. Acts 5:1-6), and it discourages others from owning up to their failures and asking for help and encouragement when they need it most.

I must say that preachers are often the most frequent and flagrant violators of this matter of honesty. They fear what people will think of them if they know how sinful they really are. They suppose that no one will listen to someone who doesn’t have all the answers—or who isn’t using them as he should.

Thank God for a man like Dr. J. Vernon McGee. Some time ago, I heard him say over the radio, “If you knew what a sinner I am, you’d reach right up and turn off your radio. But wait a minute; if I knew how sinful you were, I wouldn’t be talking to you.”

In this life God has committed Himself to working with failures, and in the process He brings glory to Himself and, by grace, accomplishes what is for the good of His children. I don’t fully understand this, but that is what my Bible teaches and I believe it.

Parents, let your children fail. Just as God lets us fall flat on our faces so that we may be the stronger for it, we must allow our children the privilege of failing, too. And when they do fail, as they most certainly will, deal with them as God does us. Deal with them in grace, for that is God’s answer to human failure.

Finally, I must make it crystal clear that what we have been saying here is for those who have come to a personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. If you have come to trust in Him as the One Who died in your place, and suffered for your sins, you will never be punished for any sin, past, present, or future. You may be chastened, but never punished (cf. Hebrews 12:1-13).

But if you have never trusted in Christ as Savior this is the one sin that is, in the truest sense of the word, fatal. You must stand before a righteous and Holy God and give account for your every deed (Revelation 20:12-15). What a frightening thought that is. May God enable you to acknowledge your sinfulness, and to accept His gracious provision for your sins in the person of His Son.
Lesson 32:
Facing the Future: A Prescription for Peace
(John 14)

Introduction

This week someone left a cartoon on the Xerox machine at my office in which a man was lying on the couch of a psychiatrist. When the psychiatrist asked the client what his problem was he confided that he had all kinds of fears about the future. “Doctor,” he began, “I’m worried about the energy crisis, inflation, the situation in the Middle East, political and social upheaval in Africa, our diplomatic relations with China …” I wish I could remember all of the concerns of the man in the cartoon; there were at least a dozen. In the final frame the psychiatrist responded, “Shut up and move over,” after which he proceeded to get on the couch with the patient.

A cartoon such as this would be much more amusing if it did not contain so much truth. The problems of the future are almost overwhelming. Those in a position to know the facts are privately saying that things are not nearly as bad as they seem—they are worse. Public officials seem to have taken the same approach to our national problems as many doctors do with a terminally ill patient—keep the unpleasant truth from them as long as possible.

Secular philosophy and ethics have come to assume a fearful future. That is why they are dominated by a note of absolute despair: “The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long.”¹

On the popular and practical level, this despair concerning the future has led to what has been called the ‘now generation.’ The most optimistic view of life is that ‘we only go around once, so we’d better grab all the gusto we can get!’, to parrot the beer commercial. Those who are more thoughtful and better informed are not so sure we are even going to go around once, and thus our pursuit of pleasure is an even more frantic one.

As a Christian I am not going to tell you that things are not all that bad. If I read my Bible correctly,² things are going to proceed from bad to worse as the time of our Lord’s return draws near. The days ahead may be difficult indeed, but our Lord has not left us without hope.

It is at the point of facing the frightening prospects of the future that we can find a common ground with the disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord had spoken more frequently and clearly of His death in Jerusalem.³ During the last supper Jesus had revealed that He was to be betrayed by one of His most intimate associates (John 13:18,21). Finally, He had told Peter that before the night was over he would deny knowing his Lord (John 13:38).

All of this was a most perplexing situation to those who had given up everything to become the followers of the Savior (Matthew 19:27). They saw the future now as something to be feared, rather than that which was eagerly anticipated. They, like many of us, viewed the future as something to be dreaded rather than desired.

The words of the Lord Jesus are words of comfort and encouragement. They contain a message of peace and consolation. It is by understanding and applying the principles of this passage that you and I can look the future in the face with faith rather than fear, with hope rather than despair.

² Cf. 2 Timothy 3:1ff.
The Answer to Peter’s Question:  
“Where Are You Going”  
(14:1-4)

Verses 1-4 of chapter fourteen are an answer to Peter’s question in chapter 13, “Lord, where are You going?” (John 13:36). Our Lord had revealed that He was departing and that His disciples would not be able to follow Him for a little while. Peter confidently assured His Lord that he would follow Him anywhere, even to death. Chapter 13 closed with Jesus’ disturbing prophecy of Peter’s denial. The first four verses of chapter fourteen contain our Lord’s fuller response to the question raised by Peter as to where He was going.

This ‘going’ was a return to the heavenly Father, but more than this it involved an agonizing death by crucifixion. What prompted Peter’s question was not a lack of information, for our Lord had already spoken clearly of His death. The problem was the disciples’ stubborn refusal to accept the clear teaching of Christ. Suffering and death did not fit their preconceived ideas of Messiahship or of the coming Kingdom. Jesus couldn’t mean what He was saying. And so the questions persisted, always seeking some other answer than what they had consistently been told.

Jesus began by dealing with the underlying cause of their unrest and spiritual agitation—a lack of faith. God’s prescription for fear is faith. “Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God, believe also in Me” (John 14:1).

Just as the disciples had trusted in God, so they must believe in the Lord Jesus. They could not help but question in their own minds the wisdom of the Savior in virtually precipitating His own death. This seemed to the disciples to be a foolish and senseless casting away of all their hopes.

To undergird the diminishing hopes of the eleven, Jesus first assured them of the final outcome of the immediate events of the future. He urged them to consider the final chapter of history before drawing hasty conclusions about the events of the immediate future. The final destination of our Lord was to return to the Father’s house, that is, heaven. The ultimate outcome of our Lord’s going was that He prepared a place for us there with Him and with the Father. He will go, but He will also just as surely return to take us to be with Him forever.

The events of the immediate future were not contradictory to this ultimate goal of history, but complimentary to it. It was true that Jesus would go, but more than this we should understand that he must go. This ‘must’ is not so much a necessity so far as the physical preparation of heaven is concerned, for Jesus said, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places” (verse 2). Heaven already exists with more than adequate accommodations for all true believers.

There is a two-fold sense in which we must understand the preparation of heaven for men. First, it was necessary for heaven to be prepared for man. This preparation was not meant to be understood in a physical sense as I have already suggested, for it was physically more than adequate for human habitation (verse 2). In the book of Hebrews, especially in chapter 9, we are informed that the high priestly work of Christ involved entering into heaven to cleanse it (Hebrews 9:23-28). It is on the basis of this preparation that our Lord will return again to take the Christians home to be with Him (Hebrews 9:28).

In another sense, we must realize that the death of Christ prepared us for heaven. Every man, woman, and child is born in a state of rebellion against God, doomed to eternal punishment apart from divine intervention (Ephesians 2:1-3; Romans 3:9-20). It was the death of Jesus Christ on Calvary’s cross that provided the eternal...
redemption which makes every believer fit for eternity in the presence of God (Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians, 2:3-10; Colossians 1:12-22; 2:13-14; Hebrews 9:23-28).

Not long ago a friend of mine went to a very fine restaurant in Dallas. He was not allowed to dine there because he did not have on a coat and tie, which was a requirement of that establishment. Heaven is something like that, I believe. Sinful men are not properly attired to enter into it. The death of Jesus Christ has removed the filthy rags of our self-righteousness. We have been clothed in His righteousness and thus prepared to spend eternity in heaven by faith with Him.

Our Lord did not spell out in detail the means for the preparation of heaven for men and men for heaven, for they were not yet able to grasp it (cf. John 16:12). The Holy Spirit would make these things clear in time to come (John 16:13ff.). The going of our Lord was a physical departure, a return to the abode of the Father. But Jesus’ leaving was also the sacrificial death of the sinless Lamb of God, on Whom would be laid the sins of men. It was for this reason He had come, and so He must leave His disciples for a while.

Jesus was going, by means of a tortuous death upon a Roman cross. It was a departure far worse than the disciples were capable of imagining. Yet while this going was far worse than they feared, the outcome was not what they feared. They viewed Jesus’ departure as a permanent separation from the One they deeply loved. While His departure would mean a temporary end to His physical presence, it was the means of establishing a much deeper and more intimate relationship.

To use the analogy of marriage for a moment, Christ’s physical presence among the twelve had been something like an engagement. The departure or going of the Lord meant an end to this kind of relationship. But it also brought about a marriage, in which a much fuller and more permanent union would be accomplished. Think of the devastating results if Jesus had given the disciples what they wanted! He would continue in His physical presence, but they would continue in their sins. He could never take them home with Him to live with His Father, because they were not fit for it.

Jesus’ departure was a painful one. There was nothing pleasant about it. But it was both necessary and preparatory. It brought about the possibility of a greater and more permanent union and communion with Him. He would leave them for a while; He must leave them for a while. This would be painful for them and Him, but it would be profitable in the results which it would accomplish.

In Jesus’ answer to the question of Peter, there is a principle which may bring us great comfort in facing the future: GOD OFTEN EMPLOYS TEMPORARY PAIN TO BRING ENDURING PLEASURE.

Think of the birth of a child. For nine months after new life is conceived it lives in the protection of the womb. This idyllic existence cannot continue indefinitely. Through a painful process, the baby is brought into the world. And yet it is this pain which introduces the greater pleasure of a far more intimate and lasting relationship as parent and child.

So it is with the Christian life. We may fear the future. The future may be even more difficult than we imagine it to be. We may face great trials and testing and undergo great pain. In the face of such frightening possibilities we need not lose our spiritual composure because we know that our ultimate destiny is to spend eternity in the presence of God in eternal fellowship with our Savior. If there should be suffering and pain in our pathway, we may be confident: that God will use this to further us along the path to our heavenly goal.

Thomas’ Question Answered: “How Can We Know the Way?” (14:5-7)

Thomas was the hard-headed realist of the group. He would not believe Jesus was raised from the dead until he saw the evidence first hand (John 20:24-25). Here he was not content with the answer given by our Lord. So far as he was concerned, Jesus had not yet answered the first question satisfactorily. They did not know where He was going. They surely did not know the way.

To Thomas, the issue was a simple one, but he could not seem to hear the answer. How can one know how to get somewhere when he doesn’t know his destination? How can one find the path without knowing the place?
The disciples still did not comprehend Jesus' words concerning His departure. They refused to accept His predictions of His death. They were unwilling to think of the Master’s departure as anything more than getting out of the country, perhaps until they had cooled down. They were thinking in the most literal and physical terms. They didn’t know His destination; they surely could not know the directions as to how to get there to meet Him.

Jesus’ reply was almost too simple. He not only claimed to be the goal but the guide. The ultimate destiny of the disciples was to be with Christ. They puzzled over the details of getting to where He was. Jesus informed them that He was the guide as well as the goal: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). Our final destination, if we are truly born again, is heaven, the Father’s house. No one knows the way to the Father’s house better than the Son. He was soon to make His way back to be with the Father, later to return for His own to share in His riches. It was enough for the disciples that they know the Son and He would be their guide. In the final analysis the way is not our responsibility, but His.

There is a very important principle here, I believe. JESUS CHRIST IS BOTH OUR GOAL AND OUR GUIDE. THE ‘SECRET’ OF GUIDANCE IS TO KNOW THE GUIDE.

In a day when the future looks dim and dangerous there is great interest, even undue concern, about guidance. Here is one of the great obsessions of our day, knowing the specific will of God. In the process we have come to place more emphasis on guidance than on the guide. All of us should listen to the words of our Lord, for He is the all-sufficient Savior. He is the giver of life, the energizing force of the Christian (cf. John 1:1-4). He is also the embodiment of truth, the perfect reflection of the Father. His is finally the way. We need not know every fork of life’s road or every bend in the path so long as we are close to the guide.

The only way to the Father is through the Son. Here is summarized in a sentence the purpose of the Life and Ministry of our Lord Jesus. All men are sinners, under the condemnation of God. The only way to the Father is through the atoning work of the Son on the cross of Calvary. That is the one point where the disciples would have wanted Him to abort His mission.

In the matter of initial salvation, the Son is the only way to the Father. And, so far as the Christian is concerned, the Son is the only way to the presence of the Father as well. We need to consistently rely on Christ as the source of our sanctification as well as our justification.

Philip’s Request:
“Show Us the Father and It Is Enough” (14:8-21)

Again and again the unbelieving Jews sought signs from the Savior (cf. Matthew 12:38). The words of promise of the Lord Jesus were not sufficient for Philip (or I suspect, for any of the other disciples). If only Jesus could perform a spectacular sign by revealing the Father to them in all His splendor, that would be enough. That would set their hearts and minds at rest. This was the request of Philip.

The issue was one of confirmation. The future looked so threatening and the words of Jesus seemed so abstract. If only there could be some kind of spectacular confirmation. If they could just see the Father …

In this request Philip revealed the frailty of the disciple’s faith at this point in their lives. They had missed one of the primary purposes of Christ’s coming, for He had come to reveal the Father.

“No man has seen God at any time; but the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:18).

6 “… it seem as if something is wrong when Christians are more interested in making decisions than in the growth of character, in geographic placement than in holy living, in guidance than in the Guide. Not God, but guidance. Not His sovereignty, but my search. Not now, not then. Not here, but there. Our problem is not so much over-emphasizing guidance as overlooking God. God has become the Hinge we must discover instead of the One Who has placed the door, and us, and the heathen, and the Tomb, and the Cross, and Eden, and the Tree, and the stars.” Joseph Bayly, ed. Essays on Guidance (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), Preface, p. 2.
“And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me” (John 12:45).

Throughout the Old Testament man had been forbidden to make idols or images because they were fashioned by human hands. Man can never accurately reflect the perfections of God. But Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is the product of divine creation, by means of the virgin birth. He alone rightly reveals God to man. Thus we can worship the Son as God (cf. Matthew 2:11; 8:2, etc.).

Divine confirmation of the identity of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah had already been accomplished. Jesus reminded His followers of the two main streams of His authority, His words (verse 10) and His works (verse 11). His teaching had been marked by an authority far above that of Israel’s religious leadership (cf. Matthew 7:28-29). His miracles were a divine seal of approval upon His claims (cf. John 3:2; 11:41-45; Acts 2:22). Even His enemies had to acknowledge the convincing force of His works (John 11:47-48; 12:9-19). His opponents refused to accept His claim to be God, but since He demonstrated supernatural powers, they had to attribute His works to the power of Satan (Mark 3:22).

In addition to the confirming evidences of Jesus’ words and works, there was yet another attestation to the presence of God to be revealed. It would come at a future time. “In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20). The day of which Jesus spoke was not the day of His return for His own, nor of His second advent to establish His Kingdom. It was the day in which the power of the Holy Spirit would be released in the lives of Jesus’ followers. That day began at Pentecost and has continued until the present. Because of this spiritual power in the lives of true believers Jesus could promise: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father” (John 14:12).

How foolish our requests and desires are. The disciples desperately hoped that what they feared would not come to pass. If our Lord had not died upon that cross and ascended to be with the Father, we would never spend eternity with God, nor could we have entered into the intimate relationship we now have with the Son. More than this, had the Savior not departed, the assurance of His presence in us through His Spirit would not have been available. These ‘greater works’ were the direct result of the departure of the Son (cf. Ephesians 4:7-16). The presence and power of the Lord Jesus Christ is multiplied in His physical absence through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

There are at least three prerequisites for the release of God’s power in the life of one of His own which are made clear in this passage. First, the acts which are done with great power must be those which bring glory to the Father (verse 13). Second, supernatural power is provided only for those things which are done in the name of the Lord Jesus. By this I understand that our requests of God must be consistent with the character and purposes of the Son (John 14:13). We must come to understand that our work is, in reality, the work of our Lord Jesus through us. Finally, works of power must always be the product of the ministry of the Holy Spirit (verses 17ff.).

There is behind the request of Philip and the answer of our Lord, a principle which we must never forget: THE REQUEST FOR A SPECTACULAR CONFIRMATION OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD IS OFTEN PROMPTED BY A LACK OF FAITH IN WHAT GOD HAS CLEARLY REVEALED TO US IN HIS WORD.

Many of us desire that God reveal Himself to us in some spectacular way, to prove to us that He is real. God has disclosed Himself to man through the final and compelling revelation of His Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). To ask for anything more is to challenge the sufficiency of what God has done.

There is additional confirmation of our faith, but it does not come from ‘out of the blue.’ It comes from the blessing of God as we are obedient to His Word. “If you Love Me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (John 14:15-16).

God does disclose Himself to His children, but normally it is not in a once-for-all spectacular way. (Spectacular confirmations had occurred in the sight of the disciples, but how quickly they were forgotten in the light of

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7 The emphasis of this promise, I believe, is on the quantity of the miraculous evidences of divine power, not the quality of the miracles. Jesus evidenced the power of God in one body. Now we are His body, the church, God’s power is now evidenced through a multitude of believers.
present or imminent adversity. Such was also the case in the Old Testament.) God normally affirms our faith as we are obedient to His Word and seek to fulfill His purposes in our lives.

The Answer to the Question of Judas:
“Why Will You Reveal Yourself to Us and Not to the World?”
(14:22-24)

Philip had requested some kind of spectacular manifestation of the Father to assure them at a time of little faith. Jesus had refused immediate response for His assurance would be given in a more continual day-to-day manner. Also, the manifestation of the Father would not be universal, but restricted to believers who would live in obedience to the will and Word of God. Messianic expectation in the days of our Lord knew nothing of this kind of manifestation. They looked for Messiah to come in a blaze of glory, to convince the entire nation that He was the Savior, and to immediately establish His Kingdom. The words of Jesus in no way fit this expectation. Judas (not Iscariot, verse 22) pressed Jesus for an explanation.

Even more intriguing than the question is Jesus’ answer. Do you see it? You shouldn’t, for there really isn’t one. Jesus politely refused to explain His statement for the present time. Instead, He chose to reiterate what He had already said, namely that the primary duty of the disciples would be obedience (verses 23-24). No explanation is given.

This leads to another principle for facing the future: THERE ARE SOME THINGS ABOUT THE FUTURE THAT FAITH DOESN’T NEED TO KNOW. THESE WILL BEST BE UNDERSTOOD IN RETROSPECT.

There is a song which I remember from my childhood which contains the words, “We’ll understand it better bye and bye.” Our fears about the future often incline us to ponder questions which are not at all profitable to us. Faith does not attempt to press God for answers which He has not chosen to give.

God did not answer this question for several reasons. First, they could not grasp the answer anyhow. Secondly, they would not believe the answer, for they refused to consider our Lord’s predictions of His death seriously. Thirdly, the answer would not really have any positive benefit for their lives. Finally, He had made provision for their full comprehension in the near future (John 14:26).

It would be well for us to give serious thought to some of the questions for which we seek an answer from God. Many of them should likely be set aside. Surely we should not be distressed if God has chosen not to inform us of His plans and purposes at present.

Jesus’ Final Words on the Subject of the Disciples’ Fear for the Future
(14:25-31)

Jesus summed up His response to the questions of the troubled disciples in verses 25-31. The words which Jesus spoke were provisional and preliminary. The disciples were perplexed because they did not comprehend what He was saying. Further clarification and revelation would be the work of the Holy Spirit after the departure of the Master. Then all of these words would be brought to memory and their meaning more fully grasped (verses 25-26).

The outcome of Jesus’ words should be faith, the corrective to fear. Since the Lord Jesus has promised peace, they need not face the future with timidity and trepidation (verse 27). The right response to the words of Jesus concerning His departure should have been rejoicing, not remorse and grief (verse 28). Since the Father is greater than the Son, love would have dictated that the disciples rejoice in the joy of the Son at His return to the

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8 Some have attempted to use these words to disprove the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father is greater, not in the sense of being God, while the Son is only man. God is greater in the sense of His headship within the Godhead. He is the One to Whom the Son is in constant submission and obedience (cf. John 5:19; 7:28; 8:28; 15:10; 17:4; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28).
Father’s above. The grief of the disciples, much as ours at the death of a loved one, is selfish, thinking only of our loss and not their gain.

Verse 29 gives us the reason why Jesus spoke these words of the fourteenth chapter of John. It was not to bring immediate relief to their troubled hearts, but a peace that would be final and complete. His teaching in these verses was for the purpose of enhancing the faith of His followers. Much of prophecy falls under this purpose of strengthening our faith. When all of His words were literally fulfilled, then the disciples would realize more fully the greatness of the One in Whom their faith was founded. Fulfilled prophecy is one of the foundation stones of faith.

Conclusion

The message of the Savior is so simple that we look for a solution much more complicated and hidden. To summarize our Lord’s prescription for peace in facing our fear of the future we need only two words: trust and obey. That is the message of our Lord in the briefest terms. When we cannot comprehend the future we must simply trust in Him in whose hands the future rests. When we do not know what our duties will be in future times, we can be assured that God only requires us to be faithful in doing that which is our present responsibility. Would you like to look the future straight in the eye without doubts and fears? Simply do as our Lord instructs. Trust and obey. There is no other way. That is the message of a well-known hymn. That is the message of our Lord Himself.
Lesson 33:
Abiding in Christ
(John 15)

Introduction

When Community Bible Chapel began several years ago, I was given a bit of wise counsel from one of the elders of Believers Chapel. He said, “Bob, I’ve been involved in the starting of several churches and my experience has always been the same. You begin with a flurry of enthusiasm and excitement, but sooner or later it comes down to just plain endurance just sticking it out.”

Such a statement is not only true of starting a church, but of other areas of life as well. Take marriage, for example. For the first few weeks or months, marriage is able to function on the fuel of romantic feelings. But sooner or later we come to the realization that marriage is not only enjoying, but enduring. There must be the transition from romance to routine. I do not mean that marriage is a drag to be endured with gritted teeth, but that it is not one continual high, perpetually warm fuzzy feeling.

When the words of John chapter fifteen were spoken, the disciples had spent a great deal of time with the Savior and the honeymoon period was about to come to a close. The expectations of the disciples were unrealistic and untimely. They had hoped for a spectacular demonstration by our Lord which would convince the nation of Israel that He was their Messiah. They had hoped for the Kingdom to be established and for positions of power and prominence in His regime. The ‘triumphal entry’ (John 12) seemed to elevate their expectations and excitement.

In John chapter 15, our Lord brought before the eleven the realities of the future. He would not be heralded as Israel’s king, but hated (verse 18). They, too, would soon experience the hostility of an unbelieving nation (verses 18-25). This should come as no shock, for Christ’s rejection had been prophesied centuries before (verse 25).

In this chapter our Lord gave instructions concerning how His disciples could maintain fellowship and fruitfulness in the difficult days which lay before them. The nature of the relationship between Christ and His followers was to change from a physical one to that which was spiritual, and the means of sustaining this kind of relationship are described for us.

Abiding in Christ
(15:1-8)

Throughout the upper room discourse, the disciples found our Lord’s words to be abstract and confusing (John 13:22ff.; 14:5,8,22; 16:17ff.). To make His teaching clear and concrete, He used the analogy of a vine, a figure familiar to the Jewish mind.

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was often likened to a vine. In Psalm 80:8 the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is described in terms of a vine being transplanted from the soil of Egypt to that of Canaan. In Isaiah 5 the nation Israel is likened to a vineyard that does not produce fruit. In Jeremiah 2:21 Israel is described as a vine that is sending out degenerate shoots. Over and over again Israel was referred to as a vine. The vine had become a symbol of the nation Israel. It was found on Jewish coins in the Maccabean period, and in the days which our Lord walked upon the earth there was a huge filigree of a vine adorning the entrance of the temple of Herod, evaluated by some (who likely were exaggerating) at a value of more than $12,000,000.1

Our Relationship Is Defined in Terms of a Vine (vss 1-3)

Our Lord described the new relationship between Himself and His followers in terms of a vine and its branches in the first three verses. He is the true vine, believers are the branches, and the Father is the vine-keeper.

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The Lord Jesus is the true vine. This word true is used primarily in two senses in the New Testament. First of all it denotes that which is true or genuine in contrast to that which is false or spurious. Surely our Lord is the one genuine vine in whom we should abide, and surely we understand that there are other “false” vines. But this I do not think to be the emphasis which our Lord intends here. This word “true” is also used of that which is the ultimate realization, or here, of that which is the heavenly reality which transcends any earthly counterpart. I think, then, that Jesus is saying that whereas the vine was a picture of Israel in the Old Testament, He is the fullest realization of Israel’s hope, of their expectations, of what God intended her to be as her Messiah. Israel, as a vine, was an utter failure; it never achieved its goal. Our Lord Jesus Christ Who came as the True Vine would accomplish all Israel failed to do.

As the true vine our Lord is the source of life and strength and fruit. There is a relationship of complete dependence between the branch and the vine. The vine supplies life-giving nourishment to the branches. Apart from it, the branches have neither life nor fruit.

As the branches, we are the visible manifestation of the life of the vine. We are the instruments of fruit-bearing. Since our Lord’s ascension into heaven, the church has been the body of Christ. The world is to see Him in us—we are His hands, His feet, His mouth. The Lord once ministered in His earthly body, but now ministers and reveals His life in His spiritual body. What Jesus began to do and teach (Acts 1:1), His church now continues to do and say.

The Father is intimately involved in this relationship between the vine and the branches. He deals with the unfruitful branches. Even those branches which are fruitful receive His care in order to effect greater fruitfulness.

Lest the mention of removing unfruitful branches create any doubts or fears, Jesus assured the disciples that they had already demonstrated their genuineness and sincerity. They had already been cleansed by faith in His words (verse 3). The word ‘clean’ in verse 3 is the same expression used earlier by our Lord of saving faith. “He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you” (John 13:10). His true followers were saved; they were ‘clean.’ Only Judas was unclean, due to his unbelief.

**Our Responsibilities in the Vine (vss 4-8)**

Verses 1-3 pertain to our position, while verses 4-8 speak of our practice. We come to the first imperative (or command) of the chapter in verse 4. Here our Lord tells us what we are to do as branches in Him. “Abide in Me, and I in you” (John 15:4a).

This is our Christian responsibility—to “abide” in Christ. John is fond of this word “abide.” He uses the term (meno) over fifty times in his writings; eleven times in this chapter. Underlying the meaning of this term is the idea of belief. Negatively this is seen in chapter five of John’s gospel: “And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent” (John 5:38).

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2 The commentaries contain seemingly endless discussions of the interpretation of the expression in verse 2, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; ...” The questions are difficult.

(1) Since these branches are said to be ‘in me,’ does this mean that they represent unfruitful Christians? Many fine scholars do not think so, cf. Rossrup, pp. 185ff. If the answer to this question is “yes,” then the crux of the matter falls upon the Greek word (airō), ‘takes away’ (NASV). It could either mean ‘lifting up’ in the sense of supporting, undergirding (cf. Matthew 4:6), or the ‘removing’ of physical death (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30). It cannot refer to one’s loss of salvation. First of all, the context is one of comfort and assurance, not of warning (cf. John 14:1). Second, we must remember the words of Jesus in verse 16: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give you.”

(2) The second major question is whether or not verse 2 must be understood as parallel to verse 6. My personal opinion is that we have lost sight of the major thrust of these verses which stress our relationship to the Father and the Son. We are confident that the loss of our salvation is impossible (verse 16). It is the Father’s task alone to deal with believers (fruitful branches) and unbelievers (unfruitful branches, those who only profess to be ‘in the vine’).
Positively, it occurs in this sense of belief in chapter six: “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him” (John 6:56).

Abiding, then, requires a belief in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. It is a dependence upon His provision of life and strength that is emphasized in John 15:4. It is a belief and a relation with the person of Jesus Christ and His Word (John 15:7).

In addition, the idea of remaining or enduring is implied by the word abide. “The multitude therefore answered Him, ‘We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain (abide) forever, and how can you say, ‘The Son of man must be lifted up?’” (John 12:34).

This is clearly the force of the term in verse 16: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16). Abiding is believing, depending, and persevering.

The principle behind the command of our Lord to abide is stated both negatively and positively in verses 4 and 5. Negatively, it is impossible to bear fruit without abiding. Positively, if one abides in Christ he will bear much fruit. Abiding is essential for fruit bearing.

The necessity of abiding is further demonstrated in verses 6-8. In verse 6 we are given a negative illustration of the results if we do not abide. In verses 7 and 8 we learn the benefits of abiding.

Failing to abide is more than just a hindrance to fruitfulness; it is a severing from the source of life. Not to abide leads to death and destruction. “If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned” (John 15:6).

I do not believe that Jesus is here teaching that we can lose our salvation by failing to abide. He is simply showing that abiding is not an option, but an essential requirement for life. To not abide is to face the inevitable consequence which is death and judgment.

On the positive side, abiding in Christ results in conformity to the Word of God. The one in whom the Word abides can be confident of receiving the answers to his prayers for he will pray according to the will of God. “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7).

Furthermore, by abiding in Christ we are caused to bear fruit which brings glory to the Father and thereby demonstrates our discipleship (verse 8).

Abiding in Christ’s Love

(15:9-25)

Yet another dimension of abiding in Christ is introduced at verse 9, for we find another imperative. “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love” (John 15:9).

Abiding in Christ (verses 4-8) stressed belief, dependence, and endurance. The emphasis in verses 9-25 is on obedience. This is “how” we abide in Christ’s love: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His Love” (John 15:10).

The finest illustration of this kind of abiding is found in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. His life was marked by a total submission and obedience to the will of the Father (John 8:28-29).

One result of our obedience to our Lord’s command is joy. Obedience brings joy into our Christian experience as it did for our Lord: “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

Not wishing to leave the imperative to abide in His love in abstract terms, Jesus gives a very specific and practical example of the commandments of which He speaks. “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” If abiding in Christ is understood as experiencing God’s love in Christ, verses 12ff. underscore expressing Christ’s love through us. The ultimate demonstration of love is about to be witnessed by the
disciples. Christ will lay down His life for His friends. If the love of Christ is to be shown in His disciples, they must be willing to give themselves to and for others.

I must repeat the story I heard of the man who was waxing eloquent to his wife of how much he loved her. He told her he would even die for her. “That won’t be necessary,” she responded, unimpressed, “just pick up that towel and help me with these dishes.” Few of us will be required to pay the ultimate price of friendship. All of us should be willing to do so and to show it in simple acts of sacrificial kindness.

The abiding of obedience results in an intimacy which cannot be experienced in any other way. Abiding in Christ by obeying His commands changes our relationship from that of slaves to that of friends (verse 14-15). The intimacy of friendship includes us in the inner circle of God, and here our Lord makes known His secrets.

Abiding in Christ in its simplest terms is trusting our Lord and obeying His word. There are no special techniques or formulas. It is as simple as our belief and behavior. Abiding in Christ provides us with life and strength. It is the only way to fruitfulness. Abiding in Christ assures us of answered prayer and an intimacy with Christ.

Verse 16 makes it crystal clear that our abiding in Christ is not the determining factor behind our eternal security as believers. Our Lord is not threatening us with the loss of salvation if we sometimes fail to abide. This passage was intended to bring peace, assurance and comfort to troubled men (cf. John 14:1). How comforting, then, to hear these words of assurance: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give you” (John 17:16).

We might like to think that we found Christ, as the “I Found It” bumper stickers seem to imply. Ultimately, we did not choose God; He chose us. The initiator of our salvation determines the one on whom our security rests, for Paul wrote, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). God chose us as the objects of His grace. He appointed us to represent Him to a lost world. He determined that we would bear fruit and that the results of our labors would be lasting. What a comfort! What motivation for service!

God never requires us to do that which is without good reason. One practical reason for the command to love one another is that if we do not love other Christians, no one will, for the world will hate us because of Christ (verses 18ff.).

We shall not explore this final portion in great detail, but will make several observations.

(1) The world’s hatred for us is the result of our abiding in Christ. Abiding in Christ identifies us with Him before the world. Because the world hated Him without a cause (verse 25), they will also hate us (verse 18).

(2) The Lord bursts the bubble of the disciples’ messianic expectations in these verses. They were looking for glory and honor. That is not what lay ahead. According to tradition, all of the disciples, save one, would die a martyr’s death. Within hours, our Lord would be lifted upon a cross and His disciples scattered.

Circumstances were to be drastically changed within a few hours. A week after He was heralded as Messiah by the throngs, He was rejected and crowned with thorns. The intimacy of physical contact and association with their Lord would be set aside for a deeper, more lasting, spiritual union with Him. All of these changes necessitated learning to abide in Christ in a way they had never known before.

Conclusion

The summation of this chapter can be expressed in two statements: (1) Abide in me—experience that love (verses 1-8); and (2) Express that love (verses 9-17).

If we understand and apply this passage correctly, it will virtually turn our priorities upside-down. Most of us are preoccupied with our performance as Christians, rather than being occupied with the person of Christ. We are more interested in the results we achieve than in simply resting in Him—abiding in Him. We want to appropriate His power, but fail to appreciate His person. Abiding stresses the source of our life and strength, but we frequently ignore the person of Christ to seek the product of our union with Him. We have the cart before the horse.
Abiding is our obligation; fruitfulness is God’s concern. The True Vine is the Author, the Source and the Finisher of our faith. We should be seeking His fellowship, and leaving the fruit to Him.

How instructive the physical union of man and woman is here. This is not conjecture; I find it clearly taught in Psalm 127.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep. Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; they shall not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.”

The first two verses graphically reveal the futility of self-effort. Human effort without divine enablement is fruitless and frustrating. We simply wear ourselves down for no good reason.

Verses 3-5 are in contrast to the first two verses. Children are a gift of the Lord. Men do not acquire offspring by hard labor. Children are given to men in their sleep, without striving. That is, children are a result, not a cause. When a man and his wife have an intimacy of relationship, there is often from their union the gift of children. Children come from resting, not striving, from intimacy, not fervency; they are the result of a union, not an intense effort.

That is the lesson which we need to learn today. We have become preoccupied with results. We want to have guidance, but we ignore the Guide. We seek God as the Giver, rather than the Gift, the Rewarder rather than the Reward. We seek His blessings rather than see Him as the Blessing.

There is no special formula or technique by which fruitfulness can be attained. It results from merely abiding. Abiding in its simplest terms is trusting—and obeying. May God enable us to abide in Him.
Lesson 34:
How to Handle a Hostile World
(John 16)

Introduction

In what is perhaps the most significant Christian book of this decade, J. I. Packer speaks to a certain type of evangelical ministry which is well-intentioned, but cruel. It is a ministry which means to offer men hope and encouragement by portraying the Christian life as a kind of utopian desert island, free from the trials and cares of life.

In actuality it creates great upset in the lives of untaught Christians. Salvation in Jesus Christ does not promise freedom from difficulties. It does promise peace with God and the power to cope with life’s trials. When unsuspecting Christians encounter trials which they did not expect, they tend to question the reality of their faith, or the vitality of their spiritual life. Often they perceive problems as divine punishment for evils unwittingly committed.

Often this kind of teaching and ministry can result in despair. Many come to faith in Christ because of personal problems and difficulties. They are wrongly promised quick and easy solutions to life’s troubles if they simply trust in Christ as their Savior. They turn to God in desperation. But when their problems remain it appears that God has forsaken them. If God cannot deliver them, what hope is left?

The disciples of our Lord viewed the teaching of Jesus through rose-colored glasses as well. Their hope was for a Messiah who would come in a spectacular blaze of glory and who would put away all the evils and injustices of life.

As our Lord’s days on earth came to an end, more and more time was spent preparing the disciples for a future quite different than that for which they had hoped. Jesus would be put to a shameful death, and in His absence, the disciples would find themselves the object of the world’s hostility toward the Savior of men (cf. John 15:18ff.).

In the sixteenth chapter of the gospel of John, our Lord taught His followers what they should expect from an unbelieving world. He also revealed how a Christian can handle a hostile world. It is my hope that as we study

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2 “The type of ministry that is here in mind starts by stressing, in an evangelistic context, the difference that becoming a Christian will make. Not only will it bring a man forgiveness of sins, peace of conscience, and fellowship with God as his Father; it will also mean that, through the power of the indwelling Spirit, he will be able to overcome the sins that previously mastered him, and the light and leading that God will give him will enable him to find a way through problems of guidance, self-fulfillment, personal relations, heart’s desire, and such like, which had hitherto defeated him completely. Now, put like that, in general terms, these great assurances are scriptural and true—praise God, they are! But it is possible so to stress them, and so to play down the rougher side of the Christian life—the daily chastening, the endless war with sin and Satan, the periodic walk in darkness—so to give the impression that normal Christian living is a perfect bed of roses, a state of affairs in which everything in the garden is lovely all the time, and problems no longer exist—or, if they come, they have only to be taken to the throne of grace, and they will melt away at once. This is to suggest that the world, the flesh, and the devil, will give a man no serious trouble once he is a Christian; nor will his circumstances and personal relationships ever be a problem to himself. Such suggestions are mischievous, however, because they are false.” Ibid., p. 222.

3 Note, for example, these words of the apostle Paul: “And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). The life of this great apostle was not a carefree existence (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:4-10).
this chapter we will come to see the Christian experience in the world for what it is and that we may learn from these words of the Master how to cope with these realities.

**Opposition and the Necessity of Divine Enablement**

(16:1-6)

The subject of persecution has already been introduced in chapter 15. It is the natural outgrowth of abiding in Christ (John 15:18-24). Love for one another is no option where Christians are despised for their faith in Christ. Abiding in Christ necessitates love for the brethren. We must love one another to prove ourselves to be His disciples (John 15:8-13). So we must love one another because we shall find little encouragement and comfort from the world.

The first provision of our Lord for those facing opposition is to be assured that it is a part of God’s will for our lives. In the words of the well-known proverb, ‘To be forewarned is to be forearmed.’ I can understand how it would be necessary for our Lord to inform His disciples of such hatred and animosity. Previous experience had not suggested it to them to any great degree. They had witnessed the crowds following Jesus, seeking to see Him and to touch Him. What little opposition Jesus had faced had been from a relatively small, but influential, group of the nation’s religious leaders. The triumphal entry fostered the hopes of the disciples that the sentiments of the masses would prevail.

Then, too, the Messianic expectations of the disciples did not include thoughts of suffering and rejection. They knew of passages which spoke of Messiah’s rejection and suffering (1 Peter 1:10,12), but practically, they set these aside in favor of more optimistic prophecies. They expected Messiah to gloriously reveal Himself, to win the support of the people, and to triumph over evil and especially Israel’s enemies. Suffering and rejection, until the last few days of Jesus’ life and ministry, were given little, if any, serious consideration.

Opposition had not yet been directed toward the disciples. The resistance that had surfaced during Jesus’ earthly ministry had come from the religious leaders who were as yet afraid to attack Jesus openly due to His popular support (cf. Matthew 21:26,46). The execution of the Savior was made possible by the rejection of Jesus by the common people. From then on hostility would be intense, and in the absence of the Master, it would be focused upon His disciples. More than anything else, the disciples needed to realize that such opposition was to be expected. It was a part of God’s plan for His own.

Not only was the opposition to be severe, even unto death (John 16:2), but it was to be religious in origin. Those who hotly pursued Christians were not atheists who believed in no god at all; they were devoted adherents of orthodox religion who considered their deeds an act of religious devotion (verse 2). Saul, before his conversion, carried out his work with religious passion (cf. Acts 9:1,2; 22:1-15; 26:4-12). Hostility clothed in the garb of religiosity, has always dealt harshly with its opponents.

Unbelief so dominated the minds of men that they put the Messiah to death and would attempt to do the same to His disciples. Such opposition necessitated divine enablement if a lost world was to be won to Christ and the church was to survive. But verses 5 and 6 remind us that the disciples also needed divine enablement. It was their hardness of heart that kept them from accepting the truth which Jesus had revealed to them about His coming destiny, and theirs.

Jesus had told them He was going, and yet, He said, none of them was asking (present tense) Him where (verse 5). Now Peter had asked (John 13:36). And they still did not understand what Jesus meant by this (John 16:17:ff), but for the moment they would not ask. The reason for their present reticence, I believe, is found in verse 6: “But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.” While the disciples did not under-

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5 A friend of mine shared with me this statement of Pascal (Pensees): “Men never do evil so completely or cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”
stand the predictions of Jesus, they did perceive that their outcome was not what they desired. Their hearts were filled with sorrow. It was an unpleasant subject, and they did not really want to understand more at the moment.

When our family goes home to visit with our parents, we find the last couple of hours before we must leave the most painful. We are often considerably more subdued and quiet, and we avoid the delicate subject of our departure. That, I believe, is what our Lord is referring to. The disciples lack of faith evidenced itself in a kind of resistance to explore future. For this reason, they, too, needed divine enablement.

Let us beware of coming down on the disciples for their avoidance of persecution and opposition. Suffering is not a popular subject among Christians today, either. Unfortunately, modern-day evangelistic methods have adopted the techniques of Madison Avenue. The approach is to capitalize on the positive benefits of the faith, ignoring or underestimating the costs involved. Evangelism is conducted more like the college athletic draft than the proclamation of the truth. We pick those who appear to be the most likely to succeed and then offer them all kinds of inducements to join up with God’s team. No wonder so many new Christians stumble over the opposition they face. Life in Christ is not what it was said to be. Fortunately for Christians, the courts have not yet entertained suits pertaining to false advertising in evangelistic efforts.

How sad it is that Christians have not understood that adversity is a part of discipleship. In the process of sugar-coating the gospel, we have placed a snare in the path of new converts. They expect a life of ease and they learn to their dismay that it is a life of struggle and opposition. The first thing we must know in order to handle a hostile world is that the world is hostile to Christ and His followers.

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit
(16:7-15)

Contrary to some popular teaching, the world is not beating on our door for the good news of the gospel (cf. 1 Peter 4:12ff.). Men are dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-3). They are blind to spiritual truths (2 Corinthians 4:4). They are enemies of our Lord and His people. While we are called to be witnesses (John 15:27), such testimony would be useless apart from divine intervention in the affairs of men. This is what is promised by our Lord in verses 7-11.

“But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.”

The departure of the Lord Jesus should not be a cause of grief, but a source of great blessing and encouragement. If our Lord did not ‘go away’ it would have been impossible for the Holy Spirit to come. When Jesus departed, He sent the Holy Spirit to minister in His stead (verse 7), and this would result in even greater miracles (in quantity) than those of our Lord (John 14:12).

The ministry of the Holy Spirit, with respect to the unbelieving world, is to confirm the witness of the believer. The matter of witnessing is a cooperative venture, involving men and the Holy Spirit. “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (John 15:26-27).

Our responsibility is to provide ‘external’ witness to the truth. We are to speak the truths of the gospel to men in such a way as to demonstrate their need of salvation. The Spirit’s task is to give ‘internal’ witness to the truths of the gospel. Our Lord described this internal witness as ‘convicting.’

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6 William Hendriksen has a very helpful footnote pertaining to the Greek word (elengkō) most often translated convict, convince, or reprove. He suggests that the Greek term has the same elasticity of meaning as its English counterparts. Convincing has a more intellectual flavor while conviction seems to deal with the moral
It would seem that there are various degrees of conviction, and that it is conducted at several levels. Not all men would experience the same degree of conviction, nor would all respond to it by repentance and faith in Christ. Conviction would seem to be universal on its lowest level. There is a certain amount of revelation available to all men (Romans 1:1-11). The Holy Spirit brings the issue presented by these facts into focus, so that men must see that the weight of the evidence demands a decision in agreement with God. A second level of conviction is on a moral plane. Inwardly, the Holy Spirit touches the conscience of man, bringing an inner sense of guilt, due to sin. The standard violated may be that of divine law, or simply of one’s own standards for the conduct of others (Romans 2).

The conviction of the Holy Spirit is necessary on both of these levels due to man’s fallenness. The doctrine of total depravity explains the effect of the fall on all men, in that every part of our being (intellect, emotions, will) has been polluted by sin. The convicting ministry of the Spirit overrides the effect of the fall on man’s mind by sharpening the focus on the issues of the gospel (or at least concerning some revelation of God, Romans 1). The evidence demands that men conclude with the Scriptures that there is a mighty, creative God Whose greatness is evidenced in creation. Man’s conscience has been rendered insensitive to sin, and so the Spirit at least momentarily and partially overcomes that insensitivity to bring an awareness of guilt.

One can be aware of the issues of the gospel and have a consciousness of personal sin and still not be saved. Man’s fallen will must also be changed in order to enable him to respond to the God toward which he is actively hostile (cf. Acts 16:14; Philippians 1:29). More than this, man is dead in his trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1) and he must be given life if he is to respond to the call of the gospel (Ephesians 2:5; Titus 3:5).

In this way we can see that the work of the Holy Spirit has a universal scope, while at the same time all men are not saved by His ministry of conviction. Once the convicting work of the Spirit has taken place, man cannot plead an ignorance of the issues or of his need of salvation. Fundamentally, the reason for man’s unbelief is not ignorance but arrogance. He does not believe, not for intellectual reasons, but for moral reasons he will not believe. Man does not believe because he will not believe. From a human standpoint, man cannot be saved because he will not be saved.

So we see that the outcome of the Holy Spirit’s ministry to unsaved men is at least two-fold. They are intellectually cornered and morally conscience-stricken. But they are not necessarily converted. The verdict demanded by the Holy Spirit is that men are sinners and that the gospel is the only way of salvation.

The case pressed upon unbelieving mankind is primarily threefold: “And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8).

The first issue is that of a man’s personal sin. Although many lines of evidence could easily be brought against him, there is one primary issue and that is unbelief. Men may differ as to whether or not a certain action is a sin, but no one can excuse willful unbelief in the person of Jesus Christ. Perhaps, my friend, you have chosen to believe that God would judge men on the curve, and you have hoped to be in the winning half. First and foremost, I believe God is concerned with one thing: what have you done with His Son? He was sent to reveal the truth of God (John 1:1-18). Have you believed in Him? He was sent to bear the sins of the world and to provide the righteousness you need for eternal life (2 Corinthians 5:21). Have you trusted in Him? You may make all kinds of professions, but it is the Spirit of God Who searches your heart and either convicts of sin and unbelief or of faith and being a child of God (John 16:9; Romans 8:15-17).


Note also Wescott’s comments on the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit: “Whatever the final issue may be, he who “convicts” another places the truth of the case in dispute in a clear light before him, so that it must be seen and acknowledged as truth. He who then rejects the conclusion which this exposition involves, rejects it with his eyes open and at his peril. Truth seen as truth carries with it condemnation to all who refuse to welcome it.” B. F. Wescott, *John*, p. 228.
Spirit works to reverse this decision. The main line of evidence is that of the empty tomb. “… concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me” (John 16:10).

Three days after the crucifixion of our Lord He began to appear to His disciples, who were chosen to be witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:22; 2:32). Our Lord’s post-resurrection appearances proved that death could not hold Him in its power (Romans 1:4). Then the apostles saw Him no more, for He had ascended to the Father. His ascension (evidenced by the fact that His disciples saw Him no more) proved that the Lord Jesus was righteous and acceptable to the Father to Whom He returned (cf. Acts 2:24-36). The empty grave enabled the Christian church to be born with great power in the very city where Jesus had been executed and buried.

The third issue which the Holy Spirit brings before men is that of future judgment. If all men are sinners, rightly condemned before God, and they have rejected Jesus Christ, God’s only provision for salvation, then the only fate which awaits them is certain judgment. Certainty of man’s judgment is established on the fact that the prince of sinners, Satan himself, has already been judged on the cross of Calvary (John 12:31). If God has dealt decisively with His chief opponent, surely He will eventually judge all those who have chosen to follow him in rejecting Jesus Christ.

While Christians do live in a hostile world where men not only reject the Savior, but also those who trust in Him, God has not left us to our own devices. Our witness is effective in the salvation of men’s souls because of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to the essential truth of the gospel, sin, righteousness and judgment.

Several truths pertaining to evangelism should be evident from our Lord’s words concerning the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit:

First, while it is our obligation to present the claims of Christ to unbelievers (John 15:27; Acts 1:8, etc.), it is not our job to convince men, nor to convert them. Ultimately, ‘Salvation is of the Lord’ (Jonah 2:9). We often make enemies of the unsaved by attempting to convince men through persuasive techniques or argumentative force. People are not argued into the Kingdom of God. Witnessing is our task; winning souls is not. Often times we may feel that our witness has fallen upon deaf ears. But long after we have left, the Spirit can press home the truths of the gospel.

Second, it should almost go without saying that sin, righteousness, and judgment should be the core of our evangelistic message. These are the truths to which the Spirit will bear witness. Obviously, those are the truths of which we are assured of God’s inner witness by the Spirit. And yet having said this, how seldom the gospel is presented in these terms. Every man is a sinner. His unbelief is manifested in a variety of overt actions and inner attitudes. Jesus Christ alone is the sinless Son of God. He alone can serve as our substitute and bear our penalty for sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). And for all who reject Christ as the righteousness of God, there awaits the judgment of God. Men without Christ are destined for eternity apart from God (2 Thessalonians 1:9), and sharing Satan’s doom (Matthew 25:41).

It is not just fallen men who need the truths of God impressed upon their minds and hearts, it is true believers who need the ministry of the Holy Spirit also. The disciples were unable to grasp the true meaning of the words of the Lord. In verses 5 and 6 of chapter 16, the Lord had once again brought out the dullness of the hearts and minds of the disciples which made them unable to grasp what He said, and even unwilling to seek the truth, because of their grief and sorrow (verse 6).

We know this inability to comprehend spiritual truths to be true of every Christian (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). Even the Christian cannot comprehend divine truth unaided by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit overcomes the effects of the fall on unsaved men to convince them of sin, righteousness, and judgment, so He illuminates and instructs Christians in the truths of God (John 16:12-15). There was much that Jesus wished to share with His disciples, but it would have been to no avail. The work of the cross was not yet accomplished. They would never understand this except as they looked back upon it. Jesus’ departure was necessary so that the greater work of the Holy Spirit could be accomplished in the lives of the disciples.

7 The tense used is a perfect. It emphasizes the abiding results of Satan’s judgment. A past tense is legitimately employed to emphasize the certainty of Satan’s doom, even though the work of the cross was yet future when Jesus spoke these words.
This work was to “guide them into all the truth” (verse 13). This ‘truth’ is not any and every truth—e.g., the truth of science, etc., as some have asserted. Jesus clarified His statement by telling us that it is all ‘the’ truth. The truth refers primarily to those truths pertaining to the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ (verses 13-15). Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6) and yet the disciples did not understand these truths pertaining to Christ as yet. This would be the ministry of the Spirit to the disciples, removing the veil of fallenness from over their hearts and minds, disclosing the meaning and significance of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Apart from our Lord’s death and departure and the coming of the Spirit, He could have spent decades, even centuries, with His disciples and they still would not have grasped the meaning of His words concerning His departure. Only in retrospect by the illumination of the Holy Spirit did the disciples come to understand the meaning of Christ’s life and teaching.

The Relationship Between Sorrow and Joy
(16:16-24)

In spite of all the teaching of the Master, there still remained a cloud of confusion concerning His words. Jesus once more reiterated, in a somewhat indirect fashion, the fact that He was shortly to depart from His disciples by death, and then in a short while to return to them after His resurrection (verse 16).

This statement served to further frustrate the followers of our Lord who could make neither heads nor tails of what He was saying. Their theology of the coming kingdom contained nothing which would explain these words. Having asked before, they were reluctant to bring the subject up again. They revealed their confusion as they spoke to one another trying to determine what Jesus meant by His words.

Jesus answered their question, but in a different fashion than they expected. He would speak clearly in a few moments (cf. verse 28), but first He must deal with the problem underlying their question. The disciples refused to consider any explanation concerning the future which included suffering (cf. Matthew 16:21-23). They could not imagine how Messiah’s suffering could be consistent with His reign in glory. Because of this underlying misconception, Jesus explained the relationship between suffering and glory. Interestingly enough, Jesus did not speak of this in relation to Himself, but as it would be experienced by His followers. (Could this imply that the disciples were more concerned about their own suffering than that of Jesus?)

It was certain that the disciples would experience deep sorrow in the near future (verse 20). In contrast to this, the world would rejoice. They will grieve over the loss of their closest companion, but the world will think, “Good riddance!”

The eleven had come to look at sorrow as the enemy of joy, and this was simply not true. Suffering did not prevent glory; it prepared the way for it. God has not called us to suffer so that later He can take it away and replace it with glory. Suffering is the way to glory. Glory could not be attained through any other means but suffering.

An illustration of this is found in the birth of a child (verse 21). There is nothing pleasant about the labor pains which a woman endures in the child-bearing process. I have witnessed this with my wife six times, so I have some experience in this area. Obviously, my wife has even greater credentials here. But it is the pains of childbirth which prepare the mother’s body for the birth of the child. It is by means of the labor pains that a child is brought to life. Further, the pains of birth are forgotten in the joy of giving life. How quickly forgotten are all the unpleasant experiences of the birth process once the new child is in its mother’s arms. There will be sorrow for the disciples, but this sorrow is a necessary part of the process by which God gives life to fallen men. In the joys of new life, these sorrows will be considered worthwhile and will be quickly overshadowed by the glory that is sure to follow godly suffering.

The questions which filled the minds of the disciples would all be answered on the day in which sorrow is swallowed up by joy (verse 23). Their problem was one of perspective. From the perspective of the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Savior, all of these things would fall into place. At this time, there will be no more questions for they will understand how suffering brings joy and victory. Instead of seeking the answers to their questions, they will devote themselves to prayer, by which God Himself will meet their every need.
We have not really given proper emphasis to the matter of prayer in the upper room discourse of chapters 14-16. Communion with our Lord since His ascension is to be carried on through the Word of God (John 14:21,23,26; 15:7,10; 16:12-15; 17:17) and prayer (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23f.). Repeatedly, Jesus assured His disciples of answered prayer.

**Final Words of Assurance (16:25-33)**

The last recorded words of our Lord to His disciples (as recorded by John) before the awful events of that night are found in verses 25-33. They are not words of warning, but of assurance. Fear is never a healthy perspective by which to view the future. Jesus’ words are those which encourage faith.

His first assurance concerns one of the most distressing things the disciples faced: Jesus’ words about the future were obscure and confusing to their troubled minds. The Master promised them that in a short while they would understand all that they needed to live godly lives (verse 25).

Assurance was also rooted in the promise of an intimacy with the Father not previously known (verses 26-27). It would be incorrect to view the present ministry of our Lord in heaven, as one of continual pleading with the Father to bless and supply the needs of true believers. In a sense, that was necessary before the work of the cross. But after the Son died on the cross and the wrath of God against sinners was appeased, an intimacy with the Father was accomplished for the saints. God is not reluctant and unwilling to bless His children. He does not need to be pestered and prodded by the Son. He, Himself, loves His own and intimately involves Himself with their needs as a loving Father.

Assurance is further given by a clear reaffirmation of Jesus as the divine Son of God, sent from the Heavenly Father, and soon to return to Him. “I came forth from the Father, and have come into the world. I am leaving the world again, and going to the Father” (John 16:28).

These words of the Savior reinforced the faltering faith of the disciples: “His disciples said, ‘Lo, now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech. Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God’” (John 16:29,30).

But the most assuring certitude is yet to come. Yes, the disciples did find comfort and confidence in the words of Jesus. But in the storm of opposition that would soon come upon them their faith would seemingly be swept away. “Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone; because the Father is with Me” (John 16:31,32).

Is this not a word of warning, rather than of comfort? Jesus has predicted that the disciples will flee when the going gets rough within a short time. What the disciples needed to know was that ultimate victory was not dependent upon their faith, but upon the work of the Savior on the cross of Calvary. “These things I have spoken to

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8 “There is no contradiction with passages speaking of Christ’s perpetual intercession for His people (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25), nor with that in which John calls Him “an Advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1). In all four passages there is one basic underlying thought, namely, that our approach to the Father rests firmly on Christ’s priestly work for us. That work is itself a perpetual intercession. It does not require to be supplemented by further intervention on our behalf. There is also a firm exclusion of the thought that the disciples should enlist Christ’s prayers for them as though He were more merciful and more ready to hear than is the Father.” Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 710.

Morris also cites Calvin as saying, “when Christ is said to intercede with the Father for us, let us not imagine anything fleshly about Him, as if He were on His knees before the Father offering humble supplications. But the power of His sacrifice, by which He once pacified God towards us, is always powerful and efficacious. The blood by which He atoned for our sins, the obedience which He rendered, is a continual intercession for us. This is a remarkable passage, by which we are taught that we have the heart of God as soon as we place before Him the name of His Son.” Ibid., p. 710, fn. 64.
you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

It is in Christ that we have peace. It is in Him that we overcome the world. Far too much emphasis these days is placed upon the quality of our faith rather than in the infinite goodness and power of the object of our faith, Jesus Christ.

Our perception of situations is not often what it should be. Surely our performance falls far short of divine standards. Our assurance and faith in times of trial and opposition seem to crumble. It is not that faith is unimportant. God forbid that anyone should suggest this, for “the just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17). But let us not place our assurance and confidence in our faith. Our faith is of no more value than the object in which it is placed. Victory and peace are in Jesus Christ. Victory has been won. And we, too, shall overcome as we abide in Him. Praise God!
Lesson 35:
The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus
(John 17)

Introduction

The story is told of a preacher who was shaking hands at the door of the church after his Sunday morning sermon. One outspoken member of the congregation thanked the pastor for both messages. “But I only preached once this morning,” he gently corrected. “Well, pastor, I meant the one you preached and the one you prayed.”

Some preachers seem to find it easier to pray their sermons than to preach them. (I can well remember amusing myself by timing them from week to week.) I would hope this is not because it is easier to say some things with ‘every head bowed’ than with people looking you straight in the eye. And lest we parents feel too smug here, we often pray little sermons to our children. For example: “Dear Lord, help little Sally not to leave her bed unmade and to be more respectful of her mommy and daddy.”

Another misuse of prayer is what I call the ‘evangelistic prayer.’ This is often prayed at church, but the most striking form of it is the restaurant version. Someone, normally with a booming voice, prays at sufficient volume for the entire restaurant to overhear. Usually every fork clatters to the plate, waitresses freeze in place, and all conversation stops. The prayer always includes a concise presentation of the gospel.

I have always been irritated by such forms of prayer for it appears they were not intended for God at all. Having said this, I must recognize that some of the prayers of our Lord were addressed to the Father, but were intended to be overheard. Among other examples I would include the prayer of Jesus for the raising of Lazarus (John 11:41-42) and this prayer in John chapter 17.

The high priestly prayer of Jesus serves as a fitting conclusion to the upper room discourse of chapters 14-16. In verse one of chapter 17 John informs us that this prayer is to be understood as a kind of conclusion to the Lord’s teaching in chapters 14-16. “These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, he said …” (John 17:1a). It is my personal opinion that this prayer, the longest of Jesus’ recorded prayers, was intended to be overheard by His disciples. One purpose of this prayer was to bring comfort and hope to the troubled hearts of the disciples. It may have been more effective at the moment than all the teaching of chapters 14-16. While a measure of assurance resulted from the words of our Lord in chapters 14-16 (cf. 16:29-30), much more comfort and faith would be gained in the light of their fulfillment (John 13:19; 16:4). This prayer must have done much to calm the troubled hearts of the eleven.

Let us look carefully at this prayer, then, to find the comfort that it afforded the disciples. And let us remember that it was not only a prayer for the eleven, but for Christians of every age (John 17:20).

The Prayer of Jesus for Himself
(17:1-5)

There is one word that dominates Jesus’ prayer for Himself in verses 1-5—glory. It occurs in some form five times in these verses. Initially, it seems unfitting for Jesus to pray that He might receive glory for Himself. Looking more closely we find there are several observations concerning this request for glory which put the matter in a different light.

(1) Jesus requested that He be glorified in order to bring further glory to the Father. Jesus’ petition was not to receive glory independently from the Father, but to be glorified to the praise of the Father. “… Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee” (John 17:1 b). “And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, …” (John 17:5). Satan wanted to usurp God’s position and glory (Isaiah 14:12-14). He wanted to receive glory independently of God. Jesus prayed for glorification in order to exalt the Father.

(2) Jesus requested the glory which rightfully belonged to Him. “And now glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I ever had with Thee before the world was” (John 17:5). When the second person of the Godhead left heaven to become God incarnate, He temporarily set aside His glory (Philippians
2:5-8). This ‘kenosis’ was illustrated by the washing of the disciples’ feet in John 13. Our Lord did not lay aside any of His deity, but rather added perfect humanity to His deity. When the work of the cross was completed the glory which was momentarily laid aside was given back to Him. This, in part, is that which Jesus requested in His prayer.

(3) Christ’s glory was earned at the price of the cross. In addition to the restoration of the glory which our Lord possessed prior to His incarnation, there is additional glory which was earned by His earthly life and ministry. He had glorified the Father by His earthly life of obedience and submission (John 17:4). He was glorified, along with the Father in the salvation of men by His work on the cross (John 17:2-3). It is because of Christ’s willingness to set aside the glory that was rightfully His in order to save sinful men that the Father gave Him even greater glory.

“Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

What a beautiful commentary these verses in Philippians chapter two provide on the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed to be glorified so that the Father would receive glory (Philippians 2:11). Jesus received the glory that was already His (Philippians 2:6), but because of His work on the cross (Philippians 2:7-8) was given an even greater glory (Philippians 2:9-11).

The matter of suffering and glory must be kept in proper perspective. The Christian experience is not one of grim determination which causes one to face a life of suffering and sorrow with glory to follow later. The Christian life is the abundant life (John 10:10b). It is one of joy and peace.

Nevertheless, trials (James 1:2-4,12), persecution (John 15:18ff.; 2 Timothy 2:12) and suffering (Philippians 1:29) are an inseparable part of the Christian experience. In times of difficulty, our faith is deepened (James 2:3), our fellowship with God is enriched (Philippians 3:10) and we experience deep joy in the midst of difficulties (John 17:13; 1 Peter 4:13; 2 Corinthians 12:10). In suffering and adversity we come to appreciate God as our great reward, as well as our rewarder. When all of our human resources have been spent, we find our sufficiency in Christ alone (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

The suffering of this life takes many forms. It may be that of opposition from friends and loved ones (Matthew 10:34ff.; 1 Peter 4:4). It can be a physical or mental experience. It may involve setting aside temporary pleasures for eternal rewards (Hebrews 11:24-26). It may be the normal failures and frustrations of our humanity (Romans 7:15ff.; 8:18ff.) as we attempt to live in a way pleasing to God and as we await our final glorification.

We should not only say that Christian suffering leads to glory, but that in many cases suffering is glory.

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures

1 “The Lord had become flesh: a real human baby. He had not ceased to be God; He was no less God then than before; but He had begun to be man. He was not now God minus some elements of His deity, but God plus all that He had made His own by taking manhood to Himself.” J. I. Packer, Knowing God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 50. I would highly recommend your study of the entire chapter, “God Incarnate,” pp. 45-56.

2 “In Hebrews 11:6 we’re told that God is the ‘rewarder of those that diligently seek Him.’ And in Genesis 15:1 God said to Abraham: ‘I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.’ Somebody said the difference between Patrick Henry and the average American today is that Patrick Henry said, ‘Give me liberty or give me death,’ and the average American today just says, ‘gimme.’ Sometimes we make a Santa Claus out of the Lord. We want the gifts and not the Giver, we want the blessing more than we want the Blesser. We need to get over the ‘gimmes.’ The Christian life ought to follow the pattern of the Lord’s prayer. It begins with His name, His kingdom, His will and then ‘give us this day our daily bread.’” Vance Havner, “Things I’ve Learned in the Night,” Moody Monthly, June, 1974, p. 29.
of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

We are told that Moses considered the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt (verse 26). Moses came to view his sufferings as glory. So also the sufferings of the Savior were a part of His glory as well (John 12:27–28).

The Christian life is a mixture of the bitter and the sweet. We have a good measure of life’s pleasures and fulfillments. There are also the bitter experiences of suffering and sorrow. These the Lord sweetens with His presence and peace, blending the bitter and the sweet in such a way as to bring about His glory and our good (Romans 8:28). There is no lifestyle more desirable than that of the disciple. There is none more difficult. But He gives greater grace to meet life’s trials and provides His strength for our weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9).

It must also be said that suffering is not the only way to bring glory to God. To believe this would be to become Christian masochists. Our Lord glorified the Father by His words and works, by revealing Him to men (John 1:14; 17:4). We glorify God by our faith in Him and our obedience to His Word. The disciples brought glory to our Lord before they experienced suffering for His sake (John 17:10). In short, we bring glory to God when He manifests Himself in our lives, whether in times of triumph or trial, of success or suffering.

The prayer of our Lord reveals that He has already glorified the Father by His earthly life and ministry (verse 4). But now the hour of His death had come (verse 1). As He had glorified the Father by His life, now He prays that He might do the same in His death.

Here is the touchstone for many Christians today. Are we as willing to live for the glory of God as we are to die for it? A willingness to do either will free us from much of the agony we experience in facing the future. The joy of the apostle Paul in the face of his sufferings in that Roman jail was that which resulted from his willingness to live or die, to prosper or to perish, for the glory of God and the progress of the gospel (Philippians 1:18-26).

Have you ever made this commitment, my Christian friend? It is the dedication of which the apostle Paul spoke in Romans chapter twelve, verses 1 and 2. Have you asked God to glorify Himself through you? It may mean suffering, it may mean success. Most likely it will mean both. That is the commitment a true disciple of our Lord must make. It is such unconditional surrender to the purposes of God which brings Him glory and results in our good.

The Prayer of Jesus for His Disciples
(17:6-19)

From His request concerning Himself our Lord quickly turned to the needs of His disciples, for it is in them that He had been glorified (verse 10). And it was in them our Lord would be glorified after His resurrection and ascension.

The request of the Lord Jesus was founded upon several factors.

First, He accomplished His earthly task of revealing the Father to the disciples (verse 8). It is interesting to note how positively the faith of the disciples is stated. I believe the perspective of the Savior throughout this prayer is from the other side of the cross. Our Lord assumed the fact of His death, burial, resurrection and ascension. From the other side of the cross the disciples would be fully assured concerning all Jesus said and did to reveal the Father to them.

Second, our Lord assumed the consummation of His ministry in the work of the cross. Our Lord prayed, “Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as we are” (John 17:11b). The request of Jesus is based upon the name which the Father has given Him. In Philippians chapter two we are told that, as a result of His humiliation and obedience unto death, the Father gave Him a name above every other (Philippians 2:9). That name, I believe, is the name Jesus (Philippians 2:10). Jesus (or its Old Testament counterpart, Joshua) meant ‘Yahweh is salvation.’

The name of a person in the days of our Lord represented a person’s character. The character of our Lord in His earthly life and ministry is well depicted by the name, Jesus. It is on the basis of our Lord’s character as God’s Savior for man that this prayer of our Lord is grounded.
Third, our Lord’s prayer is based upon the fact that those for whom He prayed were true believers: “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom Thou hast given Me; for they are Thine (John 17:9). The disciples were believers because they belonged to the Father and were given to the Son (17:6,9-10). They were believers also because they came to faith in the person of Jesus Christ as the One sent from God (17:8).

The Lord’s petition on behalf of His disciples was that the Father keep them: “Holy Father, keep them in Thy name …” (John 17:11b). This keeping was done by the Lord while He was with His disciples (verse 12), but now He is returning to the Father (verses 11,13). The keeping of the disciples has several facets:

(1) The keeping for which Jesus prayed involved the eternal security of His followers. Our Lord had already spoken to His disciples concerning the frailty of their faith under fire (John 13:38; 16:31-32). Praise God that our future does not rest upon the strength of our faith, but in its object. Keeping is God’s work, not ours. It is ours to abide (chapter 15), and His to keep.

Judas was not an exception to the rule. Our Lord did not fail to keep Him. He was the ‘son of perdition’ (verse 12). He was never saved (John 13:10,11), so he was not lost out of the keeping hand of God. His destruction was a fulfillment of his character and destiny, as well as of prophecy (verse 12).

(2) The keeping of the disciples involved giving them joy in the midst of the world’s hatred and opposition, verses 13-14. They were not of the world, just as the Savior was not. Consequently, the world would hate them and oppose them. The Father’s keeping included joy and steadfastness in this opposition.

(3) The keeping of the Father included protection against the attacks of Satan, verse 15. “I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.” Our Lord’s prayer does not guarantee that we will be kept from Satan’s attack (Ephesians 6:10ff.; 1 Peter 5:18-9), but that we will be preserved in times of Satanic opposition. God does not promise we will avoid testing, but that we will endure it.

(4) The keeping of the Father includes the sanctification of the believer. “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). This sanctification is a far cry from mere separation. This spacial view of holiness was held by the Pharisees. They were only concerned with external separation (cf. Mark 2:15-17). Their ideas stemmed largely from a misconception of Old Testament sanctification. God, however, is not impressed with externalism, but with the condition of the heart (cf. Matthew 6:1-18; 23; Luke 16:15).

The legalistic forms of Christianity of our present day equates sanctification with mere separation. We think we are holy ‘because we never allow ourselves the occasion to be in the world. We hide behind church walls as though the church building was a fortress against worldliness. We spend all of our time in church activities so that we cannot be among the lost. This is not sanctification. There is a great difference between being ‘in the world’ and being ‘of the world.’ Dr. Billy Graham once defined it as the difference between isolation and insulation. What a difference there is.

There is no better illustration of sanctification than that of our Lord Jesus Christ (verses 16-19). Our Lord was physically untouched by man’s sin in the sanctity of heaven. There, God was untouched by the sins of men. But He left the blessedness of heaven in order to remove the blemish of sin from men. Even as the Holy God was no less holy for entering a sinful world, neither are we for living in the world. This is our calling (verse 16).

If our sanctification is not synonymous with separation, what is it? We can see it best defined in the work of our Lord. “And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves may be sanctified in truth” (John 17:19). Our Lord was not sanctified by separation, but by dedication and obedience to the will and the work of the Father. Ultimately, this sanctification took Him to the cross of Calvary. And it was this work of the Son which assures the sanctification of every saint.

We are sanctified by the work of Christ on the cross. We are also sanctified by the Word of truth (verse 17). As we trust in the Lord Jesus and devote our hearts to do His will we can live holy and blameless lives in the midst of a sinful world.
The Prayer of Jesus for All Believers
(17:20-26)\(^3\)

The petition of the Lord Jesus for all believers primarily concerns Christian unity:

“… that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me” (John 17:21-23).

It is vital that we recognize the vast difference between unity and uniformity. Unity is best demonstrated in diversity; uniformity is threatened by diversity.

Our Lord chose as disciples men who were radically different in temperament, personality and political philosophy. It was because of their glaring differences that their unity was so evident.

In the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul teaches that diversity is not opposed to unity; it is essential to it. How could the body function rightly if every member were an eye, or an ear, or a mouth? True unity demands diversity, and diversity displays true unity. Marriage could be used to further illustrate this principle.\(^4\)

I say this because some churches seem to be trying to turn out ‘cookie cutter Christians’ who look alike (dress codes), think alike (credal codes, often concerning non-essentials) and act alike (codes of conduct). Sad to say, such legalism does not display true unity, nor does it constitute true spirituality. It simply teaches Christian conformity. But when the peer group changes, so does creed and conduct. This is all too frequently seen as our young people go off to college. We have not taught them to think, but to conform.

If unity is not to be found in uniformity, it is to be seen in union. “I in them, and them in Me that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst love Me” (John 17:23). The unity of the trinity is unity of being, of essence and of purpose. We are the children of God by faith if we dwell in God and He dwells in us (verse 23); there is then essential unity, between the believer and God, and also between one believer and every other.

Our unity, then, does not lie in nonfundamental (I did not say unimportant) factors, but in being a true believer. Unity should not be hindered between two believers who hold differing views concerning the details of our Lord’s return, or concerning the doctrine of eternal security, important as it is. Too many Christians think of unity only in terms of those who think and act alike. Often unity is expressed only within a church or a denomination, if at all.

Notice that unity is a vitally important matter. In the last moments of our Lord’s earthly ministry, He prayed for it. It is the way Christians are identified in a world where everyone ‘does his own thing’ and values personal independence and liberties above all else (verse 23). Here is the mark of the Christian community—unity.

In verse 24 the Lord prayed for reunion. He will shortly be led away to His trial and execution. After His ascension He will no longer physically walk among His people, until they are reunited with Him. It is for this reunion that our Lord prayed. “Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold Me; for Thou didst love Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

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\(^3\) One should probably use caution in making too much of the distinctions between verses 6-19 and 20-26, as though the first section was only for the eleven and the remainder exclusively for believers of a later time. In fact our Lord prayed for unity among the eleven (verse 11) as well as for all believers (verses 21-23).

It may be best, then, to understand verse 20 as saying, in effect, “This prayer is not only for the eleven, but for all true believers.” In this case there is little distinction made as to the benefactors of this petition, and simply a change of emphasis in the requests which are made. Verses 6-19 deal more with protection, 20-26 with unification.

\(^4\) Even in the Godhead there is an illustration of unity in diversity. Father, Son and Spirit are equally God, yet there is diversity of role and function.
Finally, in verses 25 and 26, Jesus prayed He might continue to minister to His own, even in His physical absence. “O righteous Father, although the world has not known Thee, yet I have known Thee; and these have known that Thou didst send Me; and I have made Thy name known to them, and will make it known; that the love wherewith Thou didst love Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:25-26).

His work of revealing the Father was done, and the disciples had come to know God through His life and ministry. And yet He desired to continue to reveal Himself in them and to abide in them. This I take to be the substance of His request in verse 26.

It is a great prayer which our Lord allowed His disciples to overhear in their hour of anxiety and distress. It is little wonder that the Spirit of God has preserved it for us as well.

**Conclusion**

Before we leave this prayer of our Lord, let us focus our attention on it so far as we are instructed by this prayer about prayer.

1. **The Presuppositions of This Prayer.** A prayer such as this one cannot be made apart from several premises. First of all, it assumes the sovereignty of God in the salvation and keeping of men. True believers are those who belong to the Father and are given to the Son (verses 6,9-10). Their salvation is procured by the work of the Son (verses 2-3) in which we believe (verses 6-8). Once saved by God, men are kept and preserved by Him also (verses 11-19). There is no more comforting thought than that our salvation rests securely in the hands of God.

   Also, this prayer assumes the sufficiency of the work of the Son on the cross, procuring and securing their salvation. All that our Lord requested is promised on the completed work of Christ on the cross (verses 11,12). The Savior is not a mere man, but the Son of God. Who else can claim to have been with the Father in eternity past (verses 5,24)? Who else but the Son of God can claim that everything which belongs to the Father is also His (verses 9,10)?

2. **The Power of This Prayer.** While we are not specifically told so, this prayer must have had a tremendous impact on the hearts of the disciples. We can assume, since this prayer has been preserved for us, that it was intended to bring peace and assurance to our troubled hearts. If we believe in the One Who prayed it and in the sufficiency of His work at Calvary, what right have we to worry and fret?

   I would like to go one step further by suggesting that we may not have realized the value of praying for others in their hearing. Numerous times I have gone to the bedside of those facing surgery and found that a prayer of assurance and protection brings peace of heart and soul.

   I would suggest that this prayer provides us with an excellent model for prayer on behalf of another Christian. It seeks the glory of God, even at the price of personal suffering, assured that what is for God’s glory is ultimately for our good (indeed, our best). It confidently petitions for divine protection, not from suffering, but from Satan, spiritual collapse, and opposition. It seeks a greater unity among true believers, and looks ultimately for a reunion with our Lord.

   While we do not know the precise program of God for our lives, or others, we are assured of the fact that God’s purposes will be achieved: His glory, our good (Romans 8:28ff.), our sanctification and union with our Lord and other Christians.

3. **The Price of Prayer.** Let us not leave this prayer of our Lord without seriously considering the price of it. Every request which our Lord made on our behalf necessitated the personal sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross of Calvary. Apart from His finished work in His death, burial and resurrection and ascension, these words would be mere wishful thinking.

   The price He has paid for man’s salvation is one none of us could have paid. It was paid once for all, and never needs to be paid again (Hebrews 9:24-28). But there is a sense in which our prayers have a price. Can we pray that God will minister to others without a commitment to minister in any way we can? Every prayer has a price tag. Let us be mindful of our responsibilities when we pray.
Lesson 36:
Who Killed Jesus, The Messiah? Part I
(John 18:1-27)

Introduction

Several weeks ago the president of the United States faced the nation concerning the shortages of petroleum in the United States. In one part of the program, President Carter was asked in effect, “Mr. President, just who is responsible for the present shortages?” I have never had a desire to be the president of the United States, but I would have loved to have been in his shoes at that moment and to have been able to answer that particular question.

Now I am probably going to reveal my naiveté concerning the energy crisis, but this is what my answer would have been. Everybody is at fault. The Arab oil cartel is guilty of pressing an unfair advantage by raising their prices dramatically over the past few months. The American petroleum industry is guilty of encouraging peak consumption levels of petroleum products in order to maximize corporate profits. The American public is guilty for using far more than its share of the world’s natural resources and for wanting government to fix the current situation with little or no increase in fuel prices and with no change in their present lifestyle. The Congress is guilty of failing to deal effectively with the situation due to their fear of adverse public reaction. Perhaps our national leaders have been guilty of failing to tell the public the whole truth, painful as it may be.

The question of the responsibility for current fuel shortages is a recent one. The question of the responsibility for the death of Jesus, the Messiah, is one that has been debated for centuries. Strangely enough, the answers to both questions were remarkably similar.

In our study of the arrest and Jewish trial of our Lord, we must conclude that the Jewish nation is unquestionably guilty of rejecting Jesus as Messiah and of precipitating His crucifixion. Having said this we must hasten to add that our next study of the Roman trial and execution of Christ will show the Gentiles to be equally guilty for the death of the Savior. Let us keep this in mind as we approach this lesson in the life and times of Jesus Christ.

The Arrest of Jesus
(18:1-11)

Judas Iscariot had left the Upper Room before the Passover meal was concluded (John 13:27-30). He knew intimately the places which our Lord frequented. It seems as though Jesus may never have stayed overnight in a house in Jerusalem, but camped outside the city in this garden in which He had just agonized in prayer.1 Judas had little trouble finding the Master in the dark of that night, and Jesus made no effort to elude His captors.

The arrest of Jesus was not going to be bungled this time (cf. John 7:44-46). A great multitude was led to the garden by Judas (Matthew 26:47). They came fully armed with lights, swords, and clubs (John 18:3). Among this delegation were both Romans and Jewish peace officers (verse 3). John tells us that it was a Roman cohort, which was normally made up of 600 men. It is difficult to determine exactly how many were present in the garden.2 While some scholars tend to play down the number actually there, we must remember that the gospels inform

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1 “The information that Jesus and the disciples often went to the Garden is found here only, though Luke tells us that Jesus lodged “in” the mount of Olives every night during passion week (Luke 21:37). This probably means that He and the disciples used to bivouac, sleeping in the open air, and probably in this very garden. Ryle reminds us that “Excepting at the institution of the Lord’s Supper, we have no mention of our Lord ever being in any house in Jerusalem.” “Ofttimes” would be a curious way of referring to Jesus’ custom on the present visit only. It probably indicates that He had been in the habit of using the garden through the years.” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 741.

2 “A cohort was the tenth part of a legion and thus normally comprised 600 men (though in practice the number varied a good deal) … John will not of course, mean that 600 or so soldiers took part in the arrest but that
us that it was a ‘great multitude’ (Matthew 26:47, cf. vs. 55). Both by their weapons and their numbers it is obvious that Jesus was regarded as a formidable enemy. Accompanying the Roman soldiers were the officers of the Sanhedrin, or, as John says, ‘from the chief priests and Pharisees’ (verse 3).

Jesus did not shrink from His captors, but went out to meet them, an action which obviously unnerved the soldiers. Before they had the chance to say a word, He asked them, “Whom do you seek?” (verse 4). When Jesus identified Himself as the One they were seeking it caught them by surprise. In fear, they stepped backwards as He advanced upon them. As in any large crowd the inevitable occurred. Everyone did not retreat simultaneously, and feet became quickly entangled. They literally fell all over themselves. If the events of that night had not been so treacherous and evil, it would have been a comical scene.

Jesus’ aggressive action in this confrontation was purposeful. His captors were embarrassed and rattled by their clumsiness. Jesus had also elicited from them twice that He was the One they sought. Consequently, His disciple should be free to go, rather than to be arrested with Him. This was understood by John as another fulfillment of Jesus’ words (cf. verse 9).

If there was any moment at which the disciples should act to defend their Lord, it would be during this time of confusion. Discerning what was about to take place, the disciples asked if they should make a fight of it.

“‘And when those who were around Him saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, shall we strike with the sword?’” (Luke 22:49). Apparently, Peter did not wait for the answer. He struck out with his sword, severing the right ear of Malchus, slave of the high priest (John 18:10). I have always wondered how this could happen. If Peter had chopped down with his sword, surely much more damage would have been done. I would suspect that Peter slashed horizontally with his sword, intending to sever the head of Malchus. Perhaps seeing what was coming, Malchus tipped his head to the side as he ducked the oncoming sword, losing only an ear in the process.

I would suggest that the Lord’s healing of Malchus (Luke 22:51) at this moment was more out of concern for His disciples than an act of compassion for His opponents. Had Malchus returned with such an injury, there would be ample evidence for the arrest of His disciples. This healing precluded such action—there was no longer any evidence of resisting arrest on the part of the disciples.

From the accounts of the gospel writers concerning the arrest of Jesus Christ, one primary truth stands out: Jesus was in complete control of the circumstances. He was not the helpless victim of a cruel and unjust system; His life was not snatched from Him; He gave Himself up. In the words of our Lord, “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down my life that I make take it up again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father” (John 10:17-18). Jesus’ surrender to His captors was the will of the Father (verse 11). Had this not been so, He could have summoned the hosts of heaven to His aid: “Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53).

Jesus Before Annas and Caiaphas
(18:12-24)

Following His arrest, our Lord is subjected to a series of hearings and trials. The night of His arrest He was brought before Annas, Caiaphas (John 18:19-24), and an assembly of religious leaders which may have been an official meeting of the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:57ff.). Early the next morning there was what seems to have

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3 The Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jews. It was composed of Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and elders of the people; it numbered seventy-one members; and it was presided over by the High Priest. For a trial
been a perfunctory, but seemingly more official assembly of the Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:1,2). After this, our Lord was taken before Pilate, the Roman governor (John 18:23ff.), sent off to Herod (Luke 23:7ff.), and returned to Pilate (Luke 23:11-12), by whom He was finally sentenced to death.

After His arrest, Jesus was immediately brought before Annas (John 18:13). Annas was not the official high priest, but he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was the high priest at the time. For nearly 20 years now, Annas had been removed as the high priest of the nation Israel. Nonetheless he was the head of his family, and was instrumental in seeing to it that five of his sons would hold this same office. Regardless of his official title, he was seemingly the real power and brains behind the scene.

The nature of the questions asked by Annas is revealing: “The high priest therefore questioned Jesus about His disciples and about His teaching” (John 18:19). It was obvious, even to Pilate, that the real issue behind the trial of Jesus was that of prestige, popularity and political power (Matthew 27:18). The Jewish leaders were jealous of the tremendous influence wielded by this Galilean. Annas therefore questioned Jesus concerning His disciples. He seemed to care more about the numbers that followed Jesus’ teaching than the content of His teaching.

Jesus carefully avoided any reference to His disciples, probably in order to protect them. Of His teaching there was no need to ask questions of the Master. He had spoken publicly, for all to hear and judge His words (verse 20). He did not have two teachings, one for His disciples and one for public consumption.

But there was a legal issue which Jesus raised at this point. This was not a legal hearing in the first place. This was a personal confrontation with the unofficial high priest who had long sought the removal of Jesus. His son-in-law had previously determined that Jesus must be gotten rid of” (verse 14). Annas no doubt wished to gloat over his apparent victory, and hopefully to obtain evidence for the upcoming trial of Jesus from His own lips.

It was because of Annas’ illegal questioning that Jesus responded, “Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; behold these know what I said” (John 18:21). In Jewish justice, as in our own system, no one can be compelled to produce testimony against himself. This was what Annas was doing. He was ‘fishing’ in his questions. Jesus refused to respond to such illegal questioning. One of the officers who stood by considered the response of Jesus insolent and struck Him (verse 22).

Some have accused Jesus of not following His own instruction to ‘turn the other cheek.’ May I suggest that the actions of Jesus are an excellent commentary on His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus there taught that one should never lash back or seek to retaliate for personal insults. But here it was not a matter of insult so much as a question of legal rights. Jesus would not tolerate injustice. It was not a matter of personal feelings in this situation but of principle. How few there are today who will stand up for matters of principle.

John’s account of the Jewish ‘trial ‘ of Jesus is strangely brief. Jesus was brought before Annas, the king pin of the Jewish opposition against the Lord Jesus. This was no trial at all, but a mere ‘fishing expedition’ by which the ‘high priest’ had hoped to gather evidence for the trial to come. As Jesus was sent from the presence of such as this a quorum was twenty-three.” William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 2nd ed., 1958), II, p. 390.

4 We should remember that originally the office of high priest was for a man’s lifetime, but under Roman rule it was Rome who appointed high priests as and when they saw fit.

5 “Annas held no official position. But he wielded an immense influence and prestige, and in the Sanhedrin no man’s opinion carried greater weight. Twenty years before, he had been high priest, a title which he still received by courtesy; and no fewer than five of his sons had succeeded him in this, the highest position in the land. It is probable that it was Annas who had established, for reasons of personal gain, the traffic of the bazaar within the Temple courts which Jesus had so sternly denounced.” James S. Stewart, The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ (Nashville: Abington, 1978), p. 196.

6 This is not to avoid the fact that Jesus eventually veiled His teaching due to the rejection of His words (cf. Mark 4:1-25, 33-34). The point here is that there was no duplicity in His teaching. He taught His disciples in much more depth and detail than the masses, but His teaching was consistent.
Annas to stand before Caiaphas, the official high priest, Annas must have felt extremely frustrated. All he got out of Jesus was a rebuke for his shoddy misuse of Jewish justice.

Why did John give us an account of only this encounter with Annas? The actual trial before the Sanhedrin late the night of His arrest is barely mentioned. Primarily, it would seem to be all the report that was needed. There was no real justice in these trials, but only a sham. The other gospels spoke of them. That was enough. The audience with Annas showed the stubborn unbelief of the religious leaders of Israel. All they had in mind was getting rid of Jesus (cf. verse 14).

Matthew informs us that when Jesus was brought before Caiaphas, assembled there also were the scribes and elders. Whether or not this was considered to be an official meeting of the Sanhedrin, we cannot know for certain. Either way, it was not a legal proceeding.\(^7\)

The prosecution attempted in vain to present consistent testimony against Jesus, but the witnesses could not agree. The testimonial evidence consisted of twisted versions of some of the teaching of Jesus.\(^8\) It was obvious that they were getting nowhere, so Caiaphas made one last daring challenge. Putting Jesus under oath, he demanded to know whether He was the Messiah, the Son of God (Matthew 26:63). Fully aware of the consequences, Jesus gave His answer in the clearest of terms. Not only did He say, “Yes,” but He spoke of His return in power and glory at the right hand of the Father (Matthew 26:64).

Inwardly ecstatic, Caiaphas feigned disgust and abhorrence of what He considered to be blasphemy. He tore his robes, signifying his response to Jesus’ answer. Now there was no need to carry on any further. Here was the evidence which paved the way for Jesus’ execution. The death sentence was pronounced, and these supposedly impartial jurors then engaged in the physical abuse of the Savior (Matthew 26:66-67). Whatever occurred in the meeting of the Sanhedrin on the following morning (Matthew 27:1-2), it was only a facade and a mere rubber stamp on what had already been determined, even before the arrest of Jesus.

Both the decision of the Sanhedrin and the process by which it was determined were a disgrace to the high standards of Jewish jurisprudence. Stewart\(^9\) lists five specific ways in which this trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin was illegal.

1. The men who were trying the case were also those who had arranged for Jesus’ betrayal. They could in no way be considered an impartial body of jurors.

2. The trial did not begin with a specific charge against Jesus, as Jewish law demanded. Throughout the trial, it was obvious that the Sanhedrin was searching for some kind of evidence which would be sufficient for a charge worthy of the death penalty.

3. The judge who was trying the case was the leader for the prosecution. His statement in John 11:50 clearly revealed his determination to do away with Jesus.

4. No witnesses for Jesus’ defense were produced. No opportunity for Jesus’ defense was allowed. Barclay informs us that, “in any trial the process began by the laying before the court of all the evidence for the innocence of the accused, before the evidence for his guilt was adduced.”\(^10\)

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\(^7\) “Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:1, says that capital cases could only legally be tried in the daytime; it would in any case probably take several hours to gather the full Sanhedrin for a formal session.” R. T. France, *I Came to Set the Earth on Fire* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 145, fn. 2.

\(^8\) For example, the witnesses testified of hearing Jesus say, “I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:58).


It should also be said that some scholars question some of the charges of illegality, based upon the writings contained in the Mishnah. This is because the writings of the Mishnah concerning the procedures and practices of the Sanhedrin refer to a later time than that of Jesus’ day. One must therefore assume that such later rules accurately reflect the rules for the Sanhedrin of New Testament times.
(5) Finally, the trial was conducted hastily, and thereby violated several regulations concerning the trial of one accused of a capital offense. Such a trial could not be conducted at night, as it was (cf. fn. 7). The law also stated that in capital cases sentence of death must be pronounced on the day after the trial, after 24 hours had elapsed. Furthermore, such cases could not be heard on the day preceding a Sabbath or one of the great festivals.

The trial completely failed to prove any wrongdoing on the part of Jesus, the Messiah. What it did reveal was a blindness so complete, a rejection so final, that the finest in Israel made a sham of their own judicial system. In reality, it was they who were on trial, and their guilt was proven beyond a shadow of a doubt.

**Jesus Denied by Peter**

(18:15-18; 25-27)

We have already spoken of Peter’s failure, so we shall not linger here. Suffice it to say, as Charles Eerdman reminds us, “… it was not his faith that failed, but his courage.”

I understand John’s purpose in this chapter as underscoring the complete rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people. Even those who were His closest friends and followers, for a brief moment in time, forsook the One Who loved them, and was to give Himself for them. The story of Jesus’ rejection by the religious leaders of the nation is therefore interwoven with the account of Peter’s three-fold denial.

**Conclusion**

The two themes which dominate the Jewish trial of our Lord Jesus Christ are the deity of Christ and the depravity of man. Knowing what was ahead, Jesus fearlessly advanced to meet His captors. Although He was about to face a terrible death, Jesus’ concern during His arrest was for the safety of His disciples. Even in this tragic moment, there were unmistakable flashes of the deity of our Lord. His opponents fell before Him, so awesome was His personal authority and dignity. When Peter sliced off the ear of Malchus, Jesus healed him. While Jesus could have called the angels of heaven to His rescue, He surrendered to His foes. What majesty!

Some would seem to think of Jesus as a good man who fell as the helpless victim of treacherous men. Such was never the case. The Messiah laid down His life as a payment for the sins of men, but His life was never snatched from Him. No man took His life; He gave it up.

Against the backdrop of our Lord’s deity is seen the depravity of fallen man. Here was the best that Israel had to offer. The high priest (official and unofficial) was not godly and a guardian of justice, but a scheming politician who is willing to sacrifice the life of an innocent man (more than this, the Son of God) for the sake of expediency. The Sanhedrin was made up of Israel’s finest, yet they made a mockery of justice. Even Peter, under the questioning of a mere servant girl, sank to the point of denying His Lord.

Lest any of us feel a kind of smugness concerning the conduct of these men in the presence of our Lord, let me speak very candidly. Had you or I been in the place of either Peter or the high priest, we would have done the same. Even more than this, we must go on to say that the same thing goes on today as it did then. Men con-

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10 “The difficulty in evaluating points of procedure by comparing the Gospel accounts with the Mishnah is this, that when the Mishnah is compared with other Jewish sources, whether rabbinic writings or Josephus, which lie closer to the time of the Gospels than it does, the unreliable character of the Sanhedrin tractate clearly appears.” Everett F. Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 204.

12 There are a number of difficulties presented by variances in the Gospel accounts. None of these, however, are insurmountable. For a helpful discussion of some of the problems involved and suggestions as to their solutions, cf. Morris, *John*, pp. 750-753.
tinue to reject Jesus as the Savior of men and to mock His name. Worse than this, they do so without even giving the matter a moment’s serious thought.

And we who name the name of Christ as our Lord so often deny Him before men. We may not necessarily publicly renounce Him with curses, but we simply keep quiet when it is the time to speak a word for Him. When the name of Christ is a reproach we simply shrink back and allow people to assume that we would have nothing to do with Him. Praise God, our salvation and our eternal security rests in the work which Jesus Christ accomplished on our behalf.

I am impressed with the fact that there was no real decision for or against Christ made by Israel’s leaders at this trial. Those decisions had long before been settled. The ‘trial’ of our Lord was a mere pretext to enact what had been previously planned. So, too, in our day, men and women often do not arrive at their decision to reject Christ in the great trials and crisis points of life—they simply confirm and carry out the decisions they have made over the days, months, and years of their lives. The great trials of life simply show us to be what we have become; they do not make us what we are. Let us carefully weigh the consequences of our decisions moment by moment.

Finally, I believe that John’s purpose in recording the trials of Jesus was to lay the foundation for the work of Christ on the cross. If Jesus Christ were not divine, His death would have been useless. If men were not depraved, His death was needless. By highlighting the deity of Christ and man’s depravity, we are reminded both of the need for Christ’s death and of its efficacy.
Lesson 37:
Who Killed Jesus, The Messiah? Part 2
(John 18:28–19:16)

Introduction
As a teacher and parent I have heard a lot of lame excuses in my lifetime. Once when I was teaching high school courses in a state penitentiary an inmate was found to be in possession of an eyedropper and a hypodermic needle. When asked what he was doing with it, he replied, “I was using it to feed the birds.”

Early in the history of the church, many excuses were made for the conduct of the Gentiles in the trial and execution of Jesus, the Messiah. Christian legend would tell us that Pilate’s wife was a true believer, and that even Pilate, himself, came to faith in Christ.¹

The effect of some of these early church writings was that the role of the Gentiles in the murder of Jesus Christ was played down, while the guilt of the Jews was stressed. One does not need to read far to sympathize with the negative reactions of the Jews to such blame-shifting.

From our last study, it was evident that the Jewish nation was clearly guilty of rejecting their Messiah and of condemning Him to death. Our study of the Roman trial of our Savior will convince us that the Gentiles were also to blame for the death of the Messiah. While the outward forms of legality may have been maintained in Jesus’ Roman trial, the substance was just as evil as that of His Jewish trial(s).

Before we begin our lesson, let me suggest that it is not really Jesus Who is on trial in our text, but Pilate. Throughout John’s account we see Pilate torn between the innocence of Jesus and the insistence of the Jews to put Him to death. Pilate is like a ping pong ball batted from one side to the other. Ultimately, he failed the test, just as his Jewish contemporaries.

Pilate and the Jews
(18:28-32)
In order to comply with the rules of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court met a second time shortly after daybreak to go through the formalities of a legal trial and to pronounce sentence. In order to dispatch with this matter as quickly as possible, the Jewish leaders brought Jesus before Pilate early in the morning. It would seem as though they expected little opposition from Pilate and that they were surprised and irritated by his efforts to conduct this matter strictly according to Roman legal procedures.

Pilate was the fifth procurator of Judea, a position which he held for ten years.² As such, he possessed almost absolute power over the Jews and was directly responsible to the emperor. So long as imperial authority was maintained and Roman taxes were paid, Pilate allowed the Jews to exercise a great deal of self-government. The Sanhedrin was, therefore, both the highest religious and civil Jewish authority in Israel, subject to Pilate. One right Rome carefully guarded was that of capital punishment. The Jews could not, as they admitted, put a man to death

¹ “Later Christian legend was very sympathetic to Pilate, and tended to place all the blame for the death of Jesus on the Jews, and to exonerate Pilate completely. Not unnaturally, legend came to say that Pilate’s wife, who it is said was a Jewish proselyte, and was called Claudia Procula, became a Christian. It was even held that Pilate himself became a Christian; and to this day the Coptic Church ranks both Pilate and his wife as saints.” William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1958), II, p. 397.
For this they must receive Pilate’s approval. This was why they came to the Praetorium early in the morning.

Pilate was not a man who was predisposed to do any favors for the Jews. There seems to be little doubt that he despised the Jews and their customs, and that he would eagerly pursue any opportunity to vex his Jewish subjects. Whatever Pilate granted the Jews in this trial, he did begrudgingly.

Ill feelings were mutual between Pilate and his Jewish petitioners. When the Roman governors arrived in Jerusalem, they customarily removed their standards (a pole with a Roman eagle or an image of the emperor mounted on the top), respecting Jewish sensitiveness to such images. This Pilate stubbornly refused to do, so he left his standards visible as he entered Jerusalem. Immediately, there was a confrontation. Since Pilate’s choice was to arrest or slay the entire nation, he reluctantly gave in and removed the standards.

Some time later, Pilate decided Jerusalem needed a better water supply. In order to finance the construction of a new aqueduct, he took the money needed from the Temple treasury. When a crowd of protestors gathered, Pilate had some of his soldiers, dressed as civilians and mingling in the crowd, beat the demonstrators and subdue the crowd. Such actions did not engender warm feelings on the part of the Jews toward their procurator. The incident recorded in Luke 13:1, of Pilate mingling the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices, further widened the gap between Pilate and his Jewish subjects.

While Pilate could have learned some lessons in diplomacy, the Jewish leaders did little better. They not only insisted upon having an audience with Pilate early in the morning, but they then insulted him by refusing to enter the Praetorium. They flaunted him with their religious scruples, and forced him to come out to them. I doubt that Pilate was in a very benevolent mood.

Perhaps with considerable irritation, Pilate demanded to know the charges against Jesus (verse 29). Seemingly caught off guard, the religious leaders had to search for the right words. They could not present the Jewish charge of blasphemy, because Roman law would not recognize such an offense. Thus, they attempted to skirt the issue, “If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you” (John 18:30). Pilate was unimpressed with such a poor explanation. He rightly perceived that it was, at the bottom, a religious issue, not one involving Roman law. And so he replied, “Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law” (verse 31). His petitioners revealed more than they wished when they countered, “We are not permitted to put any one to death” (verse 31).

John underscores the significance of this statement in verse 32. Had the Jews alone put Jesus to death according to their law, it would have been by stoning (Leviticus 24:16). There are several possible reasons why the religious leaders may have preferred crucifixion to stoning. First of all, it was, by far, the most painful and drawn out means of execution. They had years of pent-up anger and hostility toward Jesus. A quick and easy death was too good for Him. Second, crucifixion was more humiliating, and in the Jewish mind, implied that Jesus was thereby discredited. The Old Testament Scriptures referred to this kind of death as an evidence of divine disapproval (Deuteronomy 21:23). Finally, by this form of execution the Jews seemingly placed themselves in the background. In their eyes, it placed the responsibility (or guilt) for Jesus’ death on Rome. At least they must share the blame.

John’s comment in verse 32 reminds us that in this event, regardless of the motives of our Lord’s Jewish or Roman persecutors, was a fulfillment of our Lord’s words of prophecy concerning the type of death He would die: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32). The saving death of the Messiah was one that was to be by crucifixion.

R. T. France aptly observes, “To the Romans, the hearing before the Sanhedrin was an unofficial preliminary hearing, while to the Jews the Roman trial was a regrettable necessity to give effect to a sentence already passed, on other grounds, by themselves.” R. T. France I Came to Set the Earth on Fire (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 145. There is considerable discussion concerning whether or not the Jews could put a man to death in the light of several notable exceptions, such as the stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8–7:60). For a thorough discussion of this matter, cf. Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 786-788.
Pilate and Jesus  
(18:33-38a)

While John does not inform us of the charges made against Jesus, Luke gives three, all of which had political overtones which Pilate could not overlook: “And they began to accuse Him, saying, ‘We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King’” (Luke 23:2). Going inside to speak with Jesus, Pilate pursued the critical question of Jesus’ kingship—“You are the King of the Jews?” (verse 33).

One would wonder what the tone of voice was with which Pilate asked this question. Initially, it was probably one of sarcasm and scoffing. John pictures Jesus’ response, not as a fervent defense of Himself, but as a probing of Pilate’s own heart. “Are you saying this on our own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” (verse 3).

Jesus was more interested in the motive behind Pilate’s question than in pursuing His own defense. Pilate dispelled any possibility of genuine interest or concern. He was just doing his job, and not really enjoying it either. Pilate’s only concern was to learn the reason for the intense efforts of those who were outside to do away with Jesus (verse 35).

Pilate wanted to know if Jesus was any real political threat to himself and to Rome. Jesus quickly set aside any such thoughts: “My Kingdom is not of this world. If My Kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My Kingdom is not of this realm” (verse 36). 4

Pilate probed further into the nature of Jesus’ kingship: “So You are a King?” (verse 37).

Our Lord responded, “You say correctly that I am a King. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (verse 37). Jesus could not deny His kingship, but He could put Pilate’s fears to rest that He posed some kind of threat to Rome or to his own rule as procurator of Judea. The purpose of our Lord in His first coming was not to revolt against divinely ordained authority, but to reveal the truth of God to men. Revelation, not revolution, was His calling.

There seems to have been a mild appeal and invitation in the words of our Lord to Pilate. He had first asked if Pilate had questioned Him out of any personal interest (verse 34). Then He said, “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (verse 37). This should have encouraged even the slightest desire to pursue spiritual matters with the Savior.

Pilate’s answer made it clear that he was not in any way seeking the answers to any spiritual questions: “What is truth?” (verse 38). Here is the response of the agnostic and the skeptic. Pilate had no deep desire to discover the truth, either about the issues of eternal life, or even of the questions underlying the accusations made against Jesus. He simply wished to know if Jesus posed any threat to him.

Worse than this, it would appear that Pilate doubted that there was any such thing as truth. The only thing amazing about such a statement is that it is so contemporary and similar to the thinking of our own age. How sad it is when men despair due to the fact that there are, in their minds, no absolutes on which to base one’s beliefs and actions.

4 Some would conclude from our Lord’s statement that Jesus never conceived of establishing an earthly kingdom. They would understand the only kingdom of our Lord to be His reign in the hearts of men. They would thus not look forward to the literal fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a millennial Kingdom. Such an interpretation of these words spoken to Pilate would hardly seem to fit the facts. First of all, one would have to spiritualize all the Old Testament prophecies of a literal kingdom. Second, Jesus was speaking specifically to Pilate’s concerns about Him being a possible threat to Rome’s authority in Palestine. He was simply saying that the purpose of His first coming was to reveal God to men and to redeem sinners, not to revolt against Rome. Finally, Messianic hopes are still very much alive after the death and resurrection of our Lord (cf. Acts 1:6f.). Our Lord’s return and the establishment of His (literal, earthly) Kingdom on earth constitute much of the subject matter of the New Testament.
In Pilate’s mind, the conversation was finished. There was nothing more worth discussing. His time was too valuable to spend with this Galilean. While he was uninterested in pursuing spiritual truth, he at least was convinced that this Jesus posed no political threat to him or Rome. Whatever His Kingdom might be, it was neither political nor revolutionary.

Pilate and the Jews
(18:38b–19:7)

Going out to the Jews, Pilate gave them his verdict: “I find no guilt in Him” (verse 38). The charges which the religious leaders pressed simply did not square with the facts. It was evident to Pilate that the real issue was not treason, but jealousy (cf. Matthew 27:18).

At one stage in the Roman trial of Jesus, Pilate had attempted to sidestep the matter by raising the question of jurisdiction and sending Him to Herod, but this effort accomplished nothing except to heal a breach in the relationship of these two politicians (Luke 23:7-12). Now he would try another approach, so that he would not have to reap the consequences of standing upon his convictions. He would attempt to adapt a Jewish custom to suit his own ends.

For some time there had been a custom of releasing some Jewish prisoner at Passover time. It would seem that the selection of this prisoner was made by the Jewish people, rather than by Pilate. Perhaps he could avoid his dilemma with a sophisticated type of plea-bargain. He could pronounce Jesus guilty, satisfying the Jew’s desire to shame Jesus publicly, and yet he would then release Jesus—in effect to pardon Him—so that no grave injustice would result.

Pilate could live with this compromise, but not the Jewish enemies of our Lord. They wanted blood, and nothing less. Pilate gave them a choice between Jesus and Barabbas. I suspect that he picked Barabbas because he was such a hardened criminal that no one would want him turned loose in society. He was a revolutionary, a thief, and a murderer (verse 39; Luke 23:19). But when it came down to a choice between one or the other, the crowd chose to let Barabbas live, and Jesus die.

The hypocrisy and evil of this decision is all too obvious. The crowds were willing to release a hardened and dangerous criminal and to crucify One Who was without blame. They released a man guilty of offenses far

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5 “Still more interesting is the near certainty that Barabbas was also called Jesus. Some of the very oldest versions of the New Testament, for example the ancient Syriac and Armenian versions, call him Jesus Barabbas, and both Origen and Jerome knew of that reading, and felt it might be correct. It is a curious thing that twice Pilate refers to Jesus who is called Christ (verses 17 and 22), as if to distinguish Him from some other Jesus. Jesus was a common name; it is the same name as Joshua. And the dramatic shout of the crowd most likely was: “Not Jesus Christ, but Jesus Barabbas.” Barclay, Matthew, II, p. 399.

6 France suggests, as do many others, that the crowds were merely ‘rabble’ assembled for such an occasion, to give the appearance of popular support for the verdict of the Sanhedrin: “Much is sometimes made of the fickleness of the Jerusalem crowd which could welcome Jesus with hosannas, and a few days later clamour for his death. But there is no reason to suppose they were the same people. It was the Passover pilgrims who welcomed Jesus, but what pilgrim worth his salt would be hanging around the governor’s palace early on the morning of the great day of the festival when there was so much to be prepared? Besides, the narrow street outside the ‘praetorium,’ where the trial was held, would not allow a very large crowd to gather, only a small fraction of the thousands in Jerusalem that weekend. It is hardly likely that the Jewish leaders, who had planned the arrest and trial of Jesus so carefully, left the composition of the crowd to chance: ‘rent-a-crowd’ is not a purely modern technique.” France, I Came to Set the Earth on Fire, pp. 152-153.

Such a view does not seem to me to fit the facts. There was ‘a multitude’ assembled at Jesus’ arrest (Matthew 26:47,55), multitudes at His trial (Matthew 27:20,24), and a large crowd at His crucifixion (Luke 23:48). Could such ‘rabble’ constitute a multitude? Would a shrewd politician like Pilate not sense that these ‘rabble’ were just a ploy?
worse than those with which Jesus had been charged. Surely their hatred and rejection of Jesus clouded all sound judgment.

Having failed to accomplish his aim in offering to release Jesus instead of Barabbas Pilate tried yet another approach. He had Jesus mocked, beaten, and scourged, hoping that this would appease the blood-hungry crowds. Perhaps the crowd would have pity on Jesus after He had been severely punished. Perhaps, too, they would come to see the folly of supposing that such a pathetic figure could conceivably pose any threat to themselves or to Rome. Perhaps this is why Pilate brought Jesus forth to the crowds with the words, “Behold, the man!” (John 19:5).

Sensing Pilate’s reluctance, the chief priests and officers pressed him vigorously with the demand, “Crucify, crucify!” (verse 6). Pilate then sought to have the Jews go about their evil deed on their own (verse 6). This would help to solve his troubled conscience. It was only now that the underlying issue surfaced. “We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God” (verse 7).

The Jews had wanted a king (cf. John 6:15), but not the kind of king Jesus promised to be. They did not want a king like Jesus, and they could therefore not tolerate His claim to be the Son of God. Now the truth was out.

**Pilate and Jesus**

(19:8-11)

The religious charge of the Jews did not produce the desired effect upon Pilate. Seemingly in that calloused heart there was at least some kind of religious sensitivity, even if only pagan superstition. As a Roman, he knew there were many accounts of the gods coming to the earth in the form of men. Besides this, Pilate had been warned by his wife not to take part in the execution of this “righteous man” as she had been warned in a dream (Matthew 27:19).

This statement by the Jews prompted further investigation by Pilate, who by this time was even more fearful of his predicament (verse 8). The question, “Where are you from?” (verse 9), I would understand to be an investigation into Jesus’ origins. Was it possible that He actually was the Son of God (or in pagan theology, ‘a son of a god’)?

Let us recall that the Jewish leaders felt that they could not deal with Jesus as they would like so long as public sentiment was in Jesus’ favor (Matthew 21:26,46). As a division among the masses began to grow concerning Jesus (John 7:40-41) the scribes and Pharisees become bolder in their attempts to arrest Jesus (John 7:32,45). After our Lord’s triumphal entry (John 12:1-19), the Messiah hopes of the masses were again aroused, but when Jesus clearly spoke of His death (John 12:32) the crowds were again disillusioned. The last verses of John 12 seem to indicate a much broader rejection of Jesus than ever before. While in Mark 4:12 the passage in Isaiah 6 was quoted to show that Israel’s leaders had rejected the Messiah, John applies it to the nation at large. Jesus was rejected by His nation. While the rejection of some may have been more passive than that of others, Jesus’ death had widespread approval. Pilate had rightly assessed the strength of Jesus’ opponents.

7 “The severity of this form of punishment is seen in certain incidental references. Thus Josephus tells us that a certain Jew, son of Ananias, was brought before Albinus and “flayed to the bone with scourges” (Bell. vi. 304). Eusebius narrates that certain martyrs at the time of Polycarp “were torn by scourges down to deep-seated veins and arteries, so that the hidden contents of the recesses of their bodies, their entrails and organs, were exposed to sight” (HE, iv. 15,4). Small wonder that men not infrequently died as a result of this torture (cf. the passages from Cicero cited by Godet).” Morris, John, p. 790, fn. 2.

8 “Pilate may be using the words in a somewhat contemptuous manner. The expression need mean no more than “Here is the accused,” but it is likely that John saw more in it than that. Jesus is THE man, and in this dramatic scene the supreme governing authority gives expression to this truth. Some suggest that John may intend an allusion to “the Son of man.” It is impossible to imagine Pilate using exactly this form of words. It is not at all unlikely, however, that John intends “the man” to evoke memories of Jesus’ favorite self-designation.” Ibid., p. 793.
To this question of Pilate, Jesus gave no response. Jesus’ innocence or guilt with regard to the charge of treason did not hinge upon matters concerning His origin. Pilate must stick to the issues. Pilate was both perplexed and frustrated by the silence of the Savior. “You do not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” (verse 10). Pilate supposed that his authority should have awed the Lord Jesus, and that in the face of such power Jesus could not dare to remain silent. Jesus’ reply informed Pilate that his authority should not feed his pride, but produce humility. “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me up to you has the greater sin” (verse 11).

Several observations about the nature of Pilate’s authority should serve to humble him. First of all, his was a delegated authority. It was ‘given to him from above.’ Man only has authority to the degree that God gives it. The ultimate source of all human authority is God. Second, while Pilate possessed divine authority in a specific sphere, that authority carries with it responsibility for one’s actions and decisions. Pilate wanted his authority but was desperately trying to avoid the responsibility that came with it. While the one who delivered up our Lord had the greater guilt, Pilate must share the burden of responsibility for his decision concerning the execution of Jesus.

**Pilate and the Jews**
(19:12-16)

Pilate was a tormented man. It was not Jesus’ destiny which hung in the balance, but his own. Our Lord consistently struck a sensitive nerve in the moral conscience of this Gentile governor. The Jewish leaders sought to find a weak point at which they could apply all the leverage of their advantage.

Pilate went out from his last conversation with the Master with a renewed determination to let him go (verse 12). But the smell of a Jewish victory was in the air and with renewed boldness the Jews revealed their last and most forceful argument: “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar” (verse 12).

Were it not for the skeletons in Pilate’s political closet, this threat would have posed no challenge to him. But his administration was strewn with the wreckage of high-handedness, cruelty, and corruption. He could not afford to have Rome investigate any charges against his administration.

The struggle was over. The Jewish leaders had prevailed, sitting down in the judgment seat. Pilate said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” (verse 14).

It is hard to discern whether the tone of his voice was appealing or sarcastic. Regardless, the Jews demanded the crucifixion of the Savior (verse 15). In answer to the question, “Shall I crucify your King?” (verse 15), the chief priests tragically responded, “We have no king but Caesar!” (verse 15).

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9 I must point out that Jesus in no way questioned the fact that Pilate, as a part of a divinely ordained government, had the authority to mete out capital punishment. Jesus’ words support the right of government to execute criminals.

10 Bible students do not agree as to who this one is who must bear greater responsibility than Pilate. This person must have delivered Jesus over to Pilate and also must have done so without divine authority (verse 11). I would suppose that this best refers to Judas, and not Caiaphas, the high priest.

11 “When they said this, they used their most telling argument. He did not want the Emperor Tiberious, now on the island of Capri ill with loathsome diseases, filled with suspicions and full of ill-will and revenge, to hear that he had sided with a prisoner in a case of laese majestas. The punishment meted out for any officer of the Empire on such charge was confiscation of property, removal from office, torture by banishment, or something even worse. Pilate was sure that the Jewish Sanhedrin would like to send such a report to the Caesar. He quailed before the clear threat.” J.W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 591.

Everett Harrison quotes Ethelbert Stauffer concerning the expression, ‘Caesar’s friend’: “The expression ‘Caesar’s friend’ was a technical term. This title was an honor reserved for loyal senators, prominent knights, and notorious administrators. It assured its holder a brilliant career.” Everett Harrison, *A Short life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 215.
With this statement, Israel’s leaders publicly renounced their greatest hope, the hope of a coming Messiah-king. Their hatred of Jesus was so intense they were willing to renounce the greatest doctrine of the Old Testament Scriptures, that of the coming of Messiah who would be Israel’s King. They proclaimed themselves to recognize only one king, Caesar.12

Not Jesus, but Barabbas. Not Jesus, but Caesar. What could be more tragic than this? And with this statement, Pilate delivered Jesus up to be put to death (verse 16).

Conclusions

Historically, it is evident that responsibility for the rejection and crucifixion of Christ must be shared by both Jews and Gentiles. It is interesting that very early in the history of the church there were writings produced which tended to play down the guilt of the Gentiles, and spotlight the guilt of the Jews.13 Such teaching must be rejected as inaccurate and unbiblical. Jews and Gentiles alike stand guilty for the rejection of Jesus Christ.

Pilate is a tragic representative of all those who reject Jesus Christ in the face of overwhelming evidence and contrary to the pleadings of one’s conscience. John’s purpose in recording the details of Jesus’ trial before Pilate is to demonstrate the innocence of Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus was not put to death as a political traitor, but as a political pawn. Just as Caiaphas had pronounced that Jesus must be done away with for the sake of expediency (John 11:50), so did Pilate.

Pilate was the victim of the consequences of his own past sins. Had he not committed sins of pride and passion, he would have had no fear of the investigation of his administration due to the changes of the Jews. As it was, he capitulated because his sins were all too evident. Pilate feared the judgment of Rome more than that of heaven.

The consequences of the decision made that day are such as to make even the present day reader of history shudder. Within a year Pilate was removed from office because of his harsh and insensitive treatment of his subjects. While Pilate may never have had to face the awesome specter of the scrutiny of Tiberius, some have said that he preferred to die by his own hand. In 30 years the Jews drank the cup of divine wrath to the brim, when the Jews sought to carry out the crime with which they charged the Savior. The details of the slaughter that followed are horrifying.14

Many of us, like Pilate, would prefer not to have to pass judgment on the person and claims of the Lord Jesus Christ. But we, like Pilate, cannot avoid a decision. And the consequences of this decision determine our eternal destiny.

Two observations remain to be made. First we are reminded of the vast difference between morality and legality. In a technical sense, the condemnation of Christ to die on a Roman cross was legal. In spite of this, it was the greatest moral transgression of all time. We must discern the difference between morality and legality.

12 “The opponents of our Lord, unable to find a way of action for themselves on their own lines, fell in with the Sadducean policy of Caiaphas—a policy which, however hateful to themselves, yet made itself dominant by proving itself alone efficacious. There is this additional tragedy, then, in the final close—that the Pharisees, for the sake of slaying the Lord, forewore the creed which had been their glory and their life, and allowed themselves to be found crying in Pilate’s Hall. ‘We have no king but Caesar.’” H. S. Holland, The Philosophy of Faith and the Fourth Gospel (1920), p. 192, as quoted by Harrison, A Short Life of Christ, p. 215.

13 Cf. footnote 1 above.

14 “Thirty years later, on this very spot, judgment was pronounced against some of the best citizens of Jerusalem. Of the 3,600 victims of the governor’s fury, not a few were scourged and crucified! Judas died in a loathsome suicide, the house of Annas was destroyed some years later, Caiaphas was deposed a year after the crucifixion, and Pilate was soon after banished to Gaul and there died in suicide. When Jerusalem fell, her wretched citizens were crucified around her walls until, in the historian’s grim language, ‘space was wanting for the crosses, and crosses for the bodies.’ The horrors, of the siege of Jerusalem are unparalleled in history.” Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels, p. 592.
I have a friend who encountered a would-be philosopher at a party. My friend put his finger on a fatal flaw in this young man’s thinking when he observed, “The trouble with you is that you have failed to distinguish between sin and crime. There are a lot of sins that are not crimes. And there are a lot of crimes that are not sins.” My friend was talking about the difference between legality and morality.

Here is one of the great deficiencies of legalism. It assumes that what is legal is also moral. In our society a man who is guilty of murder can be acquitted because of some legal technicality. Once abortion or using drugs is legal many consider that it is also morally right. We must distinguish between legality and morality. Neither Pilate nor the Jews saw the distinction.

Second, I am impressed by the ‘unscrupulous scrupulosity’ (as Edersheim phrases it) of the Jewish leaders. They would not defile themselves by entering into the Praetorium, yet they would conspire to put to death the sinless Son of God. Here is illustrated the condemning words of our Lord when He accused the scribes and Pharisees of ‘straining gnats and swallowing camels’ (Matthew 23:24). Here is also one of the great dangers of legalism. In stressing meticulous obedience to some kind of code, it fails to differentiate between that which is really important and that which is incidental.

Listen to these words of our Lord:

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated. You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:16-24).

Throughout the history of the church, legalistic Christians have failed to discern between that which is primary and secondary. As a result many needless divisions have resulted and much harm has been done. Sincere Christians were put to death by other Christians because they differed with them over the necessity and mode of baptism.

Let me caution you, my friend, and I do so with sincere gravity. Some of those things which set us apart, which make us distinctive as a church (in particular, from other orthodox churches) may be non-fundamentals. Listen to me well. I did not say that these matters are unimportant, but they are not essential to saving faith or to genuine orthodoxy. Dare we divide or condemn others when we differ here? I fear that much unprofitable criticism of men like Billy Graham falls in this area. Legalism may be at the root of our failure to distinguish between matters of great importance and those which are of lesser importance, even if true.

I have a friend whom I respect highly, Dr. Haddon Robinson. There is a statement by which I will always remember him. “I will go to the wall for a lot of issues, but not for that one.” There is a lot of biblical wisdom in those words. May God enable us to discern those things which are worthy of our ‘going to the wall.’
Lesson 38:
The Death of Deaths


Introduction

While most Christians have at least some appreciation of the theological implications of the death of Christ, few of us have grasped the apologetic impact of the crucifixion. I have always felt that the crucifixion of Christ was a time of triumph for the crowds, and of agony for those who were true followers of our Lord. In my mind, it was not until the resurrection of our Lord that men and women began to be convinced as to the truth of our Lord’s teaching and claims.

As I have studied the Gospel accounts more carefully, I have found that the events of the crucifixion made a tremendous impact upon those who witnessed the death of our Savior. Even before the resurrection of our Lord, a scoffing soldier was convinced of our Lord’s innocence, a hardened criminal turned to the dying Jesus and sought his soul’s salvation, and a hostile crowd began to entertain serious misgivings about their part in the crucifixion.

As we turn our thoughts to the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us attempt to determine what it was about this event that set it apart from every other death and what changed the minds of many of those present who were previously convinced that Jesus was a malefactor who needed to be blotted out of Jewish history.

The Sufferings of the Savior

No more cruel and inhumane method of execution has ever been devised by man than that of crucifixion. Modern technology may have perfected the art of killing more people faster, but there was no harder way to die than upon a Roman cross.¹

Crucifixion was not only conceived of as a fitting penalty for those guilty of heinous crimes, but as an excellent deterrent for any who might consider such acts against society. It was a death that was both painful and public, punitive and preventative.

¹ “Klauaner, the Jewish writer, writing of crucifixion says, ‘Crucifixion is the most terrible and cruel death which man has ever devised for taking vengeance on his fellow-men.’ Cicero called it ‘the most cruel and the most horrible torture.’ Tactitus called it ‘a torture only fit for slaves.’ It originated in Persia; and its origin came from the fact that the earth was considered to be sacred to Ormuzd the god, and the criminal was lifted up from it that he might not defile the earth, which was the god’s property. From Persia crucifixion passed to Carthage in North Africa; and it was then from Carthage that Rome learned it, although the Romans kept it exclusively for rebels, runaway slaves, and the lowest type of criminal. It was indeed a punishment which it was illegal to inflict on a Roman citizen.” William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), II, pp. 401-402.

“Goguel quotes A. Reville’s description: “It represented the acme of the torturer’s art: atrocious physical sufferings, length of torment, ignominy, the effect on the crowd gathered to witness the long agony of the crucified. Nothing could be more horrible than the sight of this living body, breathing, seeing, hearing, still able to feel, and yet reduced to the state of a corpse by forced immobility and absolute helplessness. We cannot even say that the crucified person writhed in agony, for it was impossible for him to move. Stripped of his clothing, unable even to brush away the flies which fell upon his wounded flesh, already lacerated by the preliminary scourging, exposed to the insults and curses of people who can always find some sickening pleasure in sight of the tortures of others, a feeling which is increased and not diminished by the sight of pain—the cross represented miserable humanity reduced to the last degree of impotence, suffering, and degradation. The penalty of crucifixion combined all that the most ardent tormentor could desire: torture, the pillory, degradation, and certain death, distilled slowly drop by drop. It was an ideal form of torture” (The Life of Jesus, London, 1958, pp. 535f.).” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 805-806, fn. 44.
Normally the crucifixion process was prolonged to up to two or three days. It would typically begin by a preliminary scourging, such as that suffered by our Lord (Matthew 27:26). We are not told how many stripes were meted out, but on the end of the whip were attached small pieces of bone or metal which would tear open the flesh of the victim. Many were unconscious before this ordeal ended; some even died.

If the criminal survived his scourging, he was forced to carry his own cross to the place of the crucifixion by the longest possible route. This served to humiliate the wrongdoer, and to caution those who witnessed his punishment. Once at the site of the execution, the criminal would be fixed to a cross, of which there were several varieties.² It was not necessary to raise the individual to any great height, but only that his feet not touch the ground. Commonly, the victim bore a sign depicting the offense for which he was executed. He would carry this around his neck as he made his way to the place of death and the placard would then be fixed to the cross.

The precise cause of death of the one crucified is not known with any degree of certainty. Shock, exposure, starvation, heart failure, and suffocation may all have combined to slowly snuff out the life of the sufferer.

If for some reason the life of the victim lingered longer than the executioners desired, there was a simple and common solution. A large wooden mallet was used to break the legs of the dying man and his death would quickly ensue. It seems as though this made it impossible for the person to enhance his breathing by using his legs to relieve the pressure on his diaphragm. If this was the case, the person would quickly suffocate as he could no longer breathe.

Ancient Jewish writings document that some of the women of Jerusalem, out of compassion for the sufferer, prepared a mixture of myrrh and wine.³ This drug would serve to dull the senses of the dying man and ease some of the pain. Our Lord refused to drink any of this drugged wine (Mark 15:23) as He would drink to the full the cup of God’s wrath and the consequences of sin as meted out on the cross.

The physical torture of the cross was only exceeded by the spiritual agony of our Lord’s death. There on the cross He suffered the rejection of men. Golgotha was located close to Jerusalem and probably near a main thoroughfare (John 19:20), along which many would pass. Matthew informs us that many of these passers-by ‘hurled abuse’ at Jesus (Matthew 27:39-40). It is significant that these passers-by were not unaware of the teaching of our Lord. “You who destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matthew 27:40).

The Jewish religious leaders were perhaps the most aggressive in their rejection of Jesus. It is interesting to note that they chose to mock Him, indirectly. Their words of insult were addressed more to the crowds, than to Jesus. “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross and we shall believe in Him. He trusts in God, let Him deliver Him now, if He takes pleasure in Him for He said, ‘I am the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:42-43).

The soldiers, too, joined in this chorus of scoffers (Luke 23:36-37). While they may have known or cared little about the teaching of Jesus, His conduct on the cross did not match their Roman mentality of macho which they thought should be personified in a king. Even the two thieves joined in with their own reproaches (Matthew 27:44).

² "There were four forms of the cross used for this ghastly punishment: a plain stake to which the victim was nailed; the Tau cross with the transom below the top—the traditional type on which Jesus was crucified; the crux commissa, or Greek cross, with four arms of equal length; St. Andrew’s cross, consisting of two beams obliquely crossed.” J.W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1939), p. 596.

³ "Plummer cites from Lactantius: “His executioners did not think it necessary to break His bones, as was their prevailing custom.” If this is accurate, the horror of broken legs was habitually added to that of crucifixion.” Morris, John, p. 818, fn. 84

⁴ "It is good to know that it was customary for a drug to be offered to the crucified so that some of the pain was mitigated. We read of the custom in Sanh. 43a. ‘When one is led out to execution, he is given a goblet of wine containing a grain of frankincense, in order to benumb his senses, for it is written, Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish and wine unto bitter in soul. And it has also been taught: The noble women in Jerusalem used to donate and bring it.’” (Ioncino edn., pp. 279f.) Ibid., p. 814, fn. 72.
The jeering of these unbelievers was not, in my estimation, the most painful part of Jesus’ rejection by man. A certain rejection is implied by the apparent absence of those disciples in whom Jesus had invested so much of Himself. It would seem that only John was at the foot of the cross.

And then there were those women who had played such a vital part in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 27:55f.). They were standing nearby, agonizing over that fate of Him Whom they had loved and served. The jeering words of the crowd were nowhere on their lips, but the underlying question of the scoffers haunted their hearts. Why was Jesus on the cross? Why didn’t He come down and show Himself to be the Son of God? While they still loved Him, they, too, could not fathom the meaning of the cross.

As deeply as all of these things must have grieved our Lord, the greatest sorrow has not yet been considered. It was not the physical pain which our Lord most dreaded. Neither was it the rejection of men, even those who were His most intimate friends. It was the separation from God which caused our Lord to shrink from the shadow of the cross (Luke 22:39-44).

The words of the Psalmist perfectly conveyed the agony of soul of our Lord as the Suffering Servant: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34). As someone has rightly pointed out, here is the hell our Lord dreaded, but nevertheless experienced for us. Hell is not merely the presence of pain and suffering, but the absence of God in the midst of that pain. This is also true for those who reject Christ as their Savior: “And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Recently, a friend of mine was preaching on the book of Daniel. He rightly stated that while God may not choose to deliver us from our fiery trials (Daniel 3:16-18), He will be with us in the midst of them (Daniel 3:25). Only once has that not been so, and that was when our Lord bore our sins upon the cross and suffered the wrath and rejection of God in our place. What agony that must have been. The back of the Father, for an eternal moment of time, was turned to the Son.

Christians have sometimes had difficulty in maintaining a balance, in the significance of both our Lord’s physical suffering and death and His spiritual suffering and death. Both are real, both necessary, and both significant.

Some have stressed the physical sufferings of our Lord to the point where there is almost a mystical devotion to the blood of our Lord. There is a fixation upon the blood, almost distinct from a devotion to our Lord Himself. We are saved by the blood, but it is the blood of the Lamb. Others, in an effort to draw our attention to the spiritual sufferings and death of Christ, have sometimes made statements which have been viewed as heretical.

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6 “John describes the horror that was crucifixion in a single word. As in the case of the scourging, he simply mentions the fact and passes on. Popular piety, both Protestant and Catholic, has often tended to make a great deal of the sufferings of Jesus, to reflect on what was done and to dwell on the anguish He suffered. None of the Gospels does this. The Evangelists record the fact and let it go at that. The death of Jesus for men was their concern. They make no attempt to play on the heartstrings of their readers.” Morris, John, pp. 805-806.

5 “Mark and Matthew mention by name three of a group of women who were ‘looking on afar off.’ They both mention Mary Magdalene, and omit the mother of Jesus. The woman called by John his mother’s sister seems to be the woman named ‘Salome’ by Mark and the ‘mother of Zebedee’s children’ by Matthew; while Mary the wife of Cleophas would appear to be identical with ‘Mary the mother of James and Joses’ in the Synoptic narratives. Such an identification cannot, however, be regarded as certain.” R.V.G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 215.

6 “It may be a challengeable opinion, but I think the Church of God has suffered more than it knows by pictures of the crucifying of Jesus; and sometimes by very honest and well-intentioned sermons, trying to describe the matter on the physical side. I am not denying the tragedy and the pain of it physically, but the physical suffering of Jesus was nothing compared to the deeper fact of that cross.” Ibid., p. 806, fn. 45. Here Morris is quoting Morgan.
They have played down the actual blood that was shed as though it were of no value. Let us hold firmly to the infinite value of both the physical and the spiritual aspects of our Lord’s sufferings and death.

The Distinctiveness of the Death of Christ

There was nothing particularly unique about the physical sufferings of our Lord upon the cross, other than the fact that He chose not to have His senses dulled by a drugged wine. His death was unique in that it was one completely undeserved, and one that was spiritual as well as physical.

But there was something about the way that Jesus died that deeply affected those who stood by. A Roman soldier, who no doubt had witnessed countless deaths by crucifixion, was compelled to praise God and to exclaim, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54).

A convicted criminal who, only a short time before, was ridiculing the Lord Jesus, now penitently asks to be remembered when He comes into His Kingdom (Luke 23:42). A timid member of the Sanhedrin, who was fearful of others knowing of his faith in Christ, now has the courage to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus (John 19:38). Simon of Cyrene, father of two sons whose names were a household word to the Christian church of later days, may well have credited his conversion to the day he was compelled to bear the cross of our Lord (Mark 15:21).

But perhaps more amazing than the response of all of these men to the death of our Lord, is that of the crowds who consented to His death and then witnessed His execution. “And all the multitudes who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts” (Luke 23:48).

Truly, this is an amazing thing! Those who initially were shouting, “Good riddance!” at the foot of the cross, left groaning, “Good grief!” There was in the death of Christ, something so unique and compelling, that even the enemies of our Lord went away deeply disturbed.

One of the distinctives of the death of Christ was the way in which Jesus dealt with His own suffering and execution. It was common for those who were being crucified to curse at the spectators and to spit upon them. I can confidently say that never before had those people beheld a Man who could look into the faces of His persecutors and then pray, “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Further, in the midst of His torment, our Lord persisted in placing the needs of others above His own. Seeing His mother grieving at the loss of her oldest son, Jesus instructed John to assume His responsibilities in caring for His mother (John 19:26-27).

The cry of our Lord which repeated the words of Psalm 22:1 have always troubled Christians. Why, many ask, would Jesus say such a thing as this? As already suggested, these words best convey the spiritual anguish of our Lord at the reality of being forsaken of God. More than this, our Lord, in quoting the first words of Psalm 22, identifies Himself not only with this messianic Psalm, but also as the Suffering Servant of the Old Testament Scriptures. He is the fulfillment of all of the prophecies of a Saviour Who would suffer for the sins of His people.

The real question, and that which causes me to marvel, is the failure of the crowds to recognize these words as Scripture. They took the words, “Eli, Eli” (My God, My God) to be a reference to Elijah (Matthew 27:46). Now I realize that the masses in Israel may not have possessed (nor were they able to read) the Old Testament Scriptures in the original Hebrew language. But surely the religious leaders could do so. And yet no one seemed to recognize these words as a scriptural quotation. Why?

I would suggest a couple of distressing possibilities. First of all, they may not have recognized the words of Jesus as Scripture because they were not really searching the Scriptures (cf. Matthew 21:42; 22:29; John 5:39) as they should. They were more students of the scholars than of the Scriptures. That is not far from our own day when we who study the Bible spend more time in the commentaries than in the text of God’s Word.

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7 The imperfect tense used of our Lord’s prayer implies that our Lord repeatedly asked God’s forgiveness for His persecutors.
Another possibility is that while they may have read certain portions of Scripture, they were not intimately familiar with this text. This, in one sense, is amazing for it is one of the great Old Testament texts. On the other hand, it is easy to understand why it would not be a popular text for study and meditation.

This passage was known to be one of the ‘Servant Psalms.’ By this we mean that it was one of the Psalms which portrayed Israel’s Messiah as the One Who would come to suffer and to die for the sins of His people. The Old Testament mind found these ‘servant’ passages hard to square with those which spoke of Messiah as a victorious King (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-11). As a result, I suspect that the ‘suffering servant’ texts were neglected, while the more appealing passages were carefully explored.

We should not be surprised by this, for we have read in the sixth chapter of John’s gospel that the masses wanted to make Jesus their King after He had fed the 5,000. When Jesus spoke of the necessity of His sacrificial death, the crowds wanted no such King and ceased following Him (John 6:60,66). Israel wanted a mighty King, but not a suffering servant.

The final words of our Lord upon the cross were, perhaps, the most impressive. “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Jesus did not die with a whimper, but with a shout. And this was a cry of triumph and victory. “It is finished” is a far cry from “I am finished.” The work of redemption, the work to which He had been appointed, had been fully and finally completed.

It was not just the words which impressed the onlookers, but what attended them. Putting all of the gospel accounts together, one would seem to see this sequence of events: Jesus cried triumphantly, “It is finished!” (John 19:30), followed by “Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46). After this Jesus bowed His head and released His spirit (John 19:30).

Our Lord had said that He would voluntarily lay down His life for the sheep. No man would take His life; He would lay it down. He, too, would take it up again (John 10:17-18). It was much too soon for Jesus to have died (cf. Mark 15:44). The legs of the other two men had to be broken (John 19:32-33). Jesus was dead because He had fulfilled all the Scriptures. He gave up His spirit and died. No one had ever died this way before. “And when the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God’” (Mark 15:39).

In addition to the words and actions of our Lord at His crucifixion, there were also the miraculous events which accompanied His death. These were a divine attestation both to the identification of the Lord Jesus as the Son of God, and to the significance of His death.

There was the supernatural phenomenon of the three-hour period of darkness (Mark 15:30). John had introduced Jesus as the light of the world.

“In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:4-5).

“There was true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:9-11).

Jesus, the light of the world, was rejected. Men would rather live in darkness than to have their evil deeds made evident by the light. When the crowds put Jesus to death, they momentarily extinguished that light and revealed the darkness of their own souls.

The second miracle was the earthquake which occurred simultaneously with the death of our Lord. This quake split rocks and opened many tombs (Matthew 27:51-53). I believe that this miracle prepared the way for yet another sign that would occur at the resurrection. At that time many of the saints who had died were raised and they entered the holy city. This miracle opened the tombs of those who would be raised at the time of our Lord’s resurrection. Implied in this miracle was the truth that the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ was the death of death itself. He was to be the victor over the grave. When He died, death no longer held its deadly power.
Finally, we are told that the veil of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. This veil was no mere sheet hung before the holy of holies; it was said to have been one hand in thickness. Nothing less than a miracle could have torn it in this way and at the precise time of our Lord’s death.

In the rending of the veil we are symbolically instructed that the death of Jesus Christ removed the barrier between man and God. The sin which separated us has been paid for by the shedding of His blood. Through His sacrifice men can freely and boldly approach God.

“Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

The Meaning of the Death of Christ

The Scriptures often point us to the cross of our Lord as an example. It is the supreme example of brotherly love (John 15:13). It is the model which God has provided for the husband who would love his wife (Ephesians 5:25-27). It is the example of godly suffering for the sake of Christ (1 Peter 2:21-25). The cross is likewise symbolic of Christian discipleship (cf. Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34-36). We must not only be willing to die for our faith in Christ, but be willing to die to selfish aims and ambitions. We must be willing to share in the humiliation which the cross symbolizes (cf. Colossians 1:24; Hebrews 12:2; 13:12-13).

Evangelical Christians have sometimes avoided speaking of the cross as an example because of the emphasis which liberal theology places on this point. The error of the liberal is that he stops at the cross as an example, and does not see it also as an expiation. The cross of Calvary was the long-awaited payment in full for the sins of men. The bulls and goats which the Jews offered did not make atonement (cf. Romans 3:21-26); they only succeeded in forestalling the judgment of God until payment was made by the Messiah.

“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:11-12).

From the time of man’s creation the penalty for sin was death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). From the time of man’s fall, God had promised a provision for men’s sins (Genesis 3:15). The Old Testament sacrificial system was divinely ordained to remind God’s people that ‘without the shedding of blood there was no remission of sins’ (Hebrews 9:22). While the sacrifice of animals did not remove the sins of the people, it was an expression of their faith in the provision which God Himself would provide. The Old Testament prophets often spoke of Him who was to come and achieve salvation through His sacrifice.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judg-

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8 “This veil, which was the thickness of a palm breadth, was sixty feet long and thirty broad, and separated the Holy and Most Holy Places. Various attempts have been made to explain this strange phenomenon on naturalistic grounds, such as the earthquake, or as Jerome’s comment on the Gospel according to the Hebrews, by the fall of the huge lintel of the Temple broken by the earthquake. But this veil was of such tough fabric and so woven that it could not have been rent in twain by an earthquake or the falling of a lintel. Matthew connects the phenomenon directly with the death of Jesus, calling attention to the fact that it was rent ‘from top to bottom’ by God’s hand, throwing open thus the Most Holy Place to all men.” Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels, p. 604.
ment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living. For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence. Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:4-12).

The death Christ died was a fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah Who would come to suffer and die for the salvation of His people. From the outset of His public ministry, the Lord Jesus came as the Savior of men, the one sacrifice Who would bring salvation to men. As John the Baptist proclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Throughout His earthly life, it was the cross that was His ultimate and compelling destiny.9

The work of Christ upon the cross can be partially summarized by three terms: redemption, reconciliation and propitiation. Redemption is the work of Christ focused on the problem of sin. We are bought back from our enslavement to sin by the blood of Christ. Satan can rightfully demand our allegiance until the price of sin has been paid. Reconciliation heals the broken relationship between the sinner and God. Once sin was dealt with, there was no barrier between a man and God. Propitiation deals with the problem of the righteous anger of God aroused by sin. Divine wrath could only be appeased by the demands of justice being met. The death of Christ satisfied the holiness of God.10

The death of Jesus Christ is the touchstone of the Christian faith. It is not enough merely to believe that Jesus Christ was a good man, even the Son of God. One must trust in His work upon the cross as the sole basis and assurance of his acceptance before God and eternal life with Him.

The death of Christ is unique in a number of ways. It perfectly fulfilled countless Old Testament prophecies which described it in minute detail.11 It was unique also because it fulfilled the many predictions our Lord

10 Here I would urge you to read J. I. Packer, Knowing God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press,, 1975), pp. 161ff.
11 I will suggest just a few Scriptures to be compared:

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<tr>
<th>Old Testament Prophecy</th>
<th>New Testament Fulfillment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Isaiah 53:7</td>
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<td>Psalm 22:7,8</td>
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made about His death throughout His earthly ministry. It was unique because no man has ever died like Jesus Christ did. It also was distinctive in that it alone bore the testimony of divine attestation through the miracles which accompanied it.

Perhaps no words better catch the significance of Christ’s crucifixion than those of the apostle Paul: “Behold then the kindness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22). On the one hand we must marvel at the love of God which sent our Lord to the cross to die for those who would have Him put to death. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). There is no greater love than that which we see demonstrated on the cross of Calvary.

And yet we must also marvel at the immensity of the payment that was made by our Lord. On the cross we see not only the measure of the love of God, but also of divine judgment. For any who would think that God might wink at sin, let him consider the price that was paid, and by God Himself in the person of the Son. If God did not hesitate to punish His own Son with such severity, what kind of punishment do you and I deserve?

My friend, you cannot come to the cross of our Lord without making a choice. Either you will choose to trust in Christ as your salvation, or you must reject Him and bear the wrath which He bore for you. You must say, as did those who put Him to death, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matthew 27:25).

The cross leaves no room for neutrality. You must trust in Him or take your place among His enemies. May God enable you to look to Him for your salvation.

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12 I realize these are taken out of context, but they nevertheless apply to our Lord’s death on the cross.
Lesson 39:
The Burial and Resurrection of Christ


Introduction

One of my friends, Craig Baynham, tells the story of an uncle who one day was leisurely driving his convertible in the mountains. He had his top down, his radio turned up loud, and was enjoying to the full the beauties of the winding mountain road on which he was driving. So intent was he on the scenery, and so deafened by the blaring of his radio, he failed to notice the driver behind him becoming more and more impatient.

Finally the road presented sufficient room for the furious driver to pass. A blast of the horn and a shake of the fist (even a few not-so-well chosen words) were not sufficient to appease the anger of the hostile motorist. Forcing the uncle’s car to the side of the road he proceeded to verbally vent his frustration. Craig’s uncle, who had been oblivious to the whole matter until now, proceeded to apologize for the inconvenience he had caused. But no apology was sufficient.

“Your apology is not enough. I’m going to pick you up out of that car and beat you to a bloody pulp,” the man finally threatened. As the motorist began to close in on him, the uncle quickly removed a 45-caliber revolver from under the seat and aimed it point blank at his attacker. With only a moment’s hesitation the aggressor blurted out, “I accept your apology.” And with this he returned to his car and went his way.

The moral to this story is that the introduction of one unexpected element can completely change one’s perspective on a situation. That, in my mind, is precisely what occurred early on that Easter morning nearly 2,000 years ago. In the mind of the Jewish religious leaders, the crucifixion of Christ had once and for all dissolved the popular movement that centered about Jesus the Nazarene, which so threatened their position of leadership in the nation Israel.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ overruled the verdict of the Sanhedrin that Jesus was a malefactor who must be removed. When He rose triumphant from the dead, the claims and teachings of our Lord were undeniably validated. This event revitalized the feeble faith of the disciples and became the heart of the message which the apostles began to preach. It forced the enemies of the cross to face their responsibility for rejecting God’s Messiah and to reconsider the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead not only demonstrated the truth of His teaching, but the value of His death. It proved Him to be the Son of God. It transformed discouraged and disbelieving disciples into fearless preachers of the gospel. Those who shrank back from suffering were now gladly willing to suffer and die for the cause of Christ. One new element transformed the course of history. That element was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave.

The importance of the resurrection can hardly be overstated. We should recall that our Lord had publicly staked His credibility on one final and conclusive sign to the nation, the sign of the prophet, Jonah.

“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him saying, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth’” (Matthew 12:38-40).

The effectiveness of our Lord’s entire ministry hung upon His ability to rise from the grave. And lest we think of this only as a theoretical and historical issue, we must also recognize how crucial the resurrection of our Lord is to Christians today. It is an essential part of the gospel message that men must believe in order to be saved: “… if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9).
The resurrection is also the cornerstone of the Christian faith and our assurance of life beyond the grave: “... if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is vain ... and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:14,17).

Let us give careful attention to this matter of our Lord’s burial and resurrection.

The Burial of Jesus

In several ways the burial of our Lord prepared the way for His resurrection. It may seem needless to say, but the burial of our Lord testifies to the reality of His death. Skeptics and unbelievers have sometimes advocated a 'swoon theory' which explains away the resurrection as merely the physical recovery of a dying Christ. Our Lord, they tell us, was not really dead, but merely unconscious. In the cool of the tomb, Jesus revived and went His way, limping from recorded history. The evidence against such a theory is too extensive to recount.

The death of Jesus was undisputed by everyone who witnessed His crucifixion. The Roman soldiers, who were experts in this field, were satisfied. Not only had they witnessed the unusual dismissal of His own spirit, but a spear was thrust into the side of our Lord, piercing the vital organs, probably including both His lungs and His heart. In addition, blood and water issued forth, which medically verified that death had already occurred. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared the corpse, which would have revealed the normal evidences of death. The women planned to return at a later time to further prepare the body (Luke 23:55-56). There was not one glimmer of hope that life remained in our Lord’s body.

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1 For a devastating analysis of this theory, see “The Resurrection—A Historical Fact” by B. B. Warfield. *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield -I.* Ed. by John Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 183-184. This volume contains two very persuasive articles concerning the historicity of the resurrection (pp. 178-192) and the fundamental importance of the doctrine of the resurrection (pp. 193-202).

2 "What thoughts concerning the Dead Christ filled the minds of Joseph of Arimathaea, of Nicodemus, and of the other disciples of Jesus, as well as of the Apostles and of the pious women? They believed Him to be dead, and they did not expect Him to rise again from the dead—at least, in our accepted sense of it. Of this there is abundant evidence from the moment of His Death, in the burial spices brought by Nicodemus, in those prepared by the women (both of which were intended as against corruption), in the sorrow of the women at the empty tomb, in their supposition that the Body had been removed, in the perplexity and bearing of the Apostles, in the doubts of so many, and indeed in the express statement: 'For as yet they knew not the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.'” Alford Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, American Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), II, p. 623.


4 Tasker quotes John Lyle Cameron: “The soldier was a Roman: he would be well trained, proficient, and would know his duty. He would know which part of the body to pierce in order that he might obtain a speedily fatal result or ensure that the victim was undeniably dead. He would thrust through the left side of the chest a little below the centre. Here he would penetrate the heart and the great blood vessels at their origin, and also the lung on the side. The soldier, standing below our crucified Lord as He hung on the cross, would thrust upwards under the left ribs. The broad, clean cutting, two-edged spearhead would enter the left side of the upper abdomen, would open the greatly distended stomach, would pierce the diaphragm, would cut, wide open, the heart and great blood vessels, arteries and veins now fully distended with blood, a considerable proportion of all the blood in the body, and would lacerate the lung. The wound would be large enough to permit the open hand to be thrust into it. Blood from the greatly engorged veins, pulmonary vessel and dilated right side of the heart, together with water from the acutely dilated stomach, would flow forth in abundance.” R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 212-213.

5 John 19:38-41. I find it difficult to follow Edersheim at this point, where he suggests that none of the normal evidences of death would accompany His expiration. This is on the premise that Scripture prophecies that corruption will not occur in our Lord’s body. See *Life and Times*, II, p. 615.
Matthew’s account of our Lord’s burial includes some very interesting detail, not mentioned by the other gospels. The request made of Pilate by the chief priests and Pharisees is most revealing:

“Now on the next day, which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, ‘Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I am to rise again.’ Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last deception will be worse than the first. Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard, go, make it as secure as you know how.’ And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone’ (Matthew 27:62-66).

First of all, this petition reflects a lingering uneasiness concerning the person of Jesus Christ and the power He possessed. Why would they still be wary, unless the way our Lord died evidenced a most unusual happening, the end of which was not yet in sight? (Cf. Luke 23:48.) Further, it indicates how aware the Jewish leaders were of our Lord’s teaching. They knew that He had staked His entire ministry on His ability to rise from the grave (Matthew 12:38-40; 27:63).

Finally, the religious leaders unwittingly fulfilled the purpose of God by taking extreme security measures at the grave site. So long as the corpse was at hand, Christ could be shown to be only a self-deceived fanatic by His failure to rise from the dead. It would at least be possible for some of the disciples of Jesus to remove His body and claim He had risen. Pilate, who had to this point gone along with their requests, told them to use whatever means were necessary to provide maximum security. In their zeal to protect Jesus’ body from theft, the enemies of our Lord provided irrefutable evidence to the miraculous resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead.

The precautions taken by the Jewish and Roman leaders at the grave site of our Lord were something akin to the actions of Elijah at the contest on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:33-35). Three times Elijah commanded the altar to be drenched with water, making a fire humanly impossible to kindle. And yet this only heightened the effect on those who beheld the fire from heaven which consumed the wood, the sacrifice, the water, and the stones (1 Kings 18:38).

I cannot pass by the burial of our Lord without several observations concerning the people who took part in the burial of the Savior. First, I must reluctantly acknowledge that none of the eleven disciples were there to claim the body of Jesus, as John the Baptist’s disciples had done (Mark 6:29). Their absence at the foot of the cross and at the graveside was conspicuous.

It was two members of the Sanhedrin, the council which condemned our Lord, who cooperated in the burial of the Lord. Neither of these two were known to be courageous or bold in their faith (John 19:38-39), but their love of Jesus outweighed their fear of their colleagues or of Rome. Joseph of Arimathea provided the tomb, while Nicodemus brought myrrh and aloes, spices customarily used in the preparation of the body for burial. Due to the lateness of the hour, things were done somewhat hastily (Luke 23:54-56; John 19:42), and the final preparations would be made after the Sabbath.

Once again we find the women who ministered to our Lord, unashamed of their love for Him. As many have observed, they were the last to leave our Lord at His death and the first to return to find Him alive. The fact that our Lord first revealed Himself to Mary Magdalene must have been both a reward for her deep love and devotion, and a rebuke to the unbelief of the men who were His closest friends.

I must say that the more prominent role that is assigned to men in Scripture is no evidence of either greater spirituality or devotion to our Lord, nor is it any evidence of the rewards which we will receive from Him. It is not the magnitude of the task which brings about the commendation of the Savior, but the motive for our service (cf. Matthew 10:40-42; 25:40). These women surely loved their Lord!
The Resurrection of Our Lord

The Events of the Resurrection

As each of the gospel writers presents the resurrection from a different perspective, and with a different purpose, one cannot easily blend every event into a sequence that is completely satisfactory. This is no reflection on the accuracy of each account, but the product of our own lack of information.

Our Lord, unwitnessed by mortal eyes, was literally, physically raised to new life from the dead. This was not merely the restoration of life, the rejoining of soul and body, but a transformation whereby Jesus was both similar to His old self, and yet strangely different as well. His body still bore the marks of His crucifixion, and Mary was able to recognize Him by His voice (John 20:16). He no longer was limited by objects, such as locked doors, grave clothes, or tombstones, but could pass through solid objects (cf. John 20:19).

After the resurrection, an earthquake occurred, which was instrumental in the angel’s removal of the stone, covering the tomb. As others have commented, this was not for the benefit of our Lord (so that He could get out), but for the disciples, so they could look in and be convinced of His resurrection. Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb first, saw that it was empty, concluded that the body had been moved, and reported this to Peter and John.

Following the sequence of events as outlined by John, Mary Magdalene first arrived at the tomb, found the stone already rolled away, and concluded that someone had removed the body of Jesus (John 20:1-2). On hearing

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6 “St. Matthew describes the impression of the full evidence of that Easter morning on friend and foe, and then hurries us from the Jerusalem stained with Christ’s Blood back to the sweet Lake and the blessed Mount where first He spake. It is, as if he longed to realise the Risen Christ in the scenes where he had learned to know Him. St Mark, who is much more brief, gives not only a mere summary, but if one might use the expression, tells it as from the bosom of the Jerusalem family, from the house of his mother Mary. St Luke seems to have made most full inquiry as to all the facts of the Resurrection, and his narrative might almost be inscribed: ‘Easter Day in Jerusalem.’ St. John paints such scenes—during the whole forty days, whether in Jerusalem or Galilee—as were most significant and teachful of this threefold lesson of his Gospels: that Jesus was the Christ, that He was the Son of God, and that, believing, we have life in His Name.” Edersheim, Life and Times, II, p. 622.


8 “No doubt there are difficulties connected with the resurrection narratives. The order in which the appearances occurred, for example, is not so clear as to be undisputed. It should not disturb us that the various Evangelists introduce variety in details, for this is true of their records of the ministry as a whole. Broadus rightly says, “The sacred writers do not treat their Lord’s resurrection as a doubtful point, needing to be established by their statements, but as an unquestionable fact.” What Sabatier wrote about the variations in the three accounts of Paul’s encounter with the risen Lord (Acts 9:22-26) applies equally well to the resurrection narratives. “It is obvious to any unprejudiced mind that they were undesigned…. They are discrepancies of precisely the sort that one always finds existing in the most faithful repetitions of the same narrative…. They cannot in any way affect the reality of the event in question.” A Short Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 241. (Harrison’s footnotes are deleted above.)

9 It is common to suppose that Mary concluded the body of Jesus had been stolen by grave robbers. I do not think that the text necessarily lends support to this. If the burial took place late on Friday afternoon, it was done somewhat quickly, due to the fact that the Sabbath was about to begin (John 19:42; 20:1). The preparation of the body was not complete, and would be finished on Sunday (Luke 23:55-56; 24:1). Since the burial was conducted by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus somewhat hastily, Mary might well have thought ‘they’ (cf. John 20:2,13) had moved (not stolen) the Lord’s body. Since the women were seemingly unaware of the precautions taken at the request of the religious leaders, it would also be possible to assume that either the Romans or the Jews moved the body of Jesus. Notice that Mary asked Jesus (whom she mistook for the groundskeeper of the graveyard) if He had moved the body (John 20:15).
her report, Peter and John\textsuperscript{10} ran out to the tomb. John, being the younger, arrived first and looking in from outside, could see the linen wrappings lying inside. Peter, undaunted by the thought of entering a tomb, barged in for a closer look, followed by John (John 20:4-8).

While Peter’s response is not recorded, John says of himself that he believed.\textsuperscript{11} If John did truly believe Jesus had been raised from the dead it would be due to the evidence inside the tomb, and not that contained in Scripture, “For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (John 20:9).

John also must have kept his conclusions to himself, for faith does not seem to come to the disciples until our Lord appeared to them (John 20:19ff.). The disciples had refused to accept the report of the women, both concerning the angelic messenger and his words, and of seeing the risen Christ (Mark 16:9-11;14; Luke 24:11;22-24).

The evidence inside the tomb was compelling. The stone was rolled away, the guards were missing, the body, likewise was gone. But strangely the evidence was not one which pointed to theft. Had the body been stolen, the thieves would surely not have taken the time to unwrap the body there. The wrappings were neatly arranged, not flung aside in haste. Perhaps they were not unwrapped at all, but simply collapsed, like a cocoon, since our Lord could have simply passed through them as He later did the bolted door of the Upper Room (John 20:19).

Not yet seeing the Lord, the disciples simply went home to await further developments. If they believed the body to be stolen, surely they grasped the fact that they would be the prime suspects, and might expect a visit from the authorities.

Mary lingered at the tomb. Here was the place where she had last seen His body. When she looked into the tomb, she beheld not only the place where the body had once lain and the grave clothes, but also two angels. It seems that she did not recognize them as such and mechanically answered their query as to why she continued to weep (John 20:13).

In what to me is the most moving scene of the entire New Testament, Mary is now confronted by a third Person, Whom she does not yet recognize as her Lord. “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ Supposing Him to be one of those who had removed the body, she replied, ‘Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away’” (John 20:15). And then, in the one word reply, ‘Mary,’ she recognized the voice of the One Whom she most dearly loved. Tears of sorrow became those of joy. She grasped Him so as never again to be separated from Him. It was not that Jesus couldn’t be touched (cf. John 20:25), but that men could not cling to Him so as to keep Him from returning to the Father. He was alive, but He must shortly go.

“Stop clinging to Me; for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God” (John 20:17).

With great joy Mary departed to share her good news with the disciples. What a disappointment their unbelief must have been to her. At least she and the other women knew He was alive (Luke 24:10-11).

The Evidence for the Resurrection

Evidences for the actual, historical, physical resurrection of our Lord on the third day are not wanting. Several lines of evidence will be mentioned.

\textsuperscript{10} It is generally believed that John is the second party who accompanied Peter, but specifically not stated in the text. This would be natural for John, as the author, to omit.

\textsuperscript{11} I have difficulty determining just what it was that John ‘believed.’ In some ways I am inclined to think he only believed Mary’s report that Jesus’ body was missing. Verse 9 could easily support this, along with the other gospel accounts which tell us that the disciples refused to believe the words of the women until they personally saw Jesus (Mark 16:11; Luke 24:11; cf. also John 20:20). If John truly believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, then he did so without any predisposition to do so, and solely on the evidence before him in that empty tomb. If this be the case, Warfield’s words are particularly appropriate when he writes, “That empty grave is alone enough to found all Christianity upon.” “The Resurrection—A Historical Fact,” Selected Shorter Writings, I, p. 190.
First of all, there was the empty tomb. This in spite of the fact that the greatest security efforts were taken. An armed guard was on constant duty, realizing the consequences of failing to do their task well. A great stone (Mark 16:4) lay outside the tomb, making a clandestine entry or escape impossible. And on this stone was placed the seal of Rome, threatening death to any who would defy Rome’s authority by breaking it.

To any grave robber, there was no great value attached to this body, surely not so great as to challenge Rome to steal it. There were plenty of other bodies available at much less risk. To the enemies of Christ, there was no reason to steal the body. Their cause was strengthened by its presence under Roman guard. And for the disciples, there was no desire to steal the body. For them, the matter was as dead as the Lord Whom they had followed. What could be gained by taking His body? Who would wish to pursue the cause of a dead Messiah?12

We must not overlook the testimony of the guards themselves (Matthew 28:11-15). They witnessed the earthquake which the angel employed to remove the stone. They beheld the radiant appearance of the angel and trembled in his presence. They knew that Jesus’ body was not taken, but transformed. And surely they could not have known who ‘took’ the body if they were really sleeping when it happened (cf. Matthew 28:13). The religious leaders feebly tried to cover up this incident.

Then there was the evidence inside the tomb.13 The grave clothes were neatly arranged, and not scattered about. This evidenced a calm and orderly event, not a hasty theft. Perhaps the wrappings were simply collapsed, rather than unrolled, evidence of the fact that Jesus simply passed through His burial shroud. John may well have been saying that his belief was the sole result of the evidence inside that empty tomb, without any grasp of the biblical necessity for such an event, and before he had even seen the Lord Jesus raised and alive. And inside the tomb were the angelic messengers who assured those who came that they had come to the right tomb, but that Jesus had already been raised, just as He promised.

Then, too, there was the earthquake which shook Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ death and opened the graves of the believing dead (Matthew 27:51-53). After our Lord’s resurrection, these resurrected saints appeared to many in Jerusalem. I would conjecture that these Old Testament saints were the first fruits of our Lord’s resurrection power. I believe that they appeared in Jerusalem during the 40 days of our Lord’s sojourn on earth, and then, with Jesus, ascended to Heaven.

There was, as well, the eye-witness appearances of our Lord to various groups or individuals after His resurrection. He appeared to Mary Magdalene (John 20:14-17), and to the women who had come to the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10). Jesus also appeared to Peter and to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). He also revealed Himself to the disciples, once in the absence of Thomas (John 20:19-25), and then with him present (John 20:26-29). In all, over 500 witnesses could be named who had seen our Lord risen from the dead. And Paul made this claim at a time when many of those witnesses were still alive and able to verify the claims of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).

One of the most convincing evidences of the resurrection is the dramatic change in the lives of the disciples. Before the resurrection, they were a forlorn and defeated group of men. Afterward, they were men who fearlessly proclaimed the gospel, even in the face of great opposition and danger (cf. Acts 2-5).

12 “No one will so stultify himself in this age as to seriously contend that the disciples stole the body. Not only is it certain that they could not possibly have summoned courage to make the attempt, but the very idea of Christianity owing its life to such an act is worse than absurd. Imagine, if one can, this band of disheartened disciples assembled and coolly plotting to conquer the world to themselves by proclaiming what must have been seen to be the absurd promise of everlasting life through One who had himself died—had died and had not risen again. Imagine them not expecting a resurrection nor dreaming of its possibility, determining to steal the body of their dead Lord, pretend that he had risen, and then, to found on their falsehood a system of the most marvelous truth—on this act of rapine a system of the most perfect morals. Imagine the body stolen and brought into their midst—who can think they could be stirred up to noble endeavor by the sight?” Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Resurrection: A Historical Fact,” Selected Shorter Writings -I, p. 188.

The Significance of the Resurrection

(1) The empty tomb conclusively established the credibility of our Lord Jesus Christ and His teaching. Throughout His ministry, our Lord was challenged to prove Himself to His skeptics. Many signs and wonders had been accomplished by the Lord Jesus, but His opponents persisted in their unbelief. At last, Jesus refused to grant further signs other than one final demonstration of His power, that of His resurrection from the grave (Matthew 12:33-40). When our Lord arose from the dead, it was His last sign to Israel as to His divine power and authority. His resurrection was the dominant theme of apostolic preaching.14

(2) The resurrection went beyond attesting to the integrity of Jesus in assuring men of His identity as the Son of God. “Who was declared with power to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead …” (Romans 1:4). It was Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God which was the basis for Jesus’ condemnation by the Jewish Sanhedrin (Luke 22:70; John 19:7). The resurrection was God’s way of publicly overruling the verdict of the Sanhedrin and testifying that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God, even as He claimed.

(3) The resurrection demonstrated our Lord’s ability to save. “He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (Romans 4:25). Throughout His earthly life and ministry, Jesus had spoken of Himself as the One Who had come ‘to seek and to save that which was lost.’15 While the cross demonstrates the love of our Lord and His willingness to save men, the empty tomb reveals the power of our Lord and His ability to save.16 Warfield likens the Christ’s resurrection to His healing of the paralytic in Mark chapter two. If Christ can make a paralytic walk, can He not also forgive sins?

(4) The fact of the resurrection confronts the Christian with the necessity of godly living. Throughout Scripture we are exhorted to make our practice conform to our position. In the sixth chapter of Romans, Paul shows the folly of the Christian continuing to live in sin. We cannot claim to have died to sin in Jesus Christ without endeavoring to cease living in sin. We cannot profess to have been raised to new life in Christ without some evidence of a newness of life in our daily walk (Romans 6:1-11).

(5) Closely related to our last point, the resurrection provides the Christian with a measure of the power which is at work in him to enable him to live the Christian life. “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you” (Romans 8:11). God supplies the ability to do whatever He commands. The resurrection is the measure of the power which is at work in us.

(6) The empty tomb firmly roots our spiritual destiny in the soil of history. Many recent theologians have attempted to convince us that it really does not matter whether or not the tomb was really empty, that it is only our resurrection faith which counts.17 The New Testament writers refuse to speak of a faith ungrounded in history. In fact, our faith stands or falls on the historicity of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-19).

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14 Cf. Acts 2:22-36; 3:12-26; 4:10; 5:30, etc.
15 Luke 19:10; Mark 10:45; John 10:10-11; etc.
16 “That he died manifests his love, and his willingness to save. That he rose again manifests his power, and his ability to save. We are not saved by a dead Christ who undertook but could not perform, and who lies there still, under the Syrian sky, another martyr of impotent love. If we are to be saved at all, it must be by one who did not merely pass to death in our behalf, but who passed through death. If the penalty was fully paid by him, it can not have broken him, it must needs have broken upon him. Had he not emerged from the tomb, all our hopes, all our salvation would be lying dead with him unto this day.” Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Resurrection of Christ—A Fundamental Doctrine,” Selected Shorter Writings - I, p. 200.
17 Warfield summarizes the views of Harnack (The History of Dogma): “It can indeed, never be necessary to have faith in a fact; religious belief must not hang on history and must be independent of all facts, which would hold good apart from that belief. Whether Christ rose from the dead cannot, therefore, be of moment to the Christian; all that is of any significance is the religious conviction that he was “not swallowed up in death, but passed through suffering and death to glory, that is, to life, power, and honor.” Faith has nothing to do with knowledge of the form in which Jesus lives, but only with the conviction that he is the living Lord…. Christianity is not built on the rock of fact in any case, he tells us; it is a castle in the air, adjusting itself readily, as it floats
Furthermore, our Lord promised His followers that the Holy Spirit would convict men of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:3). The basis for the Spirit’s conviction concerning the righteousness of Christ was the fact of His resurrection and ascension: “And concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me” (John 16:10).

The fact that Christianity is subject to factual and historical verification opens the door for Christian apologetics. The facts bear out that Christianity at its roots is both supernatural and historical. Men need not take leaps of faith, for faith can and must be rooted in fact. While apologetics can never convince men of the truth (cf. Luke 16:31), historical facts concerning Christ’s resurrection do provide the Holy Spirit with a basis for convicting men of the truths of the gospel.

Finally, the fact of a risen Savior assures the Christian of a hope which lives beyond the grave. In the words of the apostle Paul, “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

**Conclusion**

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ has much to say to the unbeliever. It demands that the claims of One Who cannot be held captive by death must be taken seriously. Have you carefully considered the claims of this Jesus Who yet lives, 2000 years beyond His crucifixion?

Also, the resurrection of Christ is a warning to those who die apart from a saving faith in the work of the Savior. Some today welcome death as the only viable solution to a world of pain, frustration and seeming futility. May I remind you that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead means that death does not end it all for the unsaved. Paul tells us that Christ’s resurrection from the dead assures all men of resurrection from physical death: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

The frightening reality is that those who have not come to faith in Christ must spend an eternity apart from Him in judgment (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Death is not the end for the non-Christian. Everyone will be raised from physical death, and those who have not believed in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of men must face judgment beyond the grave: “And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

There is yet another danger for the unbeliever, and that is to equate intellectual understanding and academic assent with saving faith. You may say, “I believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God Who gave His life to save sinners.” That is not enough, for James tells us that the demons also believe (James 2:19).

The difference between academic belief and saving faith is this: The unbeliever acknowledges the facts of the gospel without adhering to the Savior. The true Christian believes that Christ died for sinners and rose again from the dead. But he goes the extra step from belief in a concept to a commitment to Christ. The Christian says with sincerity Christ died on the cross, and I with (in) Him. Christ rose from the dead, and with Him, so did I (Romans 6:1-11; Colossians 2:8-15). Salvation is trusting in the work of Christ as the sole basis of your eternal salvation. It rests upon historic facts, but goes from these facts to personal faith in the person and work of Christ on the cross. His death was to bear the penalty of sinners. His resurrection was for the justification of sinners. Are you resting in His work alone?


Finally, there is admonition and instruction for true believers in the Lord Jesus from this passage. Do you see how devastating and debilitating unbelief is? How fruitless and frustrating for the disciples of our Lord when they doubted His presence and power among them.

I do not really believe that the disciples conceived of our Lord as forever gone. They probably would have expressed a hope of seeing Him again in the resurrection, much as Martha did at the death of Lazarus (John 11:24). What disabled the disciples was that they felt that they would no longer experience His presence and power at the present, in the midst of their activities and ministries. The resurrection dealt with this in a mighty way.

But isn’t the problem of the disciples essentially the same problem which you and I face? Don’t we often refuse to believe that Jesus Christ is alive and well and working in and among us right now? Isn’t it true that we often think of Jesus as coming in the ‘sweet bye and bye’ rather than working mightily in our midst? It is the assurance of Jesus’ power and presence among us now which gives us assurance and confidence that we labor not alone.
Lesson 40:
The Duties of Discipleship
(John 21:1-25)

Introduction

I have a friend who devised a very clever escape plan for his getaway the day of his marriage. He was married in a southern city which had only one major highway entering and leaving town. He and his bride let the cars follow them right into the middle of a tunnel. A friend was there by prearrangement, who blocked the tunnel with his car, frustrating the attempt of the others to follow any further.

My friend and his bride laughed all the way to their honeymoon hotel. After a leisurely dinner, they returned to their suite, only to discover that all of their friends had somehow found them, even some 60 or 70 miles from their hometown. Someone had gone to the effort to call every hotel along that highway and see if my friend had made reservations for that night. The ‘friends’ blessed the newlywed couple with their presence long into the night.

If I were to capsulize a description of that situation in only one word, I think it would have to be the word ‘frustrating.’ Few Christians would even consider such a description as ‘frustrating’ for that forty day period during which our Lord manifested Himself alive to His disciples. We would probably think of such captions as ‘glorious,’ ‘transforming,’ ‘joyous,’ or the like. And, to a limited extent, those would be accurate characterizations of this unique period of time.

We are inclined to have our thinking shaped by the account in Luke 24, where our Lord appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and as a result of their encounter they said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32).

This is true enough. But would you not have found it frustrating to have had our Lord disappear just at the moment you recognized Him to be the risen Lord? While those forty days had their thrilling moments, I doubt that any of the disciples would have wanted them to continue indefinitely. The reason is that there was no intimacy, no deep and abiding fellowship between our Lord and the disciples during this time.

Let me seek to demonstrate what I have said. When Mary, the first person to see the resurrected Lord, beheld Him, she clung to Him desperately. She longed for a return to the relationship she had known with Him before His death. But Jesus put her off somewhat with the words, “Stop clinging to Me; for I have not yet ascended to the Father; …” (John 20:17).

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1 Hendriksen outlines the post-resurrection appearances of our Lord in this way: (1) To Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; John 20:11-18). (2) To the women (Matt. 28:9,10). (3) To Cleopas and his companion (Luke 24:13-35). (4) To Simon (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:15). (5) To the disciples except Thomas (John 20:19-23). (6) To the disciples, Thomas being present (John 20:24-29). All of these occurred in Jerusalem. After the disciples have gone to Galilee, in obedience to the instructions which they had received from the Lord, Jesus appears again: (7) To the seven at the Sea of Tiberias (21:1-14). (8) To the disciples on a “mountain” in Galilee, where Jesus made a great claim, gave the great commission, and proclaimed the great presence (28:16-20). By many commentators this appearance is identified with Number 9. (9) To the five hundred (1 Cor. 15:6). (10) To James, the Lord’s brother (1 Cor. 15:7). Whether this took place in Galilee or in Judea is not stated. The disciples having returned to Jerusalem: (11) To the eleven on Olivet, near Jerusalem (Acts 1:4-11; cf. Luke 24:50,51). The next appearance that is specifically recorded is by the Lord from heaven: (12) To Paul, when he was on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:3-7; 22:6-10; 26:12-18; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8). There may have been several others. How many there were we do not know (cf. Acts 1:3). Williams Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), II, p. 4.
Our Lord’s post-resurrection relationship to the disciples could never simply be a return to things as they once were. Our Lord’s death, burial and resurrection brought about a new state of affairs, a new kind of relationship with His disciples. Neither Mary nor the others could have things as they once were.

Our Lord’s sojourn of forty days on earth after His release from the bonds of death was not a period of continual and intimate contact with the disciples. Jesus suddenly appeared, but only to depart just as quickly. The appearance of our Lord to the seven who were fishing on the lake was only His third appearance to the disciples as a group (John 21:14). The little time our Lord spent with the disciples was not sufficient to satisfy their deep longings for more intimate and leisurely fellowship as they had once experienced it.

The somewhat distant relationship between the Savior and His disciples was not without purpose. As Jesus had told Mary, it was necessary for Him to ascend to the Father. Had Jesus spent lengthy hours in close relationship with His disciples, His ascension would have been only begrudgingly accepted. As it worked out, the followers of our Lord found, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, that even in His physical absence there was a deeper and stronger intimacy than ever before. The forty day period thus fulfilled its purpose of convincing the disciples that He had truly been raised from the dead. But this purpose was achieved without working against the ascension of our Lord and His ongoing relationship with His followers through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus and the Catch of Fish
(21:1-14)

Our passage in John chapter 21 reveals the frustration of the disciples better than any other. It was in response to the dismay of the disciples that our Lord came to them and clarified the nature of discipleship in the light of His completed work on the cross.

Put yourself in the disciples’ place for a moment. Jesus had called you to be a disciple, and you had left all to follow Him (Matthew 19:27). You had hoped for the promised Kingdom to be immediately established by the Lord (cf. Acts 1:6). You had even hoped for a prominent place in that Kingdom (cf. Matthew 20:20-21). Instead, He was put to death. Three days later Jesus was raised from the dead which was demonstrated by many convincing proofs (Acts 1:3), appeared to you and many others. In some of these appearances Jesus explained from the Scriptures that His death was necessary to forgive the sins of those who believe.

The questions in your mind, if you are thinking as the disciples were, would be numerous. What is going to happen next? Is the Kingdom to begin now? What is the nature of discipleship? What does the Lord want me to do now? If I were to go out and preach, what would my message be? If I am not to preach, what shall I do?

It was out of this frustration, I believe, that Peter decided to go fishing. What else was there to do? Several of the other disciples must have felt the same way. Going fishing surely was better than sitting around wondering what to do next.

Some have criticized this fishing venture as though it evidenced a lack of faith. They suppose that Peter and the others were toying with a return to their former occupation, and giving up full-time service. Peter and the others, due to their lack of direction, were simply trying to use their time profitably until the Lord gave them guidance as to what direction their lives and ministry might take.²

In those days men usually fished at night, but after a long night of effort, there were no fish caught. Our Lord, unrecognized by the disciples laboring in the boat, stood on shore about 100 yards distant and called to them, “Children, you do not have any fish do you?”³ (John 21:5). They had to admit that they were empty-handed. The

² Morris rightly concludes that this decision to go fishing leaves us with the impression “… of men without a purpose.” Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 862. Morris then quotes Lloyd: “Lloyd, however, draws the lesson that ‘when the pause comes and the vision begins to be less vivid, we are not to be idle or despondent. We are to go on with the obvious tasks of every day … How wise were these disciples who calmly went back to their fishing!’” P. 862, fn. 8.

³ It is interesting to note (as does the marginal note of the New American Standard Version) that the Greek word (prosphagion) translated ‘fish’ actually refers to that which is eaten with bread, as a kind of relish.
Savior authoritatively instructed them to cast their nets to the other side of the ship, promising an abundance of fish (verse 6). Without question they obeyed, still unaware of the identity of the One giving the instructions.

When the nets became so full of fish that they could not be lifted on board, John, always the first to perceive the true nature of things before Peter, said to his companion, “It is the Lord” (verse 7).

Peter, true to his character, put on an outer garment and plunged into the water, not willing to delay his meeting with the Lord. The others, more sensibly, waited the few moments it took to beach the ship. It is evident from Peter’s intense desire to be with His Lord, that the Savior had already met privately with Peter over the matter of his denials, and that full forgiveness and restoration had been given (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:5).

On shore, the large catch of fish was sorted and counted. Jesus had a meal prepared for the seven, which He shared with them. The disciples puzzled over this appearance, and yet they knew for certain that it was, indeed, the Lord (verse 12).

A few have dared to suggest that this event is the same as that recorded in Luke chapter five. While there are many reasons for rejecting such a suggestion, there is certainly a relationship between the two, as well as marked differences. The correspondence seems to be this: Luke’s account in chapter five of his gospel describes

Our Lord may therefore not only be asking about their catch in general. He might be implying that they not only have failed to make a catch (and thus their living), but that neither have they been able, apart from divine guidance, to provide themselves with enough for their meal. In the marvelous catch that was to follow, Jesus provided a catch, an income, and their immediate need for a meal.

4 In the original text, the question expects a ‘no’ answer, as is indicated by the translation of the NASV.

5 Hendriksen has an interesting comparison of Peter and John. He remarks, “Peter is the man of action. He generally acts before John does. John generally understands before Peter does.” Hendriksen, John, II, p. 479.

6 Morris notes, “It is, however, not at all certain that Peter wore no clothing whatever, as the English would lead us to expect. Both LS and AG cite passages where the word means ‘without an outer garment,’ ‘dressed in one’s underwear.’ The probability here is that the word means that parts of the body normally covered were exposed so that Peter was not naked but rather ‘stripped for work’ (RSV, Barclay). This may mean that he wore a loincloth, or perhaps a sleeveless tunic which would not impede his movements.” Morris, John, pp. 864-865. Morris then goes on to quote Barrett: “Barrett draws attention to a Jewish idea that since offering a greeting was a religious act it could not be performed unless one was clothed. Thus greetings were not given in the baths, since all were naked. If the point is relevant, as seems likely, Peter wanted to be sufficiently clad when he reached the shore to give the usual religious greeting.” P. 864, fn. 19.

7 Hendriksen, in an interesting footnote, summarizes some of the fanciful interpretations of the number 153, the exact count of the fish caught that morning: “Among the strange and, for the most part, allegorical interpretations of this item of information I have found the following: a. The fish were not counted until the shore had been reached, in order to teach us that the exact number of the elect remains unknown until they have reached the shore of heaven. b. The ancients counted one hundred fifty-three varieties of fish! c. There is here a veiled reference to Matt. 13:47,48, and an indication that all kinds of people are going to be saved. d. The reference is to an important date in Church History, namely, 153 A.D. e. The total represents the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 17. Well, what of it? f. In Hebrew characters the numerical equivalent of Simon Iona is one hundred fifty-three. g. The number one hundred fifty-three represents 100 for the Gentiles, 50 for the Jews, and 3 for the Trinity.” Hendriksen, John, II, pp. 483-484, fn. 300.

As Wescott has observed, “The record of the exact number probably marks nothings more than the care with which the disciples reckoned their wonderful draught.” B. F. Wescott, The Gospel According to St. John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), reprint, p. 301.

8 “The significant differences between the circumstances of the miraculous draught of fishes at the beginning of the Lord’s ministry (Luke v. i ff.), and of this after the Resurrection, have frequently been noted. Augustine draws them out very well. The one miracle, he says, was the symbol of the Church at present, the other of the Church perfected; in the one we have good and bad, in the other good only; there Christ also is on the water, here He is on the land; there the draught is left in the boats, here it is landed on the beach; there the nets are let
the incident whereby Jesus called His disciples to leave their employment and follow Him to become ‘fishers of men’ (Luke 5:10-11). The incident recorded by John is our Lord’s reaffirmation of that call, after His death, burial and resurrection.

The disciples faced a puzzling dilemma after the resurrection: What is implied by our discipleship now? Shall we return to our old occupations? If not, what is our task? In answer to this dilemma, our Lord reassured His followers that they were to understand one aspect of discipleship as that of continuing what Jesus had begun and what they had been formerly called to do, the seeking of men with the good news of the gospel.

This miraculous event did more than reaffirm the calling of the disciples to be ‘fishers of men.’ It also assured them that their Lord would be present with them in this endeavor, though not in His former physical manifestation. It promised them divine guidance and power to accomplish the task of the evangelization of the world.

Jesus’ death and resurrection did not change the calling of the disciples to be seekers after the souls of men. But this was not enough. In the remaining verses, the Lord informed His followers of yet another duty of discipleship.

**Jesus and Peter: Love’s Obligation**

(21:15-23)

It is not enough merely to evangelize men. Discipleship begins with salvation, but it blossoms into a continuing process of growth and service. Our Lord informed His disciples through Peter that we must not only seek men’s souls, but we must shepherd them also. And so we move from the well-known occupation of the fisherman, to that of the shepherd.

Most commentators seem to view verses 15-23 as a kind of public restoration of Peter to leadership by our Lord. That, to me, does not seem to be the case. I am not certain that Peter ever really ceased to be a leader among men. It was he who suggested this fishing expedition and the others gladly followed. Neither do I believe that Jesus’ three-fold question was put to Peter before the eyes and ears of the other six. Notice verse 20: “Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His breast at the supper …” You see, all must agree that at some point in this conversation Jesus and Peter left the others. I would suggest that it was at the outset. There is nothing in verse 15 which implies the place of the conversation, only the time. The reason that John alone records this event may be that he followed behind closely enough to overhear the conversation.

The correspondence between the three-fold question of the Lord and the three-fold denial of Peter is difficult not to see. Jesus began by asking Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” (verse 15).

down as it might be, here in a special part; there the nets are rending, here they are not broken; there the boats are on the point of sinking with their load, here they are not laden; there the fish are not numbered, here the number is exactly given (‘In Joh.’ CXXII. 7). It seems impossible not to acknowledge that there is a spiritual meaning in these variations of the two narratives which consistently converge to distinct ends.” Ibid.

9 For example, Morris writes, “There can be no doubt but that Peter was under a cloud with his fellow disciples after the denial. This triple affirmation, accompanied as it was by a triple commission from Jesus, must have had the effect of giving an almost “official” sanction to his restoration to his rightful place of leadership.” Morris, John, pp. 869-870. To his credit, Morris does caution us about pressing this matter too far (p. 870).

10 “The circumstances must have reminded Peter of the scene of his denial. And if the circumstances as such did not remind him of this, what was about to happen was bound to do so. Note the following resemblances: 1. It was at a charcoal fire that Peter denied his Master (18:18). It is here at another charcoal fire (21:9) that he is asked to confess (his love for) his Master. 2. Three times Peter had denied his Master (18:17,25,27). Three times he must now own him as his Lord, whom he loves (21:15-17). 3. The prediction with reference to the denial had been introduced with the solemn double Amen (13:38; see on 1:51). The prediction which immediately followed Peter’s confession was introduced similarly (21:18). But it has been shown that the resemblance is even more pointed. In reverse order the same three ideas—1. following, 2. a cross 3. denying—occur here in 21:15-19 as in 13:36-38.” Hendriksen, John, I, p. 486.
Peter had boasted of his love for the Lord before his denial, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away” (Matthew 26:33). Peter had then claimed that his love for the Lord surpassed that of any other. It is at this point that Jesus pressed Peter for a response.

Peter affirmed his love for the Lord Jesus, but with two notable exceptions. First, he did not make any comparisons between his love and that of the others. Second, he did not dare to speak of his love with as lofty a term12 as that employed by the Savior. He does love the Lord. As God knows his heart, there is great affection there. But his brash self-confidence has been eroded away by his denials.

Accepting this answer on face value, the Lord commissions Peter with the second duty of a disciple—that of tending the flock: “Tend My lambs” (verse 15).

Now, a second time, Jesus poses the question to Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” (verse 16).

The comparison of Peter’s love to that of the others is no longer involved. Only the intensity of Peter’s love is queried. Peter’s answer was the same: “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You” (verse 16).

With only slight variation,13 Jesus responded, “Shepherd My sheep” (verse 16).

It was the third question which grieved Peter deeply: “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” (verse 17).

There are two things about this question which would have grieved Peter. First of all, it was asked for the third time. The correspondence between these three questions and his three-fold denial is unmistakable. The question is asked specifically in the light of Peter’s denial of his Lord. The second cause of grief would be in the change of words employed. Jesus had previously used the word agapē (or more precisely, the verb agapao) in the first two

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11 It has been observed that the antecedent of ‘these’ in verse 15 is not grammatically certain. It could, therefore, refer to the fish, the ship, the nets, and so on (fishing as a way of life), or to the other disciples. It is not difficult to determine that the reference is to the other disciples, especially in the light of Peter’s previous boast (Matthew 26:33).

12 The marginal notes of the NASV indicate that two different Greek terms are employed for ‘love’ here. Jesus used the verb (agapaō) in the first two questions, while Peter answered each time using the verb (phileo). Finally, Jesus employed Peter’s term in the third question. Scholars have divided as to whether or not the difference is of any interpretive significance. Some feel the change is only stylistic. I must agree with Hendriksen that the difference is of significance to our understanding of the text.

Hendriksen puts the question this way: “The question, then, is this: “Here in 21:15-17 are the two verbs agapao and phileo identical in meaning, so that the variation in their use is merely stylistic; or do the two verbs as here employed convey meanings which differ to a certain extent, and does the point of the story hinge on this difference?” Hendriksen, John, II, p. 495.

After a lengthy footnote surveying the problem, he concludes: “For the reasons indicated we believe that agapaō in this story (and generally throughout the Gospels, though with varying degree of distinctness in meaning) indicates love, deep-seated, thorough-going, intelligent and purposeful, a love in which the entire personality (not only the emotions, but also the mind and the will) plays a prominent part, which is based on esteem for the object loved or else on reasons which lie wholly outside of this object; while phileo indicates (or at least tends in the direction of) spontaneous natural affection, in which the emotions play a more prominent role than either the intellect or the will.” Ibid., p. 500.

13 In the first commission, Peter was commanded to ‘tend’ (boskō) the ‘lambs’ (arnion). In the second commission he was told to ‘shepherd’ (poimainō) the ‘sheep’ (probation). To ‘tend’ emphasizes the narrower function of providing (usually pigs in the Bible) with food. To ‘shepherd’ is a broader duty involving the obligation to pastor the flock, meeting all its needs.

As Trench has put it: “The distinction, notwithstanding, is very far from fanciful. Boskein the Latin ‘pas cere,’ is simply ‘to feed’ but poimainin involves much more; the whole office of the shepherd, the guiding, guarding, folding of the flock, as well as the finding of nourishment for it.” Richard Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Marshallton, Delaware. The National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.), p. 80.
questions. Peter had answered using the less intense term *phileo*. In the third question, Jesus dropped the stronger term He had previously employed and adopted the weaker term with which Peter had twice responded. The outcome of this would seem to be that Jesus had progressively lowered the quality of love concerning which he is questioning Peter. The force of this might be paraphrased in this way:

**Question 1:** Peter, do you deeply love Me, even above all the others?

**Question 2:** Peter, do you deeply love Me?

**Question 3:** Peter, do you at least have a genuine affection for Me?

The scholars have greatly differed over the implications of the change of the Greek terms for love. But let me say this to those of you who are students of the Greek language and still remain single. If you were to become very interested in a particular young woman, you would have intense interest and concern over what Greek term she would use to describe her affection for you. A *'phileo'* love for you would not be nearly as meaningful in your mind, as an *'agape'* love would be.

Peter again must appeal to our Lord’s omniscience. “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love *(phileo)* You” (verse 17).

With this, Peter’s commission is once more repeated: “Tend My sheep” (verse 17).

One might be inclined to consider our Lord’s questioning a bit severe in the light of Peter’s previous repentance and restoration. I believe that there are several purposes served in this interchange. First Peter is reminded of the folly of self-confidence. Second, our Lord’s purpose was not to work up feelings of guilt, but of humility. No one can shepherd the flock rightly without humility. Third, Peter is reminded that the measure of one’s love for Christ is not measured by the confessions of their lips, but by the conduct of their lives. Peter’s love will be evidenced by His care of God’s sheep. Finally, this three-fold question is also a three-fold commission, assuring Peter that in spite of His fall, God has a significant work for him to do.

Finally, the three-fold commission gives the task of Peter a distinct note of solemnity. This work of shepherding the flock is one that will be done at great personal sacrifice. This is made clear in the following verses: “Truly, truly, … Follow Me!” (John 21:18-19).

In Peter’s younger days he did as he pleased. In his later years, he would become subject to the will of others. In particular, John spelled out that these words of Jesus were a prediction that Peter would die the martyr’s death (verse 19). Following Jesus would mean, for Peter, walking in His steps, even to death. No wonder our Lord’s commission was given in such a serious manner.

Peter could not help but see John, who was following them at a distance (verse 20). Peter wondered if his fate was that common to the other disciples. What about John? Would he also be called upon to die the martyr’s death (verse 21)? Our Lord informed Peter that this was not for Peter to concern himself with. His sole obligation was to follow His Lord in the path which was ordained for him.

Some who heard the report of the Lord’s response to Peter were inclined to take His words to mean that John would not die (verse 23). But our Lord had only said that whether John lived or died, it was not Peter’s concern. (I suspect that the real point of interest was whether or not our Lord was committing Himself to return before John died.)

14 The impact of this three-fold commission on Peter’s life and ministry is reflected in 1 Peter 5:1-5.

15 “The manner of Peter’s death is related by the church fathers, as follows: Eusebius: “But Peter seems to have preached in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia and Cappadocia and Asia to the Jews of the Dispersion, and at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head downward, for so he himself had asked to suffer” (The Ecclesiastical History III, i). Tertullian: “At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood this rising faith. Then is Peter girt by another when he is made fast to the cross” (*Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting XV*). Cf. also Origen, *Against Celsus II, xiv*. Hendriksen, *John*, II, p. 490.
Conclusion

This portion of Scripture makes a unique contribution to the gospels by underscoring the duty of the disciples from the other side of the cross. What should Peter do? What should any disciple do? Jesus’ answer was two-fold. First, we must follow Jesus in seeking the salvation of men (evangelism). Second, we must shepherd the souls of those who are saved (pastoring, shepherding).

I believe these two imperatives are not directed only at Peter or the seven disciples present, but are the general commands of our Lord as stated in the great commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Further, it would seem that while our Lord commands every disciple to follow Him in seeking and shepherding the souls of men, He wants us to know that our individual paths may differ. It is not the disciple’s concern to trouble himself about the individual calling of other disciples. That is a matter between a disciple and his Lord.

John, and his brother James, beautifully exemplify the sovereignty of God in His individual purpose for His disciples. Of the apostles, James died first (Acts 12:2), and John last. James left no written record for ages to come. John wrote five books. As brothers, both of these men had identical backgrounds and influences. Both were included, with Peter, in the inner circle of our Lord. We cannot hope to scrutinize the reasons for James’ ‘untimely’ death, but we must reckon it to be in the Master’s plan.

I am interested by the struggle evidenced in the commentaries over the fact that John seems to have two conclusions. Some have questioned the authenticity and value of the last chapter. To my mind, the answer is all too obvious. John closed his book the same way many preachers (hopefully, I am included here) conclude their sermons—one aimed at the unbeliever, the other at the Christian. John 20:30-31 is the conclusion of the apostle for the one who has not yet reached a decision of faith in Christ as his Savior. To this person, he writes,

“Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

But John’s gospel has clear implications for the disciple of our Lord as well. Chapter 21 confronts the disciple of our Lord with the duties of discipleship: seeking and shepherding. For these readers, John concludes with an emphasis on the reliability of these accounts, and of the vast number of incidents which could have been included in such an account.

In addition, John, in these last verses, clearly identifies himself as the author for his readers benefit.

“This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written” (John 21:24-25).

In Peter’s commission by our Lord we are reminded again of God’s ability to use even our sins to bring about our good and His glory (Romans 8:28). Past sins, once forgiven, should not hinder us from future service. While Peter should have been strengthened and humbled by his three-fold denial of the Lord, he should also be encouraged by his three-fold commission.

This chapter says much to every Christian about the matter of servanthood.

1. True discipleship is evidenced by servanthood—that is, expressing, indeed continuing, the servanthood of our Lord, even in His absence. Follow me!

2. Servanthood is rooted in and motivated by our love for Jesus Christ.

3. Servanthood involves evangelism and shepherding. It seeks both to save the lost and to strengthen the believers.

4. Servanthood involves self-sacrifice, even unto death.

5. Servanthood concentrates on God’s will for us, and does not compare our calling with that of others.
Finally, I am encouraged to learn that my fellowship with the Lord Jesus is not one whit inferior to that of the apostles. They could not turn back the clock to the days before the cross. They would not have wished to lengthen the period of His post-resurrection appearances. Intimate fellowship with Christ was only possible after His ascension, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. How is this fellowship experienced? Let me suggest three avenues:

(1) **In the Scriptures.** We come to know our Lord as He was predicted in the Old Testament, and through the eyes of four men who knew Him well in the gospels.

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1 John 1:1-4).

(2) **In suffering.** It was the apostle Paul who wrote, “… that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10, cf. also Colossians 1:24).

(3) **In service.** Not only is there a fellowship in suffering, but in service. We sense the closeness of our Lord when His power is released in our lives in His service (cf. Philippians 3:10).

Just as the disciples of our Lord sensed a deeper and fuller fellowship with the Lord Jesus after His ascension, so can you and I. Praise God!
Lesson 41:
The Ascension

Introduction

I had determined some time ago that this message on the ascension of Jesus Christ would be the conclusion of this series on the life and ministry of our Lord. When I began a serious study in preparing for this message, I came to a distressing realization: the ascension of the Savior was not considered worthy of emphasis by any of the gospel writers.

You will read the entire gospel of Matthew without finding any direct reference to the ascension. The same is true for John’s gospel. The book of Mark condenses this event into only one verse, and if you consult the commentaries, they will tell you that this verse may not be authentic. Luke’s gospel, in very general terms, relates this final event in the life of our Lord in one verse. I must conclude that for some reason the ascension was not considered essential to the purposes which compelled the gospel writers to record their accounts of the life and ministry of the Master. The purpose of this study is to answer the obvious question, “Why?” “Why do none of the gospel accounts make much of the ascension of Jesus Christ?”

Why Was the Ascension of Our Lord Not a More Important Theme in the Gospels?

Let me try to identify some of the reasons for this lack of emphasis on the ascension in the gospel accounts. While these reasons are largely inferential, they do help us to see this matter through the eyes of the gospel writers.

First and foremost, the purpose of the gospels is revealed in their title, ‘the gospel.’ That is, the authors of the gospels set out to present the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Technically speaking, the salvation was procured by the death of Christ and proved by the resurrection. The ascension did not directly contribute to the work of the cross in such a way as to be instrumental in achieving the salvation of men. In the light of the writers’ purpose to portray the good news of salvation, any part of Christ’s life and ministry which does not directly relate to their purpose would pale in the shadow of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord. It is not that the ascension of Christ is unimportant, then, but that it is largely irrelevant to the purpose of the gospel accounts.

Second, the ascension of Christ was not a favorite topic for those who were so intimately involved with Him. As John put it,

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, …” (1 John 1:1-3).

Unlike Christians today, the disciples lived and walked and talked, and touched the Savior while He was on the earth in bodily form. Whenever He talked of departing them or leaving them, they were deeply distressed (cf. John 16:6, 22). It was not something they wanted to happen, or that they wanted to think about.

Those of us who have had Christian loved ones die can understand the feelings of the disciples concerning the Lord’s ascension. While we know that God’s will has been done and that those who have died in Christ are with the Lord, we personally sense the loss of the presence of our loved ones who have departed, even though we anticipate spending eternity with them in the presence of our Lord. We do not, therefore, find great comfort or joy

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1 Lest anyone become upset by this statement, let me go on to say that it does have much to do with the application of men’s salvation, as we shall demonstrate later.
in reminiscing over the departure of our loved ones. So, too, I believe the gospel writers did not have any predisposition to write of our Lord’s departure to return to His Father.

Third, the ascension does not serve as a fitting conclusion to the life and ministry of our Lord. It somehow seems anti-climactic in the light of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. It tends to conclude on a note of sorrow and separation rather than of joy, victory, and triumph.

What, Then, Is the Meaning of the Ascension?

We have seen that the gospel accounts hardly mention the ascension, and we have suggested several reasons for this to be the case. While the ascension may not be prominent in the gospels, it is paramount in the book of Acts. While Luke did not emphasize it at the conclusion of his first book (Luke), he highlighted it at the beginning of his second volume (Acts).

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:1-11).

One of the most significant words in the book of Acts is that little word “began” in verse one. The first account, which was the gospel of Luke, was the report of what Jesus began to do and to teach. The book of Acts records what our Lord continued to do and to teach through His body, the church.

We are guilty of misunderstanding the words of our Lord upon the cross, when He cried out, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The Savior could truly say “It is finished” with regard to the work of redemption, which was accomplished on the cross. According to the usage of this expression man’s debt for sin could be marked “paid in full.” But the Lord Jesus did not say, “I am finished” in the sense that His work on earth was completed. Only His work of procuring men’s salvation was finished. The work of proclaiming that salvation to men is still going on. That is what Luke meant when he spoke of what our Lord “began to do and teach” in the introduction of his second volume. The exciting thing to realize is that the ascension of our Lord was vital to the continuation of our Lord’s work on earth through His body, the church.

While the provision for man’s salvation was the work of our Lord which was completed on the cross of Calvary, the proclamation and application of the benefits of this work have continued through the centuries, through the church, the body of Christ. The ascension of Jesus Christ was central to the initiation and continuation of this work.

From a casual reading of the gospel accounts one would get the impression that Jesus ascended to His Father shortly after His resurrection. In Acts we learn that there was a period of 40 days that our Lord continued to manifest Himself to His disciples on the earth: “To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).
The purpose of this forty-day period was three-fold as described in verses 3-5 of Acts chapter 1. First of all it was designed to convince the disciples of the fact of our Lord’s physical, bodily resurrection (cf. verse 3 above).

The remaining chapters of Acts reveal that the central truth of which the disciples were fully-convinced was that Jesus, though put to death, had risen from the grave:

“This man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:23,24).

“But you disowned the Holy and Righteous one, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of Life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses” (Acts 3:14-15; cf. also 1:22; 4:2,10; 5:30-32; 7:56-60).

‘Many convincing proofs’ which happened over a substantial period of time, in a variety of circumstances, to a diverse number of people (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:4-8), served well the purpose of convincing the disciples of the fact of our Lord’s resurrection.

A second purpose of the forty day period after the resurrection was to command the disciples.

“… appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, …” (Acts 1:3,4).

There was much that the disciples could not understand about the life and ministry of the Lord until after His death and resurrection. Now He could speak plainly of His work upon the cross and they could understand His teaching. But even now there were truths that they could not bear. Only after His departure, after the promised Holy Spirit came upon them, would they comprehend the great truths of the gospel. For this reason, Jesus commanded the disciples to wait until the promised Spirit was sent.

Third, the forty days enabled our Lord to clarify and correct certain misconceptions held by the disciples.

“And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth’” (Acts 1:6-8).

The Kingdom was a prominent theme in Jesus’ ministry. John the Baptist came before Jesus and introduced Him as the King of Israel (cf. Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:2-3), as well as the Lamb of God. Jesus frequently spoke of the Kingdom (cf. Matthew 5-7,13). The disciples were preoccupied with the subject, and particularly their role in it (cf. Matthew 19:28; Mark 10:37f.). The religious leaders accused Jesus of being a king or of claiming a kingdom (John 19:12) and this Pilate acknowledged (Matthew 27:37). The thief on the cross asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His Kingdom (Luke 23:42).

Little wonder that the disciples should persist in bringing up the subject of the Kingdom after the resurrection. They were certain that it must be forthcoming. Our Lord found it necessary to clarify His teaching on the Kingdom that was to come.

Mark it well; Jesus corrected His disciples on the matter of the time of the Kingdom’s arrival, not on its essential nature. The commentators are much more critical of the disciples than Christ was. They would seek to

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2 It is interesting to note that during His earthly life our Lord’s opposition came primarily from the scribes and Pharisees. These were men who believed in supernaturalism and such things as angels and resurrection. In the book of Acts the main thrust of the opposition came from the Sadducees, the liberals who did not believe in any resurrection (cf. Matthew 22:23; Acts 4:11).
change the disciples whole conception of the Kingdom; our Lord only dealt with the time of its inauguration. The disciples anticipated a literal, physical reign of our Lord upon the earth. Some Bible students would have us believe that such expectations were misguided. They suppose that Jesus spoke only of a spiritual reign in the hearts of men.

That’s a rather interesting thing, because our Lord does not correct the disciple’s concept of the Kingdom; He corrects their preoccupation with the timing of the Kingdom. Now if they were wrong in thinking there was a Kingdom to come after three years of teaching, they were also wrong after 40 days of post-graduate work. More than this, my friends, they were wrong after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Because one of the things you will discover later in the book of Acts is that when the apostles preached, they preached to the Jews that if they turned to Jesus as Messiah, there would be a restoration of the Kingdom.

Look, for example, in Acts chapter 3 after Pentecost. Peter and John are preaching as a result of the healing of the cripple who was outside of the temple, and who was healed. Peter says in verse 19: “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

The expression ‘times of refreshing,’ was understood rightly by Israel as being the time of the restoration and the establishment of God’s Kingdom upon earth. “And that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of the restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:20-21).

In other words, that which the Old Testament prophets had been speaking, that which our Lord Jesus came to establish, that is the message which the apostles preached. Until 70 A.D., they offered to Israel the opportunity to turn to Jesus as the Messiah, and promised that if they did, the Kingdom would be ushered in. Obviously, the nation did not repent and believe. And you understand that Israel, trying to forcibly bring the Kingdom in unbelief by rebelling against Rome, brought the power of Rome down upon them. Because of Jewish insurrection, Rome sacked that city and there was a massacre that was absolutely incredible to read about. Millions of Jews, it seems, died at that time. My point is simply this, the disciples had come to believe in a literal kingdom as a result of the teaching of our Lord, both before and after His resurrection.

Understandably, then, the disciples put this question to our Lord: “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (verse 6).

I want to underline the phrase, “at this time.” That is the issue that our Lord calls to their attention, not the issue of the nature of the Kingdom. He is dealing not with their misconceptions about the Kingdom, but with their preoccupation with the time of its coming. That is where they were wrong.

Now you must understand the circumstances in which all of this occurred. Do you remember where this took place? Not Jerusalem. It was the city outside of Jerusalem—Bethany. Bethany is where the triumphal entry began (cf. John 12:1,9,12). This is where Jesus had raised Lazarus. People had gathered not only to see Jesus, but to behold Lazarus, and it was out of all of this that the crowd came to herald Jesus as the Messiah. So it was Bethany that was the point of origin for the triumphal entry.

Now can you imagine why the disciples would bring up the subject of the coming of the Kingdom? I suppose they thought, “Here we are at Bethany again. Maybe we’re going to have the real triumphal entry this time.”

One of the seminary students suggested that the Lord had promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps it was the fulfillment of this promise to which they also looked forward. That may be. Here they were, - Jesus was raised from the dead, the subject of conversation had been the Kingdom. Now there is this promise for which they are to wait. And you know how our minds always run wild in speculation when we are waiting for something and we do not know exactly what it is. All of these things must have come together, and the disciples were almost ready to burst with anticipation. And so our Lord responded to them, not regarding their concept of the Kingdom, but regarding their preoccupation with its time: “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7).

You see, this is no correction concerning the anticipation of a physical, literal thousand-year reign. Our Lord granted that their understanding of the Kingdom was correct. He was simply saying, “Don’t get preoccupied with when it is to occur.”
There are Christians today who seem to be more interested about the precise timing of eschatological (that is, prophetic) events than they are with godly living (cf. 2 Peter 3:11-13). I am not saying we should not study prophecy. I am saying we should not become preoccupied with it to the point where we ignore our duty and our obligation to live godly lives and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is the thrust of our Lord’s words in Acts 1:7-8. They were not intended to know the exact time of the Lord’s return and the establishment of His Kingdom. But as a result of His departure, the Holy Spirit would come, bestowing power upon them, by which they would witness to Jesus Christ at home and abroad (cf. John 14:7ff.).

In one sense the ascension is the final answer of our Lord to the question raised by the apostles. We cannot view the ascension of the Savior apart from its context with the paragraph—a section which centers in the question of the disciples concerning the coming of the Kingdom.

Verse 9 informs us that after Jesus had spoken the words of verses 7 and 8 He was taken from their sight into the heavens. The last words of Jesus concerned the matter of the Kingdom and our present responsibilities. The conversation was terminated by Jesus’ departure.

But more than this the ascension itself was the most forceful and satisfying answer to the question of the disciples:

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

The ascension was a glorious event. Our Lord disappeared into a cloud, not ‘into the clouds’ (cf. verse 9). It may well be that this cloud was no ordinary cloud, but rather a manifestation of the Shekinah glory, even as it took place in the transfiguration (cf. Matthew 16:27–17:9, especially verse 5). Since the transfiguration was a preview of the coming Kingdom, the Kingdom must be quite similar. Now, in Acts 1:11 we are told that the return of the Lord Jesus will be like that of His ascension. It, like the transfiguration, must have been glorious, but it was viewed by a larger number.

The ascension was a display of the splendor and glory of the coming Kingdom. As such it was a reassurance to the disciples that this Kingdom was the same as they had previously been instructed.

What a beautiful way to dovetail a two-fold response to this pressing question of the disciples. While they were not to be overly concerned about the timing of the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel, they were assured of its certainty and its splendor. What a gracious event the ascension was. It served as an assurance to the disciples that their hopes would be realized.

One last passage remains to be considered in our study of the ascension of Christ and its importance to us.

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, “When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men.” Now this expression, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:7-12).

The ascension was the final, incontestable evidence that Jesus Christ was the victor over Satan and his hosts. It is the measure of His victory, but also the measure of the power which has been bestowed upon His saints to carry out His work on earth until He returns.

The ascension was necessary for the Holy Spirit to come upon the church (and individual believers) in a different way than in times past (John 16:7ff.). But it was also an indication of the extent of the power which was made available to complete the task set before us.
This was a desperately needed event for who but His most intimate followers would sense most deeply His bodily absence? Who most needed assurance of His spiritual presence and power? And surely those of us who have never walked the dusty roads with Him and heard Him speak or felt His touch need this assurance as well.

**Conclusion**

Taking the various threads of which the doctrine of the ascension of Christ is woven we can briefly summarize its reference and application to Christians:

1. **Separation.** In one sense the ascension was the bodily separation of our Lord from His followers. But we must quickly add that the Scriptures never record any mourning or tears concerning this. Undoubtedly this is true because, ironic as it may seem, our Lord’s departure inaugurated a time of even greater intimacy through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. “… and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

2. **Consummation.** The ascension symbolized that the work which our Lord was sent to accomplish in His physical body on earth has been finished. “… when He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3).

3. **Glorification.** When our Lord returned to the Father it was in splendor and glory. While His glory was somewhat veiled by His humble surroundings at His incarnation, His return was with even greater glory and honor because of the work He had accomplished. “Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name” (Philippians 2:9).

4. **Confirmation.** The ascension was, in part, a confirmation of Christ’s person and work. He returned to the Father. In this His claim to have come from the Father was vindicated. While no one could actually witness the actual incarnation of Christ in the virgin birth, His return was visible to His followers. The ascension of Christ is also a confirmation of our faith and assurance in Christ: “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchezedeck” (Hebrews 6:19-20).

5. **Transition.** The ascension serves as a connecting link: between the work of Christ in salvation and that in our sanctification; between the gospels and the epistles; between what has been accomplished by Christ and what is still being done through His Spirit. It is even a transition in the ministry of Christ as well. Having completed His work on the cross in His flesh, He now intercedes for us as a sympathetic High Priest, as One Who has experienced our afflictions:

   “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 5:14-16).

6. **Anticipation.** The ascension also creates in our hearts a sense of expectation as we realize that He will return, just as He departed: “… This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into Heaven” (Acts 1:11).

And so it is that we come to the importance of the ascension to Christians today. It is not primarily to be viewed as the conclusion of our Lord’s life and ministry, but as the introduction of a new phase of His ministry through His church, empowered by His Spirit. The assurance of His return and the measure of His presence and power in these intervening days is to be found, to a great extent, in His ascension. What a Savior!