

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount (the first and lengthiest of the five discourses of Jesus in Matthew) is one of the most rich and interesting, yet misunderstood, sections of sacred Scripture. This sermon is one of the most studied, quoted, yet also ignored, chapters of God's Word. "The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, thought arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed."¹ The Savior's sermon is crucial—for it is one of the lengthiest, most complete expositions of what Christ expects from His disciples in their attitudes, behavior and service to God. In our day of "easy-believism" or antinomianism, the church growth movement (i.e. the idea of making the church grow by making it more like the world), the prosperity gospel (i.e. the teaching that Jesus came so we could be wealthy, healthy, happy and full of self-esteem), the emergent church movement (e.g., postmodernism applied to the church), Charismatic mysticism and existentialism and widespread nominalism (i.e. Christianity applies to church on Sunday and not much else spiritually or ethically), the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is as needed and relevant as ever.

Interpretive Considerations

Before we begin our exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, it will be helpful to spend some time looking at issues that will help in understanding how to approach and interpret this marvelous section of Scripture. There are a number of areas to consider.

First, there is the issue of audience. To whom is the sermon directed? This point is actually quite important, for humanists, unbelievers and modernists are very fond of quoting bits and pieces of this sermon out of context and applying them to anyone and everyone. Thus, the phrase "turn the other cheek" is used by many on the left for pacifism and "do not judge" is used as a proof text against condemning homosexuality. Although multitudes of people were on the Mount and heard this sermon, our Lord's teaching is directed primarily to disciples or believers: "And when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them saying..." (Mt. 5:1-2). Luke's version, "the sermon on a level place," says, "Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples and said..." (6:20). This point is also obvious from the description of those who are blessed (Mt. 5:3-11); the ethical contrast between those who follow Christ and pagans (Mt. 6:7-8, 32), as well as religious hypocrites (Mt. 6:16-17); the many references to entering or possessing the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:10, 19, 20, 6:20); the imperatives that presuppose a commitment to Christ (e.g., Mt. 5:14, 16, 23, 44, 45, 47; 6:1, 5, 7;

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 15.

“You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” [Mt. 5:48]) and the prayer to God as Father (Mt. 6:9f.). The father of unbelievers is not God but the devil (cf. Jn. 8:44).

While this sermon is directed toward believers, it also was designed to inform the multitude what repentance and following Christ involved. This can be ascertained from both the immediate context and the sermon itself. In the chapter before this sermon there is the calling of the disciples (Mt. 4:19-32; Lk. 6:13-16) and an emphasis on the dramatic ministry of Jesus. The Savior was going all through Galilee “teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing all kinds of diseases among the people” (Mt. 4:23). The Redeemer was preaching, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven was at hand” (Mt. 4:17). Even at this early stage, Christ was extremely popular and famous throughout the nation: “Great multitudes followed Him from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan” (Mt. 4:25). When our Lord saw the multitudes He accommodated them by going up a mountain (Mt. 5:1). After the sermon was over, Matthew informs us that “the people were astonished at His teaching” (7:28).

Even though the content of the sermon (which deals with how believers are to think and act) is not directly addressed to people who are unbelievers; nevertheless, there is an evangelistic element to the sermon. The multitudes are hearing a contrast between true and false ethics (5:17-48); true and false piety (6:1-18); religious hypocrisy (5:13; 6:16); the necessity of entering by the narrow gate (7:13); and the deadly dangers of false teachers (7:15 ff.). Near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry He very clearly sets Himself apart from the religious establishment. When the people hear “repent and follow Me,” they now know the radical commitment that this involves. They also now know the internal aspect of God’s moral law; Pharisaical concepts of achieving salvation by keeping the law are impossible. God requires ethical perfection in thought, word and deed.

The Sermon on the Mount tells believers that they must be different. Jesus said, “Do not be like them” (Mt. 6:8). Christians are to be salt (Mt. 5:13) and light (Mt. 5:14-16) to a dark, unsaved world. “It is wrong to ask anybody who is not first a Christian to try to live or practice the Sermon on the Mount. To expect Christian conduct from a person who is not born again is heresy. The appeals of the gospel in terms of conduct and ethics and morality are always based on the assumption that the people to whom the injunctions are addressed are Christians.”² The message of the Sermon on the Mount properly understood clearly tells people that apart from God’s grace, there is no possibility of even approaching our Lord’s requirements for discipleship.

Second, what is the relationship of the Sermon on the Mount to Luke’s sermon on the plain (6:17-49)? Commentators are about equally divided on this issue. The case for the section in Luke being a completely separate sermon is put forth succinctly by John Brown:

There is indeed a strong similarity; but still there is a marked difference, both in the discourses, and in the circumstances in which they were delivered. There are many things in the sermon recorded by Matthew, not to be found in the sermon recorded by Luke, and some things in the sermon recorded by Luke, not to be found in the sermon recorded by Matthew. Statements, that at first view seem very similar, when examined, are found so different, that you cannot suppose them to be different reports of the same statement. The sermon recorded in Matthew, was delivered before the healing of the leper. The sermon recorded by Luke, seems to have been delivered after that miracle. The sermon recorded in Matthew was delivered before

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1959, 60] 1971), 1:23.

Matthew's call to be a disciple. The sermon recorded in Luke was delivered after the twelve disciples were called to their particular office. The sermon in Matthew was delivered on a mountain; the sermon recorded in Luke was spoken on the plain. Instead of eight beatitudes, as there are in the sermon recorded by Matthew, there are only four in the sermon recorded by Luke, and these not by any means of equivalent meaning with those which they most resemble. They only circumstance which appears to me a weighty one in the opposite scale is, that the account of the healing of a centurion's servant follows immediately the delivery of both discourses.³

If Luke records a completely separate occasion, then one can conclude that the message of the Sermon on the Mount was preached in slightly different forms on many different occasions.

Those scholars who believe that Matthew and Luke have recorded the same sermon make the following arguments. (1) There is no contradiction between Matthew's term "mountain" and Luke's "plain" because after Jesus chose the disciples on the mountain top He went to a level place to deliver the sermon. The phrase *topou pedinou* in Luke 6:17 simply means "a level place." Therefore, the mountain contained a plateau.⁴ (2) The historical setting in both is very similar. Both Matthew and Luke record that the sermon was delivered after a great multitude of people followed Him all over Palestine who came to the Savior to be healed (Mt. 4:25; Lk. 6:17). Both also are followed by the healing of the centurion's servant (Mt. 8:5 ff.; Lk. 7:2ff.). (3) The outline of the sermon is the same in both: the beatitudes; Jesus teaching on the moral law; the parable of the two builders; etc. (cf. Mt. 5:3-12/Lk. 6:20-23; Mt. 5:44-48/Lk. 6:27-30, 32-36; Mt. 7:24-27/Lk. 6:47-49). The fact that Luke omits material found in Matthew's account demonstrates that each author was selecting material and editing in accordance with the purpose of each gospel which was directed to different audiences. Matthew's coverage is much more extensive because certain things such as Jesus' relationship to the Mosaic law would have been of great importance to a Jewish audience.

Whatever position one holds, it is likely that the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount were repeated to many different audiences in different locations. Further, no matter what interpretation one holds on this particular issue, it does not affect the content or exegesis of this sermon.

Third, the Sermon on the Mount was spoken at one time in one place. The narrative containing the sermon has a definite beginning and ending ("Then He opened His mouth and taught them saying.... And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching..." (Mt. 5:2; 7:28). This point is important because some commentators (usually modernists or neo-evangelicals) view the sermon as merely a literary device used to set forth a related collection of teachings and sayings.⁵ It is argued that Matthew

³ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1850] 1990), 1:112-113.

⁴ "The Greek word *pedinos* is commonly used with reference to a plain as opposed to a mountain (a natural opposition), but sometimes for a plain or flat valley among mountains, or a flat place on a mountain. Thus in Jer. 21:13 Jerusalem is called 'rock of the plain,' and in Isa. 13:2 we have in Sept. 'lift up a signal upon a level (flat) mountain' (*ep' orous pedinou*), Heb., 'upon a bare hill,' not covered with trees. This latter passage is obscure (see Gesen, Schleus, and commentaries on Isaiah), but either this or the use in Jeremiah seems to furnish a parallel for the use in Luke" (John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Kregel (1886) 1990], 84, footnote 1).

⁵ William Barclay writes, "We speak of the Sermon on the Mount as if it was one single sermon preached on one single occasion. But it is far more than that. There are good and compelling reasons for thinking that the Sermon on the Mount is far more than one sermon, that it is, in fact, a kind of epitome of all the sermons that Jesus ever preached" (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975], 1:84).

(or for modernists, post-apostolic church leaders) very carefully weaved together sayings of or traditions about Jesus' teaching. Even the master expositor John Calvin believed this sermon was a compilation of material. He writes, "For the design of both Evangelists was to collect into one place the leading points of the doctrine of Christ, which related to a devout and holy life.... Pious and modest readers ought to be satisfied with having a brief summary of the doctrine of Christ placed before their eyes, collected out of his many and varied discourses, the first of which was that in which he spoke to his disciples about true happiness."⁶

Although any theories that reject divine inspiration (e.g., redaction criticism) or that view the sermon as a mere literary device for a collection of material that was spoken over months or years must be rejected, it does not rule out the possibility that the Sermon on the Mount was collected from a lengthy period of teaching given *at one time*. This view makes sense in that the Sermon on the Mount would have taken only about 10 minutes to deliver. Further, the changes in the sermon are often sharp and abrupt. New topics sometimes emerge without warning. This, of course, could simply be a deliberate method of teaching on our Lord's part.

Fourth, it is important to interpret the Sermon on the Mount within the broader context of the Bible's teaching, or what is called the analogy of Scripture. By this approach one can avoid a crass, literal interpretation of such passages as Matthew 5:29, 30, 34. One can also avoid common mistakes. For example, Anabaptists have historically understood Matthew 5:34-37 as a complete and new prohibition on taking oaths of any kind. But passages such as Matthew 26:63-64 prove that, when used lawfully, our Lord did not object to the use of oaths. In Matthew 7:1 Jesus says, "Judge not that you be not judged" (cf. Lk. 6:37). But in John 7:24 our Lord says, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." The passage regarding turning the other cheek (Mt. 5:39; Lk. 6:29) has been used against all self-defense and warfare. Yet other passages explicitly allow self-defense under certain circumstances and what is called a just war. Everything in the Sermon on the Mount must be viewed in the whole context of Scripture before we can properly understand the particular parts.

Also, it is important to interpret all the particular statements of the Sermon on the Mount in their proper order. "The Beatitudes do not come at the end, they come at the beginning, and I do not hesitate to say that unless we are perfectly clear about them we should go no further. We have no right to go further."⁷ The beatitudes set the stage for the injunctions that follow. The Savior's statement about the continuing validity of the moral law is the platform for the following contrast between a biblical ethic and the ethic of the scribes and Pharisees. The discussion of personal piety also logically follows Jesus' discussion of the law. There is logic to our Lord's order that must not be ignored.

Fifth, it would be wise and helpful to consider common errors in the way this sermon has been approached in the past. There have been a number of popular interpretations that are erroneous and even heretical.

One such approach is that of Christian liberals or modernists who use this sermon as a justification for what they call the "social gospel." Because the Sermon on the Mount contained no explicit references to Christ's atoning death, modernists who had already rejected the doctrine of vicarious atonement were drawn to its message in a perverted manner. They assumed that the Sermon on the Mount was the very centerpiece of all Christian theology and purposely ignored the New Testament's focus on the cross of Christ. They argued that Christianity is not founded upon a bloody cross, but rather upon an ethical system. They argued that if this superior ethic

⁶ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:258-259.

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:23.

was put into practice by people and communities, it would lead to the kingdom of God on earth, the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. It, they believed, was the key to peace on earth, the elimination of poverty, injustice, racism and so forth. The Sermon on the Mount became a type of ethical platform for the Christian liberal's concept of postmillennialism and utopianism.

Modernists, however, have completely failed to consider the biblical teaching that, apart from the redemptive work of Christ and the new birth, men are slaves of sin, Satan and guilt; and thus cannot form any type of just society or peaceful world system. Further, from the very outset of Jesus' ministry, the suffering and sacrificial death of Christ was in the forefront. Twice, John the baptizer pointed to the Savior in front of his disciples and said "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29, 35). This statement is clearly an allusion to Isaiah's description of the suffering servant, the Passover and the altar of sacrifice. Our Lord emphasized the crucifixion as the source of eternal life when He said to Nicodemus, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15). When considering the Sermon on the Mount, one must keep in mind that not every verse speaks *directly* about the cross of Christ. Sometimes there are lengthy discussions of ethical matters. However, all discussion of ethical issues must be considered in the broad context of Scripture and this context teaches us that Jesus' redemptive work is the foundation of a believer's sanctification; that obedience to ethical imperatives can only come from a vital union with the Savior in His death and resurrection. It is in this way that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount on what it means to follow the Redeemer and be a disciple in a wicked world, is rooted in, presupposes or is connected with the cross of Christ. As Matthew Henry notes, "There is not much of the credenda of Christianity in it—the things to be believed; but it is wholly taken up with the agenda—the things to be done, for 'If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine' (John vii.17)."⁸ Modernists have proved that unbiblical, unbelieving presuppositions lead to bad exegesis and wrong conclusions. As Hendriksen notes, "It is surely a very arbitrary procedure *to accept* the Sermon on the Mount but *to reject* those sayings of the same Jesus in which he demands faith in himself as present Savior and future Judge (Matt. 16:16-20; 22:42-45; 25:31-46; John 14:1ff., etc.) and clearly teaches the doctrine of atonement by blood (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 6:53, 55; etc.). Besides, does not even the sermon itself declare the majesty of Christ? See especially 5:17; 7:21-23, 28, 29."⁹ Those who pick and choose according to their presuppositions reveal a failure to submit to the all things that our Lord has commanded.

Another wrong approach to the Sermon on the Mount comes from classic dispensationalism. According to this view the sermon is not directed to Christians or the church of Christ (which is a parenthesis in God's plan), but rather to the Jews only and those living in the future Jewish theocratic kingdom during the coming millennium. It is argued that this sermon presupposes the doctrine of repentance, which old-style dispensationalists argue is a distinctly Jewish or legal doctrine. They argue that the dispensation of grace is unconditional and thus repentance as a requirement is contrary to the Christian faith. In support of this idea they point to the petition in the Lord's prayer which says, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Mt. 6:12). They argue that this prayer must be for the "kingdom age" and not the church because it rests upon personal obedience or a legal ground. Thus, old-fashioned

⁸ Matthew Henry, as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1950, 53] 1982), 13.

⁹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 262.

dispensationalists do not use the Lord's prayer in private or public worship at all. The Scofield Reference Bible says, "Under law forgiveness is conditioned upon a like spirit in us; under grace, we are forgiven for Christ's sake, and exhorted to forgive because we have been forgiven" (1002). One dispensationalist author has written that "the so-called 'Lord's Prayer,' is 'a prayer that has no more place in the Christian Church than the thunders of Sinai, or the offerings of Leviticus.'"¹⁰ The dispensationalist teaches that the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with us; therefore, it can be ignored.

Regarding this serious dispensational error we respond by noting the following. It presupposes that God has two completely separate peoples—Israel and the church—when the Bible teaches that Israel was the visible expression of the church in the Old Covenant and has been replaced or superseded by the multinational New Covenant people of God (see Gal. 5:28; 6:15-16). The middle wall of partition has been broken down and now both Jews and Gentiles are one holy temple together in the Lord (Eph. 2:19-22). It also completely misunderstands the meaning of the Lord's prayer. "The meaning is not that if we forgive others we may expect, as a kind of *quid pro quo*, that God will forgive us. But rather the emphasis is on the fact, brought out so impressively in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt. xviii.23f.), that those who have been forgiven much must themselves be ready to forgive. Those who harbor an unforgiving spirit toward their fellowmen show plainly that they do not realize that they themselves owe everything to the infinite compassion and forgiving mercy of God."¹¹ Obviously, forgiving repentant brothers their sins is a fruit of saving faith and not a co-instrument or ground of justification before God. Further, virtually all the ethical teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are found or supported by other portions of the New Testament. If the false doctrine of dispensationalism is used to eliminate the Sermon on the Mount, then, if consistent, it could also render irrelevant many portions of the New Testament epistles. The Sermon on the Mount was intended for Jesus' disciples. Therefore, it also applies to Christians in the present.¹²

Sixth, it is important to recognize that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount applies to every Christian. The sermon is not an invitation to asceticism for spiritual elite. The message is not a form of Christian idealism that no one is really expected to follow. The teaching is not directed at only super-spiritual believers who want to take their faith to another level. Its main purpose is not simply to show the need of grace in order to drive us to Christ. The radical discipleship and commitment to personal obedience, which are the focus of this sermon, are fundamental to what it means to be a Christian. Jesus expects and demands that all believers are to live in terms of this message. The sermon is primarily concerned with sanctification. The gospel is not a relaxation of the demands of God's holy law, but rather includes a call to manifest the characteristics of holiness internally, privately, publicly, outwardly and socially. The sermon even comes to a close with men who professed Christ being condemned to hell for living a life of hypocrisy, of antinomianism (Mt. 7:23); and, the *absolute necessity* of not only hearing but also obeying "these sayings of Mine" (Mt. 7:24-27).

¹⁰Haldeman, *How to Study the Bible*, 140, as quoted in Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945, 47), 295.

¹¹ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 46.

¹² The dispensational approach of treating the expressions "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" as referring to two different kingdoms is also unscriptural. Matthew, writing to Jews, usually avoids the term God and therefore substituted a euphemism ("heaven") so Jews would not be offended. These expressions, however, are identical (cf. Mt. 19:23 f.; Mk. 10:23 f.; etc.). Luke, writing to Gentiles, is not so concerned about Jewish sensibilities and uses the expression "kingdom of God" (6:20).

Seventh, the sermon is well-organized and has three main sections. The first section runs from 5:2 to 5:16 (the beatitudes [5:3-12] and the teaching on salt and light [5:13-16]). It discusses who the citizens of the kingdom are: their character, blessedness, relationship to the world and the influence they are to have over society and culture. The second section (5:17-7:12) deals with the relationship of Jesus' disciples with the moral law. Here our Lord contrasts His view of the moral law with that of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus sets Himself apart from the contemporary rabbis with six antitheses (5:21-48). Then, He deals with personal piety by contrasting outward versus inward or genuine righteousness (6:1-18). In the third section of the Sermon on the Mount the Savior focuses on the necessity of choosing and following the correct way (7:13-27). He discusses the two ways before all men (7:13-14); true and false teachers (7:15-23); and good and bad foundations (7:24-27). Matthew ends this pericope by telling us the profound effect this sermon had on the hearers. The sermon, in both its structure and content, is a masterpiece. The people are not simply instructed with the truth, but the choice God requires of them is set before their eyes with sharp, terrifying imagery. Christ, in a sense, lays out the future of everyman in terms of how they will respond to His message. The people had never heard anyone teach with such authority (Mt. 7:29).

The Setting

Matthew, writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, informs us that Jesus went up on a mountain (Gk., "the mountain") to teach. The definite article may indicate a mountain well known to His disciples. As noted, Luke indicates that this mountain had a plateau or level area suitable for teaching a large crowd. "Mountains in Matthew are clearly places where special events occur (4:8, the mountain of temptation; 17:1, the mountain of the transfiguration; 28:16, the mountain of the resurrection appearance and the great commission...)." ¹³ Mountains in Scripture are often associated with the giving of revelation (e.g., Ex. 19:3 ff.; Mt. 28:16 ff.). The fact that the Sermon on the Mount is very concerned with ethical matters and the proper view and interpretation of God's law, has led a number of scholars to compare this setting with Moses' ascent to receive the law. Many even argue that our Lord ascended the Mount to set forth a new law for the New Covenant people of God. This law, however, is not really new; but, rather, Jesus—the original lawgiver on Sinai—defends and expounds the true meaning of the moral law for His people.

This setting demonstrates the greater blessings of the New Covenant in that the original law was given in the context of earthquakes, lightning and thunder. The people were terrified and begged for a mediator so that God would not speak to them directly. Here we have the divine human Mediator, the greater than Moses, speaking directly to the people with grace and kindness. In the giving of the law at Sinai the people were not permitted to come upon the mountain upon threat of death. God's infinite holiness required a partition around the base of the mountain to protect the people from being consumed by God's wrath against sin; but, the Savior invited the people to come close to hear this teaching. Jesus removes the fence of separation and brings us safely to God. The Redeemer removes the terror of the law by His work as Mediator and then expects us to obey that same moral law for personal sanctification. "If God's grace and goodness are (as certainly they are) his glory, then the glory of the gospel is the glory that excels, for *grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*, 2 Cor. iii.7; Heb. xii.18, &c." ¹⁴

¹³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 83.

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:46.

After a suitable place for teaching was found, Jesus was seated. Our Lord assumed the posture used at that time for teaching. Sitting was the position for rabbis and teachers who were to instruct their disciples (cf. Mt. 13:2; 23:2; 24:3; 26:55; Lk. 4:20; Jn. 8:2 etc.). “When a Jewish rabbi was teaching, officially he sat to teach. We still speak of a professor’s *chair*; the Pope still speaks *ex cathedra*, from his seat. Often a Rabbi gave instruction when he was standing or strolling about; but his really official teaching was done when he had taken his seat.”¹⁵ Note that only after Christ took His seat did His disciples come and assemble themselves around Him. They understood perfectly well what His position of repose implied and hurried to get the best place possible near the Master to hear every word of His authoritative teaching. With the clear sky above Him and the hills about Him as God’s classroom, the Son of God speaks. This whole scene would have made a deep and solemn impression on His followers.

After the Redeemer was seated Matthew says, “Then He opened His mouth and taught them saying...” (5:2). “The phrase *anoizas to stoma autou*, ‘he opened his mouth’, is a Semitic idiom used at the beginning of a public address (...cf. Acts 8:35; 10:34).”¹⁶ This phrase increases the importance, dignity and solemnity of the teaching that follows. The teaching is not informal, “off the cuff” remarks, but is an official solemn utterance regarding crucial issues. The solemnity and importance of this teaching is set forth by Luke’s comment, “Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples and said” (6:20). The Son of God’s eyes of concern and compassion were focused on His disciples. The eyes of God, so to speak, are directed toward those that He blesses with His grace.

When Matthew says “He taught them saying,” the verb taught (*edidasken*) is in the imperfect tense, indicating that He began to teach and His teaching continued for some time. It was a most impressive scene as Jesus opened His mouth, looked directly at the apostles and disciples; and then spoke with a loud clear voice, so the whole multitude could hear His teaching.

Chapter 2: Introduction to the Beatitudes and the Poor in Spirit

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Mt. 5:1-12).

And he came down with them, and stood in the plain, and the company of his disciples, and a great multitude of people out of all Judaea and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and

¹⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:86.

¹⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 86.

Sidon, which came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases; and they that were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all. And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh. Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets. But woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! For ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! For ye shall mourn and weep. Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Lk. 6:17-26).

Before we examine each of the beatitudes in detail, there are a number of things that need to be noted regarding the beatitudes as a whole.

First, each beatitude has three elements: (1) Each sentence begins with the word "blessed" (*makarioi*). (2) There is a description of the person to whom this blessing applies. (3) The beatitude ends with the reason or ground why the person is blessed. The ground, reason or kind of blessing is not arbitrary, but often corresponds to the character or state described (e.g., mourn/comforted; hunger/filled; weep/laugh; merciful/obtain mercy). The final beatitude in Matthew's gospel (5:11-12) is difficult and more personal in that the second person plural ("blessed are you") is used instead of the third person. (Luke uses the second person plural throughout his account.) It is also much longer with a "whenever" clause inserted before the final reason why these people are blessed. Matthew's account has nine beatitudes, while Luke has four beatitudes (6:20-22) followed by a rejoice statement (6:23) and then four statements of "woe." The "woe" statements are structured identically to the blessing statements, but "woe" replaces "blessed."

Second, there is clearly an element of surprise or shock in the beatitudes. "The people listening to Jesus that day must have been spellbound from the very beginning. They must have been enthralled by the very opening sentence, for Jesus was telling them things which on the surface seem absurd. He was actually saying that not the rich, the gay [i.e. the happy], the well-fed, and unoppressed were to be accounted well-off, but rather the poor, the mourners, the hungry and thirsty, and the persecuted ones."¹⁷ Obviously, these descriptions, properly understood, are concerned primarily with spiritual and not material conditions. However, the fact remains that Christ was proclaiming the exact opposite of what most people would expect to hear. Those who follow the Redeemer must be willing to have their worldview, priorities and even life be completely turned upside down.

Third, it is wrong to interpret the beatitudes as if certain beatitudes were meant to apply to only certain disciples. In other words, some believers are called to be meek, while others are to be merciful, and still others are to be poor in spirit. No. All the qualities that our Lord sets forth are expected of each and every Christian; there are no exceptions. Just as Paul's list of the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit reveals God's requirement for Christian character, the Savior's nine beatitudes describe our Lord's concept for every citizen of His kingdom. Therefore, all of us are responsible to study them, learn what they mean and apply them to our lives.

¹⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 264.

Fourth, the form of the beatitudes, or at least something very similar, is found in the Old Testament. “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly” (Ps. 1:1). “Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him” (Ps. 2:12). “Blessed are those who keep justice...” (Ps. 106:3). “Blessed is he whose sin is forgiven.... Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity” (Ps. 32:1, 2). “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies” (Ps. 119:1-2). “Blessed are all those who wait for Him” (Is. 30:18).

Such beatitudes are also quite common in the New Testament. “And blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear” (Mt. 13:16). “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). “Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing” (Mt. 24:46; cf. Lk. 1:42, 45; 11:27-28; 12:37-38; 14:14-15; 23:29; Jn. 13:17; 20:29; Rom. 14:22b; Jas. 1:12; Rev. 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). An examination of both the Old and New Testament passages that speak of blessedness demonstrates that the blessedness described is virtually always connected to genuine faith, salvation or the obedience which is a fruit of faith. Christ’s salvation, in both its narrow (justification) and broad definition (regeneration, justification, sanctification, etc.), is the source of all blessedness.

Fifth, it is important that we recognize that the characteristics in the beatitudes are the result of God’s grace alone. These descriptions, properly understood, are not possible for unregenerate men. They can only be produced by the power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and the continued work of God’s Spirit in sanctification. “We must not for a moment suppose that the mere fact of being poor, and hungry, and sorrowful, and hated by man, will entitle anyone to lay claim to an interest in Christ’s blessing. The poverty spoken of is a poverty accompanied by grace. The want is a want entailed by faithful adherence to Jesus. The afflictions are the afflictions of the Gospel. The persecution is persecution for the Son of Man’s sake. Such want, and poverty, and affliction, and persecution, were the inevitable consequences of faith in Christ, at the beginning of Christianity.”¹⁸

This point is very important because the beatitudes are often applied by modernists, political liberals, leftists, secular humanists and other ignorant persons to unbelievers. For example, statist and socialists who are religious frequently argue that “God is on the side of the poor.” This phrase was popularized by the neo-evangelical socialist writer Ronald Sider: “I want to argue that one of the central biblical doctrines is that God is on the side of the poor.”¹⁹ People who handle Scripture in this manner are dishonest, irresponsible and end up advocating behavior that is sinful and stupid (e.g., subsidizing the wicked, lazy, unbelieving poor with taxpayer dollars).

It is also important that the beatitudes are not applied to persons that are unbelievers who, in an outward, superficial manner, exhibit certain characteristics found in the beatitudes. Modernists will point to people such as Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Ghandi, or Mother Teresa as wonderful illustrations of the beatitudes. Some people will point to a friend or relative who was exceptionally patient, kind, honest, and charitable. Yet, the beatitudes are not talking about such people; for true holiness that is pleasing to God is a disposition produced by grace, *not by self-effort*. Further, the only behavior that is pleasing to God is a behavior sanctified by the blood of Christ and done specifically to glorify the Redeemer.

¹⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1986), 1:177.

¹⁹ Ronald J. Sider, *The Christian Century*, March 19, 1980, 314, as quoted by David Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982), 95.

Sixth, the beatitudes, properly understood, reveal to us the fundamental difference between what a true believer and unbeliever is. The beatitudes are not a set of rules; but, rather, are descriptions of what Christians are supposed to be. They are descriptions of a life of daily repentance, of sacrificial living, of taking up one's cross and following Jesus. In our day when the church and the world have so often been blurred by syncretism, the beatitudes are exceedingly important. They reveal a very clear cut distinction between believers and unbelievers. The Christian has a completely different outlook than the current world spirit. The very things that men of this world aspire to are condemned by the beatitudes. And the very things that our Lord expects us to admire, seek and long for are things that the world regards as weak, foolish and a waste of time. "[T]he life which is lived by the Christian must be an essentially different life from that of the man who is not a Christian."²⁰ The unbeliever really lives for this world; his desire is to glorify himself and enjoy life to the fullest. The Christian is the man who has had a change of mind regarding God, Christ, the Bible, sin and self and now lives to glorify God. The believer sees himself as a stranger in a strange land and thus buffets his body and prepares for the world to come. The beatitudes reveal what repentance toward God looks like in the life of the Christian.

Seventh, the beatitudes are words of comfort and encouragement to believers who are about to suffer severe persecution. Although the beatitudes are for all Christians throughout history, they especially apply to a persecuted church. Both Matthew and Luke conclude the beatitudes with a great blessing for suffering persecution (Mt. 5:10-12; Lk. 6:22-23), for being hated because of the faith. Therefore, it makes sense to interpret things like being hungry, sorrowful and hated at least partially as things suffered for being faithful to Christ and true to the gospel. When viewed in this light, the beatitudes are words of encouragement and hope that are designed not merely to show the true from the false but also to spur believers on to greater faithfulness in times of severe testing. Also, the beatitudes must not be read legalistically in a wooden fashion (e.g., You are not blessed until you perfectly exhibit these beatitudes in every aspect of life). The woes of Luke's account are for people who place personal peace and affluence above Jesus Christ. When persecutions arise, they will be more concerned about being well spoken of than in pleasing the Savior. If we understand the context of persecution; that our Lord is promising great blessings for faithfulness; that our Mediator will wipe away every tear, then we will not think of the beatitudes as some unattainable, unrealistic utopianism.

Eighth, since every beatitude begins with the word *makarioi* translated "blessed" (KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, Moffat, Berkeley) or "happy" (Young's Literal Translation, JB, A. T. Robertson), we need to spend some time coming to a precise definition of this term. Although some excellent scholars favor the word "happy" over "blessed," there are a number of reasons why the word "blessed" is a better translation.

The term "happy" denotes a subjective emotion or state, while the word "blessed" refers to an objective judgment, status, situation or condition. That an objective judgment or condition is meant is rather obvious when we examine the second beatitude in Matthew. If we use the word happy the verse would read "happy are they that mourn [i.e. that are sad]." Our Lord is not saying that mourners are subjectively happy, but that they are blessed because God favors them and has given them salvation in Christ.

The blessedness of which Jesus speaks is a present possession and a present reality. Even when sad, poor, hated and persecuted, the Christian is blessed. The believer already has God's favor upon him. Obviously, not every believer in mourning, or poverty, or persecution is

²⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:38.

subjectively happy. This point is confirmed by the statement regarding those who mourn: “for they will be comforted” (i.e. in the future).

At the end of the beatitudes in Matthew, Christians are commanded to “rejoice and be exceedingly glad” on account of the blessedness that they already possess. In other words, their objective condition of favor with God through Christ ought to lead them to subjective feelings of joy, peace and happiness. Interestingly, in Luke’s account, those who laugh now (i.e. they are happy and rejoicing in the present) will mourn and weep in the future (6:25).

In the Bible there are many examples of men blessing God, as well as God blessing men. Obviously, when men bless God, they are not saying that God is happy or joyful; but, that God is worthy of praise or approval. However, when God blesses men He does so because of the work of Christ, resulting in justification and sanctification. When blessing is connected with obedience, God is approving of good works done by the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God. Thus, the beatitudes are not a brief discourse on psychology and personal happiness; but, rather are great encouragements that presuppose the grace of God and the work of Christ. As we understand the blessings we possess, we should be full of joy and happiness *as a consequence* of this marvelous objective blessing.

Ninth, in both Matthew and Luke’s account the beatitudes are bracketed with the promise of the same reward “theirs [Lk. ‘yours’] is the kingdom of heaven [Lk. ‘God’]” (Mt. 5:3, 10). Luke’s final promise of blessing is, “your reward is great in heaven” (6:23). “To begin and end with the same expression is a stylistic device called an ‘inclusion.’ This means that everything bracketed between the two can really be included under the one theme...”²¹ Thus, ultimately all the promised blessings of the beatitudes are fulfilled in our participation in the Redeemer’s kingdom, which He obtained for us by shedding His precious blood and obeying the law in exhaustive detail. The beatitudes could be titled the blessings of membership in the kingdom of heaven.

The Poor in Spirit

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

Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God (Lk. 6:20).

The first beatitude says “blessed are the poor in spirit” (Mt. 5:3) or, as Luke puts it, “Blessed are you poor” (Lk. 6:20). What does it mean to be poor in spirit? The meaning of this phrase is the key to understanding this beatitude and all those that follow. This beatitude is placed first because poverty of spirit is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian. In fact, all the Christian characteristics that are described in the beatitudes that follow are in a sense the result of this one.

Before we deal with the biblical definition of the “poor in spirit” we need to point out what the phrase does not mean. It certainly does not mean that the economically poor are specially favored by God. Although this interpretation is very popular among Roman Catholics, neo-evangelicals, modernists and socialists there are a number of reasons why it must be rejected.

²¹ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 16.

An Erroneous Definition

First, God repeatedly condemns people who are poor as a result of laziness and excess frivolity (cf. Pr. 6:6-11; 28:19). While economic blessings are promised to the diligent (Pr. 13:4), the lazy will go hungry (Pr. 19:15). Those who refuse correction will receive poverty and shame (Pr. 13:18). Those who refuse to work are lazy, wicked and useless (Pr. 21:25-26). Obviously, there are many people who are poor as a direct result of immoral behavior (cf. Pr. 20:13; 24:30-34). God teaches that such people deserve their poverty.

Second, the Bible only praises the poor who are *righteous* or the *godly* that are unjustly oppressed. This point is presupposed in such passages as Exodus 22:27, where the poor who are oppressed *who pray to Jehovah* are delivered: “When he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious” (Ex. 22:27). God clearly condemns the wicked poor: “Therefore the LORD will have no joy in their young men; not have mercy on their fatherless and widows; for everyone is a hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaks folly. For all this His anger is not turned back” (Is. 9:17). When the Psalmist writes about the oppressed that God favors, he emphasizes their faith or trust in God. “The LORD also will be refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You” (Ps. 9:9-10).

Third, King David, who was a very wealthy man that lived in a huge palace, under divine inspiration, repeatedly referred to himself as poor and needy. “But I am poor and needy; yet the LORD thinks upon me” (Ps. 40:17). “Bow down Your ear, O LORD, hear me; for I am poor and needy” (Ps. 86:1). “Because Your mercy is good, deliver me. For I am poor and needy and my heart is wounded within me” (Ps. 109:21-22). Obviously “poor” in these passages is metaphorical and consistent with the poverty of spirit in Matthew 5:3.

Fourth, in Luke’s account the “fact that ‘poor’ is not qualified by ‘now,’ as hungry and weep are in the next beatitudes, also indicates that ‘poor’ does not refer to an economic status that will change but to a permanent religious character.”²² The Christian will always be poor in the sense of this beatitude because he will always admit his sin and guilt, his utter helplessness and his complete unworthiness before God. He will count all things as refuse and cling to Christ.

There is no virtue in being poor economically. The unregenerate poor are no closer to God than are the unsaved rich. There is no spiritual advantage of living in economic poverty. If poverty guaranteed spirituality, the poorest sections of cities and the large third world slums would be the safest places to live. However, everyone knows they are by far the most dangerous.

The Roman Catholic interpretation of this passage has led to the totally unbiblical idea of taking a vow of poverty; that is, purposely living a life of economic destitution. “Their patron saint is Frances of Assisi and they regard him and his type as those who alone conform to the statement of this beatitude.”²³ Thus a whole order of beggars and leaches were born who wandered from city to city doing nothing productive whatsoever.

While the passage is not speaking about everyone who is economically poor, nevertheless the Old Testament does speak of the pious poor who look to and depend on God. “Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call on the LORD? There they are in great fear, for God is with the righteous. You shame the counsel of the poor, but the LORD is his refuge” (Ps. 14:6). “This poor man cried out, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles” (Ps. 34:6). Moreover, throughout the whole Old

²² Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 200.

²³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 44.

Testament we find passages where God promises to deliver and protect the righteous poor who are oppressed (Ex. 22:25-27; Dt. 15:7-11; 2 Sam. 22:28; Ps. 72:2, 4, 12; Is. 3:14-15; 10:2; Jer. 22:16; Ez. 16:49; 18:12; Amos 8:4; Zech. 7:10). Further, people are often warned not to abuse the poor (e.g., “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother” [Zech. 7:10]). In fact, according to Scripture, God’s people can, to an extent, measure their own piety before God by examining how they treat the weak, poor and helpless of the land (e.g., the poverty stricken, the widow, the orphan, the alien or foreigner).

If all these passages are carefully studied one does *not* see that God is exalting economic poverty. But rather, God is looking out for *believers* who are weak and vulnerable because it is the weak (the poor, homeless, widows, orphans, sojourners, etc.) that are most often exploited and treated unjustly. That was true during the Old Covenant administration, in Jesus’ own day, and it is still true today. These passages do not teach that God thinks economic poverty is wonderful or that Jehovah favors socialism, which is based on theft and statism, but that God will defend and avenge the righteous poor who are oppressed.

The Correct Meaning

Having dealt with most common misconceptions regarding this beatitude, let us turn our attention to the true meaning or intent of our Lord in this passage. The expression “poor in spirit” is related to biblical humility, where a man sees himself as the Word of God views him. Such a man understands that he is guilty and polluted before God; that with regard to his own life record and heart or character he has absolutely nothing to be proud of. There is not one thing that he has done, or can do, to impress God or bring him into God’s favor. “He knows himself to be an entirely dependent being; he knows that ‘in him, that is in his flesh, dwells no good thing’ [Rom. 7:18]; he knows that he has, that he can have, no hope, but in the sovereign mercy of God...”²⁴ “It is the opposite of that haughty, self-assertive and self-sufficient disposition which the world so much admires and praises.”²⁵ The unregenerate man loves “the pride of life” (1 Jn. 2:16) and relishes a life of arrogant defiance against God’s throne. God is not in his thoughts and, thus, any idea of acknowledging his own sin and guilt or bowing the knee to Christ is totally out of the question. With Pharaoh he says, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice...?” (Ex. 5:2).

The teaching that the poor in spirit are those who understand and acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy before God is taught in Scripture a number of ways.

First, as we noted with David’s inspired petitions, “poor and needy” (Ps. 40:17; 86:1; 109:21-22) refers to David’s acknowledgement that he is a helpless sinner and is completely dependent upon God’s grace and mercy for deliverance. Even though David was materially rich and powerful, he exhibited a complete absence of pride, self-assurance, self-reliance and, instead, focused his faith on God.

Second, there are some Hebrew words that can be legitimately translated as lowly, humble or *poor*. For example in Proverbs 16:19 (“Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.”), the word translated “lowly” can also be rendered “poor.” The expression “the poor” then would be the antithetical counterpart to “the proud.” In the broader context of Scripture, spiritual pride and self-reliance is the very opposite of a

²⁴ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1850, 52] 1967), 1:117.

²⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1950, 53] 1982), 16-17.

repentant, contrite heart. Thus, the first beatitude really functions as a foundation for the others that follow. The person who is of a poor spirit will mourn, will be meek, will be merciful, etc..

Third, the Bible contains numerous historical examples of godly men acknowledging their spiritual poverty. When Isaiah had a vision and saw God on a throne, high and lifted up he cried out, “Woe is me for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips” (Is. 6:5). After this acknowledgement his iniquity was taken away and his sin was purged (Is. 6:5). When King David came to his senses and repented, he acknowledged his spiritual poverty. “Have mercy on me, O God...For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me...Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me...Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities” (Ps. 51:1, 3, 5, 9). When Peter, who was by nature, proud, boastful and self-confident, understood who Jesus really was for the first time he said to the Savior, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk. 5:8)! A beautiful example of being poor in spirit is found in the prayer of the tax collector. “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’” (Lk. 18:13). Our Lord’s commentary on this man’s prayer tells us quite explicitly that biblical humility goes hand in hand with poverty of spirit. “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other [the proud Pharisee]; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk. 18:14). The tax collector did not depend on himself or his own works or character one iota, but instead admitted his sin and cast himself upon the mercy of God.

Paul expressed this same thought when he said, “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith” (Phil. 3:8-9). After establishing the fact that if anyone had reason to boast about their religious heritage and personal accomplishments he was second to none, Paul acknowledges that all his personal achievements are worthless. Thus, the poor in spirit are those that the Holy Spirit has brought to the realization that, in and of themselves, they are completely destitute morally and spiritually and thus are in need of the salvation that Christ has provided. The one who is poor in spirit is nothing in his own eyes, and understands that his proper place is in the dust before God begging for mercy. “He feels himself ‘dust and ashes,’ guilty dust and ashes. A saved sinner, a sinner saved by grace, is the highest character he can lay claim to.”²⁶

It is important to recognize that when the Bible speaks of the poor in spirit it never does so in isolation from faith in God. Poverty of spirit is not simply an expression of humility or having a low opinion of oneself, for the heathen can do that. The poor in spirit are *only* those whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated and enabled to see themselves in light of God’s infinite holiness and the perfection of God’s holy law. The poor in spirit have hearts of flesh, not stone, and eyes that see. Thus, they take the place of a beggar before God and flee to Christ. All believers, then, are poor in spirit (even those who are materially rich) because the Word of God attended by the power of the Holy Spirit has shown them their utter worthlessness and caused them to receive the spiritual riches merited by Jesus Christ. Therefore, when the expression “poor in spirit” is understood in the broad context of Scripture, we can say that the beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount opens with a statement regarding the total necessity of repentance and salvation in Christ. Consequently, the common teaching that the Sermon on the Mount contains nothing about salvation or the need for Christ’s sacrificial death is fallacious. A

²⁶ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:117.

man cannot have a biblical attitude toward himself in isolation from his view of God and Jesus. A man cannot truly forsake his self-reliance, self-confidence, and commitment to human autonomy in epistemology, ontology and ethics without simultaneously relying on Jesus Christ. In other words, a person who forsakes believing in himself and his own works-righteousness cannot embrace the void, nothingness or neutrality. Rather, he replaces self-confidence, assurance and self-righteousness with the Savior's righteousness—the righteousness of God. Thus, all the blessings that we receive, we receive as a consequence of Jesus' person and work.

The man who is poor in spirit acknowledges the righteousness, holiness and goodness of God. He acknowledges that we are sinful, wicked, depraved and utterly undone, but that Jesus is holy, perfect, separate from sinners and absolutely righteous. He places all his hope in the righteousness of Christ because he understands that “we are nothing, less than nothing, worse than nothing.”²⁷ He abandons his own righteousness, strength and confidence in the flesh for the merit of Christ. Do you see yourself as poor and destitute before God? Do you understand that all your supposed good deeds are nothing but filthy rags before the Lord? Do you approach God from a position of total abasement? Do you boast in your abilities or do you have a humble and contrite spirit? Do you understand that Jesus is your only hope and trust in Him alone for salvation? We must regard ourselves as poor because we are always in need of God's grace. We must always be clinging to the bloody cross.

Jesus places poverty of spirit first among the Christian graces. The Greek and Roman philosophers did not place humility among their moral virtues. The Nazis saw poverty of spirit as the great defect of Christianity. The natural man sees poverty of spirit as a great weakness, a negative character flaw. Even many preachers today reject poverty of spirit for the gospel of self-esteem, self-praise and self-exaltation. Many modern churches, in their desire for success, numbers, huge facilities, programs, and the praise of men, have forsaken a crucial element of Christianity. They would do well to heed the words of Christ given to the church of Laodicea: “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see” (Rev. 3:17-18). We must always keep before our minds the truth that poverty of spirit, Christian humility and self-denial is the first beatitude; the first thing to be learned in the school of Christ. The seed of the gospel will only grow in hearts where the Holy Spirit has removed the rocky soil of pride and self-exaltation. Once this occurs all the saving graces will grow and prosper. God in His compassion reduces us to nothing so that we would rely on His mercy and prostrate ourselves before His dear Son.

By way of application note how this beatitude runs completely counter to the world's way of thinking. In America people think, “Blessed are the rich, the famous, the beautiful, the powerful.” Yet true blessedness does not come from fame or power or possessions. There are multitudes of such people whose lives are full of torment and misery. Moreover, like a flower, fame lasts only for a season. Riches and power cannot go beyond one's death. After experiencing wealth, power and fame unsurpassed in the world Solomon declared, “All is vanity” (Ec. 12:8). Further, riches, power and fame apart from Christ and true spiritual poverty are nothing but a snare. These things fill a man with pride, self-assurance and many diverse lusts. In ancient Israel, it was usually the rich and powerful that compromised with the surrounding Canaanite heathenism and later with the Greek and Roman paganism. Jesus said that “it is easier for a

²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:49.

camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk. 18:25). Perhaps that is why when Paul described the members of Christ’s church he said that not many wise with human wisdom, or mighty, or noble are called (1 Cor. 1:26). Clearly pride is a great hindrance in coming to the Savior. Those who think that great blessing is only found in riches, fame, power or pleasures need to listen to our Lord’s words on the cost of discipleship: “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mk. 8:34-36). Are you willing to turn your whole life over to Christ? Are you willing to give up all for Him? Are you willing to become poor that you may be rich in Him?

The Poor’s Possession

Jesus says that those who are poor in spirit possess the kingdom of heaven. Our Lord uses the present tense (*estin*) rather than the future tense because in this passage possessing the kingdom of heaven is the equivalent of possessing eternal life. Although the kingdom of God is used in different ways in the gospels, the Sermon on the Mount uses it in a narrow sense for the possession of salvation (Mt. 5:3, 10; 7:21).

Therefore, the first beatitude assumes that all those who have been convinced of their own spiritual poverty before God have placed their faith in Jesus Christ and His work; and, thus have received the gift of eternal life. Our Lord said, “Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16); “He who believes in Him is not condemned” (Jn. 3:18); “he who believes...has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (Jn. 5:24). The verb “has passed” (*metabebeken*) indicates that a person who believes in Christ has passed from one state (that of spiritual death) into another (eternal life); and that person *remains* in that new state of spiritual life forever. Paul says something very similar when he says to Christians that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20); that God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

The poor in spirit are blessed because their sins are not imputed to them. “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity” (Ps. 32:1-2). They are blessed because God took all of their sin, guilt and liability of punishment and placed it on Christ on the cross. “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:13-14). Jesus endured hell in order to bless us with heaven.

The poor in spirit are blessed because God has covenanted with them. God said, “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be My people” (Jer. 31:33). “Happy are the people whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 144:15). “They who are in covenant with God are favourites of heaven. ‘Abraham my friend’ (Isaiah 41:8). It is counted a subject’s happiness to be in favour with his prince, though he may live a while from court. How happy must he needs be who is God’s favorite!”²⁸

²⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1660] 1971), 36.

They are blessed because through Christ they have been adopted into God's own family. "You received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). "I will be a Father to you. And you shall be My sons and daughters says the LORD Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:18). Because of what the Savior has accomplished we are not enemies, or even unloved slaves, but sons.

The poor in spirit are blessed because they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and all that that gift entails: regeneration, Spirit baptism, progressive sanctification, the seal of the Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22) and glorification. Their eyes are opened. Their hearts are made to love Jesus and are drawn to Him. Their minds are enlightened to the truth. The power of sin is broken and they are enabled more and more to put off sin and practice works of righteousness. Because of this blessing, the poor in spirit become a great blessing to others, for their hearts are overflowing with living water.

Those who are convinced of their spiritual poverty are blessed with the great intercessory work of Christ (Heb. 7:25) and His sovereign care over them. Thus, the saints are promised "that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

This message of blessedness from the lips of our Lord is not only a strong encouragement for everyone to believe in Christ and trust in Him for salvation, but also is a great comfort to all those who make sacrifices and suffer for the faith. The sufferings, self-denial and afflictions of this world cannot compare to the blessings we have in Christ. The beatitudes focus our attention on Christ and His salvation and thus give us the biblical perspective needed to endure the suffering, hardships and temptations of this world. As Luther notes, "The sea of God's mercy, overflowing in spiritual blessings, should drown all the sufferings of this life."²⁹

Chapter 3: The Blessed Mourners

Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted (Mt. 5:4).

Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh (Lk. 6:21).

The second beatitude in Matthew (Luke's third) tells us that the poor in spirit are also mourners. The verb used here (*penthountes*) "is the strongest word which is used for mourning in the Greek language. It is the word which is used for mourning for the dead, for the passionate lament for one who was loved. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is the word which is used of Jacob's grief when he believed that Joseph, his son, was dead (*Genesis* 37:34)."³⁰ The mourning described here is a profound and deep sorrow of heart that leads to weeping and bitter tears. The mourning spoken of in the beatitudes is not just any mourning, but a deep sorrow that is blessed by God. It is a mourning that flows from poverty of spirit, from being a Christian. Before we examine what a blessed mourner is, let us first examine the mourning that is not related to God's blessing.

²⁹ Martin Luther as quoted in Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 58.

³⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press [1956, 58] 1975), 1:93.

Mourning That Is Not Blessed

There are a number of situations of mourning that are either worldly or common to society which our text does not describe.

First, there is the sorrow of the world which produces death (2 Cor. 7:10). It is not biblical sorrow, but sadness rooted in meaninglessness and despair. This kind of sorrow was found in Judas (the betrayer), who had deep regret and many tears over what his wicked actions did to Jesus. Judas, however, never repented of his sin. Interestingly, Judas did more than most in that he openly admitted his wrong and even gave the blood money back to the chief priests (Mt. 27:3-4). But, he did not turn back to God; his sadness was not a godly sorrow. He did not view his sin in terms of its awfulness in God's eyes but as a humanist, as someone who had already embarked on the road to autonomy. Therefore, instead of confessing his sin to God and looking to Jesus for forgiveness, he went out and hanged himself. He took his sorrow with him down into hell. A sorrow that is not connected to faith in Christ or repentance unto life (Ac. 11:18) is worthless and sinful.

Second, there is hypocritical sorrow of one who is caught and rebuked for sin. This is not a sorrow for having offended a thrice holy God; but, for experiencing the consequences of sin. There are many people who live double lives, one to serve secret lusts and another for public consumption. But when their sins are exposed they shed crocodile tears and confess their guilt. This sorrow, however, is not from the heart; it is not a spiritual sorrow rooted in poverty of spirit. It is a sorrow to be seen by men. Godly sorrow is sincere; it never makes excuses for sin. It is a sorrow that extends even to one's hidden life, even to the prayer closet.

Unbelieving Cain is an example of a man who was very concerned about God's punishment, yet who had no concern for or mourning over his grievous sin. He said, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (Gen. 4:13). There was no mourning which said, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4). There was no tear-drenched petition: "Have mercy on me, a sinner."

Third, there is the pretend sorrow of those who are trying to please men. The Pharisees went about with glum faces to impress the people (Mt. 6:16). Yet, we know that inwardly they were full of pride and self-righteousness. Their outward appearance of affliction was not connected to a genuine consciousness of sin or a holy character.

Fourth, there is a mourning common among all peoples for the general afflictions of life. Both believers and unbelievers grieve at the death of a loved one. People are greatly saddened by all sorts of things. But the sorrow described by Jesus is peculiar to believers. It can only come from the heart of those who are already poor in spirit. In the same way the poverty of spirit was not referring to finances, the mourning described is not a natural, but an essential, spiritual experience. It is mourning completely contrary to the natural man. It is a sorrow that the unregenerate cannot experience.

It is important that we search our hearts to make sure that we are not deceiving ourselves with a false sorrow, a sorrow that is not oriented to God but self. There are many people who shed tears with their eyes but not with their hearts. There are multitudes who mourn for the consequences of their sin, but who really do not care what God thinks. Let that not be any one of us.

Blessed Mourning

The type of mourning that Jesus blesses is a mourning that flows from being poor in spirit. It is a mourning caused by the Holy Spirit in the elect sinner. There are three things related to this spiritual mourning that flows from being poor in spirit.

First, there is the godly sorrow over our own sin and pollution. This kind of mourning both begins the Christian life and continues through it. We say it begins the Christian life because every genuine conversion to Christ begins with an acknowledgment of sin and a realization that our sin and guilt is heinous in God's sight. Because of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration the sinner sees the horrible evil of sin. This consciousness of the sinfulness of sin, our hopelessness, the excellencies of the divine nature and the love and compassion of Christ breaks the sinner's heart. The heart that mourns flees to Jesus because Christ removes the guilt of sin and breaks its power in life. This new man is miserable because of an enlightened conscience and he knows that he can only find relief in the Savior. Tears from sin can only be wiped away by the blood of Christ.

This is a very elemental doctrine of the faith, yet it is largely ignored in modern evangelical churches. People are either told to accept Christ with absolutely no preaching of the law or consciousness of sin; or, they are told to acknowledge the fact that they are sinners without anything deep or specific and then to "accept Jesus." Such preaching produces superficial, carnal "Christians" who have never mourned over their sins. Have you mourned over your sins? Have you ever felt like the sinful woman who came to Jesus in a Pharisee's house? Luke tells us that she "brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil" (7:37-38). Has your heart ever ached like the publican's who cried in despair and mourning, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk. 18:13)? Have you ever sensed the wickedness of your heart and the unworthiness of your life like the prodigal son who said, "I will arise and go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son'" (Lk. 15:18-19)? Have you ever wept bitterly over sin like Peter (Mt. 26:75; Mk. 14:72; Lk. 22:62)? Has a consciousness of sin and sinfulness cut you to the heart like it did to the three thousand souls that were saved on the day of Pentecost (cf. Ac. 2:37)?

A deep sorrow for sin is also necessary for our progressive sanctification. The verb *penthountes* is in the present continuous tense. The believer lives a life of sorrow for sin because the mortification for sin is never complete in this life. In fact, as a believer grows in grace and the knowledge of God's holiness he is more aware of his own sinful conduct and inner depravity. Thus, he will repeatedly experience sorrow for his sin. He will die daily (1 Cor. 15:31) or lead a life of habitual repentance. As he is more and more sanctified, his knowledge of the sinfulness of sin increases. Thus, the more godly a believer becomes, the more sensitive he will become about offending God. A believer will mourn because he knows that sin is the opposite of loving Christ (1 Jn. 5:2, 3, 6); that sin is contrary to the Spirit of God within us; that sin was the reason the Savior was crucified. In a sense, sin pounded the nails into the Lord's hands and feet and crowned Him with thorns.

Biblical sorrow is a result of a Spirit-directed conscience. "If conscience is not a bridle, it will be a whip. If it is not a curb, it will be a scourge. If you will not hear the warnings, you shall feel the lashings of conscience. If it does not restrain sin by admonition, it will put us to pain by

contrition.”³¹ We see this in King David whose heart smote him after he had numbered the people (2 Sam. 24:10). We also observe it in David’s painful groaning for his sin with Bathsheba: “When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer” (Ps. 32:3-4). The result of this sorrow is seen in the next verse. “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:5). David, as much as any saint, knew that “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, and a broken and contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). Thomas Watson writes,

The sinner admires himself. The penitent loathes himself. “Ye shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils” (Ezekiel 20:43). A true penitent is troubled not only for the shameful consequence of sin, but for the loathsome nature of sin; not only the sting of sin but the deformed face. How did the leper loathe himself! (Leviticus 13:45). The Hebrew doctors say, the leper pronounced unclean was to put a covering on this upper lip, both as a mourner and in token of shame. The true mourner cries out, O these impure eyes! This heart which is a conclave of wickedness! He not only leaves sin but loathes sin. He that is fallen in the dirt loathes himself (Hosea 14:1).³²

Mourning for sin is natural to the Christian because he hates it. He loathes his sins and sorrows over them every day. If he could stop sinning forever, he would do so in an instant. But, because of the sin remaining in us (i.e. our flesh), sin will not be eradicated until we go to heaven. Therefore, our souls will be afflicted by this until we die. We are like Paul who said, “I am carnal sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.... O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:14, 15, 24). The believer is aware of this warfare between the regenerate mind and the law of sin within him. He groans under this wretched struggle. He has this experience of being totally disappointed with himself. Because of the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit applying the Word of God to the heart, the Christian has a great desire to be holy and pure in heart. Thus, there is a sincere conflict against the motions of his lust and corrupt affections within him. The believer is aware of this conflict and his failings and he grieves over his failings and nature. Therefore, like David, he mourns and confesses not only his guilt but also his inner depravity. “Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5).

As we contemplate Jehovah and His infinite holiness and think about our own condition, there is a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. As we ponder deeds, thoughts and words that are contrary to God, that we have done, we loathe our behavior. We all know that we have much to mourn over. There are the sins of omission and commission that are committed every day. There is the ever deepening awareness of our inner depravity that, in a sense, pollutes all our thoughts and actions before God. There is the consciousness of the surging of unbelief, the lack of fervent love toward Christ, the deficiency of spiritual growth. All of these things cause a deep mourning before God. There is even the recollection of past failures before God that have present negative consequences. There is much to grieve the spiritually sensitive Christian. The more we

³¹ Samuel Bolton, “Sin the Greatest Evil” in *The Puritans on Conversion* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 2.

³² Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 65.

know God, His Word and ourselves the more we will grieve. "The fact is that the closer the Christian lives to God, the more will he mourn over all that dishonors Him."³³

Beloved, do you mourn because you understand how offensive your sins are to God your Father? Do you mourn because you know that sin is the opposite of loving Christ, the blessed One who shed His precious blood on your behalf? Do you loathe your iniquities because you know they are an act of hostility toward God? Do you mourn over that which grieves the Holy Spirit? Spiritual mourning is a great blessing because it leads us to repentance. It causes us to cling to the cross of Christ. Paul writes, "Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:9-10).

The apostle tells us that there is nothing virtuous about sorrow itself. Virtuous sorrow is only something Christians do in response to sin as it relates to their continuing relationship with Christ. The sorrow that people of the world experience only produces death. "The sorrow of the world, indeed, is not something distinct from sin; on the contrary, it partakes of the very essence of sin. It is not sorrow because of the heinousness of sin as rebellion against God, but sorrow because of the painful and unwelcome consequences of sin. Thus the sorrow of the world manifests itself in self-pity rather than in contrition and turning to God for mercy."³⁴ We should all pray that God would increase our sorrow over sin so that we would be more diligent in the future and would, by faith, cling more tightly to our Savior.

Second, the believer not only mourns for his own sins, but also for the sins of others. Jeremiah mourned over the sin and judgment which came upon Judah. "My soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the LORD's flock has been taken captive" (13:17). "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath.... He has aged my flesh and my skin and broken my bones.... He has broken my teeth with gravel, and covered me with ashes" (Lam. 3:1, 4, 16). Ezekiel says that those who mourned over Jerusalem's wickedness would be spared God's judgment. "The LORD said to him, 'Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it'" (Ezek. 9:4). God through Zephaniah promised, "I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, who are among you, to whom its reproach is a burden" (3:18).

This is mourning over corporate sin. It is an affliction, a burden for God's visible church. Even our sinless Savior sorrowed over wicked Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37). In fact, His whole life and ministry are characterized by mourning. Isaiah called Him, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). No one understood the wickedness of sin and the consequences of sin more than Jesus; "that is why he wept at the grave of Lazarus. He saw this horrid, ugly, foul thing called sin which had come into life and introduced death into life, and had upset life and made life unhappy."³⁵

These examples show us that individual believers are to have a strong concern for the church of Christ as a whole. There is to be a sympathetic mourning for the afflictions of others that leads to fervent prayer. There is to be a concern for the repentance and reformation of the visible church, especially in our own nation. When believers "weep with them that weep" (Rom. 12:15), they make common cause with others in their afflictions and help those suffering the pain

³³ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 19.

³⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 272-273.

³⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:59.

of sorrow. Such sympathy can only strengthen the visible church and aid the cause of corporate sanctification. “It is not pleasant to weep; no one invites grief. But our love for others will constrain in us the sorrow of heart which the providence of God metes out to our brethren in Christ.”³⁶ “How much like Christ is the man who feels the sorrows and joys of others, as though they were his own!”³⁷

Third, there are believers who mourn because of persecution. Previously, we have observed that persecution is a dominant theme in the beatitudes. Those who are faithful disciples in a wicked, unbelieving generation will receive persecution. This reality is coupled with a mourning over sin in Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” Jesus, at the beginning of His ministry, read this passage at Capernaum and said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21). The passage was originally applied (at least in part) to the exiles that were in bondage and affliction because of sin. The term “brokenhearted” refers to their inner condition as they mourned over their sin. The statement “the captives...and those who are bound” refers to their outward condition. The Messiah came to comfort those who are distressed over their sins, as well as those who are oppressed as believers. When understood in its full eschatological expectation, we see that the Savior’s salvation is comprehensive and brings a complete and full comfort or deliverance.

The idea of suffering and mourning because of persecution is more prominent and obvious in Luke who follows the beatitude, “Blessed are you who weep now” (7:21) with “Blessed are you when men hate you” (7:22). The disciples of Jesus in the first generations of the New Covenant church suffered great affliction because of Jewish and then Roman opposition to the faith. Therefore, Christ comforts His disciples with the assurance that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17; cf. 21:4).

Our Lord emphasizes that the Christian life is not all fun, joy and laughter. Many modern churches, especially of the “Charismatic” variety, think that being filled with the Spirit means a life of perpetual joy; that discipleship is easy. In fact, for them, blessing and mourning are contradictions. They demonstrate defeat, not God’s blessing. But this kind of Christianity reveals a lack of understanding of God’s holiness and His righteous law. Moreover, the doctrine of total depravity has been replaced with an optimistic—man is the captain of his salvation—spirit. Therefore, mourning over one’s sin and depravity is viewed as outmoded or even unbiblical. The blessedness of mourning has been replaced by the gospel of self-esteem. Sorrowing over sin has been rejected for “having your best life now.” Bewailing our iniquities has been jettisoned for the “laughing revival,” the coffee house service, the rock and roll jam fest. Our culture’s obsession with entertainment, serving our perceived needs and wants, trying to be happy and having fun all the time has permeated much of modern evangelicalism. Modern churches would do well to follow the example of Ezra who prayed, wept and bowed down because of the sins of the people of Israel (Ezra 10:1). Or, even the old English reformer Cranmer who set an excellent example of prayer when he wrote, “We acknowledge *and bewail* our manifold sins and wickedness.”³⁸ Or, Paul who said, “I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced” (2 Cor. 12:21).

³⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1959, 64] 1968), 2:135.

³⁷ Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1835, 64] 1972), 398.

³⁸ Thomas Cranmer as quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counterculture*, 41.

In Luke's account we learn that people of the world will have the opposite experience of Jesus' disciples. "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep" (6:25). People who do not mourn over their sins, the sins of others or for the afflictions of persecution will laugh. That is, they are very happy in their heathenism. They have no concerns about God, Jesus, sin or holiness. They live for self, the present, sinful pleasures and are very happy and content to live a life of autonomy, a life without God. They are indifferent to sin as they lead lives of worldly ease, personal peace and affluence. Because they are their own god, they are completely unwilling to make any sacrifices whatsoever to follow Christ. They "are delighted in the things of earth, chasing pleasure after pleasure, are frivolous and giddy 'now'—while it lasts."³⁹ Our culture is obsessed with vain amusements, carnal mirth, and frivolous entertainment. There is no contemplation of God or consideration of sin. People fill their lives with shallow amusements because they have not been enlightened by the Holy Spirit or embraced the gospel. Tragically, however, their shallow merriment will be turned into eternal weeping. Their failure to weep over their sins now and flee to Christ will result in mourning without intermission and without end. All those who forget God shall be turned into hell (Ps. 9:17) and shall be abandoned to wailing and gnashing of teeth.

They Shall be Comforted

Christian mourners are blessed because they will be comforted (Mt. 5:4). "Godly sorrow turns the soul toward God. God, in turn, grants comfort to those who seek help from him."⁴⁰ The sorrow caused by the Holy Spirit always causes the elect sinner to look away from himself and his sin toward the Lamb of God. Thus, mourning by itself is not praiseworthy, but a spiritual mourning that drives the soul to Jesus is indeed a great blessing. True comfort is not something in us. It is not caused by something subjective, but is founded solely upon the Mediator and His work. The comfort we receive from Christ corresponds to and meets the specific needs of all the various causes of mourning in the believer.

First, there is the comfort of being justified before God from all our sin and guilt. That great burden and despair that accompanies a consciousness of sin is lifted when the mourning soul clings to Christ. Jesus said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). "Mourning over their sins, they shall be comforted, by the plain declarations of a free and full forgiveness, which, by the influence of the good Spirit, they shall be enabled to believe, and, 'believing which, they shall rejoice with joy unspeakable.'"⁴¹ The greatest comfort that we know as believers is that the blessed Savior has washed away our sins and reconciled us to God. Without the removal of all of our sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness, all other comforts would be temporary, fleeting and vain. "This Divine comfort is the peace of God which passeth all understanding, filling the heart of one who is now assured that he is 'accepted in the Beloved.' First God wounds and then heals."⁴²

Second, there is the continued comfort that we receive as we mourn over our sins daily and confess them to God. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9). The moment a person believes in Christ he is justified before God. However, Christians continue to sin after they are saved (1 Jn. 1:8-10),

³⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, [1946] 1961), 357.

⁴⁰ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 271.

⁴¹ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:119.

⁴² Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 20.

even though their lives are not characterized by sin (1 Jn. 1:6). The sins that we all commit cause us to mourn. They distress our souls because we hate sin and detest offending our dear Savior. This godly sorrow which leads to daily confession also results in a daily comforting of our troubled consciences. As we confess our sins before God, He applies the blood of Christ and forgives the guilt of our sins. We see in Scripture that believers who have sinned against God do not receive comfort until they have first acknowledged, mourned and confessed their sins to God. Therefore, spiritual mourning is not only crucial to conversion, but also for the continued restoration of fellowship as we lead our very imperfect, sin-tarnished lives.

A true believer will bewail *all* his particular sins and be comforted by God. But, there are multitudes of people that deny their sins; who make excuses for their iniquities, who redefine sins away and thus do not mourn over them, confess them and receive comfort. Without the comfort of Christ's forgiveness they turn to alcohol, drugs, sex, or materialism. But none of these things can comfort the troubled soul. Thus, modern America is a medicated nation; a country drowning in antidepressants. People want comfort; they want peace for their guilt-ridden souls. But without the blood of Christ to wash away sin, they attempt to smother the symptoms and the root cause is left untouched. Oh, what a blessing we have in Christ! He removes all of our sins and restores us to God; and he restores our fellowship when we sin, mourn and confess. After groaning all day over his sin David was blessed: "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5). Beloved, let us mourn over our sins daily, confess them to God through Christ and be comforted.

Third, there is the comfort of being restored by God after being chastised for sin. After the Jews were judged by Jehovah, many repented and a godly remnant was comforted by God. Isaiah prophesied, "'Comfort, yes, comfort My people!' says your God. 'Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins'" (40:1-2). "Break forth into joy, sing together, you waste places of Jerusalem! For the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem" (52:9). "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (66:13). God wants His people to know that as a mother comforts her grieving son, He will comfort us. Ezekiel also spoke of Jehovah's loving comfort for His remnant: "Yet behold, there shall be left in it a remnant who will be brought out, both sons and daughters; surely they will come out to you, and you will see their ways and their doings. Then you will be comforted concerning the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem, all that I have brought upon it" (14:22). "The mourner is heir to comfort, and though for a small moment God may forsake his people (Isaiah 54:7), yet there is a time shortly coming when the mourner shall have all tears wiped away, and shall be brim full of comfort."⁴³

Fourth, there is the comfort that Christians receive from God for persecution and affliction by both temporal deliverance in history and the permanent deliverance believers receive in heaven. David often praised God for His deliverance from life's afflictions. "Hear, O LORD, and have mercy on me; LORD, be my helper! You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness" (Ps. 30:10). "Show me a sign for good, that those who hate me may see it and be ashamed, because You, LORD, have helped me and comforted me" (Ps. 86:17). God spoke words of comfort to Judah through Isaiah saying, "Sing, O heavens! Be joyful, O earth! And breakout in singing, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people, and will have mercy on His afflicted" (49:13).

⁴³ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 100.

Paul also spoke of this comfort: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation” (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Regarding this passage Hughes writes,

The word “comfort”, whether as a noun or a verb, occurs no less than ten times in verses 3 to 7, building up in a characteristically Pauline manner a compelling impression of the comfort which God bestows upon His children. Paul employs the term here in its basic (Greek) sense of standing beside a person to encourage him when he is undergoing severe testing. This work of encouragement is indeed a work of the blessed Trinity: as Paraclete, the Father comforts and consoles us; as Paraclete, the Holy Spirit strengthens and guides us (Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7—Greek); and as Paraclete, Jesus Christ the righteous is our Advocate with the Father and our Helper in the hour of temptation (1 Jn. 2:1; Heb. 2:18—Greek). The present tense of the verb shows that this God of ours comforts us constantly and unfailingly, not spasmodically and intermittently; and He does so in *all* our affliction, not just in certain kinds of affliction. If any one person knew the experimental proof of this great assurance it was the Apostle Paul, who later in this same epistle justly speaks of himself in comparison with others as “in labors more abundantly, in prisons more abundantly, in stripes above measure, in deaths oft” (11:23). And the comfort God gives enables the Christian not only to *endure*, but even to *rejoice* “in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake” (12:10), so dynamic and vitalizing is its effect.⁴⁴

There is the comfort that we will all receive in heaven. Although we are continuously comforted by God in this life, these experiences are earnest points pointing to our “everlasting consolation” (2 Th. 2:16). Thus, there is certainly an eschatological dimension to this comfort. In fact, Jesus uses the future tense because the sufferings of this life precede our eternal comfort, our everlasting Sabbath rest. Our comfort includes salvation in the broad sense of the term—glorification and presence with Christ in the eternal state of blessedness. “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

God gives the ultimate comfort to His people by eliminating everything that hurts, or troubles us. There is a day coming when those who trust in Jesus receive the eternal reward that Christ merited, while their persecutors and oppressors receive the due recompense of their reward. This point is brought out very clearly in the case of the rich man and Lazarus. “Son remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented” (Lk. 16:25). The judgment of God brings a great reversal. The arrogant, unbelieving rich who lived in the lap of luxury on the earth will suffer and mourn, while the righteous poor who suffered great hardship and pain will rejoice. Believers who suffer deprivation and hardship now should rejoice because a day is coming when

⁴⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 11-12.

the tables will be turned; when those who wept shall laugh and those who rejoiced in their hedonism shall cry.

What a great day that shall be when the saints who were persecuted and dressed in rags shall be clothed with dazzling robes of white! What a blessed day when those who were chased out of their homes, who lived in constant fear; hiding in thick woods or caves, shall be given mansions in the heavenly city (Jn. 14:2 ff.)! What an amazing sight it will be when those who starved for the faith shall sit at Christ's own banquet table (Rev. 19:9) and shall eat the blessed fruit from the tree of life in paradise (Rev. 2:7)! "Christ will lead his spouse into the 'banqueting house' and feast her with those rare viands, and cause her to drink that spiced wine, that heavenly nectar and ambrosia wherewith the angelic powers are infinitely refreshed"⁴⁵

Some Further Applications

As we study the doctrine of gospel mourning there are some applications that need to be emphasized. These are things that we should do to increase our spiritual mourning before God.

First, we must carefully study the biblical teaching regarding God's nature and character as well as His holy law. The more that we understand who God is, the more we will loathe our sins. One of the greatest reasons that gospel mourning is absent from many churches today is their gross ignorance of God's holiness and righteousness. The biblical teaching on the love of God has been emphasized at the expense of the very attributes that the Bible discusses more than any other. Moreover, God's moral law is a reflection of Jehovah's righteous character. Dispensationalism in its many varieties has largely removed the preaching of the law from pulpits in our land. A meditation on God's law and a personal application to ourselves everyday will greatly assist our sorrow over our sins.

Second, we must pray for the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to our sins and to cause us to hate our sinful behavior. We want sin to give way to biblical self-loathing which in turn causes us to continually rely on Christ and habitually repent of our iniquities. Progress in sanctification is dependent on a holy hatred of sin. Those who make light of sin and turn the grace of God into an excuse for carelessness must learn the necessity of gospel mourning.

Third, for the times in our lives when we do not feel the comfort of God, we must have a future-oriented outlook. The comfort of God will come. As Paul says, "we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:17-18). Even though there are times we do not feel God's comfort, yet we still take comfort in Christ and His salvation.

Chapter 4: Blessed Are the Meek

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

The third beatitude follows logically upon the previous two. In fact, the Hebrew word for meek (*anaw*) comes from the same root and is related to the term for poor (*ani*). The one who is

⁴⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 101.

poor in spirit will be meek. The person who mourns over his sin and depravity will be humble-minded. The term meek is multifaceted and thus not easy to define whether in Hebrew, Greek or English. (For example, Webster's Dictionary defines "meek" as "patient and mild; not inclined to anger" as well as "too submissive; spineless; spiritless."⁴⁶ Our Lord is not saying that the spineless, effeminate, or spiritless will inherit the earth (e.g., Jesus and Paul were meek yet strong leaders who stood up to sin and rebuked evil.). Therefore, there is no single word which is capable of fully defining this term. As we study the virtue of spiritual or Christian meekness, we need to draw upon all the biblical terms and examples that shed light on this word.

What is Christian Meekness?

The key to understanding this beatitude is to accurately define the term "meek." What is meekness? To understand what biblical meekness is we need to note the following.

First, we must not confuse the Savior's use of this word with the usage of the world, or professing Christians who follow the world. The word "meek" (Gk., *praeis*) is a common term that has acquired a unique meaning in its Christian context. It is a spiritual virtue that cannot be separated from our relationship to God and the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

For example, when the ancient Greeks used this term in a positive sense, it referred primarily to outward behavior. If a man had a horse that was calm and gentle, then it was a "*praeis*" horse. It also was used to describe men who were not fierce, violent, cruel or angry. It described men who were gentle, kind or mild in their behavior. While these usages are helpful and necessary for defining this term, we must keep in mind that the meekness our Lord had in mind, like all the other virtues described in the beatitudes, is not a matter of *natural* disposition. Jesus describes distinctly Christian virtues that are completely unknown to unregenerate men. They are attitudes and behaviors that are produced by the Spirit of God.

Therefore, the term meek, as used by Jesus, does not describe people who are born with a gentle disposition. There are people who, by birth or genetics, are generally calmer and nicer than others. They rarely lose their tempers and comport themselves well in difficult circumstances. There are also people who through rigorous training, such as various Hindus, Buddhists and martial artists, who appear, at least outwardly, very humble, gentle and calm in stressful situations. Our Lord is not describing such people.

Christ is also not describing people who are weak, shy, quiet or who avoid confrontation because they do not like conflict of any kind. Meekness does not mean cowardice. It must not be confused with people who go out of their way to avoid disagreements, debate or verbal conflict. Jesus and Paul were meek, yet they were not afraid of theological or ethical confrontation. They boldly confronted sin and false doctrine and even used strong language when appropriate (see Jn. 4:16; 8:19, 44; Mt. 21:12; Mk. 11:15; Gal. 1:8, 9; 2:11 ff; etc.). We mention this observation because in our day, meekness, love and humility are often equated with a lack of backbone and compromise. Men who stand up to false doctrine are even accused of being arrogant and unloving. The Protestant Reformers were meek men; yet they were strong as they spoke and wrote on the authority of Scripture and other crucial doctrines. Christian meekness is totally compatible with godly manliness, ecclesiastical authority and biblical confrontation. "God forbid

⁴⁶ Jean L. McKechnie. Gen. Supervisor, *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (New York: Collins World, 1978), 1119.

that we should ever confuse this noble quality, one of the noblest of all the qualities, with something merely animal or physical or natural.”⁴⁷

Second, this word can only be understood in the light of the two previous beatitudes. Therefore, the meekness described flows from poverty of Spirit. It is gentleness, patience and humble-mindedness which spring from our consciousness that, in ourselves, we are sinners who are unworthy, unprofitable and completely devoid of any spiritual goodness. The person who truly understands his condition without Christ, whom the Holy Spirit has given a true assessment of his guilt and depravity, will be meek. The Holy Spirit develops meekness within us because He has caused us to lay prostrate in the dust before God as unworthy beggars. The person who has mourned over his own sins and condition will be gentle and patient with others because God had mercy on him. It is a Spirit-given attitude of oneself that leads to the kind, godly, gentle treatment of others. The Holy Spirit must first strip away all of our pride, self-sufficiency and autonomy before we can be meek toward others. The person who is poor in spirit, who mourns over his sins does not exalt himself, seek his own or demand his rightful place. He understands that he is a sinner saved by grace. Thus, we see that the meekness of which Jesus is speaking is not constitutional or natural, but flows from God’s grace. God takes men that are prideful, angry, bitter, mean, unmerciful, vehement, impetuous, and by His grace enables them to be humble, gentle, merciful, forgiving and patient.

Third, Christian meekness, like the other Christian virtues described in the beatitudes, is connected to a proper understanding of God’s nature and character. When we see the righteousness, holiness and absolute sovereignty of God coupled with His mercy, compassion, patience and kindness toward us as sinful, finite and pitiful creatures, we understand how meekness forms an essential part of the character of every genuine Christian. If God has been kind and merciful toward us, then obviously we must be gentle and compassionate toward others. Since we were completely dead in trespasses and sins and God reached into our hearts and saved us from our sin and ourselves, then obviously we have no reason to boast. Every Christian who looks at God and himself must assume a position of humility throughout all of life. The believer has the attitude of Jeremiah who said, “Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not” (Lam. 3:22); or Paul who wrote, “For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

Fourth, there are some excellent examples of meekness in Scripture. When Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, the Holy Spirit made the following parenthetical comment. “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3, KJV). Moses, the most powerful man in Israel and perhaps the most important figure of the Old Covenant era, is called the most meek because of his amazing long-suffering toward others and because he refused to defend himself and his position. Moses had a very humble spirit that trusted in God and waited upon Him for a resolution of this conflict. “Later Jeremiah will follow his example when Hananiah claims that the Lord speaks through him (Jer. 28:1-4). Both Moses and Jeremiah surrender the issue to the Lord. Moses clearly has not forgotten the lesson of Kibroth Hataavah (11:10 ff.)! He has become the most humble (KJV: ‘meek’) of all men.”⁴⁸ Scripture connects Christian meekness as a virtue together with reliance upon God. We see this connection in how David cried out in prayer: “Lord, You have heard the desire of the humble [or

⁴⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:68.

⁴⁸ A. Noordtjiz, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 107.

meek]; You will prepare their heart; You will cause Your ear to hear, to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, that the man of the earth may oppress no more” (Ps. 10:17-18).

The supreme example of meekness was Jesus who said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:29-30). Christ lived in complete dependence upon the Lord and committed every aspect of His life totally unto the Father. He does not rule as the arrogant, earthly leaders do, but is lowly, humble and gentle with His flock. “Now no command given to him of the Father was grievous, no suffering made him grudge, no pains made him shrink from his enemies, and his answers to them were full of meekness.”⁴⁹ He dined with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners because He placed lost souls before Himself. He quietly endured persecution, derision, lies and scorn. Paul says that He voluntarily left behind the throne room of God and all His prerogatives as God to take the form of a servant, to humble Himself and become obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:8). “[H]e was ‘brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and, as a sheep before her shearers, was dumb.’ He uttered no complaint, displayed no fretfulness—‘Not my will, but thine be done’ [Isa. 53:7; Lk. 22:42]. And then, with regard to mankind:—‘When he was reviled, he reviled not again; and when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him who judgeth righteously [1 Pet. 2:23]; and, so far from cherishing resentful feelings toward his enemies, he wept when he thought of the miseries they were drawing down on their own heads, and died with this prayer on his lips—‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’ [Lk. 23:34].”⁵⁰ “The spirit and example of Christ provide the norm which should govern all Christian conduct.”⁵¹

We also learn from Christ’s example that meekness does not mean compromise. Christian meekness is completely compatible with sternness and strictness when dealing with heresy, apostasy and unrepentant, scandalous sin. The idea that is rather common in our day that sternness and boldness are incompatible with meekness and gentleness is refuted by our Lord’s own example. The same Jesus who was the perfect example of meekness and humility drove the money changers out of the temple with a whip (Jn. 2:14 ff.). He denounced the false teachers and hypocrites in Israel with extremely strong language (cf. Mt. 23). He referred to the scribes and Pharisees as “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “fools” and “white-washed tombs” (Mt. 23:13-27). He demanded that unrepentant sinners be cast out of His church (Mt. 18:17). “Such severity did not annul His gentleness; on the contrary, it was generated by the loving depths of His compassion for the lost, as is shown, for example, by the way in which the prolonged and unsparing denunciation of Mt. 23 is brought to a conclusion by one of the tenderest and most moving of all His utterances.”⁵²

This point needs to be made because it is very common today to accuse people who are strict on doctrine of being arrogant and unloving. There is nothing wrong with being strict on doctrine as long as this strictness is coupled with meekness. The case for the Westminster Standards must be pressed strongly and fervently, but with gentleness and compassion. The cause of truth is not furthered when people who present the truth act disagreeably, arrogantly and meanly. It also is not furthered when men confuse meekness or gentleness with compromise and a lack of discipline. We live in a time when supposedly conservative Presbyterian denominations tolerate all sorts of false doctrines and even heresy relating to justification in the name of

⁴⁹ David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1647] 1981), 157.

⁵⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 122-123.

⁵¹ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 345.

⁵² *Ibid.*

humility and compassion. Such tolerance is wicked and destructive of the corporate sanctification of the church.

Another outstanding example of Christian meekness is found in the apostle Paul. “Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—who in presence am lowly among you, but being absent am bold toward you” (2 Cor. 10:1). While Paul appeals to his authority as an apostle (note the “I, Paul, myself”) to denounce the false apostles, he does so with a Christ-like meekness. He pleads for repentance “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” “As Christians are bound to be meek and gentle, Paul begged the Corinthians not to force him to be severe.”⁵³ Thus, we see that under certain circumstances a meek, gentle approach to discipline must give way to boldness, decisiveness and severity. Paul acknowledged that, in person, his tendency was to be very meek, but when absent he would write in a bold manner with utter disregard of the opinion of his opponents. The same Paul who could be as gentle as a lamb, under certain circumstances, could refer to people accepting damnable heresy in the church as foolish (Gal. 3:1, 3). He could even say, by the Holy Spirit, that he wished false heretical teachers would “cut themselves off” (Gal. 5:12)! Both Jesus and Paul were meek, yet they were also not effeminate cream puffs.

Meekness in Action

Having examined the meaning of meekness, now let us turn our attention to how this Christian virtue ought to affect our everyday lives. There are two main things to consider.

First, Christian meekness must permeate our relationship with God. It should do so in the following ways. (1) The meek believer has an attitude of submission when he comes to the Word of God. In this, once again, we see that spiritual meekness combines humility with a trust in God. The meek believer is a person who is immediately willing to set aside his own interests or desires in order to obey what the Scripture teaches. The person who comes to the Bible with the notion that he will only focus on and accept doctrines and commands that he likes is obviously not living the lifestyle of meekness that Jesus expects and demands. The man who imposes his own wisdom, presuppositions and ideas on to the Word of God is *not* living in humble submission to God.

The reason that so many professing churches in our day are so compromised theologically and ethically is the simple fact that they are not meek or humble before God. It is pure arrogance which sets aside God’s law in favor of secular pop psychology. It is obstinate pride which sets aside the absolute sovereignty of God for the absolute sovereignty of the sinful human will. It is obviously not humble when men reject the worship that God has authorized for silly, manmade gimmicks. Only men who are haughty and full of themselves would set aside the doctrine, government, ethics and worship of Scripture and replace it with their own speculations, theories and practices. This statement is as true of modern Arminian fundamentalist evangelicalism as it is of Roman Catholicism.

The people in the pews often don’t see things this way because they have essentially adopted a pagan, humanistic, antinomian concept of meekness. Thus, Roman Catholics do not see the pope as one of the most arrogant men alive because he sets himself up in the church as God, as Christ Himself. But rather, they look at his gentleness, his outward demeanor and say,

⁵³ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 59] 1974), 606.

“What a blessed holy man.” You see, an anti-christ can appear gentle like a lamb, but inwardly is a ravenous wolf (Mt. 7:15).

Therefore, one of the first tests of Christian meekness is: do you bow the knee to Jesus Christ by promptly and sincerely submitting to His Word? Let us not forget this fundamental God-ward element of meekness. “He is spiritually meek who conforms himself to the mind of God, and does not quarrel with the instructions of the Word, but with the corruptions of his heart. Cornelius’ speech to Peter savoured of a meek spirit: ‘Now therefore we are all here present before God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God’ (Acts 10:33). How happy it is when the Word which comes with majesty is received with meekness (James 1:21).”⁵⁴

(2) Meekness toward God can also be observed in how we submit to His providence. The man who is meek does not complain or murmur when he encounters the afflictions of life. Like Job he will say, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21). Or as Eli spoke, “It is the LORD. Let Him do what seems good to Him” (1 Sam. 3:18). The meek believer calmly submits to both the good and bad things in life because he has assumed a position of complete humility before God. He understands his true condition of guilt and sinfulness; that in and of himself he deserves nothing but wrath, death and hell. He also trusts in God’s goodness, mercy and compassion and knows that God has his own best interest in mind. Therefore, the meek does not rebel against divine providence but instead learns and profits from it. Meekness is necessary in order for one to be content and teachable. Those who are meek do not struggle against God. They do not “kick against the goads” (Ac. 9:5). Are you happy and content with God’s providential dealings with you? Are you meek, submissive and content before Him? If you are, you are greatly blessed.

Second, God requires meekness toward other men. In fact, Paul says that meekness should permeate our behavior. “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord beseech you to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3, KJV). The internal disposition of every Christian must be lowliness and meekness. The believer must approach his relationships with a humble and gentle spirit. The context of this passage is important, for Paul is teaching what is necessary to unity and peace in the church. He also says this attitude and behavior is the calling of every believer. If the church is to function properly Christians must put away self-assertion, self-esteem, self-exaltation and pride. Believers are to have a low opinion of themselves and set aside personal ambition, ego and self-assertiveness in dealing with others. Note that Paul adds the word all—“with all lowliness and meekness”—because every situation, at every time, requires this mindset. “Humility has been called the first, second, and third essential of the Christian life.... The meek individual is slow to insist on his rights. He realizes that in the sight of God he has no rights at all that are his by nature.... He would rather ‘take’ wrong than inflict it (1 Cor. 6:7). With Abraham he prefers to let Lot have first choice (Gen. 13:7-18), with great reward...for Abraham!”⁵⁵

Humility and meekness are crucial because they are necessary for sinners to coexist in peace. A man will not forgive another unless he first sets aside his pride. A person will not show compassion unless first he is meek. People who are arrogant and think much too highly of themselves will not show kindness to others. When a man is humble and meek he will exercise longsuffering. “Meekness is that unresisting, uncomplaining disposition of mind, which enables

⁵⁴ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 105-106.

⁵⁵ William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1967, 68] 1979), 2:183.

us to bear without irritation or resentment the faults and injuries of others.”⁵⁶ “Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

A meek spirit is crucial for controlling our passions. It enables all the members of Christ’s church, with their diverse personalities, tastes and backgrounds, to have communion with each other. As we noted, it is meekness and not doctrinal compromise that is the key to Christian unity. It holds the first place among the Christian graces because it results in a number of godly characteristics.

The person who is meek overlooks a brother’s smaller faults. Although obviously scandalous sins must be dealt with in accordance with Matthew 18, there are minor rubs and offenses that can be covered over with love. “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). A person who is humble and gentle understands that his own faults are great and does not seek to make an issue out of every little offense. A meek person will bear personal injuries. His humility makes him willing to bear and forbear. If he is angered by a minor offense or an innocent mistake, his meekness keeps his anger in check. The person who is meek is not easily provoked. If it is necessary to confront sin in a brother’s life, it must be done with humility and meekness. “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). A meek Christian shows consideration toward the repentant sinner and demonstrates humility by refraining from a censorious spirit.

A meek person is not judgmental of others. He is not quick to jump to conclusions; he gives others the benefit of the doubt. He refuses to listen to an evil report about another Christian. Because he understands his own depravity and unworthiness, he is very careful in maintaining the reputation of other Christians. “Solomon tells us, it is the glory of a man to ‘pass over a transgression’ (Proverbs 19:11). It is more honour to bury an injury than revenge it; and to slight it than to write it down.”⁵⁷ The person who is taking note of the faults of others seeks to tear others down in order to build themselves up. A judgmental attitude is a symptom of a proud and haughty spirit.

A person who is meek is quick to forgive. A person with a humble and gentle spirit is quick to forgive and forget because he knows that he is a sinner saved by grace. He knows that Jesus has forgiven him a mountain of iniquities, so he is happy to forgive the offenses of other believers. He does not take note of other people’s sins and faults and he refuses to hold a grudge. He understands that we who have been forgiven much must be kind, gentle and compassionate with other believers who sin. He, of course, does not ignore or overlook scandalous or serious sins, but when the offender repents and confesses he immediately forgives and extends the right hand of fellowship.

The person who is meek learns to put away all malice and evil speaking. “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:31-32). A Spirit-produced meek mind does not vent itself with bitter speech, verbal brawling, slander or hurtful speech. A humble spirit which understands one’s own sins and depravity is tenderhearted, compassionate and ready to suffer abuse without verbal retaliation. This, however, does not mean that Christians are not free to clear themselves of slander. They most certainly are. But they are to do so without attempting to hurt or injure the other person

⁵⁶ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1856] 1964), 141.

⁵⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 108.

verbally. When Michael the archangel got into a verbal dispute with the devil over the body of Moses, Michael “dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’” (Jude 9).

The meek person is ready to accept instruction and admonition. The proud man refuses to receive teaching; he despises admonition. A meek and humble spirit is happy to be corrected because he understands that we all fall short of the glory of God; we all could greatly improve in our sanctification before Christ. The person who is meek gladly submits to the teaching of the Lord because he places obedience to Christ and the good of the church before his own self-interest. The proud man rejects that which interferes with his human autonomy and selfish lusts. Thus we understand why Scripture says, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 3:6; 1 Pet. 1:13).

A person who is meek is quick to acknowledge his sin and repent of it. He doesn’t cover over his own iniquities. He doesn’t make excuses for his behavior. He doesn’t blame shift or lie because he is afraid of his reputation. Many of the problems and disturbances that are found in churches today are a direct result of people who are proud and, thus, refuse to admit their sin and repent. Instead, they deem it necessary to attack others in the church especially the pastor and the elders. A meek person considers others as better than himself, while the proud is willing to slander others to preserve his own self-image. Once again, we see the great importance of Christian meekness.

Given all these considerations, it is important that we give great priority to spiritual meekness. We are born as men of pride, as people who are self-centered, selfish and arrogant. But the Holy Spirit subdues our hearts; Christian meekness can only be produced by the Holy Spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [or meekness], self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:22-24). Let us pray for meekness of heart and put off everything that is contrary to a humble spirit. “‘Put on therefore as the elect of God meekness’ (Colossians 3:12). Put it on as a garment, never to be left off. Meekness is a necessary ingredient in everything. It is necessary in instruction: ‘In meekness instructing...’ (2 Timothy 2:25). Meekness conquers the opposers of truth. Meekness melts the heart. Meekness is necessary in hearing the Word. ‘Receive with meekness the ingrafted word’ (James 1:21).... Meekness is needful in reproof. ‘If a man be overtaken with a fault, restore such a one with a spirit of meekness’ (Galatians 6:1).”⁵⁸

The Inheritance of the Meek

Jesus says that the meek are blessed because they will inherit the earth. This statement is almost a direct quotation from the Greek translation of Psalm 37:11 (LXX 36:11): “For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; but the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.” There are a number of things to note about this statement.

First, it is completely contrary to the Jewish way of thinking in the days of our Lord. The Jews had developed a carnal concept of the kingdom. They believed that the Messiah would come and would rule by a military dictatorship. He would be a brilliant military leader who would crush the enemies of the Jewish people through battle, bloodshed and warfare. The meek,

⁵⁸ Ibid, 113.

suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and the book of Psalms was not really part of their thinking at this time. In spite of Jesus' teachings about the kingdom that contradicted their view, the Jews wanted to take Him by force and make Him king (Jn. 6:15). The Jews at that time had forsaken the spiritual concept of the kingdom for a fierce nationalism. Their concept of the visible church had degenerated into carnal racism.

The Savior's statement about the inevitable victory of the spiritually meek would have been a shock to the Jews. In this statement He is telling the people that they have it all wrong regarding the kingdom. Jesus is saying to the people that their theology of the kingdom is carnal and worldly. The kingdom is spiritual, not carnal. It will not come in by revolution or physical battle. It is for those who: are poor in spirit; mourn over their sins; are humble and meek before God; follow the Messiah and wait upon the Lord for the victory. The kingdom comes by the sword of the Spirit, not by physical conquest.

Second, it is contrary to the way the world thinks and acts. From Genghis Khan to Napoleon, Adolf Hitler, Stalin and Osama Bin Laden the philosophy of dominion has been that the strong and mighty, who are not afraid to use force, shall inherit the earth. Mao Se Tung said, "Power flows from the barrel of a gun." From the boardroom to the degenerate "gansta rapper," the concept of life is the same. The powerful and ruthless will excel while the weak will be obliterated and forgotten. "One would think that 'meek' people get nowhere because everybody ignores them or else rides roughshod over them and tramples them underfoot. It is the tough, the overbearing, who succeed in the struggle for existence; weaklings go the wall."⁵⁹

The Bible-believing Christian, however, has a completely different outlook because he understands the sovereignty of God and the power of the cross. He trusts in the promises of God and thus does not need to attempt to force the issue by carnal means. He knows that ultimately God decides the course of history and not men with guns and bombs. The meek are those who believe in the victory of the gospel, trust in God, humbly submit to His will and work to spread the gospel instead of death and destruction. Christians are completely different from Nazis, Communists, Islamic militants and power hungry politicians. They trust and obey, without fretting, for they know that Christ is King; that He is ruling now and that His all-powerful Spirit cannot be thwarted. "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 4:6).

Third, our Lord's statement is contrary to much of the thinking of modern evangelical churches. Many churches believe that the key to success in life and ministry is not a humble submission to God's Word but rather by a humanistic, pragmatic manipulation of the masses. A humble reliance upon the Spirit has been replaced by the adoption of the philosophy of the world. The key to success is a ministry rooted in man-made programs, giving the people what they want rather than what God requires which is what they really need. Most modern pastors do not look to the Reformers or the Puritans as a godly model of ministry. They much prefer the entertainer, the celebrity and thus will say and do all sorts of things that have nothing to do with God's Word to attract a crowd and make a name for themselves. They have abandoned *sola Scriptura* and have adopted American popular cultural and sociological ideas. Their actions and teachings prove that they really do not believe that the meek will inherit the earth. They apparently think that God needs their help, pragmatism and creativity; that the Holy Spirit needs the assistance of Madison Avenue and Hollywood to have kingdom victory over this earth. They believe that the clever, creative, charismatic, compromising church growth expert will inherit the earth. This sort of pragmatic, unbiblical thinking is what is driving evangelicals more and more

⁵⁹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 43.

toward an unbiblical ecumenism. It has driven many to avoid doctrinal precision; to eschew criticizing false and absurd doctrines; and, attack those who take a stand for the truth.

We also see the implicit rejection of this beatitude in the common evangelical approach to politics. The idea of staying on the narrow path of Scripture and only supporting Christian principles, platforms and candidates is seen as insane in our era. Instead, most conservative Christians have made common cause with the thoroughly corrupt and unbiblical Republican Party and have sought power and influence through large ecumenical/pluralistic organizations (e.g., the Moral Majority). Once again the driving force behind this thinking is pragmatism, not Scripture. In the last thirty years, as evangelicals have repeatedly thrown their support behind the Republicans, the Republicans have drifted toward the left on government programs, education, spending and even some social issues. The big tent strategy is totally contrary to Scripture. Even the Christian Reconstruction movement, which for the most part is Reformed, has adopted an unbiblical ecumenism, embracing Arminians, Charismatics, high church Episcopalians and Shepherdites. The whole idea is that bigger is better and large numbers are the key to success.

In contrast to the modern evangelical's view on the progress of the church or on politics, Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek" (Mt. 5:5). He did not say, "Blessed are those who trust to their powers, abilities and their own institutions." No, rather it is the very reverse of that. "And this is true, not only here, but in the whole message of the Bible. You get it in that perfect story of Gideon where God went on reducing the numbers, not adding to them. That is the spiritual method, and here it is once more emphasized in this amazing statement in the Sermon on the Mount."⁶⁰ The meek person does not have faith in himself and his own abilities, but rather trusts in God. Once again we must emphasize that Christian meekness is always connected to a biblical view of ourselves coupled with a trust in Christ and His sovereign power to save.

Fourth, like the previous beatitude, there is an important eschatological or future aspect to this blessing. The poor, the mourners, the meek, the persecuted will inherit the earth. The proud man who does not mourn now, who lives for the present, has no future. The things he does have will be taken away. The man who lacks meekness is in a cursed position. The only thing waiting for him is the suffering of hell. Without the humility that acknowledges sin and looks to Christ, he has neither heaven nor earth but only the lake of fire.

When Jesus spoke of the meek inheriting the earth, He referred to two things. a) The Bible teaches that there will be an eventual victory of the gospel on this earth before the second coming of Christ. Believers may suffer in the present. They may be on the defensive. They may even be a minority despised by all men. But God will bless His gospel. Daniel says that the stone [Christ] that struck the image became "a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:34-35). Paul says that a time is coming when even the Jews will be converted to Christ (Rom. 11:26). Isaiah says that "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9; cf. Hab. 2:14). David says that all nations will serve Him (Ps. 72:8-11); that all the ends of the world shall turn to the LORD (Ps. 22:27-28). Malachi teaches that Jesus' name shall be great among the nations (Mal. 1:11). Our Lord said, that "the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it all was leavened" (Mt. 13:31-33). The gospel of the kingdom will conquer until the whole earth is leavened.

Interestingly, Paul takes the promise that Abraham would inherit the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:15; 15:7) and applies it to all New Covenant believers through Christ. But, speaking by the Holy Spirit, he makes a significant change. He does not speak of believers as heirs of the land (i.e. Palestine), but as heirs of the world. "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world

⁶⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 64.

was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:13). “In light of Pauline teaching as a whole...we cannot exclude from the scope of this promise, as defined by the apostle, the inclusive messianic purport. It is defined as the promise to Abraham that he should be heir of the world, but it is also a promise to his seed and, therefore, can hardly involve anything less than the worldwide dominion promised to Christ and to the spiritual seed of Abraham in him.”⁶¹ As believers in Jesus, we hold a title to the earth in Christ. Believers may endure suffering, but kingdom blessings will come in history upon this earth. What Mohammed, Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin attempted to do through brute force, Jesus will accomplish through the message of the gospel.

The blessing given to the meek will ultimately be fulfilled in the consummated order of the new heavens and the new earth. The time is coming when the wicked shall be cut down like grass (Ps. 37:2); they shall be cut off (Ps. 37:22) and like smoke they shall vanish (Ps. 37:20). But the righteous man’s inheritance shall be forever (Ps. 37:18). “The meek will inherit the earth and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace” (Ps. 37:11). With this eternal perspective in view—this knowledge of complete vindication and victory—we can afford to be meek, humble and gentle. We can endure suffering, injustice and affliction at the hands of the wicked.

Jesus shows us the extreme folly of loving this world and the things of this world. Those who neglect Christ to attain riches, lands and possessions will, in the long run, lose everything. If you have not humbled yourself before God and embraced Christ, then right now is the time to do so. If you admit your sin and guilt and look to Christ and His atoning death, then you will be co-heirs with the Savior. “Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether...the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21, 22, 23).

Chapter 5: Hungering and Thirsting After Righteousness

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled (Mt. 5:6).

Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh (Lk. 6:21).

Those who are made aware of their spiritual poverty—who mourn over sin and are meek before God—hunger and thirst after righteousness. The first three beatitudes have focused our attention upon the person who has been awakened to his spiritual condition. Such a man understands that he is a filthy sinner before God. He realizes his spiritual bankruptcy and assumes a position of abasement and humility before a thrice holy God. He knows that, in and of himself, his case is hopeless before Jehovah. Therefore, he has a strong hunger and thirst after righteousness. He can never rest until that hunger and thirst is satisfied by Jesus Christ. Thus, we see once again that there is a spiritual progression in the beatitudes. They logically follow one another. “Each step leads to the next and presupposes the one that has gone before.”⁶² Obviously, the man who truly understands the truth concerning himself, who acknowledges his sin, who

⁶¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1959, 65] 1968), 1:142.

⁶² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 46.

admits and confesses his guilt, who understands who God is, will not stop there, but will seek relief from his spiritual hunger. That is what this beatitude is all about.

Spiritual Hungering and Thirsting

What does Jesus mean when He refers to hunger and thirst? These are metaphors for a very strong desire; indeed a desire so strong and dedicated it is an obsession. We understand this point better when we consider these terms in their original cultural context. It is hard for modern Americans to relate to the potency of these words for we have not really experienced excruciating hunger or desperate thirst. America is suffering from an obesity crisis and water is available at any tap. In the days of Jesus, however, poverty was common and the standard of living was quite low. A common laborer made very little money and would eat meat with a meal, at best, only once a week. This situation describes times when crops were good. If the crops were poor or failed, people experienced real hunger; a hunger that we scarcely understand. For example, during WWII in both Nazi and Soviet concentration camps starvation was so severe that imprisoned soldiers engaged in cannibalism and ate rats, insects, worms, leaves and grass.

In the Middle East, water is a scarce commodity. If a man was on a journey and ran out of water, he would have to tough it out and suffer an excruciating thirst until he reached the next oasis, town, well or stream. In the hot, dusty climate of Israel with the hot summer sun upon his head, such a man would be obsessed with water. In his mind at that point everything would be relatively unimportant except water.⁶³

Therefore, as we contemplate this hunger and thirst, let us not confuse our moderate hunger as lunch approaches or our desire for iced tea on a hot summer afternoon with this kind of want. We are discussing the hunger of a starving man and the thirst of man who has run out of water in the desert.

This vehement desire is rooted in the spiritual knowledge that righteousness is something we desperately need. It flows from a consciousness that we do not have an acceptable, adequate, or saving righteousness of our own. Once again, we observe our Lord teaching a doctrine that fundamentally contradicts the instruction of the religious leaders at that time. The Jews believed that they could achieve their own righteousness by an *outward* obedience to the law. It was not something to be sought as a gift of divine grace, but something to be achieved by self-effort. Moreover, the Jews eagerly desired the blessings of the Messianic kingdom as they pictured it. They craved deliverance from Rome, wealth, power, the world's respect, and a carnal dominion. But Christ ignores these triumphalist external blessings and describes the very essence of what is necessary to become a Christian and live as a Christian: an exceptional desire for righteousness. Do you have a strong inner craving for righteousness? Is obtaining the righteousness of which Jesus speaks a central obsession of your life? If it is not, then it is obvious that you are not poor in spirit. You have not mourned over your sin and guilt. Neither have you assumed a position of humility before God. "If this verse is to you one of the most blessed statements of the whole of

⁶³ Thirst as an expression of vehement desire is found in the Old Testament. The psalmist writes, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, where is your God?" (Ps. 42:1-3). "O God, you are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). While David writes of a strong thirst for God, Jesus speaks of a very strong desire for righteousness.

Scripture, you can be quite certain you are a Christian; if it is not, then you had better examine the foundations again.”⁶⁴

The Righteousness Christians Crave

What does our Lord mean by the term righteousness? A proper understanding of this word is crucial for the meaning of this beatitude. Some commentators insist that the word refers only to the righteousness associated with sanctification. They argue that Jesus is already addressing disciples or people who belong to Him. Others (e.g., Lenski) argue that the term righteousness is always forensic or declarative in nature and, thus, the Savior must only be speaking about the righteousness of justification. The best manner of understanding this term is to see how it was used in the Old Testament, especially in the Messianic prophecies. When this is done, we see that the word is used of salvation in a very comprehensive sense, which includes both justification and sanctification.

Note how the Old Testament frequently defines righteousness in terms of salvation. “Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness” (Dan. 9:24). Edward J. Young writes, “Together with the taking away or removal of sin there is a positive unfolding of salvation. Righteousness is to be brought in by God through the Messiah. This righteousness is not mere prosperity, nor in any sense of a merely external nature. It is a righteousness that comes from God (Ps. 85:11-13; Isa. 51:5-8)...it is similar to the everlasting salvation of Isaiah 45:17 and the eternal inheritance of Isa. 60:21; and corresponds (in its heavenly character of everlasting) to the eternity of the Messianic Kingdom (2:44; 7:18, 27). It therefore comprises both external and internal righteousness.”⁶⁵ “Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together. I, the Lord, have created it” (Isa. 45:8). “I will bring My righteousness near, it shall not be far off; My salvation shall not linger. And I will place salvation in Zion, for Israel My glory” (Isa. 46:13). “My righteousness is near, My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed” (Isa. 56:1). “Here the two terms, righteousness and salvation, are practically synonymous. The salvation is spiritual, characterized by righteousness.”⁶⁶ “For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10). “Salvation is righteousness, for in the salvation of man the righteousness of God is revealed.”⁶⁷ Thus, when we seek righteousness we are seeking it in a comprehensive way. As Jesus Himself said in the same sermon: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mt. 6:33). The righteousness that believers are to hunger and thirst after includes the following.

First, there is legal righteousness where a sinner is justified before God. The person who is poor in spirit knows that “there is none righteous, no not one” (Rom. 3:10). He knows that by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in God’s sight (Rom. 3:20). He understands that he has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, he assumes a position of humility before God and counts all his supposedly good deeds as nothing but foul, sin-stained rubbish. Because he knows that he is guilty of sin in thought, word and deed, he craves and seeks

⁶⁴ D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:74.

⁶⁵ Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1949] 1972), 199-200.

⁶⁶ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:310.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

“the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:9). Thus, by faith he grasps Jesus Christ’s perfect righteousness.

When a person acknowledges his sin and believes in Christ, all of his sins, past, present and future are imputed to Jesus on the cross. “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.... And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5, 6). Our Lord’s atoning death was substitutionary. That is, He suffered and died to eliminate our guilt. He bore the punishment of sin that we deserved. He “redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin” (Rom. 4:7-8).

When a man trusts in Christ he also receives the gift of Christ’s perfect righteousness (i.e. His obedience to the law of God and His fulfilling of the covenant of works). This righteousness is crucial to our salvation because God’s moral law not only prohibits sin, but also requires sinless perfection. The Savior not only washed away our sins by His blood, but He also gave us (by imputation) the perfect positive righteousness that we need to come into God’s presence and have fellowship with Him. “Therefore, as the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Rom. 5:18-19, KJV). “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the LORD’” (1 Cor. 1:30). “When we stand before the judgment-seat of God, Christ is our righteousness. He answers for us; he presents his own infinite merit as the all sufficient reason for our justification.”⁶⁸ Because the perfect righteousness of Christ is ours, God gives us the reward of eternal life. Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness (Mt. 3:15). He indeed is “the LORD our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6).

We see how the doctrine of our absolute need of the perfect righteousness of Christ logically follows the preceding beatitudes. The starting point of discipleship, of the whole Christian life begins with a strong desire rooted in our need of the perfect righteousness of the Savior. This teaching is very humbling to man. “The faith through which we obtain justification involves an acknowledgement of the reality and exceeding evil of our sin, and of our own utter helplessness. We came to God confessing that the robe of our personal character is but ‘filthy rags,’ in which we dare not stand in His sight; and we receive from Him the ample, stainless, fragrant robe of the Redeemer’s righteousness.”⁶⁹ This imagery is set forth beautifully in Zechariah, “Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, ‘Take away the filthy garments from him.’ He said, ‘See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will cloth you with rich robes’” (3:3-4). This is an excellent picture of double imputation. God removes our filthy garments by the blood of Christ. He pardons our sins and removes our guilt. Then God makes us fit and presentable for heaven by imputing to us the Savior’s righteousness. Only Christ’s imputed righteousness makes us worthy to appear before God. Jesus sets us free from condemnation and gives us the right to eternal blessedness.

Thus, we see that the beatitudes do contain the gospel. This beatitude sets forth the great charter for every soul that knows its own bankruptcy and is starving for a righteousness that can reconcile the sinner with God. Deep down, everyone knows that God is righteous and we are not

⁶⁸ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 59] 1974), 27.

⁶⁹ Robert Johnstone, *Lectures on the Book of Philippians* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, [1875] 1977), 246.

(Rom. 3:10, 20, 23). Thus, everyone must come to terms with this beatitude. There are really only two alternatives before us. We can attempt to build or establish our own righteousness by doing good works, by attempting to keep God's law and by being diligent with various religious observations. This first option is the path of the vast majority of people: Jews, Mohammedans, Roman Catholics and all apostate forms of Christianity. This is the way of the natural man, the person who does not have the Holy Spirit. As Paul said of the Jews, "Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law.... For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 9:31, 32; 10:3, 4). We see that it is crucial that, in the area of justification, people seek after the proper kind of righteousness, a righteousness objective to the sinner. Otherwise, everything is lost.

The other path, which is the only true way, is to receive the righteousness of Christ as a free gift through the instrument of faith. This is the only true way for all those who are poor in spirit; who mourn over their sins and their condition; who humbly acknowledge that all their righteous acts are like filthy rags; who seek God's judicial verdict of acquittal; and who abandon all hope in everything except the righteousness of Christ. From start to finish salvation is entirely by grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

This raises a very important question. Do you have spiritual hunger for Christ and His righteousness? If you do not have a strong hunger and thirst for Jesus and His salvation then obviously you will not be filled. Our Lord invites all to His banquet table, but only those who know they are sick will seek out a physician (cf. Mt. 9:12; Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:31). The only one who can produce this blessed hunger is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God raises our dead hearts and draws us to Christ. "A dead man cannot hunger. Hunger proceeds from life. The first thing the child does when it is born, is to hunger after the breast. Spiritual hunger follows upon the new birth (1 Peter 2:2)."⁷⁰ Although this Spirit-induced hunger causes pain and distress, yet that pain is soon satisfied by Christ. "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1).

Second, Christians are to hunger and thirst for an inward sanctifying righteousness. Although justification and sanctification are never to be mixed, merged or confused, they also must never be completely severed as if one could exist without the other. The Holy Spirit who changes our hearts from stone to flesh and draws us to Christ for justification also gives us a craving for inward righteousness or holiness. This beatitude describes a *dual* experience. There is that initial conversion experience where a sinner hungers and thirsts after Jesus and His imputed righteousness. There also is the continuous yearning for the impartation of righteousness. Like a newborn the converted sinner strongly desires to grow in grace, to more and more be conformed to the image of Christ. A hungering and thirsting after inherent righteousness involves a number of things.

It involves a hatred of the world and our old man, or the person we were before we were born again. The person who is poor in spirit and mourns over his sins has a Spirit-given loathing of this world and his old life of sin. Because he now understands the evil, sin and vanity of this world, he longs to be free of its evil influence over him. "He wants to get away from this power that drags him down in spite of himself, that 'law in his members' of which Paul speaks in

⁷⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 123.

Romans vii. He wants to be free from the power and the tyranny and the thralldom of sin.”⁷¹ If a man does not hate this present evil age and does not hate what he was in his old unregenerate-unconverted state, then he cannot have a strong hunger and thirst for personal righteousness. Thus, we see that a strong desire for righteousness must be accompanied by a holy hatred of sin. A man who loves his sin will not forsake it. The genuine disciple of Jesus hates sin and completely hates his fleshly desires for it. When he examines himself and discovers that there are sinful things that he is attracted to and tempted to do, he hungers and thirsts for a further deliverance from the pollution of sin. “Ye that love the LORD, hate evil” (Ps. 97:10).

It involves a hungering and thirsting after spiritual things that increase personal godliness. There is a strong hunger for feasting upon the Word of God. Jesus prayed for His people saying, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). The Holy Spirit subdues our sin and increases our personal righteousness over time. This process, however, occurs through means. He works upon our conscious life through the Bible. If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, then we must frequently drink the pure milk of the word that we may grow thereby (1 Pet. 2:2). One of the great problems with the Jews of Jesus’ day was that they had forsaken the Scriptures as a guide for personal holiness relying instead on man-made rules and regulations. Thus, they abandoned obedience to God’s Word as a means of personal holiness for obedience to man’s *outward* rules. Not only was their doctrine of salvation completely heretical, but their concept of sanctification was also legalistic and unprofitable.

Bible-believing Christians must understand that spiritual growth can only occur when there is a heartfelt obedience to what God’s Word teaches. Since the standard of righteousness is particularly focused upon God’s moral law, it makes sense for Christians to meditate upon God’s moral law as a means of sanctification. Watson notes that “though the moral law is not a Christ to justify us, yet it is a rule to instruct us.... The law of God is a hedge to keep us within the bounds of sobriety and piety.”⁷² Dick adds, “The purity of the law appears from its forbidding sin in all its modifications, in its most refined as well as in its grossest forms; the taint of the mind as well as the pollution of the body; the secret approbation of sin, as well as the external act, the transient look of desire, the almost unperceived irregular motion.”⁷³ Paul says, “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:12).

The law of God defines righteousness. It also defines sin (“Sin is the transgression of the law,” 1 Jn. 3:4). It tells us what behavior must be removed from our lives and it tells us what is good or ethical. Righteousness is not merely a negation of bad behavior, but also is a replacing of unbiblical behavior with good works that are pleasing to God. If we are serious about seeking righteousness, then we need to study the moral law and the inspired New Covenant applications of that law and apply them to our lives. Christians need to meditate on Scripture in order to die unto sin and live unto God. Thus the psalmist declared, “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.... Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.... I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.... Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed I will observe it with my whole heart” (Ps. 119:9, 11, 15, 16, 16, 33, 34).

⁷¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:78.

⁷² Thomas Watson as quoted in William S. Plumer, *The Law of God as Contained in the Ten Commandments, Explained and Enforced* (Harrisburg, VA: Sprinkle, [1864] 1996), 10.

⁷³ Ibid.

This point is very important for if we do not seek righteousness as it relates to our sanctification in God's Word, then we'll find ourselves following an unbiblical form of humanistic pietism. Because of the influence of dispensationalism (which teaches that the whole Old Testament law including the ten commandments was for the Jews only or a past dispensation) and the Charismatic movement (which often seeks truth not in Scripture but in a personal experience or direct revelation), the yearning for righteousness of which Christ speaks has been abandoned by many professing Christians and replaced with mysticism or an antinomian pietism. Instead of carefully studying God's Word and meditating on God's law as a guide for daily decisions, many follow what they believe is the inward guidance of the Holy Spirit. One often hears phrases such as: "The Spirit led me to do this" or "I was led by God to do that." Such practices may help people think of themselves as more spiritual. But they are useless in seeking righteousness. They are totally subjective. Everything relating to righteousness must be derived from the Word of God attended by the power of the Holy Spirit.

By way of application, note that even in the way we approach God's Word there must be a focus on the seeking of righteousness. There are many who come to Scripture only to feed their interest in theological debate, exciting controversies or hard philosophical questions. They are not really interested in sanctification and drawing closer to God, but in winning arguments and showing off their intellects. Such men usually have active brains but rocky hearts. They may be skillful in chopping off heads in religious debates, but they ignore the weightier, more crucial issues of biblical religion. If men really hungered and thirsted after righteousness would they not also be very interested in questions like: What can we do to mortify our sinful lusts? How can we make our calling and election more sure? How can we increase our love and devotion toward Jesus? There are many who play games with the Scriptures and twist it to their own destruction. Such people do not truly hunger and thirst after righteousness.

A strong hunger and thirst after righteousness involves attending to the other means of grace, especially the preached word. Such a man longs for public worship. His soul pants after the corporate worship of God. With David he will say, "I will declare Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You" (Ps. 22:22). "One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple" (Ps. 27:4). A "heartly resolution to subject ourselves to follow the appointed means of communion-keeping with God, is a sound mark of solid faith.... In using of the means and ordinances of God's house, the glory of the Lord may be seen, counsel and direction in all things may be had."⁷⁴ This desire must hold a chief place in the heart and must be continued throughout life. David said, "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God" (Ps. 84:2). "David complains of his being deprived of liberty of access to the Church of God, there to make a profession of his faith, to improve in godliness, and to engage in divine worship."⁷⁵

The preached Word is crucial for those who seek righteousness because it is the God ordained means whereby Christ applies His Word with power to hungry souls. The person who is serious about righteousness wants to be convicted by the preached Word. He wants to be wounded by the sword of the Spirit so that his infirmities and sins may be subdued. He pays close attention to the preached Word and prays for it to pierce through his soul, so that he would put off the old man and more and more be conformed into the likeness of His dear Savior.

⁷⁴ David Dickson, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth [1653-55] 1959), 1:141-142.

⁷⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:455.

Tragically, the de-emphasis of expository, applicatory preaching in our day reflects the fact that many professing Christians are not hungering after righteousness. They do not seek out preaching that cuts deep into the conscience, but rather crave preaching that tickles the ear. They “delight more in the garnishing of the dish than in food.”⁷⁶ “They are asleep in security and they hate a soul-awakening ministry...These prefer husks before manna. They live on airy notions, being fed by the ‘prince of the air.’”⁷⁷ Today, professing Christendom in our nation is at its weakest because there is no hunger for true spiritual meat. Good Reformed churches are generally quite small and ignored while the churches that skip the main course for an unhealthy sugary sweet concoction are bursting at the seams. Much of modern evangelicalism prefers child’s play and trifles to the nourishing food of Scripture. Men are very hungry; they are just not hungering for the right things. They want happiness, success, fulfillment and excitement. They want to be entertained and to drink in an exhilarating experience. But Jesus tells us that such thinking is gravely mistaken. He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Mt. 6:33). Beloved, let us not hunger after and seek vain things that are spiritually unprofitable; but, rather, spiritual things that exhort, convince and convict our souls; that cause us to turn from our sins toward godly behavior

Those who long for righteousness will also pray for it. As sinners saved by grace, we know that it is the Holy Spirit that gives us a desire for righteousness. Jeremiah prophesied that God would work effectually upon our hearts. “I will put my fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me” (32:40). David assured us that, “He will not allow your foot to be moved.... The LORD shall preserve you from all evil” (Ps. 121:3, 7). Paul wrote, “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:25). Peter taught that believers “are kept by the power of God through faith” (1 Pet. 1:5). It is obvious that prayer for personal righteousness is in accordance with God’s will. Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Mt. 6:13). “*In prayer*, how is the soul filled with passionate longings after Christ! Prayer is expressed by ‘groans unutterable’ (Romans 8:26). The heart sends up whole volleys of sighs to heaven; Lord, one beam of thy love! one drop of thy blood!”⁷⁸ “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2).

c) Hungering and thirsting after righteousness involves the daily practice of righteousness in our lives. The person who strongly desires to be righteous will “make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Rom. 13:14). He will walk in the Spirit and will not fulfill the lust of the flesh (Gal. 5:17). He will crucify the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:24). He will not deliberately place himself in situations of temptation. He will not be unequally yoked with unbelievers (1 Cor. 6:14). He will seek out godly companions knowing that, “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor. 15:33). The person who seeks righteousness will put to death his “members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (Jas. 1:22-25).

⁷⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 125.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 124.

The Jews were obsessed with external conformity to pharisaical rules and regulations. Jesus expects an inner righteousness that flows from a regenerated heart. He teaches that we ought to have righteousness in our thoughts, as well as our words and deeds. Our Lord will explain the radical nature of Christian righteousness as he contrasts the righteousness that He demands with the perverted righteousness of the Pharisees.

Third, the righteousness that the Savior's disciples are to seek extends to social institutions and even nations. Believers are to seek justice in civil government, the law courts, in business dealings and family relationships. The great commission tells us explicitly that Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth; that the church has a responsibility to disciple the nations. This task involves teaching the nations "all things that Christ has commanded" (Mt. 28:20). Therefore, if the church is faithful and God brings reformation and revival, whole nations will abandon their idolatry and humanistic law for submission to Christ and his law. Believers should pray for and seek an end to the holocaust of abortion. They should strongly desire removal of euthanasia from our hospitals and assisted suicide from our states. They should hunger and thirst for the upholding of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman and diligently oppose the abomination of homosexual rights in all its forms. They should seek the overturning of laws that destroy covenant headship, weaken the family and contradict private property rights. We should be as Lot whose righteous soul was tormented day to day by seeing and hearing Sodom's lawless deeds (2 Pet. 2:8). It was only the outcry of Christians in Nazi Germany that caused Hitler to stop his massive euthanasia plan in the 1930s. Believers will only be a salt and light to culture if they hunger and thirst after righteousness. Beloved, it is not enough merely to wish for righteousness; there must be strong hunger for it that affects our lives, that seeks to affect the lives of others. If the church is to have a real impact in our day, it must hunger less after the world and more after righteousness.

They Shall be Filled

The great blessing for those believers who hunger and thirst for righteousness is that they will be filled. In other words, Christ will completely satisfy their strong spiritual desires. The verb that Jesus used, *chortasthesontai* (shall be filled), is a "very strong word, originally applied to the feeding and fattening of animals in a stall."⁷⁹ The same word is used in Revelation 19:21 to describe the birds gorging themselves on the flesh of the wicked dead. It is also used to describe the multitudes that ate of the loaves and fishes that Jesus multiplied until they were so full they could eat no more (Mt. 14:20; Mk. 8:8; Lk. 9:17). This term expresses the truth that all those who have this Spirit-caused strong hunger and thirst for righteousness will be completely filled and satisfied in every possible way. Since the term righteousness applied to all aspects of biblical righteousness (legal, personal, social) the fulfilling of which our Lord speaks is comprehensive and applies to a number of areas.

First, there is the complete satisfaction of being justified through faith alone. Before Luther understood and rediscovered the true gospel of grace he was tormented by the fact that he knew he could never achieve a righteousness that would satisfy God's demand for absolute moral perfection in thought, word and deed. He fasted, prayed, buffeted his body, went on pilgrimages and almost completely ruined his health attempting to meet God's ethical

⁷⁹ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1887] 1946), 1:38.

requirements. It was only when he looked away from himself and his own feeble, sin-stained efforts toward Jesus and his perfect righteousness that his soul was satisfied.

The reason for this satisfaction is obvious—Christ removes all of our sins. “He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself...this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever sat down at the right hand of God...by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified...Their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more” (Heb. 9:26; 10:10, 14, 17). He also imputes His perfect righteousness to us so that the gift of eternal life is ours. For those who desire and seek forgiveness; who want peace with God; who want reconciliation and fellowship with Him, Christ is the only one who can give satisfaction. Those who embrace the Savior by faith will be filled with “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Only Jesus can do this. Roman Catholics and all merit-mongers who look to their works or purgatory or jihad will never be satisfied, for they have not embraced our Lord’s perfect gift of righteousness. We must look to the Redeemer who promised, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (Jn. 4:14). “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35).

People who look to the world will never be filled. “The world is fading, not filling. Cast three worlds into the heart, yet the heart is not full. But righteousness is a filling thing; nay it so fills that it satisfies. A man may be filled but not satisfied. A sinner may take his fill of sin, but that is a sad filling. It is far from satisfaction. ‘The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways’ (Proverbs 14:14). He shall have his belly full of sin; he shall have enough of it, but this is not a filling to satisfaction. This is such a filling that the damned in hell have. They shall be full of the fury of the Lord.”⁸⁰ But those who look to Jesus, who embrace Him, by faith, will never be disappointed. They will have satisfaction and rest for their souls.

Second, there is the great satisfaction of deliverance from the power of sin. The regenerate man longs for holiness. He knows, however, that he has been delivered from sin life by his union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:3-13). He knows that, in Jesus, the old things have passed away and all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17). Yet because of the remaining imperfection of sin, his hunger in this life will never fully be satisfied. But, he knows that all those “who are displeased with their unbelief, who truly desire to be purged from distrust, who long and pray for increased faith and assurance—evidencing their sincerity by diligently using all proper means—are the subjects of God’s approbation.”⁸¹ In sanctification their hunger will continue and they will continuously drink of the blessings of the Spirit. “Like all the qualities included in the beatitudes, hunger and thirst are perpetual characteristics of the disciples of Jesus, as perpetual as poverty of spirit, meekness and mourning. Not till we reach heaven will we ‘hunger no more, neither thirst any more,’ for only then will Christ our Shepherd lead us ‘to springs of living water.’”⁸² Only then will the sin within us be a thing of the past. Oh, how we hunger and thirst to be completely free from the sin that remains with us in this life!

Third, there is the satisfaction of the perfect righteousness of the new heavens and the new earth. In it there will be perfect justice. There will no longer be “anything that defiles or causes an abomination or a lie” (Rev. 21:27). Wickedness, oppression and the curse will be no more. The ultimate fulfillment of this blessing is when the earth is completely renewed, the

⁸⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 136.

⁸¹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 27.

⁸² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 46.

saints receive their spiritual, perfect and holy resurrected bodies which are incapable of sin and the wicked are cast into the lake of fire. Those who long for righteousness will behold the face of God. Yes, God takes care of the power of sin here with His blessed work of sanctification in us, but our desire for righteousness will yet be filled beyond measure in heaven.

Chapter 6: Blessed are the Merciful

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

In the fifth beatitude, we come to a transition point in the passage. In the first four beatitudes the Christian man shows his attitude in relation to God. The person who is awakened by the Holy Spirit as to who God is and his condition in relation to God is poor in spirit; mourns over his sins; is humble before Him and seeks the righteousness of Christ. All of these things obviously affect how a person will interact with others; but, the focus is on how people are in relation to God. The first four beatitudes are concerned with a state of mind or attitude; the focus on conduct is secondary. Thus we see that, in the biblical worldview, what a person does is rooted in what a person already is; that is, the state of his heart and his relationship with God.

The fifth beatitude and those which follow are primarily concerned with behavior toward men. Thus, once again we see a logical progression in the beatitudes. A right relationship must be established with God before men can act ethically toward other men with a proper spiritual motive. The man who has been filled or fully satisfied as a consequence of Christ's righteousness, which comes by God's grace and mercy, will be willing to exercise mercy toward others. "Those who have experienced the purifying influence of the Holy Spirit become pure in heart (sixth beatitude). And of course, these same people, having been saved by the Prince of Peace, now become peace-makers (seventh beatitude)."⁸³ Although all the beatitudes describe what a genuine Christian disciple is, the first four beatitudes deal more with the state of a man's heart who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, while the next four beatitudes focus more on the subsequent fruits. Our Lord wants His disciples, and the multitudes who are listening to His sermon, to understand what it means to be a disciple both inside and out, both toward God and toward man. The Savior's ethic and concept of the kingdom is all encompassing and comprehensive. It obliterates man's pride, while it exalts God and His grace. To understand this beatitude, we must examine a number of areas.

What Mercy Is and What Mercy Is Not

In order to understand what this passage means we need to define mercy and clear up some common misconceptions about this term. Therefore, we will examine mercy from a number of different angles.

First, it will be helpful to compare mercy with another very important biblical term—grace. The word grace (Hebrew, *hen*; Greek, *charis*) refers to the unmerited favor of God toward guilty sinners who deserve the exact opposite. Grace is the word used when speaking of God giving salvation in the broad sense, based on His unmerited favor (e.g., election, Eph. 1:3-6; the

⁸³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 275.

gospel, 2 Cor. 4:15; Col. 1:5-6; justification, Rom. 3:23-26; Eph. 2:8-9; and sanctification, Rom. 5:2, 21; 6:1, 14, 15; 2 Cor. 12:9; Eph. 2:10; Tit. 2:11-14). Grace is the primary word used for God dealing with sin's guilt or pollution. Mercy (Hebrew *hesed*, Greek *eleos*) refers to compassion or loving kindness extended toward those who are in pain, anguish and distress. While grace is the term used for God eliminating sin and guilt itself, mercy is the word which is used for God relieving the consequences of sin. That is the great calamity and misery that is the result of sin. "If the grace of God contemplates man as guilty before God, and therefore in need of forgiveness, the mercy of God contemplates him as one who is bearing the consequences of sin, who is in a pitiable condition, and who therefore needs divine help."⁸⁴

Mercy and grace are obviously closely connected in that a person who is merciful or compassionate with another person will show that person grace or favor, even if they do not deserve it. A person who is merciful, who has been greatly wronged, is quick and happy to extend forgiveness to those who confess their faults. The person who is merciful is opposed to cruelty or suffering unless such things are required by God's law (e.g., the death penalty for murder). A merciful man does what he can to relieve and prevent suffering in others.

Second, as in the other characteristics described in the beatitudes, the mercy mentioned is not something natural. There are men who by birth tend to be kinder than others. There are people who are naturally more affectionate; who generally speaking are not cruel toward others; who do not demand their rights, so to speak. Our Lord is not addressing such men. The mercy described is a result of God's grace and mercy. It is mercy extended because of Jesus' redemptive work; in the name of Christ. It flows from a consciousness of the fact that God has saved us from our sins and the dreadful consequences of those sins when we did not deserve it; when we actually deserved the exact opposite. It is an attitude that leads to biblical action that is produced by the Holy Spirit. If we divorce mercy from God's salvation in Christ, then we are left with a prideful humanism. The acts of charity and mercy done by the wicked are rooted in self-exaltation and self-congratulation. The mercy extended by Christians is rooted in poverty of spirit, meekness, and mourning over sin. Therefore, it always points to Jesus and exalts Him, not ourselves.

Before our conversion to Christ, we really did not understand or practice biblical mercy. Paul says that one of the characteristics of those who reject God is that they are "unmerciful" (Rom. 1:31). "Before conversion the sinner is compared to a wolf for his savageness, to a lion for his fierceness (Isaiah 11:6), to a bee for his sting (Psalm 118:12), to an adder for his poison (Psalm 140:3). By nature we do not send forth oil, but poison; not the oil of mercifulness, but the poison of maliciousness."⁸⁵ The Romans and Greeks did not include mercy as a virtue. The Jews believed that those most likely to be blessed in the Messiah's kingdom were men of fierce, warlike dispositions, fired with resentment for the wrongs done their country, who would inflict a severe, unmitigated vengeance on their Gentile oppressors. Men with hearts of stone are incapable of true spiritual mercy that flows from love of Christ.

Third, mercy must never be confused with permissiveness or antinomianism. Many people believe that a father who refuses to spank a disobedient child; or, a judge who does not impose the death penalty for first degree murder; or a church court that looks the other way as a member commits adultery or abandons his wife is merciful. But, that is not at all what Jesus is speaking about. Others equate mercy with handing out taxpayer dollars to those who refuse to work, who deliberately are lazy and undisciplined. They want to hand out free needles to drug

⁸⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1949] 1958), 72.

⁸⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 143.

addicts, to give free condoms to prostitutes and free anti-AIDS medications to unrepentant sex perverts and whoremongers in Africa. But, none of these things has anything to do with biblical mercy. Such thinking flows from this world's concept of mercy which rejects transcendent law, discipline and justice or righteousness. This point is very important for when mercy, pity or compassion is divorced from the overall teaching of Scripture it actually becomes vicious. "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (Pr. 12:10).

A concept of mercy that is not held in conjunction with God's moral law and biblical concepts of justice, punishment and discipline is nothing more than subjective feeling and sentimentality. We know that God hates antinomian worldly concepts of mercy from the example of Saul's treatment of King Agag. Saul spared wicked Agag after God had condemned him to death and the result was that God judged Saul and removed him from being the king (cf. 1 Sam. 15:9, 23). Those who flout God's justice in the name of mercy end up rewarding the wicked and causing distress and suffering for the righteous. American courts in the name of mercy set murderers and rapists free after short sentences to prey on the general public. In our day it is common for church courts to refuse to discipline damnable heretics and scandalous sinners because they believe their actions are loving and merciful. Consequently, they are allowing savage wolves to freely roam among the flock all in the name of compassion. "That is a false and unholy mercy which petitions the powers that be to cancel or modify a just and fully merited sentence which has been passed upon some flagrant offender."⁸⁶ Many prominent evangelical leaders revealed their antinomian concept of mercy a few years ago when they petitioned the governor of Texas to remove the death penalty for a woman guilty of murdering another female with an axe. Christian mercy does not compromise with biblical justice.

This point becomes very clear when we look at God's nature and character. The Bible repeatedly teaches that God is merciful, tender hearted, compassionate and slow to anger (Neh. 9:17b; Ps. 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2b; Nah. 1:3). However, Scripture also emphasizes that Jehovah is righteous, holy and just. God is exceedingly merciful, yet God never overlooks, condones or countenances sin. The idea that God's mercy somehow means that He doesn't really care about sin is unthinkable. It is practically blasphemous. In fact, if God's mercy was in any way antinomian then there would have been no real reason for Jesus Christ to suffer and die on the cross. Jehovah extended mercy to His people, but completely honored His own righteous character and moral law in the process. Therefore, when we interpret the term mercy in its biblical context we must never do so at the expense of the moral law or God's righteousness. To do so is both wrong and very dangerous.

Fourth, the mercy described is not meritorious before God. Many who believe that God's Word teaches salvation by faith plus our own works appeal to this verse as a proof text for their position. The idea is that God looks to see how we treat people; if we are first merciful toward them then God will show us mercy. That is, He will reward us with salvation. That our Lord is not describing our behavior as a foundation for our hope to receive mercy is proven by the following considerations.

(1) The narrow context of Scripture proves that the exhibition of biblical mercy toward others is a *fruit* of salvation and not a cause of it. We have noted that there is a logical progression to the beatitudes. The person who is merciful is first poor in spirit, mournful over his sins and meek before God. He has already been seeking the righteousness of Christ. Thus, it is quite clear that mercy is an indispensable characteristic of a person who *has already been* regenerated by the Holy Spirit and *saved* by Jesus Christ. Obviously, then, the person who is

⁸⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 30.

unmerciful, who is not forgiven by God was never a Christian to begin with. His lack of good fruit demonstrates an unbelieving root (Mt. 7:16-20). His failure to do good works proves that his faith was dead, non-existent, counterfeit and worthless (Jas. 2:17-18, 26).

(2) Such an interpretation also contradicts the broad context of Scripture. If Jesus is teaching that God only forgives us to the extent that we first forgive others, then we must reject the explicit teaching found throughout the whole Bible that men are saved by grace through faith and that our good works have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with our justification before God. “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9; cf. Ac. 13:39; Rom. 3:20-24, 28; 4:3-8; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:8-9, etc.). Further, the Bible tells us that Jesus had mercy on Paul and saved him while he was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples” (Ac. 9:1); while he was on his way to arrest and persecute Christians in Damascus (Ac. 9:2-3). Moreover, Paul says that “Christ died for the ungodly...that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6, 8); that “when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10). If we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture and allow the multitude of clear passages to shed light on passages that are less clear or that if taken out of context seem to contradict the Bible as a whole, then we will not fall into the deadly, pernicious error of works salvation.

Fifth, biblical mercy is not merely a feeling or attitude, but is a way of thinking that results in compassionate action. Christian mercy is an inward compassion that reaches out to others in need and assists them. People that talk about how much they care, but offer no real help at all, do not have real biblical mercy. “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:17-18). “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily good, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” (Jas. 2:15-16).

We once again can learn about mercy by looking at the mercy of God. God looked at fallen mankind in sin and misery, had mercy on them and took action. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16). He “spared not His own Son, but delivered him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). In the ministry of Jesus Christ, mercy in action was a prominent feature. “He not only pitied, but saved.... With what indefatigable [not easily exhausted] activity, what disinterested self-denial, what patient endurance of suffering, did he seek to”⁸⁷ helps others. Christian mercy, like the mercy of God and Christ, must be extended toward others.

Examples of Mercy

One way of sharpening our understanding of biblical mercy is to examine some examples of mercy in Scripture. Joseph extended mercy toward his brothers who had sold him into slavery by forgiving them and providing for them in a time of famine (Gen. 45:1-11). After Miriam had spoken against Moses, challenged his authority and been struck with leprosy by God, “Moses cried out to the LORD saying, ‘Please heal her, O God, I pray’” (Num. 12:13). The good Samaritan showed mercy to the man robbed, beaten and left for dead when he bandaged his wounds, poured on oil and wine, set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him (Lk. 10:34). A Christian must have compassion not merely toward those that they already

⁸⁷ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of our Lord*, 1:130.

love but even to a stranger they encounter in dire need. God has had mercy upon us so that we would be compassionate and merciful toward others. “What are we doing to help those who are troubled in mind, body or estate? There are many such in the world. There are always some near our own doors. What are we doing for them? Anything, or nothing at all? May God help us to answer these questions! The world would be a happier world if there was more practical Christianity!”⁸⁸

In the parable of the lost son when the son repented and came to his father we are told, “when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him” (Lk. 15:20). After the son confessed his sin, he was fully restored to the household with no resentment on the father’s part but only love, joy and celebration. The father’s compassion was expressed by his willingness to forgive his son’s guilt and relieve his son’s suffering. Mercy forgives and welcomes penitent sinners.

The supreme example of mercy and compassion was Jesus Christ our Savior. When our Lord saw those who were sick, diseased and lame, He had compassion on them and healed them (Mt. 14:14; Mk. 1:41-42; Lk. 7:22). He had mercy on those who were demon-possessed and set them free from their bondage and suffering (Mk. 5:13; 9:20ff.). He freely forgave men their sins (Mk. 2:6) and had mercy on a mother by raising her dead son (Lk. 7:13). When He saw that the multitude had nothing to eat and were about to faint He had compassion on them and miraculously provided food (Mt. 15:32-39). When Jesus saw suffering, He was moved to action repeatedly to relieve that pain and anguish. In fact the Redeemer’s whole life and existence was one of mercy. He came to die to relieve men of the guilt of the sins and the consequences of those sins. He took the curse, pain and suffering of hell upon Himself so that His people would not have to suffer such horrors. Christ had pity and compassion on His sheep to the point that He submitted to death, the death of the cross (Phil. 2:9). “Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in all things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17).

The Duties of Mercy

Now that we have an idea what mercy means, we need to consider specific things that we can do as Christians that are merciful towards others. Our Lord gave no indication as to whom believers are to show mercy; therefore, we need to consider this passage as having a wide range and must rely on other passages to avoid turning mercy into license or some other error. Further, it is important that as Christians who have been saved by grace, who have experienced God’s mercy that we learn to pity those who are in distress; who have wounded themselves by their own sin and foolishness. “If I weep, says Augustine, for that body from which the soul is departed, how should I weep for that soul from which God is departed? Had we seen that man in the gospel cutting himself with stones and fetching blood of himself it would have moved our pity (Mark 5:5). To see a sinner stabbing himself and having his hands imbued in his own blood should cause relenting in our bowels. Our eye should affect our heart. God was angry with Edom because he ‘cast off all pity’ (Amos 1:11).”⁸⁹ There are a number of things that Christians can do to show mercy to others.

First, a believer can show mercy by helping another Christian who has suffered calamity or financial ruin. This can be done, for example, by giving a brother in dire straits an interest free

⁸⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Trust [1858] 1986), 1:380-381.

⁸⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 144.

loan or even a gift of money to help him get back on his feet. “The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous shows mercy and gives” (Ps. 37:21). “Mercy has given to him, and therefore he gives in mercy. He is generous and prosperous. He is not a borrower, but a giver. So far as the good man can do it, he lends an ear to the requests of need, and instead of being impoverished by what he imparts he grows richer, and is able to do more.”⁹⁰ A godly society does not depend on the immoral confiscation and redistribution of funds by the state, but upon the mercy and compassion of the righteous who “shows mercy with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:8).

Second, Christian mercy extends a helping hand to everyone, even our enemies, whom we encounter in a dire life-threatening emergency. This point is illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan. In this story Jesus is teaching what it means to love our neighbor. The Jews at that time taught that one should love and help other Jews, family members and friends, but that non-Jews should be hated and not shown any mercy or love whatsoever. In this parable a man (presumably a Jew) is robbed, stripped and beaten to within an inch of his life. He is left in the hot sun to die of exposure. As he lies there suffering, first a certain priest and then a Levite sees him but walks around him and gives him no aid at all. They essentially abandon him to die a painful death. The Samaritan, however, “had compassion” (Lk. 10:32) on him and took the action necessary to save his life. The Jews hated the Samaritans with a passion and most Jews would not even enter Samaritan territory. Thus, the Samaritan extended love and mercy toward his enemy.

Our Lord ends this parable with a question that reveals the great truth of this story. “‘So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among thieves?’ And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Lk. 10:36-37). This means that one aspect of Christian mercy is a willingness to step in and take action in providential situations where we encounter someone in serious physical trouble. Whether someone has been in a car accident, or there is a house fire, or we see someone being beaten and robbed, or observe a child abduction or people trapped in rubble after a tornado, the Christian is to view such situations as opportunities to extend mercy in the name of Christ.

Note however that the example of the Good Samaritan which deals with an emergency providential situation (that one happens to encounter), does not justify the civil government’s confiscation of tax funds to send to hurricane victims in a Muslim or other heathen nation. Mercy toward our enemies in this parable is a personal one-on-one experience. Believers are not to use their tithe money to set up aid services in far-off lands unless they are subservient to the job of preaching the gospel and setting up new churches. As we mentioned earlier, the extending of mercy must not contradict God’s principles of justice or be used as an excuse to subsidize evildoers.

Third, biblical mercy involves warning unsaved sinners of their record and condition before God. All sinners who do not know Christ as Savior and Lord are living dead men (Eph. 2:1-3; Mt. 8:22). They are under God’s wrath and curse against sin (Rom. 1:18; Gal. 3:10). Even though they may be completely unaware of it, they are in bondage to Satan and sin (Ac. 26:18). With God’s wrath upon them, they are like blind men groping in the dark; walking on thin ice over the abyss of hell. The jaws of death and destruction are never far away. Their condition is desperate, tragic, very sad and exceptionally dangerous. To enter eternity without Jesus Christ is to enter suffering, pain, anguish, despair and hopelessness forever and ever. There are no second chances. There is no turning back. There can be no escape from the eternal curse of living a life serving sin, refusing to repent and not trusting in Christ. Therefore, the greatest acts of mercy do

⁹⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1882-87] 1983), 2:194.

not involve medical aid, food or shelter; but, rather words of truth. Men need the gospel more than anything. Therefore, we must explain to people their severe soul danger—that their record before God is one of sin and guilt. That they have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23); that they have missed the mark of God’s holy law and are guilty of sin in His sight (Rom. 3:9-19); that all of their supposed good deeds and personal righteousness are nothing but filthy stinking rags in God’s sight (Phil. 2:8). “They tread upon the banks of the bottomless pit. If death gives them a jog they tumble in.”⁹¹

Do you plead with sinners to repent and turn to Jesus knowing that Christ has saved you from your wicked self, sin and hell? Are you moved with compassion when you see relatives, old friends and acquaintances walking blindly in their sin and guilt toward the abyss of fire? Are you willing to be mocked, laughed at, rejected and even hated to tell them about your precious Savior and what He has done for you?

When missionaries became modernists and stopped preaching the gospel on the mission field; and, when charitable Christian organizations decided to become ecumenical and essentially secular in order to reach out to more people with education, food and clothing, they cast the most important feature of mercy aside. What is a coat and a bowl of rice compared to beholding the face of God forever in heaven? What are warm clothes and a piece of bread compared with escaping God’s wrath and the lake of fire on that final day? Charitable works are nothing but brief comforts and vapors that pass away if they are not done in Christ’s name and accompanied by the gospel of salvation. Most Christians do not have the resources to do much beyond the church tithe that God requires. But they have something far more precious than gold or silver. They have the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners and that His mission was a complete success. A mercy that looks after men’s bodies but does not minister to their souls is shallow, unwise and ultimately unprofitable. When you look upon an unsaved sinner meditate on the torment and affliction that awaits him if he does not believe in Christ. This should motivate you to the most important task of mercy which is winning souls for Jesus.

Fourth, Christian mercy involves reproving other professing Christians when they fall into scandalous sin or embrace heretical doctrine. Many believers and churches have a worldly concept of mercy and thus believe mercy entails overlooking, ignoring and sidestepping sin. Tragically, men who have insisted that church courts deal with sin and heresy have even been rebuked and censured for speaking up. But, leaving a person in sin or heresy is not mercy at all. It is irresponsible, antinomian and cruel. Scripture even equates a refusal to discuss an offense with a brother as hatred. “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him” (Lev. 19:17). It is wrong and wicked to hold a grudge in our hearts against a brother who has sinned against us. Instead of holding resentment and anger inside, which usually leads to sinful behavior and conflict, the believer must confront him regarding his sin. For his own spiritual good, the evil must not be left on him. “Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Pr. 27:5-6). The wise man welcomes and receives such a rebuke, but the fool rejects it (Pr. 9:8; 15:12; 19:25).

Antinomian pity is no better than cruelty. Correct doctrine is so important that Paul told Titus regarding false teachers in the church, “rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith” (1:3). “The surgeon cuts and lances the flesh, but it is in order to a cure. They are healing wounds. So by cutting reproof when we lance men’s consciences and let out the blood of sin, we exercise spiritual surgery. This is showing mercy. ‘Others save with fear, pulling them out of the

⁹¹ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 144.

fire' (Jude 23). If a man were in the fire, though you did hurt him a little in pulling him out, he would be thankful and take it as a kindness."⁹² If God's law tells us to come to the aid of a donkey, belonging to a man who hates us, yet is lying under a burden (Ex. 23:5), then certainly we must offer help to the Christian who has fallen under the burden of sin.

An admonition or rebuke must, of course, be delivered with delicacy and tact. The Christian must reprove his brother with poverty of spirit, meekness and humility. Paul instructed Timothy regarding this topic saying, "And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil" (2 Tim. 2:25). If our mercy is extended with kindness, patience and gentleness, then, if the person rejects the teaching of God's Word, we can rest assured that they were offended by the truth and not our arrogant tactless presentation of it. If we extend mercy toward a fallen believer and do everything we can to lead him to repentance and he still rejects our counsel, then we have done our job. Their blood is not on our head if he apostatizes (cf. Ezek. 33).

Fifth, we can extend mercy toward others through prayer. When fellow believers fall into sin we must pray for their spiritual recovery. When a Christian becomes sick, we should pray that God would heal him. Jesus instructs us even to pray for our enemies, "for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). There are times when people have so rejected the truth that all we can do is to extend mercy through prayer. Prayer is an essential ingredient in mercy, for only God can change the heart; only the Holy Spirit can retrieve fallen sinners. If we have compassion on fallen and lost souls, then one of the best things we can do for them is to pray fervently on their behalf. "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (Jas. 5:16).

Sixth, a crucial aspect of extending mercy toward others is a willingness to forgive a brother who has repented of his sin. "Our God is a merciful God and shows mercy continuously; the citizens of his kingdom must show mercy too."⁹³ When Peter asked Jesus, "'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said unto him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven'" (Mt. 18:21-22). A believer must have a merciful attitude that seeks a complete reconciliation; that is willing to repeatedly, without end extend genuine forgiveness to a repentant brother. This aspect of mercy is simple and central to the Christian faith, yet it is not followed by many professing Christians in our day. There are a number of ways that this aspect of mercy is commonly violated.

(1) Instead of following God's example and Christ's teaching many professing believers do not seek reconciliation, but instead seek retaliation through gossip, backbiting, slander and evil-speaking. The sin of malicious gossip is common in Reformed denominations and is often practiced by ministers, elders and presbyteries. Such a practice is very unmerciful and wicked. Mercy seeks to protect a brother's reputation and, thus, follows proper biblical procedure. Mercy seeks to protect a Christian's good name and not destroy it for personal satisfaction.

(2) When people repent, mercy is often not truly extended through a genuine biblical forgiveness. It is very common in our day for people to give lip service to forgiveness because believers know that the Savior requires it, but then turn right around and contradict those words by unmerciful deeds. It is common for people who have supposedly forgiven an offense to repeatedly bring it up and throw it back in a person's face. Tragically, it is also common to

⁹² Ibid, 145.

⁹³ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 47.

permanently label someone who has sinned and repented as if their sin still clings to them. We can thank God that when He forgives He truly forgives and forgets (Isa. 43:25). He no longer holds a grudge. Biblical forgiveness does not: bring up the matter again; hold a grudge; or, spread the matter abroad. Mercy comforts the repentant sinner and does all it can to help him, while arrogance and a lack of mercy beats him up and drags him down. Speaking of a man who had recently repented of a scandalous sexual sin, Paul writes, “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love to him” (2 Cor. 2:6-7). “Discipline which is so inflexible as to leave no place for repentance and reconciliation has ceased to be truly Christian; for it is no less a scandal to cut off the penitent sinner from all hope of re-entry into the comfort and security of the fellowship of the redeemed community than it is to permit flagrant wickedness to continue in the Body of Christ.”⁹⁴ According to Christ Himself, an unwillingness to forgive a repentant brother of sin is as much a sign of being unregenerate as living a lifestyle of habitual wickedness. A man cannot claim to have repented of his own sins if he is unmerciful toward the sins of others.

The Merciful Receive Mercy

Jesus says that the merciful are blessed because “they shall obtain mercy” (Mt. 5:7). This mercy obtained raises a number of questions.

First, from whom do the merciful receive this mercy? The answer to this question is, obviously, God. The receiving of mercy presupposes that the person, who receives mercy, is in need of it. Those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit and evidence their faith by living in obedience to the Redeemer’s requirements have been saved by God. On account of what Jesus has done, the guilt of their sins and the misery that sin merits has been completely eliminated. “When God shows mercy, he pardons the guilty and he blesses the miserable. To obtain mercy is for a sinner who deserves everlasting destruction to obtain pardon and salvation, as tokens of the benignant pity of God.”⁹⁵ The future tense is used because believers in Christ will receive mercy on the day of judgment and all the miseries of this life will at that time forever cease.

Second, what is the connection between being merciful and receiving mercy? This question is very important because, as we have already noted, Romanists and merit-mongers have misunderstood this passage to their own destruction. Therefore, once again we emphasize that a believer’s acts of mercy are in no way a ground or instrument of receiving mercy. The Bible explicitly teaches that Christ’s atoning death and perfect righteousness are received by faith alone, apart from the works of the law. Therefore, when our Lord says that the merciful will receive mercy, He is describing a characteristic of a genuine believer. Those who exhibit mercy in their behavior are demonstrating the reality of their faith and those who have true faith will receive mercy on the final day. We see much the same thing in Jesus’ description of the final judgment in Matthew 25. “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me’” (vs. 34-36).

⁹⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 66-67.

⁹⁵ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:134.

These works described, which are works of mercy, are decisive in the final judgment, not because of an inherent meritorious quality, but because of their evidential quality.

Third, by way of application, we all need to examine the genuineness of our faith by our works of mercy. Are we merciful toward others who need our compassion? Are we charitable toward those who ask us for help? Are we forgiving when people who have sinned against us repent and seek forgiveness; or, do we hold a grudge and tear down our brethren with malicious gossip? Being merciful is such a crucial aspect of being a Christian that if we are not merciful, then we must call into question whether we truly are Christ's disciples. God had been merciful toward us and has forgiven us a multitude of sins. Therefore, let us take pity on those around us; let us show people that Christ has loved us by being merciful toward them.

Chapter 7: The Pure in Heart

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

The sixth beatitude is very searching and broad in that it deals with the heart of man. This emphasis on man's heart is one of the things which makes Christianity unique and separates it from other religions and philosophies. The kingdom of God begins on the inside, with the heart of man. Christ rules, not by the external coercion of arms, but by His Spirit regenerating and sanctifying His people. The focus of the Savior's rule is purity, holiness and separation from evil. That is why our Lord confers a special blessing on the pure in heart. Purity of heart is absolutely indispensable if one is to be a disciple of Christ and have fellowship with God.

What is Purity of Heart?

In order to understand this beatitude we must first understand the terms that Jesus uses. We must define the word heart and we must examine the term pure or purity. The word heart is used in Scripture in a much different manner than it is used today. In modern culture, the term heart is used primarily to describe the emotional aspect of man. For example Webster's dictionary says, "the seat of the emotions: said of the moral side of human nature in contradistinction to the intellectual; as, he was all head and no heart."⁹⁶ In the Bible, the term heart describes every aspect of the inner man or person. It describes the whole self, the essence of personality. Thus, the word heart refers to the whole mind of man including the intellect, the emotions and the will. As the central essence of what a man is, the heart is the source of a man's beliefs (Lk. 24:25; Rom. 10:10), imaginations (Ezek. 13:2), understanding (1 Kg. 3:9; Job 38:36), behaviors, expressions, words (Mt. 12:34, 35; 15:18, 19), inclinations (Eccl. 10:2); intents (Heb. 4:12); reflections (1 Cor. 2:9; Rev. 18:7) and will (Eph. 6:6). "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Pr. 23:7). "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Pr. 4:23). There is no more comprehensive word use in Scripture to describe every aspect of the function of man's mind, consciousness or self. The heart is the very center and source of all that we are and all that we do. Therefore, the state of man's heart is central to one's

⁹⁶ Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary: Unabridged, 836.

relationship to God. If the heart is evil, then everything in that person's life is corrupt and defiled.

Our Lord emphasized this point when he told His disciples the central problem with mankind: "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Mt. 15:19). All of these dreadful evils flow from one polluted fountain—the heart of fallen man. Jesus focuses on the necessity of heart purity precisely because the natural man's heart is totally depraved. Everything about fallen man's nature is in rebellion against God. "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). The gospel of Jesus Christ must be concerned with the heart because every one of us enters the world with a heart that is not pure, that is polluted and enslaved to sin. "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5).

It is important that we define the word heart according to Scripture and understand what the Bible says about the heart of every unsaved person because the Scriptural doctrine on these matters is diametrically opposed to what the modern world is saying. Today, people are taught that everyone is basically good and the problem with mankind is his environment. Evil is caused by poverty, or oppression or a poor educational system. We are told that mankind's problems will be solved by eliminating poverty, by universal healthcare, by "free" government education, by liberating the environment and so forth. All such thinking is fallacious and dangerous, for it ignores the central issue. Aside from "natural" disasters and disease (which are caused by Adam's fall), all of the problems of this world such as war, hatred, poverty, racism, crime, perversion, originated from a person's sinful heart. Because man's problems are not environmental or merely intellectual, but are rooted in his own perverted, corrupted, defiled nature, the gospel of God is the only real answer for this world's problems. The heart of man is the center of his being and the center of his problem, both God-ward and man-ward. If purity of heart is given to man by Christ, then there is hope because man needs to be changed from the inside out.

Having defined the term heart we now need to understand the term "pure." As we examine this word, we will interact with some common false notions of the word. There are a number of things to consider.

First, purity of heart does not refer to sinless perfection in this life. There are a number of heretical groups (Pelagians, Roman Catholics, some semi-Pelagians or Arminians, Quakers, Wesleyans and Charles Finney along with his followers) who believe that it is possible to totally comply with all of God's requirements in thought, word or deed in the present life. This doctrine, which probably was spread the most among "evangelical" Christians by Charles Wesley, is called perfectionism. Occasionally someone will meet a professing believer who says that he is completely pure in spirit; that his carnal nature has been completely eradicated; that he no longer even has sinful thoughts. Such a view however, completely contradicts Scripture. Solomon says, "Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?'" (Pr. 20:9). John writing to Christians says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:8; see 1 Kg. 8:46; Eccl. 7:20; Rom. 3:10; Jas. 3:2; etc.). "According to Scripture there is a constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit in the lives of God's children, and even the best of them are still striving for perfection. Paul gives a very striking description of this struggle in Rom. 7:7-26, a passage which certainly refers to him in his regenerate state. In Gal. 5:16-24 he speaks of that very same as a struggle that characterizes all the children of God. And in Phil.

3:10-14 he speaks of himself, practically at the end of his career, as one who has not yet reached perfection, but is pressing on toward the goal.”⁹⁷ Moreover, Jesus and John, speaking by the Spirit, tell us that we need to repeatedly confess our sins to God and ask for forgiveness (Mt. 6:12, 13; 1 Jn. 1:9). Further, an examination of the lives of God’s saints in the Bible reveals men who, although dedicated to God, are far from perfect ethically. There is Noah who got drunk, Abraham who lied, and Moses who disobeyed a direct order from God. Job cursed the day he was born, Elijah doubted and fled in fear from Jezebel; the apostle Peter denied Christ and John fell in worship before an angel. All the great Reformers and Puritans had their struggles and defects. Therefore, heart purity in this life must never be equated with sinless perfection. “[T]he truth is, one of the most conclusive evidences that we do possess a pure heart is to be conscious of and burdened with the impurity which still indwells us.”⁹⁸

Second, purity of heart is not something purely intellectual. It is not simply an assent to certain propositions about God, Christ and ethics. When we speak of the heart, we speak of the whole man. The idea common in our day that people simply need to give an intellectual assent to Jesus and ask Him into the heart without repentance, without a radical change of heart, has more in common with certain forms of gnosticism than biblical Christianity. The disciples of Jesus are “pure in heart.” The Holy Spirit has radically changed them at the very core of their being by the implantation of new spiritual life. Believers are not only justified, but set apart and spiritually purified. Doctrine, of course, is very important. No one can be saved without a correct understanding or biblical comprehension of God, Christ and His atoning work. But if true doctrines have not had any impact upon the heart and life, then there is no evidence of regeneration or true saving faith. There are many modernist theologians who know orthodox protestant dogma inside and out, but who are spiritually dead and do not know Christ. Jesus must not only be known in the head, but also embraced in the heart.

Third, our Lord’s statement about heart purity is focused on the internal spiritual character of believers in contradistinction to the crass externalism of the Pharisees and Jewish people at that time. The Jewish people were set apart by God to be a holy, spiritually purified people before Jehovah. They had been given various laws and ceremonies to teach them about purity, both ritually and morally. The Jews, however, misunderstood these laws and in their quest for ethical autonomy externalized biblical religion. They focused on various rituals and the outward appearance of holiness, yet neglected the inward heart aspect of true religion. Therefore, Jesus referred to them as whitewashed tombs (Mt. 23:27). They appeared very beautiful and upright on the outside, but on the inside they were dead and unclean. They appeared righteous to men, but inside were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Mt. 23:28). They would use a ritual to clean the outside of a cup, but inside were full of extortion and self-indulgence (Mt. 23:25). “Looked at externally, they were without spot. But their inward parts were full of ravening and wickedness. They were most concerned about the external injunctions of religion; but they forgot the weightier matters of the law, namely love to God and the love of one’s neighbor.”⁹⁹ They forgot that true religion, in its application to the sinner, always begins in the heart and spreads out into life.

Fourth, we can better understand pureness of heart by looking at how the word is used to describe purity in other contexts. Barclay writes, “The Greek word for *pure* is *katharos* and it has a variety of usages, all of which have something to add to the meaning of this beatitude for the

⁹⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 540.

⁹⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 32-33.

⁹⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:108.

Christian life. (i) Originally it simply meant clean, and could, for instance, be used of soiled clothes which have been washed clean. (ii) It was regularly used for corn which has been winnowed or sifted of all chaff. In the same way it is used of an army which has been purged of all discontented, cowardly, unwilling and inefficient soldiers, and which is a force composed solely of first-class fighting men. (iii) It very commonly appears in company with another Greek adjective—*akeratos*. *Akeratos* can be used of milk or wine which is unadulterated with water, or of metal which has in it no tinge of alloy. So, then, the basic meaning of *katharos* is *unmixed, unadulterated, unalloyed*.¹⁰⁰

When we apply this word to the heart of man we see that purity of heart involves a number of related things. It refers to the heart of a person who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The starting point of a pure heart is the new birth which is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit upon those for whom Christ died. This change in man's heart has two aspects—purification and renewal. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5). Ezekiel presented regeneration as a spiritual cleansing. "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols" (Ezek. 36:25). Similarly, Jesus told Nicodemus, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:5). Paul represented purification as a circumcision of the heart: "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11; cf. Ezek. 36:26).

The new birth is absolutely necessary for purity of heart because we are all born with depraved, defiled hearts that are enslaved to sin. That which is impure and corrupt desires, serves and seeks the impure, sinful things of this world. But, in regeneration, the Holy Spirit cleanses the heart and imparts a new spiritual life which makes a man fit for membership in Christ's kingdom. The Holy Spirit, as a consequence of the Savior's death and resurrection for His people, cleanses the heart from sin and recreates it in righteousness. Thus, we see that even in the application of salvation to the elect sinner God is sovereign. A pure heart is not something that is earned, or self-generated but is imparted as a gift of grace. "The Holy Spirit, in the act of effectual calling, causes the soul to become regenerate by implanting a new governing principle or habit of spiritual affection and action. The soul itself, in conversion, immediately acts under the guidance of this new principle in turning from sin unto God through Christ."¹⁰¹ Because the Holy Spirit has changed the sinner's heart, that person at his very core is different. The heart is no longer defiled and no longer looks to the world and its idols, but now has spiritual affections and desires. When the heart was evil the beliefs and actions were evil. But, when the heart is made spiritual and holy by the power of the Spirit, the beliefs, desires and actions of that person follow. That person has become a spiritual person (Jn. 3:6) and is now pure in heart.

The moment the Holy Spirit regenerates a man's heart, he immediately embraces Jesus Christ by faith and is justified before God. The gift of faith always accompanies regeneration. Thus, regeneration always leads to conversion and repentance. The regenerated heart is purified and thus turns from its sin toward the Savior. Because of the implantation of new spiritual life and the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit upon man's heart, the regenerated person cannot lead a life characterized by sin. "Whoever has been born of God does not [habitually practice] sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God" (1 Jn. 3:9). John is

¹⁰⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:105-106.

¹⁰¹ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1958), 171.

not saying that Christians never sin, for that would explicitly contradict 1 John 1:8. He is saying that if you are born again your life is not characterized by sin. As Jesus said, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit” (Mt. 7:18). A person who, before regeneration and heart purification, lived to party, smoke pot, get drunk and fornicate; after regeneration would forsake such activities and instead practice righteousness, because “everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him” (1 Jn. 2:29).

The Holy Spirit’s gift of regeneration, which makes the heart pure and breaks the power of sin and darkness over the sinner, does not bring perfection in this life. The heart is purified, yet still must struggle with sin. “The believer’s understanding is *in part* purified from darkness, his judgment from error, his will from rebellion, his affections from enmity, avarice, pride, sensuality.”¹⁰² Thus, regeneration begins the life-long process of sanctification where the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with the Word of God, more and more enables us to mortify the sinful flesh and live righteously before God. Therefore, purity of heart is first something the Holy Spirit works in us immediately and sovereignly apart from any cooperation on our part. And, purity of heart is a life-long duty; it is something we must nurture by the means of grace. What is begun in regeneration will not be perfected until we are glorified at the second coming of Christ.

Purity of heart also refers to a man who, as a consequence of regeneration, has truly repented of his sin and is not leading a hypocritical life. We see this meaning quite clearly in Psalm 24:4-5: “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.” The true disciple of Christ doesn’t put on an act only in certain situations, but strives to be holy in his mind, conversation and actions at all times. Thus, this beatitude was a great rebuke to the externalism and hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the majority of Jews at that time. The Pharisees were like Nebuchadnezzar’s image, partly of silver and partly of clay (Dan. 2:35). The dross, chaff and filth of sin had not been removed. The outside appeared clean, but the inside was filthy. True repentance and consecration toward God must begin in the heart. By acting the part, we may wash the outside of the cup as long as we want; but, if the heart is filthy, we are still filthy in the sight of God. Thus, later in this sermon Jesus said “that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:20). “There must be a work of grace in the core of the heart as well as in the palm of the hand, or our religion is a delusion. May God grant that our inward powers be cleansed by the sanctifying Spirit, so that we may love holiness and abhor all sin. The pure in heart shall see God, all others are but blind bats; stone-blindness in the eyes arises from stone in the heart. Dirt in the heart throws dust in the eyes.”¹⁰³

The words for repent in the New Testament mean a change of mind (*metanoeo*, e.g., Mt. 3:2; Mk. 1:15) or heart (*metamelomai*, e.g., Mt. 21:29; Heb. 7:21), which is sincere and leads to a change in one’s life (*metanoia*, e.g., Mt. 3:8; 9:13; Ac. 20:21). Repentance is related to heart purity because it is an inward, sincere state of the heart or mind that sees the exceeding sinfulness of sin; approves of God’s moral law; hates one’s own sins and forsakes them in order to serve Christ. True repentance is known by its permanency and its completeness. “True penitents forsake sin, with a firm resolution to have no more to do with idols. They are converted from the love as well as from the practice of sin. They particularly guard against those sins to which they were formerly most addicted, and before whose influence they are most ready to fall (Psalm 18:23). They assiduously watch against all occasions of sin, and earnestly long for

¹⁰² Thomas Scott as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

¹⁰³ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1:424.

complete deliverance from it. They return to God as their rightful Lord and Master, resolving, in dependence upon his grace, to ‘serve him in holiness and righteousness all the days of their lives.’ They form a steady and unshaken purpose in their hearts, and sedulously [i.e., diligently, constantly, unremittingly] endeavour, by watchfulness and diligence, in the constant use of all [biblical] means, to avoid all sin, and to practice universal holiness.”¹⁰⁴

The man who has a clean heart is far from perfect. He must struggle with his sinful desires every day; he must take up his cross daily (Lk. 9:23). However, he never makes peace with sin. Because he has a clean heart, he desires to live a holy life. Christ is his supreme Lord and, therefore, his whole priority in life is serving Jesus and not his own desires. There is a consistency in his life between the inner spring of his conduct and the conduct itself.

Another way to put it is that he is not double-minded. Thus James exhorts us, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (4:8). If we are to cure the outward motions of sin, then we must strike first at the root of it in our hearts. “That which God looketh after and loveth is ‘truth in the inward parts,’ Ps. li.6. God will easily find us out under our disguise, as the prophet did Jeroboam’s wife. Be not careful merely of honour before the people, but of your hearts before God; and let conscience be dearer than credit [from men].”¹⁰⁵ Our Lord says something similar later in the Sermon on the Mount: “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness” (Mt. 6:22-23). “This pureness of heart, therefore, corresponds to ‘singleness.’ It means, if you like, ‘without folds’; it is open, nothing hidden. You can describe it as sincerity; it means single-minded, or single-eyed devotion.”¹⁰⁶ Man cannot serve two masters. He cannot live with two opposite goals. He cannot glorify God by living a life of daily repentance and mortification; and, at the same time, satisfy the lusts of the flesh. “[T]he sincere Christian serves God with the ‘whole heart’ (Psalm 119:2). Hypocrites have a double heart (Psalm 12:2). A heart [that thinks it is] for God and a heart for sin. ‘Their heart is divided’ (Hosea 10:2). God loves a broken heart, but not a divided heart. An upright heart is a whole heart. The full stream and torrent of the affections runs out after God. A sincere heart ‘follows God fully’ (Numbers 14:24).”¹⁰⁷

The biblical teaching on purity of heart raises some important questions. Are we living a divided or hypocritical life before God? Would we be willing to lay our whole life open before all to examine? Do we act one way in private and then another completely different manner in public? Do we cater our behavior ethically to suit those around us, acting one way with Christians and then another with unbelievers? The person who is truly pure in heart can have a transparency to their life that a hypocrite, backslider and weak believer cannot. The man who is pure in heart can be totally sincere at all times because the center of his personality and character is not defiled and devious. Because the inner spring of his heart is pure, he does not need to play out or pretend he is something that he truly is not. Some people are so adept at playing the hypocrite, at playing contrary roles on different occasions that they fool themselves. They are living in gross self-deception; they do not see their own hypocrisy. The Jewish religious leaders in our Lord’s day were such people.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus, 1973), 202.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Manton, *A Commentary on James* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1693] 1963), 372.

¹⁰⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:111.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 182.

Keeping the Heart Pure

We have noted that purity of heart is rooted in regeneration and exhibited by a sincere repentance. The man whose heart is pure is focused on Christ and does not lead a hypocritical or double-minded life. As we examine purity of heart as a continuous work, as an aspect of progressive sanctification, we need to center our attention on a number of things that nurture this purity.

First, purity of heart can only be maintained by a person who is humble in spirit. This beatitude builds on those which precede it. The man who is proud and does not acknowledge and mourn over his sins will not be pure in heart. Jesus told the Pharisees that because they believed they had no sin, their sin remained (Jn. 9:41). He rebuked the Laodiceans by saying, “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire” (Rev. 3:17-18).

An aspect of biblical humility is not to trust our own hearts because of the sin that remains in us. Even as Christians we do not fully know our own hearts (1 Cor. 4:3-5). In our unsearchable heart dwells the law of sin (Rom. 7:23) and thus we cannot fully discern our motives and deceitfulness. Because of sin our hearts are quick to excuse transgressions, to make all sorts of rationalizations in order to justify our thoughts and actions. Sinful pride is very dangerous because it can lead us down the path of sin with complete self-deception. It can also cause us to treat sin with completely inadequate half-way measures that are unacceptable to God. Therefore, if we are to be pure in heart we must be humble, not trust in ourselves and look to Jesus and His Word. As Watson notes, “A proud man admires himself; therefore he cannot deny himself. A humble man lays his mouth in the dust. He has lower thoughts of himself than others can have of him. He goes out of himself. He renounces himself. He opens to God as the flower does the sun. He will do what God will have him do. He will be what God will have him be. He is like melting wax. God may set what stamp and impression He will upon him. The humble man is the self-denier.”¹⁰⁸

Second, we can only maintain and increase heart purity through diligently examining our hearts and actions in the light of God’s holy Word. As we read, study and memorize Scripture, the Holy Spirit will apply what we read to our hearts so that we will more and more put off the old man and put on the new (Eph. 4:22). “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Are you exposing your thoughts, words and deeds to the perfect, penetrating light of Scripture? “Only God’s word can pierce through to this intangible realm, and it does so in a manner that is both dynamic and critical.... It is here, in this radical center of human self-hood, that the word of God does its work.”¹⁰⁹ It is here in the heart that God’s Word cuts away sin and purifies the spring of all that we are and do. To ignore Scripture, to neglect it, to not read it diligently is to ignore the great antidote for sin in the heart and life.

Third, knowing that we cannot trust ourselves, we need to reach out to God in prayer and repeatedly ask Him to search and purify our hearts. “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way” (Ps. 139:23-24). David had

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Duty of Self-Denial and Ten Other Sermons* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, [1675, 89] n.d.), 35-36.

¹⁰⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 166.

already searched his own heart. But, knowing the deceitfulness and fallibility of our own searching, he offered his heart to be examined by God and entreated Him to purge it of every corrupt mixture. David was so concerned about maintaining his relationship with God, of meeting God's approval in daily life, that he set his heart before God and said, "Don't let me deceive myself; examine me thoroughly; show me my faults; lead me in the right direction." We can pray for heart purity with faith, for we know that God can change hearts. "Out of an impure heart he can produce grace. Pray that prayer of David, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God' (Psalm 51:10). Most men pray more for full purses than pure hearts. We should pray for heart-purity fervently."¹¹⁰ We must combine our prayers for God to search our hearts and purify them with placing ourselves under the searchlight of God's perfect Word. With these two means of grace we will avoid a proud, antinomian spirit on the one hand; and a morbid introspection that leads to discouragement and depression in the other.

Fourth, if we are to have a pure heart, we must not hold on to sin with our heart. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). If we are serious about personal holiness, we must not hang on to any known sins. We must not make peace with secret sins that hinder our fellowship with God and hurt our prayer life. We should not even entertain sinful practices in our mind. Wicked fantasies must be cast out and locked out of our hearts. Toying with impurities is a sin of the mind that very often leads to a sin of the eye, mouth or hand. Our thought life will permeate and control our whole character. As Solomon says, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Pr. 23:7a). Wicked thoughts lead to evil acts and evil acts lead to wicked habits. Therefore, we should heed Paul's command: "Whatever things are true...noble...just...pure...lovely...[and] of good report...meditate on these things" (Phil. 4:8).

The person who fills his mind with the filth and trash of this world is corrupting his heart and not purifying it. Keeping our hearts pure will require a total commitment at every moment. We must seek heart purity right now in the present, otherwise holiness will elude us. This is what true repentance is all about. Do you commit yourself every day to at least attempt not to sin at all? Or, are you harboring sin in your heart? If you are, then you must repent immediately. Don't wait until tomorrow or next week, or next year or ten years from now, but do so now—this very moment. "Whoso covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall find mercy" (Pr. 28:13). Ask Christ to strengthen you with the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to bring "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

Fifth, we must by faith understand that, because of what Christ has done and our union with Him in His work of redemption, our hearts are no longer under the dominion of sin (Rom. 6:14). No matter how much we struggle with inner lusts and no matter how weak we may be, we must never give up or lose hope because the power of God is working in us. By faith we are to reckon ourselves to be dead to sin and alive to God. This is not some fantasy, but is a concrete, historical reality. The cross and the empty tomb are our victory over sin's guilt and power. We must look to Christ and His work every day if we are to nurture heart purity. This is a continuous process. "Observe carefully the tense of the verb in Acts xv.9: it is not 'purified their hearts by faith,' but 'purifying their hearts by faith'—a continuous experience."¹¹¹ God has given us the Holy Spirit to live within us and help us in the long process of sanctification. He gives us spiritual life and nurtures that life. The Spirit makes us alive to God, unites us to Christ and controls us through His infallible Word.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 195.

¹¹¹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

By faith we must form the habit of continually meditating on the fact that, in Christ, we are dead to sin and alive to God. Consequently, we must trust God's Word and reject sin's advances and emphatically rebuff the temptations of life. The fact that we are dead to sin and alive to God does not mean that we do nothing; that we "let go and let God," but that we look to and pray to Jesus for help and resist sin and temptation with all of our might. The work of sanctification and our continuing progress in heart purity requires diligent action based on faith. "If I believe Christ and all his merits are mine, how can I sin against him? We do not willingly injure those friends, who, we believe, love us. Nothing can have a greater force and efficacy upon the heart to make it pure than faith. Faith will move mountains, the mountains of pride, lust, envy."¹¹²

The Pure in Heart Shall See God

Those that are pure in heart are given a most amazing blessing, which is God Himself. They will see God. This seeing God has both a present and future fulfillment.

Those who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and have their hearts purified are given the ability to see God through the Scriptures in this life. They do not literally behold God who is pure Spirit, or look upon Him physically, but spiritually. The natural man cannot behold God's glorious attributes or understand God's love and mercy because such things, "are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see [comprehend, perceive] the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). If the unregenerate cannot see God's kingdom, then obviously they cannot behold God with the eye of faith. Those who have not had their hearts purified are blinded by the god of this age and thus do not embrace Christ (see 2 Cor. 4:3-4). When God's Spirit purifies our hearts, we turn from darkness and Satan to light and God (see Ac. 26:17-18). When Christ walked the earth and light shined in the darkness, "the darkness did not comprehend it" (Jn. 1:4-5). Without purity of heart man is blind and dead. He cannot see God and shall never be admitted into God's presence. This is only for the pure in heart, for those regenerated and purified by the Holy Spirit.

Do you want to see God? Then you must behold Jesus Christ and His work with the eye of faith. We can only come to God through Christ and we can only get to know God through His holy Word, the Bible. Pray that God would purify your heart and open your eyes to the perfection of Christ and His redemption. Those who reject the Savior; who choose to live in sin and follow this present evil age; whose souls are stained black with sin and the filth of hell will never come into God's favorable presence. They will not have a beatific vision of God, but rather a sight of supreme terror. "They shall see the flaming sword and the burning lake, but not the mercy seat."¹¹³ But those who trust in Christ will enjoy a peace and fellowship with God that surpasses our understanding.

The future fulfillment of this promise is our beholding of God in heaven. Theologians refer to this as the beatific vision. There are a number of things to note regarding this sight.

First, it does not mean that the glorified saints will gaze into the divine essence. God is a Spirit (Jn.4:24) and does not have a body. As a Spirit, He is invisible to the human eye (1 Tim. 1:17). Paul says that God dwells "in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). God is so awesome in infinite holiness that a sight of His true glory would completely overwhelm us, even with our sinless glorified bodies. Not even Moses, with whom

¹¹² Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 193.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 201.

God spoke repeatedly, saw God's face (cf. Ex. 33:18-23). When Moses asked God to show him His glory, God shielded Moses with His hand and only allowed him to get a glimpse of His back (Ex. 33:23). "The vision of Yahweh's glory—His full Personality—was impossible for Moses: but he might catch a glimpse of the 'afterglow'—a partial suggestion of what the whole radiance must be."¹¹⁴ Our minds, even in glory, are so small and finite in comparison to whom God really is that God will only reveal Himself to us in a way that we can comprehend and endure. The promise that we shall see God is true. However, it does not mean and cannot mean a full or complete vision of all that God is. Only God has that.

Second, it does mean that with our glorified bodily eyes we will directly behold Jesus Christ. When Philip asked our Lord to show him the Father, Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). The apostle John ends the prologue of his gospel with this amazing statement, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (Jn. 1:18). Those whose hearts are purified by the Holy Spirit will look upon the glorified Christ blazing brighter than the noon day sun. When Peter, James and John saw the transfiguration where the Savior's face shone like the sun and His clothes became as white as the light (Mt. 17:2), they saw only a small sliver of the Redeemer's glory. "There will be glory beyond hyperbole. If the sun were ten thousand times brighter than it is, it could not so much as shadow out this glory. In the heavenly horizon we behold beauty in its first magnitude and highest elevation. There we shall 'see the king in his glory' (Isaiah 33:17). All lights are but eclipses compared with that glorious vision."¹¹⁵ In Revelation, John describes the heavenly city that descends to earth: "But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light" (Rev. 21:22-23).

What a joy, comfort and blessing that day will be when we shall dwell in the loving presence of Christ. Are you ready to enter into God's glorious presence? Are you living a life that proves you really believe heaven is your final destination? Do you truly understand that all else, that everything in this present life will pale in comparison to that glorious day? This reality certainly ought to strengthen our faith and dedication to Jesus. With this hope before us we must promptly, sincerely and continuously mortify our flesh, deny ourselves and walk in faithful obedience.

Chapter 8: The Blessed Peacemakers

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God (Mt. 5:9).

In the seventh beatitude our Lord blesses the peacemakers. In this amazing statement Jesus once more sets the character of His true disciples in direct opposition to the common Jewish viewpoint at that time. The Jews in Christ's day were taught to despise the Gentiles. According to their carnal concept of the kingdom, the Messiah would come and would initiate a series of brilliant military victories against the surrounding Gentile nations. The Messiah, in their estimate, was a holy avenger who would subjugate the Romans, Greeks, Babylonians and Egyptians under the Jewish nation. The Jews would be established as the elite, the master race

¹¹⁴ A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus* (London: Methuen, 1908), 215-216.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 198.

destined by God to dominate the world. Those who stood in their path would be swept aside by force, by warfare and violence. This concept of the kingdom certainly appealed to the carnal mind. It catered to the Jewish concept of works righteousness and to their nationalistic pride. This kind of thinking was behind the Jewish multitude's attempt to force Jesus to be a political-military king after He multiplied the bread and fish (Jn. 6:15). The Savior, however, gives an emphatic "no" to all these Jewish expectations. He teaches that His disciples will have nothing to do with such a thing. They will be peacemakers, not war-mongers. The citizens of God's kingdom will be blessed for spreading peace, not violence, hatred and conflict. As with most other beatitudes this statement would have been a great shock to the Jewish worldview.

This beatitude tells us something very important about Christian character. The man who had his heart changed by the Holy Spirit, who believes in Christ and has peace with God will now strive to spread this peace among men. Biblical Christianity is a dynamic force for healing the enmity between God and men and the conflicts that occur between men. In our world of hatred, conflict, racism and constant warfare, the reconciliation that Jesus brings is our only hope for true, lasting peace.

What is Peace?

In order to understand what a peacemaker is, we first need to spend some time defining the term peace (Greek, *eirene*; Hebrew, *shalom*). In Hebrew the word "peace" has a rather wide range of meaning. It can refer to the end of hostilities, the cessation of war and the absence of ecclesiastical or civil disorder. It was also used positively to describe health, tranquility, soundness, safety and prosperity. "In the east when one man says to another, *Salaam*—which is the same—he does not mean that he wishes for the other man only the absence of evil things; he wishes for him the presence of all good things. In the Bible peace means not only freedom from all trouble; it means enjoyment of all good."¹¹⁶

According to Scripture, true peace is something achieved by Christ which results in the salvation of the whole man. When Jesus was born the hosts of heaven praised God saying, "On earth peace, goodwill toward men" (Lk. 2:14b). Before our Lord was born Zacharias prophesied that the newborn would bring salvation and remission of sins to the people; He would "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk. 1:79b). "Jesus summarized salvation as 'the things that make for peace' (19:42). He bequeathed salvation to His disciples when He left them, using the language of peace, saying 'my peace I give to you' and '...that in me you may have peace' (John 14:27; 16:33). He also used the same language of peace as a way of referring to salvation, when He appeared to His disciples after His resurrection (John 20:19, 21, 26)."¹¹⁷

Thus, we can understand why the gospel is equated with "preaching peace through Jesus Christ" (Ac. 10:36) and is called "the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15; Rom. 10:15). Paul says that Jesus came "and preached peace to you who were far off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2:17-18). The Savior has brought peace by His sacrificial death on the cross. The Redeemer's suffering propitiated God. Our Lord eliminated the guilt of sin and paid its penalty in full. The enmity that existed between God and sinful man is eliminated by the cross; the believing sinner has been reconciled to God. "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). Christ's work of redemption lies at the foundation of all true, genuine, lasting peace

¹¹⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:108.

¹¹⁷ T. M. Gregory, "Peace" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:667.

because He makes peace with God and by changing our hearts enables us to have peace with other men. Being at peace with God spiritually is only something that comes through God's grace. It is not a subjective feeling that both believers and unbelievers can enjoy, but is an objective fact established by Christ that can and should affect our emotional state and various relationships. Although this beatitude has more to do with Christian action or conduct than previous ones which focus on character, nevertheless only true Christians can spread biblical peace. True peace can never be divorced from the "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

There is no real peace for the wicked; but only a temporary, external ceasefire. Because the unregenerate man's heart is a cauldron of wickedness, he cannot make any progress towards peace with God and genuine harmony between mankind. Therefore, Jesus calls upon His disciples to spread the peace that He has achieved and its effects to those around them. The peace and harmony that the gospel spreads among men and nations has been one of its greatest evidences. The gospel turns warmongers into peace lovers; cannibals into gentle saints; wife beaters into wife lovers; thieves and violent drunks into happy, law-abiding citizens.

How to be a Peacemaker

Now that we have an understanding of how the Bible defines peace, let us turn our attention to what believers should do to make peace in this world. This involves a number of things.

First, it involves two preconditions in the peacemaker himself. (1) The person called to make peace must first be a Christian. A man who refuses to make peace with God through Jesus Christ cannot be a true peacemaker at all. That is because peacemaking can only originate in a peaceable spirit that flows from a regenerate heart. In other words, a person cannot promote peace until he first obtains it and loves it himself. The man who is called to make peace is first pure in heart. "The Scripture links these two together, pureness of heart and peaceableness of spirit. 'The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable' (James 3:17). 'Follow peace and holiness...' (Hebrews 12:14). And here Christ joins them together—'pure in heart' and peacemakers'..."¹¹⁸ The Bible teaches that all sin, trouble and warfare begin in the heart (Mt. 12:35); that out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, hatred, murder, unlawful violence and contention (Mt. 15:19). Therefore, as long as the spring is foul and poisoned there can be no real peace. Consequently peacemaking must begin with self-examination. We need to ask ourselves: Are we peaceable? Do we act like Christ's sheep or Satan's goats? Are our hearts pure before God or are they full of hatred and bitterness? If our hearts are full of malice, hatred, pride and envy, then obviously we are in no condition to be peacemakers. (2) A peacemaker must have a commitment to the Bible as God's infallible, sufficient Word and must only seek peace in accordance with truth. This point is important because many people seek peace by sacrificing the truth of Scripture. In the political realm this occurred in the 1930s with the policy of appeasement. Thus, some of the great powers in Europe gave Hitler part of Czechoslovakia in order to prevent war. In this process the Western leaders helped a wicked man to commit theft in order to stop what they considered a greater evil—war. But appeasement and compromise with evil does not really stop war, it only delays it. Nazi Germany was greatly strengthened by this policy and consequently when war came, England and France suffered greater calamities than would have occurred otherwise.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 204.

We see this same type of injustice and foolishness today in the policies of the United Nations. When there is conflict, the U. N., regardless of guilt or justice, asks for a ceasefire so peacekeeping troops can come in and patrol the area of conflict. Once again, not only is truth and justice denied, but war is merely postponed. All such appeasers and humanistic relativists do not take a stand when they should; but, in the name of peace follow unrighteous, unwise, immoral pragmatic policies. Such people may pat themselves on the back and may even win the Nobel peace prize, but in reality they leave the world a much more dangerous place to live. Therefore, the mere avoidance of war at any cost should not be confused with peace.

There are also many professing Christians who do not define peace in terms of biblical principles. For example, the whole ecumenical movement seeks peace by either compromising on doctrine or by ignoring doctrinal differences. They seek peace by sidestepping the truth. The result of such activities is that biblical terms and important theological concepts are redefined to mollify opposing parties. The goal is no longer to teach the “all things” that Jesus has commanded, but rather to accommodate contradictory and opposing opinions. The truth is rejected in the quest for consensus. Such peace is the peace of the spiritual graveyard, not the peace of which our Lord speaks. Jeremiah’s rebuke applies to all such men: “...and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely. They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace” (6:13-14). “Peace must not be bought with the sale of truth. Truth is the ground of faith, the rule of manners.... Truth is a ‘deposit’ or charge that God has entrusted us with. We trust God with our souls. He trusts us with his truths. We must not let any of God’s truth fall to the ground. Luther says, ‘It is better that heavens fall than that one crumb of truth perish.’”¹¹⁹

We must never ever compromise truth for the sake of peace or unity. To do so is to sacrifice biblical doctrine on the altar of sinful human pragmatism. Believers should seek to unite; but they should do so only on the basis of submission to Scripture alone. When Paul exhorted believers to greater unity he called them to the same mind (1 Cor. 1:10). He reminded them that believers are to have the mind of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:16). Everyone that makes peace with the adherents of serious false doctrine, (e.g., Romanists, Shepherdites, Federal Vision advocates, Arminians, Modernists, etc.), has rejected Scripture and has made a devil’s peace. Thankfully, the Reformers and martyrs of old were not like today’s pragmatists and compromisers.

Second, peacemaking involves telling people about the necessity and importance of receiving reconciliation with God through the cross. A moment ago we noted that all true peace begins with salvation and a regenerate heart. People at war with God will never achieve true peace within or among men. Therefore, peacemakers must be active in telling others about the person and work of Christ. Men are born with corrupt, cruel dispositions. They need the Holy Spirit to change their black, contentious hearts and make them peaceable, loving, kind and gentle. When God spoke concerning the power of the gospel to bring peace to this earth He said, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6). “He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3). As men believe the gospel and apply God’s Word to their lives, families, various institutions and even civil governments, this prophecy of peace will eventually find its fulfillment. No matter whether one holds to an amillennial or

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 207.

postmillennial interpretation of this passage, both views agree that it is Christ's work of redemption that results in such a comprehensive peace. The postmillennialist believes that the great leavening effect of the gospel will lead to the cessation of war before the second advent. The amillennialist believes that this prophecy receives its fulfillment at the second coming when all sin is completely removed. Both, however, attribute this great victory of peace to the blood of Christ and its effect upon history. The fulfillment of this prophecy began with the angel's announcement of "peace on earth"; continued with the first preaching of the gospel; and was guaranteed the moment Jesus died on the cross.

Genuine peace cannot be attained by human efforts, for only Jesus can give peace. Peace begins when Christ reigns in our hearts. The person who is born again seeks it, pursues it and points others to this blessed peace. The power of the gospel to change men's hearts from rage, hatred and contention to peace, gentleness and love is amazing.

The task of spreading peace through the propagation of the gospel is especially assigned to gospel ministers. Such men have been called by God to proclaim the reconciliation achieved between God and man by the sacrifice of Christ. "The heralds of the Cross are the ambassadors of peace, bidding sinners [to] throw down weapons of their warfare and enter into amnesty with God. They know there is no peace for the wicked, and therefore do they exhort them to acquaint themselves with God and be at peace (Job xxvi.21). Of them it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!' (Romans x.15)"¹²⁰

Third, a peacemaker actively pursues peace in all areas of life. He pursues peace in personal relationships by approaching people with a humble and meek spirit. With this attitude he regards others as more important than himself and thus is not contentious over insignificant matters. The Christian who is serious about making peace is also serious about communicating biblically with others. He does not judge a matter before he gathers all the appropriate information (Pr. 18:13). He treats other Christians with respect; carefully listens to what they have to say and asks thoughtful questions in order to clarify issues and avoid misunderstandings. Many conflicts between professing Christians arise from poor communication skills. The Christian peacemaker also learns to control his temper and remains calm when offended. His speech is gracious; as Paul says, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Col. 4:6). The believer speaks as one who has experienced and continues to experience the grace of God. He does not want to say anything that is unworthy of Christ who has saved him and instead seeks to edify the hearer. A gracious, humble approach to communication disarms anger, contention and conflict before it has an opportunity to break out.

Peacemaking begins with a peaceable conversation. As Christ's disciples, we must speak and act in a way that preserves peace with our brothers in Christ. We must also work diligently to recover peace when conflict arises. Paul tells us that, as an aspect of sanctification, this process is both negative and positive. He writes, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:31-32). Venomous speech that wounds the feelings of others leads to further sin and conflict. Words that cut and slice a person must be replaced with words that heal, edify and build up others. Destructive words that tear down must be replaced with constructive words that build up. Peacemaking is a natural consequence of our regeneration and sanctification.

¹²⁰ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 38.

The peacemaker also must learn to hold his tongue. As James says, “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (Jas. 1:19). The man who causes conflict doesn’t listen to others and likes to run off at the mouth. The peaceable man listens to others carefully, but takes his time in formulating thoughts and giving an answer. When he is offended, he does not merely spout forth the first thing that comes to mind which usually is tinged with anger and inappropriate. Rather, he meditates on a proper biblical response which disarms the antagonist and brings peace to the situation. When someone says something to us that is offensive, we must resist the temptation to respond in kind. We must remember our calling as peacemakers and take the time to come up with a biblical response instead of following our flesh, which desires to retaliate with something mean and harsh. In such situations we must call to mind the Solomon’s wisdom: “There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health” (Pr. 12:18). “*Wisdom* is the guiding principle; not loose talk, but a delicate discriminating tact, directing us to whom to speak, when and what to say, and how to say it.”¹²¹ “The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, and adds learning to his lips. Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones” (Pr. 16:23-24). In our communications do we take the time necessary to come up with a wise biblical response or do we speak too quickly and regret it later? It is better to say nothing at all than to say something destructive which brings further conflict and anger. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Pr. 25:11).

There are many professing Christians who do remain silent; but, instead of giving a biblical response, gossip about the person that has offended them and seek retaliation by ruining their reputation. This wicked behavior is very common in churches today and is one of the most destructive things of the peace of Zion that can happen. If someone wants to tear down another Christian, we must have nothing to do with that conversation. We must politely inform the gossip to follow Matthew 18 and other passages which relate to protecting our brother’s reputation. By refusing to listen to such unbiblical speech we will help others avoid gossip and will not be tempted to spread such peace-breaking, contentious information to others. “A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter” (Pr. 11:13). A talebearer likes to meddle in other people’s affairs. He is a busybody, a cruel trifler who tears others down behind their backs because it makes him feel better about himself. Such people are like rotten apples in the church. They do not exhibit the love of Christ or express genuine concern for others, but rather are malevolent troublemakers. People who habitually sow such discord need to question themselves as to whether they are really saved or are wolves in sheep’s clothing. Once again, let us heed the words of Solomon who says, “He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends” (Pr. 17:9). If it is a reality that peacemakers are blessed, then logically it follows that habitual peace-breakers are cursed. Then let us be diligently on our guard against gossip, slander, unjust anger, “intemperate zeal, and a quarrelsome spirit: the things of God are too sacred for wrangling.”¹²² The unity and witness of the church is too important for self-serving quarrels. “Highly important is it that we give earnest heed to the exhortation of ‘endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Eph. iv.3).”¹²³

¹²¹ Charles Bridges, ed. George F. Santa, *A Modern Study in the Book of Proverbs* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1978), 171.

¹²² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 38.

¹²³ Ibid.

A Christian can be a peacemaker by avoiding a judgmental spirit. When people aggravate smaller faults and make an issue out of every perceived wrong, no matter how small or insignificant, they cause unnecessary conflict with others. As the object of God's mercy, grace and love, Christians must be willing to overlook annoying things in others and forgive the various non-scandalous offenses that occur. Peter sets forth this point beautifully when he writes, "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8).

Moreover, we should actively seek peace by obeying Jesus' command to seek out any Christian who we believe has something against us and seek reconciliation with him (see Mt. 5:23-24). The peacemaker is a man who takes immediate action to put out the flames of discord before they spread. He does not wait for the other person to come to him. He does not procrastinate or ignore the situation. And he doesn't gossip about it with others. He takes the initiative and does everything he can through biblical communication to put to rest any misunderstandings; to bring to light any problem or offenses; and bring to pass a full restoration of the relationship. This task is not always easy. Sometimes people do not listen. Further, there are professing Christians who simply do not want to be reconciled. Also, in the process, we may need to confess our sin, which requires humility. Sometimes this process involves rebuking a person who is holding a grudge based on false information or gossip. In any case, if we are serious about being peacemakers it must be done.

Another biblical method of making peace is to do something good to those who are in opposition, who do not expect or deserve kind treatment at all. Jesus said, "Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). One of the best ways to disarm an enemy is to make it difficult and irrational for them to hate you. If they abuse you verbally, respond with a soft, wise, kind answer (Pr. 15:1; 25:15). In other words, go out of your way to actively make peace; do not respond in a manner that allows the conflict to continue. This does not mean that you are dishonest or phony, but that you answer with wisdom and kindness. For example, after someone has abused you and accursed you falsely you could respond, "John, I am sorry you feel that way. I did not intend to hurt your feelings. Why don't you come over for lunch so that we can work this misunderstanding out?" This involves humility, patience and a friendly approach. It may run counter to our emotions and ego, but it is the biblical thing to do. It is the only way to produce peace.

Finally, we must not forget that peacemaking always begins with ourselves—with a diligent application of God's Word to our hearts. To be a peacemaker we first must be serious about our own personal sanctification. The reason for this is simple. James, writing under divine inspiration, attributes the beginning of all wars and tumults to our corrupt hearts. "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask" (Jas. 4:1-2). Peacemaking begins with personal piety. The more Christians seek godliness, the more peace they will attain. So much conflict in churches today is a direct result of pride, selfishness, ego and worldliness. The godly man is humble and willing to yield to others. He doesn't pick an unnecessary fight, but rather goes to God in prayer and waits upon Him.

Believers must also pursue peace in their family relationships. Peace in the family is especially the responsibility of the father or covenant head. This involves the principles already noted and using one's knowledge of Scripture to deal with conflicts in the home. Most conflict

that occurs in families can be dealt with by learning to attack problems instead of each other. When married couples fight, they usually become defensive, begin blame-shifting and attack each other instead of the problem. In such circumstances arguments can spiral out of control with yelling, abusive speech and name-calling. The covenant head must be a peacemaker in such situations by stopping the argumentation and insisting on analyzing the problem biblically. To do this he must assume a position of humility and be willing to stop trying to win an argument in order to identify the sin or offense that led to such confrontation. A peacemaker doesn't ignore a problem or walk away; such behavior only postpones conflict and makes it worse. He doesn't remain silent; hold resentment inside and pretend everything is alright when it isn't. But, rather, he deals with sin in a calm, reasoned, biblical manner and does not stop until a genuine biblical reconciliation is achieved. The person who follows appeasement by giving in to sin in family relationships is not seeking peace, but is merely postponing a greater, more difficult conflict down the road. When husbands and wives approach their relationship in a humble, meek, Christian manner and are open, honest and biblical in their treatment of each other, their relationship is peaceful and prosperous. If there is to be peace in families, then the various sins, problems and irritations that arise daily must be dealt with biblically and eliminated daily.

Christians are called upon to work for peace in the church. If the church is to be the example of love to the world and a salt and light to culture, she must also be a haven and example of peace. "Peaceableness among Christians is a powerful loadstone to draw the world to receive Christ. Not only gifts...and preaching may persuade men to embrace the truth of the gospel, but peace and unity among the professors of it."¹²⁴ Let us pray and work for the peace of Zion. Sadly, churches today are often terrible examples in this regard. Because of pride, ignorance and sin many congregations are full of conflict, contention and bitter feuds. This tragic situation can only be remedied and prevented by obedience to the following biblical principles.

Perhaps the most important principle to follow is Matthew 18. In addition to all the biblical verses regarding gossip, tale-bearing, revealing secrets and slander, our Lord gave additional instructions to the church on how to handle sin and perceived sin. Christ insists that personal offenses (i.e. sins that are not public) are to remain private and are to be handled by the person involved alone. This simple principle is brilliant in that sin is not ignored but is handled in a biblical manner; yet, the accused party's reputation is preserved and there is no opportunity for the problem to become an issue for conflict in the church. Although this is the explicit teaching of the Savior Himself, what usually happens in such situations is that gossip spreads throughout the church; people add their own spin on what occurred; and people take sides on the issue. The person involved, whether guilty or not, has his reputation ruined and is tempted to lash out at those responsible for the whole sordid mess. People who do not follow Matthew 18 are troublemakers who are guilty of serious sin.

Many church splits in evangelical and Reformed churches can be traced back to gossip and slander relating to the pastor or elders. The devil uses such people to destroy profitable ministries or at least damage them. "The tale-bearer carries reports up and down. The devil sends his letters by this post. The tale-bearer is an incendiary. He blows the coals of contention."¹²⁵ That is why Matthew 18 exists and why God requires two credible witnesses before any accusation can be made against a pastor or elder (see 1 Tim. 5:19). If these passages were faithfully followed, the church would be a haven of peace in a world of turmoil. For this reason

¹²⁴ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 212.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 213.

we must studiously avoid listening to any accusations or reports of secondhand stories if these steps have not first been faithfully followed.

A believer can be a peacemaker in the church when called upon to act as a witness in a dispute (e.g., the second step of Matthew 18). When there are people at variance with each other, it is our duty to be objective, sympathetic, rational and especially biblical in our attempt to bring such conflict to a resolution. In such circumstances, we must set aside prejudices and strive for objectivity in seeking biblical justice.

Christians must also work for the unity of the church. Various denominations have arisen because of doctrinal differences and because of sin and pride. We can work for the visible unity of the church by spreading the doctrines of grace and biblical worship and by praying for a revival of the attainments of the second Reformations in Scotland and Holland. This, of course, does not mean that we seek unity at the expense of doctrine or truth; but, rather, that we seek unity by advocating the truth. Our Lord rebuked sectarianism and said, "Have peace with one another" (Mk. 9:50). Denominations that are doctrinally the same, that do not seek unity are following pride, ego and personality instead of Christ on this particular issue.

Christians should be peacemakers by working for political peace; that is, peace in cities and between states and nations. This task is *not* accomplished by imitating the left—carrying signs, engaging in protest or violating the law; but, by being a witness for Christ in all areas of life. This involves everything discussed so far, such as personal sanctification, being peaceable with individuals, promoting peace in family life and working for the peace and unity of the church. It also involves the long term goal of the establishment of biblical Christianity in all the various levels of civil government. The modern practice by our civil government of antinomian pluralism and ethical relativism is a philosophical platform for constant warfare and conflict. This is true because, in such a system, man acts as God, determining for himself what is good and what is evil. Without the ethical absolutes and restraint of God's moral law and the influence of Christ's gospel on men's hearts, warfare among men is inevitable. Currently in America, the divisions between the various political and special interest groups have grown sharper and the speech more vehement because secular humanism with its irrational, nihilistic view of reality does not provide a fixed reference point for discussion and debate. Without a vision the people perish (Pr. 29:18). Peace needs the anchor of God's Word and the influence of Christ's gospel.

Therefore, the best way to work for peace is to plant churches and spread the truth of God's Word among the masses. While this is occurring, churches can respectfully petition the civil magistrate and all those in authority to repent of unjust, ungodly laws (e.g., abortion on demand, assisted suicide, sodomite rights, etc.). Also, believers should do everything they can to elect godly Christians to office who place Christ and the glory of God above their own power and popularity. Peace is a great blessing for any nation. However, we must never forget that only God can give a true lasting peace. "He maketh peace in thy borders, and filleth them with the finest of wheat" (Ps. 147:14). The sound of the preaching of the gospel, attended by the power of the Holy Spirit, will drive out the roaring of the cannon and the thunder of the bomb.

Someone may object to our contention that only Christ can bring true peace by referring to Matthew 10:34-36: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'...." Note, however, that the point of this passage is not that Christians are to go about causing trouble, but rather that conflict would be the inevitable result of the gospel. This is the conflict caused by unbelievers, who became angry with those that abandon their idolatry and flee to the Savior. The unbelievers who hate

God are the troublemakers, not Christians. Further, the teaching of the New Testament is consistent throughout, that believers are never to seek conflict or be responsible for it. “On the contrary, we are called to peace, we are to ‘actively’ seek peace, we are to ‘strive for peace with all men,’ and so far as it depends on us, we are to ‘live peaceably with all’ [cf. Rom. 12:18].”¹²⁶

Beloved, are we the peacemakers that Jesus has called us to be? Do we carefully follow Matthew 18 or do we spread gossip and discord in the body of Christ? Do we do everything we can do in the political realm to stem the anti-Christian statism and barbarism that is increasingly gripping our nation? Do we support the doctrinal attainments of the reformation or do we compromise with declension and apostasy in the name of a humanistic peace? Do we tell our neighbors about the peace that Jesus has achieved between God and man by His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection? In this wicked, chaotic world full of wars, conflicts, terrorism and family disintegration, there is much that we can do and must do as Christ’s peacemakers.

The Peacemaker’s Blessing

Our Lord’s great blessing pronounced upon peacemakers is that they will be called “the children of God” (Mt. 5:9, KJV). The Greek word used here is not *ta tekna*, “the children,” but *whioi*, “sons.” “When the article is omitted in Greek, the emphasis is on kind or quality.”¹²⁷ Thus the New King James translation, “they shall be called sons of God,” is a better rendering. The point of this passage is not our adoption into God’s family, as important as that is; but, rather, the blessing of being made like God who is the great peacemaker in sending Jesus into the world. This statement by Christ is a very common way for a Jew to express Himself. “Hebrew is not rich in adjectives, and often when Hebrew wishes to describe something, it uses not an adjective, but the phrase son of... plus an abstract noun. Hence a man may be called *a son of peace* instead of *a peaceful man*. Barnabas is called *a son of consolation* instead of *a consoling and comforting man*.”¹²⁸ This beatitude says that peacemakers are blessed because in working for peace they are imitating their Father in heaven. They are engaging in a God-like work.

When Christians spread the gospel and work to expand the kingdom of God on this earth, they glorify God by fulfilling His will. Everyone who has been regenerated by the Spirit has a holy desire to be at peace with all men and wants all people to embrace the prince of peace. It is such a great title to be called “sons of God” because it indicates that, by God’s grace, we have been given the privilege of entering into the sphere of God’s own work of peace on earth. There is a sense in which all believers are God’s co-workers. By our faith and the good works that proceed from our faith, as well as our gratitude to Jesus, we become the Savior’s ambassadors of peace everywhere we go. Believers are God’s holy “peace corps” who are leavening this world with the peace of Christ. God not only owns us as sons, but also transforms us into peacemakers. Are you zealous to spread the peace of the cross? Are you a walking picture of the peace of the gospel? Are you endeavoring to be a contributor to the peace of Zion? If you are, then you are greatly blessed of God.

¹²⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 50.

¹²⁷ Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 3.

¹²⁸ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:109.

Chapter 9: Blessing and Persecution

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you (Mt. 5:10-12).

In the eighth and last beatitude, our Lord turns his attention from what true believers are (i.e. their character) to what genuine disciples will experience as a consequence of their righteous condition and behavior. As all the beatitudes were shocking to worldly logic and current Jewish sensibilities, this beatitude was the most shocking of all. After a series of statements that would have perplexed most Jews in Jesus' day, this would be akin to a knockout blow. It would have had a tremendous impact on the hearers who believed that the Messiah would bring great prosperity and the enjoyment of peace, wealth, happiness and honor. After setting forth what a disciple must be, the Savior says that people who follow Him and conform to His teaching will suffer persecution. Instead of honor they will receive hatred. Instead of wealth, luxury and ease the disciples can expect slander and opposition.

By way of introduction, there are a number of things to note regarding this last beatitude. First, (as noted) this beatitude is somewhat different than the rest in that the others speak directly of Christian character, while this one describes what happens to those who possess this character. It is amazing how our Lord places the cost of true discipleship in the forefront of this sermon. He strongly discourages pretenders and those who do not really believe in Him. This methodology is totally contrary to today's message of easy-believism and the prosperity gospel.

Second, the fact that this beatitude follows upon the one about peacemaking is noteworthy. The Christian works and prays to bring peace in this world. Yet, the message of the gospel and a sanctified life often bring conflict, hatred and persecution. The Christ we follow is rejected and hated by this world. The clash of two opposite, irreconcilable world and life views leads inevitably to persecution.

Third, the promise of blessing in this beatitude (possession of the kingdom of heaven) is identical to the first beatitude. Jesus starts with the kingdom of heaven and also ends with it. This stylistic device (called an "inclusion") shows us that all the blessings that Christ gives us ultimately flow from being a member of His kingdom. The Savior emphasizes the spiritual nature of His kingdom because everyone must understand what the kingdom really is if they are going to trust the Mediator and accept the sacrifice and suffering that true discipleship entails.

Fourth, unlike the other beatitudes, this beatitude contains two verses of application. In verses 11 and 12 Christ suddenly introduces the second person plural to remind His disciples that this benediction especially applies directly to them. This would remind the apostles that all the beatitudes are not merely theoretical, but immensely practical; that persecution is what they must expect if they continue in his service. "This full elaboration of the final beatitude casts a special glamour over it making one welcome persecution when it comes."¹²⁹

As we study this beatitude, we want to examine: why believers are persecuted; what this persecution involves; and the blessing that attends the persecution of the godly.

¹²⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 194.

Persecution for Righteousness Sake

The persecution that Jesus speaks of is not just any persecution, but persecution that is particular to Christians. It is persecution “for righteousness sake.” The term “righteousness” refers to obedience to God’s revealed will that flows from a regenerate heart dedicated to serving Christ. It is godliness that is a result of a saving relationship to the Redeemer. Unbelievers may engage in good works outwardly, but such works do not flow from a sincere love of the Savior. Thus, to “‘suffer for righteousness’ sake, is synonymous with suffering for Christ’s sake; suffering ‘for the Gospel’s sake;’ ‘suffering as a Christian.’”¹³⁰ This assertion is supported by our Lord’s elaboration on this point in verse 11 where the persecution and slander received is “for My sake.” The righteousness that comes from the gospel divides men. Men are either drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit and are sanctified, or they express hatred and hostility toward the Savior by hating His saints. Thus our Lord taught, “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. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also” (Jn. 15:18-20). Similarly Paul writes, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12).

Given our Lord’s reason for persecution, there are a number of things that we must not confuse with suffering for righteousness sake. First, we must not regard suffering for being obnoxious, purposely objectionable and unlawfully zealous as persecution for righteousness sake. For example, the man who has been hired by a company to do a certain task, but instead spends his time disrupting work to witness about Christ and thus is fired has not really been persecuted for obedience to the gospel. The company is in business to be productive and make a profit and any person who interferes with productivity is not submitting properly to authority or doing his job. Many of us have met people who have been fired from a number of jobs for disrupting work by witnessing. These people usually think they are being persecuted as Christians, when the reality is that they are a bad witness for Christ. A good witness does a good job at work and then finds time to witness at the appropriate time.

Further, the person who speaks about the gospel to people in an insulting, obnoxious manner is not commended by the New Testament. The believer is to be humble, meek, gentle and kind as he presents the truths of Scripture. If unbelievers are to be offended they should be offended by the gospel and not our arrogant or objectionable presentation of it. This point, of course, does not mean that boldness and admonition is to be avoided, but that our own defects, sins and anger must not obscure the message of the gospel that we want to convey. The person who witnesses to the local chapter of the Hell’s Angels and tells them that they are stupid idiots is not using wisdom or discretion.

Second, this beatitude does not speak about people who are persecuted for various non-Christian causes. This would include the persecution of all non-Christian cults (e.g., Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.) and persecution for various political causes. For example, people who work for democracy in China or Cuba are often imprisoned and tortured. These people, however, are not being persecuted for Christ’s sake. People who are killed while working for the Peace Corp or for famine relief in war-torn Africa are not blessed by God. This

¹³⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:144.

does not mean that famine relief is bad, but only that the enmity must be directed against Christ and His cause, not some secular humanistic organization. People often attempt to make martyrs out of people like Robert Kennedy or Martin Luther King. Neither man, however, was serving Christ; neither man's death had anything to do with Christianity. They were martyrs to secular humanism and pluralism, not the word of God.

Third, this beatitude certainly does not apply to Christians who suffer because they have done something wrong. As Peter says, "If you are reproached for the name, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter" (1 Pet. 4:14-16). When a prominent minister is caught in adultery and the matter is repeatedly shown on television and the internet, he only has himself to blame. Professing Christians who suffer because they have done something wrong and attribute it to persecution are guilty of blame-shifting.

Now that we have removed some of the confusion regarding suffering for righteousness sake, let us return to the reason for persecution and examine this topic in more depth. Why is it so common for unbelievers to hate and persecute Christians? What is it about Christian righteousness that so offends unbelievers? There are a number of things regarding the Christian that unbelievers dislike and even despise.

First, unbelievers hate a sincere believer's holy life of separation from the world. Peter writes, "For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lust, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you" (1 Pet. 4:3-4). Because Christians have repented and turned their backs on their old unconverted lifestyle of scandalous sins, vices, perversions and idolatry, the heathen are perplexed and angered. They believe that Christians are complete fools, giving up what they regard as great pleasures. They no doubt are angered because such repentance implicitly condemns the heathen manner of life as vain and wicked. When a person decides to follow Christ, he will no longer run with the crowd. He must part company with old friends. He must repeatedly refuse invitations to go out and party as before. This leads first to astonishment in his old companions and astonishment soon turns to hatred and rage. Throughout history Christians have been accused of being unsociable, boring snobs. The Puritans especially have been vilified as people who just refused to have any fun. "[W]hen the Christian prefers cleanness to filth, righteousness to sin, the people of the world speak evil of him."¹³¹

Persecution arises because the heathen do not like it when men part company with their corruptions. They strongly desire to have others infected with their sins so that there is no one to make them feel ashamed for their evil way of life. Their god is their sinful lust and the separated Christian stands as a public witness against their sin. "Profane men cannot abide that the godly should be a credit and reputation beside them, partly because of their natural enmity against them, Gal. 4:29, and partly because their way is a shame and reproof to theirs, as Christ's was to his enemies, John 7:7."¹³² Therefore, they spread lies to damage the reputation of the godly. They try to lift themselves up by falsely putting the Christian down.

¹³¹ Gordon H. Clark, *A Commentary on First and Second Peter* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, [1967] 1993), 138.

¹³² Alexander Nisbet, *1 and 2 Peter* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth [1658] 1982), 161.

Second, the ungodly hate Christians because of their loyalty to Christ and His Word. The Christian life is a battle and believers are Jesus' soldiers. Our lot in life is to live and teach the supremacy of Christ over all things. And what could be more offensive to the natural man than the teaching that his beliefs are all wrong; that his whole life is deceit and vanity; that his greatest love is nothing but idolatry; that he must acknowledge his sin, lay down the weapons of his warfare and flee to Christ as Lord and Savior? The ungodly are led by the worldview of Satan and their loyalty is to darkness rather than light. The gospel is despised as foolishness and the messengers of the gospel are hated because they have exposed the great lie of all unbelief. "The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (Jn. 3:19-20).

When men are faced with the light (without a work of God upon their heart), they always choose the darkness. "They shut themselves up to the darkness. They cut themselves off from the light. Why do they do this? Because 'their works were evil.' Immersed in wrongdoing they have no wish to be disturbed. They refuse to be shaken out of their comfortable sinfulness. So they reject the light that comes to them."¹³³ Thus, the unbelieving scientist who accepts evolution does not just disagree with the Christian creationist. No, he hates him. He mocks him. He wants to verbally destroy him. Similarly, the homosexual finds it necessary to hate and attack every form of Bible-believing Christianity. This is where the slander, lies and persecution come in. The sodomite rights movement must first lie about Christians (e.g., Christians who are faithful are full of hate speech). Then they do everything within their power to get the civil magistrate to shut off the light of the gospel. This involves direct persecution by the state. Because unbelievers hate the light and want to shut it off, they are always looking for ways to mock and attack believers. They look for hypocrisy, inconsistency, sin and then seize upon them and blow them all out of proportion. They attack the message by attacking the messenger. The unbeliever hates and opposes Christians because their message and their lives expose him to the light.

Before we end our discussion as to why believers are persecuted, we would do well to briefly consider God's sovereign purpose in allowing His church to suffer. It is quite ironic that severe persecution has often indirectly been a great blessing to the church. This is true because God uses the affliction of persecution to purify His people. Persecution not only drives unsound, carnal professors of religion out of the church (cf. Mt. 13:20-21), but also causes the righteous to cling more tightly to Christ and His Word. "It purges our pride, impatience, love of the world. God washes his people in bloody waters to get out their spots and make them look white (Daniel 12:10)."¹³⁴ Under persecution the genuine character of a man's faith is revealed. In suffering for Christ we demonstrate our loyalty to Him. "A true saint carries Christ in his heart and the cross on his shoulders."¹³⁵

What Does Persecution Involve?

When our Lord amplifies this beatitude in verses 11 and 12, He switches to the second person plural, looks directly at His disciples and tells them what will happen to them. Thus, although these verses apply to believers throughout history they especially apply to the apostles and the first Christians. Jesus tells the disciples what their persecution will involve.

¹³³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 233.

¹³⁴ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 262.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 269.

The word persecute has the sense of “to make to run or flee, put to flight, drive away”¹³⁶ and thus the churches in Jerusalem “were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Ac. 8:1); and can have the sense of “to harass, trouble, molest.”¹³⁷ Saul pursued Jewish believers with the intent of “dragging off men and women, committing them to prison” (Ac. 8:3). Obviously there are degrees of persecution and the kind of persecution that Christians presently experience in America is nothing like the persecutions of Nero, Stalin, the papacy and certain Islamic nations where believers are pursued until they are tortured and killed. If we include the parallel statement in Luke’s account, the Savior uses the following terms to describe what persecution will involve.

Persecution first begins with hatred. Luke writes, “Blessed are you when men hate you” (6:22). In non-Christian nations and cultures when a person publicly confesses Jesus and commits himself to the biblical world and life view, unbelievers are often filled with hostility and hatred. Persecution always begins in the unbeliever’s heart. Hatred is the attitude that lies behind evil words and acts toward God’s people. It is the foul spring from which persecution flows. The wicked hate God and Christ and must suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Thus, they despise those who profess it, live it and especially preach it. They disdain God’s holy law and hate all those who stand up for its obligation and authority; who attempt to follow it out of gratitude for salvation, a means of sanctification and a rule for civil order. They hate Christians because the holy gospel convicts and condemns them both in their beliefs and in their lives.

The Jews hated Christ because of His doctrine and life: His teaching on His divinity and equality with the Father (Jas. 5:17-26; 8:57-59; 10:28-39); the abiding nature of the moral law as opposed to their additions and human traditions (cf. Mt. 5:17ff.); His doctrine that men are justified by faith in Him apart from the works of the law (Jn. 8:24); His refusal to accept or participate in corrupt man-made ordinances (Mt. 15:3-9); His impeccable character; and the performance of signs and wonders that proved His authority. The Jews did not hesitate to heap insults on the Redeemer, addressing Him as follows: “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (Jn. 8:48). Hatred of believers always begins with a hatred of Christ. “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you” (Jn. 15:18).

Second, persecution involves exclusion. “Blessed are you when men hate you and when they exclude you” (Lk. 6:22). The term “exclude” refers to social, religious and economic exclusion. The first generation of Christians often suffered excommunication or complete expulsion from the synagogue for their belief in Jesus (cf. Jn. 9:34). Our Lord’s statement is likely an allusion to Isaiah 66:5: “Your brethren who hated you, who cast you out for My name’s sake.” Persecution usually begins with apostates because they cannot tolerate the righteous and want nothing to do with them. The first Protestants suffered severe persecution at the hands of the wicked and corrupt Roman Catholic Church. Today, in America, strict Bible-believing Christians are ridiculed and mocked by the civil government, the news media, universities and Hollywood. They are the object of derision by an evil, adulterous and perverse generation.

Believers also often suffer persecution by types of economic exclusion. We read about such exclusion in Revelation 13:17, which says those who do not receive the mark of the beast on the hand or forehead will not be able to buy or sell products in the market place. Given the time indicators and context this likely means that those who do not hold an allegiance to Caesar as divine with the mind and hand would have their livelihoods removed and their businesses closed. Also, in the Roman Empire, people who made and sold various goods usually belonged

¹³⁶ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1901] 1977), 1378.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

to guilds. These guilds usually required participation in some form of cultic ritual, which included eating the meat of an animal sacrificed to the guild's god. This would render membership in such guilds as antithetical to the Christian faith. Thus, when rank paganism is an integral aspect of culture, Christians are forced to exist on the fringe of society.

Third, those who persecute believers "revile" them. The word translated "revile" in the KJV is *oneidizo*, meaning to reproach or upbraid. The word reproach means to accuse, blame or censure someone for a fault, for something committed that is bad. In cases of persecution the accusations are always false. The Jews accused Jesus of being demon-possessed, a bastard, a Samaritan, a false prophet, a liar, a glutton and a drunkard. All of these accusations were, of course, completely false. This is persecution by the tongue. Those who are not willing to murder Christians seek to murder a believer's reputation. The wicked love to reproach the righteous. "In Acts xxviii.22, *the sect* is represented as *everywhere spoken against*. Slander is a part of the Christian's portion. He must endure the persecution of the *tongue*. He must expect to be misrepresented, both as to his principles and his practice."¹³⁸ The ungodly do this to seek to justify their wicked behavior.

Receiving reproach and slander was a common experience for believers for almost three centuries in the Roman Empire. Roman pagans made all sorts of disgusting accusations against believers. Because early Christians often rescued abandoned babies and because of the symbolism of the Lord's body and blood in the holy supper, believers were accused of sacrificing infants and of eating their flesh. The Christian love feasts or fellowship meals were twisted by the heathen into sex orgies. The Christian view of the second coming and the kingship of Christ was said to be revolutionary incendiarism. Because Christians did not bow down to any statue or idol they were even accused of being atheists. Thus, the most gentle, law-abiding people in the Empire were viewed as dangerous, rebellious and unethical.

Fourth, closely related to reproach is slander. In Matthew's account we read, "Blessed are you...when they say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake" (5:11). Luke writes, "They...cast out your name as evil" (6:22). Thus, unbelievers engage in malicious gossip and slanderous public accusations against believers. Early in Jesus' ministry the Pharisees said of our Lord's followers, "But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed" (Jn. 7:49). Later, the Jews would slander Paul's doctrine accusing him of teaching: "Let us do evil that good may come?" (Rom. 3:8); and, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1). The papists also accused the Reformers of teaching antinomianism which was completely false. Whether through everyday gossip or through various witnesses, judges, corrupt church officials or civil magistrates, the Christian must expect slander. "Note, There is no evil so black and horrid, which, at one time or other has not been said falsely of Christ's disciples and followers."¹³⁹ Apostates and unbelievers will treat godly Christians as evil, as someone whom they do not associate with. They attack the believer's good name in order to strike at the very person and in doing so they are really lashing out at Christ Himself.

Thus, we see that being hated, ridiculed, mocked, slandered, excluded, abused and persecuted is the normal lot of every sincere Christian. Suffering for Christ's sake is a badge of true discipleship. It indeed is a privilege and honor. "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Ac. 14:22). "For to you has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:29). Thomas Watson writes, "Though Christ died to take the curse from us, yet not to take the cross from us. Those stones which are

¹³⁸ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 195.

¹³⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:52.

cut for a building are first under the saw and hammer to be hewed and squared. The godly are called 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5). And they must be hewn and polished by the persecutor's hand that they may be fit for the heavenly building. The saints have no charter of exemption from trials. Though they be ever so meek, merciful, pure in heart, their piety will not shield them from sufferings. They must hang their harp on the willows and take the cross. The way to heaven is by way of thorns and blood."¹⁴⁰

The persecution that Christians receive in our day in the United States, Canada, Western Europe and places like Australia is obviously not as severe as what Christians experienced under the Jews and pagan Romans, yet it is real nevertheless. The almost universal abandonment of the Christian Sabbath has shut believers off from many economic opportunities (e.g., retail, restaurants, sports, real estate, many sales jobs, etc.). Today, the hatred and ridicule of Bible-believing Christians is acceptable, popular and widespread in our culture. Pagan relatives are often highly offended by a Christian's strict biblical family life. People at work often see Christians as prudish, out-dated idiots. Further, as Western nations' law systems become more consistent with their humanistic, secular, positivistic and evolutionary concepts of law, countries will (some already have) pass laws that force believers to break the law and place themselves in jeopardy of prison and large fines (e.g., hate speech laws or laws that forbid Christians from calling homosexuality a sin and laws that would force Christian churches and organizations to hire sex perverts [e.g., homosexuals, cross-dressers, "trans-gendered,"] etc.). Also, we must not forget that far more Christians were murdered for their faith under communist regimes in the twentieth century than all the believers who died during the three hundred years of pagan Roman rule and the thousands of Christians murdered by the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and Reformation period.

The Blessing that Attends Persecution

Jesus says that those who are persecuted for righteousness sake are blessed, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:10). When our Lord expands and applies this beatitude He adds, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt. 5:12). There are a number of things to note about this blessing.

First, Jesus comes full circle and returns to the blessing of the first beatitude: those who are persecuted for Christ's sake already possess the kingdom of heaven. Salvation is theirs. They are justified, sanctified and adopted into God's own family. Those who have lost all because of their loyalty to Jesus have gained much more. "All the grace and the glory that results when God in Christ is recognized and obeyed is theirs even now."¹⁴¹ "Let persecutors do their utmost to rob the godly of all that they have, yet they cannot rob them of heaven, for it is said, the kingdom of heaven is theirs."¹⁴² Their homes may be destroyed. They may be banished, imprisoned or even tortured and slain. Yet, heaven and paradise is theirs. They are in possession of a place where they will never again shed tears, or suffer pain, or experience hardship or persecution. We must remember the words of Paul when we suffer for Christ: "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). We see that one of the ways that believers are to cope with trials and tribulations is to have a future

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 259.

¹⁴¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 280.

¹⁴² David Dickson, *Matthew*, 48.

orientation. The unbeliever lives by sight and cares about present pleasures and this world's glories. But the Christian looks beyond this present world and sees heaven. He makes sacrifices now and suffers now with the faith that the kingdom of God is his and can never be taken away.

Second, those who suffer persecution shall receive a great reward in heaven. Believers who suffer persecution not only possess heaven, but shall also receive great rewards from the Savior for their suffering. These are rewards of grace, for it is the power of the Holy Spirit which enables us to endure suffering and the rewards we shall receive far transcend our service. As we are persecuted we must focus on our love for Christ and the fact that in the future, out of present sight, we have eternal heavenly rewards. These rewards are not like earthly treasures which moths, rust and thieves can destroy, but instead are completely secure. Jesus promises us that when we suffer and have our liberties and even life itself removed from us that He will abundantly recompense us for all the difficulties we have experienced for Him.

Third, persecution for righteousness sake is an indication of the genuine character of our faith and of our true brotherhood with the holy prophets who suffered before us: "For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt. 5:12). This point is especially addressed to the apostles and ministers of the gospel who follow the prophets in being persecuted for preaching against sin in the nation and apostasy among God's people. When ministers are faithful in applying the Word of God to all areas of life, they are fiercely attacked by the heathen, by wicked and heretical professors of religion and by false teachers. "Moses was reviled again and again (Exodus v.11; xiv.11; xvi.2; xvii.2; etc.). Samuel was rejected (1 Samuel viii.5). Elijah was despised (1 Kings xviii.17) and persecuted (1 Kings xix.2)."¹⁴³ According to the church fathers, Isaiah was sawn in half with a saw (see Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*; and Heb. 11:37). The prophet Jeremiah was repeatedly persecuted and abused (cf. Jer. 12; 20; 26; 36; 37; 39; 43). According to Jewish tradition he was forced by the Jews to go to Egypt and then stoned to death by them. Micaiah was evil spoken of, beaten and cast into prison (2 Chron. 18:17-26). Both Ezekiel and Daniel were persecuted (Ezek. 2:6; 20:49; 33:31, 32; Dan. 3:24ff.). Amos was falsely accused of conspiracy and forced to flee (Amos 7:10-13). "Nehemiah was oppressed and defamed (Neh. iv.). The Savior Himself, the faithful witness of God, was put to death by the people to whom He ministered. Stephen was stoned, Peter and John cast into prison, James beheaded, while the entire course of Paul was one long series of bitter and relentless persecutions."¹⁴⁴

Fourth, those who are persecuted for Christ's sake are not to fret, grieve or be depressed about it, but are commanded by our Lord to "rejoice and be exceedingly glad" (Mt. 5:12). Luke says "rejoice in that day and leap for joy!" (6:23). Matthew uses the present tense, emphasizing that this great joy must never leave the Christian during his time of suffering, while Luke uses the aorist tense to note the urgency of the command—"immediately rejoice." The fact that Jesus commands His disciples to rejoice to the extent that they leap for joy in the midst of persecution can only be truly understood by a Christian. This attitude of great joy for persecution is often seen in the book of Acts: "So they departed from the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (5:41; cf. 4:23-31; 16:25; 21:13-14).

Why are Christians to greatly rejoice when they are persecuted for righteousness sake? The Savior gives two reasons (enumerated above): your reward in heaven will be great and they persecuted the prophets before you. In order to rejoice we must have a completely different perspective on life than unbelievers. We must gladly sacrifice comfort, ease, peace and pleasures

¹⁴³ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

now for Christ, to secure the eternal rewards of grace later. If the heathen are willing to buffet their bodies and expose themselves to great danger in the present for a temporal earthly glory, what should we be willing to do for heavenly reward? As Christians we must not be overly concerned, sad or depressed about present sufferings because we know that they cannot be compared to the glories that await us. "If he that gives 'a cup of cold water' shall not lose his reward, then much less he that gives a draught of warm blood. The rewards of glory may sweeten all the waters of Marah."¹⁴⁵

Every Christian who suffers for the faith stands with the holy prophets of old. They take their place along all the great martyrs of the past. If we are to join this holy company in heaven, we must endure suffering by faith as they did. The martyred saints have had their faith tested and were victorious. Let us rejoice when we are given this great privilege. "Not in spite of our persecutions are we to rejoice, but because of our persecutions. The wounds and hurts are medals of honor. They attest that we belong to Christ not to the world. In war promotion is rapid, and the war for Christ never ceases."¹⁴⁶

Fifth, other portions of Scripture speak of persecution as a blessing because it helps sanctify us and makes us more mature as Christians. James says, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (1:2-3). Paul writes, "We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character hope" (Rom. 5:3). Peter exhorts persecuted believers saying, "You have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:6-7). "Persecution is called the 'fiery trial' (1 Peter 4:12). God has two fires, one where he puts his gold, and another where he puts his dross. The fire where he puts his dross is hell-fire. The fire where he puts his gold is the fire of persecution. God honours his gold when he puts it in the fire."¹⁴⁷

Other Applications

As we consider these verses on the blessing of persecution for righteousness sake, there are a number of things that we should focus on and apply to our lives.

First, the Christian who is truly following Jesus and leading a godly life should expect some kind of persecution or opposition from unbelievers in his life. Belief in the gospel results in a sharp distinction between believers and unbelievers. This division often causes unbelievers to lash out at the message and life of those whose worldview condemns them. If we think about this truth and the blessing that attends persecution, we will maintain a godly composure in such circumstances and will respond to insults and slander in a biblical manner. If we are full of joy instead of anger and/or depression, we will not be tempted to lose our temper, lash out or try to force a situation. We will be able to respond to hatred with kindness and leave the matter in God's hands.

Second, if our lifestyle is worldly and our doctrine is heterodox and syncretistic, we should not expect persecution, but rather praise from unbelievers and apostates. In other words, the application of this beatitude is both positive and negative. This point is brought out by one of the words in Luke's account. "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 295.

¹⁴⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 197.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 290.

fathers to the false prophets” (6:26). A professing Christian who tells dirty jokes at work or hangs out with unbelievers in the bar after work is praised rather than ridiculed because his words and life do not reflect Jesus Christ. If a believer is acting the way he should, unbelievers will not want to spend time associating with him and they certainly will not praise him.

Likewise, when ministers teach secular humanism or antinomianism and are unwilling to talk about the moral law, sin or the judgment to come, they are praised by pagan society. The world speaks well of them because their doctrine does not have the sharp antithesis between God and fallen man, light and darkness. They are false prophets who speak the world’s philosophy, but dress it up with Christian terminology. In our day of widespread idolatry, hedonism and apostasy, popularity and numbers in a congregation or denomination must not be confused with God’s blessing. It can be, but more often than not it is a sign of heterodoxy and corruption.

Third, this section of Scripture stands as a sharp rebuke to all professing Christians who engage in malicious gossip, slander and reviling of other believers. It is one thing for the unregenerate to speak evil of Christians. This is to be expected. But very often good men of God are attacked by other church members. This ought not to be so. A person who habitually slanders and reviles other Christians needs to examine his own heart as to whether or not he is even regenerate.

Fourth, we must have a biblical mindset when suffering on account of Christ. We must look beyond this present evil age to heaven and the rewards of grace that come with obedience and perseverance in trials. We must imitate Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2) and those heroes of the faith who viewed themselves as strangers and pilgrims on this earth who desired a heavenly country (see Heb. 11:13-16), “of whom the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:38). We must live our lives like Paul who did good works knowing that on the day of judgment “each one’s work will become clear” for “it will be revealed by fire” (1 Cor. 3:13); that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). When we suffer, we must focus on Scripture’s glorious promises of paradise and great reward. The reason that Scripture repeatedly mentions the reward is precisely to help us endure the trials and sufferings that come with serving Jesus. A day of perfect justice is coming and Christ Himself is the judge.

Fifth, given the previous points, do we experience joy when we suffer for righteousness sake or do we worry, complain and get angry? Our Savior commands us to rejoice, leap for joy and be exceedingly glad under such circumstances. The next time we are abused by unbelievers or ungodly professing Christians do we stop and examine our attitude to make sure we are obeying Christ or do we feel sorry for ourselves? These types of commands are often difficult because they run counter to our emotions. Therefore, such commands require meditation upon the Word, faith and practice. Let us more and more put this beatitude into practice in our lives.

Chapter 10: The Salt of the Earth

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let

your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Mt. 5:13-16).

After giving a series of bold and daring benedictions on what a disciple is and the great blessing that attends following Christ, Jesus next turns His attention to two metaphors regarding how the disciples should affect the world. The last beatitude forms a smooth transition to this new topic, for it describes how the world is going to treat believers, especially the apostles or preachers. Our Lord almost seamlessly moves from what the unbelieving world will do to them, to what the disciples will do for the world. While people of this world will hate and persecute the disciples, their message and lives will transform, enlighten and preserve the world from evil. By way of introduction there are a number of things to note regarding this section of Scripture.

First, Jesus picks metaphors from everyday life which everyone would immediately relate to and understand. Salt is one of the most common, familiar and necessary substances used by man. Indeed, in the ancient world man could scarcely live without it. In a culture without electricity the illumination from a lamp was greatly appreciated. Christ took these common things and used them as metaphors for Christian behavior. These vivid metaphors would never be forgotten.

Second, although Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount is the only place that we find the metaphors of salt and light side by side, Jesus obviously used these same terms in similar ways throughout His teaching ministry. When the Savior taught on the cost of discipleship in Luke's gospel, He ended with this statement: "Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (14:34-35). In Luke 8:16 after the parable of the sower and the different soils, Jesus uses the metaphor of a lamp on a lampstand in reference to His own teaching (cf. Lk. 11:33). In Mark's gospel the Redeemer's warning about not being salty is given after His solemn warning regarding hell. "For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another" (9:49-50). Mark's statement of the lamp parallels Luke's and follows the parable of the soils (Mk. 4:21).

Third, the structure of this section is beautiful and, like the beatitudes, almost poetic. For example, the two declarative statements regarding salt and light are exactly parallel in form: "the salt of the earth" is parallel to "the light of the world." "The discussion following each maxim is parallel in content, though not in form, focusing on the uselessness of salt that is not salty and light that is hidden."¹⁴⁸

Fourth, in this pericope, the stated mission of the disciples is rooted in what they already are as Christians. Christ does not say, "You ought to be salt and light" or "I am commanding you to be salt and light," but "You are salt and light." The word "you" is placed forward for emphasis: "You and you alone are salt and light." Jesus states a fact which is true of every Christian. "[A]ll believers are salt; their very faith makes them salt, and if they are not salt they are not believers."¹⁴⁹ The only imperative used in this whole section is found at the end in verse 16 ("Let your light shine") as a statement of application of what precedes. The imperative is implied and rooted in the indicative. Salt by nature is salty and preserves meat. Light by nature pushes back the darkness. What a Christian is determines what he does or how he leads his life.

¹⁴⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 98.

¹⁴⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 199.

Fifth, the majority of older commentators apply this section directly to the apostles and through them all teaching officers thereafter. This interpretation is inferred from the switch to the second person plural in verses 11 and following; the general context (the Redeemer has recently called His disciples and told them that from now on they would be fishers of men [Mt. 4:19]); the comparison of His listeners with the prophets in persecution (the apostles were the inspired counterpart of the Old Testament prophets); and, the association of “light” in Scripture with the gospel (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:4; cf. 4:6. In other words, the apostles were spreading the truth of the gospel in a unique and powerful manner as public preachers; etc.). While these things may point in the direction of the apostles, there is certainly nothing explicit or clear which so restricts the scope of this passage. Further, it certainly applies to all the Christian hearers even though the apostles and ministers after them are to have a greater role in leavening society with the gospel.

The Salt of the Earth

Jesus begins the section by describing the disciples as “the salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13). As we consider this statement we need to answer a number of questions. First, what does our Lord mean by salt? How would the disciples understand this term? Second, what is meant by the word earth? Obviously, the meaning of this term will instruct us as to how to understand Christ’s metaphor. Third, what are the implications of this statement?

First, regarding the term salt there is no fixed metaphorical meaning to be found in the Old Testament. However, in Scripture and the ancient world, salt’s most prominent uses would be as a cleansing or purifying agent, a preservative against corruption or decay and as a flavoring agent for food.

The Jews would associate salt with purification or cleansing in that salt was a key ingredient in the cereal offering (Lev. 2:13). “This *salt* indicates *corruption removed and prevented*; and in the case of the meat offering, it is as if to say, *Thy body and thy substance are become healthy now*; they shall not rot.”¹⁵⁰ Salt was added as an ingredient to the sacred incense and is linked with the qualities “pure and holy” (Ex. 30:35). When the water in Jericho was bad and caused the land to be unfruitful, Elisha cast salt into the spring of water to heal it (2 Kgs. 2:20-23). Salt here symbolized the removal of corruption. In Ezekiel 16:4 we are told of how the Israelites would normally bathe a newborn in water and then rub him with salt. This was part of the cleansing process. “The idea of purification is prominent in Mark 9:49 where the Lord says that in the final judgment ‘everyone will be salted with fire.’”¹⁵¹ “Although Jesus’ saying is cryptic, it is probable that it originally was a metaphor describing the process of purification, or purging, through which everyone must pass in order to gain entry into the kingdom of God.”¹⁵²

The world or earth is full of sin, uncleanness, impurity and defilement. The disciples’ ministry will act as a cleansing agent and antiseptic on an ethically darkened and filthy planet. If a Christian is to be salt to this earth, then he must live as an example of purity and he must spread the good news of the gospel—that Jesus Christ by His sinless life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection removes the guilt (justification) and power (sanctification) of sin. Thus, the statement, “You are the salt of the earth,” is equivalent to: “As Christians you are the instrument for bringing salvation and it effects upon this corrupt world.”

¹⁵⁰ Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus*, 45.

¹⁵¹ J. H. Bratt, “Salt” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5:220.

¹⁵² Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 73.

Closely related to our preceding point is salt's use as a preservative. Before the invention of refrigeration, the only method for preserving meat and fish was to rub salt into it to kill the bacteria and keep the meat from spoiling. The ancients did not know why salt worked; they just knew that it did. It preserved meat from decay or corruption. Thus, our Lord's statement is a call upon Christians to counteract the growing ethical corruption of mankind. This statement not only presupposes that the fall of Adam has rendered mankind spiritually dead and totally depraved, but also that, if unregenerate men are left to themselves, their corruption will grow worse and worse. This reminds us of what happened before the flood when only one family served God and there was no restraining influence upon mankind. Mankind grew so foul, rotten and corrupt that God washed this filth off the earth with the flood. "The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth" (Gen. 6:11-12).

Salt is the great purifier and preservative. It combats filth and deterioration. Thus this metaphor of salt is being used primarily in its negative or counteracting function. This small band of peasant disciples and all those who follow in their footsteps are given the great responsibility of setting back and conquering the moral and spiritual corruption of this world. We must remember that our Lord's emphatic statement assumes that all true Christians, or a faithful church, by nature accomplishes this task. If we are true to our calling, we will make the world spiritually a purer, less rotten place.

Salt was also used to flavor food. Without salt food is bland, insipid and undesirable. If this use of salt is part of the meaning of our Lord's metaphor, then Jesus is saying that believers' doctrine and example will season the world, making it more acceptable and inoffensive. This is likely Paul's use of the term in Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Col. 4:6). The world is tasteless and unpalatable in God's sight. But if it is thoroughly seasoned with the salt of heavenly doctrine, then it will be flavored with holiness, with people whose faith and life are pleasing to God. As Job so eloquently asked, "Can flavorless food be eaten without salt? Is there any taste in the white of an egg? My soul refuses to touch them; they are loathsome food to me" (6:6-7).

Second, the word "earth" clearly represents the whole world of fallen man enslaved and corrupted by sin. Our Lord uses the term earth in the same sense as Genesis 6:11: "The earth was corrupt before God." By this term is meant the whole human race or men of every nation, tribe, tongue or family that is not Christian. When Jesus uttered these words the whole world of men was a mass of moral wickedness, rottenness and stench. Rank paganism, idolatry, sexual perversion, violence and vices of every kind overstretched the whole earth. Apart from Christianity and its effects on men today, our era is no different. The world is unbelieving. It continually suppresses the truth about God and is ravaged by sin and ethical decay. This passage tells us very explicitly what God thinks of unbelieving humanity. It is compared to a dead carcass that is rotting and growing more foul and disgusting day by day. The world, apart from Christ, is perishing. The seeds of its corruption, disorganization and ruin are part of its very fabric. All unsaved mankind is regarded by Jehovah as rotting garbage that is in desperate need of the salt of the gospel. And without Christ this foul mass of moral rottenness will be cast into the garbage pit of human history—Gehenna or the pit of hell—the place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

Third, there are a number of things that are taught or implied by the Savior's statement at the beginning of verse 13.

(1) The Lord's statement assumes that the gospel will be carried by His disciples not only to Israel, but also to the whole world. The fall has corrupted the inhabitants of the entire earth. Therefore, the remedy for sin and corruption must be carried to the four corners of the globe. This was a radical statement to a first century Jew. The salt is to be offered to all men without exception.

(2) Jesus' statement presupposes that there is a great antithesis between believers and unbelievers. The non-Christian life is one of ethical rottenness. An unbeliever is guilty before God and his life is one of continued enslavement to sin and corruption. Because he is spiritually blind, he lives in darkness and his whole life is characterized by idolatry and sin. The believer, however, has been salted with the gospel. His life and worldview is one of healing, of stopping corruption. He is different from everybody else because God has changed him. His priorities all rotate around Jesus Christ and not his own selfish pleasures. The gospel has conquered the principle of ethical rot in his life. Therefore, the relationship of the Christian to the world is not one of compromise or accommodation, but rather loving confrontation. The salt is separate from and very different than the meat and it needs to be rubbed into the meat to be effective.

(3) Christ's maxim teaches that, although the believer is to be separate from the world ethically (that is, he is not to be *of* this world), yet he is to be very active in this world. This passage refutes the error of monasticism, that a true dedicated spiritual life can best be attained by separating oneself from society. This was the ideal in the days of the church fathers and especially the Middle Ages. The church at that time believed that holiness would result from a radical physical separation for prayer, contemplation and spiritual exercises. Our Lord, however, implies that the salt must be vigorously rubbed into the putrefying meat in order to purify it and preserve it. Christians must try to save the world, not remove themselves from it.

Jesus' statement also refutes the rather modern doctrine of rapture fever which teaches that the church's great hope is to escape this world with a secret pre-tribulation rapture. Modern dispensational premillennialism has essentially adopted the position that the world is getting worse and worse and thus there is no reason to try and change it. Rather, our task is to pluck out a few souls with evangelism and wait for the great escape, the secret rapture of the saints. This retreatist theology contradicts the Savior's salt metaphor which teaches that the church must engage the world and try to purify it and preserve it. It also contradicts the Great Commission where Christ commands the apostles to disciple whole nations. The salt of the gospel is to permeate the meat and not be placed on the shelf.

Further, the Redeemer's teaching contradicts all unbiblical forms of pietism; that is, the rather common idea that the state (i.e. civil rulers, judges, bureaucrats, police, military, etc.) and all earthly institutions are to be left in the clutches of the devil while believers go to church and pray. In other words the penetrating, purifying power of salt is restricted to a few individuals while civil governments, schools and businesses are to remain pluralistic in their worldviews and must not explicitly commit themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord. Professing Christians who hold to this view will appeal to the U. S. Constitution or to natural law or to pragmatic considerations based on a pessimistic eschatology. But, our Lord's salt metaphor teaches that a salty church, a dynamic biblical Christianity, always has societal and cultural effects. The man who really becomes a Christian will vote, educate and do business as a Christian. The salt of the gospel and the biblical worldview penetrate and purify every aspect of that man's life.

In addition, the Savior's doctrine refutes some of the teachings that have come from the Christian Reconstruction movement. That is, the Reconstructionist idea that nations and peoples will be attracted to the justness and practicality of God's moral law in the Bible and consequently

the law will salt nations apart from the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. However, the biblical concept of purification and preservation assumes a work of the Holy Spirit on the heart and a belief in the gospel. The metaphor of the disciples as the salt of the earth must be connected to the Great Commission and the church's job of preaching the gospel to every creature. Our Lord's metaphor teaches that the gospel in all its fullness is the only way to stop the putrefaction of this earth.

(4) Our Lord's instruction assumes that, apart from the salt of the gospel, all man-made schemes of utopia, or an earthly paradise, are doomed to failure. After the elites of the western powers abandoned the Christian worldview, there was a great sense of optimism among humanists. Without religious superstition (they thought) and with the amazing strides of science, technology, medicine, agriculture, industry and education it was only a matter of time until poverty, warfare, illiteracy, disease and conflict were conquered. This view was widespread among western intellectuals during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. But, this secular humanistic fantasy came crashing down with two bloody world wars, the inhumanity of communism, the holocaust and the other horrors of the twentieth century. Virtually no secular intellectuals speak about such a utopia anymore. The reason for this is simple. The earth of fallen man is a putrefying pile of filth without Christ. While the achievements of science and technology may make our lives more comfortable physically and they may increase our lifespan, they cannot change the heart of man which is evil, black and depraved. There is far more immorality and vice today in Western nations (adultery, homosexuality, unlawful divorce, lying, Sabbath desecration, idolatrous materialism, abortion, etc.) than there was one hundred years ago. There is only one solution to the ethical decay and debauchery of this world and that is Jesus Christ and the gospel. "The world is bad, sinful and evil; and any optimism with regard to it is not only thoroughly unscriptural but has been falsified by history itself."¹⁵³

How Does the Salt Work?

Having noted how the disciples would have understood the metaphor of salt, we need to ask how believers work as salt upon this earth or wicked mass of humanity. The key to answering this question lies in the meaning of the metaphor itself.

First, the Christian is to purify. This means that believers speak the gospel to others and live in a manner consistent with that message. The Bible teaches that true purity of sanctification before God occurs only when a sinner believes in Jesus, is justified and then is renewed and delivered from the pollution of sin by the Holy Spirit. As Paul says, "For he who has died [with Christ] has been freed from sin" (Rom. 6:7). Believers must confess the Savior before men and be willing to speak to others about the gospel, for that is the only way people are saved. And, once saved, people are further purified subjectively by the Holy Spirit's application of God's Word to the heart. "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). "You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit..." (1 Pet. 1:22). Thus, the church's primary task is to preach the gospel and disciple the nations by teaching them the whole counsel of God.

This is certainly how the apostles and evangelists salted the Roman Empire. They went about preaching the gospel, establishing churches and indoctrinating new believers in the truth.

¹⁵³ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:152.

They did not start a political movement to attempt to force change on a pagan culture. Neither did they form protests and marches against vices such as prostitution or slavery. They sought to purify from the inside out instead of the outside in. They were not satisfied until hearts were changed by the gospel, for such change brings sincere, true purity and spirituality. They changed the wicked, rotting heathen Roman Empire one soul at a time.

Does this mean that the church must not be involved in politics or get involved in social issues such as abortion or homosexual rights? No. The church can and should petition the government, present biblical position papers on crucial issues and raise important questions from the standpoint of the biblical worldview in the public square. But, we must not get side tracked in these areas and neglect the spread of the gospel, because cultural and societal putrefaction can ultimately only be stopped by the gospel. Unbelievers are not going to accept the ethics of Scripture until they first embrace the lawgiver. The heart of unbelieving man is wedded to human autonomy. The unregenerate person does not want to be told what to do or how to lead his life by God. But if his heart is regenerated by the Holy Spirit and he bows the knee in humble submission to the Lord, he will gladly obey the moral law. Therefore, the church's energy must be focused on the gospel, on educating people with the truth.

Indeed, Old Testament prophecies that speak of the effectiveness of the Messiah's reign make it clear that people come to Christ before they embrace His teaching. "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow into it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2-3). In light of the New Testament, we can safely say that this prophecy regards the New Testament church which has the responsibility to preach the truth to every creature (cf. Jn. 4:22; Lk. 2:32; Mk. 16). Those who want to be taught by God come into the church for instruction. Those who embrace God want to walk in His ways. Faith in Jehovah and His doctrine is coterminous with a sincere desire to walk in accordance with God's moral law. Truth leads to godliness and, when believers have been instructed, they will want to do God's will. There can be no right obedience, nor any right worship, until one first has learned of and believed in Christ. Therefore, whenever and wherever in the church preaching the truth about Jesus and His law-Word has been relegated to a secondary position, that church has been unfaithful to the will of God.

To see how to be ineffective as salt on society, we only need to examine the anti-abortion efforts of Christians in America. While the determined efforts to elect Christians or anti-abortion candidates to office are biblical, the practice of picketing abortion clinics and yelling at heathen women on their way to murder their babies has been a dismal failure. Why? Because external pressure or coercion cannot change hearts and minds! Such practices have caused very few women to forsake abortion. If all the time, energy, money and organization put into protests had been put into training new pastors and planting churches, many more lives would have saved. People who trust in Christ do not murder their children and they do not vote for men who believe that killing babies is acceptable.

Second, Christians are to work as a preservative in society. When believers are faithful in church planting and evangelism and they teach the full counsel of God, there comes a time (if God blesses these efforts) when there are enough believers in society to change it. There was a time when all of Europe was in total darkness—when everyone worshiped idols and people even engaged in satanic rites and human sacrifice. But, gradually Europe was salted and heathenism

was replaced with Christendom. In our day when the West is post-Christian and people have adopted relativistic ethics, hedonism, and materialism, the preserving power of Christianity is needed as much as ever.¹⁵⁴ If ministers are faithful in preaching and churches apply God's Word to every area of life, enough people will be enlightened to the truth to change institutions, schools, civil magistrates and unjust laws. "Every Christian, however limited his sphere of influence, must still, within that sphere, exert the influence which he possesses. He must exhibit truth in its meaning, and evidence, and influence: he must be a living epistle of Jesus Christ, seen and read of all men."¹⁵⁵ We are all called to be a cleansing agent and preservative in our society. This can only be done by defeating corruption with the truth and leading by example.

The Savior's Warning

This passage makes it very clear that the church is not to ignore society, but is to actively work to change it. This, however, cannot occur if the church loses its saltiness. Thus, our Lord's maxim comes with a sober warning: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Mt. 5:13). There are a number of things to note about this statement.

First, it is an implicit warning regarding the condition of the salt of professing Christians. The statement, "if the salt loses its flavor," means if the salt loses its character or purpose as salt.¹⁵⁶ In our day salt is very pure. But in ancient times finding a good, pure source of salt was not always easy. If salt was adulterated or too contaminated, it did not taste like salt, but was foul. This was often true of salt from the marshes and lagoons near the Dead Sea, which were mixed with undesirable substances such as gypsum. Salt which is not salty is worthless, for it cannot be used to preserve meat or add a pleasing flavor to food.

Likewise, the professing Christian, pastor or church which does not teach the truth or live the truth is worthless for the preservation of society. Think for a moment about the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. The papal church corrupted worship by human inventions. They banished the biblical doctrine of salvation by their system of works righteousness, indulgences and sacramentalism. The priests were usually illiterate and completely ignorant of doctrine. The church leaders were notorious at that time for their lust for money, drunkenness, fornication and adultery. The masses of people who attended church were given mumbled Latin and childish man-made rituals. The result was that ignorance and immorality spread throughout the countryside. The very people who were supposed to be salt were not salty. Instead, they were corrupt and worthless.

Also, consider Modernism or Christian liberalism. When many of the mainline Protestant churches rejected the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture in the early part of the twentieth century and cast aside a number of the fundamental doctrines of the faith, they ceased being a

¹⁵⁴ The expression post-Christian simply means that Christianity is no longer the predominant worldview in the Western nations. It does *not* mean that the church of Christ is not present and active in these nations. It also does not mean that Christianity will never be predominant in these nations again. Someday it will.

¹⁵⁵ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:155.

¹⁵⁶ Interestingly, the verb *morante* translated "becomes tasteless" also means "to become foolish" (e.g., Rom. 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:20). "The unusual use of it here to describe what has lost its saltiness goes back to the underlying Hebrew root, ...*tpl*, a word that had both meanings (see Black, *Aramaic Approach*, 166-167). A...translator [i.e. Matthew writing under divine inspiration] then chose the Greek word *morainein* because it applied more readily to the disciples. For the disciples, the salt of the earth, to lose their saltiness was equivalent to becoming foolish. It would in effect be to lose their identity" (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 99).

salt and light to modern society. Instead of being salt that preserves meat, they themselves became rotten, worldly, unbelieving and disgusting. Instead of challenging the world to believe in Christ and submit to His law-Word, they became the world. Their position was accommodation not confrontation. In the process they retained religious terms, but imbued them with a new modernist meaning. Now, if the church becomes just like the rotten world of heathen humanity, who is going to salt it? If the salt itself is not salty, hope of purity and preservation is destroyed.

This principle also applies to individual professing Christians. The believer who backslides and is leading the life of a hypocrite cannot be effective as salt to others. If a person's life completely contradicts his message, people are given a confused, contradictory picture of the gospel. Thus, it is crucial that we live the truth and are willing to be bold and speak up for Jesus in front of unbelievers. Most Christians have to work with and mingle with unbelievers at one time or another. This gives them a wonderful opportunity to be salt in such situations. If a believer doesn't confess Christ; but, rather, tries to fit in and commune on the unbelievers' terms, then he will not have a positive effect on them. Instead, their wicked speech and unbelief will have a negative effect upon him. There is no neutrality on this matter at all. Christians must either, stand up for Jesus and be salt, or they will backslide and put themselves in great danger of total apostasy. If a believer makes it crystal clear at work that Christ is his Lord and Savior; that he will *not* listen to dirty jokes; or allow others to take the Lord's name in vain or curse in his presence, people will take his words seriously. A strict confessing Christian can have a profound, positive effect on those around him as long as he is faithful. Beloved, are you fighting the spiritual and ethical deterioration of society by your life and words, or are you yourself deteriorating? Are you a useful citizen in God's kingdom, or have you lost your saltiness as a Christian? Are you going to be the salt that purifies and preserves, or the meat that rots, putrefies and is cast into hell—the garbage dump of all human history?

True, consistent Christians who are totally dedicated to serving Jesus are the greatest lovers of the lost and benefactors of mankind. But, worldly, wicked, hypocritical, false professors of Christ are more deplorable, less hopeful and under more severe damnation than the world because they had the truth and rejected it. They knew the truth about the Savior, but counted Him as less important than their own selfish lusts and desires. Those who are complete apostates are reprobates. "The implication is clear. Just as salt having lost its flavor cannot be restored, so also those who were trained in the knowledge of the truth but who then resolutely set themselves against the exhortations of the Holy Spirit and become hardened in their opposition are not renewed unto repentance (Matt. 12:32; Heb. 6:4-6). Therefore, let that which is named salt be salt indeed!"¹⁵⁷

Second, this warning about the condition of the salt comes with a solemn figure of judgment. The salt that is good for nothing is "to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Mt. 5:13).

In ancient oriental culture garbage was cast out into the street. The professing Christian who is not a true believer or the wicked minister who does not preach the gospel are worthless to God's kingdom and must be cast out of the church. They will be cast out into the outer darkness on the day of judgment. They will receive a much greater damnation because they rebelled against a greater knowledge. It is a horrible thing to never enter the kingdom of God. But to be a part of the visible church and profess Christ and then be cast out of it is far worse. There is nothing more useless to God's kingdom than the unchristian Christian—the saltless reprobate

¹⁵⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 283-284.

who abandons the truth for the world. Peter says, “It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Pet. 2:21). Beloved, we must have salt in ourselves (Mk. 9:20). We must fight against lukewarmness, worldliness and carelessness in our lives with every fiber of our being, for what is at stake is not mere shame, calamity and judgment in this world; but, the everlasting contempt and suffering in the world to come. How terrifying to have Jesus speak to you directly on that day, “I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness” (Mt. 7:23). “How fearful will be the doom of the unprofitable servant—‘cast into utter darkness,’ where there is ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth [Mt. 25:30]!’”¹⁵⁸

The saltless salt or the non-Christian Christian will not only be thrown out as useless trash in God’s sight, but will also be trampled underfoot by men.¹⁵⁹ The apostate Jews who denied the Redeemer and followed their own self-righteousness were trodden underfoot by the Gentiles. The areas of the Roman Empire that embraced Arianism and rejected the divinity of Christ to this day have been trodden underfoot by the followers of Mohammed. Think of the terrible judgments that befell apostate Roman Catholic nations during the Middle Ages: the wars, the plague and slavery to anti-Christ. Think also of the horrors that came upon Europe after the acceptance of modernism: two world wars, fascism and communism. If professing Christians do not retain their saltiness in our day, we may be oppressed by humanists, sodomites and feminists. Unsalty professing Christians bring down God’s judgment and are condemned by their fellow men. “Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people, because you have not kept My ways but have shown partiality in the law” (Mal. 2:9). “There is bitter truth also in the fact that a saltless and powerless Christianity makes more unbelievers than all the books of infidels that were ever written.”¹⁶⁰ “Let God be glorified in the shame and rejection of those by whom he has been reproached, and who have made themselves fit for nothing but to be trampled upon.”¹⁶¹

This passage ought to spur us to our Christian duty of holiness, of leading an exemplary life and keeping our doctrine pure and unadulterated. Go out into the world as God’s salt!

Chapter 11: The Light of the World

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth

¹⁵⁸ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:161.

¹⁵⁹ One cannot help noting the similarity of teaching between our text and the parable of the useless vine in Ezekiel 15:2-5, “Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any other wood, the vine branch which is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang any vessel on? Instead, it is thrown into the fire for fuel; the fire devours both ends of it, and its middle is burned. Is it useful for any work? Indeed, when it was whole, no object could be made from it. How much less will it be useful for any work when the fire has devoured it, and it is burned?”

¹⁶⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 201.

¹⁶¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:54.

light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Mt. 5:14-16).

After telling the disciples that they are salt, our Lord parallels this metaphor with light: “You are the light of the world.” Given the fact that Jesus was speaking to a group of uneducated peasants, this statement is remarkable. From the standpoint of the world, this little group was completely insignificant. These men were not statesmen or great philosophers or brilliant military leaders; they were unpolished, ragged fishermen. Yet, the only hope of setting the world’s corruption and wickedness back on its heels lay with this group and all believers who follow in their footsteps. The only hope of enlightening the world with truth and salvation and turning back the tide of darkness, ignorance and false beliefs is in the hands of believers. Christ’s statement should cause us to come to a sober realization of the great responsibility of following Jesus. What an amazing and earth-shattering thing it is to be a Christian!

As we examine this passage we want to answer a number of questions. First, what is meant by the term light and why are believers called the light? Second, what are some of the implications of this statement? Third, what is the function of the light? A solid understanding of this passage will impact the way we view ourselves and the world around us. May God enable us to profit from His holy Word.

What is Meant by Light?

The use of the term light in Scripture is exceedingly rich. The term light is used to describe God Himself and emphasize Jehovah’s infinite holiness and righteousness. “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5). The LORD is “the Father of lights” (Jas. 1:7) who is covered with light (Ps. 104:2) and “dwells in inapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16). Light is also linked with Jehovah’s salvation (see Ps. 27:1). God’s saving activity illuminates the darkness of calamity and trouble and gives life, peace and joy.

In John’s gospel Jesus is described as the “life” and “light of men;” “the light who shines in the darkness” (1:4, 5); and “the true light which gives light to every man” (1:9). He is called “the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5). As the Israelites followed the Light when it led them from the land of slavery to the promised land, the Savior’s disciples will follow Him out of the darkness of sin, ignorance, depravity and death into redemption in the fullest sense of that term. Thus our Lord preached, “I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness” (Jn. 12:46). Christ presents Himself to all mankind as the only source of salvation from sin and as spiritual illumination regarding all spiritual truth.

All the light that men have, or can have, comes from Jesus. As light was the first thing in the original creation, the light of Christ is the foundation of the salvific recreation. Therefore, when we discuss Christians as light we must always see Jesus as original, underived light. He is the God-man; the source of truth, salvation, holiness, revelation and righteousness. “In a secondary sense Christians are the light of the world; Christ immediately, they mediately; he the original, they the derived; he the sun, they the moon reflecting light.”¹⁶²

The prophet Isaiah describes Christ and His ministry as a great shining light upon the inhabitants of Galilee: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined” (Isa. 9:2). Because of Jesus and His gospel, a great light appeared to people who were walking in darkness. “In place

¹⁶² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 201.

of the darkness of calamity the people saw the light of peace and blessedness; in place of the darkness of death, the light of life; in place of the darkness of ignorance, the light of knowledge; in place of the darkness of sin, the light of salvation. Salvation in its widest sense had shined upon these people; a complete reversal of their condition had occurred.”¹⁶³

The term light is also used to describe God’s special written revelation, for it is through the holy Scriptures that we learn what we must believe in order to be saved from sin and lead lives that please God. As David says, “For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light” (Ps. 36:9). “For the commandment is a lamp, and the law a light; reproofs of instruction are the way of life...” (Pr. 6:23). “Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me” (Pr. 43:3). “The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Ps. 119:130). God, of course, needs to enlighten us by His Spirit for His Word to be efficacious. “You will light my lamp; the LORD my God will enlighten my darkness” (Ps. 18:28).

Paul uses the term light to describe the gospel of Jesus Christ and represent God’s shining upon man’s heart to cause regeneration and conversion. “But if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.... For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4, 6). God gives us the light of the gospel and the light of spiritual understanding when He removes the veil that lies over our heart and shows us the glory of Christ. For the elect, saving truth is always accompanied by a spiritual understanding of it.

In the passage before us, the disciples are called light because Christians, by their words and deeds, are called upon to be transmitters of the light of Christ and the gospel. Jesus was the light itself in the sense that, in His being and work of redemption, He is the foundation and source of truth, salvation and enlightenment. The light of Jesus: (1) released us from the darkness of spiritual death (“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Christ by His suffering and death merited regeneration, faith and repentance for His people. What they were unable to do in their ethical darkness and depravity the Savior procured for them.); (2) saved us from the darkness or blindness imposed upon fallen man by Satan (see 2 Cor. 4:4); (3) redeemed us from the darkness of eternal death and hell by His gift of justification (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:8-9); (4) freed us from slavery to sin or walking in darkness by His gift of definitive sanctification. “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 Jn. 1:6; cf. Rom. 6). “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph. 5:8-11). Therefore, when we speak of Christians being light, it is always as a mirror that reflects the light of Christ already revealed and received.

We are the light because we believe and possess the truth and will communicate this truth about Christ to a darkened world. As the salt of the earth the disciples were crucial in purifying and preserving the world; as the light of the world they must illuminate it with the light of Christ. Salt is used to stop rot while light is used to illuminate and push back the darkness. The metaphors are very similar except that salt is primarily negative and light primarily positive. It enlightens, illuminates, and enables people to see. “The thought necessarily suggested to the

¹⁶³ E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 1:325.

mass of hearers would be that of communicating knowledge, rectifying error, and dispelling the gloom which is inseparable from a state of spiritual ignorance.”¹⁶⁴

The statement, “You are the light of the world,” like the statement about salt is emphatic. “You (i.e. Christians) and you alone are the light of the world.” The world’s only hope for salvation, spiritual enlightenment and deliverance from darkness lies with the followers of Christ as individuals and as a body (e.g., the seven churches in Asia are described by John, under divine inspiration, as seven golden lamp stands [Rev. 1:12-13, 20]). Also, like the salt metaphor, the term light especially applies to the apostles and all preachers of the gospel, who witness for Jesus in a unique, commissioned manner. As Jesus said to Paul, “I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Ac. 26:17-18).

Some Implications

As the salt metaphor implied the deep corruption of this world of fallen men, the light metaphor implies a great spiritual blindness. Paul says that men suppress the truth in unrighteousness because they do not want to glorify God. Their rejection of God leads to darkened hearts (see Rom. 1:18-21). Thus, “professing to be wise they become fools” (Rom. 1:22). They are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile” (1 Cor. 3:20). The reason for this darkness is simple: “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Consequently, there are a number of things that our text teaches regarding the world and truth.

First, the world is in complete, total darkness when it comes to the truth that matters the most. Thus, the world can never achieve true enlightenment, salvation or ultimate meaning apart from divine revelation and Jesus Christ. The world of unsaved men can learn many things and make progress in science, technology and medicine. But it cannot attain ultimate meaning or salvation because these things are beyond the scope of human reason and empiricism. Man, apart from God, can have a surface, functional knowledge of reality, but he cannot give any answers as to our origin. Why are we here? How can we be saved? How should we live? And, where are we going?

During the so-called “Enlightenment” or “Age of Reason” in the eighteenth century, many intellectuals taught that mankind must cut itself loose from religion (which they labeled as foolish superstition) and must embrace reason as the foundation of all belief and conduct. But reason or logic at its very best is only a tool for analysis. It cannot be a source or ultimate standard of knowledge (except for simple mathematics and surface observations) because it cannot give us the axioms, first principles or starting point of reality or knowledge. If one’s starting point is flawed or wrong, then one can use reason flawlessly and yet arrive at a completely wrong conclusion. This has always been the case with unregenerate man because he continually suppresses the true knowledge of God and creates false axioms, presuppositions and worldviews to replace the truth. Unbelieving philosophers have always rejected revealed truth

¹⁶⁴ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 122.

because their network of ultimate assumptions about reality excludes God, Christ and the Bible. Thus, they reason from darkness and arrive in darkness. Their only hope is that the Holy Spirit will apply gospel truth to their hearts. They need a true enlightenment.

Others in the Enlightenment sought truth and meaning in empiricism—the idea that studying things with the senses will answer life’s deepest questions. This view also leads man from darkness to darkness for a number of reasons. (1) A study or observation of various things may tell us certain facts, but it cannot tell us how these things come into being or why they are here or where they are going. It gives a rudimentary surface or functional knowledge while everything else is pure conjecture. A nature program may successfully discuss the mating habits of baboons, but all talk of evolutionary origins, etc. is pure unbelieving speculation. (2) No person can observe and analyze things without their own preconceptions or outside of their own worldview. Therefore, any deep or meaningful analysis apart from pure, simple, surface observations is biased, subjective and untrustworthy. Indeed, both rationalism and empiricism have led secular humanism to skepticism, subjectivism and irrationalism. (3) The empiricist must presuppose a biblical worldview of the universe to an extent to conduct science, for without observing the past or the future he cannot assume that continuity of reality will continue. Without divine revelation, his assumption that the future will be like the present is a blind leap of faith. (4) Further, the empiricist must assume a biblical view of man and reality, for without a transcendent, infinite and eternal God who reveals truth the empiricist has no way of knowing how or even if his senses are altering or filtering objective reality. If the empiricist were honest he would ask, “Do I really know the nature of things outside of me or is everything I see and experience conditioned by my mind?”

When we speak of ultimate meaning and absolute ethics, the so-called “Enlightenment” was a complete failure; it gave way to skepticism, mysticism, and the abandonment of absolute truth. Rationalism has given way to evolutionary thought or the idea that the only absolute is that there are no absolutes. Intellectuals now generally follow existentialism and pragmatism. The secular humanists’ dream of salvation through state planning and control has been replaced by a radical pessimism. Thus, the optimistic humanism of the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries has given way to rank hedonism. Like the people of the spent, chaotic and deteriorating Roman Empire, the predominant American philosophy of life is, “Let us eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.” Surface or functional knowledge still increases and we are surrounded by amazing technology, but modern unbelieving man is no closer to truth or salvation than the pagan savage living in the rainforest with a bone through his nose.

This point is evident when a secular humanist is asked about the meaning of life or why we are here. A consistent secularist, like the evolutionist Gould, would say that life does not really have any meaning or purpose. Most atheists, however, will speak about love, community and working for a better humanity or an improved planet. Such thinking apart from the Christian worldview is nothing more than pure opinion. If we are merely machines of flesh that are the product of chance evolution and there is no transcendent God or law outside of the universe and there is not a judgment to come or perfect justice before God, then love is no more virtuous than hate. All talk of goodness, caring and improvement is merely an electro-chemical response in evolutionary machines that will die like dogs and forever cease to exist. Indeed, as modern scientists assert, all of humanity, including the earth itself, will be consumed by a super-nova. Without souls that live on and a transcendent God who is personal, righteous and just, it will be as if the whole human race never even existed. Therefore, modern unbelieving thought does not enlighten, but rather leads to nihilism and total meaninglessness. The secular humanist has

nothing to offer but integration into the void. Therefore, it is rather amusing when speaking with the humanist to keep asking him *why* every time he makes a statement regarding ethics, meaning or ultimate truth. They can only answer from a position of complete darkness. Thus, their answers are either completely arbitrary (e.g., because humanity, or the intellectual elites or the United Nations say so) or contradict their presuppositions about reality (e.g., macro-evolution from pond slime and concepts of absolute ethics are totally incompatible). Once again, it is obvious to anyone who has eyes to see that we need an infinite personal God who is ontological and outside of creation and we need this God (Jehovah—the God of the Bible) to reveal Himself to us.

Second, (closely related to our previous point) our text teaches the absolute necessity of Christ and special revelation for the world to have true saving knowledge. The world is dark and needs light. Darkness cannot produce its own light. But God in His infinite mercy has given this light to mankind in the Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1:1) says,

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable [Rom. 2:14-15; 1:19, 20; Ps. 19:1-3; Rom. 1:32; 2:1]; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation [1 Cor. 1:21; 2:13, 14]; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church [Heb. 1:1]; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing [Prov. 22:19-21; Lk. 1:3, 4; Rom. 15:4; Mt. 4:4, 7, 10; Isa. 8:19, 20]; which maketh the holy Scripture to be most necessary [2 Tim. 3:15; 2 Pet. 1:19]; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased [Heb. 1:1, 2].

From the study of nature we may see that evil exists but we do not know how it entered the world. The Bible tells us what sin is and how it came into the world. It tells us that salvation from sin can only be found in Jesus Christ and that no one can have knowledge or faith in the Savior without first being exposed to divine revelation (Ac. 4:12; Mk. 16:16; Rom. 10:14-17). Without God's Word everyone will perish in their sins (cf. Prov. 29:18); they have no hope and are without God in this world (Eph. 2:12).

The church is designated as the light of the world because God declared His truth to the church and the church, as the pillar and ground of the truth, passes God's Word to other geographical locations and generations. Preachers are the light in that they apply sacred truth directly to various hearers. Paul says, "It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). Christians are light because the Holy Spirit changed them through regeneration and caused them to believe in Christ. For anyone to become light, it takes a work of the Holy Spirit which is rooted in the Savior's redemptive work and it takes a belief in the Word of God or God's written testimony regarding Jesus. Paul writes, "For you were once darkness, but now you are the children of light" (Eph. 5:8). People can only be light when the Holy Spirit enlightens their dead hearts to embrace the true Light—Jesus Christ.

A person who does not have or believe the gospel is dark within and walks in darkness. But when he is exposed to the truth and the Holy Spirit causes him to understand it and believe it, he becomes a light for Christ. The gospel changes the person's whole worldview and manner of life and, thus, good works are done to glorify God. Thus, the Christian's beliefs, message and behavior reflect the light of Christ. He becomes a walking beacon of the truth of the gospel. In

our profession, character and conduct we must exhibit the truth of the gospel to a dark, unbelieving, ignorant world.

The Function of Light

After telling the disciples that they are the light of the world, Jesus spurs them on to live what they are by two illustrations regarding light followed by an imperative. “A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:14b-16).

The point of both of these illustrations is that light is meant to be seen. In the ancient world where there was no electricity or street lights, travel on a moonless night in the wilderness was very difficult. In such circumstances a city at night on a hilltop would stand out sharply in the darkness. It could be seen from every direction, even from a great distance. Similarly, people do not light a lamp and then hide it under a basket. (The Jews used a boat-shaped lamp filled with oil with a wick on one side and a handle on the other.) The lamp is put on a stand to give as much light as possible to everyone in the house. (The majority of people in the days of our Lord lived in small one room houses.) By these illustrations Jesus is telling His followers a number of things.

First, men are saved not to live the Christian life in secret, but rather to set forth the truth of the gospel to others by words and deeds. Light is a positive force against darkness and aggressively pushes the darkness back as it radiates in all directions. Thus, our Lord teaches a Christianity that goes beyond the four walls of the church building and beyond the Christian household. There is an idea common in America that one’s Christianity must not be mixed with business, art, science, education or politics. It should be kept private in our secular-pluralistic society. But Christ says the complete opposite. If our faith stops at the door of the church, then it cannot shine forth to mankind. When a man is cut off in traffic, he must shine as a Christian. When a believer speaks about others, he must radiate the gospel. When he conducts his affairs at work, it should be clear that he is different and that he follows the Master. Do we reflect the Savior in the way we talk and act at school, work or play? Do we use language that enlightens a room or do we shift our behavior to fit into the darkness around us? The light metaphor assumes that we are always confessing Christ in our thoughts, speech and actions. It assumes a very dynamic Christianity that is not satisfied with only Sunday morning radiance. “A Christian should be just as much a Christian in the factory, the workshop, the ship-yard, the mine, the schoolroom, the surgery, the kitchen, the golf course, or the playing field as he is in church. Jesus did not say, ‘You are the light of the *Church*’; he said, ‘You are the light of the *world*...’”¹⁶⁵ We must think about this verse when we are at work and others tell dirty jokes. We must remember our Lord’s words when we are with complete strangers. The world of unsaved men needs light and we must be the source of that light.

Second, this message was astonishing in that the apostles would go from obscure peasant fishermen to the very center of the world’s stage. For example, the preaching of the gospel in the book of Acts was conducted in a manner that was as public as possible. The apostles put the lamp stand where it would be visible to everyone in the house. On the day of Pentecost they preached in a public place to thousands of Jews (Ac. 2). Not long after this Peter preached on the

¹⁶⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:123.

steps of the Temple (Ac. 3). The apostles taught in Solomon's porch and did signs and wonders among the people (Ac. 5) even after they were forbidden to do so by the Sanhedrin. After they were beaten by the authorities, they still taught daily in the temple and in every house that Jesus was the Christ (Ac. 5:42). It was Paul's practice to not only speak to the Jews in the synagogues, but also to preach to the Gentiles in public places. Paul even preached to the Greeks in the Areopagus, the geographical center of pagan philosophy (e.g., Ac. 17:16-33). The apostolic church truly was a bright city on a hill. They aggressively publicized the gospel of Jesus Christ so that sinners living in darkness could find refuge in the Light. The disciples of Christ did not go into hiding or obscurity under the pretense of contemplation, modesty or self-preservation, but they diffused the light of the gospel as widely as possible. "The disciples of Christ were obscure men before he called them, but the character he put upon them dignified them, and as preachers of the gospel they made a figure; and though they were reproached for it by some, they were respected for it by others, advanced to thrones, and made judges (Luke xxii.30); for Christ will honour those that honour him."¹⁶⁶

Jesus saves us to illuminate the world with the doctrine of Christ. We have here one of the greatest proof-texts for church planting, witnessing and missionary work in the entire Bible. Although the church no longer has apostles and evangelists who perform signs and wonders and had the gift of inspiration, nevertheless ministers of the word should be trained and sent to the four corners of the globe. The church should do everything it can to enlighten society with the truth of the gospel. Churches should take full advantage of every form of media—book publishing, the internet, radio or television—to tell the world about Christ. As Christians we must understand that we have been saved to shine for Jesus. Although (as we all know) witnessing to our relatives and acquaintances is often awkward, uncomfortable and unwelcome, nevertheless we must do it to be faithful to our calling as lights of Christ. Light should be aggressive in pushing back the darkness of sin, ignorance, unbelief and depravity. We should be as the believers in Thessalonica of whom Paul said, "And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything" (1 Thess. 1:6-8). Are you a light for Christ shining in all directions or is your light hidden by an unwillingness to confess the Savior before men; and a failure to lead a consistently sanctified life before the world?

Third, our Lord's words clearly contradict a number of errors. (1) There is the doctrine of what is called hyper-Calvinism. This is the teaching that the gospel of Jesus Christ must not freely be offered to all, but only to those who first show an interest or work of the Holy Spirit on their heart. Such teaching obviously is disastrous for the work of evangelism and missions and clearly contradicts many portions of Scripture (e.g., Mk. 16:15ff; Mt. 28:19-20; Lk. 24:47; Ac. 1:8; 9:15; etc.). (2) There is the idea common among modernists that moralism and civilization is the way to bring light to those in darkness. Once the majority of men in mainline denominations rejected the inerrancy of Scripture and the doctrine of the atonement which is at the heart of the gospel, mission work shifted to one of modernization instead of gospel preaching. We must never make the mistake of equating the light spoken of by Christ with the spread of Western civilization. The Greeks and Romans built up impressive civilizations, yet were saturated with idolatry and immorality (e.g., the open practice of and encouragement of idol worship, legal cultic prostitution, chattel slavery, homosexuality, pederasty and so forth). The communists in

¹⁶⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:55.

the Soviet Union were well known for their massive slave labor camps, systematic terror and genocide. First, there must be the light of the gospel and then the sanctifying light of Scripture taught and applied if the world is to be truly enlightened.

Modernism is a heresy of the devil because it fails to acknowledge that all light comes from Christ. Isaiah prophesied, "I [Jehovah] will keep You and give as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house" (Isa. 42:6-7). Jesus does not merely bring light or lead into light, but He Himself is the light. He is salvation. To separate light from Christ is to redefine light in a completely unscriptural manner.

Fourth, Christ makes it clear that the light involves not only words, but also concrete works that support the words. Jesus commands us to let our light shine before men in order that people may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. "In Greek there are two words for *good*. There is the word *agathos* which simply defines a thing as good in quality; there is *kalos* which means that a thing is not only good, but that it is also winsome and beautiful and attractive. The word which is used here is *kalos*."¹⁶⁷ The good deeds of a Christian are to be done in such a kind, selfless, merciful and loving manner that they support the message of the gospel. They are to adorn the gospel of Christ. They are to be examples of the truth of the gospel. The light of Christ causes men to walk in the light. Good works become a distinguishing mark of Jesus' followers. Regarding those good works we need to note the following.

(1) They involve the love that believers ought to show to each other. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:34-35). Knowledge, orthodoxy and teaching must be accompanied by love if people are going to identify the true followers of Jesus. When professing Christians treat each other unkindly and gossip, slander and malign each other, their heterodox lives contradict and orthodox message. "Tertullian tells us that the heathen commented on the Christians: 'See, they say, how they love one another' (Apol. xxxix; ANF, III, p. 46). Chrysostom, however, complains that in his day Christian men show all too little love; 'even now, there is nothing else that causes the heathen to stumble, except that there is no love.... Their own doctrines they have long condemned, and in like manner they admire ours, but they are hindered by our mode of life' (LXXII, 5; pp. 266, 269)."¹⁶⁸ Beloved, does a lack of love and good works in your life cloud the brilliant sunshine of the gospel? If it does, then it is time for some radical changes.

(2) All good deeds that a believer does in the name of Christ should be used to point people to the gospel. If we help someone change a flat tire, we should let them know that we do it in the name of Christ. If we give food to starving children in Africa, it must be attended with a message that thanks Christ and gives Him the glory. If we establish a soup kitchen, then it must be an explicitly Christian soup kitchen. It must be known that we do not receive credit for our good works, but that our works of faith radiate out from the salvation achieved by Christ. By the godly behavior of believers, unbelievers will be forced to acknowledge the reality of a Christian's teaching. By the holy behavior of Christians in conjunction with the sum of saving knowledge, the true and living God shall be believed, known, loved and glorified by men. An orthodox doctrine accompanied by an orthodox lifestyle is most suitable for teaching the cross of Christ. The old saying that actions speak louder than words is often true. Such light will be used by the Holy Spirit to draw many to Christ.

¹⁶⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:125.

¹⁶⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 633, footnote 74.

(3) The good works mentioned must not be limited to charity, but are also inclusive of the preaching of the gospel itself. In verse 16 we are told that the good works that shine before men will cause men to “glorify your Father in heaven.” “The end, therefore, and also to a certain extent the *result*, of seeing such good works, will be that men, influenced by God’s Spirit, will ascribe to God the reverence that is his due for having caused the light to shine forth from human lives (Isa. 24:15; 25:3; Ps. 22:23; cf. 1 Cor. 10:31).”¹⁶⁹ Now if these men know enough to glorify God, then it is rather obvious that they have been taught the biblical doctrine of God and know enough doctrine to ascribe all glory to Him and none to those who perform the works because they are sinners saved by grace. Thus, Paul commands Christians to shine as lights in a crooked and perverse generation and combines this with the command to “hold fast the word of life” (Phil. 2:15-16).

(4) The good works that are done in Christ’s name must be truly good. How do we know when a work is good in the biblical sense of that term? For a work to be genuinely good in God’s sight, it must be done by a believer or person who is already justified and baptized with the Holy Spirit. It must be done in accordance with God’s holy Word and it alone. Obedience to human philosophies and traditions cannot be good in God’s sight. Therefore, Christians must avoid jumping on some humanistic bandwagon to seek the approval of unbelievers (e.g., free condoms to high school students and sodomites to prevent AIDS). And, it must be done to glorify God, not ourselves. We are to do good works to draw attention to Christ and not ourselves. The believer always acknowledges his own unworthiness—that God by the power of His Holy Spirit has enabled him to obey Scripture.

(5) The works must be good or the light does not shine. The professing Christian who is seriously backslidden and is committing public, scandalous sins has destroyed his witness for Christ. Indeed, it is better for the hypocrite to keep his mouth shut than to attempt to be a witness for Jesus. If the unbeliever does not use his wicked behavior as an excuse to mock and reject the gospel, then he may embrace an antinomian perversion of it. When a man says one thing and then does another, he, by his gross inconsistency, alters the very message he may have attempted to convey. We must diligently attend to our sanctification or we essentially lie to the world about the gospel. The godly Christian stands out and sheds light. The hypocritical professor either stands out in a bad way or deliberately pushes the light under a bushel because he is ashamed of his behavior.

Conclusion

In our time when Western culture is more and more casting off the truths of Scripture and consequently is becoming darker, Christians need to shine before men. This must first involve reformation and revival in the churches themselves, for a church that accommodates itself to the world darkens the light of Scripture. It also must involve us being more consistently Christian and godly in everything we do. As the world becomes more consistently wicked and perverse, we must be more diligent in prayer and all the means of grace. We must live all the beatitudes among men. We must be salt and light to society. This subject is very important because this is something that only believers can do. We have been saved to reflect the light of Christ. Therefore, let our light shine in every direction to lighten the whole world.

¹⁶⁹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 286.

Chapter 12: Christ's Relationship to the Old Testament

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:17-20).

After speaking of a Christian's character in the beatitudes and the true believer's influence upon this corrupt and dark world, our Lord proceeds with the main body of His sermon (Mt. 5:17-7:12). In the main body, the Savior concerns Himself with the kind of righteousness His disciples are to follow. He had already touched upon this in the beatitudes which are introductory, but now wants to go into greater detail. Therefore, in this section He clarifies His relationship to the Old Testament canon and contrasts His teaching with that of the Pharisees, who were the dominant religious leaders at that time.

The text before us introduces the question of righteousness and serves two main purposes. First, Christ wants to make His position on the Old Testament, and especially the law of God, perfectly clear before the general public in Israel. The Redeemer's teaching and actions were so radically different than that of the predominant religious leaders that the people would have wondered about His loyalty to what they considered the only true religion. The Pharisees' supposed loyalty to the law of Moses was expressed by "fencing" the law with all sorts of manmade traditions ("the tradition of the elders," [Mt. 15:2; Mk. 7:2, 3]). Jesus not only refused to cooperate with such manmade regulations, but also emphatically rejected them (Mt. 15:3-9; Mk. 7:6-13). Also, there were confrontations with the religious leaders during our Lord's ministry over the proper observation of the Sabbath (Mt. 12:1-12), divorce and remarriage (Mt. 19:3-9), eating without the ritual of hand washing (Mt. 15:1-9), as well as differences over the proper use of oaths (Mt. 5:34) and the use of retaliation (Mt. 5:39). To a people trained to follow the traditions of the elders, the Savior's message seemed very radical and perhaps even revolutionary. Therefore, almost at the outset of Jesus' public ministry, He makes His full and unswerving loyalty to the law and prophets public.

Second, Christ needs to clarify His position on God's law in order to instruct His disciples on the true meaning of righteousness. True righteousness is never rooted in human traditions, philosophies or ideas, but rather is founded solely upon the Word of God. The ethics of the kingdom are not contrary to Scripture, but they are contrary to the perversions of Scripture caused by human traditions. This interpretation is proven by the six contrasts set forth in the remainder of this chapter where our Lord says, "You have heard it said" (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). "Jesus' corrections of the mistaken understandings involve the presentation of the true meaning of the Torah, not its cancellation as might at first seem to be the case."¹⁷⁰

By way of introduction there are some things to note regarding this section of Scripture. First, verse 17, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets...", is the key statement (in a sense our Lord's sermon text) for the rest of chapter five. Jesus states His proposition in verse 17; then gives a reason in verse 18; then gives a related warning in verse 19

¹⁷⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 103.

and backs up this with a reason in verse 20. In verses 21-48, Christ then sets forth His view (i.e. the biblical view) in contrast to that of the Pharisees which He condemns. We could learn the most about effective preaching from the Savior's example. He not only backs up His statement with excellent argumentation, but He also has a lengthy section of illustrations that serve as explication and application.

Second, note that the Redeemer teaches in both a positive and negative manner. He emphatically and clearly teaches the truth regarding Himself and the Old Testament Scriptures with a focus on the moral law; and, He strongly and repeatedly criticizes the predominant religious views that were popular in His own day. This observation is particularly important for our own time because evangelical, as well as Reformed, churches and institutions have increasingly come to condemn our Lord's manner of teaching. When pastors critique other views, especially those held by evangelicals or backslidden Reformed denominations, they often hear comments such as: "Why don't you just focus on positive teaching? Why do you have to criticize this other viewpoint?" But such comments contradict the very practice of Jesus. He sharply criticized the Pharisaical perversions of God's law and, thus, obviously considered the exposing and denouncing of false doctrine to be pastoral and biblical.

People who do not like to hear criticism in sermons often stake their case on their own ideas of Christian love and community. But with our own Lord as an example, we could say that preaching that does not warn and convict those who contradict (Tit. 1:9) shows a lack of love and concern for God's people. The worldly, antinomian spirit that is so much a part of professing Christian churches in our day has a very dangerous habit of protecting the wicked and the guilty, while endangering the Savior's sheep. All ministers of the gospel have a duty to expose and refute doctrinal error.

Third, with the exception of a partial parallel in Luke 16:17 ("And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail."), this section of Scripture is unique to Matthew's gospel. Matthew was writing primarily to a Jewish audience. Therefore, he was very concerned to prove that Jesus was the Messianic King foretold in the Old Testament and wanted to make clear the Savior's relationship to the law. Although Christ was accused of being a lawbreaker (e.g., Mk. 2:24; Lk. 6:2) and a rejecter of the law, He rather came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He was not an enemy of the Jewish religion, but rather was its true fulfillment and cornerstone.

Fourth, this section of Scripture is very important, for it helps us understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It tells us the proper attitude that Christians should have toward God's law. Although Matthew 5:17-20 in some respects is not an easy passage to understand and has engendered a wide variety of interpretations (particularly regarding the word "fulfill"), nevertheless a thorough examination and understanding of these verses will inoculate us against the many heresies that have arisen regarding God's law and will help us in our quest for increased sanctification or personal righteousness.

Fifth, our Lord begins this section with a sharp command—"Do not think" (aorist imperative)—which implies that some of the Jews were likely to think that Jesus did come to abolish many of their laws and institutions. The Pharisees certainly accused the Savior of this, in that He did not keep the oral tradition which they regarded as coming directly from God to Moses and as having equal authority to the written law. Others may have been confused because Christ often spoke on His own authority. As God He had the right to do this, but even His disciples were slow in understanding His true character and mission. Still others may have been

confused by His mingling with scandalous sinners and outcasts. Moreover, the gospel that the Redeemer preached was one of pure grace. The Jews at that time were taught that keeping the law in an external manner was the sure path to heaven. Jesus rejected all concepts of human merit and works-righteousness as a means of earning paradise (e.g., Lk. 18:10-13). Perhaps some of our Lord's disciples were perplexed and were wondering if the gospel superseded the law. In any case, Christ's strong language is designed to crush all such thinking before it spreads.

Defining Terms

In order to understand this section of Scripture, we first need to define the crucial phrases and words in it. Most of the expressions and words are easy to understand. The great disagreements over this passage (generally speaking) all flow from different understandings of the verb "to fulfill" (*plerosai*). Therefore, we will spend more time in attempting to arrive at a precise meaning of this term.

(1) The first thing that merits our attention in this passage is the phrase "I came" (*elthon*). This verb implies the pre-existence of the Messiah and that Jesus came to carry out a specific mission. His purpose in coming into the world was not to destroy, abrogate or abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.

(2) The expression "the law or the prophets" refers to the whole of the Old Testament canon. The word law when used with prophets refers to the Pentateuch (lit. *the five rolls*) or the five books of Moses. The Jews in the days of Christ considered the law as by far the most important part of the Bible. Since the word "law" in such a context encompasses all the books of Moses, one should not attempt to restrict this term to the moral law alone. This point is important, for if Jesus is saying that He did not come to destroy or abrogate the whole law of Moses, including the ceremonial law, then this fact must be taken into account when we attempt to define the word "fulfill." There are no examples in the New Testament of the expression "law and/or prophets" where the term "law" can be restricted to the moral law or the ten commandments (cf. Mt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:33; 22:40; Lk. 16:16; Jn. 1:45; Ac. 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21).

Although the term "prophets" can refer to the prophetic books of the Old Testament (e.g., Lk. 24:44 reads, "all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me"), when it is placed next to law it refers to all the other books in the Old Testament besides the five books of Moses. The fact that the word "prophets" is placed next to the term "law" does not imply (as some scholars assert) that the Savior's focus in the passage is on the ethical context of the prophets to the exclusion of predictive prophecy. Also, there is no reason to restrict the term law to the predictive elements in the Pentateuch, to the exclusion of moral and ceremonial precepts. Both of these views not only contradict the common usage of the expression "law and prophets" in the New Testament, but also are essentially imposed on the text to accommodate a particular interpretation of the word "fulfill." (e.g., Dispensational authors want to restrict these terms to predictive prophecy to the exclusion of ethical stipulations, while certain theonomists want to focus on ethics to the exclusion of predictive prophecy.) While it is true that Matthew 5:19-48 focuses on the moral law and completely ignores predictive prophecy, the Lord does this because His focus is on the true righteousness of His kingdom in opposition to Jewish traditions. Further, it would be rather strange to go into detail regarding His fulfillment of prophecy before most of the prophecies were fulfilled.

Some commentators see significance in the fact that Christ used the disjunctive particle “or” (“the law or the prophets”) instead of the much more common conjunction “and” (“the law and the prophets”). The use of “or,” however, in Matthew 5:17 is simply better suited for use with the Savior’s negative form of expression in 5:17a (“...not...law or prophets” better expresses the negative correlation than ‘...not...law and prophets’).¹⁷¹

(3) The Greek word *kataluo*, translated “destroy” (KJV, NKJV) or “abolish” (NASB, NIV, RSV), in first century Greek literature, with regard to civil law, meant to deprive by force, annul, abrogate, abolish or repeal. The same verb was used to describe the tearing down, dismantling, destroying or demolition of buildings. Indeed, the same word is used to describe the destruction of the Temple (Mt. 27:40) and the destruction of our bodies at death (2 Cor. 5:1). Jesus is not some radical or revolutionary who came to destroy or repudiate the authority of Scripture. Instead He came to fulfill, establish and enforce it. “Christ venerated the sacred Scriptures, was regulated by them in all His actions, and definitely set His imprimatur upon their Divine inspiration.”¹⁷²

(4) The most difficult word to define in this context is “fulfill” (“*plerosai*”). This word has been interpreted a number of different ways and many views are completely wrong. The meaning of this word is crucial for understanding our text. If we go wrong here, we will misunderstand the whole passage. Therefore, we will carefully examine the meaning of this word and then come to a conclusion as to its use in this particular context.

The word “fulfill” means literally “to fill to the full.” “The verb ‘to fulfill’ suggests the image of a vessel which is filled to the top.”¹⁷³ This word is used in its normal (non-theological or non-eschatological) sense in Matthew 13:48 where, at Jesus’ instructions, the disciples’ net is filled to the full with a catch of fish. “From this basic meaning comes such derivative meanings as ‘accomplish,’ ‘complete,’ ‘bring to an end,’ ‘finish.’”¹⁷⁴ In Matthew 23:32 the word is used of scribes and Pharisees filling up the measure of their fathers’ guilt. The Jews’ rebellion reaches its climax and thus “completes” the Jewish history of guilt as a covenant nation.

When the word “fulfill” is used regarding Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecy, it clearly has the meaning of accomplish. Of the sixteen times this term is used in Matthew at least twelve refer to the fulfillment of predictive prophecy (1:22, “this was done that it might be fulfilled;” 2:15, 17; 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14 (*anapleroo*) 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9). The things that were prophesied about the Messianic King in the Old Testament had their fulfillment in the historical events of Christ’s life. In Matthew 3:15 the word, “fulfill,” has the sense of “accomplish,” of “fully obey.” When John the Baptizer questioned the Savior’s need to be baptized our Lord said, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” In this passage Jesus was not fulfilling predictions, but was rendering full obedience to the Father on behalf of His people.

In James 2:23 Abraham “fulfilled” the Scripture *when he obeyed God* in offering his son on the altar. Abraham faithfully acted upon God’s Word and thus “fully obeyed” it. Paul speaks of fulfilling the law by obeying it: “He who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). The

¹⁷¹ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament: with a Critically Revised Text, a Digest of Various Readings, Marginal References to Verbal and Idiomatic Usage* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 1:42.

¹⁷² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 50.

¹⁷³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 205. In Romans 15:19, Paul describes faithfulness in spreading the gospel from Jerusalem to as far as Illyricum as fulfilling the gospel (*peplerokenai*). “Paul had discharged his commission and fulfilled the design of his ministry within the wide area specified” (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 2:214).

¹⁷⁴ Donald A. Hanger, *Matthew 1-13*, 105.

apostle uses *plerotha* to describe obedience fulfilled, carried out, or completed in 2 Corinthians 10:6. In Revelation 3:2 Jesus rebukes the church at Sardis because He has found that their works are not being fulfilled (*pepleromena*) before God. This word is translated “perfected” in the KJV with the idea of good works obeyed or brought to completion. Given these examples we could say that Christ fulfills the prophets because all the prophecies regarding the Messiah find their fulfillment in Jesus. His birth, life, death and resurrection all perfectly accomplish Old Testament predictions. The Savior also fulfills the law because He obeys it or carries it out perfectly. Jesus, in His person and work, performs what the Law and Prophets require. He does not merely rescue the Law from the corrupt glosses of the Jews, but also brings in an “everlasting righteousness.” The moral law can only be “fulfilled” by a perfect obedience in thought, word and deed. This is something that only the God-man can accomplish.

Regarding the context and the meaning of fulfill, there are three important things to consider. First, the contrast of the term “fulfill” with the antonym “destroy” or “abrogate” is very helpful in telling us what “fulfill” does not mean. Jesus wanted to eliminate any idea that He had come to destroy, annul or abolish the law. Therefore, He set the word “fulfill” as a contrast to “destroy” to reassure the Jews of His intent. While grammatical contrasts do not have to be exact opposites, the word “fulfill” must at least be *contrary* in meaning to “destroy” or “abrogate.” Therefore, it would be out of accord with Greek grammar and simple rules of logic for our Lord to say, “Do not think that I came to abrogate the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them, but to bring them to an end.” Such words are not only contradictory, but if that had been the Savior’s meaning His audience would have expressed shock and outrage. Further, such an interpretation (which is common among evangelicals) contradicts the rest of our Lord’s sermon where He demands, defends and commends a strict obedience to God’s moral law from the heart.

Second, the expression, “law or prophets,” points us in the direction of a multifaceted understanding of the term “fulfill.” The reason behind this statement lies in the obvious fact that prophecy and the law of God in all its variations (e.g., moral, civil and ceremonial) cannot be fulfilled in the exact same manner. While there is a similarity between fulfilling prophecy and the typology of the ceremonial laws relating to sacrifice and purification, moral laws are fulfilled in a different manner. Therefore, the old Puritan approach to this passage which says that Jesus fulfills the entire Old Testament (the law and the prophets) is the right approach in a number of different ways. As noted above, attempts to restrict the phrase “Law or Prophets” to only the predictive element in the Old Testament or only the law aspect of the Old Testament are arbitrary. The audience to whom Christ was speaking would certainly not have understood such a clever and narrow distinction.

Third, verses 20 through 42 concern a discussion of obedience to the moral law for Jesus’ disciples. Therefore, any approach to the passage which says that Christ brought an end to every aspect of the Mosaic law including laws that are moral such as the Ten Commandments cannot be true. It would be completely absurd for the Savior to say that He came to bring an end to the law and then turn right around and preach on the necessity of a true understanding of various moral requirements so that His disciples would properly keep these laws.

(5) Jesus explains why verse 17 is true in verse 18: “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle will by no means pass away from the law till all is fulfilled.” The expression “assuredly” (*amen*), also translated “verily” or “truly,” means that everything that our Lord is about to say can be completely relied upon. *Amen* is the

transliteration of the Hebrew word for truth and faithfulness. When it is used by Christ it refers to an important solemn truth: “‘amen’ is the seal of *verity*, ‘I say to you’ the stamp of *authority*.”¹⁷⁵

The expressions jot (*iota*) or tittle (*keraia*) provide an extra emphasis on the absoluteness of Christ’s statement. The jot or Greek *iota* is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet and is used to refer to the smallest Hebrew letter, the *yod* (a small curve). The tittle refers to a tiny mark used in Hebrew letters that is shaped like a hook. The point is that no part of the Old Testament, however small or seemingly insignificant, will be allowed to fall to the ground or remain unfulfilled. Every little bit will be fulfilled in the Messiah. It is clear from this passage that our Lord not only believed in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, but also held a Christocentric understanding of the Bible. Jesus by His life, ministry, teaching, death and resurrection will fulfill all.

The phrase “till heaven and earth pass away” refers to the time in the distant future when Christ returns and ushers in the final state and the new heaven and earth. It will only be at this time when all the prophecies regarding the Messiah will be completely fulfilled and “the law” as a written code will no longer be necessary. The fact that all believers will be living in glorified bodies that are perfect; cannot sin; and exist in the very presence of God, will render the Bible as a written book superfluous. “Until that time arrives, however, nothing whatever will remain lacking as to fulfillment. God’s program with respect to Christ, the church, mankind in general, and the universe, will be carried out in full (Isa. 40:8).”¹⁷⁶

The expression at the end of verse 18, “till all is fulfilled,” means literally “until all is accomplished” or “until all has occurred.” This phrase supports the interpretation that the word “fulfill” in verse 17 does not merely refer to Jesus’ role as a teacher of the law, but also a fulfiller of prophecy and one who obeyed the moral law. The Savior came to accomplish all things said of Him and the prophecies regarding Him will not be exhausted until He returns in triumph to judge the world and begins the eternal state.

The word “law” in verse 18 may refer to the Torah in the broader sense and continue the thought of verse 17 “the Law and the Prophets” (i.e. the entire Old Testament). Or in anticipation of the Savior’s discussion of righteousness in verse 20 and following, Christ may have a more narrow meaning in mind. In any case the interpretation of “fulfill” discussed above would remain the same.

Some Common Errors

Now that we have some understanding of how the terms and phrases in our passage are defined by Scripture, we would do well to briefly examine some common errors regarding Jesus’ fulfillment of the Old Testament, especially God’s law.

(1) Classical dispensationalism teaches that “fulfill” should be interpreted in the sense of “complete” or “bring to an end.” Thus, they teach that Jesus essentially abolished the whole law including the Ten Commandments and replaced them with the dispensation of grace. They support this view with passages such as John 1:17: “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” This statement does not mean that the law was defective or contained no grace or truth, but that the Redeemer surpasses the ministry of Moses and the revelation of the law in that He achieved the reality to which the types pointed and is truth itself. He achieved salvation, while the law could only point to it. He is the foundation of all

¹⁷⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 207.

¹⁷⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 292.

grace and truth. None of this means that the *moral laws* as principles of godly living or sanctification are abrogated. But doesn't Romans 6:14 say, "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace"? Indeed, it does. Paul, however, is not talking about dispensations. To be under law in this context refers to what the law does to the sinner. The law convicts, condemns and curses the bond servant of sin. The law can do nothing to save, justify or even sanctify the sinner (i.e. apart from faith in Christ and a work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart). To be under grace in this context means to be united with Christ in His life, death and resurrection and, thus, delivered from the bondage of sin. There is an absolute antithesis between the potency and provisions of the law which was never intended by God to be a means of salvation and the potency and provisions of grace which truly delivers men from the servitude of sin. Paul's statement does not abrogate the moral law as a guide for Christian living. The only hope of sinners is that Jesus will set them free from the law's condemning power and curse. Thus, we renounce the law as a means of salvation, or acceptance with God, when we embrace Christ. But, once saved we acknowledge that the moral "law is holy, just and good" (Rom. 7:12) and try to obey its righteous precepts out of gratitude for the Savior's gift of salvation.

(2) Closely related to dispensationalism is the modern evangelical idea that this passage teaches that Christ came to replace the Old Testament law with a new law—"the law of Christ." According to this interpretation, the whole Old Testament law flows into Christ and is fulfilled in Him; Jesus establishes His own law. The Old Testament had its Law of Moses which applied to the nation of Israel and the New Testament has its law of Christ which applies to all new covenant believers throughout the world. A favorite passage of those who hold this opinion is Romans 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Although in certain contexts "end" can denote a termination point (e.g., Mt. 10:22; 24:6, 14; etc.), in both the narrow and broader context of Romans, Paul is setting forth the antithesis between attempting to earn salvation through works or the righteousness of the law and God's righteousness as the righteousness of faith. The apostle is teaching that using the law to attempt to attain an acceptable righteousness before God *ends* the moment we embrace Christ and lay hold of His imputed righteousness by faith. This point is proven by Paul's qualification that only for the believer is Christ the end of the law for righteousness. Thus, Paul is not saying that Christ came to bring an end to the law, but that those who believe unto justification no longer use the law as a method of attaining salvation.

Another favorite passage of those who argue that Jesus came to eliminate the law is Galatians 5:18: "If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law." In the book of Galatians Paul refutes the Judaizers who believed that faith in Jesus was not enough to be justified, but rather believed that one must also keep the Mosaic law before reconciliation with God is achieved. Paul says, "A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16); no one ever received the Holy Spirit by attempting to keep the law but only by the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2). Therefore, the man who is led by the Spirit is the one who first believed in Christ. All true believers are being led by the Spirit. Thus, in context, not being under law obviously refers to not attempting to use the law as a means of justification.

Regarding the idea that Jesus came to bring an end to the law and replace it, we should note the following. a) The verb *to fulfill* never means "to replace" in Scripture. b) The idea of Christ completely replacing the law suffers from the same objections noted above regarding the Savior coming to abrogate the law. To completely replace the law is to "end" it or "annul" it. c) A reading of the New Testament where, on a number of occasions, the apostle's appeal directly

to the Old Testament law for ethical guidance renders such an interpretation fallacious (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1; 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18; Jas. 5:4; Rom. 12:19-20; etc.). d) The idea that moral laws, which are based on God's nature and character and thus are absolute, can be abrogated is irrational. Dispensationalists, deep down, seem to understand this problem and thus will often say it is good to love the law of God and gain wisdom from it even though it is no longer binding.

(3) Another erroneous view is that our Lord came to perfect the law by supplementing it and adding an internal aspect to it. This view is based on a misunderstanding of God's Old Testament law. The idea that the Old Testament was concerned with only external behavior is simply not true. For example, the tenth commandment covers unlawful lust in all its forms. The command, "love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44) is an application of the Old Testament laws which teach the proper treatment of strangers and sojourners. The Old Testament emphasized the need for inward heart obedience and repeatedly condemned the Jewish people's sinful drift toward externalism and ritualism (see Ps. 51: 6, 10, 17; Ps. 40:8; 119:10-11; Hos. 6:6; Pr. 16:18, 19; Mic. 2:1; Job 31:1; etc.).

But (some will argue) did not Christ repeal the Mosaic legislation regarding divorce (Mt. 19:9), the Sabbath (Mt. 12:3-8; Mk. 2:25-28) and the death penalty for adultery (Jn. 8:3-11)? A careful examination of these passages reveals that such an interpretation is completely wrong. Regarding divorce, our Lord first appeals to the creation ordinance of marriage (Mt. 19:4-6), then rebukes the Jews for their hardness of heart (Mt. 19:8) and finally sets forth the proper interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:11. (In this passage divorce is allowed for "some uncleanness" [*erwat dabar*] or "something indecent." Jesus defines this indecency as sexual immorality.) Regarding the Sabbath, the Savior justified plucking and eating the grain on the basis of David's emergency situation and the spiritual work required of priests on that day. Such Old Testament examples would prove that the Sabbath did not even apply to the Old Covenant era and are worthless. Further, the Redeemer says explicitly that He and His disciples were "guiltless" (Mt. 12:7) regarding the Pharisees' charge.

Regarding the common notion that Jesus relaxed the penalty for adultery, we should note the following refutations. a) The Jews were under the Roman Empire and their rights to execute criminals had long been removed. Indeed, the Romans forbade the death penalty for adultery. If our Lord had participated in such an act, He could have been arrested by the Roman authorities. This whole situation was a trap set by the scribes and Pharisees. b) The death penalty for adultery was the maximum penalty for that crime, but not the only penalty. c) The crowd arbitrarily brought only one guilty person when there should have been two. d) Matthew 8:7-10 makes it clear that the witnesses present were not qualified under the law to testify against her. (Most commentators do not think that the Savior was demanding perfectly sinless witnesses, but that it was inappropriate for people who were guilty of the same sin to stand in judgment over her.) e) Our Lord did not come to be a judge, but to save sinners. His time of judging, at that moment, was still future.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was not adding to God's law or subjecting His disciples to a new, higher standard, but was countering the perversion of the scribes and Pharisees who externalized the law and rendered it void by their human traditions. A study of the New Testament reveals virtually no ethical principles not already found in the Old Testament. The difference in the New Covenant is not a new and different ethical standard, but Christ's completed work and His sending the Holy Spirit to empower and enable believers to more faithfully obey God's moral law.

(4) Greg Bahnsen's view that "fulfill" simply means to confirm (i.e. make firmer, establish or strengthen) the law of God in exhaustive detail is also erroneous for a number of reasons. First, the Hebrew word *qum*, which means "establish," is never translated as *pleroun* in the Greek Septuagint. Second, the word "confirm" is far too narrow and assumes that Jesus is only discussing His role as a teacher of the law and not a fulfiller of prophecy and fulfiller of the obligations of the law. Our Lord fulfills the whole Old Testament. Third, in our examination of the word "fulfill" in Matthew and the rest of the New Testament, we saw that it referred to either prophecy accomplished or the commands of God carried out or completed. It is never used to mean confirm as a teacher.¹⁷⁷ Fourth, the Savior's words "I came," which refer to the incarnation, indicate a broad purpose and not only the one aspect of teaching. While Jesus did teach the truth about the law and established the moral law in opposition to the Pharisees' human traditions, His work of fulfilling the whole Old Testament Scriptures by His perfect obedience and sacrificial death are the focus of the term fulfill. Fifth, the fact that Christ goes into a lengthy section regarding His disciples' need to teach and obey the moral law in opposition to the Jewish leadership, does not *redefine* the word fulfill and is harmonious with our Lord's fulfilling the entire Old Testament. Sixth, if the term "fulfill" is not applied to the whole Old Testament with its different application to prophecy, the types and the moral law, then one has the problem of saying that Christ established the whole law in exhaustive detail while admitting at a later point that the ceremonial laws are actually fulfilled in a different way and thus do not continue in the New Covenant era. Bahnsen insists that fulfill can only have one meaning in the context (confirm), but then applies it in a *different* manner to the ceremonial laws because He knows they have been set aside by Christ. Bahnsen is forced by the analogy of Scripture to apply the word "fulfill" in a different way to the typological ordinances than the moral statutes.

Chapter 13: Jesus' Fulfillment of the Old Testament

Having carefully examined the important words and phrases in our text, we are ready to consider *how* our Lord fulfills the Old Testament. The best way to proceed is to separate predictive prophecy from the ceremonial and moral law. Jesus fulfills each, but they are not fulfilled in the same way.

The Fulfillment of Prophecy

There is so much to know about Christ in the area of predictive prophecy, that we only have time to scratch the surface. Regarding the prophetic element we should note the following. First, the Redeemer is the central sum of the whole Old Testament and, moreover, of the whole Bible. In fact, the key to biblical prophecy is the Messiah. If this fact is not foremost in our minds as we interpret the Scriptures, then we will not understand or profit from God's Word. The Savior is the scarlet thread that runs throughout the whole Bible. Christ was the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). At the beginning of man's history,

¹⁷⁷ It is telling that the only passage in all of sacred Scripture that Bahnsen appeals to for the meaning of "confirm" is the Greek Septuagint translation of 1 Kings 1:14. Although the KJV and NKJV use the word "confirm," Young's Literal Translation of the Bible reads, "I came in after thee, and have *completed* thy words." Therefore, even the LXX does not necessarily support Bahnsen's contention.

after the fall, God prophesied of a coming day when a descendant of Eve would completely reverse Satan's temporary coup. In various prophecies to Abraham (see Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-16; 15:4-21; 17:4-16; cf. 22:15-18), we learn of a seed to come who will be a great blessing to all nations. Jesus was the prophet to come who was greater than Moses (see Dt. 18:15-19), who would supersede all prophets (Heb. 1:1-2). His sacrificial death was the anti-type of all the Old Testament sacrifices. He was the fulfillment of the Davidic kingship and the anti-type of all the judges and deliverers of Israel. Our Lord was the true Lamb, the true high priest, the true temple, the true scapegoat, the true sacrifice who would bless the world. He was Israel's suffering servant whose death would redeem Israel (53:5, 8). He was Daniel's Messiah the Prince, who would be cut off for the people (9:26) and bring an end to the Old Testament sacrifices (9:27). "He was Jeremiah's 'Branch of Righteousness, executing justice and righteousness in the land.' He was Ezekiel's 'Plant of renown,' giving shade and giving fragrance. He was Daniel's stone cut without hands, smiting the image, becoming a mountain and filling the whole earth."¹⁷⁸

The apostle Paul refers to Jesus as the great consummate "yes" and "amen" to all of God's promises. "For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us." (2 Cor. 1:20). "He is the horn of salvation raised up for us by God, 'as He spake by the mouth of the holy prophets which have been since the world began' (Lk. 1:69f.). In Him all things 'which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms' achieve their fulfillment (Lk. 24:44). The covenant promises addressed to Abraham and his seed are realized in His single person (Gal. 3:16). To the believer, therefore, Christ is all, not merely as fulfilling a word of the past, but as Himself being the very living Word of God, faithful and eternal."¹⁷⁹ Therefore, if the Savior is not the central focus of our hearts when we come to Scripture, then the Bible will be a dark and difficult book. Thus, we see why modern Judaism and Islam are built on blindness and error; because they suppress the central core of all sacred truth—Jesus Christ.

Second, our Lord's perfect fulfillment of predictive prophecy is an amazing proof of His person and claims. Given the exact fulfillment of so many prophecies by Jesus, it is astounding that the Jews who possessed the Old Testament Scriptures stumbled at Him. Almost every important detail of His life was foretold by the prophets: His miraculous birth of a virgin (Isa. 7:14; Mt. 1:22-23) of the seed of David (2 Sam. 7:16; Rom. 1:3) in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2; Mt. 2:6); His journey out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1; Mt. 2:15); the killing of the infants by Herod (Jer. 31:15; Mt. 2:17); the fact that the Messiah was raised in Nazareth (Isa. 11:1; Mt. 2:23); His ministry in the region of Galilee of the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6-7; Mt. 4:14); the Savior's amazing healing ministry (Isa. 53:4; Mt. 8:17); the Jews' rejection of Christ and the gospel going to the Gentiles (Isa. 42:1-4; Mt. 12:17); the Messiah's speaking in parables to obscure certain truths to the Jews (Isa. 6:9-10; cf. Ps. 78:2; Mt. 13:14, 35); the Mediator's ride into Jerusalem on a colt (Zech. 9:9; Mt. 21:4); His betrayal for thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12-13; Jer. 18:1-4; 19:1-3; Ps. 4:19); the fact that wicked false witnesses would be used at His trial (Ps. 35:11; Mt. 27:59-62); the Savior's silence at His trial (Isa. 53:7; Mt. 26:63); the flogging, beating and spitting upon Jesus (Isa. 50:6; 53:5; Mt. 26:67-68; 27:26-30); the offer of vinegar and gall to drink at the site of execution (Ps. 69:21; Mt. 27:34); the method of Christ's death—crucifixion (Isa. 53:8; Ps. 22:14-17; Mt. 27:35); the dividing of the Redeemer's garments (Ps. 22:18; Mt. 27:35); the presence of Gentiles at the crucifixion (Ps. 22:20; Mt. 27:54); the mocking and derision heaped on the Messiah during His suffering on the cross (Ps. 22:7-8; Mt. 27:39-42); the exact words of

¹⁷⁸ G. Campbell Morgan, *The God Who Cares* (Old Tappan, NJ: Flemington-Revell, [1931] 1987), 407.

¹⁷⁹ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 36-37.

mockery that came from the scribes and elders (Ps. 22:8; Mt. 27:43); the exact words of Jesus uttered to God from the cross (Ps. 22:1; Mt. 27:46); the suffering Servant's burial in a rich man's sepulcher (Isa. 53:9; Mt. 27:53-60); Christ's glorious resurrection from the dead (Ps. 16:9-11; 118:24; Mt. 28:6); His received authority as King over heaven and earth (Ps. 2:7-12; 110:1; Mt. 28:18); His ascension into heaven (Ps. 24:7-10; 47:5; 68:18; Mk. 16:19; Lk. 24:51; Ac. 1:9-11); His outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church (Joel 2:28-32; Ac. 2:1-4); and even the second bodily coming and universal judgment which has not yet occurred (Ps. 50:3-4; 98:6-9; Mt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:11-15).

The prophetic proof that Jesus is exactly who He claimed to be (the Messianic King, Savior, Son of God and Judge of all Mankind) is totally unique among all the world's religions. The leaders and founders of all the world's various religions (e.g., Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell) have absolutely no objective proof or way to verify their claims. They expect us to accept their word and authority based only on their own witness. But Jesus has this amazing testimony of literally fulfilling over two hundred distinct prophecies. If one or two prophecies are considered separately, then people could claim that perhaps our Lord's fulfillments are an interesting coincidence or maybe were deliberate attempts by Christ to fulfill certain messianic predictions. But when all the dozens and dozens of prophecies are taken together and we consider the fact that, humanly speaking, Jesus and the apostles had absolutely no way to control or manipulate them, we must stand in awe of this irrefutable proof.

The fulfillment of prophecy is a great apologetical tool for presenting the gospel to unbelievers because the numbers and the amazing accuracy cannot honestly or rationally be dismissed. If you do not find the Redeemer in prophecy, believe in Him and bow the knee to Him as King, then you are spiritually blind and are still in your sins. Our Lord's statement regarding His fulfillment of the prophets should have sent the Jews to the Scriptures to find the fulfillments. Sadly, however, most Jews at that time were not interested in the truth. If you do believe in Christ then don't be a fool and do so this very moment. "Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10).

The Fulfillment of the Law

When we discuss the fulfillment of the law we need to distinguish between laws that are ceremonial and laws that are moral. They are obviously not fulfilled in the exact same manner. Thus, each will be treated separately.

(1) The ceremonial laws are fulfilled in their own way because they foreshadow Christ typologically. Thus, in a sense these laws are more related to prophecy than the moral law. The Tabernacle and the Temple prefigured the special presence of Christ in and among His people. The priesthood looks ultimately to Jesus' priestly function. The whole complex system of sacrifices points to our Lord's sacrificial death on the cross. The types teach us about the imputation of sin (Lev. 1:4; 3:2; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33), expiation, redemption, reconciliation and propitiation. Therefore, the attitude which says that the Old Testament is unimportant or can be ignored is unbiblical.

The ceremonial laws were directed to Israel and were a schoolmaster intended to bring the covenant people to Christ. Like prophecy, they were anticipatory, for they looked ahead to the perfect, final redemption wrought by the Messiah. They were always designed to be temporary, for as types and shadows they could not really remove the guilt of sin and bring

perfection. God always intended to supersede the whole ceremonial system by the Savior's fulfilling of it. "Their whole purpose and design were evidently discharged as soon as His real work of satisfaction was accomplished; and therefore it is not only a truth taught in Scripture (Heb. x.1-14; Col. ii.14-17; Eph. ii.15, 16), but an undeniable historical fact, that the priestly work of Christ immediately and definitely superseded the work of the Levitical priest. The instant of Christ's death, the veil separating the throne of God from the approach of men 'was rent in twain from the top to the bottom' (Matt. xxvii.50, 51), thus throwing the way open to all, and dispensing with priests and their ceremonies forever."¹⁸⁰

A discussion of the ceremonial law in regard to Jesus fulfilling the whole Old Testament usually raises a few pertinent questions. If our Lord did not come to destroy the law (Mt. 5:17) and the ceremonial ordinances are indeed set out of gear or annulled by the Redeemer's work, then how does the Savior's work not abrogate at least some of God's law? How could our Lord say, "Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled"? Calvin gives an excellent answer to this question: "With respect to ceremonies, there is some appearance of a change having taken place; but it was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed. The coming of Christ has taken nothing away even from ceremonies, but, on the contrary confirms them by exhibiting the truth of shadows."¹⁸¹ "[H]e did not make *void*, but made *good*, the ceremonial law, and manifested himself to be the Substance of all those shadows."¹⁸² Jesus does not destroy or invalidate the meaning or essence of the types, but makes them real, concrete, and complete. Antiochus Epiphanes tried to destroy the Jewish ordinances, while Christ fulfilled them. The gospel and the New Covenant do not destroy the Old Covenant, but rather supersede them by accomplishing what they anticipate and foreshadow.

(2) As we turn our attention to the Savior's fulfillment of the moral law it is important to note that the moral law is fulfilled in a completely different manner than the types and prophecies. Predictions of what is going to happen in the future are fulfilled when those events occur. Types are fulfilled when the anti-type comes and replaces the "shadows" (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5) or "weak and beggarly elements" with the reality. The moral law of God can only be fulfilled when the penalty or curse of the law has been endured and the requirement of a perfect obedience to all its demands has taken place. In other words, the law needs fulfillment as to precept and penalty. Let us examine each of these aspects in turn.

First, Jesus fulfills the law by paying the penalty that it requires for sin in full. The *penalty* for disobedience to the law is death (Gen. 2:17; 3:3; Ez. 18:4; Rom. 6:23); the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10; Dt. 27:26); separation from God (Gen. 3:23; Rev. 6:15); and God's displeasure and wrath (Rom. 1:18; 2:8). Before anyone could go to heaven Christ had to remove the guilt, penalty or curse of the law by taking on Himself the wrath of God that we deserved and that the moral law required.

Paul often emphasized this aspect of our Lord's fulfillment of the law. He writes, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the law, to do them.... Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')" (Gal. 3:10, 13). Paul says that any violation of the law brings a curse upon the offender. Thus, to fulfill the law, Jesus had to become accursed of

¹⁸⁰ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1992), 255-256.

¹⁸¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:277-278.

¹⁸² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:56.

God. The fulfillment of this aspect of the law is seen in the fact that Christ was sacrificed upon a tree. By His slow, painful and shameful death on the cross, Jesus literally became a curse in our place.

The moral law also required separation from God. After Adam sinned he was cast out of the garden of Eden and re-entrance was barred by cherubim with flaming swords (Gen. 3:24). “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you” (Isa. 59:2). The eternal separation from God that we merited by our sin was endured by the Savior as He hung on the cross—the three hours of darkness where Jesus experienced the full eclipse of the Father’s fellowship, friendship and love. When God imputed the sins of the elect upon the Savior on the cross, Jesus was separated from the Father and entered into the outer darkness of hell. God thrust His only begotten Son into the darkness because only this intense agony, indescribable woe and terrible isolation could fulfill the law’s requirements of spiritual death and separation from God for sin. This real separation from God was so painful to Christ that He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). Jesus was abandoned by God on the cross because the only way that God could remain perfectly just; truly honor His moral law; and justify or declare righteous those who believe in the Redeemer was to punish the Savior *fully* for their sins (cf. Rom. 3:21-28).

The moral law also required death as a penalty for sin. Therefore Jesus “became obedient to the point of death” (Phil. 2:8). Paul says, “We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10). Because the law required death as a penalty for sin, Christ had to die to satisfy divine justice and fulfill the moral law. The law condemns sin and requires death so the Savior had to suffer and die to carry out the law.

The Redeemer’s suffering and sacrificial death on the cross to satisfy the requirement of the moral law as to penalty is totally unique among the world’s religions. With Islam and Judaism, the penalty that sin deserves is not dealt with at all. People are taught that God is satisfied with repentance or that one’s good works can outweigh one’s wicked deeds on the day of judgment. Both of these options, however, do not really deal with the guilt of sin. God’s moral law, which is a reflection of God’s nature and character, requires death, separation from God and the sufferings of hell for sin. If God simply overlooked the guilt of sin when people said they were sorry or turned over a new leaf, then God would contradict His holy nature and violate His own law. Who God is and what He requires cannot simply be ignored; if God did that He would not be just. So God sent His only Son, who was holy, spotless and totally without sin, and punished Him in the place of His people. “Christ is fulfilling the law on the cross, and unless you interpret the cross, and Christ’s death upon it, in strict terms of the fulfilling of the law you have not the scriptural view of the death upon the cross.”¹⁸³

Second, our Lord fulfilled the law by rendering a perfect obedience to it in our place. The moral law requires not only that sin be punished, but also that all its requirements be perfectly obeyed in thought, word and deed, from the moment we are born until the time we die. The cross of Christ removes the guilt and penalty of sin by fulfilling the law’s curse against sin. The Lord’s sacrifice delivers the believer from hell. But if we are to have the reward of heaven which the law promises for perfect obedience, we need the perfect law-keeping or righteousness of another. In other words, all sinners are under a double obligation to the law: the penalty must be endured and a perfect obedience rendered. By His active and passive obedience (i.e. His perfect law-keeping and sacrificial death) Jesus satisfies both requirements for His people. Many

¹⁸³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 192-193.

evangelicals do not understand that if God simply eliminated the penalty without fulfilling the positive obligation, then He would be setting aside a crucial aspect of the moral law.

Paul says, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). When the apostle speaks of Jesus being “born under the law” this does not mean that our Lord was only born to deal with the curse of the law. It rather refers to the fact that as a Man—the second Adam, our Lord had a personal obligation to *obey* the law. Did Christ need to obey God’s law on His own behalf? Although Jesus had to be a Lamb without blemish to be a perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice, the fact that He was born without original sin and was hypostatically united with God the Son and thus immediately fit for heaven means that His whole life of obedience was *vicarious*. He came to provide a perfect, positive righteousness for His people. He obeyed as a Surety, a substitute. Therefore, when the Bible refers to “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22; 10:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9), “the righteousness of One” (Rom. 5:18), “the righteousness of Christ” (cf. Rom. 10:4), “the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:11; 9:30; 10:6; cf. Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:9), “the obedience of One” (Rom. 5:19) and the righteousness God imputes apart from works (Rom. 4:6), we must include all of Christ’s righteousness: both His atoning death and His perfect sinless life. Both of these provide the all-sufficient salvation we need to enter God’s presence.

Paul assumed that a perfect obedience to the law is necessary for salvation when he says that “the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom. 2:12). This cannot mean that we can personally achieve justification by our own keeping of the law because in the very next chapter the apostle says “no one is righteous, no not one” (Rom. 3:11); and “a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Thus, we must seek the righteousness of another—Jesus Christ.

When the Savior submitted to the baptism of John He said, “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). When, as the second Adam, our Lord entered into temptation in the wilderness, He rendered the perfect obedience which Adam had failed to render (cf. Mk. 1:12-13; Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13). Paul says that “by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Rom. 5:19 KJV). Righteousness is based on the fact that the whole law has been fulfilled. Jesus fulfilled the covenant of works given to Adam in the garden and fulfilled the moral law in exhaustive detail and this righteousness is imputed to the believing sinner. It is reckoned to his account. Because of Christ’s imputed righteousness, the believing sinner judicially is just as righteous as Jesus in God’s sight. The Redeemer washes away all our sins and filthiness by His precious blood and then He clothes us with His own perfect righteousness. “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the LORD’” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Third, by way of application our Lord fulfills the law by causing it to be honored and obeyed by the Jews and even the Gentiles. The Savior does this in a number of ways.

First, He not only set the perfect example by yielding obedience to the law in all respects, but also taught others to obey the law. The Mediator, in His teachings, very strongly condemned any and all human additions to the law because they nullified it. We see this clearly in the Redeemer’s condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother; and, He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is

a gift to God”—then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” (Mt. 15:3-6). Jesus is the champion of what the Reformers called *sola Scriptura*. Christ understood better than anyone else that human traditions annul or destroy God’s law. Ironically, it was the scribes and Pharisees who were annulling God’s law, not Christ.

There is a great lesson here for every Christian that adding our own rules and regulations to what God has said annuls the law by displacing it with human inventions. The Roman Catholic Church has added so much of what is purely human to God’s Word that it has more in common with a cult than true Christianity. If we are to imitate Christ and fulfill the law, we must be on guard against adding any human traditions to Scripture. A human tradition may seem small or insignificant, but these additions pile up over time and become more important to people than the truth itself. History very strongly attests to this fact.

Second, Jesus’ redemptive work is what enables people from every nation to learn and obey God’s law. Paul writes, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:2-4). The apostle teaches that the law, by itself, had no ability to cause us to obey it because of our enslavement to sin. But because the sacrificial death of Christ conquered sin, both as to guilt and as to pollution in those who believe, believers can fulfill the righteous requirements of the law. Here we have conclusive proof not only that a believer’s holiness consists in obedience to God’s moral law revealed in the Old Testament as well as the New, but also that Jesus’ death causes His own followers to fulfill the law. God justifies us through Christ, who on the basis of His redemptive work sanctifies us through His Spirit. The Redeemer did not come to relax the law’s moral requirement, but to send us His Spirit to enable us to obey God’s moral standard. “The end God had in view when sending His Son was not our justification only, through freedom from the condemnation of the law, but also our holiness, through obedience to the commandments of the law.”¹⁸⁴

Thus, there is a direct correlation between our Lord’s fulfillment of the law and our fulfillment of the law in sanctification. We receive the Holy Spirit only because Jesus fulfilled the law as to precept and penalty and ascended on high. The Spirit’s work in us enlightens our mind to the meaning and importance of God’s law; causes us to delight in God’s law and convicts us when we violate the law. Without the work of the Holy Spirit in us through regeneration and sanctification, the law would remain a dead letter. As Paul says, “the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God nor indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7).

That the redemptive work of Christ would cause the moral law to be obeyed throughout all nations was foretold by the prophets. “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow into it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up the mountain of the LORD.... He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law...” (Isa. 2:1-3; cf. Micah 4:1-2). Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah will establish “justice in the earth; and the coastlands shall wait for His law” (42:4). The coming Savior “will exalt the law and make it honorable” (42:21). “The word law should not be restricted to the Sinaitic legislation, but should include as well the teaching that God has given through the prophets. Israel, in its sinful and rebellious condition, had despised

¹⁸⁴ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 221-222.

the law, but it is God's intention to carry out His purposes. He will magnify and make honorable His law, that the entire world may see the honor and majesty of His truth and authority. The magnifying of the law would also and primarily consist in it being carried out and obeyed."¹⁸⁵ "Listen to Me, My people.... For law will proceed from Me and I will make My justice rest as a light of the peoples. My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, and My arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands will wait upon Me, and on My arm they will trust" (Isa. 51:4-5). After Jesus ascends and the Holy Spirit is given, the Gentiles even in the far off isles will receive the gospel and receive the justice and judgment from God's holy Law.

When Jeremiah distinguishes between the Old and New Covenant, the superiority of the New is set forth in a far greater ability to keep God's Law because there will be a far greater effusion of the Holy Spirit who will penetrate and reform all our inward faculties. "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer. 31:33). Without the help of God's grace, which flows from Christ, we would have no ability to fulfill God's law. The gospel in this sense is not contrary to the law, but rather establishes it.

Third, the Redeemer also fulfills the judicial law. The judicial law was given by God to govern Israel as a special theocratic nation. Therefore, this law contained much that was peculiar to Israel alone. In the judicial law we find ceremonial, moral (e.g., laws condemning adultery, bestiality, incest, homosexuality, robbery, etc.) and civil or national statutes (e.g., type of government, form of tax collection, location of the capital, boundaries of the borders, etc.). Christ also lived in perfect conformity to the judicial requirements. The laws that related uniquely to Israel as a covenant nation do not continue into the New Covenant era because Israel as a special covenant nation has forever ceased to exist. Jesus prophesied that Israel's special status as the covenant nation, or the only expression of the visible church, would come to an end. "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Mt. 21:43). God has judged apostate Israel and created a new nation, which is the multinational New Covenant church. The fact that the judicial laws have expired with the nation of Israel does not mean that the Savior came to destroy them, but rather that a new situation in redemptive history has arisen where they are no longer applicable.

The moral laws that are contained within the judicial laws are applications of the Ten Commandments to specific offenses that occur in any society and are still binding because: a) they are rooted in God's nature and character and thus are ethical absolutes and b) the principles they teach have always applied to all mankind even before the law of Moses existed. Before these laws were written down and enscripturated they existed in the laws of nature; that is, "the work of the law written in their hearts" (Rom. 2:15). "Thus the moral law, as interpreted by the New Testament, stands now as much as it has ever done, and will do so until the end of time and until we are perfected. In 1 John iii the apostle is very careful to remind his readers that sin in Christian people is still 'a transgression of the law'.... The law is still there, and when I sin I am breaking that law, though I am a Christian and though I have never been a Jew, and am a Gentile. So the moral law still applies to us."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:134-135.

¹⁸⁶ D. Martyn-Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:195.

Some Applications

We have seen that Jesus fulfills the law in every possible way. This doctrine tells us a number of important things.

First, the whole Old Testament, every single part of it is inspired and important for teaching us about Christ and the gospel. We need the Old Testament to understand the New and we need the New Testament to understand the Old. The law of God reveals the gospel and the gospel in turn helps us understand the law. The attitude often found among evangelicals that the Old Testament is not important or relevant for Christians is dangerous. The practice of publishing New Testaments without the Old Testament is unscriptural and unwise. The more we understand the law, the more we will understand the person and work of Christ. In fact, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is virtually incomprehensible without an understanding of biblical righteousness or justice. Because of an ignorance of the Old Testament, many professing Christians have rejected or simply ignored Paul's doctrine of justification for mysticism and existentialism. The gospel is no longer defined in terms of Christ fulfilling the law in our place as to penalty and precept, but rather is discussed in terms of the subjective experience of asking Jesus to come and live in one's heart. This is an unwitting abandonment of the Protestant Reformation and an implicit shift toward Rome.

Second, the fact that Jesus did not annul or abrogate any of the moral laws found in the Old Testament teaches us that the *whole* Bible is our textbook for personal sanctification. The dispensational idea that believers are limited to a New Testament ethic or the Pentecostal teaching that sanctification comes through personal revelations or mystical leadings of the Spirit has led directly to worldliness, ungodliness and lukewarmness among many professing Christians. The New Testament ethic is rooted in and presupposes the moral law of God revealed throughout the Old Testament. (e.g., the New Testament repeatedly condemns fornication or sexual immorality. However, it is the Old Testament that carefully defines this general term. Further, not every Old Testament moral requirement is restated in the New Testament; there are no passages in the New Testament that explicitly condemn bestiality. Further, the detailed laws regarding consanguinity, or proper relations between relatives, are only found in the Old Testament. Obviously, "the law is good if one uses it lawfully" [1 Tim. 1:8]). To limit our teaching on morality and godliness to only the New Testament is to leave at least half of our armor and weaponry for holiness unused. If we do not diligently study and memorize the moral precepts in the Old Testament (and the prophetic teachings against those who disregarded these laws), then we do not have Christ's doctrine toward God's holy law.

Third, knowing the suffering and humiliation that our Savior went through to save us and enable us to obey the law ought to make us far more diligent and serious regarding our walk with Christ. Are we keeping the law because our Lord fulfilled the law for us? Are we following the Captain of our salvation in our quest for a sanctified life? We must always view the law through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we must strive to obey the moral law, knowing that it demonstrates our love toward Him. May God enable us to walk in His statutes to the glory of our dear Savior.

Chapter 14: Christians as Doers and Teachers of the Law

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:19-20).

After our Lord assures His audience that He did not come to destroy the law and the prophets but rather fulfill, He turns His attention to His disciples' treatment of God's law. The word "therefore" indicates that Jesus is now applying His previous doctrine about the continuing validity of the law to the teaching and behavior of His followers. The fact that Christ did not come to abolish the law means that all Christians have a duty to teach obedience to the whole moral law of God and to obey all of its precepts, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. By way of introduction, there are a number of things to note regarding our text.

First, this verse (together with verse 20) forms an introduction to the following section where the Savior gives example after example of how the scribes and Pharisees had not truly taught or obeyed God's law. Our Lord warns His disciples that they must steer clear of the popular teachers in their own day and instead follow the true meaning of the Torah given by Himself.

Second, the word "commandments" (*entolon*) in this context is restricted to the moral commandments of God. This observation is inferred from the fact that: a) Christ's statement is inclusive of the new covenantal era that He is about to introduce. The Redeemer discusses both teaching and *doing* after the cross; Christians are not to keep the ceremonial laws. b) This statement introduces a very lengthy section (5:21-48) where only the proper interpretation of moral commandments is entertained.

Third, the Savior's statement in verse 19 about doing and teaching the whole moral law is a prelude to our Lord's statement in verse 20 regarding the necessity of a disciple's personal righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees. "Instead of encouraging his followers to disregard the law of Moses, our Lord insists on the most scrupulous adherence to it...instead of requiring less from his disciples than the Scribes and Pharisees...our Lord requires more."¹⁸⁷

Fourth, Christ does not contrast two extreme positions (i.e. a complete rejection of what is required in the moral law or the full acceptance of them), but rather only the setting aside of one of the least requirements of the law. Therefore, in this verse the Redeemer is not contrasting the rank unbeliever or antinomian with the mature Christian, but is contrasting the mistaken disciple with one who holds the correct position. This verse is concerned only with citizens of the kingdom of heaven. There are a number of things that merit our attention in verse 19.

(1) Jesus first discusses the consequences of disregarding the least commandments and teaching men that they do not need to be obeyed. "Whoever...breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." The word translated "break" (*luse*) means to dissolve, destroy or annul. It is the simple verb of which a compound verb (*katalusai*) occurs twice in verse 17. Here it is translated "break" because it is set in parallel to doing the least commandments in the second half of the verse 17. The idea here is that of a disciple who does not believe he is obligated to follow a commandment which he

¹⁸⁷ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:174.

considers unimportant and, therefore, breaks this commandment. He then passes on his unbiblical viewpoint to others in the church.

The first half of verse nineteen raises a number of important questions. First, what does our Lord mean by the expression “the least of these commandments”? The phrase “least of these commandments” must be taken in an objective, not a subjective sense. In other words, our Lord is not saying “what you may happen to think is the least requirement,” but is speaking of an actual least requirement of the moral law. The idea that is common in some circles that every requirement is of equal importance is refuted by Jesus’ statement. Some requirements are supreme and absolutely essential. Others are important, yet secondary. Still others could be said to be of lesser weight. Finally there is the least commandment. Some rabbis regarded Deuteronomy 22:6-7 (“If a bird’s nest happens to be before you along the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, with the mother sitting on the young or the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall surely let the mother go; and take the young for yourself, that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your day.”) as the “lightest” or least important of all the commandments. Christ, at a later point, would even rebuke the scribes and Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of the law (Mt. 23:23). He also made it clear that the greatest of all the commandments was to love God with all the heart, soul and mind (Mt. 22:37). Therefore, even though all divine requirements are important; all moral laws form a grand unit; and the violation of even one law merits death and hell in God’s sight (Ez. 18:4; 1 Jn. 3:4), we must recognize degrees of law and degrees of sin.

Given the fact that we are discussing what is objectively the least requirement, the Savior is obviously not referring to one of the ten commandments. Although within the ten commandments themselves there are commands that are more weighty than others (e.g., worshiping a false God and taking the Lord’s name in vain are far more serious sins than coveting your neighbor’s ox), all of the ten commandments are very important and therefore could never (objectively) be a least commandment in the law. “Thus to vacate any of the ten commandments, is too bold a stroke for the jealous God to pass by. It is something more than transgressing the law, it is making void the law, Ps. cxix.126.”¹⁸⁸ Therefore, although Christ never identifies a least requirement, we can surmise that it would be a much lighter law such as Deuteronomy 22:6-7. Our Lord’s statement is an implicit endorsement of the Puritan or Reformed concept of the Old Testament law that all the various moral case laws found within the judicial laws are still binding as to their general equity. It is simply inconceivable that the Redeemer who wrote the ten commandments into stone with His own finger would regard any of these commandments, which are foundational to all morality, as least in any way.

Second, what does Jesus mean when He says that such a person will be called least in the kingdom of heaven? The Savior is not specific regarding which person or persons are doing the calling. Some believe that our Lord is speaking about believers, in general, who are recognizing that such a person is least or that the church officers are making a judgment about such a person. Others think that Christ Himself is the one giving this assessment, both in the present and the future at the final judgment. Still others think that it refers to the Lord and the church. However, given the church’s abysmal record throughout history on God’s law, it is with Christ’s assessment that we primarily need to be concerned. It is the responsibility of all Christians not only to observe the law as interpreted by Jesus, but also to teach it faithfully to others. If laws that are light are not kept, then that Christian’s status both in the present and with regard to his future reward in heaven will suffer.

¹⁸⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:56.

What is particularly interesting regarding this verse is that it tells us very explicitly that there are behaviors and teachings that are bad and wrong which are not soul-destroying errors and do not lead to complete apostasy and hell. These deficient doers and teachers are demoted to least in the kingdom, but they are still in the kingdom of heaven. They are still genuine Christians. “Such an offender shall be justly designated *least*, not *the least*, in comparison with every other, but one of the least, belonging to the lowest class of those who are in any sense the subject of Messiah’s reign.”¹⁸⁹ Consequently, believers must be very careful when accusing other professing Christians of being damnable heretics or goats instead of sheep. Those who do not make any distinction between fundamental errors and less serious erroneous views, that while still wrong are not absolute rejections of crucial truths, are themselves guilty of error.

Another noteworthy thing about the Redeemer’s statement is that it presupposes salvation by grace through faith alone. The Savior is essentially teaching that a disciple who out of ignorance holds a wrong opinion regarding lighter commandments in the law and thus breaks them and even shares his erroneous view with others is still a citizen of heaven. Therefore, this person obviously did not merit eternal life for himself. He is far from perfect in his thoughts, actions and words, but Jesus has forgiven him all of his sins and imputed to him His own perfect obedience to the law. This fact, of course, does not mean that Christ does not require real repentance from our old life of sin. He certainly does (Lk. 13:3, 5). It also does not mean that genuine Christians can disregard the ten commandments or lead lives of habitual, scandalous sin and be a true disciple. They obviously will not do such things. Therefore, the “least” are not scandalous, habitual, unrepentant sinners. “The ‘least’ has presumably been essentially faithful to the law, though not having reached or taught the ideal championed by Jesus.”¹⁹⁰ This passage acknowledges that Christians are still imperfect and guilty of sins. John concurs, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8). If anyone is tempted to interpret our Lord’s statement in an antinomian manner, then he must ignore the next verse which renders such a view impossible.

(2) After Christ warns His disciples of the consequences of breaking a least commandment, He discusses the reward to those who faithfully regard all of the commandments. “[B]ut whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:19b). Greatness in Christ’s kingdom belongs only to those who are faithful in doing and teaching the whole moral law. In the broader context of Scripture, this obviously does not refer to sinless perfection, but to those who faithfully follow our Lord’s teaching in 5:17-18 and make the effort to apply it to their lives and teaching. “The peerage of his kingdom is ordered according to obedience. Not birth, knowledge, nor success will make a man great; but humble and precise obedience, both in word and deed.”¹⁹¹ The teaching of our Savior is completely at odds with this evil world. It also explicitly contradicts the doctrine regarding the law held by the vast majority of evangelicals. Christ did not replace the Old Covenant moral law with a less stringent, milder law. He expects a careful obedience to the whole moral law and he requires His appointed teachers to set forth the same doctrine of the law that He did. There are a number of noteworthy things about this statement.

First, note that Jesus deliberately places doing before teaching. Our Lord expects His disciples to apply His teaching to their own lives and walk consistently with the Word before they teach others. A biblical application of the Savior’s teaching to our own lives is a

¹⁸⁹ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 130.

¹⁹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 109.

¹⁹¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 53.

prerequisite for guiding others into the truth. That is why Paul told Timothy, “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine” (1 Tim. 4:16). “Christ requires integrity of life and soundness of doctrine from His servants. The Lord is both mocked and grievously insulted by ministers who practice one thing and preach another: far better to quit preaching entirely if our lives be opposed to our sermons. Furthermore, there will be *no power* in the preaching of the man whose own walk clashes with his talk: his words will carry no conviction to the hearts of his hearers.”¹⁹² Jesus strongly condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they were teachers who “say, and do not do” (Mt. 23:3). If we are to be effective in reaching others with the message of the gospel, our lives must reflect the truth of the good news before we open our mouths as God’s witnesses.

Second, verse 19 makes it very clear that there are different degrees of reward in heaven. Believers differ as to the degree of dedication and faithfulness to the Savior and His teachings on this earth. Consequently, there are different degrees of rewards received at the resurrection. We see this same teaching in 1 Corinthians where Paul describes the Redeemer’s evaluation of all Christians’ works of the day of judgment. “Now if anyone builds on this foundation [i.e. Jesus Christ] with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Although we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, in God’s plan, the works of a Christian, whether good or bad, have a role to play in one’s status for eternity. This teaching should motivate us to a more diligent obedience and comfort us when we make sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom. This reward is not only meted out according to the degree of faithfulness in obedience, but also according to the correctness or orthodoxy of one’s teaching. Therefore, believers must be diligent in learning Scripture and correct doctrine as well as humbly and sincerely submitting to biblical ethics. Both are required by the Savior. The attitude which is common today that correct living is important, while correct doctrine is inconsequential, is not condoned by our Lord at all.

Third, if those believers who only deny a least commandment are regarded as least by Jesus, then how does our Lord regard those who deny weightier commandments? This is a very sober question because most evangelicals believe that the obligation to keep one day out of seven holy to Jehovah has been abrogated. Even in Presbyterian denominations that are regarded as very conservative, Sabbath observance is generally not required, nor is breaking the Sabbath a matter of discipline. Often when confessional members of Presbytery ask probing questions of a candidate for the ministry about his views and practice regarding the Sabbath, the person asking the questions is told behind the scenes to stop such a line of questioning.

Likewise, the second commandment commands no images of any persons of the Godhead. It also requires that we only worship God in the way that He has authorized in His Word. Yet in evangelical and most reformed churches in our day, pictures of Jesus are common and man-made additions to worship are almost universal. People who speak out against Sabbath desecration, pictures of Jesus and crass violations of the regulative principle of worship are judged as legalistic, unloving and unconcerned about people’s real needs. At the same time, people who are *unconcerned* about details, about strictness, about carefulness with regard to these matters are said to be practical and loving. They are said to exemplify the freedom and liberty of the gospel.

¹⁹² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 60.

The passage before us stands as a great rebuke to the declension in our day, for Jesus says explicitly that the criterion of our standing in the kingdom of God and our reward at the judgment seat of Christ is determined by our observance and teaching relating even to the minutia of God's moral commandments. The Savior demands a strict doctrine and a strict observance of the law. He demands a strictness of behavior and teaching that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). The only strictness that our Lord criticizes is that which is based on human additions to God's law and not the moral law itself. Christian love and liberty are founded only on God's Word. Those who add human traditions to God's Word are the ones denying Christian liberty, not those who simply insist on adhering only to what the Bible requires. The sad and tragic truth is that Jesus with His strict doctrine on the law would not be welcome at all in many professing Christian churches today. All of this helps us understand why in another place Christ spoke of how sloppiness in the details was the path to greater sin and disobedience. "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (Lk. 16:10). Do you have a light and trifling attitude about the little things? Do you believe that unfaithfulness to the least things in God's law is not a big deal? If you do, then you need to examine the state of your heart.

A Righteousness that Exceeds the Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:20).

After Jesus teaches that greatness in the kingdom is measured by a righteousness that conforms to the moral law in all its details, the Redeemer makes a statement intended to shock the whole multitude who held the scribes and Pharisees in high regard. These men were famous and noteworthy because of their "righteousness." The word "for" connects this statement with what precedes; that is, the necessity for Christ's followers to lead an exemplary life of obedience to God's law. The formulaic "I say to you" indicates that this statement is of great importance. "This verse points to the essence of the matter and provides a clarification of the meaning of v. 18, as well as a confirmation of our interpretation of the pericope."¹⁹³ As we examine this passage, there are a number of questions that need to be answered.

(1) Who were the scribes and Pharisees? The scribes (*grammateis*) were the Jewish scholars who were the professional interpreters of God's law in the days of Jesus. These men were respected as very learned in the Mosaic law and they were the ones who worked out all sorts of rules and regulations to explicate the law and fence it. The scribes believed that their job was to take the various general commandments in Scripture and make them more detailed and explicit by adding all sorts of regulations that defined every possible manner of breaking the original command. For example they ruled that carrying a burden on the Sabbath was work. But, how does one define a burden? "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 two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen'—and so on endlessly."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 10-13*, 109.

¹⁹⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:128.

It was the minutia of scribal law that said that Christ and the disciples were guilty of harvesting crops and breaking the Sabbath for plucking a few heads of wheat when they were hungry. One of the great problems with the scribes was that they, more often than not, were *not* making legitimate inferences and applications from Scripture, but rather were engaged in making all sorts of absurd rules that only in a very convoluted, creative way had any connection to God's Word. By the time that our Lord began His ministry, the hundreds of absurd legalistic rulings of the scribes had acquired a binding legal authority. The scribal additions to the law over time even acquired a greater authority than the law of Moses itself. What happened was very similar to the great corruptions of Romanism where canon law (i.e. the volumes of church regulations) displaced the simple teachings of Scripture. The scribes also made regulations that were binding on the people that had no connection to Scripture whatsoever, not even a tenuous one.

The Pharisees were the most popular sect within Judaism in the days of our Lord. The name means "the separated ones." These were the Jews who had separated themselves to live a much stricter obedience to God's law. (Most of the scribes during the New Testament period were Pharisees.) The Pharisees followed the oral law or rulings of their scribes and even believed that they were as equally inspired and authoritative as the Torah. However, because the oral law handed down supposedly was the definitive interpretation and fencing of the law it was in practice or everyday life more important than God's law itself. "The NT abounds with allusions to the scrupulous concern of the Pharisees with the minutia of their legalism: the tithing of herbs (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42); the wearing of conspicuous phylacteries and tassels (Matt. 23:5); the careful observance of ritual purity (e.g., Mark 7:1ff.); frequent fasting (Matt. 9:14); distinctions in oaths (23:16ff.), etc.." ¹⁹⁵

In order to understand how radical our Lord's statement was to the original audience we need to keep in mind that the Scribes were viewed as the greatest teachers on religious piety and moral duty in all Israel. If there had been religious conferences in the first century they would have been the most popular speakers. The Pharisees were known as the group which, in the most scrupulous manner, carried out the teaching of their scribes. "The first were considered the best expounders of Scripture; the latter as the most illustrious patterns of holiness. It was a proverb among them that, 'If but two men were to enter the kingdom of heaven, the one would be a Scribe, and the other a Pharisee.'" ¹⁹⁶ The crowd before Jesus must have been greatly astonished to hear that the scribes and Pharisees were not going to go to heaven. Further, the righteousness of Christ's followers must exceed that taught by the scribes and lived by the Pharisees.

(2) What does our Lord mean by the term "righteousness" (*dikaiousune*)? There are two possibilities. One is that Jesus is referring to an external righteousness. That is, the righteousness of God imputed to the believer apart from works; the righteousness of justification. The other is that the Savior is speaking of an internal righteousness or the godly behavior caused in Christians by the power of the Holy Spirit—the righteousness of sanctification. That Christ is speaking about sanctification and not justification is proved by the following considerations: a) The context points to personal behavior and not imputed righteousness. In verse 19 Jesus just spoke about the need to teach and *obey* the whole moral law. Then, in verses 21-42, He contrasts proper Christian behavior with the corrupt teaching on ethics of the scribes and Pharisees. b) Our Lord says "your righteousness" and thus demands a personal righteousness that goes beyond the behavior common among the Jews of that day.

¹⁹⁵ D. A. Hagner, "Pharisees" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:748.

¹⁹⁶ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:178.

The fact that the Redeemer is speaking about personal righteousness raises another question. Does verse 20 support the teaching that Christians are not justified before God until *after* they attain a certain level of moral achievement? If this verse is viewed in isolation from the rest of Scripture one perhaps could come to such a conclusion. But there are so many passages which teach that our own personal righteousness or sanctification has absolutely nothing to do with our justification or judicial standing before God that such a view must emphatically be rejected (read Ac. 13:39; Rom. 3:20-24, 28; 4:3-8; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:8-9; etc.). What then does our Lord mean? Christ is pointing out the fact that all those who are true believers and have already been justified by faith apart from the works of the law will indeed repent of their sins and will lead lives characterized by godliness (i.e. a sincere habitual obedience to God's law). Justification and sanctification must not be mixed up or confused, as Romanists have done. They must also not be completely divorced, as antinomians have done. Whenever God declares a sinner righteous based on the merits of Jesus Christ, He also gives a deliverance from the power of sin in the believer. "Surely righteousness alone secures for us a standing before God, but evangelical righteousness is the certain proof thereof, and as the tree is known by its fruits so imputed righteousness can be recognized in no other way than by inward righteousness with its effects in the life."¹⁹⁷

(3) Why did the Savior say that His disciples' righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Although the scribes and Pharisees were known for being scrupulous in doctrine and life, our Lord knew that there were a number of deadly defects in their approach to obedience.

First, the scribes and Pharisees completely neglected the internal heart aspect of keeping the law in favor of a focus on external obedience. Thus Christ at a later point in time rebuked them saying, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mt. 23:25-28).

On the outside, the Pharisees appeared very righteous before men. Because of their whitewash, made up of all sorts of rules and regulations, people believed they truly were righteous and holy. But inside, in the realm unseen by man, they were wicked hypocrites who were lawless. In their hearts there was no true concern for obedience to God's law. "Among all the sins that Jesus found among men none aroused his fiery indignation more than hypocrisy with its sham of righteousness and holiness. Against no class of men did he hurl invectives that were as severe as those directed against the scribes and the Pharisees: 'hypocrites.'"¹⁹⁸

Our Lord presses this very point against a mere external obedience as he continued His sermon. The scribes and Pharisees condemned the outward act of murder, but had no problem with unjust anger and verbal insults (Mt. 5:21-22). They were against the outward act of adultery, but did not condemn illicit lusts in the heart of man. Because the scribes and Pharisees believed in a system of salvation by law-keeping, they of necessity externalized the law to make it easier to obey. But, Jesus demanded a much more radical obedience that came from man's heart and was embraced by every aspect of man's nature. The righteousness that God requires

¹⁹⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 63.

¹⁹⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 912.

encompasses mind and motive. “For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7; cf. Lk. 16:5).

From this we understand why our Lord said to Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). The Jews were seeking salvation through the external keeping of laws. Jesus said that man needs a radical inner change of heart first, a cleansing before he can even see the kingdom of God. True obedience must begin on the inside with a work of the Holy Spirit. The attempt to keep the law by amassing a large body of human additions to the law only produces hypocrites. Salvation through trusting in a corrupt religious bureaucracy is a dismal failure. Only the redemption that Christ brings can produce the holiness of life that God requires. As Ezekiel prophesied, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (36:27-28). Does your life or manner of keeping God’s law give evidence that you have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit? Do you make your own little rules which enable you to circumvent the true intent of God’s Word? Are you seeking purity on the inside, even in your thought life? Although real Christians are far from perfect and must still deal with the flesh and sin daily (see 1 Jn. 1:8; Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:15-25), they never make peace with sin and they seek purity in their minds and bodies.

By way of application, modern believers must be very careful to avoid the externalism found in denominations that focus on ritualism and sacramentalism. In communions such as Roman Catholicism, high church Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodoxy and the like, there is a strong emphasis on attending to rituals, man-made holy days and the church hierarchy as a kind of machine that cranks out saints through external ceremonies. True faith in Christ and genuine repentance has been set aside for the sacraments as a direct means of salvation. Consequently, people are content to live all throughout the week as a heathen as long as they make it to church on Sunday to smell some incense, touch some holy water and partake of the ritual of the eucharist. Such false versions of Christianity have much in common with the apostate religion of the scribes and Pharisees. Also, even if we attend a solid Bible-believing church, we must be on our guard not to become lukewarm and go through external duties while neglecting our hearts. “[L]et your heart keep my commands.... Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart” (Pr. 3:1-3). “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Pr. 4:23).

Second, the scribes and Pharisees had only a partial obedience to the law. That is, they stressed certain aspects of the law (especially the ceremonial ordinances) while they neglected more important elements of the moral law. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone” (Mt. 23:23). They tithed even of the herbs they grew in their gardens, which was not even required in the law of Moses (the law required tithes from the commercial crops in the field such as grain, wine and oil; cf. Dt. 14:23-23. Leviticus required a tithe of seed and of fruit; 27:30); but they did not treat their neighbors with justice or mercy. At the trial of Christ they were very careful not to enter the home of Pilate which they believed would render them ceremonially unclean, but they had no problem with bribing Judas, producing false witnesses and conducting

an illegal, unjust trial.¹⁹⁹ They were quite willing to convict a completely innocent man to death. The scribes and Pharisees had strained out a gnat, but had swallowed a camel (Mt. 23:24).

Jesus is saying that His disciples need to exhibit a genuine repentance in their lives and not follow the unbalanced, hypocritical lives of the scribes and Pharisees. Our Lord had just made the point (v. 19) that all the moral law must be taken seriously and followed. Christians do not get to pick and choose which commandments that they want to follow and which ones can be ignored. A person who treats parts of the moral law as voluntary or unnecessary and thus habitually violates important ethical principles is not a true Christian. This verse is a very strong rebuke to the carnal Christian heresy which says that righteousness in a believer is irrelevant to salvation (in the broad sense of that term) and is something only for dedicated Christians who desire to submit to Jesus as Lord.

Thus, you need to ask yourself some searching questions. Am I genuinely seeking to obey every aspect of God's moral commandments, even the least of commandments? Do I make excuses in my mind as to why I can break certain commandments? Am I creating loopholes in the law so I can continue to satisfy my lusts and secret sins? Am I using the grace of God in a wicked, illegitimate manner as a reason for carelessness in my personal life? These are very important questions because laxity in morals and sinful behavior always starts in the mind with carnal unbiblical reasoning. The scribes and Pharisees had even developed a very large, sophisticated body of traditions to excuse their sinful behavior. Let us not be like these ungodly hypocrites by remembering that a sincere repentance is an *entire* repentance. Every known sin must be cast behind our back in order to faithfully serve Christ.

There are multitudes of professing Christians in our day, that in many ways, are like the Pharisees in their obedience to God's Word. When they become angry with a brother in Christ they do not resort to physical violence, but instead engage in gossip and slander. They have no problem murdering a man's reputation. They even gossip with a pious sounding voice and a look of concern as if they were rendering the church of Christ a great service by their wickedness. There are thousands of professing Christians who would never rob a bank or steal a car, but are happy to misrepresent their goods to increase sales or to rob their employers by loafing at work. Let us be careful to render to God a full obedience to His laws.

Third, the scribes and Pharisees did not obey God's law with a proper motive—the glory of God. They obeyed in order to glorify themselves, in order to be seen and praised by men. Our Lord would bring this serious defect out later in the same sermon. He said, "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men to be seen by them...do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men...they like to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men" (Mt. 6:1, 2, 5). Toward the end of His ministry Jesus elaborated on this same theme when He condemned the scribes and Pharisees: "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi'" (Mt. 23:5-7).

¹⁹⁹ "These rulers of the Jews and the multitude that followed them were thoroughly *Ritualists*. It was their ritualism that urged them on to crucify the son of God. Christ and ritualism are opposed to each other as light is to darkness. The true Cross in which Paul gloried and the cross in which modern ceremonialists glory, have no resemblance to each other. The Cross and the crucifix cannot agree. Either ritualism will banish Christ or Christ will banish ritualism" (Horatius Bonar as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:193).

The scribes and Pharisees did everything they could to appear devout in order to draw attention to themselves. Thus, they did not view the law and obedience theocentrically, but rather anthropocentrically. They, at bottom, were self-worshipping humanists. A true believer is not so concerned about what people think, but rather does his deeds under the omniscient eye of God. He makes it a habit to first consider what Jehovah will think of such a behavior. With Paul he understands that man's chief end in life and death is to glorify God. "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). This means that we must not treat piety as a tool for popularity, but rather as a means to magnify God. "Let self be forgotten. Let your eye be fixed on God. Let the promotion of his glory be your object in all you do. Strive in every thing to act in such a way that men may praise that God whom you profess to serve."²⁰⁰

It is important for us to recognize that a proper motive is always a crucial aspect of genuine obedience to God. That is why, for an act to be truly good in God's sight, it must flow from faith in Christ and be rooted in the Savior's death (cf. Rom. 8:7-8; 14:23). "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:4). "[T]here can be no works good in the sight of God but what flow from, and are connected with the atonement. Good works can be performed only by those who are united to Christ by faith, that is, are in a justified state."²⁰¹

Because the Pharisees did not humbly approach God through Christ, they were into self-glorification and were constantly focused on their own achievements as laudable and praiseworthy instead of having a humble approach to God. Even their prayers were humanistic and egotistical. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess'" (Lk. 18:11-12). A truly righteous man does not point to himself and brag but rather says, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk. 18:13)! Christ tells us to have a very different attitude toward our obedience than the Pharisees. "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which are commanded, say 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Lk. 17:10). "When we have done all that Christ commands, we have done no more than our duty. Yet even what we do is only from grace given to us, and not from natural strength. And even then in what we do there are countless imperfections. To talk therefore of merit or claim to God's favor, in the face of such a verse as this, is absurd and preposterous."²⁰²

We must search our hearts and make sure that we do good works with a proper heart attitude. Do we do things to glorify God or are we attempting to draw attention to ourselves? Do we acknowledge that everything we have and even the good we do is a result of God's grace? Do we have the attitude of Paul who said, "But he who glories, let him glory in the LORD. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends" (2 Cor. 10:17)? "Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:21).

Moreover, how do we act when no one is watching? Do we act one way in front of the people at church and then another with people at work or school? If we act piously in front of Christians and then worldly and profanely in front of unbelievers, then in principle we are no better than the Pharisees. How do we conduct ourselves when we are all alone when no one is watching but God Himself? What do we watch and what do we read? Do we fill our minds with the filth of this world or do we redeem the time and think upon good things? The measure of a

²⁰⁰ Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 59] 1974), 202.

²⁰¹ William Symington, *On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ* (New York,: Robert Carter, 1839), 64.

²⁰² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1986), 2:230.

man is not how he acts when the church is watching, but how he behaves when only God is watching. The person who acts like a heathen when no one is around is either temporarily backslidden or is an apostate—a heathen.

We see in the great error of the Pharisees that one's doctrine of salvation can have a profound effect on one's teaching regarding personal holiness. If our good works do contribute in any way to our salvation (which is precisely what the Pharisees believed), then one's works indeed are praiseworthy and men do have reason to point to themselves and boast. But if we are saved solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ then our good works are non-meritorious. They are not acts to be praised by men, but rather are fruits of the redemption achieved and bestowed by the Savior. As Paul says, "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:27-28).

Fourth, the scribes' and Pharisees' righteousness was built upon legalism or man-made rules and regulations. The Jewish religious leaders erected a system of obedience upon a foundation of human philosophy. Therefore, their righteousness was not true piety, but a man-made false righteousness. They were cheating their followers "through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world" (Col. 2:8). God had repeatedly warned Israel not to add to His law-Word or to detract from it (e.g., Dt. 4:2; 12:32). The reason for this warning is simple. When men add their own rules and regulations to Scripture, people spend their time focusing on human requirements and neglect the Word of God.

The Bible, however, is very clear that only God can define righteousness or right and wrong and that all attempts to be holy based on man's law or the human imagination accomplish nothing. Paul writes, "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:20-23).

The Pharisees thought that they were serving God with their human traditions, but Paul says that their human ideas consisted in "the elements of the world" (Col. 2:8). By their traditions they believed they were attaining a superior righteousness. By and large the Jewish people believed this also. But Paul says that these man-made rules were absolutely useless in producing true holiness. They are of no value in restraining the sinful flesh. Thus, instead of producing true piety, they are at variance with it.

This same error is found throughout the history of the church. Following their human traditions, Roman Catholics have sought righteousness through: pilgrimages, relics, prayers to saints, the worship of the virgin Mary, the confessional, holy water, vows of poverty, celibacy, flagellations, monasteries, works of supererogation, indulgences and so forth. The result has been a degenerate, wicked people who neglect the true teaching of Scripture. They have substituted a false human righteousness for a true biblical righteousness.

Evangelicals and fundamentalists have not been immune from seeking a false righteousness. Their crusades against the use of alcoholic beverages and various styles of music have not produced true righteousness. While they avoid drinking a beer or listening to jazz, they are quite willing to break the Sabbath, corrupt the worship of God and watch immoral filth on television. True righteousness, as it relates to sanctification, can only be found in the Bible.

How does a person obtain the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees? Obtaining this righteousness involves a number of things. First, there must be an initial change within man by the Holy Spirit. No one can obey God's law from the heart without first being born again. Paul writes, "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8). Because man's heart is totally depraved, only an act of God upon the whole nature of man is sufficient to draw him to Christ and give him a genuine desire to obey God. Thus, in regeneration, the Spirit of God penetrates into the innermost recesses of a man and plants the principle of a new spiritual life. This change brings purification and renewal (Tit. 3:5; Jn. 3:5; Ezek. 36:25-26; Col. 2:11).

Regeneration, or the initial partaking of purification (and definitive sanctification), comes only as a result of union with Christ. Thus, the path to righteous living is not through seeking to obey the law *as the path to God*, but rather through faith in Christ who sends His Spirit into us enabling us to follow God's holy law. As Jesus says, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Mt. 7:18). Thus, the starting point of righteous living is the regenerating power of the Spirit that flows out of the efficacy of Christ's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. Because the scribes and Pharisees rejected their Messiah and sought to establish a right standing before God based on their own righteousness, they resisted the Holy Spirit and did not attain the righteousness of justification or sanctification.

Second, the regenerated and justified sinner must progressively grow in righteousness by using all the God-appointed means of grace such as prayer, Bible reading and public worship. Regeneration is an act of God the Holy Spirit upon the heart in which man does nothing. But sanctification or the spiritual growth of a believer over time requires diligent effort. The Holy Spirit causes us to grow by applying the Word of God to our hearts. "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). "You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit" (1 Pet. 1:22). "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby..." (1 Pet. 2:2). "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11). Because the scribes and Pharisees did not believe in Christ they did not receive the Holy Spirit, who is the source of all true holiness. Because they essentially replaced the moral law of God with their own human traditions, they lost the chief instrument used by God's Spirit to sanctify His people.

Sanctification is completely dependent on a believer's union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection (Rom. 6:2-20; col. 3:1-3). Believers are to reckon themselves to be dead to sin and alive to God on account of Jesus' redemptive work. We are to put off the sins of the old man and put on the new man. Sanctification as a process consists of two parts. First, sin is subdued in the believer. Sinful lusts and habits are progressively removed from the Christian's life. Secondly, the believer becomes more righteous and godly in his personal life. Once again we point out that a righteous life can only flow out of a belief in Jesus Christ. As long as the scribes and Pharisees rejected what Moses and the prophets said about Jesus, they were doomed to a life of only a surface, partial, hypocritical obedience to God's moral law.

Third, all true believers in Christ will be made perfectly righteous subjectively when the Redeemer returns and all the saints receive glorified spiritual bodies that are incapable of committing sin. While our Lord was focusing His attention on the necessity of holiness *in this life* in order to be a true disciple, nevertheless it is important to point out that the scribes and Pharisees will not participate in the coming ethical perfection of the saints that is a gift earned by Christ. Their hypocrisy, lusts and sins will go to hell with them. Jesus secured our deliverance

from the guilt of sin as well as its power. But, because of our carnal nature and the remnant of sin, our life remains one of constant warfare against the flesh and sin. Paul said, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal. 5:16-17). Therefore, our salvation from sin in the broad sense of that term comes only at the end of history at the final resurrection.

(5) By way of application we need to ask ourselves: How do we know that we possess the kind of righteousness of which the Savior speaks? There are a number of things that we should examine.

First, the central question (even on an issue such as sanctification or subjective righteousness) is: Are you trusting in Christ alone for our salvation? Some may think that this question is unrelated. But we have noted again and again that true faith is always related to genuine righteousness. Regeneration and justification must take place before a person can be progressively sanctified or made godlier over time. Anyone who claims to be holy that does not embrace Jesus Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures is living in self-deception, just like the scribes and Pharisees. Further, given the fact that all of our righteousness and good works are tainted with sin and defective, it is important to recognize that the defects of a believer's personal righteousness are covered by the blood of Christ. Even as Christians who try to give God our very best, we have nothing that commends us to God. But God rewards our good works because they are covered by the infinite merits of Jesus. God looks favorably at our good works because we are clothed with Christ's righteousness and not because we actually merit anything ourselves. Thus, even our rewards are rewards of grace.

Second, are you manifesting fruits of righteousness in your life? Jesus said that a tree can only be known by its fruit (Mt. 7:20). Therefore, the way to examine your righteousness, to see what kind it is, is to analyze your behavior in light of Scripture. Have you repented of all known sins and replaced them with godly behavior? If you are still hanging out with your old unconverted friends and are still leading your old sinful lifestyle, then you can be assured that you have not manifested the righteousness required by our Lord. You must put away your old life forever. You must reckon it dead in Christ; you must leave it in the cold dark grave where it belongs. If you have a new heart and the Spirit of God living inside of you, then that old life of sin and lust will mean nothing to you. Your new heart of flesh will cling to Jesus and will seek to please Him in all things.

Are you serious about your personal holiness? Remember, Christ did not come to annul God's moral law as a rule of life, but rather to cause men to have a high regard for it and obey even its less weighty precepts. Therefore, we must be diligent in attending the means of grace and cultivating personal godliness. If a person does not bother to attend church, or read the Scriptures or pray on a regular basis, then there is concrete evidence that he has not attained the righteousness that our Lord requires. The idea that we can accept Jesus as our Savior and live any way we please and still truly be sons of God is a great delusion. "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Hughes writes, "True holiness however, is inward and private, between a man and his God, and the good deeds which are its fruit are performed as secretly as possible as an expression of loving concern and with an aversion for all fanfare and publicity (Mt. 6:1-18). This kind of holiness, which reflects the pure goodness of God, springs from single-minded love of God, not from love of human applause, and is consistent with a longing to see the Lord, who is all-holy, not with a lust to be

seen by men. ‘Those who are not holy and pure in heart will not see God,’ writes Lefevre d’Etaples, ‘and this is the most tragic loss of all and the ultimate evil of all.’”²⁰³

(6) What does Jesus mean when He says that those who do not have a personal righteousness superior to the scribes and Pharisees “will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:20)? The expression “the kingdom of heaven” can be used in Scripture to describe the visible church (Mt. 16:18-19) or even the domain of Christ’s reign on earth. In this passage it is used in a more narrow sense of salvation itself or the kingdom of glory. Our Lord uses this expression in the same manner in Matthew 18:3: “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” The phrase “by no means” is a strong negative which means that there is no possibility whatsoever that people without this superior righteousness can enter heaven. Thus the Savior, in a most decisive manner, bars everyone from paradise whose righteousness is of the same quality as that of the scribes and Pharisees. This is a very radical statement that merits our close attention. Personal godliness does not save anyone. However, no one is saved without also being personally regenerated and sanctified. As Paul says, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Faith without works is dead, phony, counterfeit and worthless. May God enable us by His grace to love Jesus more and more, to obey His voice and glorify Him in everything.

Chapter 15: The True Meaning of God’s Moral Law vs. Jewish Traditions

After setting forth His own doctrine on the Old Testament Scriptures and the necessity of His disciples living a strict obedience to the whole moral law of God even in its smallest details, Jesus proceeds to give six examples which illustrate what He had just taught in verses 17 to 20. This section will demonstrate to His followers precisely how their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. As a brilliant teacher, our Lord first sets forth His general proposition and then clarifies by numerous examples. These antitheses form the heart of the Savior’s sermon because they explain Christ’s doctrine in such a clear and unmistakable manner that everyone should understand Jesus’ exposition of the true meaning of the Torah. By way of introduction there are a number of noteworthy things about this section of Scripture.

Each paragraph contains an antithesis or contrast introduced by the same formula (with minor variations): “Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time” followed by, “But I say unto you.” The false doctrine is stated and then refuted by the true interpretation of the law.

This raises the question: What exactly is the antithesis that our Lord has in mind? The question is crucial, for one’s interpretation of the antithesis will affect the way one views the rest of the chapter and the rest of the whole sermon. A very common interpretation is that Jesus is setting Himself and the New Covenant ethic against the law of Moses. For example A. T. Robertson says, “Jesus...assumed a tone of superiority over the Mosaic regulations and proves it

²⁰³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 536.

in each of the six examples.”²⁰⁴ Barclay concurs with even stronger language: “That is what Jesus thought of the Law; and now no fewer than five times (*Matthew* 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43) Jesus quotes the Law, only to contradict it, and to substitute a teaching of his own.”²⁰⁵ In a similar vein J. Jeremias writes, “Jesus establishes a new, divine law when he opposes his ‘But I say to you’ to the Word of Scripture.”²⁰⁶ In other words, our Lord came to repudiate the Mosaic law and set up a new law in its place, a deeper, more spiritual law. This interpretation appeals to people who think that the New Covenant brings in a new ethic. Such interpreters take the antithesis as, “You know what the Old Testament law said...but I teach you something new, different and superior.”

Although this interpretation is popular in some circles, it is totally wrong and must be rejected for the following reasons. First, it completely violates the broad context of this teaching. It would be irrational and absurd for Christ to say that He did not come to destroy or abolish the law and then only a few moments later teach that the Old Testament moral law is defective and is being replaced. Further, our Lord had just told the disciples that only those who taught and obeyed the Old Testament moral law, including the least law, would be considered great. Those who did not teach and do even the least of the moral commandments would be least in Christ’s kingdom. The Christian attitude toward the whole Old Testament moral laws, whether the ten commandments or the moral case laws that flesh out the Decalogue, is to be one of great respect, honor and obedience. Obviously then Jesus is not now abrogating and replacing these laws. Moreover, laws that are moral in nature and are rooted in God’s holy and righteous character cannot be abrogated. Jehovah cannot abrogate laws that mirror His being. Therefore, any idea that the moral statutes contained in the Old Testament are defective, or only for the Jews, is untenable.

Second, the Savior’s introductory formula, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time” (21, 27, 33) or “It hath been said” (31), is never used by Jesus when referring to Scripture. When the Redeemer quoted from the Bible, He would say “it is written” (Gk. *gegraptai*, lit. “It stands written”; Mt. 4:4, 7; Lk. 2:23; 4:4) or if He was referring to only the law He would sometimes say “Moses commanded” (Mt. 8:4).

Third, the statement “it was said by them of old time” can be translated in two different ways, both of which point not to Scripture, but to the traditions of the scribes. The King James “said by them of old time” gives the sense of “taught by the ancients or the rabbis of antiquity.” “In later Jewish writings such famous rabbans as Hillel and Shammai were called ‘fathers of antiquity.’ The designation ‘the men of long ago’ is accordingly an excellent designation for those who had orally interpreted the written Old Testament.”²⁰⁷ The Jews would go the synagogue each week and would receive these human traditions from the rabbis that had been passed down from generation to generation. They were catechized in the traditions of the scribes.

Our Lord’s statement can also be translated “it was said to those of old” (NKJV). The Jews in the days of Jesus, and even today, believe that Moses gave the whole oral law to the 70 elders chosen to judge Israel. Therefore, this translation would refer to the Jewish claim of divine authority for their human additions to the law. Since the Jewish teachers at that time could not prove that their doctrines came directly from the sacred Scriptures, “they veiled the origin of them in an indefinite expression, *It was said to them of old time.*”²⁰⁸ The Jewish audience to

²⁰⁴ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:44.

²⁰⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:134.

²⁰⁶ J. Jeremias, “raca” in T. D.N.T., 4:973 as quoted in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 295.

²⁰⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 296.

²⁰⁸ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 70.

whom the Savior was speaking would have immediately understood His statement to be a reference to the scribal traditions.

Fourth, that Jesus is refuting human tradition and not the law itself can be ascertained from the antitheses themselves. While a superficial reading of the “you have heard it said” examples makes it appear that they have elements that are very similar and sometimes identical to the Mosaic law (e.g., “You shall not murder” [21], “You shall not commit adultery” [27], “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce” [31]), there are striking differences and additions that clearly have nothing to do with the Old Testament laws. The moral law did not allow men to verbally assault their neighbor. It also did not permit unlawful lusts and easy divorce. There is nothing in the whole Old Testament about hating our enemies. Therefore, Christ is not refuting actual laws in Scripture, but must be discussing additions to the law that came to be accepted by the rabbis and their followers. “It is these distortions of the law which Jesus rejected, not the law itself. After all, the first two antitheses do not read ‘It was said “you shall not commit murder and adultery,” but I say you may.’ Rather, ‘but I say you shall not even have angry or lustful thoughts.’”²⁰⁹

(2) Our Lord appeals primarily to abuses of the second table of the law: murder (21); adultery (27); divorce (31); the law of equitable retribution for a civil crime or in this case a personal offense (38); and the command to love one’s neighbor (43). The only law that would fall under duties toward God, or the first table, is oaths to the Lord (33). The Savior’s emphasis on the second table is for the simple reason that such abuses would be easier to identify (cf. Mt. 19:16; Lk. 10:25; 18:18). Note that, when Jesus instructs His disciples in the duty of personal righteousness, He does not limit Himself to the moral precepts of the Decalogue, but makes free use of the moral case laws found within the Torah.

(3) In each of the antitheses Christ introduces the correct doctrine with the statement, “But I say to you” (22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). “‘I [emphatic by initial position] say to you [plural],’ is the key statement of the pericope. The formula points to the unparalleled authority of Jesus.”²¹⁰ The Redeemer speaks with an authority unprecedented by the scribes and Pharisees and even the Old Testament prophets. “[T]he people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mt. 7:28-29). God incarnate, the very giver of the law Himself was now correcting the erroneous interpretations, conclusions and additions to His own law. Our Lord repeatedly appealed to His own authority to emphasize that what He said was exceedingly important and certainly true.

(4) There is a pattern to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ method of perverting the law. “In general, they were trying to reduce the challenge of the law, to ‘relax’ (19) the commandments of God, and so make his moral demands more manageable and less exacting. They found Torah both a yoke and a burden (indeed they called it such), and wanted to make the yoke easier and the burden lighter.”²¹¹ Murder and adultery were externalized to exclude sins of the heart, eye and tongue. Divorce was permitted for any cause whatsoever. Lesser oaths were allowed to be broken. The law of retaliation was perverted to allow for personal revenge and the law relating to loving one’s neighbor was twisted so that love was only extended to friends, not enemies. Thus, we see that verses 21 through 48 explain why a disciple of Jesus must have a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees cleverly restricted the full extent of certain laws when it suited them and expanded the permissiveness of

²⁰⁹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 77.

²¹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 116.

²¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 79.

others. Therefore, Christ skillfully expounds the true meaning of the law to reverse both methods of debasing the law.

The Law of God and Murder

Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing (Mt. 5:21-26).

In the first antithesis our Lord focuses His attention on the scribes' and Pharisees' understanding of the sixth commandment. The statement, "You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment" (v. 21), by itself does not sound that bad. (This statement seems to be the sixth commandment combined with an allusion to Deuteronomy 35:30: "Whoever kills a person shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses..."). However, in Jesus' discussion of this scribal interpretation, we will see that the scribes and Pharisees were restricting the application of this commandment to the external deed of homicide alone. In other words, the only people who were guilty of murder were those who actually went out and killed someone. Thus, according to this view as long as we have not stabbed, shot or beaten our neighbor to death, then we have perfectly obeyed this commandment. In fact, if this is our view, then we could say that violations of the sixth commandment are indeed very rare. Christ deals with the scribal perversion of this law with three examples of how this commandment is commonly broken.

He says, "But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (v. 22). There are a number of noteworthy things about this statement.

First, it is an acknowledgment that all sin begins in the heart. As James writes, "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war" (4:1-2). Murder is not simply the act, but the anger and hatred in the heart that leads to the act. People who commit homicide do so because they are very angry inside or because they are lusting after something that is not theirs; they plan the evil act and carry it out. Christ is teaching us a very important principle about the moral law. When God forbids murder, He at the same time forbids all the inward emotions, thoughts and lusts that are related to murder and that lead to murder. The Westminster Larger Catechism succinctly makes the same point: "The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavours, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any...." (A. 135)

This point is very important for two reasons. a) If Israel had not viewed the law in this external way and had seen that internal violations also merited punishment by God, then their

whole system of salvation by works would have fallen to the ground. This truth calls to mind the rich young ruler who told Jesus that he had faithfully kept the whole moral law since his youth (Mk. 10:20). This man really believed that he had kept the law perfectly because of the teaching of the scribes. But from our Lord's response to him, we learn that he loved his riches more than God (cf. Mk. 10:21). He was guilty of idolatry in his heart. The fact that sin occurs in our thoughts even if we do not go out and actually kill someone or commit adultery leaves all concepts of self-righteousness and human merit in the dust. No one this side of heaven has perfect control over all his thoughts.

b) Christ teaches us that if we are to avoid the act we must stop the hatred and unjust anger that leads to the act. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Christians are to resist the starting point of sin in the spirit or soul. The Pharisees' attitude toward sin was only to worry about gross external acts of iniquity; while Jesus teaches that sin must be dealt with at the source, the beginning. We must learn to nip sin in the bud before it has the opportunity to become outward and scandalous. The attitude of the scribes and Pharisees toward the law did not lead to a godly culture. The idea of only an external obedience does not lead to holiness because when sin is coddled in the heart, it breaks out in all sorts of wicked behavior. Jesus says, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Mt. 15:18-19). We must, therefore, diligently and constantly, watch our hearts to detect unjust hatred and rage and subdue it by repenting of it immediately. Further, we must be on guard against the sinful tendency to modify the strictness of God's laws in order to create loopholes for our favorite sins. When people do not want to repent, they often become experts at lowering the standard of God's Word. They persuade themselves that their inner lusts and secret sins are somehow excusable. This is a very deadly error. Paul the Pharisee, before his conversion, believed he had kept the law perfectly (Rom. 7:7-11). But when the Holy Spirit applied "Thou shalt not covet" (Ex. 20:17) to his heart and thus internalized the law, Paul immediately understood that, apart from Christ, he was a guilty sinner and was not even close to the kingdom. All his supposed righteousness was filthy rags before God (cf. Phil. 3:8). We must remember that the teaching of the scribes destroyed the doctrine of both justification and sanctification.

Second, it is important to note that Jesus only condemns "unjust anger." The "received text" which is clearly superior to the defective minority of Greek texts (i.e. the critical text) says "whoever is angry with his brother without a cause." Obviously, not all anger can be labeled as sinful because God Himself has anger, indignation and wrath toward the devil, his angels and all unrepentant sinners. Our Lord became so angry he drove the money changers and all those who bought and sold animals out of the temple complex by overturning their tables and swinging a "whip of cords" (Mt. 21:12; Mk. 11:15; Jn. 2:15). God and the Savior are perfectly holy and pure and cannot sin. Even Christians, at times, can experience righteous indignation at injustice, sin and persecution. Thus Paul could say, "Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26). "Anger as such need not be sinful. It is ascribed even to God (1 Ki. 11:9; 2 Ki. 17:18; Ps. 7:11; 79:5; 80:4, 5; Heb. 12:29), and to Christ (Ps. 2:12; Mk. 3:5; Jn. 2:15-17). In fact, the age in which we are living could use a little more 'righteous indignation' against sin of every type. Also, the angrier every believer is with his own sins, the better it will be."²¹²

However, we must be on guard to make sure righteous indignation does not lead to thoughts of personal revenge or retaliation. Moreover, we must carefully distinguish between

²¹² William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967, 68), 218.

things said or done against us that may hurt our pride and vanity and things done against God. We must concern ourselves with the latter. Righteous anger should lead to biblical action such as prayer and godly admonition. It must never lead to malice and revenge. Righteous anger should be turned over to God who judges with a perfect justice and metes out a due recompense of reward. We must concern ourselves with the latter. As Paul says, “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19). People who do not pray and leave things in God’s hand will hurt their own health and will enter into the temptation to get even. Such thoughts must never be entertained by believers.

To learn what it means to be angry without a cause, it will be helpful to note some examples of this common sin. One instance is when parents become angry with their children without a good cause. The child may have *accidentally* spilled his milk or broken a window. Sometimes we become angry over a genuine mistake of simple forgetfulness. At other times, our anger is all out of due proportion to the offense committed. Also, it is very common for people to become angry and lay blame before knowing the facts. Such anger is unjustified. There is anger that flows from words of gossip and slander which never should have been heard. There is even the unjust anger directed at ourselves for things that have happened beyond our control. Anger without a cause is often directed at ministers of the gospel who preach against declension, corruptions and sins that are popular. There is unjustified anger of children against their parents for proper discipline and the duty of household chores. There is unjustified anger over differences of opinion that are trivial and unimportant. Anger is unlawful when it is not directed to a good end and the glory of God, but instead is selfish, self-centered, egotistical and narcissistic. When anger is directed at simply hurting others, seeking revenge and not helping others repent and look to Christ, then it is vain, useless and sinful. Unlawful and uncontrolled anger is a very destructive thing. It does not help anyone. “Cain’s killing his brother began in anger; he is a murderer in the account of God, who knows his heart, whence murders proceed, ch. vx.19.”²¹³ We need to search our hearts and continuously be on guard against anger without a cause.

Third, what does Jesus mean when He says that those who are angry with a brother without cause shall be liable to the judgment? There are two different views regarding the meaning of this judgment. One view is that the three expressions for penalties in verse 22 (*krisi-judgment*, *sunnedrio-sanhedrin* or council: *ten geennan tou puros*—the Gehenna of fire) are simply different expressions for God’s judgment that leads to the penalty of hell. Jesus sets forth these judgments in a rhetorical manner as a kind of crescendo. In other words, the penalties all speak of God’s judgment and not a civil punishment, and God’s judgment is essentially the same. A much more common view is that, as each offense is more serious (unjust anger, *raca* [i.e. empty-headed one], you fool), each punishment is more serious (e.g., the judgment of a local council, the rendering of the supreme council, and the judgment of hell itself). Those who object to the second view argue that: a) Christ would not make a hair-splitting distinction between calling someone an idiot and a fool; b) local and regional courts do not have jurisdiction over sins unless they are defined in Scripture as crimes and it is very unlikely that anyone would take a brother to court who lost his temper and called him a “block head;” c) being angry with a brother in one’s heart is not detectable by witnesses; d) the word *krisis* which can be translated local court, in every other occurrence of the New Testament means decision, judgment or

²¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:58.

verdict.²¹⁴ Given these considerations, it is likely that Jesus is emphasizing that all sins relating to anger are worthy of God's judgment and will be recompensed according to the seriousness of the sin in hell. Lenski suggests that our Lord is using satire "to demolish the entire Jewish treatment of this commandment as a mere civil law."²¹⁵ Whatever position one holds, the central thrust of Christ's teaching is that each example is a sin and will be treated as such by God. Our Lord says that if you are angry with a brother without a cause, you have exposed yourself ultimately to the same eternal condemnation as the murderer.

Fourth, let us examine the meaning of the other expressions of unjustified anger. These are examples of inner unlawful anger that moves from the heart to the tongue. Jesus tells His disciples that they must not be guilty of making insulting comments to others. "Whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council" (v. 22). "Raca" is an Aramaic word which was transliterated directly into Greek. "The word means something like 'blockhead' or 'idiot,' but in that culture conveying a much more objectionable insult than in modern Western society. Name calling was a much more serious affair in biblical times because of the importance attached to names (cf. Elisha, 2 Kgs. 2:23-24...), than in our day when names, like labels, can be readily exchanged..."²¹⁶ An insult that proceeds from anger and malice in the heart is tongue-murder. The whole purpose is to verbally assault the other person to cause emotional pain. "[I]t is the language of that which Solomon calls *proud wrath* (Prov. xxi.24), which tramples upon our brother—disdains *to set him even with the dogs of our flock*."²¹⁷ Anyone familiar with how actual murders take place can see the importance of what our Lord says. There is virtually always a progression from uncontrolled inner anger, to verbal insults, then to blows and physical violence. There is a thread that runs from the heart, to the tongue to the bloody hand. Christ insists that each step in this process is a violation of the sixth commandment and will receive God's judgment.

If we harbor unjust anger in our hearts, then we will commit murder with our tongues. There is the tongue murder of the personal insult and there is the tongue murder of gossip and slander. Many a man's personal reputation has been permanently destroyed by the murdering tongue. Before the Jewish leaders were able to arrange the death of Christ, they made every effort to harm Him with slander. They accused Him of being born of fornication (Jn. 8:41), of being demon-possessed (Jn. 8:48), of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub (Mk. 3:22) and being a drunkard and glutton (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34). The scribes and Pharisees were committing murder with their tongues. "Killing does not only mean destroying life physically, it means still more trying the spirit and the soul, destroying the person in any shape or form."²¹⁸ Therefore, we must diligently work to control the hardest thing to control in our whole body—our tongues. "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless" (Jas. 1:26).

Our Lord's next example is similar. "But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire" (v. 22). Commentators are somewhat divided over whether the word "fool" is being used in a Greek or Hebraistic sense. The Greek word for fool (*moros*, "foolishness") is like our English word and as an insult is not very different than "*raka*" which refers to an empty-headed one, a moron or idiot. If "fool" is a transliteration of the Aramaic (*mora*) or Hebrew (*moreh*), it

²¹⁴ See William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 298.

²¹⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 219.

²¹⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 116.

²¹⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:56.

²¹⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:225.

would be a more serious insult. To a Jew it refers to someone who is not only stupid, but also is in serious rebellion against God. It was even used of apostates, “so that the one using the term arrogated to himself the passing of judicial sentence, consigning his fellow to hell.”²¹⁹ This is the same term (in the plural form) that Moses used when he lost his temper, yelled at the people of God and struck the rock twice with his rod (Num. 20:10). The word is translated “rebels.” If it is used in the Jewish sense, we do have an escalation of offense from unlawful anger in the heart, to a common everyday insult, to a very strong insult.

The phrase translated “hell fire” (KJV) means literally “the Gehenna of fire” (*ton geenan tou puros*). The word Gehenna comes from the Aramaic “valley of Hinnom” (cf. Josh. 15:18; 18:16). It was a place in Israel’s history where infants were sacrificed to Molech (cf. 2 Kgs. 23:20; Jer. 7:31). In Jesus’ day it was Jerusalem’s garbage dump. Fires were burned there continually to consume the refuse. By the first century it became associated with hell and its eternal torment. Therefore, what Christ is saying is that insulting a person is an offense against God that merits the punishment of hell.

This was a radical statement then and still is today. In our day, coarse jesting, name calling and hurling insults are accepted as no big deal. Movies, television and comedians use insults as a form of entertainment. Yet, our Lord categorizes all such activity as a species of murder, as highly offensive to God. We need to examine ourselves and make sure that the Savior’s attitude is our attitude. We must also control our children and not permit them to call each other names. We must not lower our standard to that of our surrounding culture; but, rather, raise it up to Jesus’ interpretation of the law. Unlawful anger and insults that flow from that anger are incompatible with a Christian profession. John taught this same doctrine when he said, “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 Jn. 3:15). “The law of the Messiah’s kingdom is much more strict in its requisitions, and terrible in its sanctions, than the Mosaic law as expounded by the Scribes and Pharisees.”²²⁰

Some people who are familiar with our Lord’s strong use of terms will often ask if some of His denunciations were contrary to His teaching in our passage. In Matthew 23 did He not say that the scribes and Pharisees were: “fools and blind” (vs. 17, 19), “blind guides” (v. 24), “serpents, brood of vipers” (v. 33) and were like “white washed tombs” (v. 27)? Indeed, He did. However, as the Son of God who is omniscient and the Messiah who is anointed beyond measure, He has the knowledge and authority to make such pronouncements. Further, His statements were not based on a personal offense or unjust anger, but were inspired warnings to His followers and judicial pronouncements against wicked apostates. In a similar manner, ministers of the gospel have a duty to identify false teachers and warn people of their character and doctrine. The person’s public doctrine and life can be discussed with very strong terminology, yet without hurling personal insults.

After Jesus gives His teaching on how the sixth commandment applies to the heart and tongue and focuses on things that we are not to do, He then turns His attention to some positive implications of this commandment. The disciple is not only required to avoid everything that leads to murder, but he also is to be an active peacemaker. Christ sets forth two examples of positive application of the sixth commandment:

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to

²¹⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 72.

²²⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:187.

thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing (Mt. 5:23-26).

Let us examine each application in turn.

First, the Savior describes a man who comes to the temple to make a gift offering and realizes that he has done something to offend his brother. Jesus says that under such circumstances this man must not make the offering until he first reconciles with his brother. If we apply this to our situation we could paraphrase it as: “If you are at public worship and realize that your brother has a legitimate grievance against you, do not partake of the holy supper until you first make amends with your brother.” In other words, love and reconciliation must be sought and, if possible, achieved before you approach God in worship. One must seek to fulfill even the positive application of the sixth commandment before seeking the Lord’s blessing in the ordinances. Since we praise God for His kindness, love and mercy toward us, we must also treat our brothers with love and kindness. God does not want us to approach Him in worship until the unresolved sinful conflicts in the local body that we have caused are resolved.

This teaching was a strong rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees, for they regarded such matters as unimportant; instead, they focused their attention on the external things of religion. They thought that as long as they did not commit physical murder that everything was fine. Therefore, personal conflicts, hatred, strife and insults were left to fester in their communities. These things were not considered violations of the law. Thus, they would go to worship with a clear conscience even though personal relationships were in turmoil. Christ says that once you understand the full meaning and application of the sixth commandment, you will do everything in your power to stop this situation. In order to keep the negative aspect of the commandment, you must also be very careful to carry out the positive aspect. Love and peace must be attended to and continually nurtured.

This teaching, which is simple and beautiful, is constantly being violated in Christian churches today. People often do not seek reconciliation, but rather make matters worse by excuses, gossip, slander and the like. Jesus expects believers to live in a way that is the opposite of unjustified anger and insults. They are to be aggressive with their love; they are to be active peacemakers. They are to remove the causes of conflict, even before they have an opportunity to grow worse and lead to further sin. This aspect of the sixth commandment is rarely practiced today, but it is required by Christ. To emphasize how important this teaching is, in verses 23 and 24 the Redeemer has shifted from the second person plural (“you”) to the second person singular (“thou,” KJV). He says to each particular Christian, “This teaching applies to you. Do not neglect it. Examine your own heart on this issue.”²²¹

The point that our Lord makes is so true and logical. If I treat any brother like dirt and refuse to do everything I can to make the situation right, then why should God hear me? How can I worship God actively for saving me and bringing me into His family when I abuse His family members? If you are mistreating your brother in Christ and refuse to speak with Him and perhaps are even making matters worse by gossiping about him, then the Son of God assures you that your attempted act of worship is vain or useless. “It will avail you nothing, the Lord will not

²²¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:228.

hear you.”²²² Think of how serious this teaching is. Think about the great importance that Jesus places on reconciliation and peace in the body of Christ.

In the second example, the Savior moves from a church situation to that of a court of law. Here the Lord instructs Christians to settle issues with enemies before they get to civil court. Believers are to agree with their adversary and make matters right, out of court. They are to do this quickly, even on the way to court if necessary. If the debt is not settled immediately, then the person in debt will go to prison and will pay every penny owed. In other words, putting the matter off will only cause the problem to grow worse. The problem will not go away if it is ignored. Both of these illustrations teach that grievances against us must be dealt with immediately. Both require urgent action on our part. Worship must even be postponed to make matters right as soon as possible. We must not delay making peace. Thus, the sixth commandment requires positive action. It requires active love and peacemaking.

Our Lord’s teaching on anger, insults and positive peacemaking is an excellent exposition on the meaning of the sixth commandment. We need to adopt Jesus’ attitude regarding these things and be much more diligent about watching our hearts, controlling our tongues and working for reconciliation with others before matters become worse. We must never permit anger to grow or personal conflicts to fester. These things must be nipped in the bud and dealt with aggressively. May God enable us to put this great wisdom into practice in our daily lives.

Chapter 16: The Second Antithesis—The Seventh Commandment

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell (Mt. 5:27-30).

Our Lord’s second example of the true meaning of the moral law versus the false interpretation of the law by the scribes and Pharisees relates to the seventh commandment (Ex. 20:13; Dt. 5:17) or sexual immorality. Once again the command is the same as that written in the Decalogue, but it is the interpretation that comes with this commandment that Jesus refutes. The structure of this antithesis is virtually identical to the one that precedes it. The scribal teaching is identified as received or delivered to the men of old (“to the ancients”). Christ’s teaching is preceded by His authoritative formula, “But I say to you.” Once again, the Redeemer rejects the scribal view of this commandment which was purely external. (That is, a man was only guilty of adultery if he actually had sexual relations with a married woman.) Instead He teaches the internal nature of this law; lust in the heart and the improper look or stare that comes from that inner lust and feeds it is also a violation of this commandment. This teaching is then followed by material that illustrates the very serious nature of this sin and that warns His followers of the crucial need to do whatever it takes to repent of it. Like the previous section on murder, this pericope ends with the threat of eternal hell for those who do not listen to Jesus and follow His

²²²Ibid.

teaching. This is in keeping with the central proposition of verse 20 that unless the disciples' personal righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, they will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. As we study this section of Scripture, there are a number of things to consider.

Christ's statement implies that the scribes and Pharisees "restricted the scope of the seventh commandment to the bare act of unlawful intercourse with a married woman."²²³ The rabbis' interpretation greatly limited the scope of the seventh commandment, just as they had the sixth. In fact, this interpretation was so limited that the commandment would only apply to a physical act that was a crime. Where did the scribes go wrong in their interpretation of this commandment? They were guilty of not using Scripture to interpret Scripture. They did not view this commandment in terms of the tenth commandment which requires obedience in the heart or mind. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" (Ex. 20:17). They also ignored the clear teaching of the prophets on unlawful lust. Jeremiah 5:8 describes the men of Judah as wicked and worthy of judgment because, "They were like well-fed lusty stallions; everyone neighed after his neighbor's wife." Micah speaks of those who covet fields and thus lay in bed planning iniquity for when the sun arises (cf. 2:1-2). The word "covet" (Hebrew *hamad*, or *awah*—"strongly desire") essentially means "'desire, yearn for, covet, lust after' someone or something, specifically for one's own use or gratification."²²⁴

The rabbis should have understood that, as commandments 6 through 9 prohibit wrong acts toward one's neighbor, the 10th commandment is comprehensive in scope in prohibiting the desires in the heart that leads to such unlawful acts. The scribes and Pharisees did not understand the true dimension of the law. Unlawful desires are wrong because they are contrary to God's nature. He is ethically perfect and demands truth and righteousness in the heart. Forbidden lusts are against Jehovah and thus are intrinsically sinful. Further, unlawful lusts are wrong because they are the source of all wicked deeds against our neighbor. The scribe and Pharisees did not even understand the fundamentals of biblical ethics.

(2) Jesus teaches that "looking on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (v. 28). This statement raises a number of issues.

First, what does our Lord mean by "looking on a woman to lust after her"? The present participle *blepon* denotes a continued looking or what we would call a stare. The man has focused his attention on a woman. Thus, Christ has not forbidden seeing a woman or looking at a woman, but rather a continued looking with impure thoughts. "The construction *pros to* with infinitive denotes purpose (not result), it is somewhat like our phrase, 'with a view to...'"²²⁵ Thus we could paraphrase this statement as, "whoever stares or continuously looks at a woman for the purpose of lusting after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Some have interpreted the expression "to lust after" as a strong, illicit desire coupled with the intent to carry out the physical act. While lusting after a woman can include the decision to actually commit the deed, lusting and fantasizing without a plan still involves adultery in the heart. The vast majority of men who are guilty of this sin are committing mental adultery, with absolutely no intention of attempting the physical offense. Further, in every Old Testament passage where coveting leads to the physical outward offense a second verb is added indicating that coveting resulted in taking possession (e.g., "covet and seize").²²⁶

²²³ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 80.

²²⁴ John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 297.

²²⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 226.

²²⁶ See John I. Durham, *Exodus*, 298.

The word for “woman” (*gune*) can also be translated “wife” in that Greek has no ordinary word for wife. Thus, the context is used to determine whether *gune* should be translated as woman or wife. Since the context is adultery, some scholars prefer the translation “wife” (e.g., Tyndale, “a wife” or Cranmer, “another man’s wife). They argue that adultery, strictly speaking, describes a violation of the marriage vow. As Alexander notes, “...the verb (*moicheuseis*, *emoicheusen*) has in usage a specific meaning (to commit adultery) and must not be adjusted to the wide sense of the noun (*a woman*), so as to denote fornication, or illicit intercourse in general.”²²⁷ If one prefers the translation “a wife,” then the prohibition of lust in the heart that results in a lustful stare still obviously applies to fornication by way of inference and application. Because it is likely that most men to whom our Lord was speaking were married, the translation “a woman” would still be appropriate in that lusting after any woman whether married or not would be sinful. Further, “if a more restrictive understanding were in view, one might expect the noun to be modified, e.g., *tou plesiou* [*sou*], ‘your neighbor’s’).”²²⁸

Second, in this passage, Jesus condemned two sins that are species of adultery; that are intimately related or interconnected. The Savior is condemning unlawful lust or lusting after that which is forbidden. There is nothing wrong with a strong desire, unless that desire arises from our corrupt nature and is directed to a forbidden act. God gave us natural desires so that man could function in this world and take dominion over it. There is the strong desire for food or drink when we are hungry or thirsty and there is even a desire for sexual relations which is necessary to propagate the human race. The idea that lusting after one’s own wife is somehow sinful and degrading came into the Roman Catholic Church from Greek neo-platonism; it is totally pagan. The idea common in Victorian times that sex between husband and wife was a duty not to be relished and enjoyed has absolutely nothing to do with Scripture. “There is not the slightest suggestion here that natural sexual relations within the commitment of marriage are anything but God-given and beautiful. We may thank God that the Song of Solomon is contained in the canon of Scripture, for there is no Victorian prudery there but rather the uninhibited delight of lovers, of bride and bridegroom, in each other.”²²⁹ “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4).

Jesus is only condemning inner lusts directed to a woman who is not one’s wife. This lust can involve a variety of sexual fantasies and even plans to carry out these immoral thoughts. These wicked lusts flow from the corruption of our nature. Paul refers to this source as “the old man” (Rom. 6:6; Col. 3:9), “the body of sin” (Rom. 6:6); the “sin dwelling in us” (Rom. 7:17); “the law of sin” (Rom. 7:23-25); “the sin which so easily besets us” (Heb. 12:1); “the flesh” (Rom. 7:5, 25; 8:3-5). The evil thoughts that come from within us are sin and, if not repented of, will lead to further sin. “Sin is not merely a matter of actions and deeds; it is something within the heart that leads to the action.”²³⁰ Because of the remaining sin in us, we have an enemy inside the gate always ready to betray us. The regenerating power of the Holy Spirit delivers us from the reigning power of sin over us, but the remnant of sin in us still causes sinful lusts to arise in our hearts. Sins that arise in the mind can be very subtle and can seem to arise out of nowhere. Therefore, they are usually the most difficult to control. The sin within us has taken our good God-given desires and has perverted them to sinful lusts which wage war against our souls.

²²⁷ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 140.

²²⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 120.

²²⁹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 87.

²³⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:237.

The heart that lusts is connected to eyes that lust and feed the sinful desires of the mind. It is a sin to use any of our senses to serve the lusts in the mind and feed them with fuel for even greater sinful thoughts. When John warns us about the wickedness of the present world system and why we must have no affection for it he says, “For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:16).²³¹ “The eyes are the chief channel between the flesh and the outside world; and ‘the lust of the eyes’ is the desire of seeing unlawful sights for the sake of the sinful pleasure to be derived from the sight.”²³² When related to unlawful sexual sights for the purpose of fantasizing and stimulating sexual desires we have what Peter vividly described as “having eyes full of adultery” (2 Pet. 2:14). Matthew Henry’s comments on this sin are excellent: “All approaches toward them; feeding the eye with the sight of the forbidden fruit; not only looking for that end, that I may lust; but looking till I do lust, or looking to gratify the lust, where further satisfaction cannot be obtained. The eye is both the inlet and outlet of a great deal of wickedness of this kind, witness Joseph’s mistress (Gen. xxxix.7), Samson (Judg. xvi.1), David, (2 Sam. xi.2). We read of *eyes full of adultery, that cannot cease from sin*, 2 Pet. ii.14. What need have we, therefore, with holy Job to *make a covenant with our eyes*, to make this bargain with them, that they should have the pleasure of beholding the light of the sun and the works of God, provided they would never fasten or dwell upon any thing that might occasion impure imaginations or desires....”²³³

Our culture has degenerated to the point where this sin is celebrated in songs and movies. There are whole industries devoted to feeding this sin (e.g., the multi-billion dollar pornography industry). Unlawful sexual stimulation is used to sell everything from soup to beer to cars to shaving cream. Modern bathing suits are so skimpy and provocative that Christian men cannot go to the public beach or pool without immediately being confronted with many sexually stimulating sights. Many young woman today dress indecently, for the very purpose of causing men to lust after them. For men in particular, this is one of the most common and soul snaring sins around. Our Lord tells us that such behavior is not a trivial matter, but is a serious sin that must be dealt with radically. Figuratively, we must be willing to pluck out our eye or cut off our hand if we offend God in this area.

Third, it is important to recognize just how serious and dangerous sexual lust and fornication is. There is no sin that is discussed more in the epistles. It is probable that more families have been torn apart by this sin than any other. Sexual impurity has likely cause more men to backslide and apostatize than any other iniquity. It has resulted in the disgrace and discipline of many ministers of the gospel. No sin is more strongly prohibited in the law of Christ

²³¹ “The ‘world’ here means unregenerate civilization. Pagan Rome and Greece loved athletics and sexual debauchery. The people crowded the stadiums and staged nudist parties. As John will say in 5:29, we know that all America lies in the grip of the devil. Some preachers proclaim that America is materialistic. So far as philosophy goes, there are no longer any materialists at all. If by ‘materialistic’ these preachers mean greedy and money-mad, they may have some reason for saying so. But most ‘money-mad’ people seek money in order to buy the pleasures of wine, women, and perhaps a little song. On the shirt of a hang-glider there was an inscription: Only one thing is better than hang-gliding. Under which inscription was the picture of a naked girl. And this was worn in public.

There are, of course, some few people who have other affections. Painters and musicians may praise art for art’s sake. Utrillo and his mother were no doubt licentious drunks, but they really loved art. Some practicing atheists love politics. Perhaps they dream of Stalin and Idi Amin, for a fair number of people love power just for the fun of pushing people around. They delight in multiplying regulations for the citizenry. All this is the world that a Christian should not love. It is incompatible with a love for the Father.” (Gordon H. Clark, *First John* [Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, (1980) 1992], 68-69.

²³² Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1886] 1980), 52.

²³³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:61.

than impurity. “‘Fornication and all uncleanness,’ says an apostle, ‘let it not be once named among you’ [Eph. 5:3]. No species of sin is more degrading to the intellectual and moral nature of man. ‘Fleshly lusts war against the soul.’ They obscure the mind, they harden the heart, they pervert the affection.”²³⁴ Because by nature we are sexual beings, this sin is especially able to enslave our souls. The images of past failures can creep back into the mind and make it unfit for the communion of worship. It was such a problem in the ancient church that Paul was constantly exhorting believers against it. “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess this vessel in sanctification and honor; not in the lust of concupiscence [i.e. evil desire], even as the Gentiles which know not God: for God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness” (1 Thess. 4:3-7). “Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.... Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:13, 18).

Fourth, this teaching (like all the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount) should cause all men to realize their complete dependence on Christ for salvation. When we look at Jesus’ infallible interpretation of the law and then examine our own lives in terms of it, all of us must become naked beggars in the dust before Him. Although most of us could honestly say that we have never committed the physical act of adultery, how many can say that they have never had unlawful sexual fantasies or impure thoughts? How many men have never stared at a beautiful young woman who was dressed inappropriately? How many people have not gazed upon provocative, unlawful images in magazines, or television or movies? Anyone who is honest with themselves will acknowledge that they are guilty before God, that they have violated the seventh commandment in their thought life and with their eyes. Therefore, it is obvious that, “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Rom. 3:20). It is clear that we must assume a position of complete humility before God, admit our guilt and acknowledge the necessity of the Savior’s sacrificial death to remove all of our sins. The more we understand the requirements of God’s holy law, the more we will see our need of Christ. And having confessed our sin before God and embraced His Son through faith, we must live a daily repentance in this area and strive to avoid any occasion, place or thing which may inflame unlawful passions. With the psalmist we should pray, “Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, and revive me in Your way” (Ps. 119:37).

Christ’s Instructions on How to Maintain Sexual Purity

After setting forth the proper interpretation of the seventh commandment, our Lord gives instructions on how to deal with and prevent these fleshly lusts. “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell” (Mt. 5:29-30). There are a number of things about this passage that are noteworthy.

It is important that we understand that the command to pluck out the right eye or cut off the right hand is not meant to be taken literally. Some believers throughout history have not understood this fact and consequently have done themselves great bodily harm in attempting to

²³⁴ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:192.

follow this passage. A number of early church fathers had themselves castrated in order to subdue sexual lusts. Every so often, a story in the paper will appear about a young believer who attempted to cut off his right hand and ended up in the emergency room of the hospital. That Jesus has in mind drastic action to remove sin and not literal limbs can be ascertained from the fact that He only mentions the right eye and the right hand. A man can engage in unlawful sexual lust quite effectively with only one eye. He can still commit perverse sexual acts with only one hand. Indeed, a blind man with no hands at all can still commit adultery in his heart. The mention of the “right eye” or the “right hand” is probably designed to point us to that which is more important, useful or valuable in serving our illicit lusts. The right eye is in Jewish thinking the most important eye. The right hand is (at least for the vast majority of people) the most important hand. The Redeemer is using a dramatic figure of speech to emphasize the great lengths of self-mortification that we must be willing to undergo to deal with the things that cause us to sin. If there is any confusion regarding this interpretation, we only need to examine Matthew 18:7-9 where our Lord basically says the same thing but precedes it with an explanation. “From that passage it follows clearly that the eye and the hand that leads a person into sin symbolize and represent ‘occasions of stumbling,’ or if one prefers, *enticements to do wrong, beguiling allurements*.”²³⁵

That Jesus is discussing the necessity of avoiding enticements to sin is also demonstrated by the expression “offend thee” (KJV) or “causes you to sin” (NKJV) in verses 29 and 30. The expression “*skandalizei se*” means literally “causes you to stumble.” The word *skandalon* in classical Greek referred to the stick in a trap to catch small animals. When the stick which was baited with food was touched by an animal, the trap would close ensnaring the animal. In later Greek it came to denote a stumbling block or anything on a path that would cause a person to trip and fall. “The present tense (*skandalizei*) brings the supposition home with great force to the hearer’s actual experience.”²³⁶ What is it that is causing you to stumble? What is it that leads you into temptation and causes you to be trapped or overtaken by it? Jesus is telling us that whatever leads us into temptation and causes us to sin, no matter how precious to you, must be dealt with decisively and, therefore, with strenuous exertion removed from our lives. What then can be done by Christians to avoid falling into the sin of unlawful sexual lust and the sin of using our senses to stimulate this lust? There are a number of things that need to be done.

First, it is very important that we have a biblical understanding of God’s law and sin. The problem with the Jews in Christ’s day was that they held a very external understanding of what constitutes a sin. Therefore, as a result they were constantly violating Scripture without even being aware of it. In our day many evangelicals have such a light view of sin and negative view of God’s Old Testament moral law that they are often careless and frequently sin without even knowing it. Consequently, it is crucial that we heed the message of the Sermon on the Mount on the continuing validity of God’s moral law and the importance of understanding the internal aspect of God’s commandments. Do we take seriously our Lord’s teaching that it is not only the act, but also the unlawful desire and look that is offensive to God? Are we diligent in our study of Scripture so that our world and life view and ethic is the same as the Bible? We cannot

²³⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 303. That our Lord does not refer to a literal maiming of the body is also proved by the analogy of Scripture. If Jesus were telling us to rip out an eye or cut off a hand then Scripture would contradict Scripture for as the seventh commandment applies to any unlawful thoughts, words or acts related to sexual immorality; the sixth commandment forbids all violence to others or ourselves. Self-flagellation, starving oneself to death, suicide and deliberate maiming are unlawful. Therefore, no Christian should rely on pliers or a chain saw to obey the Savior.

²³⁶ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 142-143.

mortify the sinful passions in our life if we do not know how to identify sin and we don't understand the sinfulness of all sin (even internal sins) in God's sight.

Second, we must identify people, places or things that have tempted us and/or caused us to sin in the past and completely avoid them. If a Christian man liked to go jogging on the beach and found his eyes focusing on bikini-clad women and this caused him to lust, then he must find another place to jog. If a college student would pass a newsstand on the way to school full of pornographic magazines and he was tempted to look at them and purchase some of them, then he needs to find another route to school. If a person finds that a television program fosters lust in his heart, then he has no business watching that program. Similarly, if a man is tempted to look at pornographic pictures on the internet, then he must keep the computer in a public area in the home with strong filters or he must get rid of the computer. As Paul says, "Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom. 13:13-14). We must with the apostle, discipline our body and bring it into subjection otherwise we will be disapproved (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27). We must guard the eye gate with all diligence so that lust does not grow in our hearts. We must keep our hearts with all diligence and labor for purity of heart (Pr. 4:23). The key to success in this area is a premeditated plan to avoid sexual temptations altogether.

This means that we must be willing to part with anything, even our dearest possessions, if they tempt us to sin. We must even part company with our old unconverted friends, because evil companionship will corrupt our thinking and behavior (see Pr. 13:20; 28:7; 1 Cor. 15:33). "David says that 'all his delight was in the saints, and in those who excelled in virtue.' He 'was a companion to all those who feared the name of God.' As for the wicked, he would 'not allow them to come into his sight,' nay, 'he would not make mention of them in his lips' (Ps. 16:3; 119; 101:7)."²³⁷

All men know by experience what stimulates sexual lust and what does not. Only those who choose to live in self-deception or are full of pride will err in this area. Jesus says that whatever causes us to stumble must be ripped out of our lives. It must be cut off and cast behind our backs. The man who has been caught in a certain snare and knows the consequences of that trap, yet does it again and again is a fool and is putting his soul in great danger. It does not matter what we think our needs are or what our particular circumstances are. If something causes unlawful lust and offends God then we must hate it and put it out of our lives. Once a man looks at pornographic images, lascivious movies or reads filthy novels or articles he has demonstrated that his thought life is already tainted with impurity. His sinful actions on this issue make matters worse because he is getting more polluted by his actions. His entanglement becomes worse and his repentance will be even more difficult. We must be very diligent on this point because our depraved culture is obsessed with sexual perversions of every kind. Today, there are thousands of ways to cause sexual lust that did not exist only a generation ago. Gross debauchery is only a few keys away on our personal computers. Thus, we must never play with temptations. We must flee youthful lusts (2 Tim. 2:22) and instead pursue righteousness.

The whole point of Jesus' illustration of ripping out the eye or cutting off the hand is to emphasize just how diligently we must be in avoiding temptation and sin. When it comes to sights that cause us to sin, we must behave as though we have no eyes. When it comes to sinning with our hands, we must live as an amputee. "Behave as if you actually cut off your hands and

²³⁷ Lancelot Andrewes, "An Exposition of the Tenth Commandment" in Ernest Kevin, *Moral Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), 92.

feet, and had flung them away, and were now crippled and so could not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to sin.’ That is the meaning of ‘mortification.’”²³⁸

Third, we must have discipline and control over our thought life. A man can be enticed not only by sight, but also by lustful thoughts. “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (Jas. 1:14). This entails pushing out impure thoughts when they come into the mind and replacing them with lawful and edifying thoughts. There are seven things that can be done in this area.

(1) A man who is married must learn to replace illicit sexual thoughts with thoughts about his own wife. On two separate occasions, when Paul warned unmarried Christians about the temptation to fornication, he advocated marriage as the solution to sexual desire (cf. 1 Cor. 7:2; 1 Thess. 4:3). This is the put off/put on principle of sanctification. That which is ungodly must be put off and replaced with a lawful counterpart. If a man has had trouble with sexual fantasies that are contrary to Scripture, then he must learn to focus his mind on his own wife. There is nothing unlawful about that. Further, it is important that Christian men maintain a healthy sexual relationship with their own wives as a preventive measure against a wandering mind. “Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well. Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be only for your own, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountains be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love. For why should you, my son be enraptured by an immoral woman?” (Pr. 5:15-20).

(2) If we are having impure thoughts then one thing that can be done is to occupy ourselves with some type of constructive work. In other words, we must avoid idleness. King David was idle when he was tempted to commit adultery. He was living in leisure and luxury instead of fighting for Zion. A mind that is occupied with good works and service to Christ will not have the time to wander into forbidden areas. “Idleness is the Devil’s pillow. An idle person is a standing puddle, apt to stagnate and putrefy. This makes the soil fit for Satan to sow his seed in. Therefore it was good counsel which said, Let Satan always find you alert and ready.”²³⁹

(3) On all such occasions we must focus our mind on the Word of God which is designed to convict the straying heart and purify it. “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.... Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (Ps. 119:9, 11). If necessary, write on little cards all the appropriate biblical passages regarding unlawful lust and the dangers and consequences of fornication and adultery and study them precisely at the times of temptation. Occupy your mind with Scripture instead of unlawful sexual fantasies. “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

(4) We must learn to focus our minds on the intimate presence of God who is of purer eyes than to behold evil (Hab.1:13). “Never forget that his eye is on your heart, and that ‘all things are naked and opened’ to him; and, as one of the best and most effectual methods of mortifying your members which are on the earth—crucifying the flesh with its affections and lusts, ‘Set your affections on things above’; ‘Seek the things which are at God’s right hand’ [Col. 3:2-6].”²⁴⁰ It is for this reason that Paul pleaded with the Corinthians not to take their bodies

²³⁸ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 89.

²³⁹ Lancelot Andrewes, 92.

²⁴⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:194.

which are temples of the Holy Spirit and join them to a harlot (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15-18). Since our bodies are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, our minds and bodies cannot be polluted with filth without incurring great and peculiar guilt.

(5) We must do everything we can to hate that which we once loved. The psalmist says, “You that love the LORD, hate evil” (Ps. 97:10). Sinful lusts are contrary to everything God is. Therefore, we must look at sin as contrary to our love toward Christ. Anything that hinders our communion with the Savior must be viewed as horrible, detestable and wretched. The world views sin as a light thing, as trivial. It laughs at sin because it does not fear God. But we must understand how wicked sin is in God’s sight and train ourselves to see it as God does. “Look at it; read the biblical description of it; analyze it; and the more we do so the more we shall hate it and do all we can to get rid of it at all costs, and to destroy it out of our lives.”²⁴¹ Do you love God? If you do then you will do everything you can to hate sin and mortify it every day.

(6) In all these things we must always be looking to Christ and His completed work. Paul tells us to look to our union with the Savior in His death and resurrection as the source of our holiness and renewal. “Likewise you also reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (Rom. 6:11-13). To play with lust in the mind and lust with the eyes is totally contrary to our new creation in Christ. It is not who we are.

(7) There is also the need to be continually praying for the grace to govern our appetites. Only the power and help of the Holy Spirit can deliver us from this sin. Paul says, “It is by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13). Jesus says that watching against sin and temptation must always be accompanied by prayer. “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” (Mt. 26:41). Oh Lord, deliver us from this vile soul destroying temptation so that we would not sin against thee!

Fourth, our Lord gives a very sober, weighty reason why we must be willing to put away anything that would cause us to sin in this area. He says it would be better to be blinded and maimed than to be cast into hell. The logic here is impeccable for those who have eyes to see the truth. Does it not make sense to suffer pain and loss in this present life which is temporary and will soon pass away, in order to avoid the terrors of the lake of fire which is eternal and shall inflict suffering on both body and soul? This reasoning is in keeping with another message on the cost of discipleship. “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). “Who is there among us who would not consent to the amputation of a gangrened limb, no matter how painful the operation and heavy the loss, if persuaded that this was imperative in order for life itself to be preserved?”²⁴² Of course, the stakes are much higher than preserving our lives in the present. The choice is between mortification in this present life as a fruit of saving faith and not simply physical death, but eternal death. We can mortify the flesh now and suffer for the Savior or we can spend eternity in torment.

According to Christ, believers are to view the present life through the lens of the final judgment and eternity. Everything we do in this world must be done with a consideration of how it relates to the eternal destiny of our souls. This does not mean that we are saved by works or that our present life is not important. It rather keeps us focused on preparing for the final

²⁴¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:247.

²⁴² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 90.

judgment and the eternal state to follow. Are we living as though we really believe that Jesus is coming to judge the quick and the dead? Do we live our lives carelessly as though we are not really concerned about our eternal destiny? Our Lord says that everything in this world is much less important than what happens to our souls when we die. The perspective of eternity should affect all of our thinking. When we look at the rewards of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked and compare it to the sacrifices that we make in this present life to serve Christ, there is no comparison. Thus, the pain of mortification is sweetened by heaven. There is no pleasure or power or glory in this present life that is worth the price of hell.

All of this runs completely counter to our modern culture, which is very permissive and demands instant gratification. We must be willing to forego the sinful pleasures of this world in order to enter the paradise of God. This teaching requires real faith because it requires diligent self-denial and purity in the present on the basis of the Redeemer's promises for the distant future. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is something that demonstrates whether we are a true Christian or not. If we live for this world and not the next, then we know that our faith is dead and worthless. If we live for the world to come, then we can have peace and assurance of salvation. Beloved, examine yourselves to see your true priority, your true love. If you have been deluding yourselves and living for this present world, then now is the time to repent and follow Christ.

Chapter 17: The Third Antithesis—Christ's Teaching on Divorce

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery (Mt. 5:31-32).

In the third antithesis, our Lord continues His teaching on the proper interpretation and application of the seventh commandment with a discussion of fidelity in marriage or the abuse of divorce by the scribes and Pharisees and the sin of adultery that it causes. This is a very important topic in our day, when the universal passage of so-called "no fault" divorce laws have made a mockery of God's sacred law and the institution of marriage. One of the greatest indications of our nation's spiritual and ethical decline over the past few generations is both the great increase in our divorce rate (presently it is about 49%) and the passage of statutes that make divorce laws much more elastic, permissive and easy. When the western nations cast off their Christian profession and the fear of God, moral corruption in the sphere of sexuality quickly abounded. The great losers in this new narcissistic atmosphere have primarily been women and children. By way of introduction, there are some things we should note about this passage.

First, while the first two antitheses focused our attention on sins of the heart, this antithesis and the ones which follow discuss sinful acts. The scribes and Pharisees were not just guilty of ignoring the internal aspect of the law. They also interpreted laws related to outward deeds in such a manner as to make Jehovah's law far more permissive than what it actually taught.

Second, the law that the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of perverting in this instance was a civil law in the Mosaic code relating to divorce: Deuteronomy 24:1ff. This judicial law

permitted a man to divorce his wife if he “found some uncleanness in her.” The vast majority of Jews in Jesus’ day interpreted this to mean that a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason. It is important that we understand that Christ is not refuting or speaking against Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but is setting forth an antithesis to the predominant scribal distortion of this law. The point is proved by the introductory formula “it was spoken” (*errethe de*) which, as discussed above, indicates human oral traditions, not the Word of God. Further, as noted, it would be absurd for our Lord to emphatically state that He did not come to destroy the law and then turn right around and begin refuting it. The Redeemer is honoring the law of God and is displaying its amazing wisdom and its great fullness.

Third, the teaching of this passage on divorce is identical with Matthew 19:3-12, which was given much later during the Savior’s ministry. Since Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 is a fuller discussion of the same topic, we would do well to look at the two passages together in order to shed light on our text. Matthew writes,

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” And he answered and said unto them, “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, ‘For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh’? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” They say unto him, “Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” He saith unto them, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.”

The Pharisaical Distortion

In order to understand the perversion of God’s law in our text, we need to examine the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and determine how the Jews had twisted this civil law to their own ends. This Mosaic law on divorce reads,

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

This passage is a classic example of a biblical case law where certain conditions are set forth (i.e. “if this occurs”) which become the basis for instructions and imperatives (“then do this”). The first condition is that the husband has no favor in his wife “because he has found some uncleanness in her.” Note this “uncleanness” in the woman which causes the husband to no longer want his wife is *the only reason given* for a divorce in this passage. If this “uncleanness” occurs, the man is permitted to write her a certificate of divorce and send her out of the household. The second condition of this section of Scripture is given to set up a prohibition of remarriage (Dt. 24:4). If the woman who was divorced goes out and marries another man and he

divorces her or dies, the first husband is not permitted to remarry her. Three reasons are given: she has been defiled; marrying her would be an abomination before the Lord; and, it would bring sin upon the land.

The vast majority of Jews in Christ's day interpreted the expression "found some uncleanness in her" as "if there is *anything* he finds undesirable in her." Consequently, men were divorcing their wives if they found a woman who was younger or more attractive. Interestingly, at that time there were two Jewish schools of thought on this issue. There was the school of Shammai who held to a very restricted interpretation of "uncleanness" in Deuteronomy 24:1. For Shammai "uncleanness" referred to sexual immorality or adultery. The school of Hillel, however, defined "uncleanness" as widely as possible. If she put too much salt on his food, or gained weight, or grew unattractive or spoke to him in a manner that was not respectful enough, he could divorce her.²⁴³ The Pharisees and the vast majority of men at that time were attracted to the interpretation of Hillel because of their sexual lusts. Their laxity came to expression in their question to Christ: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" (Mt. 19:3). The Pharisees wanted to know whose side Jesus was on concerning this issue. Did He hold to a very strict interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 or was He in line with the common practice of their culture?

All of this raises the question. Does Deuteronomy 24:1 ("some uncleanness") justify the common Jewish understanding of divorce for any cause? Although the precise meaning of the phrase *erwat dabar* translated as "some indecency," "some uncleanness," "something indecent" is uncertain, it is very likely that it refers to sexual perversion or adultery for the following reasons. First, the phrase literally means "nakedness of a thing" or "a naked matter." "The word uncleanness of a thing definitely implies a serious offense; it is used elsewhere of the shameful exposure of the body (Gen. 9:22; Ex. 20:26; Lam. 1:8; Ezek. 16:36, 37), in Leviticus 18 of illicit and abnormal sexual practices, and in Deuteronomy 23:14 for human excrement."²⁴⁴ Thus, this term would be perfect for describing sexual immorality. It would be an inappropriate expression to describe not being able to bear children or to designate a non-sexual offense. Second, the term nakedness is used as a metaphor for sexual intercourse twenty-three times in Leviticus 18 which deals specifically with forbidden sexual relationships. Indeed, this chapter is a catalogue of sexual sins. Third, the language used in Deuteronomy 24:4, "defiled," clearly suggests a sexual offense of some kind. Fourth, if Deuteronomy is allowing divorce only for a serious sexual violation on the part of the wife, then we have a complete harmony between God's law and the Redeemer's exception clause in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. This point is important when we consider the fact that our Lord is not refuting, correcting or adding to the law in the Sermon on the Mount, but is giving the true meaning against scribal perversions. Therefore, Deuteronomy 24:1 does not justify divorce for any cause.

Those who reject the view that sexual immorality or adultery were in mind, do so on the basis that adultery was a death penalty offense. Thus they argue that the death penalty rendered divorce in such circumstances unnecessary. The problem with this view, which is common, is that it does not take into account the fact that there are instances when adultery is known to have

²⁴³ "The house of Hillel say, if she should spoil his food, (that is, as Jarchi and Bartenora explain it, burns it either at the fire, or with salt, *i.e.* over-roasts or over-salts it) who appeal also to Deut. xxiv.1. R. Akiba says, if he finds another more beautiful than her, as it is said, Deut. xxiv.1." (Maimon and Bartenora in Gittin, c.9 sect. 10 as quoted in John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:48).

²⁴⁴ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 405.

taken place, but cannot be proven in a court of law. Jewish courts needed two or three witnesses to get a conviction and this was not always easy. For example, the woman caught in adultery in John 8 could not have been lawfully convicted under biblical law because the witnesses were corrupt, unqualified and thus disqualified (cf. Jn. 8:7-9). Further, it seems that in the case of adultery the death penalty was the maximum penalty under the law. Proverbs 6:35 speaks of the husband who refuses monetary recompense from the man who committed adultery with his wife. And there is the case of godly Joseph who, after discovering Mary was pregnant, “and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Mt. 1:18). Deuteronomy 24:1 teaches that a man who knows that his wife is committing adultery, but who does not have sufficient evidence for a civil trial, or who does not want to go through a trial, is free to divorce his unfaithful wife. However, once he does so, if she chooses a course of habitual adultery by marrying another man, he can never take her back. She is defiled before God.

The Savior’s Teaching

If we combine Matthew 5:32 with 19:4-9, our Lord’s rejection of the Pharisees’ permissive doctrine on divorce is as follows.

First, Jesus appeals to the creation ordinance of marriage as a proof text against the Pharisees’ “any cause” view of divorce. “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt. 19:4-5). By this appeal to Genesis, Christ is saying that: a) Marriage was instituted by God and thus is defined by Him. He makes the rules, not man. “It was God who made this union possible (Gen. 1:28). It was he, again, who said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help fit for him’ (Gen. 2:18). It was also God who brought Eve to Adam, to be the latter’s wife (Gen. 2:22). Indeed, from every angle, it was God who established marriage as a divine institution (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5, 6).”²⁴⁵ Therefore, those who mock this institution and treat it as nothing more than a romantic human invention, or a method of social control, that can be delayed for extended periods of fornication, or dissolved at will for any cause, mock the God who instituted it for our benefit.

b) Marriage was instituted and designed to be only between *one* man and *one* woman (the two have become one). The implication of this is that anything other than this, including homosexuality, polygamy and divorce, is the result of sin and the fall. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that God did not institute marriage so they could get a new wife every so often. One should no more get rid of his wife than cut off a limb. They are one flesh, not two.

c) Marriage was intended by God to be permanent. “Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt. 19:6). Since God is the one who joins a man and a woman together in marriage, man has no right or authority to sever marriage unions unless God Himself says they can be severed. This was a stinging rebuke to the common practice of the Jews at that time. “In the time of Jesus divorce had grown easier and easier, so that a situation had arisen in which girls were actually unwilling to marry, because marriage was so insecure.”²⁴⁶

Second, the Redeemer makes it clear that God did not command men to divorce their wives, but only permitted it because of the hardness of their hearts. “They said to Him, ‘Why

²⁴⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 716.

²⁴⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:152.

then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so’” (Mt. 19:7-8). Interestingly, the Pharisees’ question reveals their perversion of what is actually said in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Moses did not order the Jews to divorce their wives. The only imperative in the whole passage is the one forbidding men to remarry their previous wives who had married another and then been divorced again or widowed. But the Pharisees saw in this Scripture a blank check to divorce their wives at will, for any cause. Jesus says this law was a concession to their sinful, hard hearts. We must keep in mind that this was a civil law designed by Jehovah to rein in an existing chaotic practice. Because the men had hard hearts, they were divorcing their wives for virtually any reason and replacing them with younger, prettier women. This is precisely the sin that Malachi 2:14-16 condemns. Before the giving of the law to Moses, men were already divorcing their wives. What God did was to radically limit the reason for divorce to a matter of nakedness or fornication. If followed, the law would have greatly reduced the number of divorces in their society. “All the various excuses which men had been using and bringing forward were now prohibited.”²⁴⁷ Our Lord then reminds the Pharisees, “from the beginning it was not so.” This divine law was necessitated by sin. However, God’s original plan was a *permanent* union between one man and one woman. The Savior once again rebukes the Pharisees for not interpreting Deuteronomy 24:1 in light of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.

Third, following the true interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, Jesus allows only one exception as a lawful reason for divorce—fornication. Any remarriage after divorce that is not on account of fornication renders all remarriages after divorce adultery.²⁴⁸ “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery” (Mt. 5:32). “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (Mt. 19:9). Regarding these passages there are a number of things to note.

These verses state teaching that is clear and easy to understand. “The English translation ‘whoever divorces his wife except for fornication and marries another commits adultery’ is accurate and gives a precise rendering of the original statement in the Greek text. The grammar and syntax of the verse are simple and not at all unusual.”²⁴⁹ In fact, everyone can understand precisely what these passages mean *immediately* unless they come to these passages with presuppositions that are contrary to it; that require exegetical gymnastics to make them teach what they obviously do not. This is particularly true of those schools of thought that believe divorce is not allowed under any circumstances, or those who do not allow remarriage under any circumstances.

Christ clearly allows remarriage for the innocent party in a divorce. Those who believe that divorce is allowed by this passage, but who claim that all who remarry are guilty of adultery,

²⁴⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:256.

²⁴⁸ A discussion of desertion and divorce is beyond the scope of our text (see 1 Cor. 7:15 and the Westminster Confession 24:6 which reads, “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage; wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it, not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.”)

²⁴⁹ Thomas R. Edgar, “Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion” in H. Wayne House, Editor, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 156.

have violated the grammar of the Greek text. Our Lord says that the one who divorces his wife *who does not have fornication as his reason* and then remarries another is guilty of adultery. This means that the man whose wife is unfaithful and has attacked the marriage bond through adultery, not only has the God-given right to divorce his wife, but also to marry again. “According to this law, adultery is the only sufficient reason of divorce. He who for any other cause puts away his wife, is to be held an adulterer if he marry another woman; and she, by marrying him, commits adultery; while at the same time, he becomes the guilty occasion of adultery, if the woman, who is still his wife, marry another man; for in this case she commits adultery, as he also does who marries her.”²⁵⁰ “The interpretation that this verse allows divorce, but not remarriage, is not merely improbable, it is grammatically impossible.... This verse definitely indicates that someone who divorces due to the exception and then marries another does not commit adultery. The exception is a real exception which allows for a genuine divorce so that the person may marry another.”²⁵¹

It is important to establish the meaning of *porneia*, translated as fornication or sexual immorality, because this word has been used to support some innovative, but unbiblical, interpretations of these passages. After we define this word we will interact with the most popular erroneous interpretations of this word.

The word *porneia* occurs 26 times in the New Testament and is always translated as *fornication* in the KJV. Many modern translations have adopted the translation “sexual immorality” because the word has many shades of meaning all related to unlawful sexual behavior of some kind. Therefore, the context should be used to determine if the word is being used in a specific manner. A number of times the word is used to refer to sexual sins that do not necessarily include adultery (e.g., prostitution, Rev. 2:14, 20; sexual relations between unmarried people, Mt. 15:19; Mk. 7:1; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19; sexual immorality in general, Jn. 8:41; Ac. 15:20, 29; 21:25; Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:1; 6:13, 18; 2 Cor. 6:17; 12:21; Eph. 5:3). Sometimes the word is used interchangeably with adultery. This is the case in Matthew 5:32; 19:9 and Revelation 2:20-22. Moreover, *porneia* “is derived from *porne*, a prostitute, without specifying whether she (or her client) is married or unmarried. Further, it is used in the Septuagint for the unfaithfulness of Israel, Yahweh’s bride, as exemplified in Hosea’s wife Gomer.”²⁵² “[I]n Ezekiel xvi, 25-28, the wife of Jehovah is said to commit *both* sins.”²⁵³ Since *porneia* is a comprehensive word that covers all kinds of sexual immorality, including adultery, and since the context of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is marriage, it makes perfect sense to regard it in these contexts as “adultery” or “marital unfaithfulness.” Some scholars have speculated that the word *porneia* is used instead of adultery (*moicheia*) because the marriage covenant can be broken by a whole variety of perverse sexual practices (e.g., homosexuality, bestiality, incest, etc.).

Having briefly examined the meaning of *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, we need to consider a few wrong interpretations of Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage, which hinge on a unique understanding of *porneia*. One view that has become popular among Roman Catholic and a few evangelical scholars is that *porneia* refers not to some act of fornication or adultery, “but rather to the specific problem of incestuous marriage, i.e., marriage within the

²⁵⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 7:199.

²⁵¹ Thomas Edgar, “Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion,” 157, 159.

²⁵² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 97.

²⁵³ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 93.

forbidden degrees stipulated in Lev. 18:6-18.”²⁵⁴ It is argued that this is how the word fornication is used in 1 Cor. 5:1 which describes sexual relations between a man and his father’s wife. If this very narrow definition of fornication is accepted, then a divorce is only permitted in the case of a marriage that was unlawful or illicit to begin with. Therefore, a man who was lawfully married could not divorce his wife even if she repeatedly committed adultery. This view is becoming increasingly popular with those who believe in no divorce and no remarriage.

The incest theory suffers from a number of insurmountable problems. (1) The rules against incest or what today are called laws of consanguinity were so well known by the Jews that incest was essentially non-existent in Jewish society. Would the Savior bring up an issue that had no direct relevance to His first century Jewish audience? For this reason, modernist scholars who like the incest interpretation believe that the exception clause was a later addition to the gospel for the sake of Gentile converts. Such a view must be emphatically rejected because it is a denial of biblical inerrancy. Furthermore, if incest was a problem for Gentile converts and not for Jews, then why would the exception clause be omitted in Mark’s account which was written to a primarily Gentile audience and put in Matthew, which was written for a Jewish audience? This theory simply does not make any sense either exegetically or historically. (2) The prohibited relationships in Leviticus 18:6-18 would never be regarded by a Jew as a lawful marriage to begin with. After the revelation of the divine law, an incestuous marriage would be regarded as no more lawful or real than a homosexual marriage. Such marriages, when detected, would immediately be declared null and void. That which is not only sinful but against nature would never be recognized as a true, lawful marriage union. Consequently, those who hold this interpretation of the exception clause are involved in a blatant self-contradiction. They essentially are arguing that the only ground for breaking the covenantal union of marriage is that the covenantal union never really existed to begin with. According to the incest interpretation the word divorce should not even appear in our text.

(3) Further, if one accepts the incest interpretation, then our Lord’s teaching in this place would be radically different. First, the comparison between the first marriage of Adam and Eve would be inappropriate for that was a holy, lawful union while incest is not. Second, the Savior would not be speaking of only one guilty party because both parties would be involved in an extremely serious, defiling sin. Third, our Lord would not be giving permission to the innocent party to get a divorce, but would be commanding both people involved to immediately break off this disgusting, illicit relationship. The incest interpretation does not fit this passage at all. It makes no sense whatsoever. In addition, the teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 is given to correct the scribes’ and Pharisees’ false interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. No one argues that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is dealing with the problem of incestuous marriages. As noted above, this passage is dealing with the Jewish abuse of divorce and is restricting it to one cause, a matter of nakedness or fornication. The incest interpretation completely ignores the fact that Jesus is expositing on the true meaning of an existing statute.

(4) The chief proof text for *porneia* as incest in this passage, 1 Corinthians 5:1, is not even dealing with illicit marriage but with fornication between two unmarried, but related, parties. Paul mentions the incest to note the extremely serious nature of this sin.

(5) As to the objection that our Lord would have used the word *moicheia* (adultery) instead of *porneia* (fornication) if typical adultery was in mind, we have already seen that fornication is a broad term that can be used to describe adultery.

²⁵⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 10-13*, 124. This interpretation has made its way into the translation of the NJB [i.e. the Roman Catholic *New Jerusalem Bible*]: ‘except for the case of an illicit marriage’ (so too, 19:9)” (Ibid).

(6) Finally, it needs to be pointed out that the whole Romanist presupposition behind the incest argument that marriage is indissoluble, that divorce and remarriage is always wrong, *contradicts* the incest argument. As Thomas Edgar notes,

If *porneia* refers to incest, then instead of an invalid marriage, incest on the part of the wife is the exception and becomes an acceptable basis for divorce in a valid marriage. This would not only disprove the concept of indissoluble marriage, but once the concept of indissoluble marriage is abandoned it would be highly illogical to select such an isolated meaning for *porneia* when other common meanings such as “adultery” would fit. It would also be illogical to allow divorce in a real marriage for incest and yet reject adultery as a grounds. The “incestuous marriage” position depends on the fact that *porneia* refers to an invalid marriage. However, there is insufficient evidence to establish that *porneia* was ever used to refer to an incestuous marriage, or that any of the hearers would have understood it to carry that meaning in Matthew 19:9.²⁵⁵

In other words, once it is argued that those engaged in incest have a valid marriage, then their whole argument logically descends into the idea that incest is simply worse than adultery, for the incestuous marriage cannot be simultaneously valid and invalid at the same time. Since adultery is a death penalty offense, it will be virtually impossible to single out incest as somehow a more legitimate reason for divorce than adultery. The whole incest argument rests upon a number of presuppositions that are never proven and positions that are self-contradictory and inconsistent with Scripture.

Another popular argument designed to eliminate the exception clause in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is that the word “fornication” refers not to marriage itself, but only to the betrothal period before the marriage.²⁵⁶ In other words, if you are officially betrothed to marry a woman

²⁵⁵ Thomas Edgar, “Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion,” 180-181.

²⁵⁶ Those who hold to the betrothal theory have two basic exegetical arguments for their view. The first is the example of Joseph who was going to put Mary away (i.e. officially end the betrothal) secretly when he believed she was unfaithful (Mt. 1:19). This argument fails to prove anything when we consider that unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was a death penalty offense just like the penalty for adultery during marriage. Since the Romans did not allow the death penalty for adultery in the days of Jesus, divorce was the only option during betrothal and marriage. This passage does not demonstrate that divorce for adultery during marriage is wrong. It simply proves that unfaithfulness was also a legitimate biblical reason to break off a betrothal. The second argument is based on the fact that Matthew, writing to Jews, includes the exception clause while Mark, writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, omits it (cf. Mk. 10:11-12). The idea behind this argument is that Matthew includes it for Jews because they had a particular view of betrothal that was much stronger than a Gentile concept of engagement. The problem with this view is: a) Bible-believing Christians must regard the longer version in Matthew as the words actually spoken by the Savior. The idea of various authors redacting material or adding their own words to it is an implicit rejection of biblical inerrancy. b) Mark is noted for giving abbreviated accounts. The fact that Mark left the exception clause out does not mean there is no exception. Moreover, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is clearly directed to the disciples of the kingdom that Christ is establishing. It is for the New Covenant era, not just the Old. “To attempt to derive a position on Matthew 19:9 based on the recipients of Matthew or Mark is equivalent to reading Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in a modern high school book and then attempting to determine the actual content, meaning and significance of Lincoln’s original speech by the fact that the historians reproduced it for modern teenagers” (Thomas Edgar, 167). While the audience may influence terms used or the choice of materials, it cannot affect the original teaching. c) If Jesus were making a point about the importance of the betrothal period, it would still apply to Gentile Christian engagements as it does to Jewish betrothals, for a covenant bond establishes both. d) All of this is of no consequence anyway because above we have already established beyond a shadow of doubt that the Pharisees and Jesus are discussing marriage, not the betrothal period. People who hold this position are grasping after straw.

and you discover that she has been unfaithful, then you can divorce her and end the betrothal. But once you get married, you cannot divorce your wife for any cause, even if she repeatedly commits adultery. This position holds that the betrothal period is dissoluble while marriage itself is indissoluble. The betrothal unfaithfulness position was popularized in fundamentalist circles by Bill Gothard. This view is disproved by the following considerations.

(1) A study of Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-10 both make it very clear that our Lord is not discussing the betrothal period at all, but marriage itself. Note the following reasons. First, in Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus is discussing the proper interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. The Deuteronomy passage has nothing to do with the betrothal period and everything to do with real marriage. Second, Christ appeals to Adam and Eve's marriage in the beginning to rebuke the Pharisees' lax understanding of divorce. The Savior's appeal to marriage itself and the fact that Adam and Eve were one flesh would be out of place in a discussion of betrothal, where the man and woman had not yet left their parents' homes and had not yet become one covenantally, sexually or socially. Third, the Pharisees' question was about marriage and not the betrothal period. It would have been absurd for the Redeemer to ignore their question and discuss the betrothal period instead of marriage. Since Christ and the Pharisees, as well as all the passages cited (Gen. 2:24; Deut. 24:1-4), *refer to real marriage* we must regard the betrothal argument as a presupposition that is imposed on the exception passages. Furthermore, our Lord was correcting a common abuse in Israel at that time (i.e. getting rid of older wives to replace them with younger, more attractive women. Indeed, this practice was as widespread in ancient pagan nations as it is today.) There is no evidence that breaking off betrothals or unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was a problem at that time at all. Why would the Redeemer take the time to bring up such an obscure topic when the real problem in ancient Israel was divorce from one's wife for any cause?

(2) The idea that the betrothal period could not be broken by mutual consent unless fornication occurred does not make any sense whatsoever once we understand what the betrothal period entailed. The betrothal is simply an agreement between parties to get married in the future. While it is certainly more than our frivolous modern engagements, it must not be confused with actual marriage. Even with a betrothal agreement, if the actual marriage never took place and the union was never consummated covenantally, sexually or socially, then there is no biblical reason why the parties could not back out of the agreement as long as they get consent from everyone involved. The woman would retain her virginity and would still be a desirable candidate for marriage with a different man. If we accept the betrothal interpretation of the exception clause, then the woman would still be forced to marry the man even if it was discovered that he was a habitual liar or had committed fraud or had a serious, incurable disease. Such a position is both unjust and unreasonable. Further, if the people who held this position were consistent they would not allow Christians who were engaged to break off the engagement unless it was established that one of the parties had committed fornication.

(3) Those that hold the betrothal viewpoint are in the unenviable position of arguing that betrothal and marriage are alike and different at the same time. The major premise of their argument is that betrothal and marriage are the same and that the parties involved are already regarded as husband and wife. But in order to make the point that marriage is indissoluble and can never end in divorce under any circumstance, they have to argue that betrothal is not the same and is less binding than marriage. This is an internal contradiction. If the betrothal period is the same as marriage, then why do the betrothed man and woman have to have a public ceremony and get married? Also, why does the exception clause not also apply to the marriage

itself? “If betrothal were as binding as marriage, the exception would also apply to marriage.”²⁵⁷ Their presuppositions cancel each other out.

(4) The disciples’ response to the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 by itself completely refutes the betrothal theory. “His disciples said to Him, ‘If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry’” (Mt. 19:10). The word translated “marry” (*gameo*) always refers to an actual marriage and is never used to describe a betrothal in the whole New Testament. The noun refers to a wedding while the plural refers to a wedding feast (cf. Mt. 22:2, 4, 9). This means that the disciples whom Jesus was addressing understood the Savior to be speaking about marriage, not betrothal. If Christ were speaking about betrothal, then He would have corrected the apostles’ statement in verses 11 and 12. But He accepts their understanding as accurate. The betrothal theory is totally unbiblical.

(5) The absurdity of the betrothal interpretation is driven home when we examine what this view would actually mean. To see this, let us substitute the word “betrothed” for the word “wife.” “Whoever divorces his *betrothed*, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Mt. 19:9). What this means is that a man who is engaged, who for some reason other than sexual immorality calls off the wedding (e.g., he discovers his betrothed has a serious gambling problem and is 200,000 dollars in debt) can never ever get married his whole life without committing adultery. He must either marry the woman or remain a virgin the rest of his life. Such a man would be condemned to be single permanently, even though he has not even been married once. In addition, what if the Christian man who is engaged discovers his fiancée has been lying and is not even a Christian? Since she is not guilty of fornication, must he marry her to avoid being single the rest of his life? Those who hold to the betrothal interpretation of the exception clause, in their zeal to forbid divorce in marriage for any cause, have obviously not carefully thought their position through.

f) An objection that applies to the incest interpretation as well as the betrothal view is that it is unjust to penalize the innocent party the rest of his or her life for the infidelity of another. Pink writes,

Surely the very idea is repugnant to all who are really acquainted with the Divine goodness and mercy. Why, if an innocent man upon a divorce is not then at liberty to marry again, he is deprived of his right by the sin of another, which is against the very law of nature; and on such a supposition it lies within the power of every wicked woman to deprive her husband of his natural right. The right of divorce in case of adultery, specified by Christ, for the innocent party to make use of, is evidently designed for his liberty and relief; but on the supposition that he may not again marry, it would provoke a snare and a yoke to him, for if thereon he has not the gift of continence, he is exposed to sin and judgment.²⁵⁸

It is important to recognize that adding to God’s Word and attempting to be wiser and stricter than God is just as sinful as detracting from Scripture and relaxing God’s standard. In our society of no fault divorce where the divorce rate among professing Christians is only slightly lower than the surrounding heathen culture, we understand the desire to restrain this evil practice. But when the Son of God interpreting His own divine law allows an exception for adultery, we must submit to His wisdom and authority.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 173.

²⁵⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 95.

Further, the no divorce position has led to many unintended evil consequences. For example, the woman who cannot divorce and remarry that gets venereal disease from her whore-mongering husband and the godly husband who cannot protect his children and move on with his life because he is forced to stay with a satanic, adulterous witch. There are times when divorce is not only permitted by God, but is the proper, godly thing to do. If a marriage partner commits adultery and repents and seeks a genuine reconciliation, then forgiving that person and staying married is a good thing. But if the adulterer refuses to repent, staying with him or her is dangerous spiritually, physically and emotionally. Having children and a family with such a person would be idiotic. God who is merciful and longsuffering finally gave wicked Israel a bill of divorcement and married another—the multinational New Covenant church (Mt. 21:43).

The Evil Consequences of Unlawful Divorce

To emphasize the wickedness of the scribes and Pharisees' lax teaching on divorce and remarriage, our Lord warns His disciples of the consequences of divorce for any cause. Thus He introduces the shocking idea that everyone who is not divorced because of fornication is guilty of committing adultery when they marry again. The man who puts his wife away causes her to commit adultery (Mt. 5:32). "The husband who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery because in the culture of that day, unlike ours, a single woman could hardly survive on her own, except through prostitution."²⁵⁹ "The Greek, by using the passive voice of the verb, states not what she becomes or what she does but what she undergoes, suffers, is exposed to."²⁶⁰ The point the Savior is emphasizing is the great evil the woman suffers because of the man's unlawful divorce. The wicked, hard-hearted husband exposes his innocent wife to adultery and hardship. "Note, Those who lead others into temptation to sin, or leave them in it, or expose them to it, make themselves guilty of their sin, and will be accountable for it."²⁶¹ Further, any man who marries a woman who is put away unlawfully also commits adultery (Mt. 5:32; 19:9). In addition, the man who divorces his wife without the proper cause of adultery on her part becomes an adulterer if he ever remarries (Mt. 19:9). Any woman who married him would also be guilty of adultery. Those who reject the teaching of Christ and get divorced for any cause will enter into unions which are not blessed by God, but are sinful adulterous relationships. The lax teaching on divorce and remarriage by the scribes and Pharisees resulted in a society full of adulterers. Thus, our Lord repeatedly referred to His own nation as "an evil and adulterous generation" (Mt. 12:39; 16:4; Mk. 8:34).

Given the Redeemer's teaching on divorce and remarriage, there are a number of applications that we need to keep in mind. First, the strictness of Jesus' teaching is designed to promote the good and happiness of the family and society in general. The husband and wife are one and can never be severed in this life except in the case of adultery. This teaching forces husbands and wives to stay together, learn to love one another and to solve problems instead giving up and fleeing the marriage relationship. It is for this reason that serious Christians have the best, happiest marriages. The heathen attitude which views marriage in a selfish, hedonistic manner leads to divorce and chaos. The easy way out is chosen over hard work and the result is great unhappiness and damaged children.

²⁵⁹ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 125.

²⁶⁰ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 306.

²⁶¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:62.

As Christians we should meditate on the importance of marriage, on the oneness of our relationship and the significance of our duties. We should reflect on the intimate connection that God Himself has placed us in and thus strive to be of one heart and mind. We must carefully guard against all unfriendly thoughts, ill feelings or unnecessary disputes as we regard our spouses as more important than ourselves. We should studiously avoid unjust anger, irritating language and disrespectful speech with our husbands or wives. We must learn to bear each other's faults. Knowing that we will be together the rest of our lives, we must be forbearing, forgiving and conciliatory with each other. As John Brown writes,

Let them, in fine, live together as heirs of the grace of life, as those who know that death, the only cause of separation, will ere long cut the otherwise indissoluble bond; and let them seek to be bound together by a tie, which even death cannot dissolve,—even the faith of the same truth, the love of the same Saviour, the hope of the same salvation. Thus will they spend a happy lifetime together on earth: thus will they spend a happy eternity together in heaven.²⁶²

Second, those believers who are preparing for marriage and seeking a mate should do so soberly and carefully. Marriage is a life commitment. Therefore, it must not be entered into lightly. Only those Christians who are serious about godliness, who are committed to promoting the Reformed faith, who are clearly dedicated to Jesus Christ, should be considered for marriage. Don't be deceived by looks, or money or empty promises. Choose carefully for the glory of God and the good of the Kingdom.

Chapter 18: The Fourth Antithesis—Christ's Teaching on Oaths

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil (Mt. 5:33-37).

In the fourth antithesis, Jesus focuses His attention on the scribes' and Pharisees' abuse of oaths. As the vast majority of rabbis in the days of our Lord had a very elastic concept of divorce, they also had developed a permissive concept of oaths. They had come up with clever methods for making certain oaths non-binding. This, of course, was a great perversion of the third commandment because all oaths ultimately rest upon God's holy name. It also relates to the ninth commandment, which demands honesty in speech. This topic is important in our day when dishonesty and vow-breaking has become an accepted part of our culture. Not only do most people lie when it suits them, but they do not even think that it is wrong. Before we analyze the scribes' and Pharisees' abuse of oaths, there are some things that we need to consider.

First, once again Christ says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old" (v. 33). We must not make the mistake of thinking the Savior is critiquing the Old Testament law, when He is actually exposing the false doctrine of the scribe and Pharisees. He is continuing His

²⁶² John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:200.

contrast of what His disciples must be, compared to what was the acceptable popular religion of the day. The cumulative effect of hammering away at the Jewish religious leaders must have been powerful. Outwardly, to the people of that time, they appeared very respectable; in actuality, they were humanistic and hypocritical.

Second, the saying attributed to the ancients is not a direct quote of any one Old Testament passage, but is a summary of the letter of the law concerning oaths. It is a crystallization of God's teaching on the topic. The phrase, "You shall not swear falsely," (v. 33) sounds like an abbreviated form of Leviticus 19:12: "You shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD." The second part of the saying is similar to Numbers 30:2: "If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth" (cf. Deuteronomy 23:21, "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you."). The verb that the Savior uses, *epiorkeo*, translated "forswear thyself" in the KJV, can be translated "swear falsely" or "break one's oath," which essentially refer to the same thing.

Third, in order to better understand our Lord's teaching we need to define what an oath or swearing is. When we think of swearing today we usually think of cursing or using profane or blasphemous language. All such activity, however, is the abuse of swearing. To swear in biblical terms means to utter a solemn declaration with an appeal to God for the truth of what is affirmed. In our courts, people who are about to testify are required to place their right hand on a Bible and are asked, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" The point of swearing in such situations is to bolster the truth of what is said by essentially calling down God's wrath upon the person because their lie is attached to an appeal to God's name. An oath is the same as swearing. It can be attached to testimony or to a promise to do something in the future. David says that a godly man is one "who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Ps. 15:4). That is, he keeps his promissory oath even though circumstances have arisen that render the original oath disadvantageous to him. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus is focusing on the abuse of promissory oaths.

In a religious society such as existed in Christ's day, oaths should have been considered a very serious thing. The oath was used to call special attention to the fact that God Himself was a witness to the act of swearing in His name. Thus, to violate the oath was to break the third commandment: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain" (Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11). "All such improper uses of God's name have suspended over them a warning, *for the LORD will not leave unpunished him who takes his name in vain.*"²⁶³

The Scribes' and Pharisees' Perversion of Oaths

All of this raises the question: How exactly were the scribes and Pharisees abusing oaths? If we compare Matthew 5:34-37 with our Lord's expression of contempt for this same abuse later in the gospel, we will understand what was happening:

Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, 'Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor!' Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever

²⁶³ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 156.

shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. (Mt. 23:16-22)

They were guilty of the following serious errors.

First, we see that the rabbis had developed a whole system of different formulas that went beyond Scripture. They were swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the temple, the gold of the temple and even on their own head. None of this came from God's Word; it all came in by way of human traditions. If we look at Old Testament oaths, men would swear by God (Gen. 21:23), by or to the Lord (Gen. 24:3; Num. 30:2; 1 Sam. 24:21; 2 Sam. 19:7), by Jehovah's name (Lev. 19:12; Dt. 6:13; 10:20); to the LORD your God (Dt. 23:21), to the LORD of hosts (Isa. 19:18). Even God "because He could swear by one greater...swore by Himself" (Heb. 6:13; cf. Gen. 22:16; Isa. 45:23; Amos 6:8; Ezek. 17:19; Jer. 44:26). In some situations the appeal to God is there, but is more indirect. For example, in Jacob's covenant with Laban the patriarch says, "Although no man is with us—see, God is witness between you and me!" (Gen. 31:50). A man who was concerned to demonstrate the truthfulness and sincerity of his statement could also use the formula "As the LORD lives" (1 Sam. 14:39; 19:6; 20:3; 2 Sam. 15:21). "God again was called upon as a witness in an oath and the result was that the man's word was taken as inviolable."²⁶⁴ In the oath, vow or covenant the appeal is always made to God because God is omniscient, all powerful, perfectly just and thus will judge the person who does not speak the truth. God witnesses what takes place and will pass judgment on the parties involved for good or ill. This truth is especially brought out in Jeremiah 42:5 where the remnant says to the prophet, "Let the LORD be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not do according to everything which the LORD your God sends us by you." When the Jews made all sorts of different oaths to different objects, they were entering the realm of superstition. Further, in the final analysis, all oaths are made to God and are binding or else they are idolatrous.

Second, the whole purpose of the different formulas in the matter of oaths was to be able to make promises that could be broken. In the thinking of the scribes and Pharisees, there were different degrees of oaths. An oath sworn to the Lord was the highest form and must be kept; but, there were all sorts of lesser oaths that could be broken if necessary or expedient. As with most man-made traditions, this gave the religious leaders greater power over others. The rabbis could make grandiose promises that people would naturally expect them to carry out. But with their sophisticated rabbinic casuistry they could break these promises, all the while thinking they had not violated the ninth commandment. Thus, in their perverted logic, oaths which were designed to increase the likelihood of truth-telling and faithfulness became instruments of dishonesty and fraud. Oaths which were supposed to add solemnity and guarantee reliability became flippant, profane and hypocritical. By making oaths into a sort of game (like the child who believes it is okay to lie when his fingers are crossed behind his back), the scribes and Pharisees became like the devil and caused all promises to be called into question.

Third, the scribes and Pharisees were using oaths for dramatic effect, "to make an impression and to spice daily conversations."²⁶⁵ Thus, they were using oaths all the time for

²⁶⁴ T. M. Gregory, "Oath" in Merrill Tenney, Gen. Ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 76), 4:477.

²⁶⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 308.

trivial matters that were not very important. If we look at God's holy law, oaths, vows and covenants were serious affairs that were not to be entered into lightly. Consequently, oaths were actually quite rare. Oaths were used in civil court in matters of theft (Ex. 22:10, 11; Lev. 6:3) and suspicion of adultery (Num. 5:11-28). They were used in important business transactions and crucial duties. For example, when Abraham sent out his chief servant to find a bride for Isaac he made him swear not to get a wife from the Canaanites, but rather from his own family (Gen. 24:3-4). The rare, serious oath-taking under the law had been replaced by the rabbis with glib, frivolous oath-taking similar to what one hears today among pagan children.

Christ's Corrective Teaching

Jesus corrects the scribes' and Pharisees' hypocritical hair-splitting: "But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one" (Mt. 5:34-37). This antithesis raises a number of questions.

First, when Christ says, "do not swear at all," is He teaching that all oaths have been abolished for believers in the New Covenant era? This is an important question because: a) our Lord's statement appears to be strong and unambiguous; and b) this statement was a proof-text for many of the sixteenth century Anabaptists and for the Quakers (the Society of Friends). The Anabaptists would refuse to swear allegiance to any city or state in a time when allegiances were crucial for the Reformation. The Quakers would not take any oath, even in a court of law. If we examine the Savior's statement in the broad context of Scripture, it is obvious that He is only forbidding the frivolous use and abuse of oaths so prevalent at that time. Note the following reasons:

(1) Jesus is not refuting, rejecting or replacing God's holy law (i.e. the law that the pre-incarnate Son of God Himself gave), but is dealing with the perverted traditions of the scribes and Pharisees. God's law not only allowed for oaths, but (as noted) required them under certain circumstances (e.g., trials, religious covenants, etc.). Oaths are certainly implied in the marriage covenant, the sacraments and church membership. Indeed, God Himself made an oath with Abraham (Gen. 15:7-21; 22:16; Heb. 6:13-18). Obviously then, Jesus is saying, "Don't make *this kind of oath* at all"; that is, the phony oaths of the rabbis.

(2) Throughout the Old Testament the godly are seen making oaths with no disapprobation on the part of God at all. "It was with an oath that Abraham confirmed his promises to the king of Sodom and to Abimelech (Gen. 14:22-24; 21:23, 24). Abraham also required an oath of his servant (24:3, 9). The oath is mentioned also in connection with Isaac (26:31), Jacob (31:53; cf. 28:20-22), Joseph (47:31, 50:5), 'the princes of the congregation' (Josh. 9:15), and the children of Israel (Judg. 21:5). See also Ruth 1:16-18, 2 Sam. 15:21; 1 Kings 18:10; and 2 Chron. 15:14, 15."²⁶⁶

(3) When Jesus was placed under an oath at His trial before the Sanhedrin He did not refuse to answer, but openly declared Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God (Mt. 26:63-64). If the Redeemer believed that all oaths were wrong, then obviously He would have refused to answer. "He did not denounce it on such an occasion, but seemed to regard it as perfectly

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 309.

legitimate.”²⁶⁷ In Galatians 1:20 Paul takes an oath before God as to the truth of the things he writes, “I write to you, indeed before God, I do not lie.” He also takes oaths in 2 Corinthians 1:23 and Philippians 1:8. Surely Paul, writing by divine inspiration, would not take oaths if they had been forbidden under all circumstances by Christ. The author of Hebrews bases an argument about God’s faithfulness in making an oath to Abraham on the fact that lawful oaths between men confirm the truth and set aside all dispute about the thing or things promised. “For indeed men swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute” (Heb. 6:16). “To swear by God, ‘who never lies’ (Ti. 1:2), or, in other words, to call God to witness that one is speaking the truth and acting honorably, is the highest affirmation of trustworthiness that any man can make.”²⁶⁸ If Jesus had forbade all oaths as wrong such an argument would be completely inappropriate. Therefore, given the testimony of Scripture, oath-taking is lawful as long as it is not based on human tradition or abused. Because of man’s fall into sin and his corrupt tendency to lie, oaths are necessary on certain occasions to keep the temptation to dishonesty in check by adding seriousness, authority and a greater threat of judgment by God.

Second, what are the distinctions that Jesus speaks of and why are they absurd? According to the teaching of the ancient rabbis, swearing by heaven and earth meant to swear by the hosts of heaven and the hosts on earth (Mishna, Shebuot, c. 4. sect. 13). The Jewish writer Philo says it refers to the sun, stars and the whole earth. Since the Jews regarded these things as part of the created realm and not God Himself, they did not look upon such a promise as a binding oath. Violating such an oath was not considered wrong (Maimon. Hilch. Shebuot, c. 12 sect. 3). They would also swear by Jerusalem because it was the holy city. In the Genara we read, “He that says as Jerusalem, does not say any thing, till he has made his vow concerning a thing, which is offered up in Jerusalem” [T. Bab. Narim, fol. 11.1.].”²⁶⁹ To swear by one’s head meant to swear by one’s own life. In other words, “If I do not carry out my promise may my life come to an end.” We have a similar oath today: “Cross my heart and hope to die.” In Matthew 23 we hear of more absurd oaths. They would swear by the altar, by the offering on the altar and the Temple.

Christ points out that every one of these oaths is wrong because each ultimately invokes God Himself. If a person swears by heaven he is ultimately swearing by God’s own throne—the place where God sits and the glory of His majesty shines forth. Such an oath is a double sin because oaths are not to be made to aspects of creation and because God is tacitly brought into this vain oath anyway. The person who swears by the earth needs to understand that earth is God’s footstool (see Isa. 66:1; Ps. 11:4; 99:5; La. 2:1). Jehovah’s presence is also on the earth and in the world He manifests His glory. One cannot escape God’s omniscience and power by an appeal to the created realm. The oath to Jerusalem is wrong because it is the city of the great King (cf. Ps. 48:2, and “the city of our God” in 48:1). This is not a reference to the kingship of David, but to the King of kings, the LORD of hosts. It was the place of Jehovah’s special presence, the place where He was worshipped in the central sanctuary. Once again, such an oath cannot escape God’s all-seeing presence. One must not even swear by one’s own head because no one has the power to make one hair white or black. In other words, God is sovereign over what happens to us, even in the minutest, insignificant things. Therefore, it is wrong to swear by that which is not in our control. And since our heads are under God’s control such an oath is still under God’s authority and thus possesses an absolute character. The scribal attempt to

²⁶⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:268.

²⁶⁸ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 232.

²⁶⁹ As quoted in John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:49.

compartmentalize oaths (in which God is involved in some, but not in others) is impossible. It contradicts God's nature. The sinful attempt to exalt human autonomy by dividing life into different spheres where supposedly some of which God holds no sway is always a failure because God is sovereign. The scribes' and Pharisees' teaching on oaths was an implicit denial of the doctrine of God. It was exceedingly rebellious, pagan and humanistic. It reminds us of the teaching of the Syrians who believed that Jehovah was God of the hills, but not of the plains (1 Kings 20:23, 28).

Third, our Lord offers the solution to the scribes' and Pharisees' multiplication and compartmentalization of oaths in common speech by saying, "Swear not at all.... but let your communication be, Yea, Yea; Nay, nay." As noted, this is not a prohibition of all oaths, such as the oath of a courtroom or the vow of a marriage ceremony. Jesus is forbidding the use of oaths in everyday, ordinary conversation. Christians should be honest and, thus, there should be no need for oaths. As followers of the One who is truth itself, every utterance of our lips must be completely trustworthy. Of believers Paul says, "We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" (2 Cor. 13:8). Christians should be "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). "Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25). The cure for the Pharisaical use of oaths to obscure the truth and break promises is to completely avoid using oaths for things that do not merit them and speak the plain truth. We must say exactly what we mean without any ambiguity or equivocation. We must speak simply and honestly. We must keep all of our promises, without seeking loopholes or excuses to slip out of them. Interestingly, often it is the people who are the most dishonest who multiply oaths because they are attempting to induce people to believe their lies.

Fourth, the Savior gives a reason as to why speaking the simple truth is crucial and necessary. He says, "For whatever is more than these is from the evil one" (Mt. 5:37). The devil is a liar and is the originator of all lies (cf. Jn. 8:44); thus, to tell a lie is to imitate Satan. Dishonesty is a sin which makes people most like the devil. Lying is the foundation of all opposition to God, Christ and the truth. Christians are to believe in the truth (2 Thess. 2:12-13; 1 Tim. 2:4), live the truth (1 Jn. 3:18), love the truth (2 Thess. 2:10), and be of the truth (1 Jn. 3:19). We must be dedicated to the truth because the truth sanctifies us (Jn. 17:17) and sets us free (Jn. 8:32). To act like the scribes and Pharisees, who not only tolerated lying but developed a whole sophisticated method of excusing it, is to place ourselves on the side of the devil and this darkened world. All non-Christian worldviews are based on suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18) and changing the truth of God into a lie (Rom. 1:25).

This subject of speaking the truth is very important because we are all born liars (Ps. 58:3) and the tongue is not an easy instrument to control (Jas. 3:3ff.). Therefore, we must fight against the corruption of our nature, our fleshly inner deceitfulness and the bad habits of lying that we may have developed before our conversion. "Note, Christians should, for the credit of their religion, avoid not only that which is in itself evil, *but that which cometh of evil*, and has the *appearance of it*. That may be suspected as a bad thing, which comes from a bad cause."²⁷⁰

There are a number of additional reasons given in Scripture why we must not lie. (1) Lying is strictly forbidden by God's law. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 20:17). "Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked" (Ex. 23:7). (2) Lying is completely contrary to who we are in Christ. "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds" (Col. 3:9). (3) Lying is an abomination to Jehovah. "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,

²⁷⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:64.

but those who deal truthfully are His delight” (Pr. 12:22). (4) God will surely punish those who lie. “A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies will not escape” (Pr. 19:5). “You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man” (Ps. 5:6). (5) All unrepentant liars will be cast into hell. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8). (6) Lying about one’s neighbor is described in Scripture as evil. “He who is walking uprightly...and speaking truth in his heart. He hath not slandered by his tongue, he hath not done to his friend evil; and reproach he hath not lifted up against his neighbor” (Ps. 15:2, 3, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible*). (7) Additionally, we could add that lying breaks down trust between individuals, family members and society in general. When lying becomes an accepted practice in a culture, everything that is said is taken with a grain of salt. Everyone comes to expect lies so that when the truth does come people will not believe it. The flip side of a culture full of lies is that many people will be willing to believe anything except the truth.

Applications

Jesus teaches that Christians must speak the truth; that a “yes” should always mean “yes” and a “no” should always mean “no.” If we are always honest in our dealings with others, then there is no need for us to appeal to God as a witness in the everyday matters of life. Unfortunately, the state of professing Christianity today is one of such serious declension that the word of many professing believers is worth no more than the rank heathen around them. Therefore, we must carefully heed the words of our Savior and apply them to our own lives. There are a number of areas where we must watch ourselves regarding speaking the truth.

First, it is important that we take our time and be very slow, careful and thoughtful before we agree to do anything for another person. In other words we must not make careless promises that we will be unable to carry out or that we will be tempted not to fulfill. “Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles” (Pr. 21:23). “The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil” (Pr. 15:28). “A man devoid of understanding shakes hands in a pledge, and becomes surety for his friend” (Pr. 17:18). Rash engagements can become a great snare when things do not turn out as expected and we are forced into a situation where it is very difficult to keep our word. It is wise to keep our mouths shut in such situations. If people are pressing for an answer or commitment, then we need to remain calm and ask for more time to meditate on the matter at hand. If the person or persons keep pressing the issue, then it is best just to politely say “no.” It is not a sin to say “no,” but it is a sin to say “yes” and then break one’s word.

Second, Christians must be careful to avoid the careless use of exaggerations in their speech. Exaggerating is dishonest because it communicates a false impression of what occurred. A person who is prone to stretching the truth will soon be discovered and his word will no longer carry any weight. The use of exaggeration has become a large part of Christian television and evangelistic fundraising appeals. Many American evangelical ministries are so obsessed with looking prosperous and successful that they continually misrepresent statistics as they brag to raise money. Believers who are prone to exaggeration need to learn to habitually practice accuracy of speech.

Third, we must keep in mind the serious nature of oath-taking and thus not break promises that we think are not important. This is necessary because we live in a culture where

oaths and promises mean little to nothing. When most people get married today they take a vow “till death do us part.” Yet, this statement is more an empty tradition than a reality. That is because oaths and vows today are not viewed theocentrically, but anthropocentrically. When a person holds a humanistic understanding of oaths, they believe oaths can be broken when it is in the best interest of man. This is one reason that political treaties today are essentially meaningless. After being repeatedly betrayed by agreements with the Soviet Union, certain administrations in the United States adopted a system where treaties would only be entered on important matters when empirical observers would be utilized to make sure that the Soviets were not lying. The Communists, however, justified their lies on the basis of the necessity to win the Cold War.

Tragically, the humanistic concept of oaths has permeated modern churches to an extent and thus vows of church membership are often meaningless. Many people view church membership as membership in a supper club or golf course. Therefore, if they decide to leave for unbiblical or frivolous reasons, then, in their eyes, they have done nothing amiss. But when a person takes an oath or vow, they promise to abide by their word and covenant obligations. When such a person has no regard for his oath, or subscribes to an oath or vow with no intention of abiding by the agreement and Reformed churches condone this behavior by accepting such people into membership as if nothing wrong has occurred, then ecclesiastical anarchy and declension ensue. In a culture permeated with lies and a humanistic concept of oaths and vows we need to view oaths as exceptionally serious. False oaths are a barometer of church declension and social degeneration.

Fourth, if we are being honest in all our dealings it is crucial that we do not align ourselves with liars. For example, if a Christian goes into business with a dishonest man and that man breaks agreements and doesn’t fulfill contracts, then the believer is guilty by association. This same principle applies in the religious sphere. If a pastor is teaching heresy and lying from the pulpit as many ministers do in our day, then to support that man is to participate in his sins. Some will say, “Yes, but he is the one who lied. He is the one who does not care about truth or justice. I did not do anything wrong.” But you give that man tacit approval by being in league with him. This point even applies on the personal level. If a young man hangs out with liars and covenant breakers and does not speak out against them and leave, then he too is guilty of their corruptions. “Evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33).

Fifth, it is also important that we promote the truth by refusing to listen to gossip and slander about others. In other words, we must not only refrain from raising a false report about a brother, we must also refuse to receive false, slanderous or unproven reports. “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you stand against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:16). “A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter” (Pr. 11:13). “You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.... Keep yourself far from a false matter” (Ex. 23:1, 7). Calvin writes,

...[S]in may be committed in two ways: either when the wicked invent false accusations, or when other overcredulous persons eagerly associate themselves with them.... A lie would soon come to nothing from its own emptiness, and fall to the ground, if it were not taken up and supported by the unrighteous consent of others...the false witness kills with his tongue just as the executioner kills with his sword.... [Therefore] [w]e must close our ears against false and evil speaking; since he is just as injurious to his brother who eagerly listens to sinister reports respecting him, as he who exercises his tongue in maligning him.... The volubility of the tongue

causes us to think it a light transgression to inflict a deadly and disgraceful wound on our brother, to whom, nevertheless, his good name is of more importance than his life.²⁷¹

To listen to gossip and slander is to give it currency. Such behavior is a wicked act of hatred; Christians must never participate in it. If an accusation is raised the first thing one should ask is: has the Matthew 18 process been carefully followed? In the case of an elder or minister we should include 1Timothy 5:19 in this question. Gossip and slander on the part of wicked malcontents has done incredible harm to the body of Christ.

Further, the man with a lying tongue and the person who listens to the false report will both be biased and unjust regarding the person or dispute at hand. Interestingly, it is the personal experience of many that people who refuse to listen to slander shut the mouths of the talebearers. A sinning tongue needs a willing ear to spread its vile deceit. This issue is so important that David clearly implies that the man who slanders or backbites with his tongue and does evil to his neighbor is not fit to approach God in public worship (cf. Ps. 15:1-3).

Sixth, it is important not to place ourselves in situations where we will be tempted to lie to cover our misdeeds. In other words, backsliding is the handmaid of deception. The man who commits adultery or looks at pornography will deceive his wife to cover his tracks. The woman who has a drinking problem must lie to escape detection. Children who are disobedient and know that they have committed an infraction that merits stripes will sometimes lie to avoid the consequences of their behavior. There have been a number of prominent evangelical and Pentecostal ministers who have attempted to lie about scandalous behavior that has been revealed. The result has been sin added to sin. We must avoid doing things that are sinful, that we would be ashamed of if they ever become public. And if we do fall into sin we must repent and pray instead of trying to lie our way out of it.

Seventh, we must completely avoid what are called “little white lies.” This is the idea that it is okay to lie under certain circumstances to avoid hurting another person’s feelings. While it is a good thing to avoid hurting someone’s feelings, one should not have to use deception to do so. Moreover, if one gets into the habit of lying about “little things,” will it not be easy to lie about other things as well? God expects truth of His children at all times. Jesus said let your “yes” really mean “yes” and your “no” really mean “no.” He did not allow exceptions for the trivial matters in life. We need to say what we mean and mean what we say. Our Lord warned us that even our idle chatter will come under the purview of God’s judgment. “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Mt. 12:36).

Eighth, we must shun implicit deception. This is when something written or said has the appearance of truth, yet when analyzed is not the whole truth. For example, a number of “conservative” Presbyterian denominations advertise themselves as holding to the Westminster Standards when the truth of the matter is that many sections of the Standards are no longer believed or followed (e.g., strict Sabbatarianism, a six literal day creation, the regulative principle of worship, the establishment principle, no holy days except the Sabbath, exclusive psalmody, etc.). Members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America still call themselves Covenanters even though they abandoned the old view of covenanting over a hundred years ago. It is also quite common in Presbyterian courts to ignore the truth and skirt justice by ignoring Scripture in procedure and skillfully using technicalities in their book of church order. By doing so men violate the spirit of God’s law, while on the surface they attempt

²⁷¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:181, 183.

to follow the letter of the law. It's all a big scam and many people know it, but the corrupt presbyters pat themselves on the back and call it a day.

Ninth, we must never use the name of the Lord lightly or as a method of cursing. The scribes' and Pharisees' frivolous use of oaths was disrespectful to God. If we have a holy awe and reverence for God, then we will appeal to His name only when it is absolutely necessary. A flippant, profane, irreverent use of the name of God is a violation of the third commandment. The very common practice in modern America of using God's name and the Son of God's name and titles to curse is an abominable practice. People who use such curse words do so in direct defiance of God. "[U]ngodly swearing is a deliberate profanation of the purpose of the oath or vow; it is a light use of it, a contemptuous use of it, to express a contempt for God."²⁷² When the heathen in our currently post-Christian culture take the Lord's name in vain by swearing, they often mingle their defiance of God with curse words relating to sexual practices and excrement. This is the satanic attempt to pull God off His holy throne where He dwells in unapproachable light, holiness and majesty and place Him under humanistic autonomous man as refuse. It is an expression of extreme hatred and rebellion. Thus, such profanity must never ever be found on the lips of a Christian. Believers must also diligently shun the modern supposedly acceptable substitutes for divine names and titles (e.g., God—"Gosh," Jesus—"Geesh," Jesus Christ—"Judas Priest," etc.). Hopkins writes, "When we speak of God, without considering how great, how glorious, and excellent a being he is, how holy, just, and powerful, we do but make him a bye-word; which is the highest indignity, that can be cast upon him."²⁷³ Therefore, let us be very cautious in how we use God's name. Let us at all times demonstrate love toward our Maker and Savior by a holy awe, reverence and fear of the Divine Majesty.

In our study of Jesus' teaching on oaths and honesty, we have seen that profane swearing, oaths on trivial matters and lying of any kind is explicitly forbidden by the law of the kingdom of heaven. This is an area in which we need to examine ourselves; for, generally speaking, the modern church has a very poor record in this matter. Whenever we speak, we must keep in mind that we are always under the watchful eye of our Lord. If we claim that we follow the One who is "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6) and are indwelt by "the Spirit of truth" (Jn. 16:13), then we must live and speak the truth at all times. May God enable us to speak the truth at all times. May He cause us to speak the truth in love and be a shining witness of the truth of the gospel.

Chapter 19: The Fifth Antithesis—Christ's Teaching on Personal Retaliation

Ye have heard that it hath been said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth": But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away (Mt. 5:38-42).

²⁷² Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 108.

²⁷³ Ezekiel Hopkins, *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, [1874] 1995), 349.

In the fifth antithesis, Jesus turns His attention to another abuse of a judicial law. As the Jews at that time were abusing the Mosaic regulations regarding divorce and oaths, they had also misconstrued the “eye for an eye,” “tooth for a tooth” principle regarding restitution and retaliation. This principle has come to be known by the Latin phrase, *lex talionis*, or “law of retaliation.” The English word, “retaliate,” originated from the same Roman root word for “*talionis*.” Unfortunately, the modern usage of the word “retaliation” is more narrow than the older English usage and retaliation is now *only* associated with revenge, getting even or returning evil for evil. Thus, many scholars, commentators and pastors view the principle of *lex talionis* as primitive and barbaric. But according to the earlier usage of the word, it “conveyed a broader meaning” *to pay back or return in kind*, including good will.”²⁷⁴ The point of this statute was that the penalty must fit the crime; that justice must be applied in the same manner to all. We will see that the Jews had taken a law for the judges of Israel, had illegitimately applied it to personal vendettas and were not applying the principle equally to all. They perverted the original intent of this law in virtually every possible way.

As we examine this section of the Sermon on the Mount, we need to remind ourselves that in this passage Jesus is not announcing a higher standard of ethics or jurisprudence than Moses. He is not introducing something new which is more spiritual and merciful than was required under the Old Covenant administration. Rather, once again, He is correcting a gross, false interpretation and abuse of the original intent of God’s holy law. “He continues the same course as He had followed in the context, namely to define that righteousness demanded of His followers, which was more excellent than the one taught and practiced by the scribes and Pharisees; and this He does by exposing their error and expounding the spirituality of the moral law.”²⁷⁵ In our study we will consider three areas. First, what is the Old Testament teaching on this topic? Second, how were the scribes and Pharisees abusing it? Third, what is the Savior’s remedy or solution to the false teaching on this topic?

The Teaching of the Old Testament on Retaliation

As in the first two antitheses, the position of the scribes and Pharisees is set forth by quoting verbatim from the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus does not *directly* state how the rabbis were perverting the Word of God, but rather quotes the passage being abused and then sets forth the proper interpretation and application of it. The expression, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” is found in three Old Testament passages (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Dt. 19:21). In Exodus the *lex talionis* comes in the midst of a series of judgments dealing with personal injuries caused by unlawful violence and callousness. In context it reads, “If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex. 21:22-25). Like the passage in Exodus, the one in Leviticus comes in a section dealing with the penalties for killing and injuring unlawfully. “If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him—‘fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth’; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him” (Lev. 24:19-20). The passage in

²⁷⁴ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Law of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 387.

²⁷⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 109.

Deuteronomy is concerned with the proper punishment for a false witness in a court of law. A false witness was to be charged on the basis of his false accusation before the judges. “And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you are to do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you. And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” (19:18-21). Regarding the Old Testament use of the *lex talionis*, there are a number of things to note.

First, the *lex talionis* was given specifically for civil law courts and was never intended as a rule for personal retaliation. In Exodus, the judges, in consultation with the victim, render the penalty. The law of restitution and retaliation is determined by the court sometimes in consultation with the victim. The point of these laws was to eliminate personal revenge, which was often chaotic, arbitrary and all out of due proportion to the offense, and get everyone involved before lawful civil authorities, so biblical justice could be administered publicly and fairly. This point is also clear from Deuteronomy 19:17-18 where the parties in the dispute stand before “the priests and judges who are in office in those days.” That is, the central tribunal, located at the sanctuary of the Lord. The judges would carefully investigate the evidence and pass judgment on the basis of their findings. This leaves no room for vigilantes, acts of personal revenge or the taking of the law into our own hands. Thus, we see that the rather common idea of the *lex talionis* being a primitive, barbarian form of legislation is a myth. The legislation was a great advancement of justice, law and order over the common practice of the private vendetta that preceded it.

Second, the point of the *lex talionis* was justice or equitable restitution. The concern of these laws was to make sure that the punishment fit the crime. Because human beings are created in the image of God, Jehovah demands restitution for crimes against his image-bearer. If the proper repayment in kind is not forthcoming, then injustice prevails in the land. The victim, or the family members who survive the victim, understand that a convicted criminal who is not forced to make proper restitution has escaped true justice. The law of retaliation thus limits the individual or family member so that they do not impose their own arbitrary penalty rooted in anger and a strong desire for revenge. Note also that it limits the civil magistrate so that officers of the state do not overstep their authority and impose sanctions that are either too lenient or too harsh. “It is God’s law that must be enforced, and this law establishes criteria of evidence and a standard of justice. This standard is ‘an eye for an eye.’ A popular slogan in the modern world promotes a parallel judicial principle: ‘The punishment should fit the crime.’”²⁷⁶ The effect of the *lex talionis* is to keep sinful human beings from making up arbitrary rules of punishment that

²⁷⁶ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion*, 392. The Hammurabi Code, which many natural law advocates point to as an example of justice, required the death penalty for a thief who had sworn that he had not stolen. It also required a 30-fold restitution for any animals stolen from the state (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 166; see Gary North, 394, footnote 40). In the case of the accidental death of a child in a fight between two men, unlike the Bible which required the violent man to die, the Hammurabi Code required that one of the guilty man’s children be put to death. This is obviously unjust. The Muslim Shari’a law is also unjust, in that a thief (even a young pickpocket) has his hand cut off if convicted. People rightly regard such a practice as barbaric because the punishment obviously grossly exceeds the severity of the loss originally caused to the victim by the thief. What people need to realize, however, is that if they regard the Bible’s system of *lex talionis* as too harsh or limited to Israel or for an old dispensation, and consequently they believe that the state has a completely free hand in the area of sanctions for crimes, then they have no real reason to condemn the absurdly harsh penalties noted, as well as some of our modern absurdly lenient penalties (e.g., the young woman who spent three months in a mental hospital after shooting her husband in the face with a shotgun).

are unjust. The man who serves a seven year sentence for first degree murder and then is set free has not made proper restitution to the victim or his family. Biblical justice says he must die, “life for life.” Likewise, the person who serves ten years in prison for possessing a marijuana cigarette has received a gross injustice; his penalty was far too harsh. Without proper restitution and just punishments, there can be no justice in society.

The Western nations have abandoned the concept of the *lex talionis* which they believe is primitive and barbaric for the concept of reforming or rehabilitating criminals in the prison system with counseling and education. Many misguided professing Christians took part in the transition to the prison system because they believed that in the New Covenant era justice should be tempered with mercy. The result has been the abandonment of victims’ rights and a great increase in crime. The shift toward rehabilitative theory and away from simple justice by the humanistic paternalistic state has caused great injury to victims and their families and has resulted in a vast multitude of new victims. Consequently, we should note the words of Solomon that “the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Pr. 12:10). Professing Christians who think that mercy somehow trumps justice in the New Covenant era should note that: (1) When he was before Festus Paul said, “If I am an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying” (Ac. 25:11); (2) According to the apostle, homosexuals and lesbians have committed acts “deserving of death” (Rom. 1:32); (3) Paul, writing under divine inspiration says, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Gal. 6:7); (4) God required strict justice in that He did not overlook sin, but had His only begotten Son pay the full penalty for it on the cross; and, (5) Jesus is not objecting to the *lex talionis* itself which God Himself implemented, but to the perversion of it by the scribes and Pharisees.

To those who strongly object to the *lex talionis*, as defined by biblical law we ask: What is wrong with making the punishment correspond exactly to the original infraction? This biblical teaching on punishment not only obviously meets all the demands of justice (biblically defined), but also is perfectly logical. If the punishment is made to fit the crime—no more and no less, then who has reason to complain? Moreover, if the punishment does *not* fit the crime (which is common today), then on what basis has it been relaxed or made more stringent? If it has been relaxed on the basis of purely human ideas of justice and rehabilitation, then do we not have an addition to Scripture? Do we not have a displacement of God’s Word on this matter for human opinions and philosophies? Indeed, we do. Sometimes even a pagan king can have more common sense and an understanding of justice than those in authority in our modern, supposedly sophisticated culture. Note the words of Adoni-bezek after the victorious Israelites “cut off his thumbs and big toes”: “Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me” (Judg. 1:7).

Third, the *lex talionis* taught equality before the law. The judges are not permitted to give a more severe penalty for a poor man or non-Jewish sojourner than to a rich man who is notable in his community. As the old saying goes, “true justice is blind.” It has no regard for race, class, status or connections. The law is not to be a weapon of the rich against the poor or the poor against the rich. This point is very important because people have a sinful tendency to treat certain kinds of people more harshly or leniently than others. In our modern society people who are white, rich and famous often receive a more favorable outcome than men who are poor, black and uneducated. In civil trials where money is involved, rich people and large corporations often receive absurdly unjust judgments in poor communities. The law of just retribution and equitable restitution eliminates such sinful practices. The principle of *lex talionis* guards society from injustice.

This point is seen clearly in passages that deal with master-servant relationships and with sojourners. If a master lost his temper and caused physical harm to his servant, the servant would go free and the master would lose a very large investment. “Who can fail to see, then, that such a law placed a merciful restraint upon the passions of owners and made for the safeguarding of the persons of their slaves.”²⁷⁷ Regarding the foreigner or stranger the law says, “And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 20:33-34). After describing the *lex talionis* and several examples of how it applies the law says, “You shall have the same law for the stranger and one from your own country; for I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 24:22).

Fourth, the *lex talionis* biblically applied would be a great good for society by striking terror into evildoers and restraining criminal lawlessness in general. It would preserve law and order in a community by meting out the appropriate punishments on evildoers and giving justice and restitution to victims. Paul says that rulers are supposed to be a terror to those who practice evil (Rom. 13:3). They are described as ministers of God, as Jehovah’s avengers to execute wrath on those who commit crimes (Rom. 13:4). We are told that they do not bear the sword of violence and execution toward criminals in vain (Rom. 12:4). The civil magistrate can express God’s holy wrath and represent God’s vengeance against criminals on behalf of the innocent, the weak, the law-abiding and especially the victim. “Thus so far from this law being a cruel and barbarous one, it was a most just, merciful and beneficent one, calculated to remove ‘evil’ and produce that which is good...let it be pointed out that this law of judicial retaliation ought to be on our statute books today and impartially and firmly enforced by our magistrates. Nothing would so effectually check the rapidly rising tide of crimes of violence. But alas, so foolish and effeminate is the present generation that an increasing number are agitating for the abolition of capital punishment....”²⁷⁸

When the state seeks to be more merciful than God and substitutes “rehabilitation” or a stay in prison for godly vengeance, restitution and restoration, degenerates are pampered and law-abiding citizens suffer. The root cause of this situation is the sad fact that most churches no longer preach on the civic function of God’s law. The moral case laws are believed to be for the Jewish nation only. Consequently, law-makers and judges are ruled by positivistic laws, by human philosophies, sentimentalism and pragmatic considerations. Christianity’s influence over jurisprudence in Europe and America has increasingly been replaced by secular humanism. The greatest guide for suppressing criminal lawlessness in society has been set aside and replaced with autonomous man’s experiments. Nebulous concepts of natural law and emotional appeals to old-fashioned family values have not put a dent in the machinery of secularism. Many churches in America are so bad that they deliberately will not preach on the justice, holiness and wrath of God and instead only speak about God’s love and mercy. The doctrine of the final judgment and hell has also been pushed into the background. Further, the widespread acceptance of pluralism has had the effect of leavening evangelical churches with the thoroughly unbiblical idea that Christ’s rule does not extend beyond the four walls of the church or the prayer closet. Thus, many modern Christians willingly contribute to the spread of atheistic ideas in the civic realm in the name of pietism. Therefore, we need revival in the churches and a return to Christ’s teaching on the law.

²⁷⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 111.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 111-112.

The Scribes' and Pharisees' Perversion of the *Lex Talionis*

We have seen that the biblical law regarding retaliation was just, fair and superior to the practices of the ancient and modern world. But the scribes and Pharisees had misinterpreted this teaching and had applied it in a number of ways that were contrary to the spirit and letter of Scripture. Note the following errors.

First, they took a teaching that was explicitly designed to be used only by the civil magistrate and applied it to personal conflicts. Many of the Jews at that time regarded personal revenge for being wronged as a right and even a duty based on a misreading of the *lex talionis*. Thus, the very law designed to completely remove personal vendettas from society had been turned upside down by the teaching of the rabbis. What was supposed to bring law and order had been twisted to bring vigilantism, violence and disorder, instead of a just restitution determined by the careful deliberation of a court. Violence flowed from anger and hatred. The Jewish perversion of the *lex talionis* produced lawlessness, fear, injustice and unending conflicts.

In this abuse of the law, like the previous abuses, we see a distinct pattern emerging. The scribes and Pharisees were interpreting the law in a way that catered to the people's sinful lusts and practices. Because of our sinful natures we do not like to defer matters to a court, but would much rather take vengeance into our own hands. The leaders did not challenge the people's corrupt behavior by preaching the true intent of the law, but rather supported their wicked practices with sophisticated argumentation. Corrupt teachers reinforce human traditions rather than challenge them. This sad reality is just as true now as it was then.

Second, the biblical teaching of equality before the law was rejected for an unjust, racist concept of justice. For example, the law required "life for life" and, unlike other offenses where it was likely that a monetary compensation to the victim could be substituted for the severing of a limb, homicide absolutely required death in every case (cf. Num. 35:31). But the rabbis taught that the death penalty applied only if a Jew killed another Jew. If he killed a foreigner or a heathen, then the death penalty was not required. The great medieval Jewish scholars also supported this perversion of Scripture: "If an Israelite kills a resident alien, he does not suffer capital punishment at the hands of the court, because Scripture says, *And if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbor* (Exodus 21:12). Needless to say, one is not put to death if he kills a heathen."²⁷⁹ In other words, a heathen is not regarded by the rabbinical traditions to be a neighbor. Therefore, the justice and proper restitution of the law does not apply to them.

In this behavior the Jews were acting in a way that was consistent with their fallen depraved natures. They were well known for their hatred and mistreatment of non-Jews. "A heathen historian, speaking of the Jews, says, 'They readily show compassion to their own countrymen, but they bear to all others the hatred of an enemy' [Tacitus, History v.5]; and the apostle Paul describes them as 'contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved.'"²⁸⁰ What was true of the Jews was true also of virtually all nations at that time. It is true of all racists in our time whether white or black. Biblical law had a solution for racist laws in the south over three thousand years before the civil government in the United States began to even seriously deal with that problem.

Third, from our Lord's antithesis we can deduce that the scribes and Pharisees were applying the *lex talionis* to personal offenses that were not defined in Scripture as crimes. They were using the law of retaliation as an excuse for hatred and contempt of others. They turned it

²⁷⁹ Moses Maimonides, *The Book of Torts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [188-] 1954), 11:201.

²⁸⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:215.

into a “tit for tat” positive command to get even over issues that should be left alone or covered over in love. Thus, many of the Jews became obsessed with getting even over every little offense.

Jesus’ Corrective Teaching

In His reply, our Lord does not contradict the law of retaliation, but rather emphasizes that in our *personal relationships* our duty is not to retaliate. Christ says, “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away” (Mt. 5:39-42). There are a number of things to note regarding the Redeemer’s antithesis.

First, what does Jesus mean when He says not to resist an evil person? This is an important question because this passage is a chief proof text for pacifism, or the idea that self-defense, the use of police, and even armies in defensive warfare, is always wrong for the Christian. “Perhaps the most famous advocate of this position was the great novelist Leo Tolstoy, who believed that to have soldiers, or police, or even magistrates is unchristian. Evil, he maintained, is not to be resisted; for Christ’s way is not to resist evil in any sense.”²⁸¹ There are a number of variations of this position, some of which are not as extreme as that of Tolstoy. The position of extreme pacifism is unbiblical, dangerous and evil. There are a number of reasons why it is not taught in this passage.

(1) If we follow the analogy of Scripture and let the clear teaching of the Bible in many other places shed light on our passage, then the pacifist interpretation is rendered impossible. For example, the law of God is full of passages which tell the civil magistrate to resist evil crimes with violence under certain circumstances. There were several crimes punishable by the death penalty (e.g., murder, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, kidnapping, rape of a betrothed woman, etc.). Further, a man could defend his own life and property with deadly force if a thief broke into or is discovered breaking into his house (Ex. 22:2). Also, a reading of Scripture demonstrates that there is such a thing as a just and necessary war. Not to stand up to someone like Adolf Hitler would not be virtuous, but evil. All of this renders the pacifist interpretation completely absurd.

(2) The pacifist viewpoint is founded upon the false interpretation that Christ is not refuting the erroneous explanations of the scribes and Pharisees, but is speaking against the law of Moses itself. They presuppose that the Savior is setting up a new, better law in its place. We have previously noted that such a view is completely untenable given the immediate and broader context of Scripture. Further, Paul certainly rejected the pacifist view since he argued that the civil magistrate is to be a terror to evildoers because he does not bear *the sword* (i.e. the instrument of punishment and execution) in vain (cf. Rom. 13:1-4). Moreover, if our Lord was teaching that all resistance to evil was completely wrong, then why did the disciples carry with them two swords (Lk. 22:38)? These swords were carried in the Savior’s presence.

Moreover, it is not hard to prove that our Lord’s doctrine regarding the immorality of personal retaliation is taught in *both* Testaments. Solomon says, “Do not say, ‘I will recompense evil’; wait for the LORD, and He will save you” (Pr. 20:22). When Paul discusses a believer’s

²⁸¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:275.

treatment of personal enemies in Romans 12:20, he quotes Proverbs 25:21-22 which reads, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you.” “Rightly did one of the older writers say, when commenting on this passage... ‘The law of love is not expounded more spiritually in any single precept either by Christ or His apostles than in this exhortation.’”²⁸² Another excellent passage is Proverbs 24:29: “Do not say, ‘I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.’” In these personal offenses we are not to act on personal injuries, but are to place them in God’s hands. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom. 12:9). The Proverbs reflect the Old Testament law which expressly forbids personal vengeance: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18). Personal retaliation is forbidden in every administration of the covenant of grace.

(3) The pacifist interpretation of not resisting evil is essentially an invitation to hand this whole world over to Satan and law breakers. Christ is not teaching that civil magistrates, courts, armies and police are to stand by and watch people commit mayhem, violence and murder toward the innocent. Such behavior would be wicked and unconscionable. But rather, He is speaking about a *personal* wrong toward a Christian individual that does not require self-defense or the intervention of the police. The Redeemer speaks of a slap with the back of the hand, not armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, rape or attempted murder. The pacifist interpretation completely ignores and overturns the many passages that speak of the civil magistrate’s duty to stop crime.

Moreover, Jesus does not ask us to pretend that the insulting behavior is acceptable. He does not say that we are permitted to condone such behavior. He also does not command us to refuse to defend others who are in danger of violence from criminals. What He does not allow is *personal retaliation*. We are not permitted to take revenge on a person who wrongs us. This point is rather obvious when we consider the fact that when believers observe a sin in another Christian that is so serious that it cannot simply be covered over with love, they are commanded to follow the Matthew 19 process and confront the erring brother face to face. If the person doesn’t repent, he is to go before the church court and is to be excommunicated if necessary. Clearly, such activity is a resistance to evil.

(4) The pacifist interpretation ignores the fact that Jesus Himself strongly resisted evil during His ministry. On two occasions when our Lord saw that the Temple area set aside for the Gentile had been turned into an area of commerce and fraud, He made a whip of cords and drove out the animals and overturned the tables of the moneychangers (Mt. 21:12-16; Mk. 11:15-17; Lk. 19:45-47; Jn. 2:13-16). He openly rebuked those who were committing evil. When our Lord was struck on the face during His trial He did not remain silent and turn the other cheek, but challenged the officer who struck Him (cf. Jn. 18:23). Although we never see the Redeemer condone or participate in retaliation, He did aggressively resist evil. He was not a pacifist. Further, in the case of the woman caught in adultery (cf. Jn. 8:1-11), Christ had no objection whatsoever to the death penalty for such a crime. He rejected the accusers as unlawful witnesses (Jn. 8:7). Also, from other passages we learn that Jesus refused to act as a judge during His earthly ministry (Jn. 12:47).

Second, Jesus follows His command not to resist an evil person with four mini-illustrations which explain how Christians are to put this command into practice. “They are vivid little cameos drawn from different life-situations. Each introduces a person (in the context a

²⁸² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 116.

person who in some sense is 'evil') who seeks to do us an injury, one by hitting us in the face, another by prosecuting us at law, a third by commandeering our service and a fourth by begging money from us."²⁸³ These illustrations confirm the interpretation that resisting evil refers to avoiding personal retaliation or returning evil for evil. We will examine each of these mini-illustrations in turn.

The first illustration refers to a slap on the right cheek. The mentioning of the right cheek is deliberate and is intended to inform the audience that this was a blow not in self-defense or even in a fight, but was a slap intended as an insult. Using the palm of the hand, a right handed man facing another man will virtually always hit the left side of the face. But when a man in that culture insulted another man he would usually strike him with the *back* of the hand thus hitting the right side of the face. Interestingly, "according to Jewish Rabbinic law to hit a man with the *back* of the hand was twice as insulting as to hit him with the *flat* of the hand. So, then, what Jesus is saying is this: 'Even if a man should direct at you the most deadly and calculating insult, you must on no account retaliate, and you must on no account resent it.'"²⁸⁴

The expression, "turn the other cheek," is a figure of speech which means that the Christian is not to respond in kind, but rather is to patiently bear the insult. He is not to avenge the injury either physically or verbally. It is totally wrong to view this expression as an invitation to the wicked person to go ahead and strike the other cheek. Indeed, it would be wrong to tempt the aggressor to repeat the offense. It is simply a way of instructing the disciples that they need to be willing to endure further insults calmly and peaceably, without any retaliation. We are not to encourage more insults, but are to discourage them with a loving demeanor. This is the teaching of the whole New Testament. As Paul says, "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:17-21). As followers of Jesus and as those associated with His holy name, we are to conduct ourselves in such a way as to confound our enemies and glorify God. We must "love our enemies" (Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27).

The great wisdom of our Lord's statement is seen in the following observations.

(1) Turning the other cheek nips further aggression in the bud and promotes peace in society. The old saying, "it takes two to tango," certainly applies to argumentation, coarse jesting, insulting tirades and degrading hand gestures. When one person not only does not respond in kind, but acts in a calm, reasonable, loving manner, situations of hostility are usually disarmed. "There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health" (Pr. 12:18). "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones" (Pr. 16:24).

(2) As a despised and persecuted minority in a heathen culture, such behavior would demonstrate to all the love, peaceableness and law-abiding nature of Christians. Believers were despised in the Roman Empire. They were slanderously called cannibals and anti-social incendiaries. They were falsely accused of gross immorality because of their practice of closed communion. The Redeemer's instructions were very practical and necessary in that hostile environment. In our own time when paganism and immorality is growing by leaps and bounds, believers must be prepared to receive insults and mockery with a spirit of meekness and love.

²⁸³ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 106.

²⁸⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:166.

(3) Such behavior will greatly aid the cause of the gospel because a reaction of peace, control and kindness is exactly the opposite of what people expect under such circumstances. It causes people to think, “What is it about that person that makes him different than others?” There have been examples in church history where people who struck Christians or mistreated them in other ways were led to examine the gospel and believe in Christ because the abused believer’s response was so unusual and unexpected. We need to look at insults by the heathen as an opportunity to make a deep impression upon them for our Savior.

(4) A reaction of non-retaliation demonstrates faith in God and His justice. We do not take vengeance into our own hands because we know that God protects His children; if any retribution is deserved God will take care of it in His own time and manner. “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19; Dt. 32:35). Interestingly, when Paul was slanderously attacked by certain people in the church at Corinth, he was so assured of God’s just judgment and vindication that he acted as if he was almost completely unconcerned. He says, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself” (1 Cor. 4:3). The apostle had such a strong faith in Christ and His judgment of all things that unjust criticisms of his ministry did not unhinge him. He had become indifferent to the unfair attacks and insults of men. Beloved, all of us need to develop that faith-saturated mindset. It takes a strong faith to remain silent under the abuse of the wicked pagans and sometimes even by hypocritical professing Christians.

(5) To act without personal retaliation is to imitate our Lord and take up His cross. When Peter instructs Christian slaves, he commands them to be submissive even to harsh or cruel masters saying, “For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that should follow His steps: Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:19-23). The Christian answer to unjust suffering is to follow the Savior’s pattern and endure suffering by continuing to do good. Such behavior, accompanied by the gospel, is the most powerful way to overcome evil.

With the second illustration Jesus turns His attention from a personal insult toward an attack on one’s possessions. “If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also” (Mt. 5:40). The tunic (*chiton*) was the long cotton or linen inner garment which was worn next to the body. It was relatively inexpensive and even poor Jews would have a change of tunics. The cloak was the long outer garment that looked somewhat like a modern robe. It was made of a thicker more expensive material and was used as a blanket at night. Most Jews would only have one cloak. The cloak was such an important piece of clothing that if it was taken in a pledge it had to be restored before sundown (cf. Ex. 22:26-27). Christ says that if a man takes you to court and goes after your tunic (the inexpensive inner garment), then do not fight the lawsuit, but settle immediately and even give him the cloak also if it will bring the lawsuit to an end.

To understand the point that our Lord is making here, it is important to note that like the first example of a slap, this court case is over a trivial matter: the inexpensive inner garment. Therefore, just as the illustration of the personal insult does *not justify refusing* to defend oneself from an attack against life or limb; this illustration does *not* mean that if someone attempts to unjustly take away our car that we should hand over our house also. Jesus is teaching that a

Christian who is unfairly accused over a *minor matter* by a hostile heathen should not enter into time consuming and costly litigation over it. It would be wiser to hand over one's cloak and be done with the whole affair than insist on one's rights.

There are probably two reasons that lie behind the Savior's illustration. a) Christians living in a hostile pagan culture would be wise to suffer minor personal loss than stir up contention with adversaries. If a believer in such a scenario insists on his rights, it is possible that he will win the case; but in the process he may make many enemies. Such an outcome would not be good for the Christian community and it would make the spread of the gospel more difficult. By not insisting on our rights in such a situation we are following the instruction of Paul who said, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18). b) It is better to suffer the minor loss of personal things than to be distressed in spirit. Getting into a legal battle over trifles will not be good for one's inward tranquility. Further, such a battle can lead to anger and the temptation to get even. And it is personal retaliation that we are to avoid at all costs. "Nothing more surely unfits us for the pursuit of holiness than a heart which is resentful at and contentious with others. Angry passions and the workings of a spirit of revenge disqualify us for the worship of God. Meekness and lowliness of heart are the graces which we particularly need to learn of Christ."²⁸⁵ Therefore, we must be willing to suffer loss so that we can move on with a clear mind to the service of Christ.

The third illustration involved being compelled into service by the state. "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two" (Mt. 5:41). The word for compel (*aggareuein*) is a word that originally came from the Persian language. It would be applied to any man who would be ordered to help an official Persian *courier* (noun, *aggareus*) or messenger get his documents from one place to another. In the context of our Lord's audience, it referred to any kind of forced impressments into service of the Jews by the Romans, usually the military. In countries under Roman occupation the armies had the authority to force citizens to carry supplies for a certain distance. The same word is used when it says that Simon of Cyrene was *compelled* (*aggareuein*) to carry the Savior's cross (Mt. 27:32).

What Jesus is teaching here is very radical. In essence it means: "Even if the pagan occupying Roman soldiers order you to carry their food and gear for one mile, you need to not only comply with this order, but I want you to do it without any rancor or hatred or resentment. I want you to render this service with a friendly cheerful disposition." The Jews at that time would obey such orders, but they only did so at the point of a sword or spear. Also, while they did it, they seethed with anger, bitterness and hatred against the Romans. They no doubt had all sorts of thoughts of retaliation against these hated oppressors. Christ tells His disciples that they need to be very different than their countrymen. Their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Although, as modern Christians, we may not be compelled to do anything at the point of a spear, there are situations that are compatible to this illustration. If we happen to work for a boss that is ill-tempered and unreasonable, then we must not harbor hatred and resentment toward that person; but must cheerfully and faithfully obey our employer. We are to do our duty cheerfully as unto the Lord and not unto men. Moreover, the Christian is to take a humble, non-confrontational position toward the state. This does not mean that men should not preach against sin or that preachers cannot biblically critique the sinful public actions of a civil magistrate. But, in the day to day encounters with the state, believers should be friendly and cooperative with authorities. Christians ought to be the best citizens. Peter writes, "Having your conduct

²⁸⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 124.

honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. Therefore submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men" (1 Pet. 2:12-15). Christians should assist the police and military and should obey the law unless they are asked to commit sin. Once again, we see that the position of doing good instead of retaliating is one of great wisdom and peace. To insist on personal rights and to have a contrary spirit over insignificant things hurts the Christian community and can impede the open preaching of the gospel.

In the last illustration Jesus, sets forth the Christian response to those who ask for something or need to borrow money. "Give to him who asks you, and him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away" (Mt. 5:42). Here our Lord teaches that, in the case of a Christian with a real need, we must not callously turn them away; to the best of our ability we should assist them liberally and magnanimously. We must be cheerful givers. As with all these illustrations, it is important that we interpret them within the broader teaching of Scripture. If we do not do this, then this passage could be used as a proof text for indiscriminate giving and the subsidizing of wickedness. It would be immoral for a Christian to hand money over to a drunkard or drug addict so he could feed his wicked addiction. Paul says that if a man is not willing to work, then he should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10). He instructs younger widows to be cared for by their families so they will not be a burden to the church (1 Tim. 5:16). If believers (literally in every single case) had to give money to those who asked, then they themselves would soon be in poverty and would be unable to help anyone. Obviously, our Lord is speaking against a selfish, harsh, arrogant refusal. We should be kind and give in the proper circumstances instead of causing unnecessary strife by responding obnoxiously. Let us lend with love and compassion in the name of Christ. "A good man deals graciously and lends; he will guide his affairs with discretion" (Ps. 112:5).

Chapter 20: The Sixth Antithesis—Love Your Enemies

Ye have heard that it hath been said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy." But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Mt. 5:43-48; cf. Lk. 6:31-36).

In the sixth and final antithesis, Jesus makes a statement that both sets forth the positive side of the previous antithesis on non-retaliation and also serves as a climax to all the antitheses. The law of love summarizes the moral law of God (cf. Rom. 13:8-10). Therefore, this antithesis summarizes and includes all the moral teachings of the preceding antitheses. By way of introduction, there are some things that ought to be noted about this section of Scripture.

First, we need to note that most modern translations (ASV, RSV, NASB, NEB, NIV, JB), following modern textual criticism, leave three clauses out of verse 44 (e.g., “bless those”...; “do good”...; “who spitefully use”). Critical scholars favor the shorter text because it appears in a few older manuscripts. They argue that the expanded reading of the majority of texts, which are not as old, is likely the result of a copyist who borrowed material from the Lukan parallel, the sermon on a plain. We believe that the reading of the KJV and the NKJV, which are based on the *Textus Receptus* (or the Received Text, which comes from the body of texts referred to as the Byzantine/Traditional Text), accurately reflects the words of Jesus for the following reasons. (1) Although the Majority Text is not as old as the minority texts (e.g., *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*), the Majority Text exists in vastly greater numbers and was accepted as authentic by the post-apostolic church. The absence of very early texts is likely a result of the simple fact that texts that were accepted and used wore out, while texts considered defective and corrupt were filed away and not used. (2) Modern scholarship regarding the majority texts (i.e. archeology, verification of various readings by older papyri, ancient versions and quotations from the early church fathers [e.g., the disputed ending of Mark was accepted as canonical by the second century A.D.]) has more and more vindicated the very early use and reliability of the traditional texts. (3) Historical studies have revealed very serious problems with the presuppositions and methodology of the early critical scholars such as Westcott and Hort. Indeed, it is rather shocking that conservatives have put their faith in modernists and heretics when it comes to textual criticism. (4) There are great variations between the *Vaticanus* and *Sinaiticus* manuscripts and, thus, their supposed superiority is really a myth anyway. Reformed and evangelical Christians need to return to the *Received Text* and reject the presuppositions of unbelieving critical scholars.

Second, of all the statements in the antitheses, this last one would probably be the most shocking to the Savior’s audience. It is one thing to turn the other cheek, which is passive non-retaliation, but to actively love one’s enemies is another, more difficult matter altogether. “As Augustine put it, ‘Many have learned how to offer the other cheek, but do not know how to love him by whom they were struck.’”²⁸⁶ It is completely contrary to our sinful nature to return good for evil; to not merely forbear, but to serve; to not merely hold our tongue, but to bless. To return evil for good is wickedness. To return good for good is common courtesy; it is expected normal behavior. But to return good for evil is extraordinary. It is behavior that can only flow from the cross of Christ. The true follower of Jesus must not imitate the world or even follow the compromised, corrupt religion of his day. Rather, he must be like Christ; he must be like his Father in heaven. The Christian life is a call to radical discipleship.

Third, of all the antitheses considered, this one contains the most obvious indication that our Lord is not refuting, correcting or adding to the Old Testament law. The statement, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy” (Mt. 5:43), is not found anywhere in the Pentateuch. Thus, this is additional, clear and conclusive proof that the Redeemer was not setting forth a more spiritual, superior ethic than is found in the Old Testament. The expression, “hate thine enemy,” was an invention of the rabbis that catered to the Jewish people’s sinful flesh. Here, as in all the other antitheses, Jesus is refuting the corrupt rabbinical teaching of His own day and is setting forth the true teaching of God’s law. There is no better expositor of the moral law than the One who Himself gave it.

Fourth, the command to love one’s neighbor is not a civil law (i.e. There are no sanctions attached to this law in Scripture except the phrase in Leviticus 19:18: “I am the LORD your

²⁸⁶ Augustine as quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 122.

God.” This statement implies that God is a sovereign Judge who will personally punish violators of His law. It also implies the added obligation of a covenant relationship.); but a general overarching principle that undergirds the whole moral law. In the context of our passage love is not an emotion, but is primarily an attitude that seeks the good of others in the name of Christ and thus treats them lawfully and compassionately. Biblical love treats enemies in accordance with the commandments. It seeks their good to the glory of God even when one’s emotions may be going in the opposite direction. Love emulates Christ who sought not to please Himself, but to edify others. “Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10).

The Scribes’ and Pharisees’ Perversion of the Law

As we consider the rabbinical perversion of God’s law, it is important to note the clever manner in which they twisted Scripture so that we can avoid similar errors. Their main error was drawing an inference from the immediate context of a passage to the exclusion of the broader context of Scripture. The passage they developed a false inference from was Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” The rabbis argued that the term neighbor is defined by the phrase “the children of your people”; that is, the Israelites. They would also point out that chapter 19 is addressed “to all the congregation of the children of Israel” (v. 2). The rabbis taught that the word “neighbor” only applies to Jews, to those who are in covenant with Jehovah. Therefore, the Gentiles and sojourners were not to be loved, but hated. They were not part of God’s people, but were heathen dogs that deserved to be despised and treated poorly. Among many of the Jews, the word neighbor was restricted even more so that it only applied to family members, close friends and those who belonged to their own religious faction. “Another barricade must be erected between *good* Israelites, such as the scribes and Pharisees, and *bad* Israelites, such as those renegades, the publicans (see verse 46) and in general the entire rabble that did not know the law (John 7:49). In such an atmosphere it was impossible for hatred to starve. It had plenty to feed on.”²⁸⁷

We see that the perversion of this law was common in Israel, for when Jesus applied the moral law to the heart of a Jewish scribe, the lawyer knew he had not treated all men with love so he attempted to justify himself by saying, “Who is my neighbor?” (Lk. 10:29). The false teaching of the scribes had become the accepted interpretation of Leviticus 19:18, so that people would not quote the passage, but the perversion of it. Apparently, the rabbis dropped the words “as yourself” so they could make a memorable parallelism—“love your neighbor...hate your enemy.” “Clearly, neither Jesus’ listeners nor Matthew’s readers would have been surprised by the added words, since the traditional interpretation had become regularly associated with the text.”²⁸⁸

Another erroneous inference from Leviticus 19:18 was that since taking vengeance and holding a grudge were forbidden “against the children of thy people,” then it must be lawful to hold a grudge against and take vengeance upon Gentiles. They turned a positive command to love into a command to hate. They opposed themselves to the underlying purpose of the whole moral law with their evil interpretation.

²⁸⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 313.

²⁸⁸ Donald A. Hanger, *Matthew 1-13*, 134.

If we examine the broader context of Scripture, it is obvious that the command to love one's neighbor refers to all mankind and not just the Jews. If we read a little further in the same chapter, we find the following commands: "And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:34). In the first giving of the law we read: "You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 22:21). Exodus 23:4-5 is even more specific: "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it" (Ex. 23:4-5; cf. v. 9). The law of love says that our behavior toward others is not to be governed by our feelings or personal animosities. We must be kind and helpful, even toward our enemies. What is involved here is essentially a command to return good for evil. Clearly, God's law does not allow personal acts of evil or words of abuse toward our enemies. This teaching of the law is reflected in the book of Proverbs: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Pr. 25:21). In other words, treat him with love, mercy and kindness. "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the LORD see it, and it displeases Him" (Pr. 24:17-18). Christians are not to harbor hatred and resentment in their hearts toward their enemies. They are not even allowed to delight in their downfall.

The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of doing what all false teachers do. They turned to the Scriptures with the express purpose of justifying what was already popular and accepted as truth by the Jews. Thus, they had no choice but to take certain passages out of context and ignore many other clear passages. Roman Catholic theologians do this with reference to justification. Modern Arians (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses) do this with the deity of Christ. People who follow the liturgical calendar do the same with the regulative principle of worship. Therefore, it is crucial that we have a solid working knowledge of the whole Bible when we approach any particular passage as an interpreter. Being a teacher of the Word requires a very careful, patient, knowledgeable and diligent examination of the Scriptures. The source of most errors arises from approaching the Bible with presuppositions that are not derived from Scripture itself and from not understanding sound, basic, biblical principles of interpretation. It is a horrible thing when men interpret the Word of God falsely and then spread that error to thousands of people. The heresies of the scribes and Pharisees are still with us today. It is also unconscionable how, in our day, many preachers spend little time in labor over the Word because it is much easier and more popular to throw together a short "sermonette" filled with pop-psychology and self-help vignettes. They would do well to listen to James' sober warning: "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (Jas. 3:1).

Excursus on Alleged Difficulties

Before we turn our attention to Jesus' positive teaching on how to love our enemies, we would do well to consider three areas in Scripture that have been offered as contrary or at least problematic as related to our Lord's teaching.

The first alleged problem regards God's command to Israel to exterminate the seven Canaanite nations that inhabited Palestine. This campaign of conquest is regarded by many modern minds as barbaric and exceptionally cruel. It is viewed as a supreme act of hatred. This

event in Israel's history does not contradict the injunction to love our enemies for the following reasons. (1) The order to exterminate the seven pagan nations was unique in salvation history. It was not an ordinary feature of the true religion, but was something extraordinary. The Israelite battles against the Canaanites were the only authorized, genuine "holy" wars in history. (2) The wars against the Canaanites were a consequence of a judicial act of God. These nations were so wicked and abominable that Jehovah ordered Israel to mete out the heavenly sentence of death against them. Israel was God's instrument of divine judgment. They were God's executioners; their actions were no different in principle than the magistrate who lawfully executes a man for murder. They were not carrying out a personal vendetta or personal acts of hatred, but were following God's orders. Interestingly, they were not faithful in completely cleansing the land and consequently were plagued with syncretism, idolatry and wars throughout most of their subsequent history. (3) The holy wars of Israel were unique in that they served a prophetic purpose. They served as types of the gospel's spiritual conquest of planet earth. The physical sword has been replaced by the use of the spiritual sword—the Word of God and the preaching of the gospel.

The second alleged contradiction to the Savior's command to love our enemies comes from the imprecatory Psalms. It is argued by some that the Psalms contain sharp invectives against personal enemies and are full of petitions for revenge. Some scholars of dispensational persuasion argue that they reflect ethical concepts that were only appropriate for the dispensation of law; that personal vindictiveness was only permitted in the Old Covenant. Before we see that (properly understood) the imprecatory Psalms do not contradict the command to love our enemies, it is important to note that the imprecatory Psalms are inspired by God and, aside from the Messianic Psalms, are the most frequently quoted Psalms in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus Himself used imprecatory Psalms. Therefore, they cannot be relegated to a former dispensation and they cannot contradict the Savior's command to love our enemies. The solution to this alleged problem is as follows.

(1) The imprecatory Psalms call down the wrath of God on wicked men, only on the assumption of their continued impenitence (cf. Ps. 7:12ff.; 109:16ff.). The Christian loves his fellow man by praying for his salvation—that God would open his blind eyes and deaf ears and cause him to repent and believe in Christ. But, the believer is also to pray that those who reject the truth and oppose themselves to Jesus and His people will receive the just judgment of God. Our Lord rules the earth and changes history by regenerating hearts and by crushing the wicked in His wrath. There is absolutely nothing contradictory in loving our enemies by praying for them and treating them lawfully with kindness, while also hating everything they represent and are attempting to accomplish with perfect hatred. Our hatred is directed at their opposition to God and Christ, not at their *personal* differences with us. "The total destruction of evil, including the judicial destruction of evil men, is the prerogative of the sovereign God, and it is right not only to pray for the accomplishment of this destruction, but even to assist in affecting it when commanded to do so by God Himself."²⁸⁹

(2) It is important to note that a careful reading of the imprecatory Psalms demonstrates that these petitions are *not* utterances of hatred for private injuries or prayers for personal revenge. Sometimes they express the desire for God's justice to come upon heathen nations who have done great evil upon the people of God. "At other times, if the psalmist seems to call down the divine vengeance on personal foes, it will be found that the person who speaks is always

²⁸⁹ J. G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," in *The Westminster Theological Journal* (May 1942), 4:2:132.

David, and that he speaks in his public character, as the chosen servant of the Lord and anointed King of Israel; and that he has in view, not his own particular foes, but the enemies of the cause of which he is the representative,--the cause of God, and truth and righteousness in Israel. To forget David's singular position in the nation, and to read these psalms of his as if they were the utterances of some private individual in reference to neighbors who had done him a private wrong, is to leave out of account the principal element in the case."²⁹⁰ As a king who in a special way typified Christ and a prophet who could write inspired, infallible poetry, David could reveal Jehovah's plan to destroy His enemies for the harm done to His church. These were infallible judicial petitions. When we follow the pattern of these imprecatory prayers, we always do so with the condition "if they do not repent." David was inspired and we are not.

The third objection regards the behavior of Christ Himself. The same Jesus who told us to love our enemies sometimes pronounced terrifying woes against His enemies. For example, in Matthew 23 our Lord calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, fools, blind guides, whitewashed tombs, full of uncleanness, hypocrisy and lawlessness, serpents and brood of vipers who will not escape the judgment of hell. Regarding this objection we need to note a few things. a) As the Messiah and Son of God, the Savior had the authority and perfect knowledge to make judicial pronouncements against the Jews. God's holiness and justice in no way contradicts His love. An antinomian, permissive love is not biblical love at all. As Jehovah's servants we can only speak in conditional terms. That is, if a person does not repent, then he or she will go to hell. b) The Lord's teaching regarding loving one's neighbor is not at all inconsistent with telling people the truth about their sin, spiritual condition apart from Christ and the consequences of refusing to repent. Love means speaking the truth even when the party involved may be upset or even terrified by what is said. It is only the modern antinomian concept of love which sees an inconsistency between love and judicial pronouncements of woe. Remember, when the Redeemer speaks about loving one's neighbor He means primarily to treat that person lawfully in thought, word and deed. It does not refer to an emotional state, permissiveness or telling someone what they want to hear.

Christ's Corrective Teaching

Jesus corrected the scribes' and Pharisees' abuse of God's holy law saying, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you" (Mt. 5:44). In this verse, the Savior does two things. First, He makes it very clear that the term neighbor is to be applied to both Jew and Gentile, friend and enemy. The restriction of the word by the rabbis was unwarranted and unscriptural. Every human being regardless of race, creed, social status or nationality is to be treated as a neighbor. Because all men are created in the image of God they must be treated in accordance with God's holy law. The persecution of people because of race or nationality that has plagued mankind throughout its dark history is clear evidence of man's depravity. That a nation which is professedly Christian could, by its laws and actions, grossly abuse other "races" simply because they were different is an indication that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount has not been carefully heeded by many churches. Jesus used the word "enemies" because such a word cannot be circumvented by sophisticated arguments. This word includes even the most despised people imaginable. Yes, even they are to be loved.

²⁹⁰ William Binnie, *The Imprecations: God's Forgotten Prayers of Power* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books [1886] n.d.), 3-4.

Second, Christ tells us to love our enemies and then defines what biblical love entails. This point is very important because if love is not defined biblically, then this whole command seems impossible and irrelevant. When most people think of love in our modern culture, they think of feelings or emotions. In fact, love “is defined in the dictionary as ‘An emotion, sentiment, or feeling of pleasurable attraction toward, or delight in something’...plus such terms as ‘strong feeling of affection...devoted attachment...great tenderness.’”²⁹¹ While love as emotion (e.g., Jacob “loved Rachel” [Gen. 29:30]) and even as strong lust (e.g., Amnon’s lust for Tamar [2 Sam. 13:4]) is found in Scripture, here our Lord is speaking of love as a duty. Obviously, love as an emotion cannot be commanded. It would be absurd to argue that we should have a strong desire, emotion or feeling of affection toward our enemies. Jesus is speaking about love as a fulfillment of God’s commandments. Out of our love toward God and our dedication toward Jesus as Lord and Savior, we must treat our enemies fairly, justly and kindly whether we like it or not. This love has a regard for divine authority and a respect for God’s image in our fellow man.

When we say that Christ is focusing on love as a duty or as a fulfillment of the law, we do not mean that this duty is purely external. As Paul says, “Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Biblical love is always connected to a regenerate heart. It always proceeds from a heart purified by faith. A pure stream can only come out of a pure fountain. It also flows from a pure conscience; that is, a conscience that is “properly responsive to the claims of moral obligation, honestly bent on following out its convictions of truth and duty.”²⁹² Only a genuine Christian can love his enemy in the manner prescribed by Scripture. Further, as noted in the previous antithesis, we are not permitted to harbor thoughts of revenge, retaliation, malice and bitterness in our hearts toward others. When we are wronged we are to turn such matters over to God who will recompense such things on behalf of His people.

But having noted the internal aspect of love, we still must not confuse love as a duty to fulfill the law as sentiment or tender affection toward our persecutors. Jesus does not command us to be fond of or like our enemies. This point is proven by the imprecatory Psalms and the reality that, in the New Testament, the apostles instructed believers to take comfort in the fact that a time is coming in which God will severely punish their persecutors (e.g., 2 Thess. 1:6-10). Even the saints in heaven who have been martyred cry out, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). Love never means that we ignore reality or pretend that evil people are good or that we forsake justice and discipline. However, we should seek their good through our words, actions and prayers. “This is love, that we walk according to His commandments” (2 Jn. 6). This kind of love is something that only Christians can have. “Only the grace of Jesus Christ can enable a man to have this unconquerable benevolence and this invincible good in his personal relationships with other people.”²⁹³ When the Holy Spirit applies God’s Word to our hearts, then biblical love will become our habitual response to others, even our enemies.

Jesus tells us what this love means by giving us three practical examples of love in action. The first regards how Christians are to use their tongue: “Bless those who curse you” (Mt. 5:44). “To bless a person, in Scripture, often means to implore blessings from God on him, and

²⁹¹ G. D. Funderburk, “Love” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 3:989.

²⁹² Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 80.

²⁹³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:175.

had this clause stood alone, I should have been disposed to interpret the phrase in the passage before us—‘Implore blessings on the head of him who is imprecating evil on yours.’ But in this case, the injunction would be quite synonymous with pray for them. To ‘bless,’ here, I apprehend, signifies to speak in a civil and friendly manner, so far as truth will permit, both to and of those individuals who speak to and of us in a very different way.”²⁹⁴ Our Lord’s statement is very radical when we consider that it was spoken at a time when most Jews would not even extend greetings to Gentiles. The pagan Gentiles responded in kind and would not even greet a Jew. For the most part, Jews and Gentiles saluted only their own fellow nationals.

Jesus says all such behavior must come to an end. When a believer is insulted, he is not to return evil for evil, but is to respond with kind, pleasant, friendly words. He is to do what he can to say something good instead of something evil. This is essentially the positive side of the command to not resist evil. When unbelievers insult us, we are to disarm the situation by responding positively instead of negatively. As Paul says, “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification” (Rom. 15:2). When we are insulted, our sinful nature wants to strike back. Christ wants us to maintain our composure and speak words that do not tear down, but rather edify. The apostle concurs when he says, “Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside [i.e. unbelievers], redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:5-6). “When we speak to them, we must answer their revilings with courteous and friendly words, and *not render railing for railing*; behind their backs we must commend that in them which is commendable, and when we have said all the good we can of them, not be forward to say anything more.”²⁹⁵ The professing Christian who holds his tongue and even speaks pleasant words to a person, but who then goes about gossiping about him and saying all sorts of bad things about him obviously does not love his enemy.

Insulting a heathen who has attacked us verbally may appeal to our sinful flesh, but it is certainly not loving behavior. It does no one any good and only makes matters worse. But when we do not respond as would be expected and speak words of kindness and edification the unbeliever will be much more likely to listen to the gospel. Our job as Christians is not to defend ourselves and demand our rights when personally affronted, but is to represent Christ and exalt His name. “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Eph. 4:29).

The kind of biblical speech that flows from Christian love is vastly superior to the so-called love and kindness of the world. The unbeliever can offer words of compassion; but, because his words are rooted in a heathen worldview they cannot really bring God’s blessing. The believer, however, can speak *the truth* in love (Eph. 4:15). He can speak words that, when attended by the power of the Holy Spirit, can really change lives. When a believer descends to the level of a pagan and exchanges insults, he has forgotten his calling as a representative of Christ. He not only becomes a horrible witness of what a believer should be, but he misses an opportunity to suffer unjustly for the Savior and glorify God.

The second example of love in action is doing good to those who hate us (Mt. 5:44). When an unbeliever treats us with contempt, we are not to reciprocate, but are to respond with benevolent actions. One of the best examples of doing good to an enemy is found in the story of the good Samaritan. This parable was told in response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Lk. 10:29). In this story a man (presumably a Jew) is beaten and left for dead on the side of a

²⁹⁴ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:216.

²⁹⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:66.

road. After two Jews, one a priest and the other a Levite, pass the man and do nothing for him, a Samaritan comes, has compassion on him, binds his wounds and does anything it takes to save his life. This action was significant because the Jews despised the Samaritans and would have nothing to do with them. Most Jews would not even enter Samaritan territory. This Samaritan was doing good to a man who probably hated him and who would not have lifted a finger to help him. The Samaritan was loving his enemy by having mercy on him and helping him. Therefore, when Jesus says, “do good to those who hate you,” He wants us to help a person in need even if we know he hates us and is our enemy. Paul taught the exact same thing: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head” (Rom. 12:20; cf. Pr. 25:21-22).

By rendering good for evil in our personal encounters we show unbelievers that the norms governing Christians are extraordinary and heavenly compared with those outside the church. When believers live consistently with biblical ethics, unbelievers will recognize such behavior as worthy of approval and the name of Christ will be glorified. This does not mean that all unbelievers will stop hating Christians, but it does show them that believers bring peace and stability into a chaotic world. If there is to be any discord in the community, it must not be traceable to our failure to do good to those around us. Paul’s statement that such active love will heap coals of fire on our enemies’ heads means that our acts of benevolence will often result in a burning sense of shame and remorse in our enemies. By doing good to our enemies, we avoid the temptation to retaliate. “It is good never to retaliate, because if we repay evil for evil, we double it, adding a second evil to the first, and so increasing the tally of evil in the world. It is better to be positive, to bless, to do good, to seek peace, and to serve and convert our enemy, because if we thus repay good for evil, we reduce the tally of evil in the world, while at the same time increasing the tally of good. To repay evil for evil is to be overcome by it; to repay good for evil is to overcome evil with good. This is the way of the cross. ‘Such is the masterpiece of love [Godet].’”²⁹⁶ This is one of the greatest principles of sanctification—that we train ourselves not to commit sin by replacing sinful actions with their godly counterparts. In this case, acts of revenge are set aside and replaced with acts of love. This behavior will aid in the spread of the gospel by showing the unbelieving community the effect of the gospel on our lives. Sadly, if we look at American history, this command to do good to our enemies has repeatedly been neglected by Christians and whole denominations. The blatant racism that has been a large part of our culture should have been obliterated by professing Christians over two hundred years ago. Instead, most professing Christians followed heathen culture instead of leading it.

Doing good to an enemy can involve anything from helping with a flat tire, loaning a neighbor a lawn mower or giving a person a ride. Even little acts of kindness can go a long way in making peace in the community. Are we doing good to those who hate us? Are we showing the love of Christ to enemies by our actions? Let us demonstrate to the world that our profession of the Savior is not empty by doing exactly what He says, even when we would rather do the opposite.

The third example of love toward our enemies regards prayer: “Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” Instead of meditating on how we would like to get revenge against such people, we are to think of ways that God can help them and are to bring these petitions to God. Our Lord’s illustration contains great wisdom, for it is impossible to harbor bitterness and resentment when we pray for a person’s good. This activity takes our mind off of ourselves and our own egos and focuses it on the problems of others. It helps us realize

²⁹⁶ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 337.

that our enemies are in bondage to sin. They are blinded by Satan and are following a path that leads straight to the pit of hell. To pray for such people is to have mercy on them. Thoughts of malice and ill-will melt away as we commune with God and realize our place in the kingdom of God. Our life is not about settling personal scores or getting even; it is about spreading abroad the love of Christ. Remember, all unsaved sinners by nature are haters of God and are hostile to the Christian faith. All men, apart from the Savior, are God's enemies and the enemies of His people. Thus, if Christians only prayed for people that were friendly toward God's kingdom, then the kingdom would not be advanced by this important means of grace. Do you pray for people who abuse you because you are a Christian? Do you ask God to have mercy on those who persecute you by causing them to repent and believe? It is important to understand that we are not asking God to tolerate their wicked behavior or to overlook it; that would be antinomian and unjust. Instead, we are asking God to change that person by His sovereign grace and make him a new person; a person who loves the Redeemer and who loves the brethren. This is precisely what Jesus did on the cross when He prayed for God to forgive those who crucified Him.

All the examples of love in action could be summarized under our Lord's statement: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39; Lev. 19:18). "A regular self-love respects all our interests, but especially our spiritual and eternal interests: so ought our love unto our neighbor. A regular self-love prompts us to be concerned about our welfare tenderly, to seek it diligently and prudently, to rejoice in it heartily, and to be grieved for any calamities sincerely: so ought our love unto our neighbor prompt us to feel and conduct ourselves with regard to his welfare."²⁹⁷ If we have this perspective which seeks to love even our enemies as ourselves, then thoughts of revenge melt away, for we would not want any harm to come upon us. Moreover, this perspective causes us to think of ways of doing them good. Instead of focusing upon retaliation, we think of ways to help bring them to repentance. This attitude will affect our speech, our actions and our prayers. This is the perspective that needs to become habitual in our lives. If every Christian could consistently follow this principle, then slander, backbiting, tale-bearing, gossip and other acts of hatred would cease.

Paul follows this line of thinking in the great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians: "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (13:4-7). As Christians we must learn to be slow in thinking thoughts of resentment. We must patiently bear with those who seek to provoke us to anger with unjust attacks against us. We must not be quick to assert our rights or hold a grudge against those who injure us. We must learn to set our self or ego aside so that, instead of seeking our own, we seek the good of others. Instead of resenting people who treat us like dirt, we must channel that energy into good words and works that lead to edification. All of this, of course, requires great humility and composure. It requires being poor in spirit (Mt. 5:3) and thirsting after righteousness (Mt. 5:6). It requires placing Christ and His kingdom far above our own reputation and interests. It requires a repeated practice of loving thoughts, words and actions, even when our emotions would like to go in the opposite direction. But, as we repeatedly put biblical love into practice in our lives every day, these things will become holy habits. And, eventually, our emotions, which were so accustomed toward anger and retaliation, will also more and more be brought into subjection to Jesus Christ.

This teaching is important because if our society continues to decay morally and the persecution of believers becomes even more acceptable and increases, we will be called upon to

²⁹⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 134.

more and more put the Savior's teaching upon love into action. Therefore, we must continually study this section of Scripture and place it in our hearts because we have no choice but to love our enemies and forgo revenge. We are commanded to bless and to do good to those who hate us. We are even called to pray for those who look at us having eyes aflame with rage against us, who may even want to kill us. We must pray with love and faith knowing that this is the will of God. If God does not answer our prayer for the conversion of our enemies, then we can rest assured that He will answer our prayers of imprecations against the sons of perdition.

Reasons for Obedience

After our Lord sets forth the injunction to love our enemies and gives three examples of Christian love in action, He gives two reasons why we must love those who hate us.

The first reason is that these loving actions demonstrate that we are like our Father in heaven. Jesus says we are to do these things in order "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt. 5:45). "Hebrew is not rich in adjectives; and for that reason Hebrew often uses *son of*...with an abstract noun, where we would use an adjective. For instance *a son of peace* is a *peaceful man*, *a son of consolation* is a *consoling man*. So, then, *a son of God* is a *godlike man*."²⁹⁸ The reason why we must love our enemies is that God shows benevolence and kindness to all men. Since this is how our Father in heaven conducts Himself, we must be sons of God or godlike men by modeling our behavior on His. Note that the Savior does *not* say that acting in this manner causes us to become sons of God. By grace we are already God's sons through adoption; but, by loving our enemies we confirm or manifest the fact that we are God's people. This point will be emphasized again in verse 48. Christ wants us to reflect upon the character of our heavenly Father. As Paul says, "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children" (Eph. 4:32-5:1).

Jesus explains the love we are to imitate by pointing out that God gives His good gifts of sunshine and rain to both the just and the unjust. (Note that verse 45 does not say "the sun," but "His sun." The sun is God's and not ours or "mother nature's"; it exists by His creative power and providence). God gives the benefits of His creation to those who are not only saved and love Him, but also to the most wicked of the heathen who hate Him. God causes the pagan farmer's crops to grow just as He does the Christian's, even though the pagan worships idols and does not thank God for his crops. Unbelievers breathe the same fresh air as God's people. They enjoy the same ocean breeze, beautiful sunsets, lovely mountain streams, magnificent fall colors and delicious foods. These are all gifts of God. Jehovah does not deal with men in the present world on the basis of how they treat Him or according to what they deserve, but is longsuffering and benevolent. Indeed, everything that is good in this world should be attributed to God. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17).

God (even in His relations with the ungodly) shows kindness, beneficence and mercy. The heathen are recipients of good gifts because of God's kind, longsuffering nature. "Not only does God bear with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction, but He bestows upon them many favors."²⁹⁹ Under His normal providences, God bestows His temporal blessings

²⁹⁸ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:177.

²⁹⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 141.

upon the just and unjust alike. (Only in exceptional cases of judgment, such as the Egyptians during the leadership of Moses, does Jehovah make distinctions). “As the Gospel of Luke expresses it, ‘He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil’ (vi. 35).”³⁰⁰

This kindness and mercy, however, must never be confused with God’s saving love directed to the elect. God shows benevolence toward His image even in reprobate men; but, these men are still hated by God and shall receive their due recompense of reward in the life to come. There is no inconsistency here, for a temporal kindness to the wicked and everlasting saving love toward the elect are two completely different things.

In this passage we learn some important things about what Calvin, and Reformed theologians after him, call “common grace.” (1) God restrains His wrath due to sin before the final judgment. While it is true that, after the fall, a curse has come upon this earth and all the evil and calamity in this world is due to sin; nevertheless, God has greatly restrained the execution of His wrath on the wicked. If it were not for this restraint, unrepentant, non-believing sinners would immediately be consigned to everlasting damnation. This restraint is obviously necessary so that God’s plan of redemption could be carried out and an elect people (the invisible church) could be gathered throughout history. (2) God not only withholds the full brunt of His wrath against godless men in history, but also gives good gifts to wicked men that they do not deserve. That is why this behavior is called “common grace,” because *unmerited favors* or *undeserved gifts* are bestowed on wicked men, reprobates and even apostates by God. These men freely partake of the rich bounty of Jehovah’s creation. They are also bestowed with gifts, talents and aptitudes that enable them to excel in science, technology, art, music and agriculture. God even ordains institutions for the protection of life and limb, for the better ordering of society and restrains sin in the world so that men can live in peace and prosperity. All of these benefits, however, must be distinguished from “special grace” or “saving grace,” which is only directed to God’s elect.

Some have attempted to pervert this doctrine by using it to soften the biblical Calvinism taught in Scripture. Others have denied it altogether by saying that kind treatment by God only leads to greater judgment in the life to come. While it is true that the abuse of God’s gifts in this life will result in greater condemnation on the final day (“To whom much is given, from him much will be required” [Lk. 12:48]), this does not mean that the many good gifts bestowed by God do not flow from His kindness and mercy. This point is obvious from our text, which teaches that we are to imitate God who is good and renders kindness to His enemies.

Following God’s example means that we need to learn to treat people, not according to how they treat us, but as God in His kindness treats His rational creatures. This will require us to, in a sense, go outside of ourselves and view relationships objectively. When we see someone get all bent out of shape emotionally because they have been mistreated, we remain composed because the abuse did not involve us. We have all experienced this. We need to train ourselves to see attacks against us in the same way so that we can avoid being led by negative or angry emotions and, instead, think of a loving, scriptural response.

If we are unwilling to treat our enemies with love and kindness, but instead stubbornly hang on to hatred and acts of retaliation, then we need to question our commitment to Christ. There are many who proclaim that they are God’s children; but how many evidence it by their walk? This command to love our enemies is what should set us apart from other men. It is what should distinguish us from religious hypocrites like the scribes and Pharisees. “The man who hates his enemies is not like God—cannot be a child of God. A child of God!—he is of his father

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

the devil, and the works of his father he does.”³⁰¹ The sad fact that, in our own time, many professing Christians do not even show kindness and courtesy to other believers shows us the need for churches to return to a study of the Sermon on the Mount. If Christians gossip, slander and backbite against each other like wild dogs, then how can they be an example of the Savior’s love to others? This God-imitating love is a major way to let our light shine before men (Mt. 5:16).

The second reason that Jesus gives is that Christians must be different from the heathen and must be expected to go beyond the love of the wicked if they are to receive a reward. “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?” (Mt. 5:46-47). There are a number of notable things about these verses.

(1) Our Lord acknowledges that a kind of love exists in the unbelieving world. People have tender affection for their children and vice versa. Christ said that even evil men give good gifts to their children (Lk. 11:13). Wicked people have friends which they treat with favor and kindness. “Fallen man is not incapable of loving. The doctrine of total depravity does not mean (and has never meant) that original sin has rendered men incapable of doing anything good at all, but rather that every good they do is tainted to some degree by evil. Unredeemed sinners can love. Parental love, filial love, conjugal love, the love of friends—all these, as we know very well are the regular experience of men and women outside Christ.”³⁰² Because of sin, however, unbelievers’ love is impure. It is connected to self-interest and it is never connected as it should be to the glory of God. The love required in the second table of the law was always designed to rest upon, and flow out of, the love toward God enumerated in the first table of the decalogue.

(2) In the example of an unbeliever who loves, the Savior names one of the most wicked, despised class of people among the Jews: “tax-collectors” or “publicans.” Tax collectors at that time were farmed out by the Roman authorities. These men had an agreement where they paid a fixed amount of money to the Roman government. In return, they were allowed to place tolls on exports, imports and merchandise that had to go through their territory. The amount that the tax-collectors could take was not fixed and so they essentially squeezed every dollar out of the populace that they possibly could. They had a reputation for being exceptionally cruel, greedy and guilty of extortion. The fact that all the injustice, pain and hardship they caused were done in the service of the Roman state made them even more despised. The tax-collectors were getting rich at the expense of the Jews and were helping heathen oppressors in the process. Thus, when Christ speaks of tax-gatherers loving those who love them and greeting the same, He wants the disciples to see how ordinary such love is. It is not love that flows from saving grace and it is not a kindness that is above the kindness shown by the wicked. In other words, it is not a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

(3) Consequently, the punch line of our Lord’s example is found in the question, “What do you do more than these?” (Mt. 5:47). It is not enough for disciples to resemble unbelievers. The call of discipleship that permeates the whole Sermon on the Mount is a call of extraordinary behavior. The Savior’s disciples must excel in a sincere, heartfelt obedience to the true meaning of the whole moral law of God. Christians must, by the power of the Holy Spirit, rise above ordinary fallen humanity.

The Redeemer’s question is very important. It is a question that we should put to ourselves every single day. What do we do more than others? How do we live our lives

³⁰¹ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:218.

³⁰² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 120.

differently than ordinary, unsaved people? Are we only friendly to our own friends? Well, the heathen do that also. Do we excel at kindness to strangers? Do we lead lives of sexual purity? Or, are we no different than the heathen? Do we insult those who insult us? Or, are we exceptional? Do we bless instead of curse? Do we watch the same ungodly trash on TV and the movies as the heathen? Or, are we completely different than our neighbors? With the light that God has given us, we certainly know a lot more than others. As Christians we obviously profess much more than others and have been promised from God great things that do not apply to unbelievers. “God has done more for us, and therefore justly expects more from us than from others; the glory of God is more concerned in us than in others.”³⁰³ If we walk carnally as typical unsaved men and women do, then we walk far below the behavior that our dear Savior expects and demands.

This question—“What do we do more than others?”—is especially significant and sobering to our own generation, when many professing Christians are little or no different in their thinking, behavior and speech than the godless, surrounding culture. In our day, evangelicals commit adultery and get divorced at virtually the same rate as unbelievers. For the most part, they disregard the Sabbath day, as do their heathen counterparts. Increasingly, worship services have become nothing more than stupid, corny imitations of the world’s entertainments, whether theater, rock concert or variety show. The children of professing Christians usually attend the same state schools and grandparents are put away in the same state-run or state-subsidized old folks’ homes. Professing Christians often vote for the same pro-abortion, statist, anti-freedom candidates as do the sodomites, atheists and feminists. Jesus speaks to this great declension and says that if professing disciples do not rise above the spirituality and ethics of the tax-collectors of this world, then they cannot expect a Christian’s reward. “Note, those who promise themselves a reward above others must study to *do more than others*.”³⁰⁴ “Justification before God is by faith alone, but it is not a faith which remains alone. Saving faith is not a lifeless, inoperative and sterile thing, but a living, active, fruit producing principle. And it is by the fruit which a saving faith produces that it is distinguished from the worthless and unproductive faith of the empty professor.”³⁰⁵ A saltless, lightless, worldly, unbelieving, unfaithful expression of Christianity is no Christianity at all. It is ICHABOD writ large.

All of this raises a question: Why should a Christian be so different than others? The true disciple has been born again by the Spirit of God and has been changed from someone who hates Christ and the law to someone who loves the Savior and wants to obey His Word. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). The natural man has an innate hatred of God and the law because of his depravity. It is to be expected that he would love his friends and hate his enemies. But the true believer is very concerned about pleasing His Redeemer and thus diligently works to bring all his thoughts, emotions and actions into captivity to Jesus. There are times when he would like to strike out and return evil for evil, but he restrains himself and gives a biblical response because he knows that this pleases his Master. Our love for others grows out of our relationship to Christ and our love toward Him. Our uniqueness lies in our union with the Savior in His life, death and resurrection. We are different only because God has made us different. Thus, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are really only for true disciples. Only people who are saved by grace through the person and work of Christ can imitate their Father who is in heaven. Yes, beloved, God has set you apart, and through Jesus, has made you unique and special. This is your

³⁰³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:67.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 143.

calling. This must be your whole existence. “If God is your Father you must be special, you cannot help it. If the divine nature is in you, and has entered into you through the Holy Spirit, you cannot be like anybody else; you must be different. And that is what we are told about the Christian everywhere in the Bible, that Christ dwells in his heart richly through the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit is in him, filling him, working His mighty power in the depths of his personality, teaching him his will”³⁰⁶ through His Word. If this does not describe your experience, then you need to examine your faith in Christ. Are you truly committed to Him or are you like the scribes and Pharisees who lived their lives within a self-created world of illusion and deceit?

Be Ye Perfect

Jesus ends His argumentation on loving our enemies with the logical consequences of all His teaching on this topic. “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). There is a sense in which this statement is a fitting conclusion to all the proceeding antitheses. There are a number of significant things to note regarding this statement.

First, in Greek the “you” is emphatic: “You—My disciples—are to be perfect...” Jesus is emphasizing our duty as Christians and He is emphasizing the antithesis between true disciples and non-believers. “You *on your part* over against all hypocrites such as the scribes and Pharisees are to be perfect.”

Second, in order to understand our passage, we need to determine what our Lord means by the word “perfect.” Since there have been misunderstandings and disagreements regarding this word, we will examine a number of different things regarding it. (1) In this particular, context the Savior is not discussing the perfection or perfect righteousness associated with justification. The whole context of this section of the Sermon on the Mount deals with the proper interpretation of the moral law as it relates to sanctification or personal behavior. Note also that very similar commands are found in the Old Testament, all of which are designed to spur the Israelites to greater holiness or obedience to the law. “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2; cf. 11:44; 20:7, 26; Eph. 5:1; 1 Pet. 1:16). Deuteronomy 18:13 says, “You shall be blameless before the LORD your God.” The Hebrew word translated “blameless” is *tamin*. The Greek Septuagint translates this word as *teleios*, the same word in Matthew 5:48. Thus, just like our passage, the Israelites were commanded to be perfect before God. Since the Old Covenant Jews and the Redeemer’s disciples were already a redeemed people, these commands are not calls to embrace the imputed righteousness of Christ. Rather, they are calls to obey God’s holy law not as a covenant of works, but out of gratitude for a salvation already received.

(2) The command to be perfect must not be interpreted to mean that Christians are capable of ethical perfection in this life. Wesleyan perfectionists and various holiness teachers have interpreted the passage in this manner. However, this cannot be the case because believers are called to a whole life of hungering and thirsting after righteousness (Mt. 5:6); they are commanded to repeatedly pray, “Forgive us our debts” (Mt. 6:12); Paul, the greatest apostle, admitted that he had not attained perfection (Phil. 3:12) and the Bible explicitly teaches that no Christian can achieve moral perfection in this life (1 Jn. 1:8). Perfectionism is a false and dangerous doctrine. It rests upon the presupposition that God would never command what man is incapable of carrying out. The fact, however, that man has fallen into sin and has rendered

³⁰⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:319.

himself incapable of perfectly obeying the law cannot be a reason for God to lessen His standard. If it did, then the more that man sinned and caused himself to be enslaved to sin, the lower God would have to make His ethic. Since the moral law is absolute and unchanging, that is impossible.

(3) There are three possible ways of looking at this word in Scripture. The first refers not to absolute ethical perfection, but to a consistent ethical uprightness in a believer. For example, in Genesis 6:9, we read that “Noah was a just [i.e. righteous] man perfect in his generations.” The word “perfect” in this passage cannot refer to sinless perfection, for the Bible teaches that Noah was still committing sins (e.g., Gen. 9). Here the word means that Noah was recognized by the community as blameless, righteous or above repute. “The same word is used of a sacrificial animal that was ‘without blemish.’ Thus, Noah was a man whom no one could justly criticize. He lived an irreproachable life.”³⁰⁷ Given this usage, we can say that when the word “perfect” is used to describe the behavior of a believer, it essentially refers to a person who is habitually righteous; who constantly walks with God (e.g., Gen. 17:1; 2 Sam. 22:24-27). If we apply this meaning to our passage, then Jesus is commanding His disciples to have a consistent, habitual, non-hypocritical righteousness. He would be telling us to be blameless, upright and above repute in our behavior because the God we serve is perfect in holiness and righteousness.

A second view regards the word perfect as meaning “‘brought to completion, full-grown, lacking nothing.’ Jesus is saying to the people of that day, as well as to us now, that they should not be satisfied with half-way obedience to the law of love, as were the scribes and Pharisees, who never penetrated to the heart of the law.”³⁰⁸ While it is true that the word *teleios* (or *tamin*) can have the sense of completeness, wholeness or totality (e.g., Lev. 23:15, 30; Josh. 10:13; Mt. 19:21; Col. 4:2; Jas. 1:4), it is unlikely that the word has this meaning in this particular context. The parallelism between man’s perfection and God’s perfection clearly points in the direction of ethical perfection. Our Lord does not mean, “Be complete for your Father is complete.”

A third view is that Jesus is setting forth the goal of ethical perfection or a summary statement of the standard of God’s moral law. Our Lord has been expositing the moral law and this law requires absolute perfection in thought, word and deed. Believers are to aim at and press towards perfection in holiness, even though they know that such perfection is unattainable in this life. “Be ye therefore perfect is the unchanging requirement of the Law, ‘even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect’ is the exalted standard which the gospel presents to us. The moral excellency of the Divine character is the copy and rule set before us, and nothing short of that is to be our sincere, ardent and constant endeavour.”³⁰⁹ “The perfection here is the fulfillment of the Mosaic law.... Love for God and one’s neighbor (and particularly, love of one’s enemies) will be described by Matthew as the commandments upon which thus all the law and the prophets depend (22:40). For Matthew, to be *teleios* means to fulfill the law through the manifestation of an unrestricted love (including even enemies) that is the reflection of God’s love. This unrestricted love preeminently embodies ethical perfection. This perfection, and nothing less, is that to which Jesus calls his disciples.”³¹⁰

It is a great error on the part of many professing Christians who teach that the divine rule of duty is relaxed and made easier for the new covenant era. It is precisely this kind of thinking that Jesus’ statement is against. We are not to act like the scribes and Pharisees who water down

³⁰⁷ G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 1:159.

³⁰⁸ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 317.

³⁰⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 144.

³¹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 135.

the standard of God's law and twist it to make it easier to obey. The law calls us to strive for ethical perfection even though we will not achieve it until we are glorified. This is the only interpretation that does justice to the parallel of God's perfection. The moral law of God is a reflection of God's nature and character. Thus, to seek to obey the moral law is to seek to imitate our heavenly Father. We are to love and be merciful because our God is loving and compassionate. The moral law of God is not some pragmatic, positivistic, ethereal, utilitarian rule that God has arbitrarily imposed on the people. It is a window into the perfections of God Himself. That is why Jesus is so concerned to refute the perversion of the moral law by the Jewish leaders.

Some may object and say, "Why would God command the impossible?" The answer to the objection is simple. Because of who God is, He could do no less. God would have to cease to be God to relax the standard of His moral law. Others may object and say, "What's the point—why should I strive for a goal that is unattainable in this life?" The answer to this question is also uncomplicated. One reason is that this is what God requires. Another is that our obedience pleases Christ. We strive for perfection because this behavior demonstrates our love for our precious Savior. Further, our struggle for personal holiness, for a habitual, daily obedience to God's law, carries blessings in this life as well as great rewards in the life to come. Therefore, we must strive for, pray for and yearn for perfection until the day we die. This is the call to radical discipleship.

Third, there are some important applications that we should note regarding the command for perfection. (1) By way of inference, our passage teaches the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If we were to ask the average American if he or she expected to go to heaven, the answer would usually be, "yes." Such people would go on to explain how they have been good people. They have not committed any despicable crimes and most of the time they have been very nice to others. But, in light of our text, the appropriate question that needs to be answered is, "Have you been ethically perfect in your thoughts, words and deeds?" It is this question that flows from the standard of God's holy law and makes all of us beggars in the dust before God. Since we obviously fall far short of such righteousness, we must by faith embrace the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. His sinless blood washes away our guilt and His perfect life merits eternal life in our stead. (2) The life of Christian discipleship is one of humility. The more that we mature in knowledge and personal godliness, the more that we will see our continued need to look to Christ. Biblical sanctification causes us to be humble because the closer we walk with God, the more we see ourselves as we really are. Discipleship entails self-abasement. It progressively destroys pride and self-complacency because our God is infinitely holy and we know that we are not even close to the perfection that God demands. (3) It teaches us that sanctification is a long struggle in which we must never give up. The holiness doctrine popularized in the nineteenth century that the Christian life is easy, that all we need to do is "let go and let God" is a lie of the devil. While it is true that we have victory over the power of sin in our lives by virtue of our union with the Savior in His life, death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6-7); nevertheless, discipleship involves a life of struggle, service, self-denial and good works for Christ. Because the standard is so high, this means we can never let down our guard, relax and say that we have arrived. We always must be watching and praying for sin and temptation not to overcome us.

May God enable us to be like Him and love even our enemies! Amen.

Chapter 21: How to Avoid False Religious Piety

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly (Mt. 6:1-18).

With Matthew chapter six, we begin a new topic in our Lord's sermon. The sermon has moved from a true disciple's character (the beatitudes, 5:3-12); to a believer's influence on this world (the contrasts, 5:13-16); to a Christian's relationship to the law (5:17-19); to a disciple's righteousness (5:20-48), which must be based on a true interpretation of the law without human traditions. This righteousness must exceed the so-called righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). In chapter six Jesus continues His discussion of righteousness, but shifts His focus from how a proper regard for the true meaning of the moral law should affect our everyday lives to how Christians are to practice religious exercises (i.e. in 6:1-18). There are some important things to note about this section of Scripture before we examine our Lord's treatment of charitable deeds, prayer and fasting.

First, the arrangement of this section of our Lord's sermon is careful and excellent. Verse 1 contains the central proposition, whereas verses 2 through 18 contain specific examples. The word *eleemosunen*, translated "alms" (KJV), "charitable deeds" (NKJV) or "merciful deeds" (*A Literal Translation of the Bible*), in verse one refers to religious exercises in general. It is best to view the first verse of this chapter as an introduction to the next three points (giving, 2-4; praying, 5-15; and fasting, 16-18) rather than simply as part of the discussion on almsgiving. Some early copyists recognized this and substituted *dikaiosynen* (righteous duties) for the word *eleemosunen* to clarify the central proposition.

This whole section begins with the words, "Take heed." The Greek word used, *prosechete*, means "beware" or "be careful." The disciples are carefully to compare the wrong way to the right way of piety and apply these lessons to themselves. They are to be very cautious

when it comes to the motivation behind their good works. Alexander notes that as “the reference is commonly to danger, physical or moral, it is usually rendered in this Gospel by the English verb *beware* (7, 15, 10, 17, 16, 6.11.12), and elsewhere by take heed (Luke 17, 3), give heed (Acts 8, 6), give attendance (1 Tim. 4, 13), have regard (Acts 18, 11), in all which versions the original idea of applying the mind to any object is distinctly traceable”³¹¹ The fact that our Lord instructs us to pay special attention to this kind of behavior shows us that improper motivation behind good works is a common and serious problem. “Our Lord’s emphatic language intimates that what he warns them against is an evil of great magnitude, and an evil which they were in great hazard of incurring; an evil, to borrow the quaint language of Matthew Henry, that they were ‘in great danger *by*, and in danger *of*.’”³¹² This somber warning is a subset of the great warning in chapter five that a Christian’s righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Second, this section is concerned with personal piety. The three examples—charitable deeds, prayer and fasting—do not encompass every aspect of personal piety. However, they are major pious acts that are easy to contrast with the acts of religious hypocrites and even with pagans. The apostate Jews had turned these things into acts of self-promotion and self-exaltation. Charitable deeds were announced so that the giver would receive credit or praise from man. Prayers were done to be seen so that everyone would know how religious the person was. Similarly, men who fasted let everyone know the pain they endured to receive glory from men. Virtually every religion in this world requires charity, prayer and the mortification of the flesh. Buddhism and Hinduism have these features, as does Islam. The Savior wants to contrast biblical Christianity with false professors and false religions.

The Redeemer deals with personal acts of piety instead of public worship because this chapter continues His teaching on what a Christian is and must be. In other words, He is dealing with personal sanctification. Also, everyone who knows Church history understands that many of the corruptions and innovations that came into the churches came through deviations in private and family worship. Reformed churches were corrupted with holy days, the church calendar and hymns of human composition because these things had already been accepted and had become popular on a personal level.

The three forms of piety described deal with three separate areas. The first deals with good works or charity directed toward man. The second deals with our approach to God in prayer; while the third deals with the self-mortification. Although most other religions speak of these things as steps toward salvation, as deeds that merit paradise with God, biblical Christianity views them as fruits of a redemption already achieved by Christ.

Third, each illustration follows the same pattern. Jesus first describes the hypocritical acts of piety in a vivid, almost humorous manner. Christ deliberately shows how artificial, phony and ostentatious false piety is. Then He tells the disciples the proper way that piety expresses itself. Further, each of the three sections contains verbatim, and almost identical, important phrases for emphasis: “Truly I say to you they have their reward” (vs. 2, 5 and 6); also the concluding formula “to your Father who is in secret” (vs. 6 and 18) or “who sees in secret” (v. 4).

Fourth, the central teaching of this whole section deals with the *underlying motivation* behind a Christian’s acts of piety. The central problem behind the description of wrong acts of piety is the fact that they are done, not out of a genuine desire to please God and be faithful to Him, but rather to gain standing before men. Each illustration forces us to examine our hearts to

³¹¹ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 163.

³¹² John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:222.

look to the *why* behind our acts of piety. Do we do certain things only because people are watching or do we act the way we do solely because we are concerned about what God thinks? Christ's emphasis makes this one of the most penetrating, convicting sections of Scripture. The Redeemer says to each and every professing Christian, "Know yourself. Don't simply look at what you do, but also ask yourself why you do it." This process may indeed be painful, for we often act with impure motives. Yet, because of the deceitfulness of sin, it is necessary and practical. Moreover, when we see the deceitfulness of our own hearts we will focus our attention even more upon Christ.

The teaching of this section of Scripture regarding motive is as apt today as it ever has been. Think for a moment what the various churches would be like today if the central motive was not to please men but God. Think of how all the man-made trash that corrupts worship today would be tossed aside. Think of how all the jokes, gimmickry and pop-psychology would be kept out of the pulpit. All the pomp, ceremony and sensuousness of modern worship would fall to the ground. Denominations and churches would be transformed. This section of Scripture overturns the man-made ritualism of Romanism, as well as the man-pleasing entertainment of the church growth movement. Our piety is done for God and before God. If we set out to please man, then declension and apostasy are inevitable.

This section of Scripture teaches us a simple yet fundamental aspect of Christianity—that we are to glorify God in everything that we do. As Paul says, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). When men do good works to be seen by men, they are really seeking to please themselves or their own ego by glorifying self. Thus, ultimately, we must continually choose throughout life whether to please ourselves or to please God. The philosophy of this world tells us the very opposite of what Jesus says. It says that man's chief end is to seek happiness or personal fulfillment or self-esteem. Christ, however, taught that we must die to self and lose ourselves if we are to follow Him. "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Mt. 10:38-39).

Paul taught the same principle when he said that all of our obedience, even under the eye of men, must be done with sincerity, or literally, singleness of heart to Christ (cf. Eph. 6:5). There must be no ulterior motive, deceit, false pretense or egotism behind our obedience. We must be like Christ who viewed everything in His life in relationship with His Father. Jesus lived to please God and do His will. That was His constant obsession from the moment He got up in the morning until He went to bed. He deliberately humbled Himself in order to focus attention upon His Father and glorify Him. He lived with a complete absence of egotism and ostentation. When Christ became immensely popular because of the miracles, He remained detached and unimpressed by the adulation of the crowds. Celebrity meant nothing to Him, while communion with the Father was His passion. When men rejected Him, He did not get angry or upset because He was concerned only with the honor that comes from God. In fact, He identified a fundamental problem of the religion of His day as seeking the praise of men instead of from God. "How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?" (Jn. 5:44). The scribes and Pharisees were so focused on themselves and their own glory and standing among men that they completely lost sight of the true and living God.

This section of Scripture is very important in our day of celebrity worship and the obsession with getting one's fifteen minutes of fame. It teaches us that true Christian discipleship involves a singleness of mind toward God. "No one can serve two masters" (Mt. 6:24). It teaches us that we have been saved to exalt God; that a focus on self is the way of the world. Once again,

we emphasize that this way of thinking must undergird our whole outlook on life and our obedience to the law.

Fifth, before we examine these verses in detail we need to dispense with the common notion that these verses contradict our Lord's earlier command: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:16). In chapter six, Jesus tells the disciples that their good works must be done in secret, while in chapter five He tells them that the light of their works must not be hidden under a basket, but placed on a lamp stand so men can see these works. Is this not a contradiction? No, it is not, for the following reasons. For one thing, each of these teachings is speaking to separate issues. In the first, the Savior is warning against cowardice because the disciples' job is to spread the gospel of Christ in a fallen world. It is obvious from the Great Commission and other passages that the church must interact with the world in order to disciple the nations. This requires courage and good works that are public. In the second teaching Jesus is not dealing with courage, but self-exaltation or improper motives. He speaks about attracting attention to self when it is totally unnecessary and only serves to glorify self. This can be seen from the choice of good works involved. A charitable deed does not need to be advertised by the one performing the deed. To do so is obnoxious and actually detracts from the glory that God should receive. Also, when we speak of individual piety, both prayer and fasting should normally be done in secret. There is no good scriptural reason for doing such things in public. However, there are other good works, such as evangelistic preaching, witnessing and being a good Samaritan, that are by nature public. Thus, we see that each section focuses our attention upon different sins that must be avoided. Further, both sections have the exact same goal—the glory of God. There are works that, when done with the proper motive, glorify God. There are also works that do not glorify God because they are done out of a desire for self-promotion.

Thus, we see the need to let Scripture interpret Scripture. Both of these teachings must be taken together. Our light must shine before men so they will embrace Jesus Christ and glorify God. And we must have a proper motive and intent when doing good works. Moreover, there are certain acts of piety that, by nature, are designed to be private. The same Jesus who healed the sick and preached good tidings to huge crowds also "went up on the mountain by Himself to pray" (Mt. 14:23). Secret works must not be made public and public works must not remain secret.

Sixth, in the introductory statement, as well as each illustration, the central reason given for doing things to please God instead of man is the reward received from God: "Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Mt. 6:1). Those who do things from unworthy motives, to receive praise from men "have their reward" (vs. 2, 5 and 16). They receive a reward in the here and now, in this world. But they forfeit any possibility of a heavenly reward. From this we can ascertain the following.

(1) Those that habitually do things solely for the praise of men are not to be regarded as true disciples, but are to be classed together with the hypocrites—the scribes and Pharisees. Obviously, if hypocrites are to receive any kind of reward, it must be in this world and it must be from men and not God. This is a sobering thought that should cause all of us to think. "If you are seeking a reward from men you will get it, but it will be all you get. Work through your religious life, think of all the good you have done in the past, in the light of that pronouncement. How much remains to come to you from God? It is a terrifying thought."³¹³

³¹³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:17.

(2) It is clear from this section of Scripture that a reward from God is a legitimate biblical motivation for obedience. For some reason the idea that we should obey God with an eye to our heavenly reward has come under attack as somehow improper and not noble. The general idea is that we should do what is right, solely because it is right without any other considerations. The problem with this view is that it contradicts the explicit teaching of Scripture. The beatitudes, for example, repeatedly connect a proper attitude, or obedience, or suffering for Christ with blessings. Those who suffer are told to rejoice, for their reward in heaven is great (5:12). Paul motivated believers to greater obedience by speaking of the judgment seat of Christ. Some of our works will be burned up as useless wood, hay and stubble, while others will be treated as gold, silver or precious jewels (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11-15). We are told that the Redeemer Himself looked to His future reward: “Jesus...who for the joy that was before Him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). Given the biblical teaching on rewards, all of us should have a strong interest in heavenly rewards and, consequently, in leading holy lives that please God.

Charitable Deeds

“Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly” (Mt. 6:2-4). In the first illustration Jesus deals with acts of mercy. The word translated “alms” (KJV) or “charitable deeds” (NKJV), *eleemosynen*, refers primarily to charitable giving. “It comes from the noun *eleos* (mercy, pity, compassion) and the verb *eleeo* ‘to have pity or mercy on, to show mercy.’”³¹⁴ In the Old Testament, showing mercy to the poor among the covenant people by helping them with a gift of food, clothing, money or an interest-free loan was an integral aspect of biblical religion. For example, the law says,

If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land. And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the LORD thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him. And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day (Dt. 15:7-15; cf. Lev. 25:35; Job 29:16; Ps. 41:1; Pr. 14:21; 19:17; 21:13; 28:27; Amos 2:6, 12).

³¹⁴ Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 5.

The teaching of the Old Testament regarding poor believers is continued in the New Covenant era. Note that Christ says “when you do a charitable deed” (v. 2), not “if you do it.” It is assumed that disciples will help a brother in need. When Paul appealed for funds to help the saints, he encouraged the Corinthians to give by quoting Psalm 112:9: “He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever” (2 Cor. 9:9). Therefore, the issue before us is not the necessity of giving, but the motive and manner of giving. As we consider verses 2 through 4, we will note the following: the wrong way to do charitable deeds; the motive or reason behind the wrong manner; the proper way to give; and the reason for giving the proper way with the correct motive.

The wrong way to give to charity is identified as announcing the giving by the blowing of a trumpet. This is said to be done in the synagogues (i.e. during formal worship) and in the streets (i.e. in every day acts of charity). Commentators are divided as to whether the blowing of trumpets is to be taken literally.³¹⁵ Even if it is not literal, the point remains the same: the scribes and Pharisees did everything they could to draw attention to their generosity. When they gave in public worship, they made sure everyone knew about it. When they gave in the streets of the city, they proclaimed their good deeds before the general public. These hypocrites announced their charity as broadly as possible. They, in essence, say, “Look at me; look at how merciful, kind, good and holy I am. Take note of how giving and caring I am.”

Jesus calls these men hypocrites “because they put on the appearance of religion and holiness, but inwardly, and otherwise, were very wicked men.”³¹⁶ The word *hypokrites* in Hellenistic Greek was the word used to describe an actor in the theater. It referred to someone who was pretending to be someone that he was really not. This word is often used against the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; cf. 7:5) because they put on a religious front before men, even though inside they were unregenerate and evil. “In the NT it is used consistently in a negative sense. Matthew captures the duplicity inherent in hypocrisy when he juxtaposes the word with the quotation of Isa. 29:13, ‘this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’ (15:8).”³¹⁷ The best way to identify a hypocrite is to discover if a person acts one way in private and another way in public. Or, he may act one way in front of his Christian friends and in a completely different way when he is with unbelievers. Our modern culture has become exceptionally adept at hypocrisy in that, during the week, people lie, cheat, get drunk and fornicate, but on Sunday they put on their church clothes and act very piously. Even many modern worship services display a form of hypocrisy, for the service of God has been taken and twisted into something it was never meant to be. The modern service is full of make-believe and entertainment. It is a theatrical display before an audience that is all done for the applause of men. In a sense, the modern church is in a more degenerate state than ancient Israel, for the Jews’ trumpet blast merely preceded their deeds. In the modern church almost the whole worship service is a trumpet blast of entertainment and gimmicks. In the ancient church men merely thought good things of the Pharisees; now people literally applaud.

³¹⁵ A. T. Robertson’s comments on this topic are excellent: “Is this literal or metaphorical? No actual instance of such conduct has been found in the Jewish writings. McNeile suggests that it may refer to the blowing of trumpets in the streets on the occasion of public fasts. Vincent suggests the thirteen trumpet-shaped chests of the temple treasury to receive contributions (Luke 21:2). But at Winona Lake one summer a missionary from India named Levering stated to me that he had seen Hindu priests do precisely this very thing to get a crowd to see their beneficences. So it looks as if the rabbis could do it also. Certainly it was in keeping with their love of praise. And Jesus expressly says that ‘the hypocrites’ (*hoi hupokritai*) do this very thing” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:50).

³¹⁶ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:55.

³¹⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 139.

The motive or reason for announcing charitable deeds is to “have glory from men.” They advertised their good works to be seen by men and thus to be praised by them. They wanted others to think that they were great. They did not do good deeds to glorify God’s grace and mercy, but their own beneficence. They viewed good works as ego boosters. Their problem was that they were filled with pride. Their giving to the poor was not contrary to Scripture, but their motivation or thinking behind the giving was immoral. As John says, “they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (12:43).

We see once again that our Lord is very concerned about hidden thoughts and not simply outward acts. Earlier Jesus warned us of adultery in the heart (Mt. 5:28) and murder in the mind (Mt. 5:22). Now, He wants us to search our hearts and root out all unlawful motivations, especially pride. The scribes and Pharisees thought more highly of themselves than they should have (cf. Lk. 18:12) and did not mortify the pride in their hearts. Consequently, pride controlled them; it became like a cancer that devours all before it. Their whole outlook on life and their whole way of doing religion was tainted by inordinate self-esteem and conceit. Every action was calculated to exalt their status, achievements and position as religious leaders. They had completely perverted the true purpose of good works and charity in the process. The good works that we do are to be done only to glorify God and not ourselves. To minister to the needy for the purpose of being seen and glorified by men; and, in the process, receive more power and influence over others is worldly and sinful. It is not a display of true Christian love, but rather of carnal ambition. To give to the poor to increase our own status in this world is dishonest and insincere; it is a form of covetousness. It is a very grievous sin because men are coveting and then stealing the glory that belongs only to God. Moreover, it puts man in a place that he does not really belong, as the judges and approvers of our works.

This section of Scripture is very convicting because we all know that we have been guilty in this area. There have been many times when we were more concerned with what men think of us than what God thinks. There perhaps have been instances where we became very upset because men thought ill of us; even more upset than when we know that our actions have offended God. Such thoughts prove that, at times, we have been guilty of selfish pride.

Christ’s Remedy for This Sin

After identifying the behavior that His disciples must avoid, Jesus tells them the proper way to give and the correct motive. “But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret” (Mt. 6:3-4). There has been much speculation regarding the meaning of the left hand and the right hand. It is wrong to see something esoteric or mystical in the naming of the two hands, for the Savior is making a point about secrecy in giving and even the proper attitude of the giver. This is clear from the explanatory “that” clause which follows. This is the central point of instruction in all three illustrations that righteous acts must be done in secret, beyond the attention of others. Therefore, the two hands may represent others and ourselves and perhaps, at times, even just ourselves. In other words, we are not even to take note of our own works. We are not to have pride and self-congratulations over our own good deeds that have been done in secret. From this teaching we must learn to do a number of things in the future.

First, the most simple and obvious application is that we must do everything we can to avoid doing charitable deeds to be seen of men. This means that we should not go around

bragging about our merciful acts to others. We should keep things as secret as possible.³¹⁸ Another thing that we must do is not participate in fund-raising practices that violate this passage of Scripture. A number of charitable organizations attempt to stimulate giving by publishing lists of donors. Some lists even are categorized according to the amount given. Organizations that seek donations do this because studies indicate that people give more when they receive credit for doing it publicly. Believers who want to give to such an organization must first insist that their name not be published as a donor. Certain churches do something similar when they post little brass plaques on the side of the pews or below a stained glass window indicating which parishioners donated money for that item. Such practices are in complete violation of this passage. If you give to have your name on a plaque, then you have your reward. Colleges, seminaries and hospitals occasionally will name a building, facility or a wing after a rich, generous donor. This is unbiblical and should be stopped at once. We must never advertise our giving.

Second, when we give or do some charitable deed, we need to examine our heart to make sure our actions are not based on self-exaltation or egotism. Ask yourself, “Am I seeking the praise of men, or is my sole concern the glory of God? Am I giving because I want to glorify the Savior and advance His cause, or do I want to feel good about myself and pat myself on the back? Self-congratulation must not be our motive to do good works. Everything must be directed toward the exaltation of our heavenly Father. Modern unbelieving concepts about charity and giving which are based either on some concept of duty toward humanity, self-esteem, or both are humanistic and egotistical. The point of self-examination in this area is to identify pride in our hearts and then subdue it by proper giving. This soul-searching will require diligence and honesty because our hearts are deceitful and many professing Christians are living in complete self-deception regarding their motives.

Third, there are some things that we should be continually thinking about, that will give us a proper perspective about ourselves that should help us subdue pride in our hearts. (1) We need to consider the fact that we have been saved by grace and have received everything as a gift from God. Thus, we have no reason to boast (Rom. 4:2) or brag about our achievements. As Paul says, “For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). We can replace pride with humility when we understand that it is God who created us “in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). We should thank God and glorify Him alone, for apart from a work of the Holy Spirit in us we would be walking in darkness. The scribes’ and Pharisees’ pride and exaltation of themselves in works of mercy were merely a reflection of their doctrine of salvation by works, of personal redemption through human achievement. Unlike the Pharisees, we look at all our works through the cross of Christ. We know that everything we have and do that is good is founded upon the Savior’s shed blood at Calvary.

³¹⁸ That all charity is not to be secret is obvious from Acts 11:29-30 in which the disciples sent relief to the believers in Judea and Acts 4:32-5:5, in which the disciples were selling their property and laying proceeds at the apostles’ feet. Ananias and Sapphira his wife were struck dead not because they did not give all their property, but because they lied to the apostles about how much they gave (i.e. the percentage, vs. 2-3). In the ancient church, people would bring all sorts of things to pay their tithe such as oil, wine, produce, gold, silver, pottery and even farm animals. These things would be brought to church on the first day of the week (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-2). In the synagogues and the Temple, a tithe box was used to receive monetary funds. Obviously, with such tithes absolute secrecy was impossible.

(2) We also need to keep in mind that all of our good works are tainted with sin and thus do not merit boasting. Thus, we need to follow our Lord's instructions when He said, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Lk. 17:10). When we have done a good work, we should praise God and thank Jesus. Whenever we are tempted toward spiritual pride, we need to remember that even our best service does not bring any gain to God. Nothing we do, or can do, gives us a claim on Him. Even our best works do not really deserve to be rewarded by God. If we think of them as we should, we will see that they fall so short and contain so much that is wrong mixed in them, that we should not presume to think them worthy of Jehovah's notice. (God only rewards our works because He has graciously promised to do so and because our sins have been removed by Jesus Christ.) With all this in mind, we can fight against pride through a continual consciousness of humility. Moreover, we can embrace humility far easier with a consciousness that it was our sins which sent the beloved Lamb of God to the cross. There is nothing more effective in humbling the pride in our hearts than the realization that it was our sins that sent Jesus to the cross to suffer and die.

Jesus' Reason for Obedience

After Christ tells us the right way to do charitable deeds, He gives a very weighty reason why He must be obeyed. If we keep our charitable deeds a secret, "[our] Father who sees in secret will Himself reward [us] openly" (Mt. 6:4). From this statement we learn two important things.

First, we see that there are two kinds of rewards. There is the reward from men (v. 2) and the reward received from God (v. 4). If we live to glorify self and seek the praise of men, we will be rewarded. Men will think better of us and we may advance ourselves socially and economically. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the charity of the rich and famous that is announced in front of cameras. Movie stars and corporations do this as a publicity/marketing tool to improve their image before the general public. Such publicity usually works. In correlation with such self-glorification, Hollywood and corporate America have all sorts of award shows where great givers are handed beautiful plaques or golden statues, once again in front of the lights and cameras. Indeed, they have their reward. But, Jesus' underlying message about the rewards of men is that they are temporal, earthly, fleeting and ultimately (i.e. in the long run) worthless. A movie star's many glittering awards are of little comfort on his death bed; they mean even less when he dies without Christ and goes to hell.

In contrast, there is the reward from God. This refers to the rewards of grace that Christians receive for their deeds done in the name of Christ, to glorify Him. In the area of charity, these good works are a secret. The person who does them is not praised or rewarded by men. He has received no accolades from the public; there are no plaques or golden statues on his shelves. But there is something far more important—God Himself will reward Him openly. The deeds done for God's glory will receive a public reward on that great day when our Savior returns and sits on His throne of judgment. Whereas the rewards from men are temporal, earthly and fleeting, the rewards received from God are eternal, heavenly and can never be taken away. "Note, they who in their alms-giving study to approve themselves to God, only turn themselves

over to him as their Paymaster. The hypocrite catches at the shadow, but the upright man makes sure of the substance.”³¹⁹

This teaching regarding rewards is amazing and should spur all of us on to greater holiness and devotion toward God. Yet, how many professing Christians live as though this glorious promise were not really true? Do you practice good works simply to receive praise from men, to increase your own prestige? If you do, then you have your reward from man; but, that is all you will have. Do you live your life to serve Christ and glorify Him so that you will have great treasures in heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy (Mt. 6:20)? If not, then why not? What you do for the Savior will last forever. But to live for self is complete and utter vanity and foolishness.

Second, this verse tells us that God is always watching what we do. Jehovah sees everything that we do. He sees all of our actions, all of our words and even all of our thoughts. This is a sobering truth that we should think about all the time, especially when we are tempted to sin. The hypocrite can easily fool men. He can become adept at acting one way in front of people at church and another when he is in the world. But God sees everything, even our hearts; we cannot fool God. When we wake up in the morning, we need to remember that God is with us, watching us. When no one is around and we could say or do anything we want without another soul knowing—God is present with us. He observes and notes everything. We need to practice the presence of God; this is fundamental for our sanctification. Matthew Henry writes,

Consider the eye of God is always upon you. When we are with our superiors, and observe them to look upon us, that engageth us to look upon them; and shall we not look up to God, whose eyes always behold, and whose eye-lids try the children of men? He sees all the motions of our hearts, and sees with pleasure the motions of our hearts toward him, which should engage us to set him always before us. The servant, though he be careless at other times, yet when he is under his master’s eye, will wait in his place, and keep close to his business: we need no more to engage us to diligence, than to do our work with eye-service, while our Master looks on, and because he doth so, for then we shall never look off.³²⁰

Everyone (generally speaking) is on their best behavior when they are at church or are fellowshiping with serious Christians. It is usually when professing Christians are alone that they commit secret sins. There is the sin of pornography that is ravaging our nation. There is drunkenness, filthy speech, lascivious movies, debauched literature, gambling and so forth. Professing Christians who struggle with these sins and backslide do so behind closed doors when no one is around. They would be shamed and embarrassed if other Christians knew what they were doing. But what they don’t realize, or they simply choose to ignore, is that God is watching. In God’s universe there is no such thing as a secret sin. This thought should put the fear of God in all backsliders; it should terrify all hypocrites. If people would focus on this fact and live in terms of it, then backsliding and hypocrisy would be a thing of the past.

The thrice-holy God of Scripture, who sees in secret, is the main motivation for obedience in the text before us and should be a main motivation for obedience in general. If everyone could consistently live in the presence of God all the phoniness, hypocrisy, showmanship and plastic worship would cease. If every professing Christian would heartily live in God’s presence every moment of every day, the effect upon Christendom would be profound.

³¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:69.

³²⁰ Matthew Henry, “How to Spend the Day with God” in *The Complete Works of Matthew Henry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1855] 1997), 1:227-228.

No doubt, a great revival and reformation would break out at once. What a wonderful blessing that would be to individuals, families and churches.

Chapter 22: Christ's Teaching on Prayer

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:5-15).

In verses 5-8, Jesus gives the second illustration regarding the proper method and motivation for Christian piety. Here He deals with prayer. Once again, He contrasts the proper way to pray with the hypocrites (the scribes and Pharisees), but also adds a comparison with the prayers of the heathen. Regarding this section of Scripture, there are some important introductory comments.

First, Christ is once again applying the general principle set forth in verse one that we are not to do acts piety before men, to be seen by them so that we would glorified by them. Those who do so receive their reward now (i.e. the praise of men and self-exaltation on earth); but, they forfeit a far greater reward that comes from God. This section of Scripture is very searching and relevant because it tells us to not just be satisfied with an outward obedience to God's Word, but also to look at our hearts or the motives that lie behind our actions. This is an area that believers often ignore. It is also an area in which many professing Christians are living in self-deception. For this reason the Savior says, "Take heed."

Second, as was the case with deeds of mercy, our Lord assumes that all believers will engage in secret prayer. Those who view prayer as an external ritual may be happy when their mindless recitation of prayers is over, but genuine Christians desire to approach their Father in prayer to commune with Him. The first thing that we find Paul doing after his conversion is praying—"Behold he prayeth" (Ac. 9:11). The Savior wants His people to avoid the hypocritical manner of praying that had become the habit of the religious leaders of His day. He wants them to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees in the way they pray.

Third, this is the first recorded teaching by our Lord on prayer and Christ regarded this topic of such importance that He gives a model prayer in verses 9 through 15. Jesus is so interested in this subject that He not only tells us the proper motive and place of prayer, but also how to pray. The Redeemer, whose whole purpose in coming to earth was to open the door to heaven and bring men to God, has a special concern about how disciples approach His Father in

heaven. Clearly, there is something especially odious about perverting the instrument of personal communication with God.

The Wrong Way to Pray

Jesus describes two incorrect ways to pray. The first regards hypocrites; that is, professors of the true religion who are not sincere, who pray in order to glorify themselves. The second regards pagans or complete unbelievers who do not know how to pray at all. For the sake of clarity, we will deal with each of these errors in turn.

Christ's description of the hypocritical way to pray is vivid and similar to His illustration regarding charity. "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward" (Mt. 6:5). Interestingly, the Savior says that the hypocrites love to pray conspicuously. In other words, it is not prayer that they love. Rather, they love to put themselves in a position where they will be the most noticed while they pray.

He gives two examples of praying in a manner that points men to their great piety. The first refers to praying standing in the synagogues. The synagogues were the places of public worship. Standing as a posture of prayer is common in Scripture (e.g., Gen. 18:22; 1 Sam. 1:26; Neh. 9:4-5; Mk. 11:25; Lk. 18:3, 11, 18) and is eminently biblical. It is a posture of respect and solemnity when coming into the presence of God. It was a common posture in the early Christian churches and is still the predominant posture in the stricter Reformed churches.

Praying to be seen in the synagogues can refer to a few different things. One possibility is that Jesus is referring to leading in prayer in public worship. In synagogue services, public prayer was led by a prominent male member of the congregation. This person would stand in front of the people with arms raised toward heaven as he prayed. This public prayer would be an ideal time for a man who was full of himself to show off before the congregation his great ability to pray and his magnificent spirituality. A man could easily succumb to the temptation to pray with an eye on the congregation instead of toward God. We have all probably heard this at times. The man who fills his prayer with poetic and beautifully crafted flourishes; who has a manufactured, unnatural tone of piety in his voice; whose fervency seems too fervent. Such a man crafts his prayer with the idea of winning the approval of men. He loves the opportunity to pray in public worship because it feeds his ego.

Another possibility is that Christ is referring to the practice of private prayer in the synagogue. In the days of our Lord, synagogues were always open for private prayer, just like Roman Catholic churches used to be. The Pharisees thus frequently went to the synagogues, not just at the regular stated times of worship, so that their piety would be carefully noted by those in the community. Also, when they prayed in the synagogues they would deliberately go up to the front of the building and stand in a conspicuous place to be seen by men. It is interesting that in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who came to the temple to pray, Jesus implies that the Pharisee stood to pray in a prominent place, for when He mentions the tax collector He notes that he prayed "standing afar off" (Lk. 18:13). In other words, the publican, in his contrition and humility, chose a place to pray that was as inconspicuous as possible. In the story, the places they chose to pray were reflective of the state of their hearts. One being pride, self-exaltation and spiritual egotism; the other being great humility and a consciousness of sin before God.

The second example regards the corners of the streets or literally "the corners of the wide (streets)." The Jews, throughout the Old Testament and in the days of our Lord, had three set

times for prayer: morning, afternoon and evening (Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10; Acts 3:1). At the appropriate time, pious Jews were expected to stop whatever they were doing and attend to their supplications toward God. If they were not at home, they would pray at the temple or they could stop at the local synagogue which was always open for prayer. Apparently, what the scribes and Pharisees were doing was to deliberately arrange their affairs so that when the time to pray came they were not in a secluded place, but were instead on a busy street. Therefore, they held their time of private devotions right out in the open for everyone to see. They refused to hide themselves in an alley or behind a building because they wanted to pray in the most conspicuous place. They were seeking the admiration of men instead of focusing on their communion with God. Their motive and purpose was self-exaltation. "Behind their piety lurked their pride. What they really wanted was applause."³²¹

These examples of praying in public in an ostentatious manner to be seen by men and glorified by them are shocking and sobering. They should stand as a warning against the deceitfulness of sin in our hearts and the danger of human pride. Think of how wicked and dishonoring to God it is to use the appointed means of speaking to Jehovah as a crass publicity stunt. We must be on guard to make sure our sinful natures do not lead us away from the purity and simplicity of true gospel worship into showmanship and sensuous or man-pleasing forms of devotion. We must guard our worship from human devices that detract from true worship and instead exalt man and his ideas. Sin is so deceitful within us and has so penetrated our nature as fallen beings that even in the highest activity we can engage in, we still must watch against sin and mortify it. Even when we pray, sin can affect us and pervert this noble activity. We must guard against pride, for sin can follow us even as we pray to God. "Truth and sincerity in the heart are vastly more important than choice language or a correct demeanor. Let us seek grace to heed that exhortation, 'Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God... Be not rash with thy mouth and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon the earth, therefore let thy words be few' (Eccles. v. 1, 2). If the Divine perfections duly impress our souls, then we shall be saved from much folly."³²²

As was the case with deeds of mercy, Jesus says, "Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward" (Mt. 6:5). Our Lord assures the disciples that what He says is true. The verb, "have" or "have received" (*apechousi*), "is a compound, signifying to have entirely, have the whole of, have in full. The idea is that in being gazed at and glorified by men they have all the reward they will ever obtain."³²³ Those who pray to be heard by men will receive a reward from men; but only from men.

The second type of wrong prayer regards the praying of the heathen. "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Mt. 6:7). "Vain repetitions" (*battalogesete*) is an excellent description of heathen prayer. The word means babbling, speaking without thinking or empty chattering. This type of praying is very common throughout the world. The Buddhists and Tibetans have their prayer wheels and nonsensical chanting. Hindus have their prayer beads and mantras. They believe that they can achieve bliss through chanting "ohm," "Hare Krishna" and so forth. Mohammedans, to a degree, also fall into this category of vain repetition and much speaking. They show off their piety by repeatedly banging their heads on the floor like drunken numskulls. Mohammedan dervishes spin in a circle and repeat the name Allah until they fall down in a dizzy ecstasy. None

³²¹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 133.

³²² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 154.

³²³ John Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 127.

of this pagan nonsense is new. The worshippers of Baal on Mount Carmel in their confrontation with Elijah called upon Baal using the same formal invocation from morning until noon (1 Kings 18:26). The worshippers of Diana cried out the exact same sentence of devotion for about two whole hours (Ac. 19:34).

This warning regarding praying as the Gentiles do was timely, for the Jews were influenced by the unbelieving nations around them. The Jewish religious scholars penned such sayings as: “*everyone...that multiplies prayers is heard*; and whoever prolongs his prayer, his prayer does not return empty; and he that is long in prayer, his days are prolonged: and, according to their canons, everyday a man ought to pray eighteen prayers.”³²⁴ The Pharisees were noted for the length of their prayers. This practice was regarded as evidence of their great piety.

In our day, Roman Catholics are perhaps the most notorious in their imitation of the heathen. Millions upon millions of deluded souls mindlessly pray through all the beads of the rosary thinking they will receive a great blessing. After confession, to make penance for their sins, they are told to say so many Hail Marys, this number of Our Fathers and so on. “In a popish prayer, addressed to Jesus, the word *Jesu* is repeated fifteen times, with only the words, ‘Have mercy on us, and help us’; and ending thus, ‘Give me here my purgatory!’”³²⁵

Among professing evangelicals, the Charismatic movement has been one of the largest purveyors of heathen-like vain prayers in the modern world through their practice of praying in tongues. Unlike the biblical practice of speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*), which were prophecies supernaturally bestowed by the Holy Spirit in real human languages, Charismatic tongues are nothing more than gibberish or non-cognitive babbling. We know this is true for three reasons. First, biblical tongues were a revelatory gift that *ceased* with the death of the apostles (1 Cor. 13:8-12; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4; Ac. 4:30; 14:3). Second, modern tongues have no resemblance to linguistic structure consistent with any languages. Third, modern tongues are a *learned* phenomenon. Tongues and ecstatic forms of devotion are common in pagan religions. This was practiced in ancient Greece, by a number of tribes in modern Africa and can be found among Muslims, Eskimos and Tibetan monks. Tongues have also been found among practitioners of the occult. Praying in tongues, which is nothing more than babbling like an idiot, is completely worthless and even harmful, for it is a counterfeit miracle that mocks the true gift.

While we are on the topic of vain repetition, we would do well to consider the danger of prayer books that are used week after week in public worship. In papal and prelate worship services, many prayers are repeated verbatim week after week. Although the old low church Anglican prayer book contains many excellent prayers, it is unwise to use the same man-made petitions every week because a believer can easily slip into praying with the mind disengaged. Many people mumble through the prayer book while they think about football or what is for lunch. The early Puritans and Presbyterians viewed prayer books only as aids or training manuals on proper prayer and did not think it was wise or biblical to continue their use week after week. They favored a well-informed *ex tempore* praying that followed the pattern set forth by Jesus in the Lord’s prayer. They understood that the Bible authorizes using our own words in prayer and that God promises His people that the Holy Spirit will assist them when they form their prayers (cf. Zech. 12:10; Rom. 8:26-27).

Our Lord’s teaching on vain repetitions does not preclude saying the same prayer more than once, for the Savior made virtually the same request to the Father three times in

³²⁴ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:56.

³²⁵ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:235-236.

Gethsemane (Mt. 26:44). Similarly, Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to have his thorn in the flesh removed (2 Cor. 12:8). In Psalm 119 David petitioned God saying, “teach me your statutes,” seven times. The repetition that Jesus condemns is that which is not honest, sincere, attentive and from the heart. Moreover, Christ does not condemn the use of all verbatim written forms of prayer, for in Luke’s gospel He introduces a condensed form of the Lord’s prayer with the words, “When you pray, say” (11:2). It is important to recognize that even *ex tempore* prayers can be cold, formal and insincere. The idea that is common in certain evangelical circles that complete spontaneity somehow equals spirituality is simply not true. A man can come up with a completely new prayer and can sound very spiritual, yet may be babbling as the heathen do. We must be attentive and sincere whether we recite the Lord’s prayer or make up our own prayer.

The Right Way to Pray

Having noted the Redeemer’s teaching on the hypocritical and pagan method of prayer let us examine His solution to wrong prayer. As we consider this subject, keep in mind that our Lord is discussing private prayer. We know this not only because the Greek words are singular (“But thou...”), but also because Scripture is filled with examples of public prayer in corporate worship (e.g., 1 Kgs. 8:22-53; 2 Chr. 30:27; Ez. 9:5-15).

Jesus considers two primary errors related to prayer: one by the Jewish hypocrites and the other by the Gentiles or heathen. First, we will turn our attention to the hypocritical prayers of the scribes and Pharisees. “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Mt. 6:6). The “you” in this injunction is singular and emphatic. The praying of Jesus’ disciples must be different than the corrupt Jews. Christ focuses on two things that must characterize our prayers.

First, in our personal devotions, prayer is to be done in private. Our Lord brings this out in a number of ways. A believer is not to pray out on a busy street corner, but is to go into his own room and shut the door. The word translated room (*to tameion*) originally referred to a closet (“The LXX of Isa. 26:20 refers to entering *ta tamieia*, ‘the closets...’”³²⁶), and came to designate an inner room or private chamber of a house. We are to go to a secluded place where we can withdraw from others, shut out the world and commune with God. We are to seek out a place that is secret or inconspicuous. In our modern circumstances, we can simply go into our bedroom or office and shut and lock the door. In the days when Jesus spoke this and many people lived in a one room house, this could involve a corner of the house or even a secluded place out in the garden. Our Lord, who had no place to lay His head, would simply walk away from everyone to a secluded place, whether a mountain top (Mt. 14:23) or an olive orchard (Mt. 26:36). “A field, a garden, a mountain, may be as retired as a closet, and have all been sanctified by the Savior’s example, as proper scenes for secret prayer.”³²⁷ Godly Isaac retired to a field (Gen. 24:63) and the apostle Peter removed himself from his hosts by going up on the roof (Ac. 10:9).

Why are we to pray in secret? One reason is that secret prayer is unobserved prayer. In such a place there will be no temptation to ostentation or watching for the approval of men out of the corner of our eye, for no one is there to watch us pray. The secrecy of the place of prayer

³²⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 142.

³²⁷ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:233.

must reflect our heart. Humble and sincere worshippers are not interested in making a public display of their devotion to God. They are not concerned about impressing their neighbors. They understand that God not only sees in secret, but also sees the heart out of which petitions flow. God hates a proud heart (cf. Pr. 6:17). “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5; cf. Pr. 3:34). We need to give as much consideration to the place of prayer as we do to our posture in prayer.

Another reason is that, in our personal devotions, we do not want our prayer disturbed or interrupted. “If it be indeed to God that we pray, there can be no need for anyone else to be present; for it would hinder rather than help devotion to have a third person for a witness of the heart’s private intercourse with the Lord.”³²⁸ Sincere prayer from the heart requires our full attention. When we enter into God’s presence and are alone with Him, we do not want anything to distract us from this time of blessed fellowship. Perhaps this is the reason that our Lord repeatedly uses the singular second personal pronoun in this verse (i.e. eight times in only one verse). This brings out the fact that, in private prayer, we are alone with God. This is a special time for offering up our thankfulness, love and special requests to our God. Jesus treasured this special time of communion with His Father so much that, on occasion, He would pray all night to God (Lk. 6:12).

Moreover, by praying in seclusion where no one can hear us, we have a greater freedom in revealing our thoughts and concerns to God. There will be no temptation to hold anything back related to the confession of our sins and the personal battles that we have with the flesh. As people who know our own hearts, we can freely attend to the particulars of our personal sanctification without worrying about what is appropriate for other ears to hear.

The believer should pray in secret, for God’s presence is in that secret place; and, God who observes you praying in the secret place will reward you openly. God transcends all spatial limitations and His presence is everywhere, even in secret places (cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 139:7-10; Isa. 66:1; Jer. 23:23, 24; Ac. 7:48, 49; 17:27, 28). Thus to enter in your secret place to pray must be viewed as entering into the audience chamber of Jehovah, God almighty, the maker of heaven and earth. The fact that we are praying to our Father in a closet, bedroom, office or garden does not mean that such prayer is somehow less important, or casual, or off the cuff. Perish the thought! God who is light and in whom dwells no darkness at all (1 Jn. 1:5); who is consuming fire (Heb. 12:29); who created the whole universe in only six days, is there. He is present. He is watching and He is listening to everything you have to say. Consequently, it is not at all important that other people cannot hear you pray or do not even know that you are praying. If you have God’s attention, then that is all that matters. We must understand what a blessed privilege this is and take full spiritual advantage of it as Christians. By His sacrificial blood Jesus has ripped in two the curtain to the holy of holies and has given every believer direct access to God’s loving presence.

By way of application, the Savior’s teaching dispels a very common notion that certain places are holy, such as church buildings, and that God is somehow more present or more approachable in such places. No, such teaching comes from Roman Catholicism. When Christ died on the cross, the time came when special places such as the Temple were no longer significant (cf. Jn. 4:21). As Paul says, “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth does not dwell in Temples made with hands” (Ac. 17:24). Since God is not confined to man-made temples, all such buildings really hold no religious significance in God’s sight. We must realize that God “is not far from each one of us” (Ac. 17:27); that prayer to

³²⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 66.

Him does not need to be offered in church buildings, or cathedrals, or “temples.” The Romanist practice of keeping church buildings open for prayer is based on human tradition and is clearly in conflict with Matthew 6:5-6.

It is significant that each individual believer is told to pray “to your Father.” This is covenantal language. This indicates that Jesus has expiated our sins and propitiated God’s wrath, that God is our covenant God and friend waiting to welcome us. Many of us, who do not pray as often and as fervently as we should, often do so out of a sense of being unworthy to come into God’s presence and have a time of special communion with Him. This is one reason why we must address God as our Father. Whenever we pray we must focus our faith on Christ and acknowledge that we came into God’s presence not because we deserve it; but, because we are clothed with Christ’s perfect righteousness. If we do not meditate upon our precious Savior as we approach God, then we will sink in doubts and waiver under a consciousness of sin. Prayer can be destroyed by looking away from God to the praises of men. And it can also be hindered by not looking to Christ. God is our Father and has taken a special interest in us because we are justified by His Son and united to Him.

Like the teaching about deeds of mercy, our Lord’s instructions on secret prayer are accompanied by a promise: “your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Mt. 6:6). The men who prayed to be seen by others have the reward of praise from men. But those who pray in private must have faith that God sees them and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). “It is called a *reward*, but it is *of grace*, not *of debt*; what merit can there be in begging?”³²⁹ Sometimes secret prayers are rewarded openly in this life when God magnificently answers our prayers in a bold, dramatic fashion. This promise, however, is in the main eschatological. It points to the time when the saints will appear in glory, in white lustrous robes before the King of kings. The hypocrites had their pat on the back in this world. But those who pray in secret will receive a reward from God before a multitude of men and angels. Is our concern the rewards and trinkets of this world which are passing away or the praise and eternal rewards that come only from God? If you are living for the here and now and your 15 minutes of fame before this wicked world, then you have no reason to believe that you are a child of God.

You must ask yourself some searching questions related to your heart and the place of prayer. Do you have a secret place of prayer where you regularly go to commune with God? Do you pray more frequently and fervently in your private place than you do at church functions (e.g., prayer meeting)? Do you love to pray in secret to your heavenly Father? Is private prayer a habitual practice in your life or something you only do once in a while? When you pray at a prayer meeting, is your public prayer an overflow of your private devotions? These are serious questions, for in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is describing what a true disciple really is and is not. If you are deficient in this area of private prayer, then you must repent at once. If we do not obey Christ in this crucial area of piety, then we need to question our commitment to Him. Let us be diligent in this area, so that we are not classed with the hypocrites.

Second, our Lord warns us not to babble and use empty repetitions like the heathen. “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Mt. 6:7). Earlier we looked at some modern examples of vain repetition in prayer. Here we will look at some practical ways to avoid vain repetitions. Matthew Henry writes,

³²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:71.

When we go to pray, we must not give the sacrifice of fools, that think not either what is to be done, or what is to be gained, but speak the words of the wise, who aim at some good end in what we say, and suit it to that end.... This is directing the prayer, as he that shoots an arrow at a mark directs it, and with a fixed eye and steady hand takes aim aright. This is engaging the heart to approach to God, and in order to that, disengaging it from everything else. He that takes aim with one eye shuts the other; if we would direct a prayer to God, we must look off all other things,—must gather in our wandering thoughts,—must summon them all to draw near, and give their attendance,—for here is work to be done that needs them all, and is well worthy of them all: thus we must be able to say with the Psalmist, “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed.”³³⁰

Consequently, one thing that we must do is focus our minds upon God and what we want to say without wandering or daydreaming. A prayer can be vain or empty even when we are not repeating the same words over and over. Prayer that honors God requires concentration. When in conversation with other men, we are offended when it is clear that the other person is not paying any attention. Yet how many times do our minds wander far from God in private prayer and even during public prayer. We must watch ourselves and not allow such a dishonoring thing to happen.

If we do use composed prayer on occasion, we must use prayers that are biblical and do not use repetitions in a vain, superstitious manner. The various professing communions that say the same words or phrases over and over like a mantra or chant, obviously are violating Jesus’ teaching. Further, if we read a composed prayer, we must read it not only with our lips but also with our hearts. If we say something to God but are not even aware of what we say or do not mean what we say, then we are wasting our time. Such prayers are vain. Empty words are ineffectual. “[T]he superstitious rehearsing of a tale of words, without regard to the sense of them, as the papists saying by their beads so many Ave-Marys and Paternosters; or the barren and dry going over of the same things again and again, merely to drill out the prayer to such a length, and to make a show of affection when really there is none; these are the vain repetitions here condemned.”³³¹ When people treat prayers like magic formulas that merely need to be said over and over again, they treat God as an impersonal machine rather than a personal loving Father.

We also must avoid prayers that are long simply for the sake of being long. There is a tendency among pagans and Romanists to regard long prayers as automatically better and more efficacious. “There was—and still is—a kind of subconscious idea that if men batter long enough at God’s door, he will answer; that God can be talked, and even pestered, into condescension.”³³² Our Lord’s statement does not automatically exclude all long prayers, for He Himself prayed all night and the Bible contains a number of lengthy prayers (e.g., 2 Chr. 6:14-42; Neh. 9; Ps. 18, 89, 119). Sometimes long prayers are necessary, such as in extraordinary times. Moreover, in the parable of the unjust judge (cf. Lk. 18:2-9), the Savior commends persistence in prayer. Once again, the main focus of this passage is on the motive behind long prayers. Pagans think that praying longer and louder will increase the possibility that their gods will hear and respond. The priests of Baal kept praying, shouting, dancing around and cutting themselves because they thought their god would be impressed (cf. 1 Kgs. 18:25-29). Therefore, we must not multiply

³³⁰ Matthew Henry, “How to Begin Every Day With God,” in *Works*, 1:204-205.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:195.

words in a superstitious way. We must not think that a multiplicity of words can force God's hand.

Christ gives two reasons why vain repetition and useless long prayers are to be avoided. First, that is the way the heathen pray. Believers are never to imitate the ways of the heathen in their worship, whether in public or private. Syncretism between the true religion and the surrounding pagan culture was the downfall of Israel throughout its history and has also resulted in the apostate Roman Catholic Church. To model our approach to God on practices invented by unbelievers is a rejection of *sola Scriptura*. It is insulting to God, who gave us His Word. When Jesus gave this warning, the Jews despised the Gentiles and did not think that they had adopted their ways. The Pharisees, who were "the separated ones," were praying like pagans. True disciples must return to *sola Scriptura* and, thus, have a righteousness that surpasses the scribes and Pharisees. As individuals and churches, we must examine ourselves and see what we are doing in our worship that comes from God and what we may be doing from the mind of man.

Second, our Lord appeals to God's omniscience. He knows the things that we need before we even ask Him. The pagans believed in finite gods that were corrupt like men. Thus, their prayers needed to be long, so their finite gods could learn all the details. Their prayers were designed to twist the arm of an unloving, corrupt deity. But we pray to the true and living God who is not only fully aware of all our needs, but also who cares about us as a loving Father. Therefore, we can be concise in our prayers. Indeed, many "of the most striking and fervent prayers recorded in Scripture are brief and pithy; such as that of: Moses (Exod. 32:31, 32); Solomon (for an understanding heart, I Kings 3:6-9); Elijah (I Kings 18:36, 37); Hezekiah (II Kings 19:14-19); Jabez (I Chron. 4:10); Agur (Prov. 30:7-9); the publican (Luke 18:13); the dying thief (Luke 23:42); Stephen (Acts 7:60); and Paul (for the Ephesians, Eph. 3:14-19). To this class belong also the many one sentence prayers or ejaculations of Nehemiah (Neh. 4:4, 5; 5:19; 6:9, 13:14, 29, 31). Christ's high-priestly or intercessory prayer, too, can hardly be called lengthy (John 17), and the Lord's Prayer, which he taught his disciples to pray, is certainly marked by brevity (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4)."³³³ To go on and on in prayer as if God was ignorant, or as if Jehovah did not have our best interest in mind, shows a lack of knowledge of, or faith in, God's attributes. In fact, the Almighty knows our own needs better than we do. "[H]is eyes run to and fro throughout the earth, to observe the necessities of his people (2 Chron. xvi.9), and he often gives *before we call* (Isa. lxxv.24), and *more than we ask for* (Eph. iii.20)."³³⁴

Some may object saying, "If God already knows everything, then why pray at all?" Aside from the fact that we are told to pray to God throughout Scripture by precept and example (e.g., cf. Dt. 22:5; Zech. 12:10; Mt. 6:9; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Thess. 5:17; Phil. 4:6; Heb. 13:18; Jas. 1:5), prayer is essential to our sanctification and daily communion with God. The primary point of prayer is not simply to relate information, but also to confess, to love, to reverence and to commune. It is the appointed means to secure God's help and blessing. It reveals our consciousness of complete dependence on God. It is the uplifting of our hearts to the throne of grace. It is children by adoption, through Christ's blood, crying out to a loving, merciful Father. God has instituted prayer for us, for our Spirit-given desire to cry "Abba, Father."

Do you regularly pray to the One who sees you in secret and knows your heart? Do you honor Him as the Father of all mercies and the giver of every good and perfect gift? Do you enter into secret prayer and pant after the only wise God, who lifted you out of the mire of sin and saved you from yourself? Do you have faith that God wants you to ask for the things you need

³³³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 324.

³³⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:72.

and that He is willing to bless you? God wants you to come into His presence. If you neglect prayer, then you neglect your own sanctification and blessing. Let us pray and bless “Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:21).

Chapter 23: The Lord’s Prayer, Part 1

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:9-15).

In His continued teaching on prayer, Jesus gives His disciples a model or sample prayer which tells believers the manner, method and even proper content or subject matter for prayer. The word “therefore” connects the prayer to what immediately precedes it and thus this prayer should be viewed as an example of true prayer, given against the vain repetition or mechanical incantations of the heathen. This prayer shows the great attention that Christ paid to this act of piety. He not only told them what not to do and why, but he also told them what needed to be done and gave this model prayer so as to be exceptionally specific. The corruptions regarding prayer among the Jews were so deep and widespread that the Savior gave the church a new directory for prayer. Before we consider the specific aspects and details of this model prayer, there are some preliminary comments that are in order.

First, the Lord’s prayer is to be noted for its brevity and simplicity. Unlike hypocritical and heathen prayers which were verbose, unthinking, complicated, empty and mechanical, Jesus’ prayer is perfect in every respect. Not one word is wasted. “This delightful prayer is short, devout, and full of meaning.”³³⁵ From this we learn that in our conversation with God our prayers should be concise and simple. Much can be said with few words if our prayer flows from a solid knowledge of Scripture, theology and the meditations of our hearts.

Second, this prayer is for disciples or believers who alone can call God “Father.” This is proven when our Lord contrasts true prayer with hypocritical and pagan prayer and the fact that the term “father” is used in a soteriological or redemptive sense throughout the New Testament when speaking of God. Christ said that those who do not believe in Him are children of the devil, not God (Jn. 8:44; 1 Jn. 3:1, 2). While there is a sense in which God is Father of all as their creator (Mal. 2:10; Ps. 36:6; implied in Ac. 17:28), the Sermon on the Mount is driving home the great antithesis between unbelievers and disciples, or the true children of God. Therefore, the idea that the “Lord’s Prayer” is a pluralistic prayer, an ecumenical prayer or a non-Christian prayer because the prayer does not say “in Jesus’ name” is erroneous. The sacrificial work of Christ that enables us to call God Father is presupposed in the very first words of the invocation.

Third, the scope and organization of this prayer are amazing. The prayer consists of an invocation, six petitions and a conclusion. Both the invocation (preface to the requests) and the conclusion (according to the Received Text) exalt and glorify God. Our prayers are to begin and end with the glorification of God. Although prayer is a time to express our needs to God, it is

³³⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 67.

still theocentric and focused on the nature of and cause of God above all else. The first three petitions deal with Jehovah: His name, kingdom and will (vs. 9-10). The second three deal with our own necessities: bread (i.e. our physical needs); debts or sins (i.e. our spiritual needs); and enemies (both spiritual and physical). Like the ten commandments, this prayer focuses our attention upon God before we are concerned with ourselves. “First, God’s concerns will be given priority... (‘Your name..., your kingdom..., your will...’). Secondly, our own needs, though demoted to second place, will yet be comprehensively committed to him (‘Give us..., forgive us..., deliver us...’)”³³⁶ An understanding of this prayer would dispel the self-centered, self-esteem, prosperity gospel, God-exists-to-meet-my-needs attitude of much of modern evangelicalism. This prayer, in a comprehensive way, deals with God’s glory and His dealings with the whole world, as well as with our own personal lives. “This is indeed the perfect pattern for our prayers!”³³⁷

Fourth, the introduction to the Lord’s prayer, “Therefore you are to pray in this manner,” indicates that in the Sermon on the Mount this prayer is a model to be followed and not set forth only as a form to be used. The verb is a present imperative (*proseuchesthe*) and thus indicates that, whenever we pray, this model should guide the outline or structure of our prayers. This means that we do not simply rush into prayer mindlessly, but that contemplation must precede what we say. It may even be a good idea to make an outline of prayer at first and make some notes so that we faithfully follow our Lord’s pattern. As we use this pattern every day we will become better at prayer and the good model that Jesus gave us will become habitual. Although we can never exceed this perfect prayer, we can learn to flesh it out so that it accords with our spiritual needs and unique situation.

Never forget that there are some great advantages in following our Savior’s example. (1) If we model our prayers on this prayer we will avoid errors in the way we pray. In fact, if we are careful to follow Jesus’ inspired example it will be difficult to make mistakes. (2) Another great advantage is that it gives us the proper priority and balance in prayer. Prayer must glorify God and focus on Him before it regards our own needs. Much prayer today is lopsided and anthropocentric. Many evangelicals speak and pray as if God exists to serve us instead of the other way around. This model teaches us that Christian prayer is not simply a list of our own needs and desires. Biblical prayer is much broader than ourselves and takes into account God’s character, His overall plan of redemption in the world and His will. (3) Following the Savior’s model prayer will make our prayers more effective: “If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1 Jn. 5:14). Obviously, the best way to pray according to His will is to follow the pattern that He Himself gave us.

That this prayer can also be used as a set prayer in public or private worship is deduced from the giving of an almost identical prayer on a completely different occasion where our Lord says, “When you pray, say” (Lk. 11:2). The earliest surviving post-apostolic church manual or directory of public worship, the *Didache* (*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) dated around the end of the first century (usually A.D. 110) says that Christians should recite the Lord’s prayer three times a day. Although Calvin did not interpret Luke’s account as a command to use “a

³³⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 146.

³³⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 326.

prepared form of words,³³⁸ he did use a long paraphrase of the Lord's prayer in the liturgy of the communion service.³³⁹

Fifth, the second example of this prayer with some minor differences indicates that the Lord's prayer is the supreme example of how to pray given in the New Testament. In Matthew's account, the prayer comes in the midst of admonitions regarding the proper way to do acts of Christian piety. In Luke's gospel, the prayer comes at a later time in Jesus' ministry. It comes in response to a direct question of one of the disciples" (Lk. 11:1). Christ's answer to this request is essentially the Lord's prayer. The differences are minor and indicate that the Savior Himself followed the pattern with some variations on different occasions.

In Luke's version, the invocation is simply "Father" instead of "Our Father which art in heaven" (Mt. 6:9). The petition "thy will be done..." is omitted. Instead of "this day our daily bread," it says "each day." The words "debts" is replaced by the word "sins." The conclusion, "For Yours is the kingdom and power and glory..." is also omitted. It is also lacking in Matthew's version in some of the most ancient manuscripts. Unfortunately most translations (NIV, RSV, JB, NASB have it in brackets indicating it does not belong) also omit the conclusion to the Lord's prayer in Matthew. They do this on the basis of modern textual criticism. Virtually all modern commentaries follow suit. This omission is rather absurd when we consider that the authors of the *Didache* (c. A.D. 110) who printed Matthew's version of this prayer had the doxology, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory." Thus, the church, only a few years after the death of John, concurred with what would be the majority and received texts of Scripture.

Sixth, as we study this prayer, we must continually remind ourselves of the importance of this means of grace. "Prayer is beyond question the highest activity of the human soul. Man is at his greatest and highest when, upon his knees, he comes face to face with God."³⁴⁰ Man was created to walk and talk with God in the garden. Christ has redeemed fallen sinners to restore this

³³⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:316.

³³⁹ See William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988), 114ff. Although the Lord's prayer can be used as a set form of prayer and was from the beginning, we must beware of the cold formalism of the use of set prayers among Romanists and high church Anglicans. Herman Witsius writes, "Neither God, nor Christ, nor his Apostles, ever prescribed a stated liturgy; not in the most ancient church, since the days of the Apostles, was there ever any liturgy in universal use. This is evident from what Justin says, in his Apology addressed to the Emperor Antoninus: *The pastor offers up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability*. A similar proof is found in Tertullian's Apology: *Christians pray with outspread, because clean hands; with uncovered head, because we are not ashamed, and without the aid of a prompter, because we pray from the heart*.

When piety declined and sloth increased, when heresy and ignorance grew to a shameful height, the first steps began to be taken towards a fixed liturgy. The earliest traces of it, so far as we can perceive, appear in the council held at Laodicea, A.D. 364, the eighteenth canon of which contains a decree, *On the necessity of employing the same liturgy of prayers on all occasions, both in the afternoon and evening prayers*. Shortly afterwards, private Christians were forbidden to use their own prayers till they had taken advice from the better informed. 'If any one,' says the Council held at Carthage, CCCXCVII., 'shall draw up prayers for his own use, let him not use them till he has conferred with his better instructed brethren.' But they went still farther, and thought proper to prohibit the use of all prayers not authorized by the Synod, as appears from the following enactment of the Council of Mela, CCCXVI. Can.XII. 'It is also enacted, that prayers or invocations, or impositions of hands, which have been approved by the Council, may be observed by all, and that no prayers, which have not been authorized by well informed persons, or approved by the Synods, shall be used in the church, lest, through ignorance or carelessness, anything contrary to the faith should be received into such compositions.' The stupidity of the ministers of that age and country, which occasioned the necessity of such enactments, must have been truly extraordinary" (*The Lord's Prayer* [Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1994], 145-146).

³⁴⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 45.

blessed fellowship between God and man. When a Christian speaks to God, he has a foretaste of heaven. A study of church history reveals that the greatest of saints spent a good deal of time in prayer and relished this special time with God. If we are to be holy and serious about our walk with Christ, then we must be diligent about spending time with God. We should even view prayer, to an extent, as a barometer of our walk with God. Prayer can be difficult and many Christians do not know how to pray; so our loving Savior says, “Here is how to pray. Pray like this.” The Shepherd of our souls guides us in this crucial area to commune with us and bless us.

The Invocation or Words of Address

The Lord’s prayer begins with a direct address to God: “Our Father which art in heaven.” Christian prayer is by nature deeply theological. It begins with an acknowledgment of the only true God and our relationship to Him. Regarding this address, we should note the following.

First, the word “our” indicates that we pray not simply as saved individuals, but as part of the body of Christ. Because we are in the Beloved, we are members of one another who live in fellowship with one another. Thus, when we pray, we acknowledge that He is not only my Father, but also the Father of every believer. The word “our” assumes that even when we pray in secret, intercession for other Christians is included. This word “our” indicates a covenantal relationship and rules out the idea common among liberals and Unitarians that Jesus is referring only to the Fatherhood of God over all men by virtue of creation. When God is represented as the Father in a salvific sense, then we understand that these words speak of a deep love of God for His people—a love greater than a mother has for her only child. Thus, these opening words are great words of faith that presuppose that God sent His only begotten Son and that God has a special saving interest in His people. “You, God, are my loving Father who saved me and sanctified me and you are well pleased to bless your children and answer their petitions.” “Father denotes reverence: Our Father, denotes faith. In all our prayers to God we should exercise faith. Faith baptizes prayer, and gives it a name; it is called ‘the prayer of faith.’ James v 15. Without faith, it is speaking not praying.... Prayer is the key of heaven, faith is the hand that turns it. Pray in faith, ‘Our Father.’ Faith must take prayer by the hand, or there is no coming nigh to God.”³⁴¹ These words of faith are also words of praise and adoration; with them we praise our Father who is love, holiness and power.

Second, we address God as “Father.” The word “father” (Greek, *pater*; Aramaic, *abba*), when used of God, describes one or all of three truths (1) God is the Father of all men by virtue of creation. “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10). Paul says, “We are also His offspring” (Ac. 17:28). (2) God is our Father by virtue of the covenant relationship that He has established with His people through Christ. Jehovah gave new life to His people Israel when He brought them out of Egypt and delivered them from slavery. “In the Old Testament God was called ‘Father’ only fourteen times, but many of these are very significant passages. His fatherhood was...linked...to the events of salvation history. God showed himself to be a Father to Israel by acts of saving power in history.”³⁴² (3) God is our Father by virtue of our regeneration in Christ and adoption into His spiritual family. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who

³⁴¹ Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1692] 1960, 65), 32.

³⁴² Jan Millie Lochman, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1990), 17.

were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out ‘Abba, Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Gal. 4:4-7).

By praying to God as Father, we remind ourselves and Him of the tender loving relationship that we have because of Jesus. The Redeemer has expiated our sins, propitiated God’s wrath, reconciled us to Him and made us sons. God is not some impersonal or disinterested deity, but has a special love for us as dear children. Because of Christ, God delights in us. The word “Father” is a two-sided term of endearment rooted in the cross at Calvary.

When we pray, we must not only believe that God exists, but we must also have faith in Jehovah’s attributes. We address God according to His nature. He is our Father because of His love, compassion and mercy toward us. His love was an infinite love that sent His only begotten Son to the cross. “[W]e should approach him with a mingled sentiment of veneration and love, awe and confidence, in the full assured belief, that he is both able and willing to answer the prayers we present to him.”³⁴³ God is eager and happy to help us. God has sealed this special affection and intimacy by sending the Spirit of His Son into our hearts (Gal. 4:6); by making us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

The word “Father” is important because it also reminds us that, as a father, God will continually pity us, even in our weaknesses and infirmities. “As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). This point is brought out beautifully in Jeremiah 31:20 where Jehovah replies to the repentance of a remnant of Ephraim. “Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD.” Although we are justified by Christ, we are still sinners who continually fall short of God’s standard. Therefore, as we fight against our flesh and worldly lusts, God will not abandon us. And if we do fall into scandalous sin, God will cause us to repent and will spare us (Mal. 3:17). “When we come repenting of our sins, we must eye God as a Father, as the prodigal did (Luke xv.18, Jer. iii.19); when we come begging for grace, and peace, and the inheritance and blessing of sons, it is an encouragement that we come to God, not as an unreconciled, avenging Judge, but as a loving, gracious, reconciled Father in Christ, Jer. iii.4.”³⁴⁴

Since God is our Father, we will love to be near Him and to commune with Him in prayer. True believers love to get as near to God as they can. In the preached Word they draw close to His voice; in the holy supper they sit at His table and feast upon Him spiritually. “A child of God delights to be in his Father’s presence; he cannot stay away long from God; he sees a Sabbath-day approaching, and rejoices; his heart has been often melted and quickened in an ordinance; he has tasted that the Lord is good, therefore he loves to be in his Father’s presence; he cannot keep away long from God. Such as care not for ordinances cannot say, ‘Our Father which art in heaven.’ Is God the Father of those who cannot endure to be in his presence?”³⁴⁵

The biblical practice of addressing God as Father often raises a question: why are we enjoined by Scripture to address God the Father in prayer instead of Jesus or the Holy Spirit? The answer to this question lies in the fact that when we address the first person of the Godhead, we do also invoke at the same time the Son and the Holy Spirit who are one in nature or essence with the Father and are honored when He is honored (Jn. 5:23). “In the economy of grace the

³⁴³ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:240-241.

³⁴⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:73.

³⁴⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1692] 1965), 13.

Father is represented to us under that character in which we ought to address him in our prayers, as sustaining the power and majesty of the Godhead, and as originating and bestowing all saving benefits; the Son, as opening up our way to the Father, and providing for us opportunities of approach by his merits and intercession; and the Spirit, as forming within us our prayers and groans. And this is the reason why most frequently, and indeed almost always, in Scripture, we find worship addressed to the Father; rarely to the Son; very rarely to the Holy Spirit.”³⁴⁶

The fact that we are commanded to pray to God the Father rules out the common practice of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox practitioners of praying to Mary and the saints. Prayer to God by millions of believers assumes God’s omniscience, omnipotence and the fact that God alone is the source of all goodness. The idea that Mary and the saints can act as mediators between God and man or that they have the ability to receive and comprehend all these millions of prayers in different languages is nothing but sheer idolatry. Jesus’ rebuke of Satan applies to all such deluded souls: “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve” (Mt. 4:10). Only God has a perfect knowledge of all our necessities and only Jesus Christ can intercede between God and man. “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Third, we acknowledge that our Father is in heaven. Although, the Bible is quite clear that God is present everywhere, He is in heaven in a special way. Heaven is where He manifests His glory and places His throne. “The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). There are a number of reasons why heaven is an important part of this invocation.

(1) As the term “Father” gives us faith in the work of Christ and God’s love toward us, the expression “in heaven” points us to God’s boundless power. “When the Scripture says, that God is *in heaven*, the meaning is that all things are subject to his dominion,—that the world, and everything in it, is held by his hand,—that his power is everywhere diffused,—that all things are arranged by his providence.”³⁴⁷ Thus the psalmist says, “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh.... He shall speak to them in His wrath” (Ps. 2:4, 5). “But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:2). “The biblical term ‘heaven’ expresses the absolute superiority of God to all visible and palpable reality, especially to our own reality and to the reality that we can grasp. Along the lines of Ephesians 3:15 and 4:6, we are to think of the sovereignty of God over all created things (over *panta* and *panter*). But we are able to think of what results from this sovereignty, of his creative and liberating nearness to all, especially to believers.”³⁴⁸

Believers pray to our Father in heaven, for Christ our Mediator dwells there at God’s right hand (Ps. 110:1, 5; Ac. 2:3-34; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22). Thus, the great throne of power is also a throne of grace. Because God is our Father, we may approach Him with boldness. But, since He dwells in heaven we must come to Him with reverence (Eccl. 5:2). Since we pray to our God in heaven, our prayers should be heavenly-minded. God and His kingdom must be the axis around which our petitions are focused. Our minds must rise above the things of this world and focus on God’s glory and majesty.

³⁴⁶ Herman Witsius, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 155.

³⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:317.

³⁴⁸ John Milic Lochman, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 23.

The First Petition

The first petition is that all men everywhere will sanctify God's name: "Hallowed be Your name" (Mt. 6:9). The verb translated "hallowed be" is *hagistheto* (aorist passive imperative of *hagiazō*: to set apart or sanctify). The related noun of this verb *hagios* carries the idea of separation and purity. When describing men, it is paired with righteous (Mk. 6:20; Ac. 3:14), and blameless (Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Col. 1:22). When the Bible speaks of the holiness of God, it communicates His "otherness," that God is majestic, perfect and incomparable with any of His creatures. "Holiness is not merely one of God's attributes. It represents His essential nature.... Holiness is what makes God who He is."³⁴⁹ It is an aspect of His sovereignty, power and righteousness. It reveals who He is and His attitude toward all sin and all opposition to His throne. If we could only choose one word to explain the God of Scripture and the purpose of redemption, it would be holiness. Thus, when Isaiah entered the throne room of God, he heard the seraphim cry out: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" (6:3).

The expression "Your name" refers to God Himself. In Hebraic thought, there is a special correspondence between the name of a person or thing and the person or thing itself. The name was not simply a word arbitrarily attached to a person, but was designed to express something about the nature of that person. This is especially true of God who names Himself and who reveals Himself in all His works. Thus, in the Bible, the "name of God is virtually indistinguishable from the person of God (cf. for example, Mal. 1:6; Isa. 29:23; Ezek. 36:23; John 12:28; 17:6). Consequently, to set apart or sanctify God's name simply means to sanctify God or regard Him as infinitely holy. With all this in mind there are a number of things to note regarding the first petition.

(1) Petitioning God in prayer must begin with recognition that God is God; that because He is infinitely holy, He should be honored and sanctified by us and all men. Because God is who He is, we want His name to be exalted, glorified and revered by everyone. Thus, prayer begins with the praise and the adoration that God deserves. When we speak of sanctifying or glorifying God's name, we do not mean that an increase of holiness or glory can or will occur in God Himself, for that is impossible. God remains God no matter what we say or do. The imperative is directed to what men need to do. Most men reject God and His Word and thus embrace various idols. Therefore, they do not revere, honor or glorify God as they should. Professing Christians, by their speech and behavior, also do not always render to God the honor that He deserves. Consequently, men need to set God apart from everything common and profane. They need to adore, revere, honor, prize, and esteem God above all things. In this sense, the first petition corresponds to the first and third commandments. This petition expresses a regenerated heart's desire to see God truly honored as Jehovah in our wicked world. It also expresses "an eschatological longing for the day when all men acknowledge God as the Lord."³⁵⁰ Do your prayers begin with an expressed longing to see the whole world bow before Jehovah and acknowledge Him to be infinite in holiness?

(2) This petition teaches us that God's honor and glory are always the first concern of prayer. It gives us a proper perspective on our whole lives—that our chief aim is the exaltation of God. Thus, we must view this request as foundational to all that follows. All of our desires, actions and petitions must be subordinate to this one. Thus, we pray, "Father, give me sustenance

³⁴⁹ A. S. Wood, "Holiness" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 3:175.

³⁵⁰ R. T. France, *Matthew*, 134.

so that I may serve and glorify You. Lord, expand Your kingdom so that You will be exalted.” Earlier, we saw how the Pharisees’ prayer was motivated by and rooted in self-glorification. Here Jesus directs us, even in the content of our prayers, to make the exaltation of the name of God our chief end. This is certainly the pattern that our Savior followed who said, “Father, glorify Your name” (Jn. 12:28) and “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You” (Jn. 17:1-2).

If this crucial aspect of prayer was understood and practiced in the professing Christian community, then the whole modern hedonistic view of prayer as a key to health, wealth, self-esteem and success would be abandoned forever. Our prayers would focus on moving our own hearts to sing God’s praises; on regulating our whole lives by the Holy Spirit to promote the glory of God; on enlightening our minds to see and understand God’s perfections; on a sincere desire to seek God’s glory among the heathen. Humanism would be cast out of the church, root and branch.

The Second Petition

In the second petition, we pray for the coming of the kingdom of God: “Thy kingdom come” (Mt. 6:10). This petition logically follows upon the first, for God’s name will not be sanctified throughout the whole world as it should until the kingship of Christ is acknowledged. To understand this petition, we must answer a few crucial questions.

First, what is meant by the kingdom of God? The broad definition of God’s kingdom simply refers to His sovereign rule over everything in both the spiritual and physical realms. “God is the King of all the earth.... God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne” (Ps. 47:7-8). “The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty.... Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting” (Ps. 93:1, 2). When we speak of God’s reign in this sense, it cannot increase or decrease, for it is based on God’s nature and character. Therefore, God’s kingdom in this sense cannot “come.”

Consequently, the second petition deals with the salvific kingdom, or kingdom of grace, established by the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although there is indeed a sense in which the Savior’s kingdom reaches back in time and encompasses the whole Old Testament people of God, the focus of this petition is on the work of the gospel in the whole New Covenant era, climaxing in the second coming of Christ and the consummate kingdom. “The gospel is itself, above all, the announcement that God’s promised rule has now begun in and through the work of Jesus the Messiah...so the disciples are thus encouraged to pray that what was begun in the ministry of Jesus, what they have now begun to participate in, may be experienced in all its fullness.”³⁵¹

The Old Testament contained many great promises regarding the victory of the Messiah’s Kingdom. These prophecies were unfortunately grossly misunderstood by the Jews and, thus, they expected the Messiah to almost instantaneously deliver a full blown kingdom of peace, prosperity and deliverance.

The kingdom of grace that Jesus brings in is very different. It has three aspects that are important to understand for our prayers.

(1) The kingdom is definitive in the sense that our Lord’s redemptive work has already merited a complete victory. Salvation, in the fullest sense of that term, has already been

³⁵¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-3*, 148.

accomplished and guaranteed by the bloody cross and empty tomb. The Savior's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection is complete, perfect, sufficient; therefore, as the *foundation* of a world-wide kingdom victory is not dependent on man's cooperation for ultimate success. Nothing can be added to what Christ has done. Thus, we can speak of the kingdom coming in the past tense. Consequently, in the book of Revelation, the kingdom is described as having already arrived: "So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, 'Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come'" (12:9-10). "The victory over the Dragon, according to St. John, does not take place by means of a cataclysmic event at the end of history, but by means of *the* cataclysmic event that took place in the middle of history: the sacrifice of the Lamb."³⁵² Thus when we pray for the kingdom to come in history, we can pray with hope and a full assurance of faith.

(2) The kingdom is also progressive and grows throughout history. It starts out like a mustard seed and grows into a great tree (Mt. 13:31ff). It began at Jerusalem and is spreading to the very ends of the earth. This is one reason that praying for the coming of the kingdom must accompany preaching the gospel and discipling the nations. The church is involved in fighting the kingdom of darkness by letting her light shine before men and imploring men to bow the knee to the King of kings.

(3) The kingdom is eschatological, or future, because complete victory in time, on this earth, does not occur until the second coming of Christ when all opposition to His throne is forever crushed and all the forces of darkness, whether spirit beings or men, are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-15).

Second, how does this kingdom of grace come? It comes throughout history by the preaching of the gospel attended by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit; the discipling of the nations by the church teaching the whole counsel of God; and, the progressive sanctification of individuals and societies by the Holy Spirit. This kingdom is furthered and strengthened by Messiah the King's judging and subduing the enemies of God and His people throughout history. Therefore, when we pray for furtherance of Christ's kingdom we pray for the following things.

(1) We pray that sin and iniquity would be subdued and replaced by godly behavior in our own lives. We petition God to enlighten our minds to any violations of His Word in thought, word or deed; to convict us of the heinous nature of these sins in God's sight; to confess these sins to God and sincerely repent of them. The kingdom of God must begin with us, with putting off the deeds of darkness and replacing them with habitual acts of righteousness. This must occur if our light is to shine before men. "[W]hen grace comes, there is a kingly government set up in the soul. Grace rules the will and affections, and brings the whole man in subjection to Christ; it kings it in the soul, sways the scepter, subdues mutinous lusts, and keeps the soul in a spiritual decorum."³⁵³

(2) We pray that the church of Christ would progressively be sanctified and that the church will always be reforming instead of declining spiritually. This point is important, for if the church has lost its saltiness, then how will pagan culture be transformed? The visible church is the means that God has set up to advance the cause of His kingdom in this world. If the church becomes corrupt in worship, doctrine or discipline, then it cannot be a city set on a hill; it is good for nothing. A church that imitates this world and then virtually becomes like this world ceases

³⁵² David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 315-316.

³⁵³ Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Prayer*, 62.

to be a true church; it becomes a synagogue of Satan. Thus, there must be continual prayer for reformation and revival in Zion. If there is one step back because of sin and declension, we pray for at least two steps forward. We pray that God would raise up men who are like Martin Luther, John Calvin or John Knox to challenge sin and declension in the church and that their work would be attended by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(3) We pray for the success of the gospel. This involves systematic prayer for Reformed missionaries and church planters. This also involves praying for particular people to be saved by Christ: relatives, acquaintances and even enemies. We pray that evangelism and missionary work will be so successful that the majority of people in each nation will embrace the Savior and submit to His Word. We even pray that all the nations of this earth will bow the knee to Jesus, covenant with Him and adopt biblical Christianity as the established religion of each nation. We can pray this prayer with hope and faith, for God has promised such a time of gospel victory before the second coming in time and on earth. “For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 1:11). “Nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your name” (Ps. 96:9; cf. Ps. 22:27-28; 72:8-11; Isa. 2:2-3; 42:1-4). “What God has promised we must pray for; for promises are given, not to supersede, but to quicken and encourage prayer.”³⁵⁴ Let us pray that: the Messiah’s kingdom will flourish; that the whole earth will be covered with the true Christian religion as the waters cover the seas (cf. Isa. 11:9); and, the glorious gospel will transform multitudes of blasphemers into true worshipers who will glorify God in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:23-24).

(4) We pray for the overthrow of all the forces of darkness by the preaching of the gospel and by Messiah’s acts of judgment in history. We must daily petition God to conquer by the sword of the Spirit, so that secular humanism in all its forms, as well as popery, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and the like, would be destroyed and swept off the face of the earth. It is sad to think that, though the devil’s kingdom is so wicked, yet it should have multitudes to support it. At the present time Satan has many more that work for his kingdom than Jesus has for His. Satan gathers in a large harvest of souls. He even has much of professing Christendom in his grasp. But, we know that he is already a defeated foe and that it is only a matter of time before his hellish kingdom is beaten down in history and then is fully destroyed at the second coming. Thus, we pray for Messiah the Prince to rule by His Spirit and His rod of iron. Imprecatory prayers are certainly part of this petition. For the kingdom to advance, persecutors and mortal enemies of the church must be judged and subdued by Christ. “It is a prayer that all atheism, and infidelity, and ignorance, and error, and superstition, and false religion, and impiety, may be banished from the world, and that the only living and true God, ‘our Father in heaven,’ may be worshipped and honoured over all the earth.”³⁵⁵

(5) We are to pray for the second *bodily* coming of Jesus, when all the sin and evil in us and the world is routed and removed. This prayer demonstrates our faith that we are “looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:12). We pray for the day of the Lord at the end of history, when Jesus will be fully glorified before all men and all opposition crushed forever. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” (Rev. 22:17). “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

³⁵⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:74.

³⁵⁵ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:241.

Let us daily approach the throne of grace, hallowing God's name, petitioning our loving Father to bless His church and spread His heavenly kingdom in this earth. "Let us learn to labour fervently in prayer, as Epaphras did, Col. iv.12 and we shall find, it is the hand of diligence in this duty that maketh rich."³⁵⁶

Chapter 24: The Lord's Prayer, Part 2

The Third Petition

Just as the first petition leads logically to the second, so the third logically follows the second. The coming of the kingdom is intimately connected with God's will being done: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). "The will of God to which reference is made is clearly his 'revealed' will, expressed in his law. It is that will which is done in heaven, but not yet to any great extent on earth. On the other hand, the will of God's 'decree' or 'plan from eternity' is always being realized both in heaven and on earth (Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11), and cannot be the subject of prayer."³⁵⁷

This petition tells us a number of important things. First, the gospel of Jesus is not antinomian, but rather results in a greater obedience to God's precepts. Paul says that the purpose of his ministry in word and deed was "to make the Gentiles obedient" (Rom. 15:18). As the gospel leavens society and people believe in the Savior, they are renewed by the Holy Spirit and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness. The coming of the kingdom means that people are justified by the Redeemer and are delivered from the pollution of sin (cf. Rom. 6:5-7). As the kingdom progresses and the earth is leavened with the gospel, the earth will become more and more like heaven, for people will be willingly subjecting themselves to God's authority.

In the garden of Eden, Eve rejected God's will in order to follow the desires of her own heart. This resulted in the fall of the human race. The essence of sin and rebellion against God is human autonomy in ethics: men would determine for themselves what is good and what is evil. Because of sin and depravity men do not want to be told what to do by God. Thus they invent from their own imaginations false religions, erroneous philosophies and humanistic laws. They suppress the true knowledge of God in every aspect of their lives. With the death and resurrection of Christ and the coming of the kingdom with power, all of this rebellion is being progressively turned back. The coming of the kingdom means the coming of the King's laws, statutes and ordinances. To embrace the King involves bowing the knee to Him and His law-Word.

Second, the more that people on earth submit to the Redeemer and obey His laws, the more that earth will be like heaven—peaceful, loving, harmonious and joyful. The idea that is common in evangelical circles that Messiah's kingship will not be victorious in time and on earth; that God's moral precepts in the Older Covenant have nothing to do with our day; that the coming of the kingdom is wholly future and that there is no point in polishing brass on a sinking

³⁵⁶ Matthew Henry, "How to Begin Every Day with God" in *Works*, 1:213.

³⁵⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 331.

ship, is totally contrary to the Lord's prayer. So contrary, in fact, that the older, more consistent dispensationalists believed that the Lord's prayer had nothing to do with Christians. They believed it was for a Jewish remnant during the distant future "great tribulation" period. Such a view is so absurd and obviously unscriptural that even most modern dispensationalists regard it as a fantasy.

Third, this petition teaches us the importance of teaching and preaching the whole counsel of God in churches. If the earth is to be more like heaven by the observance of God's will, then it is important that the people of God have a good understanding of Scripture, theology and biblical ethics. The idea that is common in our day that doctrine and a deep study of God's moral law are unimportant is the exact opposite of the intent of this third petition. How can earth be like heaven without heavenly doctrine? How can people live according to God's will when they do not bother to know what that will is? God requires obedience with faith and faith requires knowledge of God's Word.

The flip side of this aspect of the third petition is that doctrine, ethics and worship (ordinances) that are not from heaven; that are not thoroughly based on God's Word are not in accord with this petition. The angels in heaven do exactly what God has commanded without wavering. They do not depart to the right or the left. They also do not add to or detract from God's revealed will. There are no ceremonies or ordinances in heaven that have been created by their imaginations. When men make up their own ethics, theology, ceremonies or worship ordinances, they are working against God's heavenly will. They are working directly against the third petition. "As a watch is set by the dial, so our obedience is right when it goes by the sundial of the word. If obedience has not the word for its rule, it is not doing God's will, but our own; it is will worship.... There is in many a strange itch after superstition: they love a gaudy religion and are more for the pomp of worship than the purity; which cannot be pleasing to God. To thrust human inventions into sacred things, is doing our will, not God's; and he will say... 'Who hath required this at your hand?' Isa.i.12"³⁵⁸ If we are to live consistently with the third petition, then we must obey God's will—sincerely, consistently, promptly, fervently without complaint and we must be exceedingly careful not to corrupt that will with our own ideas or human pragmatism. If God's name is to be hallowed, then we must reverence His law and the worship that He has instituted. The kingdom of God can only advance when the church obeys God's will and frees itself from human traditions, superstition, will-worship and the trinkets of Babylon. "It is the ardent desire of the person who sincerely breathes the Lord's Prayer that the Father's will shall be obeyed as *completely, heartily, and immediately* on earth as this is constantly being done by all the inhabitants of heaven."³⁵⁹

The Fourth Petition

As we move from the first three petitions, which regard God, His kingdom and will, to the second three petitions, which deal with believers and their particular needs, we need once again to point out the comprehensive nature of these petitions. They are designed to deal with all of our physical and spiritual needs. They show our utter dependence upon God for everything. They give us the structure to deal with all areas of life as long we fill in all the details and flesh out these requests. These words which are few and simple take in all our daily needs. Daily bread, daily mercy and daily protection are exactly what every man needs. He who possesses

³⁵⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Prayer*, 157.

³⁵⁹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 331.

them is truly rich in God's sight. He who is wise and spiritual will not be ashamed to pray for them every day. "The child of God, no doubt, is fully justified before God, and all things are working for his good. But it is the life of true faith to apply daily for fresh supplies of all our wants. Though the promises are all ours, our Father likes His children to remind Him of them."³⁶⁰

The first request of the second division regards what is necessary for our bodily existence on this earth: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt. 6:11). Luke's account reads, "Give us day by day our daily bread" (11:3). Bread in the ancient world was the staff of life. It was and still is in many cultures the foundation of the people's daily sustenance. Without the wheat and barley harvest, starvation would have been inevitable. Thus, it is proper to regard "bread" in this petition as representative of food in general. In fact, "bread" should be regarded as a term for all of our physical needs in life. There are a number of significant things about this petition.

First, the term "bread" stands for the basic necessities of life and not the luxuries of this world. By this, Jesus is teaching his disciples to be temperate in their desires and requests for material necessities. Because our physical well-being is necessary to serve God and attend to our spiritual well-being, we need to pray for the necessary material supports of this life. Contrary to the modern prosperity gospel, which is syncretistic and heretical, we do not see our Lord telling His disciples to pray for riches, luxuries and mansions. Rather, they are instructed to pray for "bread." Since the 1950s in America, a dangerous teaching within the Charismatic movement has arisen called the Word of Faith movement (also known as Positive Confession), which teaches that the central purpose of Christianity is not spirituality, but rather is prosperity (i.e. physical, financial and material blessings). People are told that if they have genuine faith and they audibly speak their request (actually, these are more a demand or order than a request), that God *must* give them what they want. "Word faith writings carry such titles like 'How to Write Your Own Ticket with God,' 'Godliness is Profitable,' 'The Laws of Prosperity,' 'God's Creative Power Will Work for You,' 'Releasing the Ability of God Through Prayer,' 'God's Formula for Success and Prosperity,' 'God's Master Key to Prosperity,' and 'Living in Divine Prosperity.'"³⁶¹ Many evangelicals have adapted the prosperity teaching, omitting many of its most crass and heretical aspects, yet retaining the central idea that God exists to serve, pamper and glorify us instead of the other way around.

The Lord's prayer, which is the clearest, most organized and systematic method of prayer in Scripture, gives not the slightest indication that God wants all of us to be rich. In fact, it is clear that we pray for basic necessities so that we can serve and glorify God. This makes perfect sense, for the Bible does not teach that everyone should try to get rich or that great riches are automatically a blessing from God. Paul even warned Timothy to withdraw himself from teachers "who suppose that godliness is a means of gain"; that we should be content with just having "food and clothing"; that "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare...for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:5, 8, 10; cf. Jude 11-16; 2 Pet. 2:1-19). Those who teach that prayer is a hotline to riches and great possessions are simply catering to covetousness, which is a sin of the flesh (cf. Eph. 5:5-7). We should heed the words of Agur who prayed, "Give me neither poverty nor riches—Feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God" (Pr. 30:8-9).

³⁶⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1986), 2:5.

³⁶¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 266.

Second, the Lord's prayer, in both Matthew and Luke, emphasizes that we pray for what we need daily or day by day. We are to ask for what is needed for each particular day. This is consistent with our Savior's teaching on worry in the same sermon where Jesus says, "Do not worry about tomorrow" (6:34). Christians are to live by faith in God in the present and must trust His divine providence and goodness every single day. This does not mean that we do not consider the future or make plans and preparations for it, but that we fervently serve God and commune with Him in the present. That is, we do not neglect present duties for a hypothetical faithfulness in the future. We must trust God for our material needs each day. God gave the Israelites their allotment of manna in the wilderness each particular day instead of in one large sum. The manna could not even be stored for future use. This obviously was designed to teach them to daily trust God. We are to daily "renew the desire of our souls toward God, as the wants of our bodies are renewed; as duly as the day comes, we must pray to our heavenly Father, and reckon we could as well go a day without meat, as without prayer."³⁶²

This point teaches us a very important lesson about the Christian life. The means of grace and sanctification are not something that happen in one moment. Believers are not zapped and given a second work of grace or entire sanctification all at once, but are to learn to practice godliness and dependence upon God every day of their lives. God wants us to learn to continually lean on Him and progress in the faith a little each day. This shows that Jehovah likes us to come to Him. He likes to listen to us and answer our prayers daily. This demonstrates God's love; that He truly is a Father to us and genuinely has our best interests in mind. "The God who made heaven and earth, and orders the stars in their courses, likes to hear our lisping praises, likes to hear our petitions. That is because God is love; and that is why, though He knows all about our needs, it gives Him great pleasure, if we can so put it, when He sees us coming to Him to ask for our daily bread."³⁶³

Another important thing to note regarding "this day" is that it teaches us to live every day as if it were our last. How would you act if you believed that this day was your last on earth? Would you be careless about your walk with Christ? Would you spend your last day indulging yourself? We really have no way of knowing whether we shall live tomorrow or one week or many years. If we treat every day as a possible final day then we will live a life of mortification now. We will be sober and serious about our walk with the Savior now. There are multitudes of people who always promised themselves that they would repent and serve the Redeemer tomorrow. But tomorrow never came. Don't be a self-deluded fool. Believe in Christ and bow to Him now, before tomorrow. Do not play Russian roulette with your own soul.

Third, this prayer is an acknowledgement that God, and God alone, gives us the necessities of life. In our economic life, we are to look to God and not man or the state as our provider. In modern times communists, socialists and welfare statistes teach men that they need to trust in the benevolent father-state for all their needs. They want men to believe that the state is sovereign and has the ability to provide through government manipulation and controls of the economy. In most nations people have largely bought into this deception. They willingly bow the knee to the coercion of the state and praise the state's bureaucratic wisdom as the root cause of prosperity. When the economy fails, the administration in power takes the blame and is condemned by the general populace as an incompetent deity. Simply put, faith in God and His law-Word (which greatly limits the power of the state and gives economic freedom under law) has been replaced by faith in man (i.e. faith in the economic experts and governmental

³⁶² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:75.

³⁶³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:70.

bureaucrats). This is a form of idolatry that is little different than the apostate Israelites praying to Baal deities for rain and crops. Only God can truly bless His people. God alone is the giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas. 1:17). A people that trust in God will not worship the state. “The greatest of men must be beholden to the mercy of God for their *daily bread*.”³⁶⁴ The modern secular humanist who, following the enlightenment, looks to the state as the predestinator and provider of mankind does not pray “Thy kingdom come,” but rather “My kingdom come.” One’s view on the provisions of life reveals ultimately one’s view of God.

Fourth, this petition for our daily physical needs tells us something very important about prayer as it relates to valid secondary agencies. When we pray for bread we do not sit around and wait for bread to miraculously appear on our doorstep. If we did, we would all starve. Instead, we pray for God to meet all of our needs and then go out and work diligently to provide for our families. There are certain areas of life such as the spread of the kingdom, personal sanctification and the development of our economic life that we are totally dependent upon God, yet God expects us to work hard and use every lawful means available to succeed in these areas. Christian faith looks to God and gives Him the full credit for success in these areas; yet, in these spheres of life, faith results in good works, in diligent labor. “God’s bounty and man’s toil must combine.”³⁶⁵ When it comes to these basic physical necessities, prayer without appropriate work is ineffectual. When we pray this prayer, we recognize two basic realities—that, without Jehovah, we can achieve nothing and that, without our effort and obedience to God’s word in these areas, God will do nothing for us. Consequently, we must constantly pray for God to bend our hearts and cause us to obey.

Fifth, this petition is wider than our own selves, for we ask God to give bread to “us,” not to “me” only. As we pray for our own needs, we are also to focus on the needs of others, especially Christians. There are many believers in this world who live in situations where food, shelter and clothing are difficult to come by because of poverty and oppressive civil governments. We need to include these brethren in our prayers. The corporate nature of this petition teaches us not to be self-centered or selfish in the way we pray. It reminds us that we are part of a wide body of believers all connected by the blood of Christ and the Spirit of God. We pray and work diligently so that we will be in a position not only to take care of our own families, but also to help others.

Sixth, this prayer for our physical, bodily needs is an implicit refutation of Gnostic, neo-platonic and dualistic systems of philosophy that regard the physical realm as inherently evil and unworthy of any regard whatsoever. God’s creation, which is physical as well as spiritual, is good and ultimately will be redeemed by Jesus Christ. The salvation that our Lord wrought is comprehensive and even includes our physical bodies. On the final day, our dead bodies will be resurrected, transformed and glorified. “The Bible contradicts the idealistic, spiritualist axiom. It does so in every respect—cosmologically, anthropologically, and eschatologically—and with all the ethical implications.”³⁶⁶ The Savior rose from the dead in the same physical body in which He died, so that believers, both body and soul, would be forever redeemed. Consequently, we need to respect our bodies and take good care of them. Various forms of asceticism where the body is starved, whipped and mistreated flow from Greek paganism and not Scripture.

³⁶⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:75.

³⁶⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:219.

³⁶⁶ Jan Milic Lockman, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 86.

The Fifth Petition

Those who hallow God's name must trust Him for physical as well as spiritual necessities. Thus they are to pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (v. 12). Verses 14 and 15 contain some explanatory comments on this petition: "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Note, that this petition is connected to the preceding one by the conjunction "and," indicating that the confession of sins should be the daily routine of believers. Consequently, Christians should view daily confession and pardon as just as crucial to one's well-being and personal happiness as having sufficient food and clothing.

Before we consider the elements of this petition, we need to answer an objection that is often raised in connection with it. If we are justified (i.e. declared righteous in the heavenly court) the moment that we believe in Jesus and all of our sins—past, present and future—have been washed away, forgiven or pardoned and the perfect righteousness or law-keeping of Christ has been imputed to us, then why do we pray for our sins to be forgiven repeatedly throughout life? There are a number of reasons why we are to pray for forgiveness every day.

First, believers in both the Old and New Testaments are commanded to confess their sins. "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Pr. 28:13; cf. Josh. 7:19; Ps. 51:1-3). "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9). "No prayer of mortal men could be complete without confession of sin. Prayer which does not seek for pardon will fail, as the Pharisee's prayer did. Let proud men boast as they please, those who are in Christ's kingdom will always pray, 'Forgive us our debts.'"³⁶⁷

Second, although we were justified the moment that we believed and all of our sins were imputed to Christ on the cross, we still must *experience* daily forgiveness because we continue to sin in time. From one perspective, we are already fully redeemed, for Jesus has paid the price in full by His atoning death. But from another perspective, we *experience* the merits of Jesus' death daily. When God views us judicially He sees the perfect righteousness of Christ. Yet, He requires us to acknowledge and confess every known sin as it occurs in our lives. We need to *experience* the forgiveness of sin each day. Our faith in Christ is not a one-time act, but continues through life and is always clinging to Him and depending on Him for forgiveness.

Third, that our Lord's merits are applied to us through time is demonstrated by the Savior's work as a high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. John writes, "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 Jn. 2:1). If a believer commits a sin, he still remains a child of God. However, the Holy Spirit is grieved by sin (Eph. 4:30) and a believer's fellowship with the Father is disrupted. Thus, we need to acknowledge our sin and appeal to God through our Advocate—Jesus Christ. Confession is an expression of faith in Christ's blood and high priestly work. It is crucial to our sanctification, as well as our assurance of salvation. When we confess, we trust in the completed, perfect work of Christ, that "He is the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 2:2). Ryle writes, "The justification of every believer no doubt is a finished and perfect work, and one admitting of no degrees, no increase and no diminution. The moment a man believes on Christ, he is as much justified as St. Paul or St. John, and cannot be more justified if he lives to the age of Methuselah. But all this is no reason why he should not

³⁶⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 68.

daily confess his sins, and daily seek fresh application of Christ's blood to his conscience. In fact, it is the life of faith to do so."³⁶⁸

Forgive Our Debts

As we look to the first part of this petition, we need to examine the meaning of the phrase "forgive us our debts." Therefore, we need to answer two questions. What is meant by the word "debts"? And what does it mean to forgive?

The word translated "debts" (*opheilema*) is based on the original Aramaic word spoken by Jesus *hobha* which refers to "debt" or "sin." "In the ancient Greek *opheilema* is common for actual legal debts as in Rom. 4:4."³⁶⁹ Luke, writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, uses the word "sins" (Greek, *hamartias*). *Hamartias* emphasizes that we have "missed the mark" of God's perfect standard, while the word "debts" focuses on the fact that when we sin we do not render to God what is due to Him. All men owe to God a perfect obedience. It is called a "debt" because, when we sin, we are guilty of violating God's majesty and holiness. Sin is a serious thing because, by it, we act as if we were not under subjection to God. Sins are called debts "because on account of them we owe satisfaction to the law and justice of God: the proper debts we owe to God are love, obedience, and gratitude; and in default of these, we owe the debt of punishment."³⁷⁰

In our Lord's further explanation of this petition in verses 14-15, He uses the general term "trespasses," which literally means a "a false step." (This may explain why the Anglican Church mistranslates the words "debts" as "trespasses" in their prayer book.) The Bible is crystal clear that sins, which are in a spiritual sense debts owed to God, can never be paid by our own works or contrition (see Rom. 3:23; Mt. 16:26). Everyone who does not look to Christ must pay for their sins in hell. The payment, however, and the sinning in hell never ends (cf. Mt. 18:8, 34; 25:46; Mk. 9:43-49; 2 Th. 1:7-9; Jude 6; Rev. 14:11; 19:3; 20:10). The word "debts" or "sins" is plural because we repeatedly fall short of God's perfect moral law in our lives.

The word, "debt," teaches us a number of things about prayer. First, we approach God with a deep sense of our own unworthiness. By acknowledging our sins, we assume a position of humility and need. In and of ourselves, apart from the person and work of Christ, we know that we have no claim upon God and we are totally unworthy of God's friendship and blessings. When people approach God with a proud spirit, as if God owes them something, then they pray not like a Christian, but like a Pharisee.

Second, we approach God with a full realization that our guilty, sinful condition is real. The Lord's prayer is an honest prayer. It deals with reality as it is. The Bible explicitly recognizes the problem of remaining sin in the believer. The Christian does not pretend that he is perfect. He recognizes the truth about himself and pours his heart out to God on this matter with the full knowledge that Christ has washed away his sin and delivered him from the power of it. Prayer is such an amazing means of grace, not only because God answers prayer and comes to our assistance, but also because prayer focuses our attention on areas that we want to change. The praying man does not stagnate and backslide because, in forming his petitions, he sees his true self and his daily spiritual needs.

³⁶⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:9.

³⁶⁹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:54.

³⁷⁰ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:59.

Third, we approach God with an acknowledgment of our debts and a sincere desire to forsake them because we know that God has promised mercy to those who do so (Pr. 28:13; 1 Jn. 1:9; 2:1-2; cf. Josh. 7:19; Ps. 51:1-3). A daily acknowledgment of debts, coupled with a daily dedication to the mortify sin in our lives, is important if we are to avoid backsliding, high-handed or presumptuous sins. Thus David prayed, "Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless" (Ps. 19:13).

Fourth, the biblical acknowledgment of debts before God shows faith in Christ because it is an admission that we (i.e. our own selves) can do nothing about the guilt that sin brings. We know that we are utterly dependent upon Jesus Christ and His redemption. Genuine faith looks away from one's self to the Mediator. It lays hold of His perfect, sufficient, vicarious, sacrificial death and His perfect righteousness.

The non-Christian really has no proper way to deal with guilt. Consequently, (generally they have three unbiblical ways to deal with guilt) one response is to deny guilt altogether. Some atheists will argue that there is no such thing as sin and, thus, guilt is purely an illusion. Others acknowledge that guilt exists; but, not understanding the true nature of God or sin, believe that man can pay back the debt through repentance, good works, charity and acts of penance. This results in the age old error of salvation by works or human achievement. We have already seen that only Christ can deal with guilt and not we ourselves. Still others acknowledge guilt, but confine it to a subjective feeling of guilt. Therefore, they think that all that is necessary is to eliminate the feelings of guilt. Consequently, people look to psychiatrists, psychologists, eastern mystics, scientology, alcohol, drugs, sex, possessions and so forth to ease their guilty feelings. All such things, however, do not deal with true guilt as defined by Scripture, which is an objective record of debt kept by an all-knowing, thrice-holy God. Real guilt can only be removed by the blood of Christ and, when this occurs, often feelings of guilt subside. Are you looking to Christ to remove your guilt forever and give you peace with God? "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18).

With an understanding of our sins or debts, we come to the matter of forgiveness. The word, "forgive" (*aphes*), means literally to send away, or dismiss. This idea is expressed beautifully in Psalm 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." In Isaiah it is expressed as a blotting out: "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins" (43:25). The Bible speaks of God covering our iniquities (Ps. 85:2); washing them away (Ps. 51:2); and not imputing them to us. "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin" (Ps. 32:1-2; Rom. 4:7-8). All of these terms teach that God pardons or remits our sins. To be specific, theologically, forgiveness refers to the fact that sin, both as guilt and the liability of punishment that is connected with guilt, is completely removed by Christ's sacrificial death. This petition assumes vicarious atonement, justification and the fact that salvation is all of grace from start to finish. God forgives us completely and perfectly because Jesus rendered a full and perfect satisfaction to God the Father on the cross.

We noted earlier that, when a person truly believes in Jesus, he is immediately justified and his sins (past, present and future) are remitted and Christ's righteousness is imputed to him. Thus, every believer is justified once and for all (Jn. 5:24; Rom. 8:1). But, because of our flesh (Rom. 8:1, 5; Gal. 5:17), the old man (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9), the body of sin (Rom. 6:6), or the sin

remaining in our members, we all still commit sins in thought, word and deed, by omission and by commission, every single day. This does not mean that we all live a habitual lifestyle of sin (1 Jn. 1:6; 2:3) or that we commit scandalous sins every day. Yet, we all sin (1 Jn. 1:8). Our daily failings to meet God's perfect standard do not and cannot overturn our standing in Christ as a justified Christian. True believers cannot lose their salvation (Phil. 1:6). Nevertheless, our sins can still offend our heavenly Father. "They cannot destroy the believer's union with God, but they can interrupt and weaken his communion with God. Therefore, the believer is daily to confess his sins and to pray for God's pardon for his daily failings."³⁷¹

As We Forgive

The fifth petition is unique in that we ask God to forgive our sins "as we forgive our debtors." This connection between God's forgiveness and our forgiving of others is sometimes misunderstood. Jesus is not teaching here that if we forgive others we somehow merit God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness is not grounded on the fact that we forgive others. This would be a variant of salvation by works and would contradict the teaching on salvation in the whole Bible. God's Word repeatedly teaches that we are forgiven and declared righteous based not on our own deeds, but solely on the merits of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9).

What our Lord is saying is that a true Christian repents of his sins and obeys the teachings of Christ. The person who does not have mercy on another but comes and admits guilt and asks for forgiveness is not exhibiting faith in Christ by his good works. He is blatantly disregarding and disobeying the Redeemer's teaching. A professing Christian who is completely unwilling to extend forgiveness to a brother that admits his fault and asks for forgiveness should not expect to be heard by God at all. This point is brought out more clearly in Matthew 18:23-35:

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took *him* by the throat, saying, "Pay me what you owe!" So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

The point of this parable is that the man who was completely unwilling to forgive his fellow servant was not a true believer at all. God only forgives those who have faith and truly repent. One of the evidences of faith in Jesus and repentance toward God is a willingness to forgive.

³⁷¹ Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 570.

Paul emphasizes this teaching in Ephesians 4:32: “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). A professing Christian who does not imitate Christ, in having a spirit of forgiveness and who does not forgive out of appreciation for the mercy he has claimed to receive, is not exhibiting the genuine fruit of conversion. Vos writes,

We are not merely “exhorted” to forgive because we have been forgiven, we are *commanded* to forgive, as a matter of duty. If we are not willing to forgive others, we should question the reality of our own Christian experience. If our life does not produce the *fruits* of salvation, what ground have we for assurance that we are saved? Genuine love of the brethren is an evidence that a person is truly saved: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death” (1 John 3:14). The person who is unwilling to forgive his brother abides in death; that is, the person who does not love his brother is unsaved. Therefore the Bible teaches that the person who is unwilling to forgive his brother is himself unforgiven by God. Forgiving our brother is of course not the *ground* of God’s forgiving us; rather, it is the *evidence* that God *has forgiven us*. Where there is the real root, there will also be the fruit; if there is no fruit, then the real root is absent.³⁷²

With all this in mind, let us note the following about forgiving others. First, the word debtors must be defined by the immediate context and the parallel in Luke. Jesus is *not* saying that we have a moral obligation to release Christians from financial obligations toward us. Debts do not refer to money, but to sins done against us. “*Our debtors* are those persons who, by unjust designs, or words, or actions, have done us an injury. All sins, indeed, are committed against God, as the supreme Lord and lawgiver. But some are also committed against men, as the objects to which the sins immediately relate.”³⁷³ Thus, when we sin against someone, we are debtor to him. We need, to the best of our ability, to make restitution and ask for forgiveness. And if someone sins against us, they need to admit their guilt, attempt to make restitution when appropriate (e.g., sins of physical violence causing bodily harm or sins involving property; or even sins involving false witness, etc..) and ask for forgiveness. Our Lord’s teaching about debtors in the Lord’s prayer is consistent and harmonious with His teaching on Christian reconciliation in Matthew 5:23-23 and 18:15-20.

The concept of sin as debt is important because it emphasizes the need for confession, restitution and reconciliation between Christians. This aspect of the fifth petition teaches us that there are to be no loose ends in the church; sins, whether on our part or the part of others, are not to be ignored and overlooked. The Lord’s prayer presupposes the necessity for reconciliation between believers. If reconciliation and genuine forgiveness do not come about through biblical means, then Christians are not acting like Christians and hatred and bitterness will fester in the body of Christ.

Second, we are required to forgive our debtors. What does our Lord mean when He says, “forgive”? Forgiveness means that we no longer hold the sin against the person who sinned against us. This means that we do not dwell on it anymore or hold a grudge against that person. In fact, we are to act as though the sin never even occurred. We do not bring it up anymore to the person who sinned, to other people or even to ourselves. Paul says that we are to forgive like Christ. “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Herman Witsius, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 321.

anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you must do also” (Col. 3:12-13). The person who forgives lays aside all thoughts of anger, bitterness, revenge and malice and replaces them with thoughts of mercy and kindness. All negative thoughts and words must give way to a spirit of brotherly love.

Sadly, many professing Christians have a bad record on forgiving others. There are some who write off those who have sinned against them and refuse to seek reconciliation. Such people are not exhibiting the spirit of Christ at all. Others are happy to extend forgiveness verbally when the offending party apologizes and asks for forgiveness. But, they do not really mean it in their hearts and thus do not put the sin behind them. Consequently, the sin is brought up again and again and the penitent believer is damaged by continued gossip and bitter speech. Such behavior is anti-Christian and unloving. Still others only forgive in a half-hearted, partial way. They keep their mouth shut and do not malign the penitent; but, they also do not actively extend love to the person as they used to. When we forgive, we must really forgive. We must forgive fully, not partially. We must cast the debts of the penitent into oblivion. We must fully restore fellowship and actively love the other Christian.

It is very important that believers seek true reconciliation and not merely sweep unresolved conflicts under the rug. It is quite common today to encounter people in the church who have been offended by something, but act as if nothing is wrong whatsoever. If these people are asked if anything is wrong, they would even say, “No, everything is fine.” But on the inside they are angry and full of malice. Instead of communicating, being honest and seeking reconciliation they clam up, cut off fellowship and leave the church. They are so full of pride that they are simply too good to remain in a church where people sin against them. Such people mask their pride and lack of love with talk of piety. But, in reality, they are hypocrites who do not love the brethren.

We should avoid these great errors that are common in churches by focusing on our own failings. When we think of all the wrongs and sins that we have committed against God and the amazing fact that we have been forgiven because of Christ, we must forgive. Forgiveness can only flow from a humble heart, a heart that is conscious of its own sinfulness and unworthiness before God. The proud man cannot forgive injuries because his estimation of himself is far too high. He needs to be clothed with humility (cf. 1 Pet. 5:5) and see his own continued need of forgiveness.

A willingness to forgive those who have sinned against us is the condition of our assurance that God has forgiven our sins. If we want to pray with faith that God will answer our prayers, then we must forgive our brothers from the heart. A believer who is happy and quick to forgive others has real evidence of a work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. He can have a strong confidence that his own sins have been forgiven by the sacrificial death of Christ. Jesus emphasized this point in His ministry because the tendency of our sinful flesh is not to forgive. Professing Christians who do not forgive are hypocrites and often do great harm to the local church. “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mk. 11:25-26). Jesus does not permit broken relationships in His body. The forgiveness that He established between God and man must deeply affect relationships in the church. The church of Christ is to be a haven of love and forgiveness. We all need to remember this when we are tempted to hold a grudge against a penitent brother in Christ.

This part of the fifth petition calls for serious self-examination. Do we have consciousness of our own need for forgiveness from God that leads to humility? Are we seeking a full reconciliation with those we have offended or who have offended us? Are we immediately willing to forgive those who have sinned against us, who admit their guilt and ask for forgiveness? When we forgive others do we really forgive biblically and completely? Do we forgive from the heart as well as with the lips? If we cannot answer these questions in the affirmative, then where is our Christianity? If we cannot say yes, then can we be assured of God's forgiveness? No, we most certainly cannot. Let us determine, then, to fully repent in this area and let us determine to truly forgive our penitent brethren. This is one of the best ways to imitate Christ and please Him. "God's free forgiveness of sins is our highest privilege in this world. God's free forgiveness will be our only title to eternal life in the world to come. Then let us be forgiving during the few years that we are here upon earth."³⁷⁴

The Sixth Petition

After we pray that God will forgive our sins that have occurred in the past, we next look to the future and ask God to protect us from temptations too difficult for us handle. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Having confessed our sins, we want the Lord to help us not to commit sin again. The sixth petition has a negative and positive element.

Negatively, we ask God not to lead us into situations of severe testing. The Greek word rendered "lead" is, in every instance outside the Lord's prayer, rendered "bring into" (Lk. 5:18-19; Ac. 17:20; 1 Tim. 6:7; Heb. 13:11). This aspect of the sixth petition is a recognition that God is in absolute control of all events and that trials in a believer's life do not come without His approval.

The word temptation (*peirasmon*), depending on the immediate context, can refer to "temptation" or to "testing" (i.e. a trial). In modern English "temptation" refers to a solicitation to commit a sin or evil deed; while a "testing" denotes not a *direct* solicitation to evil, but a trial that can strengthen and benefit the Christian. The old English and the translators of the King James Version often simply use the word "tempt" for both a righteous and unrighteous trial. Thus, the first time the word tempt is used in the King James Version is Genesis 22:1 where it says that "God did tempt Abraham." This, of course, was not a solicitation to commit evil, but a holy trial of Abraham's faith. Since James says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (1:13), we are asking God not to bring us into a trial that our level of Christian maturity will not be able to withstand. "When we meet with temptation, we should realize two things: a) It is not God that is tempting me, but Satan, or my sinful heart, or both. b) Yet this temptation has been foreordained by God as part of his plan, and it is God that has permitted this temptation to come to me, for his own wise purposes."³⁷⁵ Some may argue that this is a fine distinction with very little difference. But it is a distinction that the Bible is careful to make, for God is not the author of evil, nor can be.

A key to understanding this petition is the great promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." This promise is essentially what we are to pray:

³⁷⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 175.

³⁷⁵ Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 576.

that in the course of providence, as God does test the sincerity of our faith, He will not place us in a situation that due to our particular weakness and the severity of the temptation would cause us to fail. From God's perspective it is a test, but Satan and his minions will use such occasions for direct solicitations to sin. God knows the state of our hearts. He knows our weaknesses and the areas in which we have failed in the past. Thus, we ask God for our own spiritual benefit to control our inner weaknesses and our outer circumstances.

This petition does not contradict the biblical teaching that believers benefit from trials that God sends our way. As James says, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience..." (1:2-3). However, it does recognize that, due to our remaining sin and the different levels of our faith, there are tests that we cannot endure. "Temptations are to be prayed against, both because of the discomfort and trouble of them, and because of the danger we are in of being overcome by them, and the guilt and grief that then follow."³⁷⁶

The fact that this petition comes immediately after we have asked for and received forgiveness of sins is significant. This proves that God's forgiveness does not lead to antinomianism and an excuse for sinning, but instead to a renewed dedication to overcome that which led to sin and caused us to fall. When our sins are forgiven, our love and dedication to Christ is strengthened. Thus, our response is to immediately request not to become ensnared by temptation, so that we do not once again offend our Savior by our behavior. "Lord, protect us from the solicitations of Satan and the corruption of our own hearts. Protect us from the deception of the devil, the vain allurements of this world and the carnal affections of our own hearts. Protect us from all circumstances that would hold us fast in a strong temptation, a temptation that we are not yet able to endure."

This petition assumes that our union with Christ is the foundation and ultimate cause of our sanctification (see Rom. 6:1-8:14). It stands upon the fact "that we have no strength for living a holy life, except so far as we obtain it from God. Whoever implores the assistance of God to overcome temptations acknowledges that, unless God *deliver* him, he will be constantly falling."³⁷⁷ This is a petition for God and Christ as our mediator to continuously work for our sanctification. It is set in a negative form, yet it presupposes the positive: that based on Jesus' work the Holy Spirit will lead us into the path of righteousness. We are to daily cast ourselves upon the throne of grace for spiritual victory. It is very careless and extremely unwise to neglect this aspect of the Lord's prayer, for our continued spiritual well-being depends upon God's work in us and His control of events around us.

While the first part of this petition is negative and relates to keeping out of temptations or trials that will injure us, the second part deals with deliverance when we do enter severe trials: "But deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:13). The phrase "from evil" (*apo tou pornrou*, literally "from the evil") can be translated as neuter, as in the KJV ("from evil"), or masculine ("from the evil one"; i.e. the devil). Although a number of excellent commentators prefer the masculine, the neuter best fits with the comprehensive nature of this petition. Thus, all situations of severe temptation and moral evil are included. Consequently, the second part of the sixth petition teaches us a number of things about God's deliverance of us.

First, we pray to be delivered when we enter a severe temptation or trial. We pray that God would give us strength to endure the time of testing and we ask God to use His providential control of the situation to remove the temptation or at least alter it so that we can overcome it.

³⁷⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:75.

³⁷⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 1:328.

We pray for spiritual courage, prudence, and perseverance to withstand the terrible snare of a severe temptation. It was a God-given inner strength that caused Joseph to flee from such a temptation (Gen. 39:7-12). We pray that God's sovereign hand will rescue us by overruling the world, subduing our flesh, and restraining Satan and all of God's enemies. We can pray this prayer with confidence because God has promised us that with the temptation He will also provide a way of escape so that we can bear it (1 Cor. 10:13).

This petition, by way of application, teaches us that we should do everything that we possibly can to avoid placing ourselves in situations of temptation. A person who is careless or who deliberately exposes himself to temptations can only pray this prayer as a hypocrite. "For persons acting in the manner, to say, 'Lead me not into temptation,' is to mock God."³⁷⁸ Thus, we must treat temptations as exceedingly dangerous because temptations are the gateway to sin. If we know our sinful natures and how quickly we may fall, then we will watch carefully against all circumstances and occasions of temptation. We must act as if our flesh was like highly explosive gun powder and temptations like sparks. We must keep a safe distance from them at all times.

Second, when we do fall into sin we pray that God would deliver us out of it. We ask God to deliver us from the evil of sin in our lives. We pray that God would convict us of our sin, subdue our lusts and give our regenerate nature ascendancy over the remaining corruption in us. If we fall, we want to ask the Holy Spirit to give us the strength to repent and forsake that sin immediately. Because of the old man (our flesh), our lives are a constant struggle against sin. We often find ourselves doing that which we hate and falling back into old sinful habits. Thus, we pray for God to keep our carnal natures under control. We want the Holy Spirit to limit the old man's activity. We petition God to help us put to death our sinful members and live consistently with the reality of our victory over the power of sin, by virtue of our union with Christ (Rom. 6:4-10). If we do not look to Christ and pray for deliverance in such situations, we will backslide and place ourselves in danger of apostasy. When we fall and the Spirit mercifully brings us to repentance, we need to learn from our experience not to make the same mistakes that led us into sin previously. Therefore, we pray that God in His infinite mercy would further sanctify us and use our occasion of falling for future improvements.

Third, we ask to be delivered from the assaults of the devil and his minions. Satan hates Christians and goes about as a roaring lion seeking to devour them (1 Pet. 5:8). In the Bible he is called "the prince of this world" (Jn. 14:30), for he is the leader of all in opposition to God. He is the father of the evil world system that exists. He is the liar, the great deceiver (Jn. 8:44) who appears as an angel of light to deceive God's people (2 Cor. 11:14). The devil is called the strong man (Lk. 11:21) because of his great power (cf. Rev. 12:3-4). Satan has thousands of years experience in tempting people to sin. He has long experience in destroying souls and helping to bring about new heresies to wreak havoc in the church. Although he does not have power to compel the human will; nevertheless, he is an expert at manipulating circumstances to tempt men to fall. He studies his enemies and does all he can to stir up their corruptions and excite their unlawful lusts. It was Satan who worked on David's heart to number the people (i.e. the men of war) of Israel (1 Chron. 21:1). He also put the idea into Judas's mind to betray Jesus (Jn. 13:2). "Satan, in tempting, uses many subtle policies to deceive. We read of the depths of Satan (Rev. ii.24), of his devices and stratagems (2 Cor. ii.11), or his snares and darts. He is called a lion for his cruelty, and an old serpent for his subtlety."³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:252.

³⁷⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Prayer*, 262.

When we pray to be delivered from the evil one, we can pray with faith and assurance because Satan is a defeated foe who has been chained by Christ's redemptive work (Rev. 20:1-3). Moreover, he is a finite being and can do nothing without God's permission (Job 1:12). Further, Christ is our high priest who is able to aid us when we are tempted because He was tempted and was victorious over sin and the devil (cf. Heb. 2:18). The Redeemer overcame every single temptation placed before Him (Heb. 4:15; 5:7 ff.). His complete victory over temptation and human suffering makes Him the perfect high priest because He can identify with our predicament and He has true compassion for us when we suffer. The victory of the cross makes the Lord's intercession for us totally effective. Jesus helps us by forgiving our sins and He gives us the ability (i.e. the power that flows from His redemptive work [Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:14]) to fight and overcome temptation. Thomas Watson writes,

Christ succours them that are tempted by "interceding for them." When the devil is tempting, Christ is praying. The prayer which Christ put up for Peter when he was tempted, extends to all his saints. "Lord," said Christ, "it is my child that is tempted; Father, pity him." Luke xxii 32. When a poor soul lies bleeding of the wounds the devil has given him, Christ presents his wounds to his Father, and, in the virtue of those, pleads for mercy. How powerful must his prayer be! He is a favourite. John xi 42. He is both High Priest and a Son. If God could forget that Christ were a Priest, he cannot forget that he is a Son. Besides, Christ prays for nothing but what is agreeable to his Father's will. If a king's son petitions only for that which his father has a mind to grant, his suit will not be denied.

Christ succours his people, by taking off the tempter. When the sheep begin to straggle, the shepherd sets the dog on them to bring them back to the fold, and then calls off the dog; so God takes off the tempter. He "will with the temptation make a way of escape," he will make an outlet. I Cor. x 13. He will rebuke the tempter. "The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan." Zech. iii 2. It is no small support, that Christ succours the tempted. The mother succours the child most when it is sick; she sits by its bedside, brings it cordials; so, when a soul is most assaulted, it shall be most assisted.³⁸⁰

The Conclusion to the Lord's Prayer

The conclusion of the Lord's prayer reads, "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen" (Mt. 6:13). Most modern commentaries, based on rules of textual criticism developed by the modernists in the nineteenth century, do not regard this postscript as genuine. The general idea is that this ending made its way into the Lord's prayer because it was the practice of the Greek churches to add this conclusion to all prayers in public worship. But regarding this idea, it seems to make a great deal more sense that the Greek churches used this ending in their prayers because it was first found in the Lord's prayer. Regarding the genuineness of this ending Witsius writes, "It is manifestly found in the most ancient and most approved Greek copies. This is not denied by those who choose to hold the opposite view."³⁸¹ It also is found in the *Didache* (c. A.D. 110) and the expositions of Chrysostom, Euthymus and Theophylact. Moreover, it is similar to other doxologies in Scripture (cf. 1 Chron. 29:11, 12; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; Jude 25). Although it is not found in the earliest Latin manuscripts, the Latin is a translation. The Greek was the fountain, while the Latin is but a stream. Moreover, the longer ending is found in the ancient Syriac and Arabic versions. The ending also is in perfect harmony

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 287.

³⁸¹ Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer*, 371.

with the teaching of the Lord's prayer, as well as the theology of the Sermon on the Mount. As Calvin says, "It is surprising that this clause which agrees so well with the rest of the prayer, has been left out by the Latins: for it was not added merely for the purpose of kindling our hearts to seek the glory of God, and or reminding us what ought to be the object of our prayers; but likewise to teach us, that our prayers, which are here dictated to us, are founded on God alone, that we may not rely on our own merits."³⁸² Given these and many other considerations, we believe that Christian churches should use the King James Version (which is based on the Received Text or *textus Receptus*) or at least a faithful modernization of the Authorized Version in the church's liturgy, exegesis and exposition.

The conclusion of the Lord's prayer, which takes the form of a doxology, exalts God while comforting His people. It is a pastoral doxology that encourages our faith and stands as our foundation of hope. It is fully consistent with the gospel, for it takes our eyes off our own weakness and infirmities and places them squarely on the triune God of Scripture. Our faith is lifted up as we consider the glorious attributes of our covenant God and the accomplished redemption of Jesus Christ. Thus, we conclude our prayer by not looking to, or relying on, our own power or works or experience; but we focus our faith on God and the work of Christ. Thus, Calvin says that the postscript was added to make us bold to ask and confident of receiving. He writes, "This is [a] firm and tranquil repose for our faith. For if our prayers were to be commended to God by our worth, who would dare even mutter in his presence? Now, however miserable we may be, though unworthiest of all, however devoid of all commendation, we will yet never lack a reason to pray, never be shorn of assurance, since his Kingdom, power, and glory can never be snatched away from our Father."³⁸³

When we say the conclusion of the Lord's prayer, we are not only exalting God and giving Him all praise, but we are also making a confession of our faith. This is the God we trust and serve. This God is an impregnable foundation against doubt, ambivalence and fear. He can and will accomplish exactly what He sets out to do. In this conclusion we find three things that are affirmed of God followed by the word, "amen." We will briefly consider each thing in turn.

First, there is an acknowledgment that the kingdom belongs to God. This reference to the kingdom is important, for the second petition was "Thy kingdom come" (Mt. 6:10). We look to the only true God who is absolutely sovereign over all things whether material or spiritual. God rules over His whole creation. Not one atom or molecule is outside of His complete control. We can take comfort that there is no such thing as chance or pure contingency in God's universe. There is no reason at all to worry that God's enemies will get the upper hand. God is in control. He cares about us and can answer our prayers.

Moreover, because of His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection, the Mediator has been declared King over all things in heaven and on earth (Rom. 1:3; Mt. 28:18). Messiah the Prince is seated in heaven at God's right hand and rules the new creation—the kingdom of grace. God "has put all things under His feet to the church" (Eph. 1:22). Consequently, when we pray, we look to the Redeemer with the eye of faith believing that we have been purchased with the blood of Christ, sanctified by the Spirit and that Jesus rules over us for our own best interest. His Spirit subdues the desires of our sinful flesh which war against us and molds our hearts so that we live in obedience to His rule. By regeneration and the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus brings people from every nation into a voluntary obedience to His law-Word. The Savior

³⁸² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:329.

³⁸³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:915-916; 3.20.47.

King is our precious high-priest who continually makes intercession for us. As we pray we must continually look to God as He is revealed in Scripture and the redemptive kingship of Christ and, as we do, our speech will break forth in praise and adoration.

Second, we acknowledge God's power. We strengthen our faith and encourage our hope by acknowledging God's infinite power to carry out His will and answer our prayers. "*Yours is the power* to maintain, support and advance Your kingdom." God has the might to protect His own and we can take comfort that no one is able to snatch us out of God's loving hand (cf. Jn. 10:28-29). By that power, God is able to subdue and conquer Christ's enemies. He is able, by virtue of Jesus' redemptive work, to subdue our sinful habits and desires and present us a spotless bride to Christ. By His power, He preserves us from the assaults of hell and from our own selves. We have every reason to trust in God and praise His holy name. "You have a mighty arm; strong is Your hand, and high is Your hand.... For You are the glory of their strength" (Ps. 89:13, 17).

Third, we glorify God: "Thine is the glory." We acknowledge that the triune God alone possesses infinite holiness and perfections, that He alone, because of His nature, deserves worship, praise and service. Jehovah dwells "in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). We also glorify God for His marvelous works of creation, especially His wonderful work of redemption. We cast our crowns before God for His creation, providence and recreation of all things. "Thou are worthy to be acknowledged, worshipped and adored by all classes, from the highest to the lowest, FOR EVER AND EVER; while they spend that endless eternity not so much enjoying their blessedness, as in celebrating thy praises and admiring thy glory."³⁸⁴

The Lord's Prayer closes with the word "amen," which comes from a Hebrew term meaning "truly" or "faithful." Here it carries the connotation of "let it be true" or "let it come to pass." Thus the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! The LORD do so; the LORD perform your words which You have prophesied" (28:6). We see in this petition Jeremiah's strong desire expressed with a bold assertion of faith. "Lord you truly possess the kingdom and the power and the glory. Let everyone of these petitions be answered in accordance with your infinite power, majesty, grace and mercy." The word "amen" beautifully ties everything that precedes it together. It reveals our confidence that God both hears and answers our prayers. "The 'Amen' at the end of our prayer is like the signature at the close of a letter, a token or evidence of our sincere belief and desire. At the same time it forms a fitting and properly solemn conclusion for our prayers, and is therefore an indication of reverence."³⁸⁵ "It is good to conclude religious duties with some warmth and vigour, that we may go from them with a sweet savour upon our spirits."³⁸⁶ It is important that when we say "amen" at the end of our prayers that we do so thoughtfully and not mindlessly. "Amen" is a confession of our trust in the God of truth, the Holy One who delights in our petitions and is happy to answer our prayers on account of Christ.

³⁸⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Lord's Prayer*, 378.

³⁸⁵ Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 589.

³⁸⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:76.

Chapter 25: Fasting

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly (Mt. 6:16-18).

The third illustration, where Jesus sets forth the proper way to practice piety for his disciples in contrast to the phony righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, regards fasting. This is an important topic because this is an area in which, generally speaking, modern Reformed and evangelical churches know very little and, for the most part, no longer practice. This author is unaware of any Reformed denominations or any Western nations within the last one hundred years proclaiming a day of prayer *and fasting*. This ought not to be the case, for fasting was an important and frequent practice in Scripture and Christ assumes that His followers will fast when He says, “When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites” (Mt. 6:16). The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, following Scripture, regards “solemn fastings” as a biblical, extraordinary aspect of religious worship (21:5). In other words, although there are not set times for fasting, nevertheless believers will fast. Moreover, the apostle Paul spoke of Christian married partners abstaining from marital relations to devote themselves to a period of fasting and prayer (1 Cor. 7:5). So, the assumption of both Christ and the apostles is that believers ought to fast.

The neglect of fasting is not new. John Calvin, writing in the sixteenth century, spoke of a similar problem in his *Institutes*: “Let us, therefore, say something about fasting, since very many, while they do not understand how useful it is, regard it as not very necessary; others also, considering it superfluous, completely reject it. And since its use is not well understood, it can easily lapse into superstition.”³⁸⁷ Perhaps there was an overreaction among Protestants to the mechanical, meaningless, superstitious way that papists were fasting. In any case, we will greatly benefit from learning the occasions and purpose of fasting, as well as the proper way to fast, which is the Redeemer’s purpose in our text.

Fasting Defined

Biblical fasting refers primarily to the complete abstention from food. Some extend the term to what we would call partial fasting where delicacies and rich foods are completely avoided for a time; that is perhaps what was going on with Daniel and his brethren. Some fasts only last a day, from sunrise to sunset, while others are for more extended periods. Fasting is only *commanded* in Scripture in connection with the Day of Atonement and even here a synonym is used for fasting (Lev. 16:29). Yet fasting was practiced throughout the Old Testament by God’s people. It is primarily from these inspired historical examples that we learn when and why it is appropriate.

³⁸⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, 2:1241; 4:12:14.

The Occasions and Purposes of Fasting

In this section we want to determine the purposes for fasting by examining the different occasions of fasting in Scripture.

The first occasion is connected with repentance and humility before God because of past sin or declension. Note the following examples. (1) On the Day of Atonement the people were required to “afflict their souls” (KJV) as they were conscious of the guilt of their sin before God. The Hebrew terms *innah nepes* could be translated “humble themselves” or “deny themselves.” This expression in Psalm 35:13 is more explicitly defined by the additional words “with fasting.” In Isaiah 58:3, 5 it is used in a parallelism with the word “fast.” Fasting is an expression of deep humiliation and sorrow before God because of sin. Matthew Henry writes, “Fasting from bodily refreshments, upon such extraordinary occasions, is a token of self-judging for the sins we have committed (we own ourselves unworthy of the bread we eat, and that God might justly withhold it from us), and of self-denial for the future; fasting *for* sin implies a resolution to fast from it, though it has been to us as a sweet morsel.”³⁸⁸

(2) When the city of Nineveh was threatened with the judgment of God because of its wickedness, the people repented with fasting and sackcloth and cried out to God in prayer. The king and the nobles of the city decreed, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell *if* God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?” (Jonah 3:7-9). The Ninevites’ acknowledgment of their guilt, repentance and desire to avoid God’s judgment led them to prayer and fasting. Once again, fasting, coupled with sackcloth and ashes, is an expression of humiliation before God.

(3) A similar case is found with King Ahab’s response to Elijah’s prophecy of severe judgment against him. “So it was, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house’” (1 Kgs. 21:27-29). The cases of Nineveh and Ahab are unique and interesting in that both returned to their sinful ways and were destroyed by God.

(4) When David’s child through Bathsheba lay sick, as a consequence of his adultery and murder, he pleaded with the Lord for the child and fasted and lay all night on the ground (2 Sam. 12:16). David continued his fast until the child died hoping that God would spare the child.

(5) When Daniel understood the full measure of God’s judgment against Israel, he sought God through prayer and fasting. “Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, ‘O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments, we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land.... O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for

³⁸⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2:966.

Your city and Your people are called by Your name” (Dan. 9:3-6, 19). Daniel is not only confessing his own sins, but is also confessing the sins of the nation with fasting in sackcloth and ashes, humbling himself before God.

(6) After Israel heard the book of the law of God read for the first time in many generations, the people “assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads” (Neh. 9:1). They repented, “stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers” (Neh. 9:2). This fast may have been ordered by Nehemiah. The people forsook their sins and they mourned over them. “By these outward expressions of sorrow and humiliation, they gave glory to God, took shame to themselves, and stirred one another to repentance.... They spoke to him in prayer, offered their pious and devout affections to him in the confession of sin and the adoration of him as the Lord and their God. Fasting without prayer is a body without a soul, a worthless carcass.”³⁸⁹ The Word of God, accompanied with the power of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts, had done its work and the people fervently turned to God.

Fasting is also associated with mourning over judgments and calamities that come from God. After Israel had suffered a defeat at the hands of the Benjamites because of pride and carelessness, they sought the Lord through prayer and fasting before they fought again. “Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD” (Judg. 20:26). They humbled themselves and acknowledged their complete dependence upon God for victory. “We cannot expect the presence of God with us, unless we thus seek it in the way that He has appointed.”³⁹⁰

David, the people of Israel and especially the people of Jabesh-Gilead fasted and mourned over the death of Saul and Jonathan his son (1 Sam. 31:13; 1 Chr. 10:12; 2 Sam. 1:12). Fasting is a fitting response to these situations because judgment and calamity are the consequences of sin. “[T]hey humbled themselves under the hand of God, and prayed for the repairing of the breaches made upon Israel by this defeat.”³⁹¹

Fasting is a proper action when the people of God seek Him in prayer because of external threats and dangers. When Judah was threatened by the Moabites, Ammonites and other wicked forces, “Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to ask *help* from the LORD; and from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD” (2 Chr. 20:3-4). There was a seriousness, earnestness and settled resolution of the heart to look to God in prayer.

Ezra and the godly remnant sought God’s direction, protection and blessing for their journey back to the promised land. “Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions” (Ez. 8:21). They humbled themselves and by faith cast themselves upon the guidance and protection of divine providence. “Note, all of our concerns about ourselves, our families and our estates, it is our wisdom and duty by prayer to commit them to God, and leave the care of with Him.”³⁹²

There are times of fasting that are unique, where the person is nourished supernaturally by God. For example, both times that Moses met with God to receive the covenant law, the ten commandments (Ex. 24:18; 34:28; Dt. 9:18; 10:10; the second occasion was a renewal of the

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 2:1098.

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 2:247.

³⁹¹ Ibid, 2:449.

³⁹² Ibid, 2:1056.

covenant), he fasted for forty days; he neither ate nor drank water. This means that God sustained his health in a miraculous manner. Scholars are divided as to why Moses fasted. Some think it was a preparation to receive divine revelation. Others see the symbolism of 40 days as a time of testing for Israel. Still others view it as a means of strengthening Moses' faith. It may be a solemn preparation for receiving the covenant law. The people were not holy, while God was infinitely holy. Moses humbled himself before God. From this we see that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God. "*The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, neither in the abundance nor delicacy of food, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.* As Moses, so Elijah and Christ, fasted forty days and forty nights. The more dead we are to the delights of sense the better prepared we are for the pleasures of heaven."³⁹³

Jesus fasted forty days and nights at the beginning of His public ministry (Mt. 4:2; Lk. 4:2). Although a number of commentators believe the whole forty days of fasting was a period of temptation, it is more likely that the temptation came at the end of the 40 days. Christ went into the wilderness as the second Adam to pray, meditate and commune with the Father in preparation for the work set before Him. Calvin's comments on this passage are excellent: "There were two reasons why Christ withdrew into the wilderness. The first was, that, after a fast of forty days, he might come forth as a new man, or rather as a heavenly man, to the discharge of his office. The next was, that he might be tried by temptation and undergo an apprenticeship, before he undertook an office so arduous, and so elevated."³⁹⁴ It is interesting that Moses who represented the law, Elijah who, in a sense, represented the prophets and the Savior who ushered in the gospel in all its fullness all experienced forty day fasts.

Fasting can be a regular practice of self-discipline. The gospel accounts tell us that John the Baptist taught his disciples to fast often (Mk. 2:18; Lk. 5:33). Apparently, the disciples of John were fasting to maintain the discipline encouraged by their leader. John had a ministry of repentance and preparation for the coming Messiah. Fasting was suited to self-consecration and personal piety. John's disciples were puzzled as to why Jesus' followers did not fast and were told by Christ that they would fast when the Bridegroom was taken from them (Mk. 2:18; Lk. 5:33-35; Mt. 9:14-15). In other words, when Jesus was with His disciples it was inappropriate for them to fast because figuratively speaking they were groomsmen at a wedding party. Weddings are for feasting, not fasting. "The wedding imagery suggests a sense of new beginnings, and of a new relationship established with the people of God, and it especially conveys the joy and exhilaration of this new situation."³⁹⁵

Godly Anna demonstrated her great piety before Jehovah by serving "God with fastings and prayers night and day" in the Temple (Luke 2:37). Anna was a widow who had given herself completely over to the service of God. "Anna's activity pictures a person totally focused on serving God."³⁹⁶ She was a woman of self-denial for the kingdom of God who continually mortified the flesh and kept it in subjection so she could more readily serve God in prayer. This teaches us that crucifying the sinful flesh and continually communing with God are companions; they complement each other.

Cornelius, whom the Holy Spirit calls a devout man that feared God, was fasting and praying when an angel appeared to him with instructions on where to hear the gospel (Ac. 10:30-31). His prayer and fasting were private, not ostentatious.

³⁹³ Ibid, 1:429.

³⁹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:207.

³⁹⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 139.

³⁹⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 252.

In 1 Cor. 7:5 Paul assumes that Christians will have special times of seeking the Lord with prayer and fasting. It is obvious from these examples that fasting ought to be the practice of the church in our own time. Biblical fasting is a mark of dedication to godliness and devotion to Jehovah and, yet, it is almost absent from the church today.

Fasting was also done before sending men out into the mission field. For example, the leaders of the church at Antioch “ministered to the Lord and fasted” before God set apart Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2). They also fasted and prayed before sending them out (Acts 13:3). The choosing of men for the ministry was regarded as so important that God’s help was sought by extraordinary means. The spread of the gospel was such a monumental task that success was also sought by prayer and fasting. The modern church needs to take these responsibilities more seriously.

From these many examples, there are certain things that can be said about the purpose of fasting. The central purpose is clearly seeking God’s help in prayer. Fasting is always accompanied by prayer and communion with God. Fasting is also often coupled with repentance, humility and self-mortification. Fasting is the appropriate preparation for spiritual conflict (see Mk. 9:29) because, on the one hand, it mortifies the flesh and, on the other, it shows a radical reliance on God for everything. “When we find Satan strong and violent, and not yielding ground for us, when he is opposed or set upon us, then must we set an edge upon our faith by prayer; and an edge upon our prayer by fasting and separation of ourselves to the exercise of prayer.”³⁹⁷ The one who fasts is taking spiritual discipline a step further by mortifying the flesh and setting aside even normal necessities such as food and even undergoes hunger and pain to wholly devote himself to spiritual exercises. By fasting we dispose the body to serve the soul in prayer. “The use of a full, and especially of a luxurious diet, is inconsistent with that clear, calm state of thought and feeling which devotional exercises require. When the mind and heart are very much engaged with any subject, especially if that subject is of a serious and mournful kind, there is an indisposition to take food; and in that state of mind produced by deep sense of the evil of sin, and of the supreme importance of things unseen and eternal, to refrain from food seems a natural expression of our sense of our own unworthiness, and the comparative insignificance of all earthly things.”³⁹⁸

As we consider fasting, it is important that we do not view it in a mechanical manner as if it automatically produces results. The results of prayer are completely dependent upon God, whether we fast or not. Moreover, it is important that we do not look upon fasting in a superstitious way, as if it were at all meritorious. The man who fasts is just as much the beggar as any man. Fasting, however, renders us more eager, dedicated and unencumbered for prayer.

The Pharisees’ Hypocritical Fasting

Before Jesus instructs his disciples in how to fast, He first tells them the improper method. “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward” (v. 16). The Pharisees had perverted fasting and turned it into a means of gaining a reputation among the people as the most pious. The purpose of fasting in connection with private prayer was an expression of humiliation and a means of concentration towards God. There is no reason whatsoever for fasting to be placed on display to impress others. In fact, we know from

³⁹⁷ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 239.

³⁹⁸ David Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:256.

other passages that God rejects the piety of fasting as nothing more than an empty show when it is insincere. When the Jews fasted without accompanying heart repentance, the Lord commanded the people through Joel, “Rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God” (Joel 2:13). Similarly, God rebuked the people through Isaiah because they were fasting even while they were blatantly violating God’s moral law: “In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers” (Is. 58:3).

The Pharisees took a useful act of piety that was designed for extraordinary occasions to seek God in prayer and turned it into a meritorious work before God. That which was designed to work humility and an inner concentration before God was turned into an act of pride and self-exaltation. This was hypocrisy of the worst sort; fasting is for humility not self-exaltation. They walked around with a sad countenance, not out of sorrow over sin, but so that others would know that they were fasting. The expression “they disfigure their faces” means literally that they made their faces invisible. (The verb *aphanizousin* means “to make invisible.”) Thus, what occurred was likely a rubbing of ashes on the face to make them unrecognizable. In the Greek there is even a play on words: “They hide their faces in order to be seen.” When the Pharisees fasted they rubbed ashes on their head and appeared completely disheveled like a modern “street person.” They called attention to themselves and made themselves stand out sharply in a crowd. Consequently our Lord says, “Assuredly I say to you, they have their reward” (Mt. 6:16). “Again as in the previous examples of ostentatious piety (see vv 2, 4), the present tense of *apechousin*, ‘they are having,’ is emphatic and ironic. They are *at that moment* receiving the *only* reward they will get.”³⁹⁹

The purpose of fasting is to humble oneself and seek the Lord in prayer. The person who fasts comes to God as a beggar and seeks an answer to his prayers. He realizes his complete dependence upon God and casts himself on His mercy for an answer to his particular need. The hypocrite is not genuinely concerned about this. He is simply seeking praise from men, a human reward and that is precisely what he will get, but nothing more. As in the example of alms and prayer, the Savior is emphasizing the absurdity of phony pious acts done to be seen and praised by men. True religion is about glorifying God, not ourselves. The man who puts God above all else will receive a reward, but the man focused on the things of this world and the pride of life will receive a worthless, temporary reward from sinful men. What foolishness!

We see in the practice of the Pharisees a very common error of ritualism or focusing on the externals of religion. The visible aspect of fasting, the sackcloth and ashes, were only external signs of what was supposed to be the state of one’s heart. The purpose of fasting is to humble oneself and seek God. The Jews in the days of Christ had made the act of fasting an end in itself. The voluntary, occasional, unique circumstances that normally were associated with fasting had given way to the human tradition of a required fast twice a week. The degenerate Jewish religious leaders took an extraordinary means of religious devotion and made it an ordinary weekly requirement. They took a useful act of piety designed to focus our attention on our own unworthiness and turned it into an act of self-righteousness and self-exaltation. They took something designed to focus our attention upon God and made it all about man. All of this is connected to their diabolical scheme of works-righteousness in relation to salvation. They believed that eternal life was achievable by keeping the law and doing acts of piety. Therefore, their whole concept of good works and piety was perverted. The pious man who fasted was, in their view, causing God to react to his righteousness.

³⁹⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 154.

The Pharisees looked humble on the outside, but they were proud and unrepentant on the inside. It is such foolishness when men think that they can deceive God by an outward show without the inward reality. When we approach God and seek Him through the extraordinary means of fasting, our hearts must be truly humbled first or our hunger is nothing more than a shadow and an affront to God. Let us beware of spiritual pride, which is deceitful and very dangerous. There are cults and false religions all over the world where men fast not unto God, but to their own pride. They serve their delusions with much outward pomp and solemnity. “The fast that God has chosen, is *a day to afflict the soul, not to hang the head like a bulrush, nor to spread sackcloth and ashes under him*; we are quite mistaken if we call this a fast, Isa. lviii.5.”⁴⁰⁰

Anyone familiar with the history of the Christian church knows that, in the centuries after the close of the canon of Scripture, superstitious ideas regarding fasting arose that led the church into bondage on this issue. In fact it is apparent that our Lord’s teaching on fasting was almost completely ignored. The Jews required fasting on Tuesdays and Thursdays; therefore, some ancient Christian writers so as not to follow the Jews, required fasting on Mondays and Wednesdays. Fasting came in also as the church held superstitious observances of Lent (i.e. the spring period of fasting in preparation for Easter).

Fasting among the papists is a complete perversion of Scripture and contains many gross errors. First, in order to make fasting acceptable to the masses they allowed eggs, fish and cheese to be substituted for meats. Thus, one could fast on Friday by feasting on pizza or barbequed salmon. They also placed no restrictions on other delicacies. Second, they took an extraordinary ordinance that was voluntary (except in the O.T. on the Day of Atonement and in exceptional circumstances) and made it into a mandatory law of the church. Thus, not fasting on that particular day was considered a mortal sin. This is a violation of *sola Scriptura* and Christian liberty. Third, they declared that fasting gained merit before God and could reduce one’s suffering in purgatory. This is a denial of the sufficiency and perfection of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. For the papists, fasting was another good work that was an automatic means of blessing before God. Thus, Calvin declared that in “both fasts and in all other parts of discipline the papists have nothing right, nothing sincere, nothing well-ordered and arranged, to give them occasion to boast, as if anything remained among them deserving of praise.”⁴⁰¹

The Proper Way to Fast

After criticizing the hypocritical method of fasting, our Lord turns His attention to the biblical way. “But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Mt. 6:18). Like His teaching on almsgiving and prayer, Christ teaches that our fasting should be as inconspicuous as possible. Instead of walking around with one’s hair unkempt and in disarray, we should anoint our head and comb our hair. (Keep in mind in that dry climate they would anoint their head with oil.) We should appear in public well-groomed; instead of putting ashes on our faces to look pale and malnourished, we should wash our faces so that we look completely normal. Although it is unstated, we also should not go around with a gloomy look on our faces so that people will know we are fasting. We also must not announce the fact that we are fasting to others or brag about it when the fast is over.

⁴⁰⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:77.

⁴⁰¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1248; 4:7:21.

Such behavior violates the spirit of our passage. We are to conduct ourselves in such a way that others will have no idea that we are fasting. We are to fast only to be seen by our Father who dwells in a secret or unseen place. The One who cannot be seen will see everything that we do in secret. The purpose of fasting is not to build up our reputation or to advertise our piety, but rather to humble and discipline ourselves before God. If we fast and pray to God and He hears us and answers our prayers, then we should be satisfied with that alone. It is this approach to fasting that will receive a reward from God.

Some Applications

This teaching on the proper and improper way to fast contains a number of important applications.

First, professing Christians must not conduct their piety in a manner that draws attention to them or that leads to self-exaltation. (This is certainly the central point of all three of these illustrations.) For example, the Bible requires modesty in dress and all believers should dress in a manner that does not cause anyone to stumble. Certain Anabaptists, however, take this principle to mean that they must dress in styles of the distant past and thus they stand out in a crowd like sore thumbs. They draw attention to themselves and advertise their piety to the world. In fact, the Amish have taken this concept of piety and separation from the world to the extreme and have become tourist attractions. Some people violate this principle by putting on an act when they pray, changing their tone of voice and speech patterns. Others choose a prominent place in the church so that people can hear their beautiful singing voice. We must always be on guard against doing acts of piety in such a way as to be seen by and glorified of men. Our sole purpose is to glorify God.

Second, fasting is a useful tool in our quest for self-discipline and mortification of the flesh. There are times when a believer may be struggling with a particular sin or temptation. These are the times to seek God with prayer and fasting. If we buffet our body, we will learn to avoid excess. The extreme hunger of fasting should help us to learn moderation. Modern America is a land of excess, gluttony and hedonism and this self-centered attitude has made its way into the church. In this time of self-indulgence and spiritual apathy, we need to seek God with extraordinary means.

Third, in this age of the progress of evil, apostasy, antinomianism and heathenism, the church, as a whole, needs to fast; humble itself; confess its sins; and seek God in prayer for revival. We live in a time when many, even in “conservative” Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, are arrogant and work to justify the accumulations of their departures from the Scriptures that have occurred over the past few centuries. Modern, so-called conservative Presbyterian seminaries are using John Frame’s and/or Dr. Gore’s book on worship, both of which repudiate reformed worship for an Anglican or Lutheran view. Instead of humbling themselves and repenting, they are seeking to justify their declension, their departure from God’s law. That’s pride and self-exaltation. The church needs to humble itself, confess its sins, proclaim a fast and repent. We live in an era of self-justification, not humility before God. If we are to have a return to vital godliness, biblical worship and purity of doctrine, we need to afflict our souls, repent and seek a return of the Holy Spirit’s blessing upon the church.

Our nation is far from God at present and sins boldly in every aspect of civil government. The people are wicked and seek out rulers who exult in high-handed rebellion against God. God’s judgment no doubt hangs over our wicked Christ-hating country. We need to fast and pray

for God to have mercy on our nation and bring a radical change of heart to many in it, so that we will glorify God and be spared from His judgment.

Fourth, believers who encounter trials and tribulations must learn to display a cheerful countenance. While times of public mourning are certainly appropriate, Christians who go through life with no joy or happiness and walk about with a dour visage give people the impression that Christianity is a negative thing; that salvation does not lead to great joy among God's people. We are to mourn in spirit over our sins, but we are not to look sad and serious to impress people with our piety and dedication to Christ.

Fifth, we must always be on guard against viewing fasting in an external, ritualistic manner, as if it automatically bestowed blessings. Fasting is an aid to fervent prayer and mortification. However, whether or not God blesses us in some special way or answers our prayers is completely in His hands. It is solely a matter of grace and not merit. We cannot manipulate God or use fasting as a means to get what we desire. This is a great error that will lead to superstitious concepts of piety.

In conclusion, we need to remember that our piety must be directed solely to God. We are not to concern ourselves with what others think of us or be egotistical about our pious conduct. We are to concern ourselves solely with what God thinks of our conduct. God is watching. Focus on what God sees and what God thinks. We are to focus on glorifying God and do these things in a way that pleases Him. If we do this, then our sanctification will progress, our reputations will be above reproach; and God will reward us openly for being faithful to the teaching of His own dear Son. Our faith must be focused on God's reward, which never perishes and not on the fleeting, temporary opinions of sinful men.

Chapter 26: Serving God Rather than Wealth

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (Mt. 6:19-24).

With verse 19, we begin a new topic in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus will now instruct the disciples on the biblical attitude towards wealth, possessions and material needs. This section is still part of our Lord's exposition of the necessity for His followers to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. But, the subject has now changed from a believer's private piety (with regard to charity, praying and fasting) to his everyday functioning in the world. Thus, He discusses money, possessions, food, drink and clothing. Christ is teaching believers that Christianity must radically affect our "secular" life and not merely our private, religious life. Believers must not only trust in God and shun hypocrisy in matters of religious piety, but must also put God first and trust Him in every aspect of life. By way of introduction, there are some important things to note about this portion of Scripture.

First, in the section on material things, which extends from verse 19 to 34, there are three separate, yet related, sayings: the storing up of treasures (19-21); the eye (22-23); and the impossibility of serving two masters (24ff). In each of these pericopes, the Savior sets before us two and only two alternatives. One can store up treasure in heaven or treasure on earth. One can have a good or an evil eye resulting in two bodily conditions (light or darkness). One can only serve one of two masters: God or money. Jesus emphasizes throughout this section that even in the everyday, “secular” areas of life there can be no neutrality with regard to God. There can be no fence sitting even when it comes to money and how we view possessions.

This is a very important topic for our materialistic, consumer-oriented culture; a society where buying and accumulating things is paramount; a nation where keeping up with the Jones’ is an obsession. In America, people are not praised and looked up to for being righteous, but for being rich. Those who neglect God, but amass great fortunes, are put on the cover of magazines and are given their own television programs. The love of money over God and the service of money as a god is the American way. Thus, this topic is pertinent to our age. Capitalism without biblical law and especially without Christ becomes distorted by fallen human nature, greed, selfishness and covetousness into another aspect of this evil world system.

Second, although this section is focused on material things, it is another way of speaking of what the Bible calls “the world.” Jesus is telling us the proper way to view all of life. Although He focuses on money and material things, we need to understand that people worship money not simply for itself, but also because of what it can bring. Money and riches are sought for what attends them—power, prestige and a multitude of lusts. Thus, Paul says, “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Consequently, Jesus in this section on money and possession tells us the only way for a Christian to be faithful in this world. He tells us how to be in the world without being *of* it. Christ focuses on two serious dangers. One is an inordinate love of this world and the things in it. This causes men to worship material things and money instead of God. The other is an over-anxious care relating to the necessities of life. Both of these things flow from a lack of faith in God and both can only be solved by placing God first in everything.

Third, as we look at this section of our Lord’s sermon, we must not forget that He is still correcting false beliefs common among the Jews. The Jewish people, following the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, were looking to the Messiah’s reign as one of unequalled prosperity for the Jews. They expected the Jewish nation to be exalted after conquering the Gentiles. They would be rich beyond belief with the spoils of their neighbors. “Our Lord informs them that such anticipations were founded in error—that the happiness to be enjoyed under the Messiah is spiritual, not carnal, in its nature.”⁴⁰² Our focus in life is not to be in things which are temporal, which are passing away, but in the pursuit of spiritual riches. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Mt. 6:33). This worldly value system is universal and, thus, one reason we must avoid it is that it is the practice of the Gentiles (v. 32).

Heavenly or Earthly Treasures

Jesus begins His teaching on wealth and possessions by contrasting, in a parallel form, two different places to store up treasures. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where

⁴⁰² John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:262.

moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Mt. 6:19-20).

The instruction, “do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth,” can be translated, “stop laying up for yourself treasures,” indicating that some or many of the hearers of this imperative were already violating this teaching. The word “treasures,” as the immediate context indicates, does not refer only to money. In the ancient Middle East, banks were rare and were not trusted. Therefore, treasure would refer to a variety of material goods kept in the home or hidden on the property. This would encompass hard currency such as gold, silver or jewelry. It would include fine fabrics and elaborate clothing, which at that time were difficult to produce. (For example, when Elisha’s servant Gahazi sought illicit profit from Naaman after he was cured by Elisha, he asked for “a talent of silver and two changes of garments” [2 Ki. 5:22]. Also, Achan was tempted by gold, silver and “a beautiful Babylonian garment” [Josh. 7:21]). It could also refer to livestock and large store houses of grain.

Before we examine the reasons why we are not to lay up treasures on earth, we need to determine precisely what our Lord was prohibiting. This analysis is important because there are some who interpret this command as forbidding having any extra money set aside, such as a bank account, or acquiring any earthly possessions that are not immediately necessary. According to this view, investments in gold, silver, real estate, stocks, insurance policies and retirement funds would be unbiblical. People should simply live day by day with no regard for the future. This view is completely wrong and untenable because it fails to take into account the broad context of Scripture regarding wealth and possessions. That possessions and wealth are not forbidden in every case is proved by the following.

First, there are examples of men in the Old Testament whom God prospered and made very rich such as Abraham, Job and David, who obviously were not condemned by Jehovah for their wealth. In fact, Job lost his riches in a test and then after the time of testing was over God not only restored his losses, but “gave Job twice as much as he had before” (Job 42:10). Second, the LORD promised Israel economic blessings if they were careful and diligent in observing His commandments (Dt. 28:3-5). These blessings would even extend to their “storehouses” (Dt. 28:8). They would also be blessed with “plenty of goods” (Dt. 28:11). The Israelites would have so much money that they would be able to “lend to many nations” (Dt. 28:12). Third, it was Joseph’s large storehouses of grain that preserved Israel in a time of famine (Gen. 41:47-49; 45:5). Fourth, hard work that leads to abundance is commanded so that Christians can help others. “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give to him who asks” (Eph. 4:28). “Be kindly affectionate to one another...not lagging in diligence...distributing to the needs of the saints” (Rom. 12:10, 11, 13).

Fifth, the Bible teaches that a godly man leaves behind an inheritance so abundant that it even provides for his grandchildren. “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children” (Pr. 13:22). Obviously, this task would be impossible if all investments, savings and accumulation of money were forbidden. Paul teaches the same principle in 2 Corinthians 12:14 when he writes, “For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.” “Treasures are gathered by parents for their children, who become heirs.... King Solomon wisely observes, ‘Houses and wealth are inherited from parents’ (Prov. 19:14a).”⁴⁰³

⁴⁰³ Simon J. Kistemaker, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 428.

Sixth, there are a number of passages in the Proverbs which teach the wisdom of financial planning and saving. “There is desirable treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise, but a foolish man squanders it” (Pr. 21:20). The man who is disciplined, who learns the law of God and applies it to his life will have the Lord’s blessing. “The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, but those of everyone who is hasty surely lead to poverty” (Pr. 21:5). The patient, plodding, hard-working man will prosper, while the impatient man who must have things now will end up with poverty. “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Pr. 22:7). Obviously a man must have more than he needs if he is going to lend to the poor. “Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches” (Pr. 24:3-4). A wise believer knows how to build a house and fill it with pleasant and precious treasures. God’s people can have possessions and can even partake of luxuries.

Seventh, in the parable of the talents Jesus uses principles of wise investing in order to make a profit to teach His people the need to be diligent and wise in kingdom work (see Mt. 25:14-27; cf. Lk. 16:19-23). He even says that it would have been better to put the money in the bank to accumulate interest rather than simply to bury the talent in the earth (Mt. 25:27).

Eighth, a reading of the gospels indicates that Christ had some rich disciples. There was Zacchaeus who was very wealthy. Although after Zacchaeus was converted he gave abundantly to the poor and made restitution to those he had defrauded, there is no indication that he was required to give away all his treasures to be a Christian. There also was Nicodemus who used some of his riches to anoint the body of our Lord for burial (Jn. 19:39). Given all these passages, the idea that wealth and possessions are altogether forbidden is simply impossible.

What then is our Lord saying? Jesus is forbidding the covetous, selfish, self-centered accumulation of goods. He is speaking against people who place the seeking of material goods before living for God’s kingdom. He is rebuking people who accumulate goods not to glorify God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31), but rather for the sake of self-satisfaction and glorification. People who place the accumulation of material things above their walk with God, or the Christianization of their family, or their responsibilities to the local church have made money and things into an idol. This interpretation is supported by the parallel command to lay up treasures in heaven. The focus of the Christian life is not to be on the accumulation of riches, but on obedience to God’s Word and good works. The man who focuses on serving Christ, who works hard and uses godly wisdom will, under normal circumstances, prosper. But his prosperity is a fruit of his living for Christ. It is not the center of his life.

There are a number of things that this imperative is intended to correct. First, Jesus instructs us not to give first place to temporal-material things. The believer must have a proper perspective regarding the things of this world—they indeed are often necessary and useful, but they must always have a secondary place to spiritual riches and to our service and devotion toward Christ. Believers must live in the world without becoming worldly. The Savior taught that our salvation is more important and more valuable than even owning the whole world. “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mt. 16:24-26).

Second, this teaching is against covetousness and for contentment. The philosophy of modern American consumer culture is on getting more things and getting them right now, even if debt is involved. This attitude of rank consumerism is a form of idolatry. We are the richest

nation in the world with the highest standard of living in history, yet people are not content. Their lives are centered on grasping for more and more things: clothes, cars, gadgets and the like. Consequently, the average American owes over 8,000 dollars in credit card debt and tithes less than two percent of their income. As our text emphasizes, it is easy to determine where their hearts really are by how they spend their money. Their pleasures and their bellies are their idols.

Third, this imperative is against the idea of self-trust or in trusting in our own possessions as a substitute for God. If we store up possessions and look to them as rendering trust in God unnecessary, or as a bulwark against disaster, then our riches have taken us away from God. This trusting in riches and possessions is a common stumbling block and, thus, Moses warned the Israelites against pride, self-exaltation and forgetting God when they took possession of the land and became prosperous:

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—*when* you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell *in them*; and *when* your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, *in which were* fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.”

And you shall remember the LORD your God, for *it is* He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as *it is* this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish (Dt. 8:11-19).

This confidence in riches is perhaps the main reason that it is hard for “a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:24). Most rich men are proud because they attribute their riches to self-sufficiency and brilliance. Consequently, they believe that religion is for poor people who must suffer in the here and now. For this reason, if God does prosper us, we must keep in mind that it was Jehovah who gave us the power to get wealth (Dt. 8:18). God is responsible for our blessings in this life. If we prosper economically, then we must heed the words of David: “If riches increase, do not set your heart upon them” (Ps. 62:12). Remember: “Whatsoever a man sets his heart upon and looks to for support is his god, and therefore his covetousness is called ‘idolatry’ (Col. iii.5).”⁴⁰⁴

Fourth, this injunction corrects our sinful tendency to be selfish. Jesus said, “Do not lay up for *yourselves* treasures on earth” (Mt. 6:19). When professing Christians pamper themselves with luxuries—new cars, fine clothes, big screen TV’s, lavish vacations, exceptional houses, fancy dinners out and so on—yet barely support the gospel or the cause of God and truth, then we have the selfish laying up of treasures for ourselves only. It is quite common for those on a pastoral visitation to be told that Mr. and Mrs. Jones would like to tithe more, but simply can’t afford it. There are too many bills to pay. The elders on this visit look around and see designer clothes, a shiny new car, top of the line furniture and a refrigerator stocked with steaks and fresh

⁴⁰⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 188.

salmon. The truth of the matter is that such people can easily afford to tithe what they ought, but give God and His kingdom a secondary place to their own desires and luxuries. They are self-centered and selfish with their money. Their behavior is little different than the Israelites who kept the healthy cattle for themselves and offered God the sick, injured and deformed animals.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones relays a story he heard from another preacher that beautifully illustrates this point regarding pampering ourselves while being selfish with the Lord:

It is the story of a farmer who one day went happily and with great joy in his heart to report to his wife and family that their best cow had given birth to twin calves, one red and one white. And he said, "You know I have suddenly had a feeling and impulse that we must dedicate one of these calves to the Lord. We will bring them up together, and when the time comes we will sell one and keep the proceeds, and we will sell the other and give the proceeds to the Lord's work." His wife asked him which he was going to dedicate to the Lord. "There is no need to bother about that now," he replied, "we will treat them both in the same way, and when the time comes we will do as I say." And off he went. In a few months the man entered his kitchen looking very miserable and unhappy. When his wife asked him what was troubling him, he answered, "I have bad news to give you. The Lord's calf is dead." "But," she said, "You had not decided which was to be the Lord's calf." "Oh yes," he said, "I had always decided it was to be the white one, and it is the white one that has died. The Lord's calf is dead."⁴⁰⁵

While this illustration is amusing, it teaches us the need to always be on guard against self-deception in the area of possessions. Everything we have comes from the gracious hand of God. The hoarding up of money and things for our own selfish use, at the expense of kingdom work, is a grievous and foolish sin.

Four Reasons and the Biblical Alternative

Our Lord supports His imperative not to accumulate treasures on earth with a number of excellent arguments that demonstrate the stupidity of focusing our life on gathering worldly possessions.

The first argument expresses the reality that all earthly possessions are insecure and transitory. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal" (Mt. 6:19). "The moth (*ses*) was a well-known destroyer in the ancient world and, hence, frequently came to be used as a symbol of destruction (cf. Isa. 50:9; 51:8; and esp. Job 4:19, 'those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before the moth')."⁴⁰⁶ One can buy and store away beautiful clothes, but their beauty and value is easily ruined by moths that deposit their eggs on woolen garments. The eggs hatch unawares and the larvae destroy the clothes.

The word translated "rust" (*broxis*) means literally an *eating away*. The word is used in the LXX of devouring locusts (Mal. 3:11). In ancient Greek, the word could be used to describe rotting teeth. James 5:3 does speak of gold and silver rusting, but uses the specific word for rust (*ios*). The word *broxis* denotes either a man's stored grain being consumed by mice, rats and insects or the image of the corrosion of precious metals, or both. One can have years of food stored only to have it ruined by vermin, bacteria or mold.

⁴⁰⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:95-96.

⁴⁰⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 157.

One's hard currency such as gold is not even safe for "thieves break in and steal." The word translated "break in" (*diorussein*) means literally "dig through." The houses in ancient Israel were made of baked clay bricks and with the proper tools could easily be entered by digging a hole in the wall. Thus, Jesus speaks here of a man who comes home to find that the coins and jewelry he was hoarding have all been taken away.

Our Lord makes a very good argument. Why should we focus our lives on storing up that which so easily can slip through our fingers? Today's precious possessions are often tomorrow's forgotten junk. Cars grow old, rust and fall apart. Clothes wear out and rot. Houses can be destroyed by fire, flood or wind in seconds. Whole neighborhoods in New Orleans are now ghost towns, full of trash and debris. Further, we must never forget that someday each one of us will die and all our earthly possessions will fall into the hands of others. When we are dead our possessions are meaningless to us because, as the old saying goes, "You can't take it with you." Death is the ultimate equalizer of men. When Donald Trump and the poor beggar on the streets of Calcutta die, they both own the same thing—nothing. Their abode becomes the grave and their companions are worms. The rich man rots just like the poor man and his silk suit rots with him. Those who trust in riches are very shortsighted. They must ignore the reality of the future. They must ignore the fact that money cannot give a man immortality and eternal happiness; only Christ can give us eternal life. Only God has the unchangeableness and solidarity that merits our trust.

Thus Paul instructs Timothy regarding rich believers saying, "Charge those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they may be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Those who trust in riches need to be humble themselves and see that such hope is unwarranted. "To trust in riches, the apostle would have it understood, is virtually to make uncertainty one's confidence, since both their continuance with us, and our possession of them, may at any moment come to a termination. The contrast to such an insecure foundation is God, the eternal, the all-sufficient, who ministers richly to His people's necessities and just desires, and who, as a source of enjoyment to those who trust in Him, can never fail."⁴⁰⁷ The similarity between Paul's injunction and the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is striking.

This argument about the unreliability and temporal nature of earthly riches leads to an exhortation which is the only logical alternative to the first imperative: "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Mt. 6:20). Whereas earthly treasures are unreliable, temporal and fleeting, heavenly treasures are permanent and can never be taken away. They are not part of this fallen world which is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31), or the elements which will melt and be burned up on the day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:10). They are spiritual riches, which are incorruptible and eternal. Thus, Peter spoke of "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). Paul tells us that the things which presently are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). Thus he assured us that no "created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39); that our good works will endure the Day and receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:11-14). Consequently, we are to live as "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13; cf. 1 Pet. 2:11). We must focus our lives on the fact that

⁴⁰⁷ Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1874] 1956), 248.

there are treasures in heaven. They are every bit as real as the treasures we can see on earth. In fact, they are the treasures that really matter because they abide forever.

What exactly are these treasures? Although the text does not specify, other sections of Scripture point us in two directions. First, there is the reward of heaven itself and the joy and bliss of living in God's presence. This is the meaning in a similar passage: "Do not labor the food which perishes, but for food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him" (Jn. 6:27). The "work" that God wants is faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Jn. 6:29). The man who truly believes in the Savior will take far more care regarding the supply of the needs of his soul than the desires of his physical body. Instead of living like the unregenerate, who are focused on this world and this life only, we are to give all diligence to make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10). Our hopes, cares, dreams and happiness are connected to Jesus and eternal life in Him. When we compare the things of this world to the title that Christ has merited for us, we will be content. We will trust the Redeemer and live for Him and put Him first in all things, knowing that He has gone to prepare a place for us (cf. Jn. 14:2). Our Lord assures us that the sacrifices made to follow Him are well worth it. "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Mt. 19:29; cf. 25:21, 23, 34, 36).

Second, the Bible teaches in many places that our good works are rewarded by God in heaven. These works do not earn anything in an autonomous meritorious way, but God, according to His good pleasure, has graciously decided to reward us for the good things He enables us to do by His Spirit. These are rewards of grace. For example, Proverbs 19:17 says, "He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, and He will pay back what he has given." "If then,—we want to save up for the future, where is there a better place to keep it, than in the Christian's treasure? The poor man's hand is the treasury of Christ."⁴⁰⁸ Jesus taught that whoever gives a cup of cold water to a needy disciple "will by no means lose his reward" (Mt. 10:42); that the believer who is faithful in a very little will have authority over ten cities (Lk. 19:17). Paul says that a Christian's good works that are built on the foundation of Jesus with gold, silver and precious stones will endure the judgment seat of Christ and receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:11-14). He compared the Christian life to a race and urged believers to run in such a way as to obtain the prize—an imperishable crown (1 Cor. 9:24-27). He brings home the point that we all need to exercise self-control in order to obtain the eschatological reward. When He speaks of His own ministry near the end of his life He says that a crown of righteousness awaits Him and all who have loved His appearing (2 Tim. 4:8). Jesus told the persecuted church of Smyrna, "Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

Since Jesus is addressing disciples who have already received the gift of salvation, the reward for good works is likely the chief focus of this teaching. The way that we live our lives will have eternal consequences. Therefore, we must be diligent in our service toward Christ. This includes our daily growth in grace as well as good works done to others: visiting the sick, helping orphans and widows, telling others about Christ and so on. Whatever we do for Jesus lasts forever; it cannot rust or be taken away by thieves. Thus, we need to view our lives from a heavenly-eternal perspective. This is a great motivation for denying ourselves, taking up the cross and following the Savior. It is a great encouragement for our labors. "It is a happiness above and beyond the changes and chances of time, *an inheritance incorruptible*."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁸ Charles Bridges, *The Book of Proverbs* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1978), 382.

⁴⁰⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:79.

This exhortation—which also contains an additional reason, the permanence of heavenly rewards—is followed by another argument about the heart. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21). In this verse, our Lord switches from the plural (vs. 19-20) to singular “you” and singular “treasure.” He is making a very searching personal application: “Where is your heart?” The word heart in Scripture denotes every aspect of who we are. It encompasses the will, intellect and emotions. It speaks to what is of central importance to our being. Thus, the place where our treasure is indicates our true character. “The sequence might suggest that the orientation of the ‘heart’ follows from the determination of where the treasure is to be, but that is too pedantic; the valuing of the treasure both follows from and reveals the orientation of the heart.”⁴¹⁰ Out of the heart comes a lusting after the things of this world and the treasures and allurements of this world, in turn, can further corrupt and enslave the heart. If we live for this world and focus our lives on building up earthly treasure, then our hearts will be aligned to and enslaved by these earthly things.

That is why Jesus said that it is so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 19:23-24; Mk. 10:25). It is also why the Savior commanded the rich young ruler to sell all he had, give to the poor and follow Him (Lk. 18:22). The rich young ruler had been a very pious Jew outwardly. However, his heart allegiance was not toward God but toward his great possessions. Therefore, when he was put in a position where he had to choose between Christ and his riches, he chose the riches. His possessions were his god, even though outwardly he was very devout and religious. “Worldly-mindedness is as common and as fatal a symptom of hypocrisy as any other, for by no sin can Satan have a surer and faster hold of the soul, under the cloak of a visible and passable profession of religion...”⁴¹¹ “The heart must and will go in the direction of that which we count precious. The whole man will be transformed into the likeness of that for which he lives. Where we place our treasures our thoughts will naturally fly. It will be wise to let all that we have act as magnets to draw us in the right direction. If our very best things are in heaven, our very best thoughts will fly in the same direction: but if our choicest possessions are of the earth, our heart will be earthbound.”⁴¹²

Let us examine our lives and see where our heart really is. Do we leave behind a good church to move to an area where the churches are deforming and corrupt, simply to make more money? Do we leave behind a solid church and godly friends to move to a part of the country that has better weather and more worldly amusements? Do we rob God of His tithes and offerings so we can spend the money on luxuries that we really do not need? Do we avoid the weekly prayer meeting to go shopping at the mall or watch a favorite TV show? As we go about our day, do we think about Christ and His Word or are we continuously fantasizing about things such as a new car, a plasma TV or the latest video game? Our thoughts and actions reveal the allegiance of our hearts.

For many professing Christians Jesus is only a side compartment to life, a necessary fire escape from hell. However, Christ and His kingdom should be and must be our obsession. The Redeemer must take the first place in our hearts. We must fix our supreme affections on Jesus and not the things of this world. The man who loves Christ will inevitably seek meaning, fulfillment and happiness in Him, both for the present and the future. But the man that seeks these things in the present life, who places the Redeemer in a little side compartment will prove himself a lover of this world and not God. Remember, where your treasure *now* is—where you

⁴¹⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 259-260.

⁴¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:78.

⁴¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 72.

now look for meaning, fulfillment and happiness—there will your heart or your whole being (mind, will, affections), as a necessary consequence, be directed. Paul understood this teaching well and thus instructed the Colossians saying, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1-3). Because we are united with Jesus in His life, death, resurrection and ascension, we are to be continually seeking the things that are above (i.e. the right heavenly treasures) so as to obtain them.

Jesus follows His reasoning about having one’s heart in the right place with a saying about the necessity of having a sound or healthy eye. “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good [or single, KJV], your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness.”

When our Lord says the lamp of the body is the eye, He is obviously speaking metaphorically. The eye does not produce light, but merely allows the body to see. Without the eye there is no illumination and direction in the outside world. In this sense the eye is our lamp; it serves as a flashlight to view reality.

The way we operate the eye is used by Christ to illustrate a very important spiritual truth. Jesus says that the eye must be single or sound if the body is to be full of light. The adjective *haplous* (only here and Lk. 11:34) means literally “single or simple.” Thus, many believe that the Savior is teaching the need for the eye to be centered or focused on the right thing. Singleness of heart is followed by singleness of eye. The word *haplous*, however, came to have a number of shades of meaning, from “integrity, uprightness and sincerity” (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:3, “sincere devotion”) to “generous” (e.g., Rom. 12:8, he who gives with “generosity”), depending on the context. Since the expression “single eye” is contrasted with a “bad [*poneros* is unambiguous] eye” the word *haplous* can mean sound, good or upright. Thus, the general idea is that a good, sound or upright eye will lead to a body full of light (i.e. a life dominated and regulated by the truth—the Word of God), while a wicked eye will lead the body into darkness. The body itself is described as full of darkness. A darkened eye corrupts the whole life.

When understood properly, we see how this obscure saying strongly reinforces what was just said about the heart, for the eye follows the heart or mind. The man who is not regenerated by the Holy Spirit and does not have a sound, spiritually illuminated eye to guide him has an evil eye. His eye is focused on the things of this world. It is greedy, selfish and worldly. Consequently, the whole body lives in ethical darkness. The man whose heart treasures this world will have an evil, covetous, selfish eye. His unsound eye will lead him into a heathen, unchristian lifestyle.

Is your heart spiritual and singly set upon Christ? Is your eye sound? Does it guide you toward spiritual treasure or is your eye bad? Does it lead you to seek the lusts and treasures of this world? Once again we are presented with only two options. If the mind’s eye attempts to focus a little on God, while it is really primarily focused on this world, the result is not some light, but rather total darkness. If you say that Jesus is your Savior and Lord (your first love), but focus your life upon things, money, power and self-glorification, then you do not have some light, you have none. “If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness” (Mt. 6:23). Our heart must be directed with an *exclusive* and steady gaze towards Christ and His kingdom. If we are distracted and side-tracked by worldly aims and anxieties, then we will not

have a clear perception of the truth. Pink's summary of the principle point of Christ's statement is helpful:

Our discernment between things, our estimation of values, our practical judgment of earthly and heavenly objects is very largely determined by the condition of our understanding—whether it be Divinely illumined or still in nature's darkness. An enlightened understanding, perceiving objects according to their real nature and worth, enables its possessor to form a true judgment, to make a wise choice and to act aright respecting them. But a darkened understanding, conveying a wrong estimate of things, results in an erroneous choice and a disastrous end.⁴¹³

With this saying in mind we understand how most Americans have embraced a selfish materialism. Their hearts need to be born again to see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:5). Only then will their eye become sound and focus on the true light—God's only begotten Son. The man who thinks he is a Christian because he goes to church and is not committing adultery, but is living for earthly things is really in a deep darkness—a darkness where he is self-deceived and does not even know it. On the final day such people will be shocked to find that they are on our Lord's left hand. The man who gives lip service to Christ, but dedicates his life to possessions is a practical atheist.

(5) After contrasting heavenly and earthly treasures and a good and bad eye, our Lord speaks about two masters. "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24). Here Jesus illustrates the total commitment which He requires of his disciples by talking about the service required of slaves. He is not speaking about employers, for many people can work two different jobs. Rather, Christ is pointing out that when a master buys and thus owns a slave, that slave owes a complete commitment to him (the owner). In fact the word "serve" (*douleuo*) means literally "be a slave to." The slave master (the word *kyriois* could also be translated "lords" or "owners") demands a total and undivided commitment of his slaves. It is impossible to serve two masters simultaneously.

While it is important that we understand Jesus is not approving of the Roman or Greek practice of slavery, which was unbiblical and barbaric; nevertheless, we cannot comprehend the point our Lord is making without knowing a few things about slavery in antiquity. For one thing, the slave was regarded by the state and heathen populace as a piece of property with virtually no rights whatsoever. The slave was viewed in the same manner as an ox. He could be beaten, sold and used as the owner saw fit. The master owned the slave and had control over him in the same way as a carpenter uses a hammer. Also, in antiquity, slaves had absolutely no control over their own time. They did not get vacations or time off to visit relatives. All of their time belonged to the slave master. They lived, breathed and worked for the owner.

This ancient totalitarian institution serves as an analogy for us to see the all-encompassing nature of our relationship to God. The disciple does not own himself, his time or his possessions. Everything is God's and, thus, we must live with God as the undisputed master of our lives. Because God is God and we are sinful creatures, saved by grace, we cannot compartmentalize our lives and say, "I have complete control over this part of my life (e.g., my wealth, business, personal relationships, etc.) while God has control over these activities (e.g., church, acts of piety, etc.)." The believer has no time off from being a disciple of Jesus. There is

⁴¹³ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 201.

no time when he can relax his commitment to Christ's Lordship, God's law or Christian ethics. Disciples do not get vacations from truth or sanctification. An inconsistent or part-time service is not enough. Being a Christian is a full-time endeavor. Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is the exclusive service which God demands more clearly set forth.⁴¹⁴

This argument about two masters is the climax to our Lord's teaching on the Christian attitude toward riches. Everyone must choose where their treasure and their heart are going to be. The mind's eye must not be divided, but must be singly focused on God. The reason for this is that we can only serve one of two masters. We can serve God or mammon. The word mammon (Gk. *mamones*, only here and Lk. 16:9, 11, 13) comes from the Aramaic and denotes money, property or possessions. The word mammon is not used with any negative connotation. Jesus is not saying that money or possessions are intrinsically evil. As noted earlier, there is a biblical way to handle money and possessions. Also, the Savior is not speaking directly against making money in an illicit manner. The central point is that God can only be served with an entire and exclusive devotion. The man who thinks he can be completely devoted to both God and money simultaneously has actually placed money above God and has become an idolater.

Christ explains why it is impossible to be a slave to two masters by noting that the slave's heart cannot be divided: "For either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (v. 24). The man who attempts to serve two different owners will soon discover that his loyalties really belong only to one master and not the other. For a while he may deceive himself and think that it is possible to serve both, but over time he realizes where his real allegiance lies. He understands that he loves one master, but hates the other. The man who serves money and the things of this world, yet claims to be a Christian and love God, soon finds out that God's commandments and priorities conflict with his own desires. Thus, in order to serve mammon, the man must either renounce God or pervert God's Word to allow for human autonomy and idolatry. The man can only show God's love by trusting in His Word and obeying His commands. But, he rejects God's Word and follows his own selfish lusts and, thus, his hatred of God becomes evident. By holding to the one—narcissistic materialism, he ends up despising the other—God and His law-Word. There is a simple reason that sodomites, feminists, atheists and hedonists hate God and despise the Bible. Their hearts are united with the idols they have created and will not submit to God. There is no neutrality. There can be no fence-sitting when it comes to God and His Word because His demands are all-encompassing and totalitarian.

An excellent example of this principal is found in Judas Iscariot. For a period of time, he forsook all and followed Jesus as one of the twelve. But after a few years, his love of money began to afflict his soul. He began to hate the life of hardship and sacrifice that came with following Christ. Consequently, it was a love of money that led him to deliver the Redeemer into the hands of the Jews (cf. Mt. 26:14-16; Jn. 12:6). He even betrayed the Savior with a kiss of mockery, contempt, hatred and betrayal because his heart was in the world. His master was mammon. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 Jn. 2:15).

There are a number of things to note regarding our Lord's teaching about the impossibility of serving two masters. First, this teaching is an application of the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3). This commandment is foundational and basic to the keeping of all of God's precepts. The positive form of this commandment focuses on our complete and undivided loyalty to Jehovah: "You shall love the

⁴¹⁴ See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:249.

LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Dt. 6:5). Jesus called this, “the first and great commandment” (Mt. 22:37). Loyalty, faithfulness, submission and supreme devotion toward God are needed to comprehend and obey the whole law (cf. Pr. 1:7). God sets before us only two alternatives. We can either completely dedicate ourselves to serving the true and living God or we will serve idols. There can be no middle ground or neutrality in this area.

Man was created a religious being with the purpose of worshiping and serving God. In fact, man’s religious impulse (which is a part of the fabric of his being) cannot be eradicated. But the fact that man is now a fallen being, mired in sin, results in this religious impulse being directed into service toward new and false gods. Because of his nature, sinful man must find something in this world to believe in, trust, love and serve. Consequently, people worship all sorts of things (money, power, nature, sports, possessions, etc.) instead of the God who created them. Whatever a man places on the top of his pyramid of values is ultimately what he serves. Thus, the saying about two masters is a call to radical discipleship rooted directly in the first and primary commandment. Our love of God must extend to every area of our lives (1 Cor. 10:30). “[T]he implications and obligations of the first commandment are far-reaching in their significance. The commandment calls for a style of life dominated by a relationship to God. The commandment was not merely ‘theology,’ nor was it concerned simply with proper form of worship. It affected the whole life of the whole covenant community. Its implications remain the same today; the relationship to one God must dominate every sphere of life, whether the life of action, of thought, or of emotion. There can be no area of life in which a person or things come before the commitment to one God. The *other gods* may take on forms more subtle than wooden images or stone idols; indeed anything that relegates the relationship with God to second place functions in effect as ‘another god.’”⁴¹⁵

It is noteworthy that the rank idolatry of the Old Covenant people of God was very often connected to the idea of material prosperity. The Israelites looked to the fertility gods because they did not trust God to provide for them. They placed a bountiful harvest before loyalty to Jehovah. Consequently, they made offerings to the Baals and Ashteroths. The fertility cults were in essence simply a religious expression of their seeking of mammon.

This ought to be a warning to us because, although mammon was often the root cause of their worship of images, they still believed they could be loyal to Jehovah. Their religion was syncretistic. They did not simply admit that they were rejecting God. Instead, they attempted to have two masters. They made offerings to Baal on the high places and they still made offerings to Jehovah. Thus, in Elijah’s time, the prophet commanded them to decide which of the two is really God and follow him (1 Kgs. 18:21). By faltering between two completely different theologies and worldviews, they were breaking God’s covenant and committing idolatry. We see virtually the same thing in 2 Kings 24: “They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods” (v. 33; cf. v. 41). “So we must choose between being the servants of God and Wealth; we cannot be both.”⁴¹⁶ Many professing Christians are guilty of doing something that in essence is the same. They go to church on Sunday and sing praises to Christ as God, but the rest of the week they are completely dedicated to materialistic hedonism. They live within the grip of our consumer culture. Our Lord warns such people that their god is really mammon.

Second, Jesus focuses on money and material possessions because this is an area of our lives where it is easy to be deceived. The idolatry of putting material things before God is often

⁴¹⁵ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 153.

⁴¹⁶ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 147.

very subtle and goes undetected. The man who spends all his time at the office and neglects his family and religious duties may have convinced himself that such dedication is necessary to provide for his family. The person who is obsessed with sports or the one who loves going out to restaurants and makes his belly his god; both may think that what they are doing is simply a legitimate hobby. They do not see their obsession. The man who neglects the things of God to focus his life on leisure and entertainment probably sees his activity as a legitimate and necessary form of relaxation. The business man who is focused on worldly riches and honors from men may think that he is simply taking dominion for God in the area of economics. The putting of money and material things before God is not as easy to identify as bowing down to an idol. We do not see men bowing before the gods of Lexus, BMW or Mercedes. But when you drive to church and see men polishing and waxing their cars or fixing up their houses when they should be worshipping God, their idolatry is evident.

This is an area where we must constantly be examining our hearts and our behavior. Is God first in our hearts or do our possessions and status take the first place in our lives? Jehovah is a jealous God and will not tolerate rivals. He is infinitely holy and will not put up with idols of gold, silver, wood or chrome. We cannot divide our service between God and the world. Can we say with Caleb, "I wholly followed the LORD my God" (Josh. 14:8)? Are we as committed as David who declared, "I will keep your precepts with my whole heart" (Ps. 119:69)? Or will the LORD rebuke us as he did Israel: "They have not wholly followed Me" (Num. 32:11)? The way we live reveals whether our faith is genuine or whether it is counterfeit.

Third, to be careful and diligent in obeying this teaching, we need to realize that our culture is saturated with covetousness; that our economics and politics are geared to serving mammon. The main purpose of advertising is not to convey useful information so that people can make an intelligent decision when they need something. It rather is designed to create a perceived need or desire where none existed before. Much advertising is designed to stimulate lusts for luxuries and toys that we really do not need. Today it is common for both spouses to work full-time, while their children are placed in day care, to maintain a certain standard of living that is not necessary. What is more important: raising up a godly seed or having a large, fancy house? Often parents sacrifice their own children on the altar of materialism. In our day, people are so full of covetousness and lust for things that they go into debt to buy what they really cannot afford. They are slaves to mammon, working to pay off the lender, rather than slaves to Christ. The Bible teaches that we should live within our means (i.e. a modest, sober lifestyle) so that we can pay more attention to our kingdom responsibilities. The Christian does what he can to stay out of debt, so that he can spend more time with his family and more time with other believers. He believes that it is wiser to invest in the Redeemer's everlasting kingdom than in toys and trinkets that will not last.

In American society, politics is centered on the idea that the state is man's provider, that the proper president can bring us material prosperity and happiness. Consequently, politicians promise economic growth and government handouts. All of this is sheer idolatry; only God can bring a true and lasting prosperity. Americans should be seeking leaders who truly follow Christ; who are righteous and are committed to ruling in accord with biblical principles. When Americans place prosperity, handouts and healthcare above Jesus Christ and His law-Word, they embrace mammon. They are money idolaters.

Instead of preaching against the modern American materialistic lifestyle, many churches have embraced it and incorporated it into their theology and preaching. They teach that Jesus came so that we can have prosperity, self-fulfillment and happiness. They implicitly and

sometimes even explicitly teach that God exists for man—to meet his needs instead of teaching that we are beggars before God. Consequently, many modern Christians cannot recite the ten commandments, the Lord’s prayer or answer questions about rudimentary theology. They have embraced the American materialistic-hedonistic lifestyle. They have not seen the importance or truth of Christ’s teaching that no one can have two masters. “[W]e *cannot* love both, or hold by both in observance, for they are contrary, the one to the other.”⁴¹⁷ “[T]hat thing is a man’s master which he loves most, holds most unto and prefers in competition. If a man will rather offend God than lose riches, pleasures or preferment when he must do the one, then is the man not the servant of God but the servant of the other thing beside God.”⁴¹⁸

Fourth, this passage teaches that the Lordship of Christ is contrary to the ways of this world. Jesus insists that God is to be loved and served as “Lord” or “Master.” Now that the divine-human mediator has arisen from the dead “all power and authority in heaven and on earth” has been given unto Him. Consequently, one of the ways to serve our Redeemer over mammon is to obey His precepts regarding money, possessions and wealth. This means that we must never do business or even think about our worldly affairs on the Christian Sabbath. It means that we always place the church and people above making a buck. The man who treats people like tools that can be abused and cast aside to increase profits has not submitted to the Lordship of Christ. The person who lies or uses deception in any way to seal a deal is not living as if Jesus is His Master. The man or woman who does not tithe as they ought or care for the Christian poor when they can has not bowed the knee to the prince of Peace. When employers do not biblically love their workers because it may affect their own compensation, they obviously are placing money above Christ. The poor believer who votes for a politician because he promises to deliver money and benefits unjustly taxed from the rich is greedy. He is a thief through ungodly legislation; he is a worshipper of mammon. Let us not forget that both poor and rich can be covetous and selfish.

Tragically, one of the areas where professing Christendom has a very poor record is in the area of economics. Professing Christians were deeply involved in the slave trade and in owning and using slaves to make a profit. The slavery practiced in America had nothing to do with the biblical form of slavery. Many a professing Christian capitalist used nefarious methods to put his weaker rival out of business. Using dishonesty and bribes to smash the competition is not Christian. In the past, factory owners worked men, women and children like slaves in miserable, unsafe conditions because it made them rich and powerful. In England in the early 1800s children often worked from 5 am to 8 pm six days a week while the factory owners lived like kings with several large estates. These professing Christian capitalists could have improved the conditions of their workers and still have remained competitive. But, they refused to do so because they grasped at every cent they could earn. They lusted after the glory that attends riches. They did not improve working conditions because the only way they could do so and *remain competitive* was to take less money for their own. They followed mammon which says, “Grasp at all you can; cheat your competitors whenever you can; mistreat your workers if you can profit by it.”

Because many professing Christians did not love their neighbor by treating them lawfully and putting their welfare above their own riches, the Western nations have turned toward statism, welfare programs, socialism and onerous regulations. When men did not obey God’s law because they worshipped mammon, they sacrificed the liberty of biblical law for the coercion of

⁴¹⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:81.

⁴¹⁸ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 80-81.

the humanistic state. The alternative to a free market economy conditioned by Christian love and biblical law is not a society built on friendly cooperation, but rather on coercion. “Greed has driven purposeful economic activity on the defensive and is replacing it with political power in order to get what it wants. The modern redistributive society has made factual Spengler’s remark that every modern election ‘is a civil war carried on by ballot-box.’....The nightmares of the nineteenth-century French philosopher and politician, Fredric Bastiat, have come true: The law is converted ‘into an instrument of plunder’ [The Law, 12]. The spectacle of a whole society busily living off the labors of others, in turn stealing and being stolen by the redistributive powers of the elite, brings us what Hilaire Belloc, some seventy years ago, called the ‘servile state’ [The Servile State, 16].”⁴¹⁹

As we conclude our brief study of the proper Christian view toward money and possessions, let us remind ourselves why we should be exclusively devoted to God. First, the things of this world are unreliable and are passing away. Therefore, the only wise and safe place to put our treasure is in heaven. Second, if our eye is not singly focused on God and His kingdom, our vision will be unsound and we will walk in great darkness. Our whole lives will be wasted walking the path of sin and vanity. Third, it is impossible to be a servant of God and a servant of mammon. The man who lives for wealth and possessions will hate God. The man who loves God will not have too high a regard for earthly things. There is no fence sitting or neutrality in God’s universe. It is our hope and prayer that our nation repents from its gross idolatry in this area. This will only take place if the churches repent and show people the biblical way to live. If our nation does not repent, we should expect judgment and economic hardship.

Chapter 27: The Christian and Anxiety, Part 1

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof (Mt. 6:25-34).

After our Lord discussed the foolishness and danger of focusing one’s mind on the things of this world, storing up treasures on earth and making a slave master out of possessions, He begins a new, closely related section in verse 25. The subject matter continues the general theme of a disciple’s attitude toward possessions; but, from verse 25 to the end of the chapter, Jesus

⁴¹⁹ Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 134-135.

shifts His attention from temptations of people who are often more affluent and thus have the ability to hoard possessions, to people who worry about the bare necessities for living—food, clothing and water. Both groups are guilty of a lack of faith in God and of having wrong priorities, but exhibit this lack of faith in different ways, perhaps due to different circumstances.

The sections are connected by the word “therefore” (*dia touto*, literally, “on account of this”) which shows that this teaching (25-35) logically follows what precedes it. Many commentators connect the “therefore” only to verse 24 which speaks of the impossibility of two masters; but, it is more likely connected to the whole preceding section (19-24). Thus, the sense would be, since earthly treasures are undependable and temporary while heavenly treasure is permanent (19-21), those who focus their mind on earthly treasures instead of God are blind and full of darkness (22-23). Also, because it is impossible to serve both God and material possessions, do not be anxious about even the necessities of life such as food, clothing and water. After all, God who gave you your life regards you as more important than these things. Consequently, He will provide for you.

By way of introduction there are a number of things to consider about this section of Scripture. First, the translation of the King James Version, “Take no thought for your life,” is antiquated and easily misunderstood. The expression “take no thought for” is from the old English and was used by writers such as Shakespeare and Bacon in the sense of being anxious or excessively concerned. The Greek verb used is *merimnao* (from *merimna*) which means to be anxious or excessively concerned. This verb comes from *merizo* and has the basic sense of being distracted or divided in mind. The person who is anxious has a disturbed mind that is in a continual state of painful uneasiness. “The cognate noun *merimna* occurs in 1 Macc. 6:10 and Sir. 42:9, where it is associated with sleeplessness.”⁴²⁰ This verb occurs five times in this section (vs. 25, 27, 28, 31, 34), three of which are in the imperatival form. It is used only one other time in Matthew where Jesus tells the disciples not to worry about what to say when they are delivered up to the civil magistrate.

In this context the command is emphatic. The imperative is in the present tense and can have the meaning, “Do not have the habit of being anxious;” or, “If you are already in the habit of worrying, then stop it at once.” In verse 31, our Lord uses a different tense (aorist subjunctive), which has the sense of “do not become anxious” or “do not worry at all.” The forbidding of anxiety is clearly the central proposition of this whole section.

It is important that we note how radical this teaching is. It is crucial that we understand that faith in Christ and excessive worries about life are contrary to each other. Worrying over material needs is a sin that is dishonoring to God. It is explicitly forbidden by the Redeemer three times in these verses. If you are in the habit of excessive worry over the future, then you need to pay very close attention to this section of our Lord’s sermon. “There is scarcely any one sin against which our Lord Jesus more largely and earnestly warns his disciples, or against which he arms them with more variety of arguments, than the sin of disquieting, distracting, distrustful care about the things of this life...”⁴²¹ “The very fact that such anxiety is here forbidden not only exhibits once more the exalted standard of piety which is set before us in the Holy Scriptures, but also evidences their uniqueness, their Divine Authorship, for there is no other...religion in the world which condemns inordinate solicitude over the temporal necessities of life.”⁴²² Although

⁴²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 163.

⁴²¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:82.

⁴²² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 219.

the natural man and our pagan culture see anxiety as a trifle, we must view it as a serious sin requiring repentance.

Second, this section, like the others, is clearly directed to Christians: “Therefore, I say to you.” It is a given that unbelievers who worship money and possessions will live with continual anxieties about the things needed for life. They do not trust in God and His providence and thus they, according to their own worldview, are adrift on a sea of chance where bad things can happen for no rhyme or reason. The life of unbelief is presented to people by the devil as the good and easy life, but the truth is completely different. Those who do not place their faith in God, who instead look to the things of this world, are weighed down with cares and troubles. Our Savior’s yoke is a light one. The more faith we have in Christ, the more peace of mind we will have—even in spite of trials and persecutions.

Fourth, in order to understand the command not to worry about provisions of our temporal needs, we need to learn the biblical distinction between a godly, balanced, moderate care for the future and an immoderate, overanxious, distrustful worrying about the future. This is particularly important in light of the fact that some professing Christians have misunderstood the King James translation, “Take no thought,” as an injunction not to think about or prepare for the future at all. Thus, there are professing Christian street people who live day to day and make virtually no contribution to society at all.

If we take the command not to be anxious about material needs in the broad context of Scripture, we see that a concern to prepare for the future is lawful and commended. We are taught to look to the ant that makes preparation for the bad times by working diligently and storing up provisions during times of bounty (Pr. 6:6). We think once again of godly Joseph who put away grain for a time of famine (Gen. 41:47-49). Paul tells believers that if they don’t work they should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10) and he commends parents for setting aside an inheritance for their children (2 Cor. 2:14; cf. Pr. 13:22; 19:14). Earlier we looked at the many passages that speak of using money responsibly, investing wisely, of working diligently (e.g., Pr. 21:5, 20; 22:7; 24:3-4; Mt. 25:27; Lk. 16:9-13). God teaches us to work hard, to try to stay out of debt, to prepare for hard times or what we would call economic downturns. The Bible says that such behavior is wise and can lead to prosperity. If farmers did not think about the future and store grain and other foods for the winter and for planting the next season, everyone would starve. Thus, we could even say that a man who is lazy, idle and irresponsible, who does not carefully plan for the future and work diligently to achieve certain realistic goals, is not a good Christian. “Jesus is not advocating a shiftless, thriftless, reckless, thoughtless, improvident attitude to life; he is forbidding a care-worn, worried fear, which takes all the joy out of life.”⁴²³

In this regard, it is helpful to note that the same Greek word for anxiety is also sometimes used for lawful concerns in life. Paul speaks about married Christians having “cares” about how to please husband or wife in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34. The apostle uses the same word when he speaks of his “deep concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). “These passages show that the word sometimes expresses a lawful feeling of intense concern, which is directed towards proper objects, kept within due bounds, and stimulates efforts to do our duty.”⁴²⁴ A concern for something lawful means that we take a biblical interest in that person or thing and use lawful means to help it (e.g., prayer, education, alms, kind acts, etc.). Worry is different, in that it is rooted in concern for the wrong things and for the wrong reasons. It is man-centered, rooted in a lack of faith, selfish, egotistical and irrational.

⁴²³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:255.

⁴²⁴ John A. Broadus, *Commentaries on Matthew*, 148.

Consequently, the passage before us condemns people who are overly anxious and troubled in mind about the future because they are not trusting in God. There are many professing Christians who are constantly thinking about money and are very anxious about the future with no good biblical or rational reason whatsoever. God has provided for them time after time and has repeatedly demonstrated his kindness, yet such people continue to worry. They live with a nagging paranoia when it comes to money. The person who is continually troubled in mind lacks faith. He is not trusting in God's attributes or promises.

The connection between faith in God and not being anxious is very clear in Paul's classic statement on worry found in Philippians 4:6-7: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." The Christian, who has fears and worries, must trust in God and show the fruit of that faith by turning his problems and anxieties over to Him. This trust results in peace. "[T]his is our consolation, this is our solace—to deposit, or (to speak with greater propriety) to disburden in the bosom of God everything that harasses us. Confidence, it is true, brings tranquility to our minds, but it is only in the event of our exercising ourselves in prayers."⁴²⁵ When the storms of life beat upon our hearts and begin to trouble our minds, we must look to God through Christ and take refuge in His loving arms.

Fifth, this is a very common sin among professing Christians and even plagued the Old Testament people of God. When the Jews were delivered from Egypt, they complained about a lack of water (Ex. 15:24) and about food (Ex. 16:2). They even argued to Moses and Aaron that they had brought the people out into the wilderness to starve to death (Ex. 16:3). When we examine ourselves, we have to admit that we have worried at times over the necessities of life. This has especially been a problem for many women. A good number of women are completely dependent on their husbands to provide for the family and not all husbands are reliable or good at making money. Excessive worry is also common among heads of households who have a responsibility to care for a family. Sometimes there are economic downturns and men lose their jobs. Under such circumstances there is a strong temptation for both husband and wife to worry. The news media in our day is constantly speaking about the economy and especially focuses on negative statistics and dire warnings. People are trained by our unbelieving culture to worry about the future and fret over the economy. Consequently, we could say that excessive worry is not only a symptom of unbelief, but is often also the counterpart to covetousness. Thus, we understand why Jesus repeats His command three times and has so many excellent reasons why worrying is wrong. Our Lord came to set us free from sin, bondage and the anxieties that flow from such bondage.

Satan's goal is to take our minds off of Christ and our proper service toward our Savior. He knows that many Christians are not so stupid as to focus their lives on material things and riches. Such covetousness and idolatry is too crass and obvious. Therefore, he takes a much more subtle back door approach with many Christians by attempting to chip away at their trust in God and getting them to worry about everything he possibly can (e.g., family, finances, church, relationships, etc.). He really does not care what you worry about because he knows that such anxiety is incompatible with a strong confidence in Jesus Christ. He knows that, for the most part, the anxious, fretting believer is useless in Christ's kingdom. The man who is paralyzed with fear is the man in full retreat from kingdom responsibilities. The person who is consumed with

⁴²⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 119.

anxiety will not take the offensive against the world, the flesh and the devil. He is too busy contemplating his own problems and feeling sorry for himself to fight. The devil also knows that anxiety is not considered a sin in our culture, but merely a disease that needs to be medicated with drugs and soothed with self-esteem platitudes. Worrying has become the acceptable sin. But, beloved, let us not be fooled by these hellish tactics. Let us not die in the wilderness because we were focused on our bellies instead of Christ. Jesus has given us blessed truths by which we can conquer our fears and rebuke the attacks of Satan.

Sixth, our Lord supports His prohibition with several clever, irrefutable arguments. There are seven: (1) Life is more important than food or clothing. (2) God cares for the birds and we are more important than birds. (3) Worrying cannot add to our stature or lifespan. (4) God beautifully adorns the flowers and we are much more important than flowers. (5) To worry about these things is to act like heathen. (6) God knows what we need. (7) Sufficient is the trouble for each day. Another reason, by way of precept, is that if we seek God's kingdom first these things will be given to us. In some of these arguments Jesus makes brilliant use of parabolic imagery. He often appeals to undeniable facts of nature that would have had a dramatic effect on His hearers. His refutation of anxiety is so full and multi-faceted that disciples who are guilty of this sin are immediately convicted of the foolishness of such behavior. May God apply this rich teaching to our hearts as we turn our attention to our Savior's specific reasons to avoid being anxious.

The Importance of Life

The first argument is based on the truth that our life or existence is much more important than the things that sustain life such as food and clothing. "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" (25). Here Jesus argues from the greater to the lesser as if to say, "What is more important, your life and your physical body or the things needed to sustain and care for your life and body? This is an observation that everyone would immediately recognize to be true. If a man's house is on fire, he flees the house to save his life. Food and clothing are necessary to sustain life; but, they are merely supports to life. They are not life itself; they are inanimate objects that are not even comparable to human life. "The daintiest food and finest raiment are from the *earth*, but life from the *breath of God*. Life is the *light of men*; meat is but the *oil* that feeds that light."⁴²⁶ Our Lord taught that the whole world is not worth even one soul (Mt. 16:26).

Thus, the Savior's rhetorical question teaches us that since God gave us life (indeed, we are created in the image of God) and created our bodies (which are fearfully and wonderfully made), we have an excellent reason to trust Him for food and clothing. After all, if God provided us with our life, which is the greatest, most noble gift possible, will He not also provide those simple, rudimentary things needed to sustain that life? The logic behind this argument is impeccable. The creation of man was an act of God's power and favor. Jehovah did not create man to let him starve, but also created abundant provision for food and clothing. "When God gives, He gives royally and liberally, honestly and sincerely, logically and completely."⁴²⁷

The unbeliever cannot take comfort in the goodness and mercy of God because he believes that ultimately everything is arbitrary. The universe and our existence, he believes, is a

⁴²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:83.

⁴²⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 227.

great accident. But we know that man did not come into being by chance. We know that we did not evolve from pond scum or appear out of the void by random mutation. God gave us life and He has an intimate knowledge of who we are and what we need to survive. Consequently, we dishonor God and demonstrate our distrust of Him when we do not place our confidence in Him for food and clothing. Whenever we begin to worry about our material needs, let us remind ourselves that God will take care of the life which He gave us. The God who breathed life into the dust and created the universe from nothing can easily give us bread and raiment.

We should also remember that, in addition to our regular lives, God has given us eternal life. This renders anxieties over material necessities even more absurd. Paul tells us that if God “did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not also freely give us all things” (Rom. 8:32). “He that guards us against the evils we are exposed to, will supply us with the *good things* we are in need of. If he had been pleased to kill us, to starve us, he would not so often have *given his angels a charge concerning us* to keep us.”⁴²⁸ When you are tempted to worry, think about the many times that your heavenly Father’s special providence has come to your rescue.

The Example of the Birds

The second reason is taken from God’s providential care of birds. “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Mt. 6:26). Here we have our Lord’s first example from nature. Israel was full of birds and was a stop for many migrating birds on their way back and forth from Europe and Africa. In the law’s discussion of unclean birds, no less the nineteen birds are mentioned (Lev. 11:13-19). It is probable that birds could be seen by the multitude, flying and even feeding as Christ spoke these words.

Jesus’ example contains two elements. (1) He points out that, as creatures far inferior to man, birds have no real logical thinking ability to plan ahead. They do not know how to plant or harvest crops. Also, they do not know how to build barns for the long term storage of food. Yet, in spite of all this, they are fed and taken care of by God. This point should not be construed as teaching that birds do absolutely nothing for their food, for they are almost constantly searching for seeds, insects or prey. They are diligent creatures. It is God, however, that created the things that birds need to eat; who sends rain and sunshine to the earth; who, by His sovereign power, causes everything to grow.

This passage is an excellent proof text against Deism and all impersonal concepts of the natural realm. God is in complete control of everything from birds, to ants and atoms. That He cares for all the lower creatures is taught throughout Scripture. God taught Job saying, “Who provides food for the raven, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?” (38:41). David says that God feeds the sea creatures in their due season (Ps. 104:27); that all eyes look expectantly to God for their food (Ps. 145:15). This providential care flows from God’s goodness. God governs His world with tender care and compassion even in its fallen estate. Although it is true that there is much suffering and hardship in this world and even droughts where many animals perish, these things are the exception, not the rule.

(2) After the illustration of God’s care for the birds, our Lord appeals to an argument from the lesser to the greater. This argument is based on the biblical teaching that man is the

⁴²⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:83.

crown of God's creation and far superior to birds. "The assumption that God's human creation is of more importance to him than the non-human (cf. 10:31; 12:12) echoes the pattern of the Genesis creation narrative, where human beings constitute the final and climactic act of creation and are given authority over the rest of animal creation (Gen. 1:26-28; cf. Adam's naming of the animals in Gen. 2:19-20)."⁴²⁹

The gist of what Jesus is saying is as follows: If God takes care of birds that are inferior, irrational creatures that are not even able to grow crops or store food, then obviously He will take care of you who are much more important and valuable than birds. Birds have tiny little brains and are completely unable to provide for themselves with careful foresight, yet God supplies their needs. Will He not then provide for you whom He has given great intelligence, reason, the ability to make and use sophisticated tools as well as plan ahead? "Note, the *heirs* of heaven are much better than the fowls of heaven; nobler and more excellent beings, and, by faith, they soar higher; they are of a better nature and nurture, *wiser than the fowls of heaven* (Job xxxv.11)."⁴³⁰ Christ uses a similar argument in Luke 12:6: "Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten by God. But the very hairs of your head are numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Our faith in who God is and how He operates should dispel our anxiety. Jehovah assigns a great value to those created in His own image. He assigns a far greater value to the objects of His grace that are washed in the blood of His Son and clothed with His perfect righteousness. We will not worry when we focus on the fact that everything is arranged and appointed by God; that by God's sovereign power all things are "working together" for our good (Rom. 8:28). We must have a continued focus on God's sovereign loving hand in the things that happen to us. We must live by the sight of faith and not the vision of the flesh which looks for bad in everything and refuses to trust God. Let us meditate on the fact that God is watching over us and guiding our steps. This kind of thinking and living is the only sure path to contentment and happiness. Even in times of trial and discouragement we must trust in God's love and compassion. We must remind ourselves that God could deliver us out of these harsh circumstances, but for some wise loving reason He has not. God knows exactly what He is doing and has promised us that this experience must be for our benefit. "Hence it is evident, that Christ intended nothing more than to teach his people to throw all their cares on God."⁴³¹

Worrying Accomplishes Nothing

Jesus' next rhetorical question drives home the point that worrying is useless or ineffective: "Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?" (Mt. 6:27). The Greek word translated "stature" (*helikia*) can also refer to a person's age or length of life. This is almost universally true of classical Greek and is the predominant usage in the Greek Septuagint. The same word is translated "age" in John 9:21, 23 ("He is of age, ask him."). Given the fact that the context here is physical survival not stature and that it is common knowledge that excessive anxiety shortens life rather than extends it, it is likely that our Lord is referring to the length of one's life and not height. This view is supported by the fact that a cubit is about eighteen inches and thus only an extremely short person would dwell on adding that amount to his height. Moreover, there is precedent in Scripture for applying a physical method of measuring to time:

⁴²⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 268.

⁴³⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:83.

⁴³¹ John Calvin, *A Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*, 1:341.

“You have made my days as handbreaths” [i.e. short] (Ps. 39:5). Thus we could paraphrase the meaning of this verse as: “Who among you by worrying is able to increase your lifespan even a little?”

This is another brilliant, irrefutable argument. A person can worry all day long and even lay in bed worrying during the night, but all that suffering and anxiety is a complete waste of time. It cannot change the outcome of anything. It is totally useless. It will not add a single second to one’s lifespan. In fact, worrying is worse than useless because it leads to all sorts of problems: depression, ulcers, high blood pressure, sleeplessness, gluttony, drunkenness and drug abuse. Many of us have personally experienced the utter foolishness of anxiety by going through some bad times, worrying and losing sleep for days and even weeks. Then, after the Lord providentially works everything out just fine, we realize that all of that suffering and anxiety was for nothing. It was stupid, irrational, counterproductive and sinful. It was a symptom of a lack of faith in God.

Since we cannot alter our lifespan at all through anxiety, we must trust in God and submit to the disposals of divine providence. It is the power, mercy and goodness of God that keeps us alive, not our irrational fears. Therefore, instead of worrying about material things, we show daily acknowledgment of God’s goodness through prayer and praise and trust Him for all our needed supplies. This is a simple, biblical and rational view of life. Yet, many professing Christians insist on clinging to their anxieties. They would do well to break this sinful habit by memorizing this verse and focusing on the fact that our life is a gift from God. We should go about our work and be diligent in our religious duties and be happy that ultimately God is in control, not us. Those who do not believe in the sovereignty of God, such as Pelagians and Arminians, have every reason to worry because they have placed the human will upon the throne of destiny. Calvinists, however, have no excuse whatsoever for nail biting and worry. They understand the biblical truth that God is in control of all our circumstances. Christ is king, not chance. With Jeremiah we should say, “O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (10:23).

Consider the Lilies

In our Lord’s fourth argument, He returns to another example from nature. In an argument that is similar to the one about birds (v. 26), He now points us to the lilies (vs. 28-30). “So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” (Mt. 6:28-30).

Here Jesus begins with a question that both implied that some of His disciples were worrying and that such worrying was unwarranted. In the example of the birds, the focus was on food, while this illustration deals with clothing. The verb “consider” is a command to “notice carefully” or “study closely” and implies that we are to learn something from such a close examination. Greek scholars and commentators have no idea *exactly* what kind of flower (or flowers) the term “lilies” (*krina*) refers to. Given the context (“the grass of the field” [30]) it is very likely that Christ is referring to wild flowers in general. There are many species of wildflowers that grow on the hillsides of Galilee that are very beautiful. After the spring rains, the hillsides are covered with a dazzling array of colors.

The argument that Jesus presents is once again from the lesser to the greater. It contains three elements. First, our Lord points out the fact that flowers do not toil nor spin. Flowers are even more passive than birds. Birds can fly around and look for seeds and insects. But flowers do not toil at all. Men have to go out and work to make a living if they are going to purchase clothes. Flowers do not do anything. They soak up the sun and drink in the rain that God provides for them. Women can work hard and spin and sew pieces of fabric together into clothes. But flowers just sit there, passive. They cannot move about, let alone spin; yet, God provides for them abundantly.

Second, the inferiority of flowers is demonstrated by their exceptionally transitory nature. In hot, arid climates after a rainstorm, the hillsides, which were completely brown and barren, spring forth into a beautiful tapestry of flowers. But, not long after the rains are over, the flowers wilt and the hillsides are covered in a mass of brown stems. This point is emphasized by the statement, “which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven” (Mt. 6:30). Flowers are not only transitory, but once they dry out their only use is for fuel in an oven. Notwithstanding their extreme beauty, wild flowers are on the same level as common grass. In Middle Eastern societies at that time where firewood was unavailable and coal nonexistent, families would gather whatever they could to burn as fuel to cook food. Dead grass and wildflowers were gathered and tied into bundles and were thrown into the fires under their brick ovens to cook. (Dried dung was also saved for this purpose.) The flowers had a very brief existence which often ended in the flame. In this illustration flowers are placed on an even lower scale of value than birds. Wildflowers are passive, exceptionally transitory and are destined for the flames of the oven. Yet, God clothes them with a beauty so amazing and extraordinary that the richest, best adorned monarch on earth (Solomon) does not even come close to their beauty.

Third, after pointing out the inferiority of flowers in value yet their superiority of beauty, which is a gift of God, Jesus draws His conclusion: “Will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” The point is that if God provides so well for these little transitory flowers by His power and providence, then we can obviously trust Him to meet our essential needs in the sphere of clothing. If God gave the flowers such gorgeous attire, then we can have a strong confidence that He will give the needed clothing to His own dear children. Since Jehovah has clothed the lilies, then we can rest assured that He will clothe those who have been created in His image and who have immortal souls. We are much more important to God than grass and flowers which are food for cattle and fuel for ovens. If God, in His plan of creation and providence, makes flowers so excellent, then it is foolish to think that He will leave us unadorned and out in the cold. “In other words, biblical cosmology plus observant eyes engender real trust in God.”⁴³² “Lovely lilies, how ye rebuke our foolish nervousness! The array of lilies comes without fret: why do we kill ourselves with care about that which God gives to plants which cannot care?”⁴³³

In modern America where modest clothes are usually very cheap and easy to obtain, there is not the kind of worry about clothes as bare necessities that occurred in ancient times. Today fretting about clothes (at least in wealthy countries) is connected with covetousness and a lack of contentment. Men and especially young women lust after fancy clothes and the latest fashions. They are continually looking at catalogs, websites, shopping malls and clothing stores for the latest fashions, accessories, shoes, purses and jewelry. They obsess about things they want, but do not have and usually cannot afford. They are more concerned with keeping up with the latest styles than in serving Christ and humbly walking before Him. For such people clothes have

⁴³² D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 91-92.

⁴³³ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 74.

moved from the realm of necessity to an exhibition of pride. It is a form of gross worldliness when young men and women concern themselves with what the surrounding heathen think of their attire. It is the embracing of vanity and extravagance. It is rooted in a pagan desire for popularity. It is a form of materialism that is a species of idolatry.

The key to humbling proud, worldly hearts, subduing inordinate cares and immoderate lusting after clothes and accessories is this lesson of the lilies. If God wanted us to be as beautiful as the wild flowers in our attire, then He would have made us so. But even Solomon with his silks, gold and jewels is nothing compared to the hillsides in spring. Attempting to achieve such beauty is vanity. Thus, we must be content with the ordinary garments that God supplies. Clothes, like food, are to serve our bodies and not the other way around.

Moreover, we need to meditate on the fact that, although our souls are immortal, our earthly bodies have something in common with the grass of the field. Man's days on this earth are numbered. As Peter says, "All flesh is like grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever" (1 Pet. 1:24-25; cf. Isa. 40:6-8). We will live our allotted time on this earth and then we will be cast in the grave where our flesh will rot and be consumed as in an oven. Thus, to be overly concerned about clothing and fashion shows that one's priorities are all wrong; that our hearts and minds are focused on this world and not on the world to come. Remember, that your handsome body and beautiful clothes will rot; that the body you pampered and clothed will be consumed by worms. In view of this, we need to devote our energies toward "the beauty of holiness" (1 Chr. 16:29), for this is the beauty that really matters. It cannot disappoint us for it will never fade away, but will be rewarded by God forever. Does your ambition rise no higher than to appear as the wildflowers and impress those around you? If so, then remember that death and the oven of the grave await you. You need to repent and listen to Peter who said, "Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 3:3-4).

Men of Little Faith

As our Lord's argument about anxiety over clothing comes to a climax, Jesus calls His disciples men "of little faith" (*oligopistoi*). This is a gentle rebuke designed to cause the believers to embrace the Savior's imperatives and supporting arguments and replace this weakness with a strong, steady belief. There are a number of things that are noteworthy about this statement.

First, it proves once again that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is directed specifically to Christians, not unbelievers. Christ does not say that they had no faith at all or that their faith was counterfeit and worthless, but that it was "little" or weak. These were men who understood their guilt and sin and thus mourned over their record and their heart. They knew that they were helpless to save themselves from their predicament and, thus, were meek before God. They thirsted for righteousness and came to the Redeemer as naked beggars in the dust. They had faith, but it was weak and deficient in this area of trusting in God's care and provision for their needs.

Second, it is an expression used to describe the apostles on a number of occasions. Besides our text, on a different occasion, Jesus says the same thing in relation to their worry about clothes (Lk. 12:28). When the disciples feared because of the great storm on the sea Christ said, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" (Mt. 8:26). After Peter began to sink in the

water the Savior caught him by the hand and said, “O you of little faith, why do you doubt?” (Mt. 14:31). After the great miracle of the multiplying of the bread and fish, our Lord rebuked the disciples for not remembering the lesson of His power in connection with food (Mt. 16:8). It is very interesting that the gospel accounts repeatedly portray the disciples as weak in faith in spite of the Redeemer’s presence, teaching and repeated use of His amazing miraculous power. This is clear and excellent evidence for the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

Jesus’ great love toward His disciples did not cause Him to withhold painful truths or rebukes from His apostles. On the contrary, He repeatedly corrects their weakness because He loves them and wants them to be strong. The soft, antinomian, non-confrontational version of Christianity that is so common among evangelical and Reformed churches in our day is more a reflection of our lax, lawless, permissive, pluralistic culture than it is a reflection of the teaching of Scripture or the example of Christ and the prophets. We must not skirt the truth or explain it away, but speak it in love (Eph. 4:15).

Third, it is important that we understand that Christians have different levels of faith and that our Lord is encouraging us to strengthen or increase our faith. A person can have a very weak and imperfect faith and yet still be saved by the Redeemer. We must always keep in mind that it is Jesus that saves us and not our faith. A person’s faith may be very feeble, yet the Savior it grasps *is infinitely strong to save*. What Christ wants us to understand is that an assailed or weakened faith may be strengthened and grow if we meditate on and pray over God’s promises. That is the main point of all these arguments. Our Lord keeps pointing us to God’s gracious character and the proof of His goodness in creation. If we meditate on who God really is and we think upon His providences and promises, we can subdue our doubts and increase our faith. Faith, as it relates to sanctification and daily living, needs to be nurtured and exercised. In these areas God does not simply bestow more faith mystically and immediately, but rather uses the ordinary means of grace. Consequently, we are responsible to care for our faith, nurture it and increase it.

Is your faith or trust in God weak when it comes to basic necessities? Do you have the sinful habit of worrying about money and the future? If you are, then you need to *read* God’s Word daily. You must study, memorize and meditate on passages that speak of God’s goodness, love, faithfulness, grace and mercy. There must be a careful consideration of the doctrine of Christ’s intercession and God’s loving preservation of His people. Also, there must be a continued concentration on the cross of Christ. The more we learn of Jesus and His Word, the more absurd, irrational and stupid worry becomes. We must pray that God, by His Holy Spirit, would use His ordained means to enable our faith to grow and our anxiety to subside. Faith enables us to hand over all our earthly cares to God because we know He cares for us. Let us not be guilty of remaining men of little faith. “‘Little faith’ is not a little fault; for it greatly wrongs the Lord, and sadly grieves the fretful mind. To think the Lord who clothes lilies will leave his own children naked is shameful. O little faith, learn better manners!”⁴³⁴

⁴³⁴ Ibid, 75.

Chapter 28: The Christian and Anxiety, Part 2

Don't Be Like the Gentiles

In verse 31, our Lord draws a conclusion and summarizes the previous teachings on worry. Interestingly, however, He repeats the command not to worry, but changes the verb tense for emphasis. Instead of the command to stop the habitual practice of anxiety, Jesus now says, "Don't even begin to worry." The gist of what the Savior is saying is, "Now that you know all these reasons why worrying is wrong and unreasonable; and, that God's people must be characterized by faith, you must not even take the first step on the path to anxiety."

After this summarizing recapitulation with a new emphasis, Christ begins giving new arguments against worry. He argues that when believers worry they are acting like the heathen. "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek" (Mt. 6:31-32). This is a strong argument, for Jesus is essentially saying that worrying is inconsistent with the Christian world and life view.

The pagan unbeliever does not trust in Christ and lives his life as though God does not exist. For the pagan there is not the transcendent, infinite personal God who is loving, just, compassionate and merciful. The secular unbeliever thinks he lives in a chance universe where bad things happen, but no one knows why; a universe in which human life has no more value than a tree or a rock; a world without real ethics, meaning, truth or justice. The secular humanist believes that suffering, death, calamity, war and nature, "red in tooth and claw," is simply the natural order of things. He thinks that when he dies he steps into the cosmic void of oblivion forever. It is no wonder that modern unbelievers live with all sorts of anxieties and that the sale of antidepressants is at an all-time high.

The pagans in Jesus' day believed in finite gods that were arbitrary and immoral. The heathen were very superstitious and lived in constant fear of offending some god who would bring calamity down upon them. Disaster was always right around the corner. The gods of the ancient world were not trustworthy. "So far from regarding their 'gods' as beings of benevolence, who regarded their devotees with compassion, they were looked upon as objects of dread, whose favour could only be purchased by the most costly of offerings (appropriated by the priests) and whose ire had to be placated by human sacrifices. Of a future life beyond this vale of tears the heathen had but the vaguest and gloomiest ideas."⁴³⁵ One could add to all this the nagging fear and anxiety that attends all men who have not been washed by the blood of Christ and had their sins removed. All men apart from the Savior have a weight of guilt upon them that makes life anxious and that causes men to seek solace in false gods and earthly pleasures.

Because pagans do not believe in the true and living God, they live only for the present world. The things of this world mean everything to them; therefore, their focus is on self and the attainment of money, pleasure and power. As a result they worry about things: fancy cars, big houses, being popular, having fancy clothes, traveling the world, keeping up with the Joneses and making for themselves a name. All these cares weigh them down with worry.

This is very effective reasoning for devout Jewish disciples. Jesus is saying, "Why do you want to descend to such an abominable level? Why do you want to live as though you are completely

⁴³⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 247.

ignorant of the truth? Why do you want to imitate a bunch of unclean heathen?” Do you think that God is asleep; or, does not concern Himself with the affairs of mankind; or, does not bother to feed the members of His own family purchased with the blood of His dear Son? God has revealed Himself to us by His infallible Word and saved us through Jesus Christ. Given redemptive history, the promises of God and the Holy Spirit’s powerful effect on our own lives, it is wicked, sinful and shameful to worry like unbelievers. They are walking in darkness and have every reason to worry. But we are born again and have every reason *not* to worry. We are God’s children destined for glory. “All the purposes and promises of God are meant for us and designed with respect to us; and the one thing we have to do, in a sense, is just to realize what God has told us about ourselves as His children. The moment we truly grasp that, worry becomes impossible.”⁴³⁶

This argument teaches us something very important about the cause of worry. People usually think that worry is caused by external circumstances. Therefore, people believe the way to eliminate worry and feel better about life is to alter those external circumstances. For the unbeliever, this usually means making more money, or purchasing more things, or taking an exotic vacation and so on. But Jesus teaches that worry is directly connected to what we think and believe. It is rooted in our world and life view. Because the unbeliever has finite, arbitrary, immoral gods who do not have absolute control of reality, they should be expected to worry. The Christian, however, who truly believes the Word of God and trusts in Christ should not be shaken by external circumstances. He knows that he is saved and safe in Jesus; and, he knows that God is absolutely sovereign.

Think for a moment about Paul. Many scholars believe that his wife divorced him when he became a Christian. There is no evidence that he had any family support or owned any property. Throughout his whole Christian life he was persecuted, abused, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, left for dead, imprisoned and then beheaded. Yet, in spite of these outward circumstances Paul was a very happy, thankful man. He was always praising God. He was an outstanding example of peace, joy and contentment. Why? It was because he knew the truth and firmly believed it. As Isaiah says, “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You” (26:3). “Wholeness and fullness of well-being, true repose in the sunshine of God’s favor, belong to those whom God keeps.”⁴³⁷ When our minds trust in God and rest upon His character and promises, they remain firm and constant in a life of storms and challenges and are preserved in His perfect peace, for they “rest not upon the changing sands of human opinion, but upon God, the Rock eternal and unchangeable.”⁴³⁸

After looking at this excellent reasoning, we need to search our hearts and ask ourselves some important questions. Even though we profess Christ, do we think and act like pagans when it comes to material things? Does our faith, theology and worldview condition and control our whole way of thinking about life? Are we constantly worrying about things like unbelievers? When something happens to us that is distressing do we act like our heathen neighbors? Jesus is telling us that our Christian view of reality should make us radically different than the pagans around us. There should be calmness, steadiness, and peacefulness about our character that flows out of our faith in Christ and our trust in His infallible Word.

⁴³⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:132.

⁴³⁷ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2:207.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, 2:208.

Your Father Knows What You Need

After presenting a negative argument (worry is like heathen unbelief) Jesus presents a corresponding positive argument: “For your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things” (Mt. 6:32). This argument underlies the preceding arguments and is the greatest reason for believers not to worry. God has made us His dear children through Jesus Christ and has an intimate knowledge of all of our needs. Therefore, given God’s omniscience, love and compassion towards us we can depend on Him to provide for us. Our Lord said that the very hairs of our head are numbered. God’s loving eye is continually watching over us. He sees when bad things happen to us. He carefully notes our sufferings and sorrows. There is nothing that occurs in us or to us that is outside of God’s sight. Consequently, we should conclude from this fact that our loving heavenly Father will take care of us. Moreover, we need to think about what the use of the word “Father” entails. By way of application, it calls to mind a number of relevant biblical teachings.

First, there is God’s love that chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. “[T]he God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). If He freely gives us “every spiritual blessing,” then food and clothing are obviously assured. The Bible teaches that God’s love for the elect does not change and cannot be destroyed. It is God’s love for the elect which sent Jesus to the cross and which guarantees that He will not allow any of His children to perish. “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you” (Jer. 31:3).

Second, there is our justification before God. With Paul we can say, “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33). If our salvation was a matter of personal effort, or it depended on our faith plus our own good works, then we could *never* have peace with God. If such was the case, our worries would *never* cease. But our Savior removed the guilt and penalty of our sin and His perfect righteousness is reckoned to our account. God’s love and favor toward us is not dependent on impressing Him or meriting anything, but comes freely to us in Christ. Consequently, “we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37) and nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

Third, there is our adoption into God’s own family. “God sent forth His Son, born under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Gal. 4:4-7). This is the ultimate pledge of God’s love, that we receive the same Spirit as His only Son. God declares to us that He loves us and cares about us with a Father’s love. We have all the blessings of heirs through Christ. If we meditate on this teaching we cannot be overtaken with anxiety. God has a loving concern for us as His own dear children. He is concerned about every aspect of our lives. Our Lord assumed this grand truth when He said, “If you then being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Mt. 7:11).

Fourth, there are the promises of God’s preservation of His own people. “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6; cf. 2:13; Eph. 3:20; 5:25; Jn. 6:39; 10:27-29; 17:11; Ps. 37:28; 121:3, 7-8; Jer. 32:40; Rom. 14:4; 16:25; 1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Cor. 9:8; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:12; 4:18; Heb. 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:4-5; Jude 1:24; etc.). Note that a Christian’s confidence resides

not in himself, but in God. If our faith was to be divided between ourselves and Christ, then we should worry. We are finite, sinful and, apart from God's grace, completely undependable. But our faith is directed solely to Jesus. He has accomplished a perfect, sufficient redemption and on the basis of His victory, He sends into our hearts His Spirit, who applies it and brings it to completion. If God guarantees our preservation in grace then we can trust Him for the basic necessities of life.

If we think about God's love, covenantal faithfulness, promises and power, we will defeat anxiety. We are not enemies, strangers or even slaves, but rather are the children of God in a special redemptive sense. "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:6-7). To stop worrying, we should follow David's instructions: "Trust in the LORD, and do good...feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass.... Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him" (Ps. 37:3-5, 7).

Seek First the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness

After the argument about the Gentiles, Jesus concisely states the climax to this entire section on worry: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Mt. 6:33). Previously our Lord supported His command not to worry with reasons why anxiety is wrong, illogical and stupid. These were all brilliant intellectual arguments that were rooted in Christian theology, in a Christian view of the world and God. Now the Savior turns our attention from the proper way to think to the correct way to live. Believers are not to worry, but are to seek. If we seek God's kingdom and His righteousness and make these things our top priority in life, then the cares of this world will fade into the background and God will make sure we have everything that we need. Christ is telling us that the best way to stop the sinful pattern of worry is to replace it with righteous living. To understand this teaching, we need to examine two areas. What is the object of our seeking in this verse? And what does it mean to seek?

The object of the disciples' seeking is "the kingdom of God and His righteousness." The expression "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven" in this context refers to the kingdom of grace established by Jesus Christ. It is the realm of God's redemptive rule that flows from the cross and empty tomb. As the Holy Spirit and the Word of God change hearts, this kingdom progressively expands throughout the earth. This new spiritual economy must take the first place in our lives because Jesus is our Lord and Savior. The focus of our existence is not to be on our own interests, but rather on promoting the reign of Christ in ourselves and others. "He who assigns the first rank to *the kingdom of God*, will not carry beyond moderation his anxiety about food."⁴³⁹ The man who is busy thinking about Christ and how to serve and glorify Him is too preoccupied to worry about the basic necessities of life. Doing the will of God is his meat and following the Redeemer his drink. "If we were but more careful to please God, and to work out our own salvation, we would be less solicitous to please ourselves, and work out an estate in the world."⁴⁴⁰

The expression "His righteousness" is closely connected to the kingdom of God, for it is the righteousness required by God for all those who belong to the kingdom of grace. Jesus is *not*

⁴³⁹ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*, 1:344.

⁴⁴⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:85.

speaking about seeking the righteousness of Christ associated with our justification. He is not instructing these disciples on how to become a Christian, but about how to live one's life as a Christian. Believers are not only to recognize Jesus as Lord in every area of life; they also are to be preoccupied with personal godliness. If disciples are focused on the things relating to the kingdom of God and are concerned about a steady progress in holiness, then worries about necessities will not be a problem.

The verb "seek" does not mean to look for something that is not yet present at all, for the kingdom of God is present and, through the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification, we are already on the path of holiness. This term means that we should be absorbed in a strenuous effort to obtain the betterment of the kingdom and personal righteousness. The verb is in the present tense and indicates a continuous seeking. This seeking is to be a lifelong obsession. The kingdom is to be the center of our existence; living according to God's will is to be our chief concern. "The verb 'seek' (*zeteo*) echoes the stronger compound verb (*epizeteo*), which was used for the Gentiles' anxious quest for material provisions in the previous verse. Disciples, by contrast, have a different orientation, a higher purpose in life."⁴⁴¹ We see that the key to peace of mind is to serve the right Master with all our heart; to have our eye singly focused on Him; to store treasures up in heaven and not on earth. If we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we will be filled.

This imperative to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness is very comprehensive. It brings everything in our lives under the Lordship of Christ and His holy requirements. It means that we must be committed to learning what the Bible teaches and how it is to affect every aspect of what we do. The great enemy of anxiety is biblical faith and this faith must be very active in exercising itself daily to remain strong and grow. Our faith must express itself in prayer; cling to God's promises and exhibit patience; and, feed upon the truth through all the means of grace. Such a vibrant faith resolves daily to die unto sin and live unto God.

If we are to defeat worry, then everything in this life must be subordinate to serving Christ. The professing Christian who is worldly will have worries. But the man who gives diligent attendance unto all the ways of duty and obedience will patiently wait for the accomplishment of God's promises. "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD" (Isa. 51:1). Have you taken the yoke of Christ upon you? Are diligent in studying the Scripture to learn God's revealed will? Do you submit yourself to His laws and endeavor to obey Him at all times? Are you part of a church that worships Him in Spirit and truth? Are you doing what you can to be a salt and light to society and bring others into the kingdom of grace? Let us cast off our worldly cares and instead embrace our personal, family, social and ecclesiastical responsibilities as followers of Christ. Jesus said that the person who loses his life will save it and whoever desires to save it will lose it (Lk. 9:24). It is rather ironic that the only true way to have peace and enjoy life is to deny ourselves and gives ourselves up wholly to Christ. "Let your care for your souls and another world take place of all other cares; and let all the concerns of this life be made subordinate to those of the life to come; we must seek the things of Christ more than our own things; and if ever they come in competition, we must remember to which we are to give the preference."⁴⁴²

This imperative is connected to a gracious promise that all the necessities of life will be granted by God as an extra gift. The verb "will be given you" is best understood as a "divine passive." Those who put the kingdom and His righteousness first will be supplied their basic

⁴⁴¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 270-271.

⁴⁴² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:86.

material needs by God. This glorious promise makes explicit the conclusions of the illustrations given from nature. Those who focus their lives on God's interest and live for Christ are assured that He will take care of their needs. Regarding this teaching we should note the following.

First, this statement is consistent with the Old Testament teaching that those who are diligent in their keeping of the law, not in an attempt to be justified but to show one's love and appreciation of Jehovah, will be blessed by God. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land" (Isa. 1:19). "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11). Think of King Solomon, who only asked Jehovah for wisdom to rule effectively according to God's law. God not only gave him great wisdom, but also added things he did not ask for such as riches and honor (2 Chr. 1:11-12).

Second, the purpose of this promise is to free our minds of worldly cares in order to serve Jesus more effectively. Let us have faith in this promise and get to work waging war against sinful habits and everything that hinders our walk with Christ. Instead of sitting around worrying about the things of this world, let us get to work on today's kingdom responsibilities. It is interesting that the early Puritans in New England became so prosperous, for they really cared little about the things of this world. But because they were so diligent and thrifty (i.e. they did not waste their money on vain things and earthly luxuries), they thrived financially. With everything we do, let us first look to Christ to love Him and please Him.

Third, this promise had a special relevance to the first disciples who were itinerant preachers of the gospel. These men set aside their whole lives to bring good tidings to others and were almost completely dependent upon the kindness of strangers. They, in an obvious and radical manner, were putting the kingdom of God above their own interests. They did this service standing upon our Lord's promise. This promise has an ongoing relevance to us who live in an environment not only of exceptional worldliness, but also one in which hostility to the gospel is increasing.

Do Not Worry About Tomorrow

After this climactic positive command, Jesus restates the original exhortation and gives His final reason why it is wrong to be anxious. "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Mt. 6:34). This seventh reason has all the characteristics of a popular proverbial saying. There are a number of noteworthy things about this verse.

First, this final reason appears to be somewhat anti-climactic after the previous positive injunction about seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. But after reflecting on the teaching of this verse, we see why our Lord placed it where He did. "*Becoming anxious for tomorrow is always wrong. The only right way to provide for tomorrow without at the same time being anxious is to take care that today the admonition of verse 33 ('But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness')* is obeyed."⁴⁴³ Thus, we see that verse 34 logically follows what preceded it and extends the Savior's teaching in a new, vital direction.

Second, this reason teaches a very important lesson about how Christians must view time and their own personal sanctification. It is crucial that we focus our attention on dealing with the problem of each particular day that very day and not dwell on a hypothetical future. This is a

⁴⁴³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 355.

realistic and brilliant analysis of the problem of worry. Our Lord assumes that there are concerns that arise each day. This is a simple fact of living. Given this fact, He tells us that we must deal with each particular day as it comes. We must obey God in the present. It is totally pointless to try to analyze and deal with problems that do not even exist. There is nothing we can do about tomorrow, but we can serve and obey God today. *Today* we need to have faith and hear God's voice (Ps. 95:7). Jesus taught something very similar in the preceding petition: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt. 6:11).

When we think about people who have a serious problem with anxiety, we see the inspired brilliance of this passage. Such people virtually always have a problem with being overburdened with cares about what *may* happen in the future. They may be anxious over the news media's dark picture of the future: global warming, terrorism, recession, the housing crisis and so on. Sometimes they simply have a very negative, pessimistic view of the future. Consequently, they worry about their children, or finances, or their health, etc.. Christ tells such believers that worrying about the future is completely worthless because worry cannot change anything (Mt. 6:27) and they must live for God in the present. Living a life of faith and obedience in the present is really the only logical way to have a positive effect on the future. The person who has the habit of worry is an expert at using their imagination to think up all sorts of negative future scenarios. Their minds wander from this bad possibility to that tragic possibility and they work themselves up over nothing, over fantasies of the mind that do not exist. Jesus says that such thinking must come to a complete stop at once.

Once again we need to note that our Lord did *not* say don't think or plan for tomorrow. He does not forbid a wise foresight that prepares accordingly. Every responsible Christian must do that. It is the person who speculates about tomorrow's *personal* problems and worries about calamities and difficulties that may never come that is condemned. "The meaning is, *let us mind present duty*, and then *leave events to God*; do the *work of the day in its day*, and then let *tomorrow* bring its *work along with it*."⁴⁴⁴

If you are one of those people who tend to lie in bed at night and fret over all sorts of possible future scenarios, then you need to stop such ungodly, unproductive fantasies and instead meditate on how better to obey God in the present. Think about new and better ways to serve Christ's kingdom. Meditate on things that can be done to help in the area of personal righteousness. Keep your mind occupied with good things that edify and not hypothetical troubles that cause worry and stress. Think upon things that are noble, just, pure, lovely and virtuous (see Phil. 4:8). If you can't sleep, think about something positive such as a garden or building project, or something good you can do for your wife or husband. It is very important that we develop a habit of not worrying. This will involve training our minds not to wander into negative, harmful, pointless and unedifying areas. Some people are so consumed with worry as an ungodly habit that they have convinced themselves that such anxieties about the future are somehow spiritual and pious. Some women believe that part of being a good mother is worrying all the time about their children. But all such negative thinking is rooted in a lack of faith and is clearly sinful.

Third, in this seventh argument, our Lord personalizes tomorrow to make the case that tomorrow can worry about itself. If tomorrow does the worrying, then we are free to focus on today's duties. This statement is explained by the saying, "Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." Since each day has its own troubles we should not try to speculate and anticipate them ahead of time. "Do not double the burden of to-day, under the idea of lightening the burden of

⁴⁴⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:86.

tomorrow.”⁴⁴⁵ This is a very wise statement. The man who is burdened with thoughts of tomorrow will not deal properly with today. If we waste our energy worrying about tomorrow, we will neglect what is needed today. This point reminds one of the old English proverb, “Never cross a bridge until you get to it.”

This statement recognizes the fact that we live in a fallen world where bad things and various problems are common. It also acknowledges our limitations as redeemed, yet fallen creatures. God wants us to walk the path of obedience one step at a time. The man who runs the hurdles must carefully clear each one as they come or he will fall flat on his face. As problems arise, we are to deal with them biblically and immediately. We are to do what we can about them and lay them before the throne of grace. This is a simple rudimentary principle. We are to wake up in the morning and live that day as if we would be standing before God that night. We are to live in faithfulness day by day. The man who lives in the past or lives with his mind in the future will never be an effective, righteous Christian in the present. “When tomorrow arrives, there will be new troubles, but also renewed strength. God has not given us strength today for tomorrow’s difficulties.”⁴⁴⁶

Although we are justified by God at a point in time in the past—the moment we believed in Christ—sanctification is a progressive process that involves a fresh dedication and commitment to Jesus every day. Therefore, as we pray for our daily bread we should pray for daily grace and faith to meet the challenges of each day. We need to meditate on the fact that this particular day will have certain problems, difficulties and temptations. We need to commit ourselves to complete faithfulness for that day. We need to stay focused on trust and obedience for that day. There is no need to have anxiety over tomorrow, for when that day comes we will simply do what we do every day. Matthew Henry writes, “What a folly it is to take that trouble upon ourselves this day by care and fear, which belongs to another day, and will be never the lighter when it comes? Let us not pull that upon ourselves all together at once, which Providence has wisely ordered to be borne by parcels. The conclusion of this whole matter then is, that it is the will and command of the Lord Jesus, that His disciples should not be their own tormentors, nor make their passage through this world more dark and unpleasant, by their apprehension of troubles, than God has made it by the troubles themselves.”⁴⁴⁷

As we come to a conclusion of this section on the Christian and anxiety, there are a few observations that are in order. First, we are stuck by the brilliance and wisdom of our Lord’s teaching on worry. There is nothing comparable to it among the world’s religions and philosophies or among all the writings of secular psychologists and psychiatrists. The more closely we study the Savior’s teaching, the more we realize the need to trust Him in every area and lean not upon our own so-called wisdom and understanding. A study of modern psychology and psychiatry is a study of fools, of blind men groping in the darkness.

Second, it is a tragic fact of modern history that many churches have ignored this teaching and embraced the pagan, secular, medical model of anxiety. There are countless evangelicals who are on prescription anti-depressants. This practice is ungodly and counter-productive because medications simply cause a physical-chemical reaction in the brain that *temporarily* makes a person feel better without any concern for spiritual problems and sanctification. They can hide or delay symptoms, but they do not really deal with sin or difficulties. Ethically, they are no different than the man who has a few strong drinks in an

⁴⁴⁵ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:286.

⁴⁴⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 355.

⁴⁴⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:86.

attempt to forget his troubles. Jesus does not want us to take drugs to hide symptoms; he wants us to deal with problems each day with faith, prayer and obedience.

Third, we must remember that anxiety is always related to a failure to believe what the Bible says about God, salvation in the comprehensive sense of that word, and God's promises. Therefore, we must study the Scriptures, meditate on its teachings, memorize portions of the Bible that deal with worry and exercise faith daily in serving the kingdom of God and practicing righteousness. If you are diligent regarding your walk with God, then your faith will grow. If you are careful to follow Jesus each day, one day at a time, you will be holy and happy. May God enable us to set aside the ungodly practice of worry and replace it with a strong faith and obedience toward Christ.

Chapter 29: The Christian and Unlawful Judgment

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye (Mt. 7:1-5).

After dealing with the Christian's attitude toward material possessions and anxiety, our Lord changes the subject somewhat abruptly and begins the last major section of His sermon. Scholars, commentators and expositors are divided on how to approach this final section. Many view this chapter as a series of detached exhortations that are really unconnected to each other. Others view these short sections as basically unrelated, yet find a tangential link between verses 1-5 and verse 6 because verse 6 reveals that a godly, righteous judgment of others is still necessary. (In other words, verse 6 is supposed to provide a balance against a misinterpretation of verses 1-5.) Still others attempt to organize these different sections under one particular theme: whether judgment (e.g., D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones), or a Christian's relationships (e.g., our brothers; dogs and pigs; our heavenly Father; all men; false prophets; see John R. W. Stott). Although attempts to find one major theme are tenuous; nevertheless, this section continues to set forth the contrast and essential difference between Christ's disciples and the corrupt religious character of that time.

The first part of chapter seven is a command not to judge. This is perhaps the most misunderstood and misquoted verse by modern Americans in our corrupt, antinomian age. Whenever a Christian raises his voice against adultery, homosexuality or the like he is rebuked by the modernist, humanist or ignorant professing Christian with the words "don't judge." In our day, there are many people who essentially want to abdicate all moral and theological standards and judgments. For them, the only absolute is that there can be no absolutes. Others are extremely judgmental and fanatical in their condemnation of others. They love to point out the faults of others in order to tear them down and exalt themselves. The passage before us will be very relevant in dealing with both of these wicked tendencies. By way of introduction, there are a number of things to note regarding our passage.

First, as with the teaching of the whole sermon, this imperative is directed to believers. We find the word brother, or brother's, used in verses 3, 4 and 5. Thus, the focus of this passage

is on the proper conduct of believers toward each other in the Christian community. Church members who judge others in the local congregation unfairly and hypocritically are divisive and cause all sorts of problems. Anyone who has been in the pastorate for any length of time could speak of many examples of people who were very permissive in judging their own faults, yet were extremely uncharitable toward the faults of others. Their own sins were tolerated while minor problems in others were unfairly magnified into major issues of contention. They would make a mountain out of a molehill. A correct understanding of our passage and application to our lives will help eliminate such ungodly behavior from the church.

Second, it is important to recognize that Jesus is not forbidding all judging, but rather personal judging that is unfair, uncharitable and hypocritical. This assertion is easily proved by the following considerations. (1) In the very next section, believers are required to use their faculties to determine which people are worthy of the titles “dogs” or “swine” (v. 6). Moreover, the sermon contains a whole section which contrasts the false ethics (5:20-42) and religious piety of the scribes and Pharisees with the Savior’s disciples. Believers are also called upon to distinguish between true and false prophets (7:15-20) and Christ repeatedly says that they can be known or judged to be bad by their fruits (7:16, 20). (2) Our Lord judged and condemned His enemies on a number of occasions (e.g., Mt. 15:1ff; 23:1ff), as did John the Baptist (e.g., Mt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7-14), the apostle Paul (Gal. 1:8, 9; Phil. 3:2; 1 Thess. 2:14, 15; 1 Tim. 1:6, 7; Titus 3:2, 10) and John the beloved disciple (1 Jn. 4:1; 2 Jn. 10; 3 Jn. 9). Examining people on the basis of doctrine and behavior and forming judgments about them is one of our God-given faculties and the proper use of it one of our most important duties. Jesus even said to the multitudes, “Do you not judge what is right?” (Lk. 12:57) and to the Jews, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24). “If we do not form judgments as to what is true and false, good and evil, how can we embrace the one and avoid the other?”⁴⁴⁸ (3) In Matthew 18, we are told to privately confront a brother that we have witnessed commit a scandalous sin. If he does not repent, then two or three witnesses are to be used and if that doesn’t work, the church session is to get involved. It is obvious from the analogy of Scripture that Jesus’ command was never intended to forbid private evaluation and confrontation or ecclesiastical and civil courts. Paul says that the civil magistrate does not bear the sword in vain (Rom. 13:4) and that churches have a responsibility to pass judgment on cases within their jurisdiction (1 Cor. 5:12). The idea that our Lord is forbidding value judgments, criticism or law courts is contrary to literally hundreds of verses in the Bible. We will see that Christ is only condemning a certain kind of judgment.

(4) There are examples and injunctions in the New Testament that are founded upon the idea that judgment or critical discernment is necessary for our sanctification and for the edification of the church. Paul only admitted people into church membership that he first judged to be faithful (Ac. 16:15). He told Timothy to stop certain persons in the church from teaching false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3) and said to “reject profane and old wives fables” (1 Tim. 4:7). The apostles ordered Christians to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11); to not even eat lunch with a person who claims to be a Christian yet who lives in gross immorality (1 Cor. 5:11); to “withdraw ourselves from a brother who walks disorderly” (2 Thess. 3:6); to “note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17). Paul told Titus to use sound doctrine “to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9). Morison writes, “It is right to judge whether or not men around us sin; and to blame them when we cannot avoid the judgment that they have sinned. It is

⁴⁴⁸ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:288.

right to sit in judgment on ourselves, and to condemn our own sins.... And if we were without judgment, we would be things, not persons. If we were to live without the exercise of our judgment, we should be at the mercy, not only of every wind of doctrine, but also every wave of passion.”⁴⁴⁹

Third, the historical context of this imperative is the hypocritical, unfair, unjust, censorious nature of the judgments against others made by the scribes and Pharisees. The popular religion in the days of our Redeemer was harsh, negative and cruel. The scribes and Pharisees were narcissistic egotists who gloried in self-righteousness and looked down upon others as ethical scum. When they prayed, they thanked God that they were not like other men (Lk. 18:11-12). They would persecute the church of Christ and were “contrary to all men” (1 Thess. 2:15). “The very fact of having a righteousness that is far better than that of the scribes and Pharisees might lead the disciples into the vicious fault of the scribes and Pharisees who set themselves up as judges over others, gloried in their own false holiness, and despised all others (John 7:49).”⁴⁵⁰ Moreover, it is a very common sin among all men to praise themselves as good, while they pass a severe judgment on others. One of the main reasons that vices such as gossip and slander are so popular is that people enjoy learning about other’s faults. They overlook their own sins as they revel in and condemn the vices in others.

Fourth, our Lord follows the same pattern in this section as in other sections of this sermon where He states an imperative and then gives reasons and illustrations on why it must be obeyed. Here the command is “judge not” or “do not judge” (*me krinete*). It is a present imperative and thus means that the habit of this kind of judging must cease.

The word “judge” can have different shades of meaning depending on the context. It can refer to an opinion formed after a careful analysis. Paul says, “Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” (1 Cor. 11:13). It can refer to the judicial process of a civil or ecclesiastical court. “You take Him and judge Him according to your law” (Jn. 18:31; see 1 Cor. 6:4-5). It can even have the sense of judging that results in condemnation. “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?” (Jn. 7:51). In Romans 14:3-4 it refers to a condemning censorious judgment: “Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another’s servant?” In verse 3 the word “judge” is set in a parallel to “despise.” In our text, it certainly has the meaning of a condemning censorious judgment that is neither fair nor loving.

Fifth, it is extremely important that we understand the meaning of this passage and apply it to ourselves because we live in an anti-theology age where precise definitions, detailed doctrine and dogmatic argumentation are hated. Our modern culture is noted for its pluralism and its attitude of tolerance for all philosophical opinions and ethical norms. This pluralistic, relativistic, non-dogmatic way of thinking has strongly influenced evangelical and Reformed churches. Consequently, the command “judge not” has been twisted into “discern not,” “criticize not” and even “discipline not.” In fact, in our day it is the man who stands on biblical principles and seeks to protect the church from error and heresy that is often condemned. The great warrior against modernism and heresy, J. Gresham Machen, was disdained by Christian liberals (for obvious reasons) and also by many “moderates” and “fundamentalists” because he was supposedly disturbing the peace of the church.

⁴⁴⁹ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 104.

⁴⁵⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 288.

“There have been ages in the history of the Church when men were praised because they stood for their principles at all costs. But that is not so today. Such men today are regarded as being difficult, self-assertive, uncooperative, and so on. The man who is now glorified is the man who can be described as being in ‘the middle of the road’, not at one extreme or the other, a pleasant man, who does not create difficulties and problems because of his views. Life, as we are told, is sufficiently difficult and involved as it is, without our taking a stand on particular doctrines. That surely is the mentality today, and it is not unfair to say that it is the controlling mentality.”⁴⁵¹ Thus, in Presbyterian denominations which are still regarded as fairly conservative, the men who end up on various standing committees and so forth are often the most non-dogmatic, pluralistic and tolerant of doctrinal deviations. This practice has assured the steady declension of such denominations.

The best way to understand the imperative “do not judge” is to study the immediate context. After the context is examined, we will bring in other passages that deal with this topic and make further application. After the command “judge not,” Jesus deals with three related areas: a reason; an explanation by illustration; and a concluding injunction.

The Reason Not to Judge

The reason that we are commanded not to judge is that if we judge, we will be judged. Judge not, that you be not judged” (Mt. 7:1). This is intended as a warning. The question this injunction raises is: who is the judge of those who have passed unfair, hypocritical judgment? There are basically two different interpretations. A number of commentators believe that our Lord is teaching that a person who is in the habit of passing a censorious, unfair judgment will receive the same harsh, unfair treatment by others in the community for his actions. People will say, “Treat him as he has treated others.” There is certainly an element of truth in this view, in that judges and politicians who have been noted for their harsh attacks on others receive no mercy when they are caught in hypocrisy. In the recent case of New York Governor Elliot Spitzer (who is known as one who was an especially aggressive prosecutor), virtually everyone wants the book thrown at him for his alleged crimes. If applied to personal relationships it would be similar to the modern proverb, “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.” Consequently, “what is forbidden here is the sort of fault-finding mentality and speech which is likely to rebound against the one who exercises it (Jas. 2:13; 4:11-12; 5:9).”⁴⁵² In other words, “He who, like Ishmael, has his hand, his tongue, *against every man*, shall, like him, have *every man’s* hand and tongue *against him* (Gen. xvi.12); and no mercy shall be shown to the reputation of those that show no mercy to the reputations of others.”⁴⁵³ A person who is a self-righteous jerk will be quickly and strongly condemned when he falls.

Another possible interpretation is that the person who is harsh and unmerciful in his judging of others will receive similar treatment by God. In favor of this view are the following considerations. (1) The verb “be judged” (*krithete*) is a punctiliar aorist which points to an eschatological judgment. If the judgment of men was in view it is likely that a present tense would have been used. (2) The parallel passage in Luke, in its context, clearly has the judgment of God in view. “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you” (6:37-38). (3)

⁴⁵¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:161-162.

⁴⁵² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 274.

⁴⁵³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:87.

Paul apparently had this passage in mind when he wrote, “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Rom. 2:1).

(4) The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of a hypocritical, unfair judgment of others all the time, yet were held in high regard by most of the people. The judgment they did receive in A.D. 67-70 and in the life beyond came from God. Further, there have been many very godly Christians down through the ages who did not judge others unfairly, hypocritically or harshly, yet who themselves received treatment that was totally unfair and hypocritical. In fact, we are promised that all who desire to lead holy lives as Christians will receive persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). The Lord Jesus Himself was constantly judged unfairly, even though He was the most godly, kind and compassionate person who ever lived. Moreover, Paul, who perhaps was the best example of a believer who did not have a hypocritical, censorious spirit, was repeatedly defamed even after blessing his enemies and was regarded as the filth of this world (1 Cor. 4:12, 13). Therefore, if this statement is only applied to men and not to God, it, at best, is only a very general observation that applies only some of the time. If true, this would seem to be out of accord with the other strong contrasts of the sermon.

(5) Professing Christians who are very serious about their personal holiness and daily walk with God are not very concerned about what others think of them, but are very concerned about what God thinks. This warning would be much more effective upon the thinking of believers if they understood that their harsh, censorious judgment of others sets the standard of God’s evaluation of their own faults. Paul certainly was focused on the judgment seat of Christ and not on the opinions of others. “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself...But He who judges me is the Lord” (1 Cor. 4:3, 4). Moreover, the believer who is guilty of unjust, unduly harsh or hypocritical judgment who is genuinely concerned with his own sanctification would welcome a sharp rebuke for such ungodly behavior. “Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you” (Pr. 9:8). “Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness. And let him rebuke me; it shall be as excellent oil; let my head not refuse it” (Ps. 141:5).

The fact that the judgment of God is in view raises a few important questions. First, how are we to view this judgment in light of the many passages that speak of our justification by faith alone? Did not Jesus say, “He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (Jn. 5:24)? Did not Paul promise us that, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1)? These passages should not be misconstrued to teach that believers are not scrutinized or judged by God in any way, for they are speaking about judgment leading to condemnation and eternal punishment. Obviously, genuine Christians can never be judged in this way because Jesus endured the full penalty for their sin on the bloody cross.

Since our Lord is speaking to believers and is warning them about being judged a certain way by God, there must be judgments of God that are endured by Christians. The Bible speaks of two different kinds of judgments that we endure as disciples. (1) There are chastisements that we endure during life for serious sins. There are many examples of God punishing His own dear children in the Bible. There was Moses who was forbidden to enter the promised land because he struck the rock when God told him to speak to it. David was severely punished for his adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12:7-12). There were church members at Corinth who became sick and even some who died because of their unbiblical behavior at the Lord’s supper (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The author of Hebrews speaks specifically to the issue of temporal judgments in chapter 12: “My son,

do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives” (vs. 5-6; cf. Pr. 3:11-12). God’s chastisement of His children is not because He is harsh or heartless, but because He loves His people and is concerned for their welfare. Heavenly discipline is part of our instruction in the school of holiness. We must live our lives with the knowledge that we are always being watched by God. If we fall into scandalous sin we should expect chastisement from God’s loving hand.

(2) The Bible also speaks very clearly about a judgment for all believers on the day that Christ returns. Paul warns Christians not to condemn their brothers: “For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Rom. 14:10). He is more specific about this judgment in 1 Corinthians 3:13: “Each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.” In 2 Corinthians, the apostle makes it clear that even our bad deeds will be evaluated on that day: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (5:10). “The judgment pronounced is not a declaration of doom, but *an assessment of worth*, with the assignment of rewards to those who because of their faithfulness deserve them, and the *loss* or withholding of rewards in the case of those who do not deserve them.”⁴⁵⁴ This is not a judicial punishment of sin, but rather an evaluation of the Christian life. Paul makes it very clear that every believer’s works are built upon the one foundation that has been laid—Jesus Christ and His redemptive work (1 Cor. 3:11). The Savior will determine the Christian’s place in the everlasting kingdom of heaven. This is an encouragement and comfort to those who are faithful and suffer for their faith. “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit. ‘That they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them’” (Rev. 14:13).

Second, how are we to view this judgment in light of the fact that God’s judgment is contrasted with the unjust, unfair, hypocritical and harsh judgment of men? This point is crucial because this passage is often completely misunderstood. People argue that if we are very generous when dealing with other people’s scandalous sins, then God will be very lenient in His judgment of us. This interpretation is used as a platform for antinomianism in the church and the virtual elimination of any real church discipline. People have used this passage as a reason to take serious sin lightly and to unfairly judge those who believe that scandalous sin deserves some sort of censure from the church. Moreover, if we compare this passage with others that speak of God’s judgment, it is obvious that God can never be guilty of judgment that is hypocritical, unfair or unduly harsh. Paul assures us that “the judgment of God is according to truth” (Rom. 2:2) and that “there is no partiality with God” (Rom. 2:11). God’s judgment will be just in every respect and thus is called “the righteous judgment of God” (Rom. 2:5; 2 Thess. 1:5). Throughout the Scriptures we are told that God will judge us according to our works (Pr. 24:12; Mt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14; Rev. 20:12-13). In other words, each deed will receive the due recompense of reward. Consequently, when believers judge others they are to judge not according to appearance, but with righteous judgment (Jn. 7:24). Because of God’s righteous nature and character, His judgments of *necessity* must be absolutely just and righteous. That is simply the way God is.

Given these considerations, when our passage says that “with what judgment you judge, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” it means that the standard of judgment that we use against other Christians will have an effect upon how God

⁴⁵⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 182.

judges us. In essence Jesus is saying, “Beware of forming wrong judgments of your brethren and fellow men, especially hasty and unmerciful ones, for all your judgments are to be reviewed in the searching light of God’s throne, and by those judgments you are yourselves to be then judged. Not that the judgments we form of each other are to be the sole test by which our profession will be weighed and our character tried, but that this will be one of the tests.”⁴⁵⁵ Since God’s judgments can never be unfair or unduly harsh, Jesus is teaching that our unfair, censorious judgment of other believers will receive a strong, corresponding judgment by God.

As followers of Christ we need to be very careful in our assessment and judgment of others, for if we are unjust, hypocritical, unduly harsh or unfair in our judgment of others we will be chastised by God for such ungodly behavior. Jesus is warning us that a judgment of other believers is a very serious matter that can have very serious consequences. What James says of teachers can be applied to judges: “‘Be not many’ judges, ‘knowing that ye shall receive the greater condemnation’ [Jas. 3:1], or rather, the severer judgment.”⁴⁵⁶ Paul appealed to this principle when he said, “For in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Rom. 2:1).

An Explanation by Illustration

After giving the reason why unlawful judging is a serious matter, Jesus supports His reason with a little parable demonstrating the absurdity and hypocrisy of an unlawful condemnation toward others. “And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye” (Mt. 7:3-4).

The imagery presented here is so absurd it is perhaps intended to be somewhat amusing. There are two men who are probably working in a carpenter’s workshop. Both have problems relating to their eyes or vision. One man has a “speck” in his eye. The Greek word here (*karthos*) can refer to a small speck of anything. In this context, it likely refers to a chip of wood or to a speck of sawdust. The other man has a plank in his eye. The Greek word used here (*dokos*) can be translated as “beam” (KJV), “log” (RSV, NASB) or “plank” (NKJV, NIV). The man with this large plank of wood stuck in his eye believes that his sight is clear enough to go to the rescue of the man with a little speck of sawdust in his eye. This man, who is completely incapable of seeing, analyzing or helping his brother, believes that he is in a superior position. He doesn’t realize his own blindness; that his problem is far greater than that of his brother and that it is inappropriate for him to draw attention to his brother’s problem. In other words, it is wrong for him to judge his brother because he is incapable of doing so and he has greater issues of his own to deal with.

This passage teaches us a number of important things. First, the analogy of the beam and the speck demonstrates that there are different degrees of sin. As our Lord says in another place, some sins are like camels, others are comparable to gnats (Mt. 23:24). The point, however, is not intended for us to make light of small sins, for they are still sins and offensive to God.

Second, there are professing Christians involved in serious sin who either are completely unaware of it or who make excuses for it and push it out of their consciousness. It is a very dangerous thing when people who profess Christ are under the dominion of some serious sin, yet act as if their lives are totally normal. The backslider most in danger of total apostasy is the one

⁴⁵⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 270.

⁴⁵⁶ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:291.

with the beam in his eye; but, he seems to be blind to his spiritual condition. People who do not honestly examine themselves in light of Scripture will not repent and will not be able to help others.

Third, there are many people who have a tendency to judge others much more harshly than themselves. The person who has serious defects in his own character, yet who loves to point out smaller faults in others, is a problem in the church and a terrible witness before the world. The children of the devil love to point out the hypocrisy of Christians. “It is common for those who are the most sinful themselves, and least sensible of it, to be the most forward and free in judging and censuring others.”⁴⁵⁷ The same people who cheated widows, refused to care for their aged parents, exploited worshippers at the Temple and condemned the Lord of glory were quick to condemn the apostles for eating with unwashed hands (Mt. 15:1ff.). If we do not want to end up like the scribes and Pharisees, then we need to learn to view our own sins as more heinous than the same sins in others. We need to be stricter and harder on our own behavior than the behavior of others. A person that overlooks his own sins, while at the same time condemning minor faults in others, is a blatant hypocrite. This is the primary form of unlawful judging condemned in our Lord’s illustration. We need to pay close attention to Christ’s teaching because of the corruption of sin that remains in us. This element of hypocritical judging is common among professing Christians because we are all Pharisees by nature. We are all too quick to come to a negative judgment about a brother, while making all sorts of excuses for our own sins. Therefore, let us bow the knee to Jesus’ instructions on unlawful judgment and watch against it in our hearts every day.

Fourth, the use of the term “speck” indicates that the professing Christian with the beam in his eye is guilty of focusing his attention on the smaller faults of others. He is an uncharitable, unmerciful person who delights in pointing out minor defects in other believers. This is a common problem in many churches and results in discord and factionalism. It is important to note that the Bible makes a distinction between scandalous sins and the minor rubs and offenses that are a part of everyday life. These minor offenses are often best simply covered over in love and forgotten. The person who is looking for such faults will find them. The one who obsesses over them and gossips about them to others will cause pain and unnecessary conflict in the body of Christ. If we are focusing our unfriendly gaze upon the tiniest faults of others, then we are guilty of not loving our brothers. This is Pharisaical judging. It is the kind of judging that God hates and will judge. This is something of which we must carefully guard against in our own behavior.

A Concluding Injunction

As our Lord draws this illustration to its climax, He says that the remedy for unlawful judgment is to first repent and deal with our own sin, so that we are in a spiritual condition to properly and sincerely come to the aid of an erring brother. “First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Mt. 7:5). Jesus did not merely condemn the wicked habit of unlawful judging, but also gave us instructions on what must be done if we are going to judge others. This teaching proves that Christ was not forbidding all judging, but only hypocritical, unfair, censorious judging.

⁴⁵⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:88.

Our Lord's injunction raises the question: why must this plank be removed and what does this involve? The answer to this question involves a number of elements.

First, the person with the log in his eye cannot see properly to deal with the speck in his brother's eye. Jesus says the log must be removed to see clearly. A man who is nearly blind cannot be an eye specialist. Sin and hypocrisy cloud one's judgment. The man who is a hypocrite lacks the spiritual perception necessary to work spiritual surgery upon his neighbor. By their behavior and thinking, hypocritical judges demonstrate that they are not really concerned about the sanctification or welfare of the brother they are condemning. The scribes and Pharisees were blinded by their hypocrisy and used judging others as a means of self-exaltation. They took great pleasure in dragging others down.

Consequently, it is rather ironic that the person with the log in his eye needs to look at himself before he can observe others. We must never judge our brother without first carefully noting our own spiritual condition. Backsliders make very careless eye surgeons. If we are going to judge anyone, we need to objectively examine our hearts and lives in light of God's infallible Word. If we see inconsistencies in our lives, we must not make excuses for them or attempt to explain them away but must repent of them at once and confess them to God. It should be a part of our daily prayer life to ask God to reveal to us areas of behavior that are contrary to Scripture, especially areas in which we may be living in self-deception. Most Christians who make unlawful judgments are not aware of their gross hypocrisy before God. They need God to open their eyes. Clear vision is needed to operate on the speck in our brother's eye and only the Holy Spirit can enable us to see the beam in our eye so that we can remove it. Physician, heal thyself. The next time you decide to speak to a brother about his sin, first take a good, long, hard look at yourself.

Second, when the hypocrite judges the good of the other person is not the true motive. Much judgment today is nothing more than hatred or revenge disguised behind a mask of piety and concern. Thus, the log must be removed because correction must flow from Christian love. If a person does not have a genuine desire to really help a brother, while protecting his reputation as much as possible (cf. Mt. 18:15ff.), then he is *unqualified* to judge. Tragically, when a professing Christian unlawfully judges a brother he usually spreads the matter abroad in an attempt to damage his reputation. Such behavior is truly despicable. If we really love someone as a Christian brother, then our real desire would be to speak to him privately and help him remove that sin out of his life. Once we remove the beam out of our own eye, then we will *not* act as an adversary who is out to exact personal retribution. Instead, we will come to our brother as a compassionate physician. Paul says that we are to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21) and that we are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

When our hearts are not right before God and we are set upon revenge, we may speak the truth; but, we often do so in a manner that is unnecessarily harsh and cutting. Such behavior may indeed make matters worse. But if we can take the beam out of our eye, examine our heart and true motive, and put our heart in the right place, then our whole approach to our brother will change. We are able to perform gentle eye surgery with a scalpel instead of butchering our brother with a hatchet. It is crucial that we search our hearts to make sure that we do not have any ulterior motives in our judgment. Are our motives genuine Christian love and the sanctification of our brother? Or, are we really only interested in revenge and tearing our brother down? If our motive is getting even or damaging his reputation, then we simply have no business passing judgment until we repent. Believers are not sanctified by hypocrisy. Christians are not

made holier by gossip, slander or insults. A heart full of unlawful hatred is the springboard for destruction, not constructive criticism.

Third, the need to remove the beam is consistent with the biblical teaching that a judge must have clean hands or else he is disqualified from judging. In other words, a person who is currently guilty of some serious or scandalous sin has no business probing into the affairs of others and sitting in judgment over them. Our Lord stated this principle in His confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees about the woman caught in adultery. He challenged these hypocrites saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (Jn. 8:7). By this statement the Savior was not telling the Jews that they had to be sinless to judge this woman, but rather was pointing out that habitual adulterers are not in a biblical position to stand in judgment over an act of adultery. They were hypocrites and knew it and so, one by one, they walked away. People who are living in sin and thus have so little respect for God's authority and law are not fit subjects to accuse others or to demand the enforcement of the law's sentence.

Fourth, a believer who is living in some serious sin cannot be a good example to other Christians. Rebuke, correction and judgment must flow from sincerity and godliness, not hypocrisy and declension. Hypocritical teachers and judges send two contradictory messages. With their words they may speak the truth and rebuke according to Scripture; but, by their hypocritical behavior they teach people to sin. Their judgment may be orthodox, while their lives are heterodox. Their implicit message is, "Do as I say not as I do." The old Jewish method of discipleship was not simply to teach people verbally, but also to be an example of how this teaching is to be reflected in one's life. A wicked, hypocritical judge will do great harm to the church.

Fifth, the necessity of identifying and removing the beam teaches us that judges must be humble. Pride was one of the main reasons that the scribes and Pharisees were unwilling to identify and admit their sins. Arrogance is often the platform for self-deception and hypocrisy. The man who is full of pride excuses his own sins because he is unwilling to admit who he really is. The identification and admission of sins would involve self-abasement. It would take him off the pedestal that he has erected. The scribes and Pharisees were more anxious to please men rather than God. Their pride, self-deception and self-confidence caused them to pervert justice, to look down on others and condemn the innocent.

If we are guilty of sinful pride, then we must cast this beam out of our eye, confess our sin to God and humble ourselves before Him. A consciousness of our own past failures before God and our own former struggles makes us approach our sinning brother with humility and sympathy. We know that we have fallen before and that it is only by God's grace that we have escaped the mire of sin. Humility leads to genuine compassion and a desire to help. Paul speaks to this issue from a different perspective when he writes, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). Only the person who is spiritual, who has dealt with the sinful habits in his own life and walks daily with God is qualified to approach an erring brother. Only such a one can come with gentleness, lowliness, sympathy and perform what is needed. The Pharisees were not like this at all and thus Jesus said of them, "They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch" (Mt. 15:14).

Sixth, the injunction implies that, once we have removed the beam out of our eye, we need to be *close* to our brother to remove the speck out of his eye. Our Lord presupposes the intimacy of the local church and close church fellowship. One of the reasons that Christ has organized the church into local congregations is that people who are close to us, with whom we

become intimate friends, are best able to see our faults and deal with them in a careful, surgical manner. “The eye is the most sensitive organ of the body and the most easily damaged. A steady and gentle hand is required to extract the foreign substance from it. Care should be taken in selecting the *best time* to approach an erring brother, so that the reproof is likely to be effectual.”⁴⁵⁸ Correction is not to be by e-mail or letter or even the phone (except in extraordinary circumstances), but rather in person. Our Lord’s teaching is in perfect harmony with Matthew 18. People who attempt eye surgery through e-mail do not have the close intimate contact necessary for careful communication required in admonition.

Other Biblical Examples of Unlawful Judgment

In the passage before us, our Lord focuses His attention upon hypocritical judgment; however, it is not the only judgment condemned by the Word of God. Consequently, as part of the application of our Lord’s imperative, we will consider other forms of unlawful judgment.

First, there are ecclesiastical, moral or religious judgments that are based on human regulations instead of the Scriptures. These judgments are a form of legalism because they violate the principle of *sola Scriptura* (i.e. Scripture alone). The Bible teaches that God’s Word is our sole standard for doctrine, ethics, worship and church government. Therefore, if a Christian sets out to judge or condemn another believer for a certain behavior, then he must demonstrate that that behavior violates the teaching of the Word of God. If the conduct does not contradict the teachings of Scripture in any way, then such judgment would be based solely on human opinion or tradition.

This was a serious problem in our Lord’s time. For example, the Pharisees followed all sorts of man-made religious traditions and consequently came into conflict with Jesus on a number of occasions. They judged Him to be guilty of a serious offense for eating without first practicing a ritual hand washing (Mt. 15:1-2). The Savior strongly condemned their legalism saying, “In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:9). Because of their various human regulations regarding the Sabbath day, the Pharisees condemned our Lord for plucking and eating a few heads of grain on the Sabbath (Mk. 2:23-24) and even for healing the sick (Jn. 5:16).

The problem of legalism and unlawful judging has plagued the Christian church almost from the beginning. Paul, for example, had to admonish believers at Colossae on this matter because they were subjecting themselves to human regulations that had nothing to do with the Word of God (Col. 2:20). These regulations, “do not touch, do not taste, do not handle” (Col. 2:21), are “according to the doctrine and commandments of men” (Col. 2:23). They are of no use in subduing the sinful flesh (cf. Col. 2:23). Apparently, some of the Colossians were basing their ethics on principles from neo-Platonism. “The Holy Spirit points out that in such cases to judge a brother is to ‘speak evil of the law’ (James iv, 11), which means that he who condemns a brother for anything which *God* has *not* proscribed regards the Law as being faulty because it has not prohibited such things. ‘He who quarrels with his brother and condemns him for the sake of anything not determined in the Word of God does thereby reflect on His Word as if it were not a perfect rule.’”⁴⁵⁹

When judgment is only in accord with truth and, therefore, is righteous judgment (Jn. 7:24), then and only then does true liberty or freedom reign. This is the true meaning of the rule

⁴⁵⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 265.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid, 265.

of law. Today most churches do not fully understand *sola Scriptura* and, consequently, people are unlawfully judged for all sorts of things that are not violations of God's Word (e.g., the moderate use of alcoholic beverages, the modest use of jewelry and earrings, not celebrating man-made holy days such as Christmas, not singing uninspired songs in worship, etc.).

Second, the Bible forbids partiality in judgment. "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor" (Lev. 19:15). It is very common in our modern society for people to be either too lenient or too harsh on someone in judgment based on a person's social status. The Bible condemns such behavior and orders us to administer justice without regard to the status of the person being judged. That is the only way that judgment can be fair and objective. The law of God is the standard of justice and not our personal biases or emotions. Noordtjij writes,

Ancient Near Eastern society operated primarily in terms of unwritten law, in which the social position of the respective parties could exert more influence than considerations of justice. The demands of the law could thus often be frustrated by the commission of *awel* ("injustice, perversion"), whether this arose from feelings of sympathy, from fear of the rich and powerful, or through the influence of other members of society who also had an interest in the case. This was never to happen in Israel, however. The same law applied here to all persons (cf. Exod. 23:2-8; Deut. 16:19-20; Zech. 8:16), for law was no mere human invention, but was rather the codification of God's will (see Exod. 21:1). The justice of the Lord stands behind and supports a nation that exercises justice in its own affairs. In Israelite society, the law was to be administered with total impartiality, and there was therefore no room for any form of class justice.⁴⁶⁰

Third, judgment is unlawful and unfair when it is based on gossip, rumor, hearsay or slander. Tragically, many churches and even ecclesiastical courts today are riddled with gossip and unconfirmed rumors. Things are said of people that are often untrue, distorted and exaggerated and then judgments are formed about brothers that are completely inaccurate and unfair. Such behavior, though common, is wicked and is strongly condemned by the Word of God. "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (Lev. 19:16). "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases" (Pr. 26:20; cf. v. 22; 11:13; 18:8; 20:19). "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters" (1 Pet. 4:15). Note that Peter places being a busybody in with sins that are very serious and scandalous. Gossip, idle talking and insinuating, exaggerating or hinting evil about another Christian is a form of unlawful judgment and a serious offense. "The villages and cities of Israel, their households and their family circles, were exposed to this pestilence. 'The tongue is set on fire of hell.'"⁴⁶¹ Satan loves to kindle the flames of gossip, slander and injustice in the church. "Without the benefit of a trial, all slander serves to give a false or unjust judgment about a person and leaves him only a negative recourse. Slander suits

⁴⁶⁰ A. Noordtjij, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 198. S. H. Kellogg's application of this passage to his day is still relevant in our time of growing statism: "A plain warning lies here for an increasing class of concern for the poor, but who in their zeal for social reform and the diminishing of poverty are forgetful of righteousness and equity. It applies, for instance, to all who would affirm and teach with Marx that 'capital is robbery'; or who, not yet quite ready for so plain and candid words, yet would, in any way, in order to right the wrongs of the poor, advocate legislation involving practical confiscation of the estates of the rich" (*The Book of Leviticus* [Minneapolis: Klock & Klock (1899) 1978], 400).

⁴⁶¹ Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1846] 1966), 348.

are difficult to win and often do as much damage in themselves as the slander does. They are also very costly.”⁴⁶²

Fourth, judgment is unlawful when it is based on assumptions, a lack of evidence, or one-sided testimony. “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Pr. 18:13). It is foolish and unbiblical to come to a judgment about a person’s behavior when one has only heard one side of the story. (This assertion is obviously intimately related to the previous point.) One cannot come to a fair conclusion on a matter without first hearing both sides and weighing all the evidence. Justice requires patience, diligence and objectivity. Listening to one side of an issue *without* also considering the other side *at the same time* can prejudice judges ahead of time. Then, when they finally do see the other evidence their view is tainted and prejudiced against it. This unfairness and injustice is very common today in Presbyterian judicial procedures. A person involved in a dispute will gain the ear of presbyters and, in many cases, their minds are made up long before they hear the other side.

A closely related passage reveals that often a proper judgment can only be arrived at by diligent inquiry and cross-examination. “The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him” (Pr. 18:17). A man comes along and gives his side of the story, but does so in a way that minimizes his faults and maximizes those of his opponent. But, when he is questioned carefully by someone with biblical wisdom it is discovered that his original testimony is distorted. He had lies and self-deception in his heart which led him first to deceive himself and then afterward his neighbors. “If a man can detect exaggerations on one side, and concealments on the other, amounting to untruthfulness in their general effect, it shows that the fear of God was not before the eyes of the witness when he emitted his evidence.”⁴⁶³

Fifth, judgment is unlawful when it does not follow proper biblical procedures. When a person believes that he has witnessed another Christian commit a sin, he is first required to go to that brother privately; then, if repentance is not forthcoming he must take two or three witnesses; then, finally if necessary, he must take the matter before the church session (cf. Mt. 18:15-20). In the case of an elder, no accusations are to be received without at least two separate witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19). This procedure is designed by Christ to keep all the previous injustices (legalism, partiality, gossip, hearsay, slander, assumptions, etc..) from taking place. If proper biblical procedure has not taken place, then the case should be thrown out and, if possible, retried following the proper procedure. The teaching of our Lord in Matthew 18:15-20 is designed to protect the church from its members’ own sinful natures. Because of remaining sin, we are prone to gossip and judge without the proper facts. We are also inclined to assume an authority over others that does not belong to us. Jesus set up a body of elders to rule in each local congregation and we must allow them to do their job. If we do not, chaos and schism will result.

Sixth, judgment is unlawful when it is unnecessarily harsh or unjust. In other words, the punishment must fit the crime. Because biblical law (i.e. the moral law—the ten commandments and the moral case laws that explain and flesh out the Decalogue) is held in such low regard in our day, not only in American society but also in many churches, judgments are often completely arbitrary. In the civil courts, a murderer may only get ten years in prison while someone who runs over a kangaroo rat with a tractor may lose all his property. In evangelical churches, a young woman who gets herself pregnant out of wedlock may get a baby shower, while a man caught drinking a beer may be excommunicated. There was recently a case in a Reformed

⁴⁶² Rousas John Rushdoony, *Leviticus* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2005), 220.

⁴⁶³ William Arnot, *Studies in Proverbs: Laws From Heaven For Life on Earth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1884], 1978), 386.

denomination where a pastor was charged with being unloving and unpastoral for voting to discipline a woman who, without just cause, abandoned her husband. Today many Reformed churches are so saturated with antinomianism and the world's concept of love that men who adhere strictly to the Westminster Standards are held in contempt and are treated severely for any perceived minor infraction.

Seventh, judgment is unlawful when it is not accompanied by love and mercy. This statement applies to judgment in a number of ways. By mercy we mean that in cases of discipline the person judged must be lovingly shown the biblical path to repentance, restitution and reconciliation. Judgments in church discipline cases are always carried out ultimately for the long term benefit of the one judged. Even when speaking of excommunication Paul says, "Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:5). The offender was delivered to Satan so that his body would suffer affliction with the result that he would see his sin and repent. "It appears from 2 Cor. 7, 9-12, that this solemn exercise of the judicial power of the apostle, had its appropriate effect. It led the offender himself, and the whole church, to sincere and deep repentance."⁴⁶⁴ Thus we see that love and mercy are not contrary to a just sentence of judgment. It is rather ironic that those who, in the name of love and mercy, do *not* discipline members of the church actually do great harm to them because they hinder them from the suffering and affliction (that when accompanied by a work of the Spirit) leads to true repentance and reconciliation with the local church.

When coming to a judgment about a Christian, we should give the person the benefit of the doubt and put the best possible construction on the evidence when it is not clear. "Love suffers long and is kind...does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth" (1 Cor. 13:4, 5, 6). The person who is unloving puts the worst possible construction upon things and rejoices when his brother is snared in some sin. Such behavior is wicked and contrary to our duty to love each other as members of the body of Christ. These important truths, however, do not mean that we should ignore plain evidence, or give a heretic slack because he is adept at hiding fundamental errors behind equivocations and mixes his heresies with some solid truths. God never requires us to call evil good or heresy truth; nevertheless, because we have so much sin in ourselves and make many mistakes ourselves we must be extra careful so that we do not call light darkness and good evil. "We are not to go about with our eyes closed nor wink at sin when we see it, yet it is equally wrong for us to hunt for something to condemn and seize upon every trifle and magnify molehills into mountains."⁴⁶⁵

Tragically, there have been many examples of people in local churches who do not like a particular Christian in their church. As a result, they keep a mental (and sometimes a literal) list of every minor rub and offense with the idea of eventually bringing that person down. Such behavior violates the law of love (cf. 1 Cor. 13), Matthew 18:15ff, and is condemned by Scripture with the strongest of language. As John says, "Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother" (1 Jn. 3:10). To go after another brother and disturb the peace of the church over minor doctrinal differences, personality conflicts, jealousy, envy, or personal animosity is not piety or godliness. It rather is the work of Satan. May God use our Lord's penetrating and convicting teaching on judgment to root all such wicked unlawful judging out of His church.

⁴⁶⁴ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1959), 86.

⁴⁶⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 266.

Chapter 30: A Warning against Unlawful Liberality

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you (Mt. 7:6).

After speaking at length about unlawful judgment, our Lord turns His attention to the necessity of a careful, holy discrimination on the part of Christians toward unbelievers. Although it is common to see this verse as an unrelated statement, it should be viewed as a balancing verse to the preceding teaching. The saints are not to judge hypocritically or unfairly and they are not to be naïve or indiscriminating towards the heathen. Believers should not be unnecessarily harsh or judgmental and they must not abuse love and grace by casting pearls before dogs and pigs. Jesus wants to make sure that His teaching about being unfair in judgment is not turned into a reason for a lax, antinomian, wishy-washy attitude towards people who are wicked, foolish and obstinate. There are people who Christ says are in such a state that it is actually wrong to preach the gospel to them or attempt to spiritually admonish them. By way of introduction, there are some things to note about this passage.

First, our Lord was not afraid to use strong language to describe people when appropriate. After a section on carefulness and fairness in judgment, He turns right around and refers to some people as “dogs” and “swine.” Later in His ministry, He referred to the respected religious leaders in His day, the scribes and Pharisees, as “whitewashed tombs” (Mt. 23:27) and a “brood of vipers” (Mt. 23:33). He told them that they were hypocrites whose covenantal father was not God, but the devil (Jn. 8:44). He also referred to Herod Antipas as “that fox” (Lk. 13:32). The Jews regarded the fox as “the sliest of beasts” and, thus, Christ is openly identifying Herod’s wicked craftiness.

The Savior always called a spade a spade and, unlike many of today’s religious leaders, did not pretend that wicked political and religious leaders were wonderful human beings for the purpose of publicity or material gain. In our day, it is deemed inappropriate to use strong language because modern Reformed and evangelical churches are often effeminate, pluralistic and non-confrontational in their thinking. A common view is that we should only be positive in our teaching and not call dangerous error, heresy or false teachers, heretics. Jesus emphatically rejected such a view, as did the Protestant Reformers who referred to the Pope as anti-Christ and his bishops as Satan’s lieutenants.

Second, unlike the other sections in the Sermon on the Mount, this instruction is brief and is not accompanied by detailed explanations, illustrations or applications. This makes interpreting this passage more difficult. It can really only be properly interpreted in the light of the broader context of Scripture. Our Lord uses figurative language (“dogs, swine, pearls”) which can only be properly understood in the light of the cultural and religious background of the original Jewish audience.

The structure of this saying is interesting. The verse naturally divides into halves with each part having parallel clauses. The first two clauses are parallel and essentially say the same thing with different terminology. Many scholars believe that this verse follows the a-b-b-a pattern, where the trampling refers to the swine and the rending refers back to the dogs. While this may be the case, the pigs described are not tame farm animals; but, rather, are wild boars which are ferocious animals and quite capable of tearing into an unwise giver.

Third, the teaching of this verse is neglected in our day due to Arminian, antinomian and pagan concepts of love and fairness that have penetrated many churches. Because Jehovah’s

holiness is no longer emphasized in preaching and God's moral law is no longer taught in many churches, the idea of refusing to preach the gospel to certain persons or witness to them is seen as incompatible with Scripture. It is viewed as undemocratic, anti-egalitarian and unloving. False views of love adopted from our pagan culture have caused many to refuse to obey this command of Christ. Believers, in their ignorance of the teaching of this passage, are sometimes guilty of casting the holy pearls of the gospel before the blaspheming swine and dogs of this world.

Defining Terms

The first thing that we need to do to understand this teaching is define the words that are used metaphorically. What does Jesus mean by "dogs" and "pigs"? Also, what does He mean by "holy things" and "pearls"?

The words "dogs" and "pigs" were among the most derogatory in the Jewish vocabulary of the first century. This was not because the Jews simply had a personal or subjective dislike of these animals, but because of their treatment by Scripture. The law of God regarded dogs and pigs as unclean and unholy animals. Because the Jews regarded dogs as utterly unclean, they were not kept as tame pets like in ancient Egypt or modern America. As a result, the dogs in and around Jewish cities were wild, vicious, and dangerous scavengers. They killed any small animals they could and roamed garbage heaps eating refuse and dead bodies; they often carried diseases. In 2 Kings 9 when Jezebel was thrown over the wall the dogs were waiting to eat her flesh and consumed her whole body (vs. 35-36). Earlier dogs had licked up Ahab's blood that was washed from his chariot (1 Kgs. 22:38) "while the harlots bathed." Because Ahab and Jezebel were exceedingly wicked apostates who savagely persecuted the holy remnant of God, it was fitting that both were left to the dogs. This was God's ultimate judgmental insult toward them. The filthy scavenger nature of dogs is set forth in Proverbs 26:11, which speaks of "a dog that returns to its vomit." Peter applies this verse to unregenerate professing Christians who apostatize from the faith (2 Pet. 2:22).

In Deuteronomy the word "dog" is used to designate a male (i.e. homosexual) prostitute: "You shall not bring the wages of a harlot or the price of a dog to the house of the LORD your God for any vowed offering, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God" (23:18). In both Philistine and Israelite culture the term "dog" was used as a strong insult to persons who were deeply hated (1 Sam. 17:43; 24:14; 2 Sam. 9:8; 16:9; 2 Kgs. 8:13). In Matthew 15:26 Jesus uses the term "dogs" to represent the Gentiles, although the expression there refers to a house dog or pet. In Psalm 22 the word "dogs" is used prophetically to describe our Lord's cruel taunting enemies (vs. 16, 20). This included both Jewish and Gentile tormentors and persecutors. The Jews in Jesus' day referred to all Gentiles as "dogs." It was a term of hatred and derision. In the last chapter of the Bible, people who are excluded from the new Jerusalem—the paradise of God—are identified as "dogs." "But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie" (Rev. 22:15).

The picture that Scripture gives of pigs is as bad as dogs. In the Old Testament, they are listed as one of the unclean animals (Lev. 11:7; Dt. 14:8). God says that anyone who has eaten swine's flesh or offered swine's blood in sacrifice has committed an abomination (Isa. 65:4; 66:3, 17). When Peter describes apostates who go back into the world, he describes pigs as having the same nature as dogs. "'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and 'a sow, having wasted, to her wallowing in the mire'" (2 Pet. 2:22). Interestingly, when Jesus cast the demons out of two men, he sent them into a herd of swine at their own request (Mt. 8:28-32). When our Lord

wanted to illustrate the depths of declension and sin in the life of the prodigal son, He described him as a feeder of swine who wanted to eat the swine's food (Lk. 15:15-16). In other words, ethically and spiritually, he had reached the bottom of the barrel.

Given the scriptural use of these terms what specifically does our Lord mean? It is important that we recognize that Jesus is *not* simply referring to Gentiles, unbelievers or notorious sinners. This point becomes evident when we look at the broad context of Scripture. The Bible explicitly teaches that the gospel is to go into every nation (Mt. 28:19-20). It is to be preached "to every creature" (Mk. 16:15), first beginning at "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Ac. 1:8). Moreover, it cannot refer to especially wicked unbelievers for Jesus and the apostles preached to prostitutes, tax collectors, homosexuals, sorcerers and all the dregs of society. Therefore, it must refer to people who have already heard the gospel and rejected it or to pagans and apostates who are blaspheming and mocking the gospel. This point will become clearer as we look at specific examples in a moment.

The expression "what is holy" refers to something that is set apart by God. It is consecrated unto God and, thus, is special. It is *not* something that is common or profane. The Jews were required to make a distinction between that which is "holy and unholy, and between clean and unclean" (Lev. 10:10). The term "holy" is set in parallel with the word "pearls" and both are used to describe the same thing, but with a slightly different emphasis. Pearls in the first century were exceptionally valuable and were only purchased by people of great wealth. "In order to obtain a pearl of great value a merchant might have to sell all his possessions (Matt. 13:46; cf. 1 Tim. 2:9; Rev. 17:4; 18:12, 16; 21:21)."⁴⁶⁶

Taking all this together, Jesus is saying that there is something exceptionally valuable and profoundly holy that believers have that must not be placed before men who are in such a wicked state as to abuse it and turn upon the Christian. Although this very valuable and holy thing is not identified in the immediate context, an examination of the broader context of Scripture reveals that Christ was speaking about the Word of God; in particular, the gospel of the kingdom.

Biblical Examples of This Principle

The best way to understand what our Lord is teaching here is to examine the many examples of the application of this principle in Scripture. There is the example of Christ Himself. The Savior was very patient and careful in how He dealt with the disciples, even though they were slow to learn and of little faith. He sometimes rebuked them, but the admonitions were loving and were designed to help them. But when He confronted His hardened enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, He condemned them outright and did not seek out any middle ground. The scribes and Pharisees, who heard the truth of the gospel but rejected it and sought to kill the Messiah, were not sheep, but were "dogs" and "swine." They were vicious, ravenous apostates who were only interested in trampling the gospel underfoot. But when our Lord encountered Nicodemus, "ruler of the Jews," who had not rejected the truth, He spent a good deal of time explaining the gospel to him.

We see this principle at work at Jesus' trial. Christ was willing to speak to Pilate and tell him some amazing things about Himself even though Pilate was a wicked Roman ruler. But when He came before Herod Antipas, who had privately been instructed in the truth by John the baptizer yet rejected it and killed him, Jesus kept silent. Herod had rejected the gospel and his

⁴⁶⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 359.

only interest in the Nazarene was a perverse curiosity relating to the Savior's miracles and popularity. Our Lord was unwilling to cast the pearls of the gospel before this hedonistic, egotistical swine (cf. Lk. 23:3, 9).

Also, when Jesus sent forth the apostles, He gave them specific instructions on what to do when people, or even whole cities, reject the gospel and do not welcome His representatives. "And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet" (Mt. 10:14; cf. Lk. 9:5; Mk. 6:11). Among the Jews a shaking of the dust from the feet was done when leaving Gentile territory to remove the uncleanness from their feet. Here, the act is a sign that the gospel rejecters have been hardened in their separation from God and that impending judgment awaits them if they do not repent. It is a holy "good riddance" from God. Our Lord wants everyone to understand that rejecting the gospel is a very serious matter. It is a direct insult to Christ and God. With people who have rejected the truth, we are not "to beat a dead horse," but rather are to figuratively shake off the dust. That is, we are to regard them as vile and have nothing whatsoever to do with them. If they show signs of repentance and are sincerely seeking spiritual guidance, then matters can change. Obviously, such people, while still alive, are not beyond the reach of grace. We can still pray for them, but we are to move on to other fishing grounds.

That the apostles followed our Lord's example and teaching regarding this issue is seen in the book of Acts. In Acts 13 we read about certain Jews who heard the gospel, yet rejected it and opposed Paul and Barnabas. These first missionaries responded exactly as Jesus had commanded. "On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles'" (vs. 45-46). After these Jews stirred up the leaders of the city to persecute them and drive them out of their region we read, "But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium" (v. 51). There was a disapprobation, complete rejection and renunciation of the Jews who made themselves enemies of the gospel. Later, in his ministry at Corinth, we find Paul doing the same thing: "But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, 'Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'" (Ac. 18:6). From this we see that, while there is a responsibility to preach the gospel to all men without exception, there is also a duty to not cast precious pearls of truth before those set in array against the gospel. Those who oppose the gospel with a systematic and concerted opposition and blaspheme it are filthy, vicious "dogs" and "pigs" that need to be left alone.

Another teaching of Scripture that relates to our topic, at least in a tangential manner, is the matter of the excommunicated brother. Paul writes, "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person" (1 Cor. 5:11). Here the apostle is instructing believers to avoid contact and fellowship of any kind with hypocritical and excommunicated professing Christians. Unlike the earlier examples, here we are not necessarily dealing with people who have rejected the gospel with their mouths, but with people who repudiate it by their lives. Such people know the truth and have repeatedly been admonished to repent of scandalous sins, but have obstinately rejected the truth by their behavior. Since these people were already part of the Christian community, believers cannot

shake the dust off their feet and leave them. Instead they are to be cast out of the local church of Christ.

These people, like the enemies of the church noted earlier, have been given the truth but have rejected it. Indeed, apostates have heard the gospel and the teachings of Scripture many times, but have chosen to trample it underfoot as worthless. Thus, they too are to be regarded as “dogs” and “pigs.” To speak to them is a waste of time because they have already been given the truth and have rejected it. In fact, if Matthew 18 has been carefully followed, they have been given at least three separate occasions to repent, but have not. For those who disagree with this interpretation we point to the radical nature of the apostle’s statement: “With such a person do not even eat!” In the Eastern culture of that time to not make such an offer of hospitality would be considered a great insult. Socially, it was virtually unthinkable. Thus we can only conclude that Paul was following Jesus’ teaching regarding excommunication. That excommunication must result in a complete separation between the unrepentant scandalous sinner and the Christian community. “Such a sinner must be excluded from Christian fellowship. Then he may learn to see the error of his way, repent, and return to the faith.”⁴⁶⁷

When we look at Scriptural examples that flesh out our Lord’s command, we see certain things in common. Those deemed “dogs” and “pigs” have three characteristics. First, they already have received the truth and rejected it emphatically. This point is important because certain Christians called hyper-Calvinists have come up with the idea that the gospel is only to be spoken to people who are seeking it or who already show some interest in the truth. This teaching is refuted by the Great Commission and the many examples in the gospels and Acts where Jesus or the apostles preach to people who are simply going about their business. The woman at the well (Jn. 4:7-26), the man born blind (Jn. 9:35-39), the multitudes in Samaria (Ac. 8:5-8) and the philosophers at the Areopagus (Ac. 17:22-23) are obvious examples. If gospel preaching is limited to those who show some interest, then how are we to know who is interested without first speaking the truth to them?

Second, the people who have rejected the truth have also become hostile toward the gospel. Christ said that those who are “dogs” and “pigs” will respond to the truth by committing grievous sins. Instead of contemplating the truth or embracing it, they trample the gospel underfoot as worthless and attack the gospel messenger. This was first true of the Jews who persecuted the church, then the Greeks and Romans and can still be observed in many heretics, modernists, secular humanists and Muslims today. Preaching or witnessing to such people is not only a waste of precious time, but is also dangerous. It only manages to stir up a hornet’s nest of abuse and persecution.

Third, the people who have rejected the gospel and made themselves active enemies of the truth are not worthy any longer to hear it. Hearing the gospel is a great privilege. For thousands of years God’s special revelation and ordinances were limited to a tiny fraction of the world’s population. But with the death and resurrection of Jesus, Satan has been chained and now the Savior has a comprehensive authority over heaven and earth. The gospel is to go to every person in the whole world. Those who turn on the gospel are to be cut off from these precious words of life. This should be seen as a form of judgment. Those who hear the gospel need to take full advantage of this revealed light. It may be their last chance to ever hear it again.

⁴⁶⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 170-171.

Applications

Now that we have an understanding of our Lord's metaphorical language, we need to consider how this teaching applies to our own situation. There are a number of implications and applications that we should take from this text.

First, we need to see that Jesus is telling us that we possess a priceless treasure in the gospel. Christ does not speak of throwing stubble, hay or even bread before "dogs" and "pigs," but rather pearls, one of the rarest, most valuable commodities in the ancient world. Therefore, by implication, we need to see the importance of possessing the gospel and spreading it. It is a tragic thing when professing Christians act as though they take the gospel for granted. They are not serious about studying it, praying over it and meditating on it. They often view it as just another piece of information or part of their life. We need every day to think about and act upon the preciousness of Christ and His redemption. "It is wonderful beyond words. All physical wealth palls to insignificance beside it. Because this is God's world, nothing is more important to me than to have my sins forgiven and to be accepted by him; and nothing is more wonderful than the way God has accomplished this by sending his own son to die in my behalf. God has graciously given to men, both in human language (the Bible) and in a human person (Jesus), true and sure revelation of himself; and nothing absolutely nothing is richer or more important or of more consequence than that."⁴⁶⁸ Young people raised in Christian homes who have heard these words of life since birth must always keep in mind the value of the gospel. The whole world is nothing but a speck of dust in God's sight compared to the work of His dear Son.

Also, with an understanding of the preciousness of the gospel, should we not be more willing to tell our neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances and relatives about it? If we found a great chest of gold and became rich beyond belief, would we not be excited and tell others about it? Oh, that we could be more like the Samaritan woman who was so excited about Christ that she brought many people in her own city to a saving knowledge of the Savior (Jn. 4:29, 39-41).

Second, this passage tells us something very sobering about what man has become because of Adam's fall into sin. When the Word of God looks at fallen mankind and considers how men apart from grace treat God and His Word, it says that they are "dogs" and "swine." The effect of sin upon man has been spiritually devastating. That which is holy, good and spiritual is hated by men, while they love to wallow in the mire of sin and all sorts of disgusting perversions. Paul says, "To be carnally minded is death" and "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:6, 7). Because of the pollution of sin, we are born as ethical and spiritual "dogs and pigs." We are born rebels against God's throne, with an inner hostility and hatred of God's truth. Do you not see how terrible sin is? It has taken the crown of God's glorious creation that was meant to live in fellowship with God and serve Him with joy and has turned him into a wild, ravenous, savage boar. It is for this reason that, without a work of the Holy Spirit, people are hostile to the gospel. People become angry when they hear the truth of God's Word because it shows them what they really are and what they truly need. "That is what sin does to man; that is what it does to his nature; that is how it affects his attitude towards the truth. It is something that gets into the very depths and vitals of man's being, and turns him into something that is not only hateful, but utterly opposed to God, and purity, to cleanness, and holiness, and truth."⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 105-106.

⁴⁶⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:190.

Third, Jesus is commanding us to use wisdom and discrimination when speaking to others about Christ. This is the central teaching of this passage. Unfortunately, many Christians have been ignorant of this principle and have allowed the gospel and themselves to be punching bags for the heathen. For example, prominent ministers have appeared on pagan television programs with good intentions, but have been used by hardened, Christ-hating, secular humanists to try and make God's Word look foolish. A Christian preacher or intellectual should never appear on a format where a notorious anti-Christian has control over the debate or the editing of the final product. In the United States the pattern of secular humanists in the media is to place three secular humanists who hate Christ up against one incapable Christian minister, simply to trample the truths of Scripture underfoot. We must not cast our pearls before swine.

Our Lord's teaching needs to be applied to personal witnessing. There are people who will respectfully listen to what one has to say and then there are hostile mockers and blasphemers of the gospel who are out to make trouble. It is sad to see fervent Christians in a campus ministry stand and take repeated abuse by people who have already rejected the gospel because the Christians have not learned discrimination. In such situations we should be like Paul and Barnabas and tell such people that they are not worthy to hear the gospel and move on. There are plenty of unbelievers to witness to in our day and age. If you are witnessing to someone and they understand what you have to say but hate it and begin attacking you, then it is time to shake the dust off and walk away. People who are out to mock and ridicule the gospel should be rebuked and asked to leave. We accomplish nothing good when we waste much time and energy on people who already know the truth and hate it. We can and should pray for such people, but we must refuse to talk further with them until the Holy Spirit changes their hearts and makes them seekers instead of haters.

All of this does not mean that we should mistreat, abuse, or act hatefully toward those who mock and ridicule the message of the kingdom. Christians who go to funerals for AIDS activists and carry signs that say "God hates fags" or "faggots burn in hell" are accomplishing nothing productive. They are simply stirring up more anger and hatred toward believers. We are to shake the dust off of our feet, not throw it in their face. Many who are Christians now did mock and reject the gospel the first time they heard it. Therefore, it is wise to avoid being nasty and vindictive toward them; simply refuse to argue with them. We must avoid the temptation to become abrasive and verbally fight with those who mock the gospel. It is easy to become angry when people make fun of our most cherished beliefs. It is at such times that we must remember not to cast pearls before "dogs" and "swine." That is why Jesus told his disciples regarding the Pharisees, "Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind" (Mt. 15:14). Solomon says that we should "go from the presence of a foolish man" (Pr. 14:7). There is nothing more foolish than rejecting and mocking the truth.

The flip side of this teaching is that when we are *not* dealing with savage "dogs" and debauched "swine" (who are destitute of the fear of God and have a hardened contempt for the gospel), we need to be patient and persevere with the unbeliever. A person may not believe immediately, but may have many questions. The person who is willing to listen and does not emphatically reject the truth ought to have all of his questions patiently answered. As Peter says, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15). We all need to be ready to give the inquirer biblical reasons why we believe in Christ. This involves not only knowing what the Bible says, but also being able to explain it logically. We are to do so without showing off or acting arrogantly. We need to know when to walk away and we need to

know when to stay and earnestly contend for the faith. It is probable that more Christians are guilty of walking away before they should, than are guilty of staying too long.

As we use biblical discrimination to identify “dogs” and “swine,” it is important that we learn to be objective with former friends and even relatives who hate the gospel and attack it. Our Lord’s principle is really not that hard to implement with strangers and people with whom we have no emotional attachment. But when it comes to people with whom we have emotional attachments (e.g., childhood friends, close relatives and even *grown* children), the tendency is to think that the principle does not apply to such situations. Thus, we see Christian parents that tolerate, fellowship with, and even support grown apostate children who trample the cross of Christ underfoot as worthless. This is a grave mistake. While we need to be there for such people if they decide to repent, we actually do them more harm when we continue to cast “pearls” before them. These “dogs” and “pigs” will not only blaspheme and curse the gospel even more, but they will turn and rend the misguided Christian. Many a believing parent has been taken advantage of and has even fallen into serious sin by not heeding our Lord’s command with their *adult* apostate, anti-Christian children.

Fourth, although the teaching of God’s Word is in mind in our Lord’s command, it also certainly applies to the Lord’s supper where the gospel is set forth symbolically in the bread and the wine. This is how the post-apostolic church applied this passage. In the early second-century document, the *Didache* (*The Teaching of the Twelve*), we read, “Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, but they who have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs.’”⁴⁷⁰ The Lord’s supper must not be distributed to unbelievers, unrepentant apostates, believers guilty of scandalous sins and people who refuse to join a Bible-believing church. The common practice today in evangelical churches of handing out communion to every person who walks in the door of the church is totally unscriptural. The church elders have a responsibility to fence the table and make sure that that which is holy, or set apart for the saints, is not given to the dogs and swine of this world.

Fifth, in a tangential way, our passage can be applied in a sense to professing Christians who themselves mock and scoff at the truth. If someone who claims to be a believer completely rejects any correction from God’s Word and viciously attacks you for attempting to correct him, then you are wasting your time and placing yourself in harm’s way. It is best to stay away from such people. “He who corrects a scoffer gets shame for himself, and he who rebukes a wicked man only harms himself. Do not correct a scoffer lest he hate you” (Pr. 9:7-8). “Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words” (Pr. 23:9). To correct such a person is like catching the tail of a snake who then turns and bites you. It is like trying to cut a piece of wood with an ax and having it rebound and strike you in the face. “Wisdom’s messengers must discriminate in the proclamation of their message.... The gospel is a thing too holy to be exposed to scoffing fools. Why should we *correct*, where more harm than good may be occasioned?”⁴⁷¹ If the person is a member of the local church and is guilty of some scandalous sin, then Matthew 18:15ff would come into play. However, most Christians are not connected to a solid church that has real discipline.

God has given us His Word which is holy and exceedingly precious. We need to use this Word with great wisdom and discretion. The gospel which is the Pearl of pearls must be revered and treated with respect. It must never be thrown to the filthy, savage dogs and pigs of this world, as if it were common or unclean. As representatives of Christ, our witnessing must

⁴⁷⁰ *Didache* (Chapter 12) as quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 181, footnote 4.

⁴⁷¹ Charles Bridges, *The Book of Proverbs*, 107.

not be indiscriminate. We need to be on guard for those situations when we must shake off the dust and leave those who have a hardened contempt for the gospel to wallow in their own blindness and filth. Their blood will be on their own head.

Chapter 31: An Encouragement to Prayer

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? (Mt. 7:7-11).

In this section, Jesus turns His attention once again to prayer. Earlier, He instructed the disciples on how not to pray and then gave them His own model prayer. Now He strongly encourages them to persevere in prayer and does so with an amazing promise relating to our heavenly Father. This is no doubt one of the most comforting promises found in all of sacred Scripture. We are to “ask, seek and knock” because our Father loves us and delights to give good gifts to His children. By way of introduction, there are a number of things to note regarding this passage.

First, is this section a self-contained unit or does it have some connection with the immediate or broader context? Commentators and expositors are divided over this question. Although there is certainly no obvious connection between what immediately precedes and follows, the content of the sermon as a whole makes this promise and encouragement to prayer a fitting aspect of the sermon. Any believer who looks at this sermon in depth will immediately recognize that he has not met the standard of moral and spiritual excellence set forth in our Lord’s teaching. Therefore, the natural response to this sermon for Christians will be to seek God’s help to meet these amazing demands of discipleship and holiness. We all know that we fall short in many areas and we may be tempted to be discouraged or even doubt our salvation. Consequently, our Lord encourages us to seek divine assistance and promises us that our heavenly Father will come to our aid. God’s assistance is to be sought with faith because of His loving character and it is to be sought diligently and persistently. This teaching on prayer is an implicit acknowledgement that the Christian life is a battle; that we can only meet the uncertainties, problems and struggles in life by constantly relying on God in prayer. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you.”

Second, the structure of this pericope is beautiful and almost poetic. There are three imperatives followed by complementary assertions of God’s faithfulness. We have a triple imperative, followed by a triple explanation in the indicative. The two statements are perfectly balanced and form a deeply memorable saying. The imperatives are in the present tense and indicate that this “asking, seeking and knocking” is to be the habitual practice of every Christian.

Many scholars note a progression to this threefold exhortation: “ask, seek, knock.” In other words, there is a rising scale of intensity in these words. Asking refers to a verbal request. Seeking implies asking plus diligent petitioning. The person who seeks stops what he is doing and goes out and looks. Knocking implies that the person asking and seeking must persevere in those activities. By way of illustration, it is like a little child who calls out to his mother. When

the mother does not respond, the child gets up and looks around the house for his mother. If the mother is behind a closed door, the child continues to ask and seek but now he also keeps knocking on the door until he gets a response. The point is not that prayer contains three separate things, but that the one act of prayer must involve diligence, persistence and patience. This assertion is supported by our Lord's use of this same saying immediately after the parable of the importunate friend in Luke 11: "I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs" (v. 8).

Third, what is it that Christians are to request and seek out or knock to receive? On this, the passage is silent. Some believe that it refers to seeking the Holy Spirit, or the righteousness, humility, wisdom, purity and love that the sermon demands. Others think it refers to eschatological blessings and still others the ordinary, everyday ongoing needs of Christians. Given the fact that the passage is silent on this matter, it is best to view this three-fold command as applicable to petitionary prayer in general. We are to be persistent in all kinds of prayers.

Fourth, given the universal nature of the Savior's promise ("for everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened") it is important that we interpret this passage within the broad context of Scripture. Many professing Christians have mistakenly seized upon this verse to support the idea that if we have enough faith and ask God for something that He must grant our request. This, in essence, is the teaching of the so-called "word of faith" movement. They say that if we ask with true faith, that God will grant us whatever we want. Then they usually go on to talk about the wonderful material blessings that they have obtained using this formula. One notable prosperity preacher would often brag, "You may have Chevrolet faith, but I have Cadillac faith." People who follow these false teachers find out very quickly that God does not give them everything they ask for and the result is often doubt, depression and even despair. Because their requests were not granted, they usually think that there must be something wrong with their faith or, even worse, some begin to question the veracity of the Word of God.

All of this misunderstanding and distress is completely unnecessary, for other portions of Scripture that speak of prayer make it clear that Jesus is not speaking unconditionally. This is evident from the following considerations: (1) Our asking must be according to God's will. "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 Jn. 5:14). Christ who had perfect faith asked God to remove the cup of His wrath "if it is possible" and said "not as I will, but as You will" (Mt. 26:39; cf. v. 42). We can "ask, seek and knock" until we are blue in the face and it will not make any difference if we do not ask according to God's will. We should be very thankful that God does not give us everything we ask for because He knows what we need better than we do and always gives us that which is good for our own spiritual welfare. Probably all of us can look back and think of occasions where unanswered prayers ended up being a great blessing. At the time, we may have strongly wanted a certain job, or to marry a certain woman, or to move to a certain place. Consequently, we may have prayed earnestly for such and such to come to pass. But now we look back and thank God that He knew what we needed and closed certain doors while opening others. It is a great blessing that God does not give us everything we want.

(2) The apostle Paul prayed three times to have "a thorn in the flesh" removed from him (2 Cor. 12:8) and was denied this request by Christ (v. 9). Are we to believe that the greatest of apostles had less faith than the prosperity charlatans? No, of course not! The Redeemer was glorified in Paul's weakness and the apostle was full of joy that he was strengthened by this affliction (see v. 10).

(3) In the explanatory parable given after the encouragement to prayer, our Lord says that the Father only gives us “good things” (Mt. 7:11). “So then if we ask for good things, he grants them; if we ask for things which are not good (either not good in themselves, or not good for us or for others, directly or indirectly, immediately or ultimately) he denies them; and only he knows the difference.”⁴⁷²

(4) James says that Christians do not receive what they ask for when they ask with wrong motives. “You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (4:3). The cause for failure in this situation lies in man and not God who is always faithful to His promises. If we pray for blessings with a carnal and selfish goal instead of God’s glory and our own sanctification, then we should not expect God to hear us. As we noted earlier, God does not always give us what we want, but rather what we need for our own edification.

As we turn our attention to this passage, there are three areas that need to be considered. First, there is the three-fold command. Second there is a three-fold reason why this command should be carried out. Third, Jesus explains the reason with an illustration about our heavenly Father who gives.

The Three-fold Command

The three imperatives all refer to the same activity (petitionary prayer to God) and are intended to show the necessity of persistence in prayer to Jehovah. This theme is found throughout the Bible. Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the Lord and would not let go of Him until He blessed him (Gen. 32:24-26). This amazing scene does not impugn God’s omnipotence, but it does effectively portray the importance of prevailing in prayer. Like Jacob, we must continually seek God’s blessings and persevere in prayer until we get results. Of Jacob’s victory Calvin writes, “A wonderful method of triumphing; where the Lord, to whose power all praise is entirely due, yet chooses that feeble man shall excel as a conqueror, and thus raises him on high with special eulogy. At the same time he commends the invincible perseverance of Jacob, who, having endured a long and severe conflict, still strenuously maintains his ground.”⁴⁷³ When Jacob encountered opposition, prayers and tears were his weapons (Hos. 12:4). The difficulties, oppositions, afflictions and tragedies in life must not silence our prayers, but rather increase them. Faith will hold its ground in the day of battle.

Importunate prayer is taught in Isaiah 62:7 which reads, “And give Him no rest till He establishes and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.” We are to constantly and fervently pray on behalf of the church of Christ. We are to give God no rest until our prayers are answered. Paul said something similar when he discussed prayer as a weapon for Christian warfare in Ephesians 6:18: “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.” This constancy in prayer is commanded by Jesus in Luke 18:1: “...that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.” This teaching is supported by the parable of the unjust judge who finally gives in to the woman because of her continual coming unto him (Lk. 18:5). God will, without fail, grant the requests of his people who cry unto Him “day and night” (Lk. 18:7). That is, those who are in the habit of continual prayer. Likewise, in 1 Thessalonians, Paul exhorts believers to “pray without ceasing” (5:17). Prayer was a fundamental activity of the apostle’s life (cf. 1:2ff; 2 Thess. 1:11; Rom. 1:10; Col. 1:3, 9) and he expected all believers to be devoted to prayer. Believers must regularly

⁴⁷² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 189.

⁴⁷³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:198.

pray for their own needs as well as the needs of others. We must continue steadfastly in prayer (Rom. 12:12).

These imperatives from the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of the Scriptures teach us that regular, habitual prayer is a Christian duty. It is grievous sin of omission to neglect this important means of grace. Yet, tragically, American professing Christians are not known as great prayer warriors. Believers in the West are known for their programs, mega-churches, clever organizations, self-confidence and pragmatism. Perhaps this is due to the widespread influence of Arminianism and the popularity of the church growth movement. In any case, one thing is clear—the widespread declension, indifference, apostasy and worldliness in the churches are connected to a low view and feeble practice of prayer. “You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (Jas. 4:2b-3). Oh, that God would give us hearts that seek Him in prayer!

As we contemplate this three-fold command, there are a number of things that are noteworthy. First, asking God for anything requires faith in Jesus Christ. “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). Our text obviously does not apply to the unregenerate. Only the man who has been humbled by the Holy Spirit, who sees his own complete unworthiness and need of Jesus, will reach out to God by faith. Only the man whose heart has been changed by the power of God recognizes that he needs daily supplies of grace. The humbled heart cries out to God and seeks help from above. Genuine faith looks away from itself to the throne of grace. It is this kind of heart that prays without ceasing because it always has a burning desire for God and His kingdom.

The secular humanist obviously does not “ask,” for his god is humanity. The Roman Catholic turns prayer into a meritorious exercise. For many, it is a mindless ritual and mumbling of written words without a true seeking of God. True prayer is not a stringing together of artful, beautiful expressions to impress or inspire others. It is the irrepressible cry of the child of God to His heavenly Father.

Faith embraces the God who is revealed in Scripture and thus believes that He has the power to give us what He has promised or what is according to His own revealed will. Jesus said, “Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them (Mk. 11:24; cf. Mt. 21:22). As James says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord...” (Jas. 1:5-7).

Second, the seeking and knocking emphasizes persistence and perseverance in prayer. If we really want something from God, a passing, ill-considered request is not the way to go about it. We must seek God with the whole heart (cf. Jer. 29:13) and continually knock on heaven’s door with our petitions. This means that if we are praying for the salvation of a loved one or the healing of a friend, there is nothing wrong with praying every day, repeatedly, about the same issues.

We are reminded of the Syro-Phoenician woman who came to Jesus and pleaded for the deliverance of her demon-possessed daughter. The disciples asked Christ to get rid of her because she was crying out after them. Our Lord even spoke as if He were going to refuse her request. He said it was inappropriate “to take the children’s food and throw it to the little dogs” (Mt. 15:26). Instead of getting discouraged and walking away, she pressed her case with another argument that the little dogs should be allowed to eat the crumbs that fall from the table. The

Savior answered, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire” (Mt. 15:28; cf. Mk. 7:24-30). She kept asking, seeking and knocking until her request was granted. Note that it was her great faith that caused her to persevere in prayer. She knew that Jesus had the power to deliver her daughter. She also knew that He was kind, compassionate and merciful. Her faith reached out and clung to Christ and, thus, she persisted until her prayer was answered.

Another example of determined perseverance in prayer is that of blind Bartimaeus. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was coming near: “He began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (Mk. 10:47). The people around him did not encourage him to pray, but rather “warned him to be quiet” (v. 48). But the rebukes of men were not going to stop him from repeating his petition. Although he had never seen Jesus, he had heard all about Him and believed in His great power and compassion. He knew that the opinion of these bystanders must not be a hindrance in seeking the mercy of the Son of David. The ridicule of men did not hinder his faith. Instead, “he cried out all the more.” The result was that his persistence paid off. Christ called Him over, asked him to be more specific and then gave him his sight. “Go your way; your faith has made you well” (v. 52).

Are you half-hearted in your seeking of the Redeemer? Are you easily deterred, checked and discouraged when you draw near to God? Do you throw up your hands and give up easily when the door of heaven seems closed to you? If this is a problem for you, then you need to see Christ and your Father more clearly. You need to understand the power, love, kindness, compassion and mercy of God. You need to strengthen your faith with the teaching of God’s Word.

All of this often raises a question as to why God requires persistence and perseverance in prayer. The answers to this question are simple. (1) There is a need for this kind of prayer in the Christian life. The walk of a believer is a constant struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. Because of the sin that remains in us we must fervently, persistently battle against the flesh using all the biblical tools afforded to us. Because we are always in need of daily supplies of grace to move forward in godliness we must persevere in prayer. Our only stronghold of safety is to continually call upon God’s help so that we do not slide into sin and despair. Calvin notes, “By doing so we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us.”⁴⁷⁴ Ironically the more we grow in grace, the more sensitive that we become of our shortcomings and the heinousness of the sin that remains with us. Therefore, as we mature in Christ we see the need to pray more and not less.

(2) God likes to test our faith in order to increase it. Obviously, God is omniscient and knows everything that we need before we even ask. Jesus acknowledged this truth earlier in the sermon (e.g., Mt. 6:6-8). Also, we know that God loves to give gifts unto us. (This point will be considered in a moment.) Therefore, prevailing prayer does not mean that God is unwilling to give until we twist His arm and He finally gives in. It may seem that way because of the parables on persistence in prayer. But, although these stories emphasize the need for perseverance, they are not lessons on God’s nature and character. God is not like the wicked, uncaring, unjust judge of Luke 18:1-6.

God has us wrestle with Him in prayer until we are ready to receive; until our faith has been sharpened and sanctification furthered. With the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus drew out

⁴⁷⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), [iii:xx:2] 2:851.

her faith and then praised it. The same is true of blind Bartimaeus. When our Lord asked him what he wanted, the Savior already knew. Indeed, it was obvious to everyone. But Bartimaeus' confession of faith was sweet to Christ and He declared the importance of his faith. When the Angel of the Lord wrestled with Jacob all night, there is a sense in which Jacob prevailed on God in prayer. However, didn't God really allow Jacob to prevail for his own benefit? "Even when Jacob 'prevailed on God,' what really happened is that God prevailed over him, bringing him to the point of surrender when he was able to receive the blessing which God had all the time been longing to give him."⁴⁷⁵

We must never view Jehovah as reluctant to answer our prayers, for the Bible explicitly teaches that God reached out to us, saved us and blessed us with all spiritual blessings before we were seeking Him (e.g., see Eph. 1:4-6; 2:1-9). In truth, He will "do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). Yes, God is sanctifying us and developing our patience. Indeed, faith tells us not to give up or worry or get discouraged, but wait because God is faithful. "Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD" (Ps. 27:14). Real faith endures and hopes, while a counterfeit faith crumbles and falls to the ground. Genuine faith understands God's ways and trusts Him, while a phony faith panics, murmurs and complains against God. What James says about trials can also apply to unanswered prayer: "My brethren count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (Jas. 1:2-3). Beloved, if you want God's special blessing, then you need to persevere in prayer. Christ has saved us and now He says, "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it" (Ps. 81:10).

The Reason to Ask, Seek and Knock

The reason for persevering in prayer is stated in verse seven, immediately after each imperative. Then in verse eight, which gives the explanation of verse seven, the reasons are stated once again after every participle. "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Mt. 7:7-8). Persistence in prayer leads to results. We are not to cease praying for something because there is no immediate or apparent answer to our prayers. If we continue to pray, God will answer our prayers. It is God's revealed will that the secondary agency of fervent, persevering prayer be used to bring to pass things that He has already decreed and desires to bring to pass. Under the Old Covenant, coals from the altar were taken to burn the sweet incense in the censers causing the perfumed smoke to ascend to God. We need the Holy Spirit (who proceeds from Christ because of His redemptive work) to burn in our hearts so that our prayers will be a sweet smell unto God. God loves the prayers of His saints. The Lord is greatly pleased in devout and religious ascents; He delights in answering the requests of His dear children.

James, the half-brother of our Lord, teaches the same thing about fervent prayer in his epistle: "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain on the land for three years and six months, and he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (Jas. 5:17-18). James says that for success in prayer the person praying must be righteous. We should not expect God to answer our prayers when we are sinning with a high hand and committing

⁴⁷⁵ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 186.

scandalous trespasses against Him. God will not listen to the prayers of a hypocrite. “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination” (Pr. 21:27). “One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination” (Pr. 28:9). As Samuel said to Saul, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD?” (1 Sam.15:22). Our prayer life must flow out of a life of obedience toward God.

Also, for prayer to be effective it must be earnest, fervent prayer. There must be a continuing force and verve behind our prayers. This was the practice of the apostolic church: “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplications” (Ac. 1:14). Fervent, persevering prayer requires labor. Because of our flesh, we have a tendency to be lazy and neglectful when it comes to prayer. This is something we must struggle against. Like Moses’ hands during the battle, we need to keep our attention and our love upward. “To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul” (Ps. 25:1). “A bird cannot stay up in the air without a continual flight and motion of the wings; neither can we persist in prayer without constant work and labour: our faith is so weak that we are hardly brought into God’s presence; and our love is so small, that we are hardly kept there: affections flag, and then our thoughts are scattered; weariness maketh way for wandering; first our hearts are gone, and then our minds, so that we have need of much labour and diligence; all acts of duty are drawn from us by an holy force.”⁴⁷⁶

The great encouragement to prayer is Jesus’ promise that God hears us and answers our petitions. As James says, “effective, fervent prayer...avails much.” Prayer is clearly one of our greatest and most rewarding duties. Prayer is the key that God has given us to unlock heaven. It is the chief means of grace whereby we obtain from God every blessing. Christ bids us to ask, seek and knock because we do not seek God’s face in vain. Because of the blood of Christ and our justification and adoption, our prayers are efficacious. Our heavenly Father is pleased to accept our petitions in His dear Son. To “avail much,” our prayers must not be mechanical or only spoken with one’s lips, but must flow from our hearts. And like Jacob we must cling to God saying, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” (Gen. 32:26). We, who can pray *in the name* of *Jesus*, have the greatest promise and the most effectual strength. May the Lord increase in us the faith that reaches out to God and calls down the blessings of heaven.

An Illustration Explaining Why God Answers Prayer

In verses 9 through 11 Jesus uses an analogy from human parenthood to demonstrate the reason why we can trust God to answer our prayers. This is the proof that supports His promise. It is another “how much more” (*a fortiori*) argument. If human parents who are evil know how to give good gifts to their children, then how much more will our heavenly Father (who is not evil at all but absolutely good) give good things to those who ask Him!

Our Lord begins with two examples of a son asking his father for food (Luke will add a third example, 11:12). If a son requests bread, a normal parent would never mock him by giving him a stone. A stone can resemble bread, yet it is worthless as food. If a child asks his father for a fish, that parent would never give him a serpent. The word “serpent” probably refers to an eel without scales. According to the law (Lev. 11:12), Jews could not eat eels because they were unclean. Once again, the gift given is useless. It makes a mockery of the request. Luke’s gospel adds a scorpion for an egg (11:12). A scorpion would not only be useless, but also would be harmful. Normal parents do not intentionally mock, disappoint or harm their children. The whole

⁴⁷⁶ Thomas Manton, *A Commentary on James* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1693] 1963), 464.

point of these examples is to get the audience to completely agree with what our Lord has said. Parental affection toward their children (even in a fallen world) is one of the strongest feelings of the human heart. For a parent to treat their own child's reasonable, necessary requests (bread and fish was the staple diet in the region of Galilee) with base deception and mockery would be monstrous. It would be unthinkable to any normal parent. Any man who acted this way would be considered an unfit parent and a disgrace to the human race. "The point is not that human parents are incapable of cruelty or neglect of their children, but that our inbuilt assumption of what parenting ought to be like is a valid pointer toward the greater parental concern of the heavenly Father."⁴⁷⁷

After these two examples where Jesus has already convinced his audience about human parents, He then summarizes the premise behind the examples and drives home His conclusion. "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Mt. 7:11). There are a number of things to note about this statement.

First, our Lord presupposes the fall of Adam and the doctrine of original sin and says plainly that the human race is evil. All men and all parents are fallen, depraved and corrupt to the very core of their being. This solemn and striking statement was not made to His enemies or to convicts on death row, but to His friends and disciples. This is obviously a statement with a universal application. The modern secular humanistic notion that all people are basically good and that mankind if left alone can work out all its ethical, political, spiritual and socio-economic problems through reason and science is pure nonsense.

Note, however, that even though the parents are said to be evil, they are still capable of doing good. The fall does not mean that the image of God in the broad sense is destroyed. Man still has reasoning capabilities and a conscience that discriminates between good and evil. Men can still do activities that are *outwardly* good. They cannot, however, do deeds that are spiritually good or good in relation to God. Their actions do not flow from a true love of God and a seeking of His glory. "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8). The pagan unbeliever hates God and lives in rebellion against him and therefore is "evil." But, because he is created in the image of God, he still has a natural affection for his children and thus seeks what he deems is best for their welfare.

Second, Christ sets forth His conclusion that if we can trust an evil earthly father to give good gifts to his children, then obviously we can also trust our good, merciful, loving heavenly Father to give good things to His children. In other words, the reason that we can rest assured that God will answer our prayers is that God is our Father through Jesus Christ and God has a certain character. In knowledge, wisdom, compassion, kindness, love and power our heavenly Father infinitely surpasses all earthly fathers. They are not only finite, but sinful, depraved and undependable. God's saving, electing love toward His children is infinitely greater than even the best of human love. It infinitely surpasses the love that a mother has for her only son. It is a love, compassion and mercy so great that it sent Jesus Christ to the cross to bear our sins in His own body. If evil parents respond with kindness to the cries of their children, what should we expect from Jehovah who has placed His dear children in the bosom of Jesus? Once we grasp this love and relationship established by Christ, then we can, with faith, endure every trial and storm that lies before us.

⁴⁷⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 281.

The implication of all this is that not only should we be persevering in prayer, but we should be fully assured that God will give us “good things.” He will answer our prayers in such a way that benefits us the most. If our prayers are not answered right away and we are suffering some affliction, we can trust that God is giving us what we need. We must avoid the sinful attitude of unbelief which thinks that God is out to get us; that even though we have asked for something good, God will give us something bad that will bring us harm. We must never allow such sinful thoughts to enter our minds.

But what do we say to professing Christians who argue that they have prayed and prayed and yet their circumstances in life seem even more difficult than before? In order to be faithful to this passage and the rest of the Scriptures, we must cling to these promises by faith. Many of God’s saints such as Moses, Job, David and Paul have gone through trials and have benefited greatly from them. “Your present lot is from the Lord, your circumstances are ordered by Him who is too wise to err and too loving to be unkind.”⁴⁷⁸

Until we believe in the goodness of God and our adoption as sons in Jesus Christ, our prayers will not be prayers of faith and such prayers would be ineffectual. But now that we understand why our Lord commands us to persevere in prayer and why our prayers will be answered, we should be more ready and willing to go to God to supply all our needs. We have no excuse whatsoever not to pray fervently and frequently. To not pray as we ought is a serious sin that needs to be repented of immediately. It is the height of foolishness not to seek God in prayer when He has commanded us to do so and has promised to answer our prayers. We need to appreciate this privilege and make daily, set times of prayer a non-negotiable habit. We also should commune with God throughout the day and say little prayers as we walk, or drive, or sit at our desk. All of this is so simple and easy to understand that there is no excuse for us to neglect fervent, persistent prayer. Does your prayer life demonstrate that you believe in the goodness and love that God has for you? Are you so worldly that laziness and entertainments have cut into your prayer time? Are you so careless and unorganized that your prayer life is minimal and haphazard? Today, beloved, is the day to take this teaching seriously and repent. May God enable us to pray with a full confidence that we shall be heard and blessed!

Chapter 32: The Golden Rule

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets (Mt. 7:12).

In this verse, Jesus begins a new topic regarding how His disciples are to treat others. This is probably the most famous and most quoted saying of our Lord from the gospel accounts. This statement could be called the capstone or summit of the whole sermon. In fact, as far as it speaks of relations between men, it is the summit of all Christian ethics. This statement shows the genius and wisdom of the Mediator. He taught and spoke as no man has or ever will. With one brief statement, the Redeemer sets forth the whole moral law as it relates to our duty to man and the whole application of that law. If properly understood, this rule is like the Torah in a nutshell always ready to be contemplated and applied as we go through life. If this principle was

⁴⁷⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 313.

applied biblically, consistently and habitually from regenerate hearts to all areas of life (individually, to the family, at work, between civil governments, etc..) it would transform society from one of conflict, hatred, confusion and enmity to one of peace, love and prosperity. Only when multitudes of people are converted to Christ and this rule is almost universally acted upon in this earth, will the golden age of the millennium be realized.⁴⁷⁹ Before we examine this verse in detail there are some noteworthy introductory matters to consider.

First, the designation of this teaching as the “golden rule” is traditionally traced back to the Roman Emperor Alexander Severus (A. D. 222-35). Although this ruler was a pagan, he had heard this saying and was reputedly so impressed by the wisdom and comprehensive nature of it as a guide to ethical living, that he had it inscribed in gold on the wall of his closet. Apparently, he wanted to look upon it frequently to remind himself of it.

Second, an important matter of interpretation that needs to be considered relates to the word, “therefore,” which begins our passage. There is a great deal of discussion and disagreement among commentators and expositors as to whether this word points to the section which immediately precedes on prayer or whether it applies to much more. Some believe it is connected to the section on judging others and view the pericope on prayer in verse 7-11 as a parenthesis. Certainly, when judging others we want to apply the golden rule. Others believe that “therefore” applies the immediate context on prayer (7-11) because we should not expect good things from God if we mistreat our neighbors. Also, if God gives good things to His children should we not also imitate Him and be kind, merciful and righteous with each other?

Although these kinds of arguments make sense, it is better to view this “therefore” as leading into a kind of epilogue or concluding statement or summary saying of all the ethical teachings regarding our duty toward man. With this thought in mind we could say that our Lord is stopping for a moment to pull together and reemphasize the most prominent theme of the discourse as a whole. This makes sense when we consider the fact that all evangelical scholars would readily admit that the golden rule does fit perfectly with the ethics of the beatitudes (5:3-10), the discussion on fulfilling the law and the prophets (5:17-48), the teaching on being salt and light (5:13-16), the requirement to forgive others (6:14-15), and the imperatives on unjust, unfair judgment (7:1-5). All of these teachings are now brought together in a comprehensive and memorable summary of Christian ethics. This verse 12 is the exclamation point to the challenge of “greater righteousness than the scribes and Pharisees” of 5:20. They treated others like dirt and themselves as princes. The disciples must treat others as they themselves would like to be treated. After this conclusion, the rest of chapter seven (vs. 13-27) is *primarily* a call for a decisive response instead of focusing on further instructions on the ethical requirements of discipleship.

Third, it is important to note the similarities and differences between the “golden rule” and other ethical maxims outside of Christianity. We read in the Talmud about a Gentile that wanted to become a proselyte to Judaism who asked the great Rabbi Shammai to explain the law to him so quickly that he could do so standing on one leg. The challenge was curtly refused. Consequently, the Gentile immediately went to Shammai’s rival Rabbi Hillel and asked the same

⁴⁷⁹ This statement presupposes a postmillennial eschatology (cf. Isa. 2:2-4; 9:6-7; 11:9; 32:15; 42:1-4; 44:3; 65:17-25; Ps. 2; 22:27-28; 72:1-17; 86:9; etc.; Dan. 2:35ff; 7:13-14, 27; Hab. 2:14; Mic. 4:1-4; Mal. 1:11; Mt. 12:20; 16:18; 28:18-20; Gen. 22:17-18; Rom. 4:13; etc..) and that we are already in the millennium (Rev. 20:1-10; Mt. 12:28-29; Jn. 12:31-32; Lk. 10:18-19; 22:26; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 1:18; Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:6; 2 Tim. 2:12). In other words, the kingdom “*with power*” *began* at Jesus’ resurrection and thus the millennium is not future. It runs from the resurrection until the second coming.

question. Hillel replied, “Don’t do to your neighbor what is hateful to you. This is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary” (b. Sabb. 31a). This statement is similar to the golden rule, but it is put negatively while Jesus’ statement is positive and thus is more comprehensive. A common modern secular maxim similar to Hillel’s saying is “You can do whatever you like as long as you don’t hurt anybody in any way” (i.e. physically, emotionally, economically). When the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was asked how men should relate to their friends, he is reported to have said, “As we would desire that they should bear themselves toward us” (Diogenes Laertius, Lib. V. 21). The Chinese philosopher Confucius said, “Do nothing to your neighbor which afterward you would not have your neighbor do to you” (Mahabhartā XIII.5571). It is reported that Buddha once said in one of his ethical utterances, “the motive of all our actions should be pity or love for our neighbor” (Max Muller’s Science of Religion, p. 249).

That statements similar to the golden rule can be found in extra-biblical literature should not surprise us. All men, we are told by Paul, “show the work of the law written upon their hearts” (Rom. 2:15). Everyone, by virtue of their creation in the image of God have moral motions and abiding concepts of ethics. Moreover, the Bible makes it clear that unbelievers can, in a certain sense, do good (1 Ki. 21:27-29; Mt. 5:46; 7:11; Lk. 6:33; Ac. 28:2; Rom. 2:14). Reformed theologians refer to this as civic goodness. But, in spite of the similarities, there are a number of crucial underlying fundamental differences between the golden rule and heathen ethical sayings.

One major difference is that all non-Christian religions and philosophies view such a rule through humanistic eyes, apart from Jesus Christ and His work. They believe that man can do such deeds in their own strength, apart from a work of sovereign grace. Men can print the golden rule on cards, calendars and monuments and can recite it and even memorize it; but, apart from the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and His work of sanctification upon the heart, society as a whole will never embrace it and internalize this principle. Moreover, without the blood of Christ and work of the Holy Spirit, God does not accept or bless man’s attempts at ethical living.

Besides separating this rule from Christ’s redemptive work, unbelievers also have no real connection between this saying and our duty to love and obey God (that is, the duties of the first table of the law). Modernists, atheists, Buddhists and others are happy to embrace the principle of the golden rule; but without it being connected to our love and duty toward God, they cannot tell us why it must be obeyed. Their humanistic platitudes about love toward humanity without the philosophical, theological and ethical foundation of an inerrant, inspired Bible are arbitrary, non-provable, and inconsistent with their own presuppositions. The Savior made it very clear that our love toward God is the first commandment (Mt. 22:38); that everything else in life is secondary. Our treatment of our fellow human beings must flow out of a complete trust in God and a genuine love in our hearts toward Him. The secular humanist and modernist may speak words that are very similar to the golden rule, but their ethic is rooted in self-worship, idolatry and human autonomy and not a love of Christ.

The unbeliever separates the golden rule from God’s moral law revealed in Scripture and thus ends up with pragmatism, utilitarianism and autonomous ethics. Jesus says that, properly understood and applied, the golden rule is a summary of all the moral or ethical teachings of the law and the prophets. Consequently, we must take the golden rule as, “Whatever you (that is, you Bible-believing Christians who fully accept the authority of all the moral laws found throughout the whole Old Testament) want other people to do to you (that must not contradict, violate, abrogate, or impugn the moral teachings of Scripture) do so also for them.” With this in mind we see why the golden rule, which is universally known in the West, doesn’t really work with

unbelievers. Because pagans are slaves to sin and have an unbiblical, anti-Christian worldview, they may want people to do things to them that are unscriptural. The radical Islamist believes he is doing backsliding Muslims a favor by blowing them up. The Mormons who slaughtered the non-Mormons at the Mountain Meadows Massacre in 1857 believed that they were helping these people atone for their sins. Unbelievers may want their neighbor to violate certain moral laws because they are wicked or their concept of ethics is perverted. By connecting the golden rule to the moral teachings in the law and prophets, our Lord connects subjective desires to objective transcendent truths. Without this connection the golden rule is rendered antinomian by its subjectivity. A man's unbiblical, unreasonable and wicked desires can never render conduct which in itself is moral, righteous or good. Consequently, only treatment that accords with biblical morality, which I desire from another person, is that which I am bound to do to another. When an unbeliever says they like the golden rule, they are simply nodding to an abstraction divorced from God's holy law, which they hate. Tragically, that is the bottom line. "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7).

The Golden Rule's Meaning and Purpose

The golden rule shows us that Christ not only came to tell us what we need to know and believe, but also how we are to live once we are Christians. We are to treat others and do for them whatever we would have them do to us. "In the ordinary intercourse of life, our conduct ought to be regulated by this maxim. We ought to treat others with the same respect, courtesy, and kindness, as we would wish to be treated by them. We must not subject others to those slights and neglects, which, were we in their circumstances, and they in ours, we should feel to be undeserved and unpleasant."⁴⁸⁰

This is a positive way of summarizing the whole moral law of God as it relates to man. It is essentially a recasting of what the Savior calls the second great commandment taken from Leviticus 19:18—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39)—which together with the greatest commandment—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart..." [Dt. 6:5; Mt. 23:37])—underlies all the ethical teaching of the law and of the prophets (Mt. 22:40). The brilliance of this rule is not only its comprehensive summary of our whole duty to man, but also that it implies an exhaustive application to every conceivable situation that may arise.

There are a number of things that this saying requires or implies. First, it requires a consciousness saturated with the moral precepts of Scripture. As we noted, the golden rule is not founded upon mere human opinion, but is rooted in what a sanctified mind (i.e. a mind trained by Scripture) believes ought to be done. "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments" (1 Jn. 5:2). This means that we must do to our brother what is best for him according to the Bible. A godly Christian would want to be rebuked if he were guilty of a serious offense. Therefore, rebuking an erring brother biblically, in the proper manner and under the correct circumstances, fulfills the golden rule. Our desire to be treated in a certain manner must be in accord with biblical principles or human emotions, subjectivity, cultural mores and personal biases will be the controlling factor of this rule.

Second, this rule requires unselfishness on our part. The essence of biblical law and love is to treat others as well as or even better than we are willing to treat ourselves. As Paul says,

⁴⁸⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:311.

“Love suffers long and is kind...does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil” (1 Cor. 13:4-5). “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each man esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). The reason that the golden rule is so difficult for people is that because of sin, by nature, we are self-centered, selfish and egotistical. Consequently, people become very agitated and upset when they are slandered, insulted or maligned; but, they usually are not bothered when others are so mistreated. Jesus says that we need to step out of ourselves for a moment and place ourselves in the other person’s position and learn to be objective. If we do not like it when people gossip about us and say things that are not true, then we must not do it and also we must not even listen to it.

With this rule we put people on the same level as ourselves and as a result all biases, prejudices and class considerations should be eliminated. The rich man will treat the poor man with the same respect and fairness as his wealthy friends. The white man will be just as kind and loving toward African-Americans and Hispanics as his Caucasian acquaintances. If properly understood and consistently applied, this principle would lead to equal justice under the law. It would eliminate racism, class warfare and mistrust between various social groups.

Third, this rule eliminates self-deception and all unlawful self-justification for unkind, uncharitable behavior toward others. Because of sin men have become very adept at justifying their own biases, prejudices and dislikes toward others. They often treat others badly because of the presuppositions that they have accumulated throughout life. But, if we apply this rule to our thinking, we end up casting such self-deceptions and self-justifications aside. We ask ourselves, “How would I want to be treated, if I were in the same situation as this person?” This question requires us to put the best possible construction on a situation. It forces us to give other believers the benefit of the doubt. It requires us to be as patient and gentle as possible. It demands that we do for the other person what is spiritually in their own best interest. It completely eliminates any thoughts of revenge, payback or getting even.

Fourth, the positive formulation of this rule shows us that Christian love must be active and take the offensive. The rule is not simply “do not do things to others that you do not want done to yourself.” It encompasses that; but, being set in the positive form, it requires us to do acts of love toward others that otherwise we would not do. In other words, it is not merely a check upon crime, acts of aggressive or hateful words, but also a requirement to do good works in the name of Christ. If we were old and forsaken, living in a nursing home, would we not want visitors? If we had a medical emergency, would we not want help? It tells us to be a good Samaritan and reach out to help someone that we may not even like personally.

The Old Testament has many examples of how the golden rule should be carried out in a positive way. “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it” (Ex. 23:4-5). Laws such as this, which are rooted in the golden rule, not only make social relationships more pleasant, but also facilitate reconciliation in broken relationships. The cross of Christ not only reconciles men with God, but heals relationships between men and other men. The golden rule forces us to do acts of kindness that disarm our enemies. Our lives are not to be governed by our feelings, but rather by God’s holy law. The golden rule is exhibited in the Bible’s laws regarding the poor: “If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of your gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly, lend him sufficient for his need,

whatever he needs” (Dt. 15:7-8). We are to have a charitable attitude toward poor believers and reach out to them in their need. The Christian with money is to respond positively and generously to a poor man’s request, even though he knows he will not receive any interest whatsoever.

The golden rule must extend beyond our actions even to our thoughts and attitudes. Solomon says, “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles” (Pr. 24:17). We do not want people to hate us in their heart and therefore we must guard our hearts against unlawful thoughts. As we noted in Matthew 5, Jesus speaks against adultery and murder in the heart by lustful, inappropriate thoughts and revengeful fantasies and imaginations. The golden rule extends to our minds. Holding grudges and lusting after another man’s wife or belongings is also strictly forbidden.

Fifth, the golden rule is so comprehensive and penetrating that it is an excellent guide to show us our sins and any areas of life in which we need sanctification. If we repeatedly meditate on this principle we will find ourselves habitually applying it to our own behavior. If we are sharp, harsh or unkind in our speech, we will see that we do not want to be spoken to in that manner and we will be convicted. If we are tempted to exploit one of our workers, we will put ourselves in their position and this will bring conviction and a proper response. If we have the bad, sinful habit of pointing out minor faults in others and making mountains out of molehills, then this rule should show us how unbiblical and unreasonable our behavior has been. We need to develop the habit of putting ourselves in other people’s positions, so that we can analyze our behavior and see if it is displeasing or offensive to others. The golden rule, as a summary of the whole law of God as it relates to man, should stand before us as a mirror showing us when we are good and when we are bad. This use will, of course, take study and practice. We cannot drift through life on autopilot, but must constantly be meditating on the law and analyzing our thoughts, words and actions in light of it. The golden rule is the supreme call to self-examination. It takes the principle of self-interest and self-love and ties it to God’s moral law and, as it were, makes it the handmaid of love and justice. The Holy Spirit, in conjunction with Scripture, takes the principle of looking out for number one (i.e. self) and turns it on its head so that our neighbor becomes the focus of our love, not self. This teaching is pure, inspired genius.

Sixth, the golden rule proves that, when it comes to ethics, there is an essential unity between the Old and New Covenant era. This point is proven by the reason or commendation given for this rule: “for this is the law and the prophets.” Our Lord’s standard for Christian morality with regard to our fellow man is not only the second table of the Ten Commandments and the moral case laws from the five books of Moses, but also the explanation and application of the moral law found in the prophetic books. This agrees with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:17ff, as well as the New Testament epistles. For example, Paul teaches that “love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10). “He who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). In this context he not only quotes from every commandment of the second table, but also gives the identical summary of the law that Jesus did: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom. 13:9). In the book of Galatians Paul says virtually the same thing, “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14). James refers to this summary of the law (i.e. Lev. 19:18) as the “royal law according to the Scripture” (Jas. 2:8). If Christians fulfill it they “do well.”

In our day, many people believe that the golden rule has replaced the law or that love and law are somehow incompatible. But nothing could be further from the truth. Love, biblically defined, simply states the law in a positive form and summarizes it. It is a comprehensive

principle that encompasses the law and the prophets. People who argue that love contains its own moral compass or who, like the Beatles, say, “all you need is love,” are being naïve. A general concept needs particulars to flesh it out. The reality is that love cannot be properly defined or even function without an objective moral standard. That is why Scripture does not say that “love is the end of the law,” but that “love is the fulfillment of the law.” Indeed, love and the moral law are intimately connected. Law without love remains a dead letter, an intellectual exercise, an unobeyed code. Only the Bible holds these two crucial things in harmony.

It is rather ironic that evangelicalism’s attack on the Old Testament moral laws either through dispensationalism or Charismatic mysticism has actually done much to destroy the biblical concept of love. Love is no longer seen as treating people in accordance with the moral law, but rather treating people in a manner that makes them feel good or that caters to their emotions. This antinomian concept of love has been the death of discipline in many churches. If a female church member gets pregnant out of wedlock, then the church sponsors a baby shower and celebrates her sin. If a woman leaves her husband without just cause (i.e. he is not committing adultery or beating her), then the church offers to get her an apartment to give her time to “cool off.”

Love is no longer connected to law in any way, so it is generally seen as being nice or speaking softly with deep emotion and an expression of concern. While speaking softly and acting concerned are good in certain contexts, if people are not directed to obey God’s moral law, then counseling, preaching and giving advice are a waste of time and even harmful. This modern disconnect between love and biblical morality is one of the main reasons that evangelical churches have embraced secular psychology in their counseling. Without biblical love, men *will not be confronted* by God’s voice speaking in Scripture. Therefore, they turn to humanism or clinical psychology. We need to understand that living a life of love means nothing less than being totally submitted to God’s moral law by the process of the sanctification bestowed through Christ’s work. As Paul says, “Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5).

Applications and Implications

The golden rule has a number of very important things to say to us as to how we are to think and how we are to conduct our lives. Let us turn our attention to some of the things this passage is telling us that we have not already considered.

First, it tells professing Christians to stop having a negative view of God’s moral law. People tend to view the law as purely negative, as something that only says, “Do not do this or that.” But what our Lord is emphasizing here is that the law is a very spiritual, positive thing for living our lives. As Paul says, “The law is holy, just and good” (Rom. 7:12). The law not only shows us our sin and leads us to Christ and tells us what we must avoid doing; but, also tells us the positive side of morality. It tells us how to love our neighbor. It teaches us to help our poor brethren. It instructs us to be a good Samaritan. It shows us that morality has a positive side that is active and reaches out to others. It even instructs us to love our enemies. Jesus did not give the New Covenant church an ethic superior to that of the Old. Instead, He refuted human additions to it and used it as the platform for His own ethical teachings. When the law is viewed from the perspective of justification, it is something that slays us because we cannot keep it perfectly (Rom. 7:9). But once we are saved, it is our guide book of Christian love. It is the light that guides our path (Ps. 119:105) and tells us how to love. The real spirit and purpose behind the

moral law was to instruct a people, already redeemed from sin and set apart by God, on how to love God with their whole heart and their neighbor as themselves. Possessing God's enscriptured moral law is a privilege. It is a wonderful and blessed thing.

By tying this principle to the law and the prophets our Lord is once again setting the true Christian ethic in opposition to that of the scribes and Pharisees. They claimed to believe in and follow the law, but they really did not love others. They clung to a self-centered religion where deeds were done in a mechanical manner and where human traditions had obscured their understanding of the law. Their focus was not on helping others and ministering to the poor outcasts of society. Instead they were elitists who viewed religion as a way to advance oneself in society. They treated people in their inner circle with kindness and charity while outsiders were treated like dirt. They proved the point that religion without Christ and without love becomes little more than a country club where those who belong pat each other on the back.

Second, as part of our application of this verse we must avoid a modern misuse of the golden rule. It is very common today in evangelical circles to hear a convoluted application of this passage. People say that the command to do unto others as we would have them do unto us requires us first to love ourselves. Therefore, they argue, that the key to loving others and obeying the golden rule is to first focus on our own self-esteem. In other words, we need to nurture self-love before we turn our attention to our neighbor. The pop-psychology view of this verse must be rejected for the following reasons.

(1) Such a view is read into the passage because the point is that our love must be selfless. It must not be turned in toward self, but must be directed outward toward others. Our Lord assumes that people already are self-centered, self-focused and that they need to apply what is already there to our neighbors. We need to be willing to make sacrifices in our own lives and focus less on our own desires, wants and needs to help others. The proselytizers of the self-esteem gospel have turned this verse upside down. Self-love is actually a great obstacle in the way of doing our duty to our neighbor. Our problem is not that we do not have enough self-love or self-esteem, but that we have too much. We need to be more caring, considerate and loving toward other people.

(2) Scripture often describes self-centeredness, egotism and self-love as part of the essence of sin. Instead, we need to affirm everything in us which is part of our creation in the image of God, while denying the perversion and depravity that affects us because of the fall. Self-preservation and care for oneself is perfectly normal and part of our being. However, sin has perverted self-preservation and made us selfish, self-centered and uncaring about others. Consequently, what Jesus requires is that we must love our neighbor with the same normal, healthy concern that we have for self. He obviously is not asking us to love them with a perverted, obsessive, corrupt kind of love. The concepts set forth in the self-esteem gospel are essentially derived from modern pagan culture and not divine revelation.

Third, the consistent application of this passage to society would have a profound impact on our culture. It would force the civil government to abandon the politics of guilt and pity and would teach them to treat rich and poor alike. The police would not fabricate or ignore important evidence in criminal cases. Business men would stop lying and exaggerating about products to bolster sales. Useless and adulterated products would disappear from the market. Dishonest debtors, con-artist salesmen and telephone/computer scams would no longer exist. Whites would no longer mistreat blacks and blacks would cease their enmity against whites. Immigration policies would be made more fair, equitable and merciful while welfare policies based on state theft would be abandoned and repeat felons executed. Those who are rich would not take

economic advantage of the poor; they would seek to improve wages and working conditions as best they could without state coercion. The poor would cease looking to the state as a hired thief to take from the rich for their benefit. Everyone would stop supporting politicians who believe that murdering unborn babies is ethical. Moreover, doctors would cease murdering the pre-born and would do everything they could to protect all babies. A vast number of practices in business and government which are corrupt, yet in our day have ceased to be considered improper, would be cast aside as wicked and loathsome.

Just think about how revolutionary this principle would be for the family. As self-centeredness and egos are set aside for the benefit of helping a husband or wife, marital arguments would radically change. No longer would people fight to win an argument or retain their own rights. Instead they would stop contention and seek to analyze problems using only the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. Husbands obviously do not enjoy being yelled at or bullied and thus they would seek out a gentler, more composed manner of discipline and communication. Wives certainly do not like being disobeyed or nagged and would seek to be more submissive, respectful and responsive to their husbands. We need to remember that Jesus did not say do unto others as you think they deserve. He did not say to do unto others as you would like them to do to you if you think they have earned it. The golden rule should make Christian households places of peace and happiness. Husbands would love their wives and wives would respect and obey their husbands. Parents would be careful not to neglect their children or provoke them to wrath. Children would be careful to listen to their parents, honor them and obey them.

It would also be a great blessing in the church. No longer would church leaders attempt to impose their own ideas and traditions upon the flock. They would cease trying to bind men's consciences to man-made holy days and other popish trash. Men and women in the church would cease and desist from all malicious gossip and slander of other Christians. People would no longer look out only for their own interests, but rather would concern themselves with the health of the church as a whole. Church members would no longer assign malevolent motives to others or assume the worst over minor faults and personality differences. Abusive language, unjustified accusations, factionalism and sinful schisms would be a thing of the past. Believers would be slow and careful to assign guilt and would follow Matthew 18:15ff. They also would be quick to forgive a repentant brother. In theological controversies equivocations, deceptions, malignant insinuations and all unnecessary *ad hominem* attacks would cease. The church would be a true example of Christian love to the world.

We need to examine ourselves to determine if we have been faithful to the golden rule. Do we treat the brethren with the same fairness, courtesy and kindness that we desire to be treated by others? Are we as concerned with the reputation of other believers as we are for our own? Do we help spread or even listen to slanderous reports about others or are we concerned to safeguard their good name? Do we refrain from bitter, abusive speech with our own wives, husbands, children and co-workers? If we habitually neglect or violate this rule, are we not acting like antinomians no matter what our profession? It is time that we reflect upon this rule and think about it as we go about our daily activities. This is the path of godliness; this is the only way to be a salt and light to culture. It is the only way that people will listen to us as ambassadors of Christ.

Chapter 33: The Narrow Gate

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it (Mt. 7:13-14).

After completing the main body of His sermon, Jesus turns His attention toward applying what He has said to His audience. No more ethical teaching will be given for, from this point on, Christ will be warning His hearers about the absolute necessity of embracing Him and living the life of discipleship. The Sermon on the Mount is not meant simply to be admired, but obeyed. In essence, our Lord is saying, “Now that you know the true character of the kingdom I am bringing into this world; the differences between what God requires you to believe and be, versus the corrupt, unbiblical, popular religion of today and the strict requirements of discipleship for My true followers, come to Me at once, embrace what I have said, separate yourself from the crowd and follow the narrow path of discipleship and genuine sanctification.” There is a sense in which this is the most important imperative of the whole sermon, for if the narrow gate is not entered, all is lost. People’s entire lives would be full of vanity, foolishness, wickedness and lies, lived on a highway to hell.

By way of introduction there are a number of things to note regarding this passage.

First, the imperative of verse 13, “*enter* by the narrow gate,” is the central proposition or main point of this whole final section. All the warnings which follow are designed to reinforce this command. There is the warning of the wide gate and broad way which leads to destruction. There is a warning about false profession. There are people who claim to be Christians that are antinomian. They are also on the broad path, but do not know it; they will be excluded from heaven by Christ Himself. Then, finally, there is a parable about two builders. The one heeded our Lord’s words and thus he could withstand the storms of life. He persevered on the narrow road and was victorious. The other man’s building or life was destroyed because he listened but did not obey. He didn’t enter the narrow gate or live on the narrow way. One cannot help but notice the brilliance of Christ’s preaching; His application is penetrating and multi-faceted. The Sermon on the Mount demands decisive action on the part of every listener. “Enter by the narrow gate.”

Second, note that Jesus only speaks of two gates, two ways, two kinds of travelers and two final destinations. There are many people who view these two alternatives as descriptive of two paths with one containing all sincere, devout, religious people—whether Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, etc.—and the other containing only gross, irreligious, debauched sinners. That is, people who are leading a very lawless, disgusting lifestyle (e.g., whores, drunks, drug addicts, child molesters, murderers, etc.). This is a false and dangerous perversion of this passage. We need to keep in mind that our Lord is preaching to a large multitude of religious Jews. Many Jews were very devout and very sincere about their beliefs, yet rejected Jesus Christ and attempted to establish their own righteousness before God by keeping the law. These people were proud and self-sufficient. Our Lord includes these people along with the scribes and Pharisees on the broad path that leads to destruction. It is important that we recognize that the broad gate and wide way contains all people, no matter what race or religion, who have not embraced Christ as Savior and Lord and who are not following Him as faithful disciples. Therefore, the Savior is plainly teaching that ultimately there are only two kinds of religions or

philosophies in this world: the true or false. Consequently, if we profess Christ we need to examine ourselves in light of our Lord's teaching in order to see if we have really entered the narrow gate and are truly walking in the narrow way. Those who are not followers of the Redeemer must recognize the terrible horrifying place they are in and thus "strive to enter through the narrow gate" (Lk. 13:24).

Third, one thing that is striking about these verses is the fact that they are so completely contrary to the common modern evangelical method of presenting the gospel. The typical pastor today will say things such as: "Simply accept Jesus as your personal Savior"; or, "Just walk the aisle, pray the prayer and know that you are saved. Don't ever doubt it"; or, "Becoming a Christian is the easiest thing in the world and being a Christian will solve all your problems. Isn't it time to enter a life of prosperity and blessing?" Under the degrading, poisonous influence of heretical Arminian doctrine and semi-Pelagian "revivalism," gospel preaching has often been transformed into a slick sales pitch where everything is easy, positive and exciting. Christ, however, goes out of His way to present the complete picture of the Christian life and at the outset tells men to count the cost of discipleship. This is because our Lord does not simply focus on the one act of believing, but also on the whole life of struggle, tribulation and self-sacrifice that living a faithful Christian life entails. The Redeemer does not appeal to men's flesh or attempt to draw men who are proud, thoughtless and selfish. He does not want a church full of hypocrites. Indeed, the whole sermon has been directed against hypocrisy, pride and a complacent spirit. Rather, He is appealing to those who have been convicted by the Holy Spirit, are poor in spirit and mourn over their sins (Mt. 5:3-4).

While it is certainly true that we are justified solely by the sacrificial death of Christ and the imputation of His righteousness (Ac. 13:39; Rom. 3:20-24, 28; 4:3-8; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:8-9; Eph. 2:8-9) which is apprehended by faith alone; nevertheless, we are called to a life of self-denial in which we must take up our cross and continually follow Jesus (Mt. 16:24). In His presentation of what is necessary for Christian discipleship, He sets before our eyes the lifelong warfare involved in progressive sanctification. This involves plucking out the right eye and cutting off the right hand if necessary (Mt. 5:30). It means that we must "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). As Paul says, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Ac. 14:22). Jesus is discussing salvation in the broad sense which involves a faith that perseveres down the long, narrow, thorny road toward heaven. There is nothing of easy-believism or the idea of carnal Christians living in licentiousness in His message. We cannot serve two masters (Mt. 6:24). We cannot enter the narrow gate with the baggage of our old, unconverted life. Paul put it this way, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). When we look at the Christian life we see that it is hard, difficult and trying, but it is the only alternative if we are going to persevere and enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Narrow Gate

The first thing that Jesus does in this section is command us to "enter by the narrow gate." The imperative "enter" is an aorist because entering a gate only takes a moment. There is a starting point to the Christian life—the moment we first believe in Christ and repent of our sins. The verb tense indicates that everyone must take decisive action to enter the narrow gate. This point is brought out in an exhortation that parallels our passage found in Luke 13:24. After the disciples ask the Savior, "Are there few who are saved?" (v. 23), our Lord responds: "Strive to

enter through the narrow gate.” “The Greek word rendered ‘strive,’ is that from which we take our English word ‘agonize.’ It implies great exertion and conflict. It is elsewhere translated, ‘labour fervently,’ and ‘fight.’ [see Col. 4:12; 1 Tim. 6:12].”⁴⁸¹ The matter of embracing the Redeemer and entering upon the narrow path of being a disciple of Christ is not one to be taken lightly. By birth we are already on the broad path that leads to destruction. By nature we are already part of the crowd that relishes sin, wants to be loved by this world and suppresses the truth of God at every moment. If we have not entered this narrow gate, then the wrath of God is upon us and the agony of hell is before us. We are on thin ice and, at any moment, we could die and be lost forever. Consequently, we must strive to enter this gate with every fiber of our being. Urgently, immediately enter the narrow gate. It doesn’t matter what your family, friends and acquaintances think; by God’s grace go through that narrow gate. Apart from Christ you are like the man in a submarine that is taking on water. Before you lay a small portal to life and safety; in such a situation you would rush to that portal and use of all of your energy to get through it before it was too late. Christ is the only way for you to escape the destruction of the broad path. Flee to Him at once and enter His salvation!

There are a number of things about Jesus’ statement that merit our attention. First, what is the narrow gate? The narrow gate is not defined by Jesus in the immediate context. However, it is not hard to determine from Scripture what this gate refers to. The narrow gate is Christ Himself who, in John’s gospel, calls Himself the door: “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:9). The narrow gate is the Savior and we enter this gate when we are converted to Christ. We have access to the Father and all the blessings of grace through Him. “[He] is the gate of heaven, through which we have boldness to enter into the holiest of all by faith and hope now; as there will be hereafter an abundant entrance into the kingdom and glory of God, through his blood and righteousness.”⁴⁸²

This explains why the narrow gate precedes the narrow way. The path of Christian discipleship always begins with the new birth (Jn. 3:3, 5), faith in the person and work of Christ (Rom. 3:20-24, 28; Eph. 2:8-9) and repentance toward God (Ac. 20:21). Such teaching is radically different from the Jewish doctrine taught at that time; that the Jews—the children of Abraham—were already in the kingdom by virtue of their lineage and circumcision. John concurs when he writes, “He came to His own, and his own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:11-12). “Only those are accounted the true children of Abraham who have his faith (Romans iv, 16), who do his works (John viii, 39), and who are vitally united to Christ (Gal. iii, 29).”⁴⁸³

Second, why is the gate described as narrow? There are a variety of reasons.

(1) The kingdom that our Redeemer established is exclusive. There is only *one* door and *one* path to heaven—Jesus Christ. The idea that is very common in our day that all religions are basically true and generally teach the same thing is emphatically rejected by the Savior. The teaching that all paths lead to God is a lie of the devil designed to keep people on the broad path that leads to destruction. Christ said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink” (Jn. 7:37). “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved.... I have come that

⁴⁸¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:135.

⁴⁸² John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:70.

⁴⁸³ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 323.

they [My sheep] may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.... I give them [My sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (Jn. 10:9, 10, 28). “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (Jn. 11:25). “I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.... He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day” (Jn. 12:46, 48). “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6).

Unlike various religious teachers throughout history who purport to point men to the true way, Jesus says that He Himself is the way. He is the only One who saves men and takes them to the Father. Unlike modern ecumenical false teachers, Christ compares people who attempt to get to heaven without coming to Him to thieves and robbers (Jn. 10:1). He told the Jews, who at that time were much more religious and devout than most people today, “I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He [i.e. the Messiah—the Son of God], you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24). When Peter (who was filled with the Holy Spirit) confronted the Sanhedrin after the first persecution he said, “Nor is there salvation in any other name, for there is no other name in heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Ac. 4:12). God has authorized only one way of salvation and Christ is the cornerstone of it. No other person, or system, or philosophy or religion has God’s authority or truth behind it. The Word of God could not be clearer on this matter. As Paul says, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus who gave Himself a ransom for all” (2 Tim. 2:5-6).

All men seek to manufacture a ladder of their own to heaven. Religions are full of “good” deeds, techniques, prayers and penances whereby men attempt to climb up to God. All these systems have one thing in common. They are based on some system of works-salvation. But the narrow gate is the way of grace alone, faith alone and Christ alone. It is simply impossible for depraved, polluted, sinful creatures to impress an infinitely holy God and gain entrance to heaven. The way of works seems right to men, but it is the way of death (Pr. 14:12). It is Satan’s goal to keep all deluded sinners on the broad path, the self-imposed so-called journey to God. What men need to grasp with the hand of faith is the glorious truth that Jesus has come all the way to sinners. God has come unto men because sinners could never come up to God. The gate is exceedingly narrow because it has nothing to do with human autonomy or achievement. You need to understand that the narrow gate is the only gate to heaven. Christ is your only hope of eternal life.

(2) The gate is narrow because the gospel and Christ (as defined by Scripture) are hated by the world and rejected by the vast majority of men (i.e. all unregenerate men). As Jesus says, “There are few who find it” (Mt. 7:14). Ever since the fall of Adam men—apart from a work of sovereign grace—are groping around in the darkness of sin, evil, error and ignorance. “The way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble” (Pr. 4:19). “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). “There is none who understands or seeks after God” (Rom. 3:11). All unbelievers suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Consequently, their foolish hearts have been darkened (Rom. 1:21). The broad gate encompasses the whole world of unsaved men. It is so wide that the blind walk through it. It takes no effort at all to enter this gate because the natural man enters it by birth. “Having their understanding

darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart” (Eph. 4:18).

(3) The gate is narrow because it is impossible to enter it without a work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart. Our Lord said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt. 19:24). After the disciples were “greatly astonished” by this statement they asked, “‘Who then can be saved?’ But Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’” (Mt. 19:26). Christ said to Nicodemus, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3, 5). The new birth makes one a new person, for that which is of the Spirit is spiritual or Spirit-directed (cf. Jn. 3:6). As Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). Consequently, believers “have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Col. 3:9-10). This verse points to the radical extent of our change. We are not simply given a new tongue or a new hand, but a new heart. The principle of new life extends to every aspect of our being. Thus, entrance into the narrow gate begins with a supernatural work of God. It requires a spiritual resurrection from the dead (Eph. 2:1), a new creation (Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:10), a work of sovereign grace (Eph. 1:4, 19).

(4) The gate is narrow because genuine conversion involves both faith in Christ and repentance toward God. No one can enter the narrow gate without believing in the person and work of Christ. Faith is the hand, instrument or vessel which receives the perfect salvation achieved by Jesus. We must believe that the Savior Himself, in our name and on our behalf, met all of our obligations before the heavenly bar of eternal justice. The Redeemer’s sacrificial death eliminates our sin, guilt and liability to punishment and His perfect, righteous life is imputed to our account. Thus, heaven is ours solely because of Christ. The object of our faith is Christ and the written word of God which tells us what to believe and how to live. Saving faith is rare because it only comes through supernatural grace (Eph. 2:8) and by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). Although the Bible describes it as an activity of man (i.e. we must believe, God does not believe for us), yet we must not forget that it is a direct result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit upon man’s heart. Jesus is the gate and the Holy Spirit enables us to see this gate and lovingly draws us through it. The Holy Spirit uses the knowledge of the Word of God to convict a person of his sins, to convince a person of the truth of Scripture—in particular the gospel—and to place his trust in Christ. “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

When a person comes to Christ, he also repents of his sins. It is a great error to think that we can bring our old life of sin, worldliness and rebellion through the narrow gate. Saving faith is always accompanied by a change of mind concerning sin and a forsaking of iniquity. This is because by faith we lay hold of the *whole* Redeemer. We believe in Him not simply as Savior, but also as Lord. We trust in Him not only as Prophet and Priest, but also as King. Consequently, we lay aside our weapons of warfare against His throne, bow the knee and fully surrender ourselves to Him. Anything that offends our King; that is contrary to His kingdom; that violates His teaching, must be cast aside.

The common teaching today that says a man can be saved simply by accepting Jesus while refusing to forsake a life of sin is totally unbiblical and exceedingly dangerous. It is a demonic doctrine, for it results in shallow, counterfeit conversions. It fills churches with

unregenerate professors of Christ who do not manifest grace in their lives. There is no mourning over sin, poverty of spirit or thirsting after righteousness in such churches. It turns churches into clubs full of entertainment, programs, self-esteem, laughing and clapping. Jesus is turned into a resource for the betterment of man. He is the gateway to self-esteem, material prosperity and a happy, fulfilled life. He has come so that we can have a wonderful emotional experience and feel good about ourselves. Is such teaching consistent with what our Lord said about the need to count the cost of discipleship and repentance? No. There is no resemblance whatsoever. Our Lord said, "I tell you...unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3). Matthew characterizes Christ's central message after He began His ministry as, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17).

Preachers who do not set forth the full gospel message are cruel, for their preaching results in destruction and eternal death. They fail to point people toward the narrow gate and toward the narrow path that leads to life. They give their flock a false sense of security, while leaving them on the broad path of sin, which leads to eternal damnation. They attract people with itching ears that like the biblical teaching about a Savior, but emphatically reject the Lordship of Christ. Given this tragic fact we understand why the imperative regarding the narrow gate is followed by a warning against antinomian/heretical false prophets and the deluded fools who follow them (cf. Mt. 7:15-23). True preachers call sinners to both faith and repentance. Faithful pastors do not fail to warn people of the absolute necessity of repentance. Preachers should be ministers of the Word, not apologists for a lifestyle of sin and human autonomy.

Those who reject the necessity of repentance often argue that if repentance is required, then salvation is not wholly of grace. They say that it contradicts the biblical teaching that we are saved by faith in Christ alone. This view is a serious misunderstanding of the doctrine of repentance. Repentance is not a prerequisite of faith, but always accompanies it. Genuine faith is always accompanied by all the other saving graces. Our change of life and good works do not save us or contribute anything to our salvation; but, they flow from a heart changed and regenerated by the Holy Spirit and are the fruit of saving faith. It is simply impossible that those who are united to Christ by faith will not seek to obey Him and bring forth fruits of thankfulness. "You and your sins must separate, or you and your God will never come together. No one sin may you keep. They must all be given up: they must be brought out like the Canaanitish kings from the cave and hanged up before the sun. You must forsake them, abhor them, and ask the Lord to overcome them."⁴⁸⁴

James says that faith that does not lead to good works is dead, worthless and counterfeit (Jas. 2:20). Paul teaches that "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). The fact that we are His workmanship proves that salvation is of the LORD. He made us what we are. The reality that we are created in Christ for good works demonstrates that redemption results in holiness. Consequently, those who live in habitual sin are not the subjects of redemption. There is no such thing as a justification that exists without works. If we possess Christ and His saving benefits, then we are partakers of His sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30), for Jesus cannot be divided. Did not our Lord say that only "the pure in heart will see God" (Mt. 5:8)?

Given the fact that the command to enter the narrow gate is given right after the climax of the sermon about how a disciple of Jesus must live his life, we could say that repentance is being emphasized in this imperative. At the very beginning of the Christian life there must be a radical break with one's non-Christian past. To break with the past life of sin requires a number of

⁴⁸⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 327.

things. a) There must be a biblical understanding of what sin is. This involves knowledge of God's holy law. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 Jn. 3:4). After our Lord's brilliant and searching exposition of Christian ethics He essentially says, "Now that you know what discipleship involves, *repent* and follow Me." b) There must be an acknowledgement that we are guilty of sin. If a person does not see that he is guilty and stands under condemnation, he will not repent. When David confessed his sins and turned away from them he prayed, "I acknowledge my transgressions, and sin is always before me" (Ps. 51:3). c) There must be loathing of our sins. We hate the fact that we have offended God and have a deep regret and sorrow over our past evil course of life. "Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10). d) There must be a turning from sin and a forsaking of it. "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin" (Ez. 18:30). It is not enough to intellectually acknowledge that we are sinners or have been living a life of scandalous sins. We must dedicate ourselves to Christ, become His slaves and eliminate any known sins from our lives. A sincere repentance must be an entire repentance. We simply cannot go through the narrow gate and come unto God while we cling to our idols. e) There must be a turning from sin to the living and true God. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7; cf. 2 Chr. 7:14; Jon. 3:10). When Paul described the gospel message that he first preached to the Jews and then to the Gentiles he said, "...that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance" (Ac. 26:30). Earlier he said that he testified to "Jews and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ac. 20:21). "Both Jews and Gentiles had to repent of their sins and both had to express their faith in Jesus.... Indeed, 'repentance and faith are tied together in an unbreakable connection'" [John Calvin].⁴⁸⁵

There are some things to note about repentance that each believer must to apply to himself. First, repentance involves leaving behind the way of the world and joining oneself to the people of God. This step is radical because it involves leaving anything (and anyone) behind that does not help you follow Christ. Your old unsaved friends that like to party, fornicate and use filthy speech will tempt you to commit sin and revert back to your old lifestyle. Perhaps, when you are more mature in the faith, you can witness to your old friends; but, now that you are a Christian you have nothing in common with them. If you associate with them you will either devolve to their level or witness to them and they will hate you unless they believe. Repentance involves a willingness to be unpopular, to be hated by the crowd, to be maligned and persecuted for your faith. Most young professing Christians who apostatize do so because they do not separate themselves from ungodly influences.

It also means that close relationships with unsaved relatives must be avoided. A repentant life means that we must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). While we are still required to respect our parents, we must not allow their heathen influences to tempt us. Jesus made this point clear when He said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Mt.10:34-39). You must always keep in mind that

⁴⁸⁵ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 726.

unsaved relatives will call you back to the evil world system. Figuratively speaking, they are Canaanites and do not understand what it means to be Christian. Things like covenant headship, homeschooling, sabbatarianism, the rejection of pagan-papal holy days, and family worship are completely foreign and strange to them.

Entering the narrow gate and traveling the narrow path involves a radical break with the past. You must count the cost and understand what your new life involves. You are joining yourself to a tiny remnant in a post-Christian culture. Your views will be seen as antiquated, extremely bizarre and even harsh and unloving. You are in a culture where there is intense pressure to fit in and conform to accepted societal norms. You must be willing to regard all of the things that our culture desires as dung compared to owning Christ and you must realize that if you hang on to any of this worldliness you cannot enter the narrow gate.

Second, repentance involves abandoning syncretism with the world. Much of what passes as Christianity in our day is little more than baptized secular humanism. Many people profess Christ and think that their lives have changed, but they are still filled with the spirit of worldliness. They go to church and even use Christian terminology, but most things in their lives are done in full accord with the world spirit. Their houses are run by feminist philosophy. Their children are raised by the Molech state school. Their Sabbaths are given over to restaurants and the National Football League, after a brief church experience of course. Their businesses use the same unethical tactics as their heathen competitors. They refuse to turn the other cheek. They do not mourn over their sins. They do not go the extra mile and they do not love their enemies. In other words, they have really stayed in the broad gate and wide way in order to compromise with this evil world. They do not realize it, but they really want one foot in the kingdom of God and the other planted squarely in this world. Tragically, they are living in self-deception. We cannot take the world's philosophy, ethic and worldview through the narrow gate; we must abandon it or all is lost. If we live the way of the world yet dress it up with Christian terminology or follow the world system yet do so in a church setting, we are only deceiving ourselves. Everything that pleases this evil world system must be left outside the gate if we are to walk the narrow path. This truth cannot be avoided.

Third, genuine repentance involves leaving behind our most cherished sins forever. There are many professing Christians who say to themselves, "Well, I'm willing to give this or that up, but there is this area over here that I simply cannot part with. I love it too much. I cannot live without it." Such repentance is only partial and, thus, is phony. While repentance is never perfect this side of heaven because of the indwelling sin that remains with us, nevertheless all known sins must be forsaken. The prayer of a genuinely repentant heart is, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). If you love your sin more than you love Christ, then you have not passed through the narrow gate. You must give up your whole soul to Jesus to be His forever and ever. You must renounce the most cherished sins of your heart and continually strive to keep them out of your life. "True repentance must be perpetual. It is not my turning to God during today that will prove that I am a true convert; it is forsaking my sins throughout the whole course of my life, until I sleep in the grave. You must not fancy that to live upright for a week will be a proof that you are saved, it is a perpetual abhorrence of evil. You may go home and pretend to pray, you may today be serious, tomorrow honest, and the next day you may pretend to be devout; but yet, if you return—as Scripture has it, like the dog to its vomit and like the sow to its wallowing in the mire—your repentance shall but sink you deeper into hell, instead of being a proof of Divine grace in your heart" (Charles H. Spurgeon on Ps. 7:12).

Other Applications and Implications

There are a few important things to consider before we turn our attention to Christ's reason for entering the narrow gate. First, what is the significance of the narrow gate preceding the narrow way? Jesus says that the narrow gate is first because regeneration, faith, repentance and justification precede progressive sanctification. In other words, we are saved the moment we believe and do not have to go through a long process to be justified. While it is true that one can speak of salvation in the broad sense which encompasses the new birth, justification, sanctification and glorification; nevertheless someone with true saving faith possesses eternal life the very moment he believes. "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (Jn. 5:24). The fact that the narrow gate precedes the narrow way refutes a number of dangerous errors.

It disproves the teaching on justification of the Roman Catholic Church. The papal church views the gate as coming at the *end of life* or even, for most Catholics, after a very long painful period in *purgatory*. They believe that God will only accept men after they become personally holy. Romanists teach that salvation is a *long process*; that men are only saved by faith plus the *good works that flow from faith*. They believe that very few actually enter the narrow gate during life and these few they call saints (a term that Paul applies to all Christians). Romanism combines the merits of Christ (which they implicitly teach are insufficient to save) with the inward holiness or *subjective righteousness* of men. They believe that justification is a cooperative effort between God and man. This doctrine is very similar to the old heresy of the Judaizers that Paul refutes in the book of Galatians. Christ rejects all of this teaching when he says that the long narrow road *follows* the narrow gate. It does not precede it. The long, narrow, thorny road of struggle is the life of one who *is already justified*. It is the path of the true Christian.

It disproves the Auburn Avenue or Federal Vision heresy. The Auburn Avenue theologians also place the narrow gate at the end and not the beginning of the Christian life. They teach that men are ultimately justified by faith and faithfulness to the covenant; by belief and personal obedience; by trust and perseverance in personal righteousness. They say that on the day of judgment, God will evaluate the works of believers and, if believers have been faithful enough to the covenant, they will receive final justification. This teaching is a deadly heresy. Our Lord says of all those who do not lead holy lives and walk the narrow path of godliness: "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Mt. 7:23). Everyone who is cast into the outer darkness on the day of judgment because he or she lived a life of habitual unrighteousness, *never* had a saving relationship with Christ to begin with. They had never entered the narrow gate. One cannot be on the narrow path without first coming through the narrow gate. Justification always precedes sanctification. Although no one is saved by personal holiness or faithfulness to the covenant, no one is truly saved who *after* professing Christ does not practice these things. Personal righteousness is a fruit and evidence of justification and not a ground or cause of it.

It disproves all forms of sacramentalism. There is a sense in which sacramentalists teach that there are two gates in the Christian life. There is a very broad gate that one enters by baptism. Sacramentalists teach that everyone who is baptized is regenerated and therefore a Christian; but they also hold to a narrow gate at the end of life because most baptized people (they argue) are not faithful and lose their salvation. Jesus, however, rejects this view. There is

only one narrow gate and it can only be entered by having a saving faith in Christ. (Saving faith receives and rests upon Jesus without exceptions or equivocations. It lays hold of the Savior in all His offices—as Prophet, Priest, and King. It receives all the Redeemer’s teachings [including the moral law] and all the challenges, pains and sufferings of the Christian life. It also looks to Christ for the sanctification that purifies the heart and life.) Moreover, we are assured in many places in Scripture that, once the narrow gate of salvation is entered, the Holy Spirit will not let true Christians abandon Christ and apostatize (Ps. 37:28; 121:3, 7-8; Jer. 32:40; Jn. 6:39; 10:27-29; 17:11; 24; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:12; 4:18; Heb. 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:4-5; Jude 1, 24; etc.). Christians can fall into sin and backslide, but the Holy Spirit will not let them go back to the broad path.

Second, the gate to heaven is so narrow that sinners can only enter it one person at a time. Although as we have noted salvation is a work of sovereign grace, you personally are still responsible to repent and believe in Jesus. No one can believe or repent for you. Being part of a Christian family or becoming a member of a church does not get you in the gate. Every soul must choose between life and death, heaven and hell. Since we are born on the broad path, we really only have one choice. Are we going to remain with the world, the crowd, the mass of blind and deaf humanity or are we going to repent and follow the Savior? Ask yourself these all important questions. Do I believe in Jesus Christ? Have I really forsaken my most cherished sins and taken up the Savior’s cross? Do I confess Christ as my Savior and Lord before the world? Have I committed my whole life to following *everything* that the Lord requires of me? Does the Word of God dominate my life or am I still following the crowd? There can be no neutrality when it comes to Jesus. He demands a decision. He calls upon you to repent and follow Him the rest of your life. “This of course, involves a very definite act of the will. It calls upon me to say: ‘Recognizing this as God’s truth and as the call of Christ, I am going to give myself to it, come what may. I am not going to consider the consequences. I believe it, I will act upon it; this henceforth is going to be my life.’”⁴⁸⁶ Right now, as you still have breath, you need to receive Jesus as the only means of life, as the only way and the only name given under heaven for salvation. You must not look for salvation in any other person or thing but Christ. You must cast yourself on the Redeemer alone. You must cling to the Savior no matter what the cost. You are choosing Jesus and you are choosing the narrow road. You embrace heaven and also embrace the burden of Christ: the cross, the persecution and the self-denial. You must be willing to take the whole Savior. “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Urgently, immediately, with utmost diligence enter the narrow gate. Heed the biblical wisdom of Richard Baxter:

If you mean indeed to turn and live, do it speedily, without delay. If you be not willing to turn today, you are not willing to do it at all. Remember, you are all this while in your blood, under the guilt of many thousand sins, and under God’s wrath, and you stand at the very brink of hell; this is not a case for a man that is well in his wits to be quiet in. Up therefore presently, and fly as for your lives, as you would be gone out of your house if it were all on fire over your head. O, if you did but know in what continual danger you live, and what daily unspeakable loss you sustain, and what a safer and sweeter life you might live, you would not stand trifling, but presently turn. Multitudes miscarry that willfully delay when they are convinced that it must be done. Your lives are short and uncertain; and what a case are you in if you die before you thoroughly turn! Ye have staid too long already, and wronged God too long. Sin getteth strength while you delay. Your conversion will grow more hard and doubtful. You have much to do, and

⁴⁸⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:230.

therefore put not all off to the last, lest God forsake you, and give you up to yourselves, and then you are undone for ever.⁴⁸⁷

Third, our Lord's teaching about the narrow gate and the narrow way tells us something very important about personal evangelism. When presenting the gospel to others, we must never completely divorce receiving the forgiveness of sins from what God requires of believers after they are justified by faith alone. True biblical evangelism is concerned not merely with the one initial act of believing, but also with the whole life of discipleship which follows. When Jesus gave His disciples their marching orders after the resurrection He did not say, "Go into all nations and try to get people to make a decision for Christ." Instead He commanded them to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:19-20). If we witness to someone and they make a profession of faith, then our job is not completed until they are baptized and join themselves to a solid, Bible-believing, Reformed church. If people are to walk the narrow road of discipleship, then they must submit themselves to pastors and elders who are able and willing to teach the whole counsel of God (cf. Heb. 10:24-25; 13:7, 17). After Peter preached on the day of Pentecost and three thousand souls received the word, were baptized and added to the church (Ac. 2:41), "they continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and prayers" (Ac. 2:42). We come to Christ all by ourselves, but after we embrace Him we must join the church and place ourselves under all the *corporate* means of grace in order to walk on the narrow path. If someone confesses Christ but refuses to join themselves to the church, their profession is counterfeit.

Christ's Reason for Entering the Narrow Gate: The Broad Path

After Jesus commands the assembled multitude to enter in by the narrow gate, He gives a strong and terrifying reason why it is the only viable, wise, biblical choice. The only alternative to the narrow gate is the broad gate and way which leads to eternal destruction. "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it" (Mt. 7:13). There are two possibilities before all mankind. There is the narrow gate and way which involves a life-long commitment to Christ and there is the broad gate and way which leads to hell and eternal damnation. Our Lord essentially says, "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15). "Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death" (Jer. 21:8).

The Greek word translated "broad" is *eurychoros*. It is a compound word containing *eurys*, which means "broad," and *chora*, which means "country." Thus, this word does not simply refer to a wide road such as a four lane highway; but, refers to a path that encompasses the whole countryside. Tens of millions of people can walk this road side by side because it is so spacious. Indeed, in a sense, this road has no boundaries at all except one. The people on it cannot come near to the kingdom of heaven.

There are certain questions that most people would like answered, such as why are we here and where are we going. Here Jesus answers the second question with terrifying clarity. Everyone's life can be compared to a journey. There is the beloved spacious, roomy, comfortable road that is very easy and popular. This road is so broad, comfortable and approved that it seems like the logical place to be. But there is a major problem with this road—it leads to a deadly

⁴⁸⁷ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 132-133.

precipice where every single person on it falls into a terrifying abyss of death, suffering and destruction. People on this road go about their lives as if everything was fine, as if the end of the road was quite pleasant. They pretend that the road leads to paradise or they simply refuse to even contemplate such a question. If people in America were asked where they are going when they die, most would immediately respond that they are going to heaven. The passage before us, however, says something quite different and terrifying. Most people are on the broad path that leads to destruction. Christ tells us about the two roads and two possible destinations so that we would get off the broad road and make sure we are the narrow path that leads to heaven. There are a number of things to note about this broad road.

First, the broad road is the way of the flesh. It is exceedingly broad because everyone is born into it by nature. When Adam fell, the whole human race fell in him. Thus, everyone is tainted with hereditary sin and is by nature inclined toward evil. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (Jn. 3:6). “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born” (Ps. 58:3; 51:5; cf. Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9; Mt. 15:19; Rom. 5:12). Thus, no matter what philosophy or religion men invent out of their own minds, the path is always away from the true and living God of the Bible. The broad road is the way of human autonomy. Anything is accepted on this road as long as it doesn’t include Jesus Christ, as defined by Scripture, or biblical Christianity.

Everyone who does not believe in Christ proceeds along this path of the flesh, autonomy and sin. Within the broad path there are different religions and worldviews that cater to different paths of autonomy. There are exceptionally religious people who act devoutly. There are murderers, thieves, rapists and professional criminals. One can find bishops and Satanists, nuns and prostitutes. “The covetous and the spendthrift, the profligate and the hypocrite, the Antinomian and the Pharisees, the sons and daughters of pleasure and the grave designing politicians and proud philosophers, decent moralists and infamous debauchees, have their several paths and their select companies; they mutually despise and condemn each other, yet they all keep one another in countenance by agreeing to oppose the holy ways of the Lord.”⁴⁸⁸ They are all at war with God and they all reject the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, the path is broad because it is the easy path. It is the road of tolerance, pluralism, diversity, permissiveness and moral laxity. It does not take any effort to go down this road at all. It holds the philosophy, “whatever feels good do it,” or “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.” There are really no curbs or boundaries on this road, for there are no ethical absolutes. Every opinion is equally true and equally false. The only absolute is that Jesus cannot be acknowledged or obeyed. Every man does what is right in his own eyes (Jdg. 17:6; 21:25). It does not take any effort or sacrifice to follow our own sinful inclinations. There is no need to strive to learn to follow one’s own lusts; this all comes so naturally. One does not need to be diligent or work at being selfish, hypocritical, or pleasure-oriented. All of this evil flows freely from our wicked hearts (Mt. 15:19). People do not really need to repent or examine themselves if their religious life is external, mechanical and humanistic. The broad path is the way of everyone who is spiritually dead. Their dead hearts follow this evil world system as naturally as a feather floats on the wind. Consequently, they all follow the satanic philosophy: “Do whatever you want.” “The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts” (Ps. 10:4). “The transition from sin to sin, from occasional transgressions to habitual indulgences, is easy, and in this way you will be in no want of company. The old and the young,

⁴⁸⁸ Thomas Scott as quoted in Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 331.

the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned walk there. It is ‘the course of the world,’ in which all men naturally walk, ‘fulfilling the lusts of the flesh, and of the mind.’”⁴⁸⁹

The broad path was the way set before Eve by Satan when he accused God of lying and told her to become her own god determining for herself both what is good and what is evil. It is the path that rejects trust in God, hates the truth and breaks free of God’s moral requirements. It says, “I will not have Christ to rule over me.” Therefore, God is not sought. The Word of God is not diligently searched and the commandments of God are seen as antiquated and enslaving. It is very easy because the cross is not taken up, discipleship is not embraced and self-denial is not tolerated. “A dead fish can float with the stream, but only a living one can swim against it: so the unregenerate mechanically follow this road, for there is nothing in them to resist the law of gravity. The going is smooth and easy because it is all *downhill!*”⁴⁹⁰

The broad path is the path of custom and habit. It is the way that is celebrated by the media and praised by the crowd. It is the way that is rewarded by our Christ-denying society. It is easy to do what others like. It is easy to try and be popular. It does not take any effort to follow the trends, styles, and opinions of the pagan masses that modify their views as the world spirit evolves and changes. Unbelievers are like pigs at the garbage dump happily moving from trash heap to trash heap eating the scraps of a Christ-hating culture.

Third, the broad path is crowded. Jesus said, “There are many who go in by it” (Mt. 7:13). Throughout history the vast majority of people have taken no interest in Christ whatsoever. People today are too busy with pleasures and entertainments to give any time to God. When people get on a bus or plane, they first insist on knowing where the trip will lead them, but most people go through life on the broad road without any concern for their final destination. This incredible negligence can only be attributed to spiritual blindness. It is because the carnal mind is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7). “There is none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:11). All men who have not embraced Christ are loyal to the devil—the god of darkness—because they love darkness rather than light. Men have been taken captive by Satan to do his will (2 Tim. 2:26). The fact that the majority is drifting along on the broad path toward hell without concern, effort or thought should cause us to think about our own life. Are we drifting with the crowd having no concern for our final destination or have we entered the narrow gate that is so unattractive to the masses? If you are not on the narrow path, are you willing to fight your way through the thoughtless, blind, contented crowd to go through the narrow gate? Are you willing to make a decisive break with your unconverted past to become a disciple of the Savior? Let us obey God who says, “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil” (Ex. 23:2).

Fourth, Christ warns us that the broad road leads to misery and destruction. Our Lord wants us to contemplate this all important decision. If you take the narrow road and follow Jesus, you will have to make sacrifices. You will have to take up the cross and deny yourself. You must die to self and live unto Christ. Your life is no longer your own, for you were brought with a price. The kingdom of God takes priority over our own wants and desires. This narrow way of tribulation and difficulties, however, leads to eternal life. There are unfathomable rewards for the Savior’s disciples.

By contrast, the broad road is easy. It takes no effort. It is the way of pleasure, self-indulgence, fun and popularity. There are no sacrifices involved in following our own lusts and running with the crowd. But our Lord says the broad, easy way has a tragic end: destruction. We find this truth throughout Scripture. “The soul that sins will die” (Ez. 18:4). “The wages of sin is

⁴⁸⁹ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:316.

⁴⁹⁰ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 328.

death” (Rom. 6:23). Those who do not enter the narrow gate and follow the narrow path will be cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). Everyone who does not follow the Lamb of God will be cast into the lake of fire and the smoke of their torment will ascend forever and ever (Rev. 14:11). Those who ran with the crowd and followed their lusts will lose everything on the final day. They will be cast into the ethical garbage dump of all human history where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched (Mk. 9:44, 48).

Those on the broad path are sowing seeds of lawlessness and must answer to God for a whole lifetime of sin and rebellion against His throne. As Paul says, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (Gal. 6:7-8). Those who tended to the desires of the present life and indulged the lusts of the flesh without any regard for the future life will reap what they have sown. On the great harvest day of history at the final judgment they will reap “everlasting destruction” (2 Thess. 1:9). But those who submit to Christ, walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16) and are led by the Spirit (Gal. 5:18) will be given the everlasting life that Jesus merited for them. On the final day those who have lived for self and rejected Jesus and the narrow path will endure shame and everlasting contempt (Dan. 12:2). They will be excluded from paradise and will be placed in the terrifying pit of the abyss (Rev. 20:3). But those who obeyed Christ will have God’s shining countenance upon them. Their hardships will be replaced by eternal joy.

The Redeemer’s argument is terrifying and extremely powerful. In essence, Jesus is saying that the proper way to count the cost and analyze one’s decision about the two gates and ways is to view them from the perspective of eternity. Once we do this, we see how vain and stupid the broad path really is. Who in their right mind would choose a brief season of pleasures when the reward for such a life is an eternity of suffering, agony, despair and remorse? You need to know the bad news if you are going to embrace the good news. The gospel, or the narrow gate, is your only hope of deliverance from the bad news. You have been born and have continued to lead your life on the broad road leading to destruction. The good news is that Christ can save you from it. But if you do not believe that you are currently on the way to hell, how can you be interested in the good news of deliverance from it? Christ’s logic is impeccable. His warning is terrifying, yet merciful. He spoke more about hell and warned people of it more than all the prophets and apostles combined because of His infinite love for His sheep.

Think about this warning. Meditate upon it. You know that someday every single human being must die. You know that after death you must stand naked before the great white judgment seat of Christ (Rev. 20:11). You know that the clock is ticking on our brief span of earthly existence. The grave awaits your body. Your flesh will rot and our soul will immediately be cast into hell if you do not repent and flee to Christ. If you do not embrace the Savior, but decide to stay on the broad easy path, then think of yourself on your death bed contemplating a life without Christ; a life of selfishness and sin. You know that you are about to take that final step into eternity. You know that because you chose to stay on the broad path you have nothing to look forward to except fear, agony, horror, despair, torment and eternal suffering. Do you not see the great need to strive to enter the narrow gate while you still have breath; before it is too late? Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). That body that you dressed in fine clothes and pampered on the broad road of pleasures will be resurrected unto everlasting pain, suffering and torment in hell. What is the brief span of your life compared to eternity? Is it not

time to cast off temporal fleshly lusts in order to receive Christ and the assurance of everlasting life? Is not your soul worth more to you than the childish, vain trinkets of this world which is passing away? Repent or perish!

Our Lord's teaching about the final destination of everyone on the broad path tells us that God has made only *two* places for the final abode of men after death and the resurrection. There is heaven and there is hell. Also, the Bible is very clear that no one can ever escape from hell (cf. Lk. 16:26) and hell lasts forever (see 2 Thess. 1:7-9; Rev. 14:10; 20:10). There is no third estate called purgatory where people can burn off their "venial" sins. There are no second chances; there is no such thing as reincarnation. Moreover, the doctrine of annihilationism is unscriptural. People on the broad path cling to unfounded theories and lies about the afterlife in the vain hope that hell does not exist. Because of their unwillingness to go through the narrow gate, they cling to myths and human traditions about the afterlife. They listen to the lies of the false teachers who say that a God of love would never send people to eternal torment. These pseudo-preachers tell the flock, "Do not be afraid of going to hell. Do not fear the wrath of God. There is no such thing as the terror of the Lord." These wicked liars ignore the fact that the Word of God speaks of the Lord's infinite holiness far more than about His love. They not only ignore the dozens of passages of hell, but also the fact that according to the Bible God hates all the workers of iniquity (Ps. 5:5); that He is angry with the wicked every day (Ps. 7:11). Yes, the true and living God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29) that cannot tolerate or overlook sin. If your sins are not removed by the blood of Christ, then God has no choice. His nature requires that you go to hell for your sins.

People embrace the lies of false prophets because the thought of death makes them very uneasy. The thought of eternal damnation brings them to a panic. They try to convince themselves that there is a third way, a more moderate alternative. But Christ will have none of this humanistic rationalizing. He tells us the shocking truth in plain, sobering language. If you do not believe in Christ and become His disciple and live on the narrow road, then you have chosen to go to hell forever. Jesus tells this multitude to count the cost of discipleship and He also tells them to count the cost of not becoming a disciple. Your sole alternative to a life of servitude to Christ and heaven is darkness, slavery to the devil and the lake of fire. Choose this day who you will serve!

Chapter 34: The Narrow Way

After giving a brief, yet strong, reason as to why the narrow gate must be entered, our Lord explains and amplifies this argument by returning to a description of the narrow gate and difficult way. "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Mt. 7:14). One reason the broad way is so popular is that the narrow gate is very small. In fact, there is a sense in which this tiny gate is hidden from the unregenerate masses and can only be found with the power of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the narrow gate gives entrance unto this "narrow way" which is a very difficult way. The unregenerate are repelled by the great sacrifices involved on this narrow, difficult, thorny path. The narrow, difficult path is completely contrary to the lovers of this world; to those who live life to fulfill fleshly lusts.

The narrow gate leads to the narrow road. Becoming a Christian is the beginning of discipleship; it is the starting point of a life-long struggle against the world, the sinful flesh and

the devil. Interestingly, the word translated “narrow” (KJV) or “difficult” (NKJV) in verse 14 is not the same Greek word translated “narrow” in verse 13 (*stenos*). The adjective used to describe the way or road is *thethlimmene* (a perfect passive participle of *thlibo*) which means “press” or “compress.” The idea being conveyed is that the road of Christian discipleship is very restricted or confined. The imagery is a path between two rocky cliffs so close together that a man can barely squeeze between them. These rock walls almost meet and there are sections that bulge inward causing the person on this path at times even to turn sideways in order to squeeze through. There also may be rocks on the path to make the way most inconvenient. The man who makes his way down this path can only do so with constant attention and diligence. He must persevere to get through this road and he can only do so with cuts, scrapes and bruises. This is the picture of the Christian life that Jesus presents to us. Unlike the broad road, however, this narrow, difficult path leads to everlasting life with God. The scraped, battered and bruised bodies emerge into the home of peace and everlasting bliss.

Before we examine the narrow way in more detail, we need to note that the Redeemer tells us plainly that the Christian life is difficult. It requires effort, struggle and even pain. Jesus said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mt. 16:24-26; cf. 10:38). The disciples thought Jesus would conquer Rome and immediately set up a kingdom where they would receive worldly honors and temporal rewards. Therefore, our Lord made it crystal clear that true Christians are perfected through conflict and suffering. Following the Savior involves self-denial and many troubles. If we want the crown of glory, we must crucify our flesh daily, resist the devil often and overcome the world. When you come into Christ’s service you enter into spiritual warfare and must fight many battles. This constant struggle is the inseparable accompaniment of being a true Christian. No one enters the kingdom of heaven without it. Never forget the old saying “no cross, no crown!” If this has not been your experience as a professing Christian, then your soul is in extreme danger.

This very important element of biblical Christianity has largely been forgotten in our day. Jesus is presented as a resource to fulfill our needs and many churches do everything they can to downplay or suppress the great struggle in following Christ. If a person does not want to repent of their sins or mortify the flesh, he is welcomed into the church as a “carnal Christian.” If a married couple is obsessed with material things and the focus of their life is possessions, luxuries, entertainment and personal happiness, then they are told that Jesus came so they could have their best life now. If people do not like to come to church to pray, worship God as He has commanded and hear true, convicting, expository preaching, then the church will be turned into an entertainment center where even the unregenerate can have fun and feel right at home. In America, success is usually equated with great numbers, large buildings and numerous programs. Consequently, let us carefully consider some noteworthy things regarding the narrow way.

First, the way is called narrow because of the Christian’s life-long struggle concerning sanctification. Once a person is converted to Christ and is justified before God, he must strive to be holy every day of his life. There are a number of things associated with discipleship and sanctification that make the path narrow or difficult.

The person who trusts in the Savior must conform his worldview and ethics to the Word of God. Before he was a Christian, he could do or say or think anything he wanted. But after conversion what he believes, says and does is limited by Scripture. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to

the Spirit, the things of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5). Before conversion people happily followed the flesh or human nature which is corrupted, directed and controlled by sin. This as noted takes no effort. But after receiving Jesus, one’s thoughts, interests, affections and purposes are to be submitted to the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture. The narrow way has clearly marked boundaries. The Bible has ethical absolutes which are non-negotiable. When the teaching of Scripture contradicts what we would like to do or believe we have no choice; we must bow the knee to Christ. To walk the narrow path involves refusing to make excuses for sin. It involves a refusal to compromise with the world. To walk this narrow road we need to follow the example of the blessed man in Psalm 1: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:1-2). *Sola Scriptura* is not just a slogan of the Protestant Reformation; it is also crucial for sanctification or walking according to the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). As Jesus said, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17).

The road is difficult because we must wage warfare against sin in all its manifestations. First, there is a great struggle against the power of sin in us. Although every genuine believer is sanctified in principle by the redemptive work of Jesus (1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 5:25-26; Heb. 10:10) and by virtue of our union with Christ the power of sin has been broken in our lives (i.e. the Savior has overthrown its rule, weakened its power and set us free from its dominion over our lives [see Rom. 6:4-13]), nevertheless indwelling sin will not be eradicated this side of heaven (cf. 1 Jn. 1:8). Paul warns believers in Romans 7 of the “sin that dwells in us” (v. 17), “the flesh” (v. 18), “lusts” (vs. 7-8) and “the law of sin in our members” (v. 23). The road of discipleship is difficult because our sinful inclinations draw us toward what is evil and “wars against the law of our minds” (v. 23). “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the thing you wish” (Gal. 5:17). Paul spoke of the essence of this battle in Romans 7:21-23: “I find then a law that is evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing one into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.”

Every true Christian has experienced this struggle. We know what the right thing to do is and sincerely would like to do it. Yet time and again we find ourselves doing the precise thing that we hate (see Rom. 7:15). This is because of “the law of sin” (Rom. 7:23). Paul is using the term law here in the sense of a force or inclination (e.g., the law of gravity). As result of the fall, our natures are corrupt; and, although the power of sin is broken in us through our union with Christ, our sinful natures still wage war against our Spirit-directed mind. The unbeliever goes with the flow of this law and relishes sin, while the believer battles against it and uses all the means of grace to overpower it.

There are three things about the law of sin that make the narrow road difficult. (1) The law of sin is in us; it is part of the fabric of our being. In this life we can never escape it. We have a deadly enemy within that seeks to slay us, that is always working contrary to the Holy Spirit and our Spirit-informed mind. It is one thing to deal with external temptations and quite another to wage war against something that we always carry within our breasts. It is necessary to always be watching and praying, for we live with an inner corruption that is contrary to self-discipline and holiness. (2) The law of sin never subsides or rests. There is never a time that our inner corruption takes a vacation. Consequently, there are no times during the Christian life that we can relax in our striving for personal godliness. The road of discipleship is narrow and difficult at

the beginning, the middle and end of the Christian life. The law of sin is there when we wake up in the morning and when we go to bed at night. It is with us at church, work, the park and the prayer meeting. Thus, we see why diligence in Bible reading, prayer, self-examination, Sabbath-keeping and the public ordinances is not simply a preference or duty, but a *necessity*. (3) The law of sin is with us even when we are at our spiritual best. Even when we want to serve God with our whole heart and are striving to please Him, this law is working against us. In fact, those who are the most diligent in their seeking of holiness are usually the most sensitive to this inner struggle. Because of God's grace, like Paul, we want to do good works. We want to glorify God in our speech and our actions. But we sometimes find ourselves doing things we despise. Yet, the true disciple never gives up. If he trips and falls on the narrow path, he immediately gets up, confesses his sin and moves forward. He subordinates his own interests to the interests of Christ. His faith in Christ sustains him. He reckons himself to be dead unto sin and alive unto God (Rom. 6:11). Consequently, no matter how difficult and painful the narrow road, he perseveres in faith and obedience to Christ.

Second, there are the temptations of this world and the sinful habits from our unconverted past. We must live our lives of discipleship surrounded by a society that worships self and pleasures. If the law of sin is like a fire, the allurements of this world are like dry wood ready for the flame. Walking the narrow path involves a strenuous effort to avoid temptations that surround us. This requires a strong faith in Christ and a biblical perspective on life. It takes faith in the Word of God to sacrifice present pleasures and popularity for a distant, unseen reward. This point is emphasized by the author of Hebrews: "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:24-25). Moses turned his back on the great pleasures of wealth and power that this world has to offer and even cast aside the earthly security he had known in Egypt. This is what walking the narrow thorny path is about. It means saying no to sin and saying yes to obedience. It means putting "to death the deeds of the body" (Rom. 8:13) and "your members which are on the earth" (Col. 3:5).

The narrow road requires continuous mortification of sin. We must crucify "the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). Plucking out the right eye and cutting off the right hand can be very painful, but taking up the cross and following Christ requires it. Do you have a ruthless rejection of this evil world and an uncompromising forsaking of sin? It is not by accident that Peter points out that we are sojourners in this evil world of men before he speaks of the mortification of sin. "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11).

God expects us to faithfully tread the narrow, thorny path because he has changed our hearts. He commands us to live consistently with who we are in Christ. We are a new creation, "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10). We are dead to sin and alive to God. For us "all things have become new." The old man—the unregenerate scoundrel that we once were—is dead. Therefore, everything we are by nature (fallen, corrupt, depraved and polluted, with a hatred of God and a bias toward evil) and all the sinful habits and desires we developed in our old life must be put to death. The narrow path is a new path. It requires a continually putting off of those things that are contrary to Scripture (ethically, doctrinally, philosophically, etc.) in order to replace them with what God approves. This involves taking up the cross and following Jesus every day. The terms that Paul uses to describe how we are to deal with sin and unlawful lusts (put to death, flee, abstain, crucify, etc.) indicate that we are to go about this task diligently, radically and continuously. The narrow road requires biblical change and progress in holiness

over time. The road is difficult because we must constantly be fighting off the enemies of the flesh, temptations and sin.

The fact that the narrow way is a path means that we must never stand still in our walk with Christ. To *not* move forward leads to stagnation and lukewarmness. We must move forward in sanctification by abhorring what is evil and clinging to what is good (Rom. 12:9). It is a big mistake to view the narrow path simply in terms of negatives. Eliminating sinful habits is only half the equation. The life of discipleship involves replacing old, habitual sin patterns with new habits of righteousness. The scribes and Pharisees had a mechanical, negative ethic instead of the positive, outward, loving ethic that Christ demands. We must “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21) and not only “not be conformed to the world,” but also “be transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom. 12:2). While the outward man is perishing, the inward man is being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:10). To walk the narrow path, we must actively put on the new man created in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). This new man exhibits the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22). This is progress on the narrow road. If this is not your experience and there is no mortification of sin in your life and growth in godliness, then you have not yet entered the narrow gate. Pink writes, “They who tread this narrow way heed not the counsel of the ungodly (Psalm i, 2), lean not unto their own understanding (Prov. iii, 5), and follow not ‘the customs of the people’ (Jer. x, 3). Rather are the believer’s thoughts formed by the Scriptures and his conduct directed by its statutes, so that God’s Word becomes to him in fact and experience ‘a lamp unto his feet and a light unto his path.’ The narrow way is strictly marked and exactly defined in the Divine Charter, and along it the Christian must go without turning to the right hand or the left (Prov. iv, 27). When he meets an enemy that enemy must be overcome, or he will be overcome by him.”⁴⁹¹

As we walk this narrow path of Christian discipleship, there are a number of things to keep in mind regarding progressive sanctification (read Jn. 17:19; Rom. 6:1-7:6; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30-31; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 13:12; Col. 3:1-5; 1 Pet. 1:2-4; 4:1-2).

We only have victory over the flesh, the world and the devil because Jesus first trod the narrow, bloody, tear-stained path to the cross. There is a covenantal and vital union between Christ and His people. We must by faith look to the Savior’s victory and draw upon His strength. Jesus’ overcoming of temptation, His sacrificial death and His glorious resurrection provide us with the spiritual power to overcome. It was only after the resurrection and ascension that our Lord sent the Holy Spirit to empower the church. His Spirit raised our dead hearts and enables us to overcome and grow spiritually. Christ is the “captain,” “author” or “pioneer” of salvation in the most comprehensive sense of the term (cf. Heb. 2:10; 12:2).

Consequently, from one perspective, the long, narrow, thorny path is very difficult and it takes great effort to move forward; but, from another perspective, the Redeemer’s yoke is easy and His burden is light (Mt. 11:30). It is light in the sense that Jesus’ Spirit causes us to obey and persevere. The Holy Spirit not only gives us divine revelation which sets the boundaries of the narrow path, but He also binds our stubborn wills, convicts our hearts, illuminates our minds and causes us to repent daily and lean upon Christ.

Also, there is a sense in which the broad path is both easy and hard. It is easy because it has no restraints; every man is his own god. It does not require any sacrifice. But, it is hard in the sense that everyone who follows the broad path is enslaved to sin and the devil. Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (Jn. 8:34). “He is truly chained as is the prisoner with the iron band around his leg, the band that is fastened to a chain

⁴⁹¹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 334.

which is cemented into the wall of a dungeon. Every sin he commits draws tighter that chain, until at last it crushes him completely. Since the wicked have no inner peace (Isa. 48:22), how can they be truly happy?”⁴⁹² The broad road involves earthly pleasures, but these pleasures are fleeting and accompanied by many troubles. The “happiness” of those on the broad path is very shallow and superficial. Human autonomy and a life of sin carry its own negative sanctions from God: family disintegration, drug addiction, alcoholism, sexually transmitted diseases, poverty, depression, and so on. The broad path is wide and easy, but it is not a bowl of cherries. The inner peace and meaning that believers have is far more preferable than time wasted with drugs, alcohol, liars, whores and degenerates.

As we walk the narrow path, we must meditate upon our love and devotion toward Jesus. We love God only because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). One of the greatest motivations for carrying our cross daily and making the sacrifices of discipleship is the glorious fact that Christ endured humiliation, suffering and death for us. His great love caused Him to leave behind the glories of heaven to be born in a manger and be rejected by His own people. As we think about the road of suffering that He walked for us, we will want to show our love by faithfulness and concrete acts of loyalty. We want to suffer for Him because He suffered for us. We want to imitate Him in His perfect love, dedication, loyalty and service to the Father. We demonstrate our love to God by setting Christ before us as the perfect example of obedience. “To enter this way means to follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an invitation to live as He lived; it is an invitation to become increasingly what He was. It is to be like Him, to live as He lived whose life we read of in these Gospels. That is what it means; and the more we think of it in that way the greater will the inducement be. Do not think of what you have to leave; there is nothing in that. Do not think of the losses; do not think of the sacrifices and sufferings. These terms should not be used; you lose nothing, but you gain everything. Look at Him, follow Him, and realize that ultimately you are going to be with Him, and to look into His blessed face and enjoy Him to all eternity. He is on this way, and that is enough.”⁴⁹³

Because of the difficulty of the narrow path, we must pray often for God to sanctify us, for Christ to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24), and for the Father to lead us not into temptation (Mt. 6:13). We are told to pray throughout the New Testament (e.g., Mt. 6:9-13; Rom. 12:12; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Pet. 4:7). God expects us to ask for His special assistance and protection in resisting sin and temptation. In the previous chapter, our Lord told us to pray for this assistance every single day. Walking the narrow path takes humility. We recognize that we cannot walk this narrow, thorny path alone; we need the Holy Spirit daily to apply the efficacy of Jesus’ work to our hearts. We walk with the understanding that we are dependent on our union with Christ, His priestly intercession and the power of the Holy Spirit. We are to pray diligently, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Ps. 51:11). And when we do stumble and sin we must confess these sins to Christ, forsake them and keep moving forward (1 Jn. 1:9).

We must keep in mind that walking the narrow path requires perseverance in faith and obedience. It is a life-long duty. The narrow road encompasses the whole Christian life. Jesus warned us about those who receive the Word with gladness, but reject it when tribulation arises. They did not count the cost and did not think the path to heaven was narrow. They immediately fall away when the going gets rough (see Mk. 4:16-17). They give an intellectual assent to the truths of the gospel and profess faith for a while, but in time of temptation fall away (Lk. 8:13).

⁴⁹² William Hendricksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 370.

⁴⁹³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:236.

They regard the narrow road as unacceptable. It is simply too narrow. Jesus warned about others who seem to be good professing Christians for a while, but “the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mk. 4:19). They were so preoccupied with the “pleasures of life” (Lk. 8:14) that following Christ held no interest with them. They had what the Puritans called a mere historical faith. They believed that certain redemptive facts were true, but did not really trust in the Lord or commit themselves to Him. The cares of this world dissolved their profession of Christ.

The narrow path tells us that our priorities in life must be those of the kingdom and not those of the world. Throughout our whole Christian life we must focus on Christ. If we place our priorities on the pursuit of riches, pleasures, fame or popularity, then the Word of God will be choked out. The narrow path will be abandoned. Interestingly, in this parable the choking of the plants is not sudden, but is a gradual process. Often the process of becoming worldly and falling away occurs almost imperceptibly. It is like a deadly cancer growing beneath the service that strangles the life out of a person progressively. If we are to bear fruit to eternal life we must persevere in godliness and always be on guard against a slow and steady drift back to the world. Of all the people who profess Christ at one time in their life and claim to be on the narrow path very few actually persevere to the end. Be diligent to make your calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10).

Third, the narrow road involves tribulations and persecutions. Jesus, on a number of occasions, warned his disciples that they would have to come to terms with hatred and persecution. “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. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:18-19). The world hates Christians because they have forsaken this evil world system. They have abandoned the broad path. Their heart follows Christ, who sits at the right hand of God, and their citizenship is in heaven. The world hates us, not because of our weaknesses and inconsistencies, but because we have experienced God’s grace. We are a living testimony that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and will come to judge all men. The world also hates us because we tread the narrow path. We hold to a much higher standard than that of the world. Our existence as disciples angers everyone who loves darkness. Abortionists, sodomites, atheists and Mohammedans all want to strike at the Redeemer by striking His followers. We must never be surprised when the people of this world hate us and attack us, for such a reaction is inevitable. “You will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mk. 13:13; cf. Lk 21:17; Mt. 24:9-10).

Paul also spoke of the inevitability of hatred and opposition when he wrote to the persecuted Thessalonian church. He said that he sent Timothy “to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know” (1 Tim. 3:2-4). Being a Christian is not a walk in the park. It is not for cowards and those seeking to avoid conflict. “It is not on flowery beds of ease that the pilgrim is conducted to the Father’s house: rather does he have to force his way through briars and thorns which cut and tear the flesh. There is not one path for the Redeemer and another for the redeemed (John x, 4). His was a path of affliction and ours cannot be otherwise if we follow the example He has left us; and if we do not we shall not join Him on high.”⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 334.

Every serious Christian knows the pain of being rejected by family and former friends because of the faith. Believers at school or work know the ostracism that occurs when we do not participate in their evil speech and deeds. As Peter said, “They think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you” (1 Pet. 4:4). The news media, Hollywood, colleges and universities, public schools and major corporations regard Bible-believing Christians as ignorant fools whose opinions must be suppressed for the advancement of science, situation ethics (e.g., sodomite rights) and statism.

The hypocritical professing Christian who has conformed himself to this world philosophically and ethically will not be ostracized or persecuted. The world’s pleasures, principles and behaviors are his own, even though he calls himself a Christian and goes to church. The professing Christian who accepts theistic evolution, or denies biblical inerrancy, or accepts evolving ethics, or who simply refuses to repent and leads a carnal lifestyle will fit right in with unbelievers. The professing Christian woman who is a feminist, who rejects covenant headship, who refuses to be a “keeper at home” (Tit. 2:5), who only occasionally submits to her husband fits right in with the world. She is more interested in shopping than praying. She is a slave to fashion and worships material goods just like her pagan neighbor. She has conformed herself to this evil world system. The people of this world love their own; they can quickly tell when a person’s profession is meaningless.

But true believers who walk the narrow path and separate themselves from this world will experience hatred and persecution. As Paul says, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Serving the Savior means that we are to enter into “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). If we are not willing to suffer as He suffered, then we are not worthy to be called His disciples. The modern world boasts of its tolerance and liberal principles; but when believers live for Jesus as they ought and boldly set forth the whole counsel of God as it speaks to every area of life, the world’s hatred of Christ will manifest itself. A lukewarm, pluralistic Christianity that is happy to leave the robes of authority in society in the hands of the secular humanists will be tolerated. But those who live out the Lordship of Christ in all its implications will not. Part of being a Christian is testifying to the world that its deeds are evil and telling men to bow the knee to Christ as King. This kind of testimony-bearing will arouse those who reject our message. Yet, we must think it a great privilege to suffer on behalf of Jesus. As Peter notes, “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified” (1 Pet. 4:14).

The Way to Life

Jesus ends this section with an appeal to look at the end of the narrow path. Yes, the narrow path is difficult and can only be traveled with much struggle and tribulation, but it is “the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt. 7:14). The term “life” in this passage refers to eschatological life or the eternal life bestowed on the final day. Those who give up their old, unconverted life to follow Christ; who remain His faithful disciples their whole lives and do not apostatize or reject the faith will be glorified and will behold the face of God. They will experience perfect fellowship with God without any remaining inner pollution, sin or depravity. The sacrifices, sufferings and tribulations of this present life “are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Our present sufferings fade into insignificance when compared with the glory that we will experience before Jesus’ white,

lustrous throne. Those who were dressed as beggars; who had to flee into the wilderness to escape persecution; who longed for a scrap of bread will sit and dine with Christ at the great wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).

When we suffer for Christ and make painful sacrifices for the kingdom of God, we must do so with an eye of faith on the final resurrection and the glory to be revealed. If you are tempted, then you need to contemplate the great blessedness set before you. If you are depressed and discouraged, then you must set your eyes upon the heavenly reward. Paul speaks of this as one of our greatest encouragements: “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:24-27). If unbelievers are willing to buffet their bodies and make such sacrifices for a wreath of olive branches, or a gold medal, should we not be willing to exercise self-denial and make painful sacrifices for rewards which will last throughout all eternity? Yes, the narrow path of discipleship is hard; but when the rewards are considered and the alternate ending of the broad path is contemplated, it is the only logical and biblical choice.

As we conclude, we must emphasize that teaching the necessity of holiness and the mortification of sin does not mean that we believe in salvation by works. As we noted earlier, a person is justified or redeemed the moment he truly believes in Christ. But, the moment he is regenerated and justified he begins a life-long process of sanctification. Salvation in the *broad sense* is not an instantaneous affair, but encompasses the whole of life on the narrow road. Sanctification is part of salvation in the wide sense of the term. Our obedience does not save us; but, no one can be saved without then following Christ. Jesus saves us from both the guilt and *pollution* of sin. He removes the objective penalty and renews the Christian subjectively. Saving faith trusts in Christ and then follows Him. It not only relies on God’s promises, but also obeys His laws. Genuine faith always leads to a life of obedience. Biblical faith never gives up or throws in the towel, no matter how difficult the circumstances of life. If a person does not continue on the narrow path, then he never had real faith to begin with (1 Jn. 2:19). True faith comes from God (Eph. 2:8) and always overcomes the world, endures trials, is victorious over temptations, resists the devil and seeks after vital godliness. Does this description fit with your life? Although we all fail in many things and are not as godly as we would like, we will never stop striving and moving forward on the narrow path to heaven.

Chapter 35: Beware of False Prophets

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Mt. 7:15-20).

After our Lord's strong warning about the need to enter the narrow gate and walk on the narrow path, He proceeds to tell the disciples to be on guard against false prophets. These verses are obviously an application of verses 13 and 14. Jesus is telling us about one of the central dangers that can lead men away from the narrow gate and the difficult way. Listening to false teachers places the people of God in great danger and their message can be spiritually fatal to people in the visible church. This section reveals Christ's great concern for His people. He is the good Shepherd who takes great care to warn the flock of savage wolves that disguise themselves as true preachers. He not only commands us to "beware of false prophets" (the word "beware" [*prosechete*] is a present imperative and indicates a continuous watching), but He also tells us how to discern the difference between true and false teachers. Their fruit must be examined. To emphasize the importance of this teaching, He reiterates the reality of judgment. If we desire to persevere on the narrow road, then we must prepare ourselves to avoid the snares of Satan. This is part of the challenge and struggle of being a disciple.

Warning and Description

Jesus begins with a distinctive warning against false prophets that includes a description of how they appear and what they really are (v. 15). We need to carefully examine this verse and define terms before we proceed to our Lord's instructions regarding how to identify them. There are a number of things to consider.

First, we need to define the term "prophet" so we can then understand what is a "false prophet." The word prophet occurs over 300 times in the Old Testament and over 100 times in the New Testament. A prophet is someone who acts as mouthpiece for Jehovah. He would receive direct revelation from God and then would give fully authoritative pronouncements to God's people. A prophetic exhortation that came by way of divine inspiration is not just sanctified advice; it is not just the exposition of texts from the Bible. It has the same authority as Scripture; it is a "Thus-saith-the-Lord" exhortation. In Amos 3:8 we read, "The LORD God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Whatever I command you, you shall speak.... Arise, and speak to them all that I command you" (1:7, 17). In Ezekiel 3:4 we read, "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them'" (Ezek. 3:4). Scripture often refers to a particular prophet as a "man of God." Unlike a king or priest, a prophet could not inherit his title from his family or even through majority vote. He had to be chosen by God and given a revelation by Him.

Prophets not only gave inspired predictions about future events or revealed mysteries, they were also preachers. For example, John the Baptist was a prophet who went about preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 3:2). In Deuteronomy, a false prophet was one who performed signs and then *taught* the people to serve other gods (Dt. 13:2). In 2 Peter 2:1, the apostle compares false teachers of the New Covenant era to the false prophets of old. The emphasis is not so much on false prophets as predictors, but rather as pseudo-teachers. Similarly, in 1 John 4:1 and following, the beloved apostle begins a section on the marks of false teachers by saying "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn. 4:1). Consequently, we do not want to restrict the expression "false prophets" in this context merely to people in the church who give false prophecies or who purport to give a direct revelation from God. It also applies to false teachers which have always been a major problem among the churches of Christ. Any *false* religious teacher who claims to teach with a divine authority behind him is a false prophet. Given the fact that the Bible teaches that direct revelation ceased

with the death of the apostles (Eph. 2:20; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4; Ac. 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 15:7-8) and the close of the New Testament canon (e.g., see 1 Cor. 13:8-12; Eph. 2:19-22; Rev. 22:18), our primary concern as Christians will be to identify and avoid false preachers and teachers.

The Greek word translated “false prophets,” *pseudo-propheton*, (cf. Mt. 24:11, 24; Mk. 13:22; Lk. 6:26; Ac. 13:6; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 Jn. 4:1; Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) refers to a sham, counterfeit, spurious or false teacher. The word *pseudo* comes from the Greek verb *pseudein* which means “to deceive.” A false prophet is a person who is pretending (either deliberately or through self-deception) to be something he is not (i.e. a true teacher from God). “In formulation it is similar to *pseudo-brothers* (II Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4), *pseudo-apostles* (2 Cor. 11:13), *pseudo-teachers* (II Peter 2:1), *pseudo-speakers* (liars, I Tim. 4:2), *pseudo-witnesses* (Matt. 26:60; I Cor. 15:15), and *pseudo-Christ*s (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22).”⁴⁹⁵ Every time *pseudo* is used it means the person described is phony or false.

Second, like many sections in the Sermon on the Mount, this passage begins with an imperative and then is followed by an explanation. The command, “beware” (*prosechete*), in the original language means literally, “keep holding your minds away from” false prophets. The English word “beware” means to be on guard against. Thus it is used to warn people against great dangers: “beware of falling rocks,” “beware of downed power lines,” “beware of cliff ahead,” “beware of dangerous undertow,” “beware of sharks,” etc.. The word always implies great danger. Jesus orders His followers to be aware that savage wolves will come among the flock.

Third, our Lord gives the reason why we are to beware: the false prophets “come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” These false teachers pretend to be the very opposite of what they truly are. The phrase “coming to you” indicates that they seek out the church in order to represent themselves as on the same side. The expression “sheep’s clothing” has been interpreted in two different ways. Many believe that “garments of sheep” simply points out that these false teachers present themselves as part of the people of God or members of Christ’s flock. The idea conveyed is that of a wolf disguised as a sheep in order to infiltrate the flock.

Another view is that the wearing of sheepskin is an allusion to the peculiar dress worn by Old Testament prophets. Elijah, for example, had a hairy mantle (1 Kgs. 19:13, 19) described as a hairy cloak (2 Kgs. 1:8). The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) calls Elijah’s covering a sheepskin mantle (*he melote*). One can deduce from the Scriptures that, with at least some of the prophets, a hairy coat became like a uniform. When the prophet Zechariah prophesies about a coming time of great revival he predicts that when the false prophets repent, “they will no longer wear a robe of coarse hair to deceive” (Zech. 13:4). John the baptizer who came in the spirit and power of Elijah was “clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist” (Mt. 3:4). Such rugged apparel was symbolic of the prophetic office. Interestingly, the great false prophet of the book of Revelation is described as a lamb having two horns who spoke like a dragon (i.e. like Satan; Rev. 13:11). If we accept this interpretation, then we do not have a deceiver who merely attempts to blend into the flock and appear as a true Christian; we also have a person who comes to the church and presents himself as a true preacher sent from God.

In either case, the idea of deceit and great treachery is conveyed. The person comes to the church and appears totally harmless. On the outside he seems like a sincere Christian or a caring teacher, but in reality he is a ravening wolf on the inside. A wolf is the natural enemy of sheep and a ravening wolf is a very hungry, fierce animal on the prowl for food. These false teachers

⁴⁹⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 372.

seek to devour and destroy the flock. They want to tear the church in pieces. False prophets, if undetected, will destroy the church from the inside. They appear as messengers of light, but they are really agents of the devil. All of this indicates great craftiness and subtlety. Many believe that such teachers are great men of God and excellent examples of piety. But, in reality, they are leading many people to hell. Paul spoke of those “who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins” (2 Tim. 3:6). Peter warned of false teachers “who will secretly bring in destructive heresies...they will exploit you with deceptive words” (2 Pet. 2:1, 3). Jude wrote of “certain men [who] have crept in unnoticed, who turn the grace of God into lewdness” (v. 4). Paul warned the Ephesian elders saying, “I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Ac. 20:29-30). The apostle even had to warn the Corinthians of counterfeit apostles: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Cor. 11:13-15). None of this was new, for the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel saying, “The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured people; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst” (Ezek. 22:25).

The Scriptures abound with warnings against false teachers because the fact that they can work secretly and craftily on the inside means that they can do much greater damage to the church than external enemies. Persecutions come and go, but heresies can ruin a church forever. Think, for example, of the damnable heresies of Roman Catholicism, many of which are over one thousand years old. The false teaching of Romanist theologians crafted throughout the middle ages and beyond holds millions of poor souls in the chains of darkness and satanic bondage. The false teaching of higher critics and modernists in the late nineteenth centuries and early twentieth centuries still holds sway over millions of deluded souls in the mainline denominations. The great corruptions of Arminius and John Wesley have essentially destroyed what is called modern evangelicalism. The great doctrine of salvation has been merged with a perverted humanism. Also, anyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that false prophets played a major role in the apostasy and destruction of Israel. “An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so” (Jer. 5:30-31).

False teachers were a dangerous problem even while the apostles were still alive. The apostle John had to warn the churches saying, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1). They have continued to plague the church ever since. In fact, the history of the church has been marked by one battle after another against false teachers. There are multitudes of people who apparently will believe almost anything if it is presented by someone who is an ordained teacher, or seminary professor, or popular conference speaker in the church. They have forgotten our Lord’s warning about wolves in sheep’s clothing. They have neglected to carefully examine their teachings under the light of holy Scripture. Pastors and teachers are only to be followed and believed if their doctrine agrees with Scripture and their lives are consistent with God’s Word.

The identification of false teachers as wolves who sneak into the flock to seize, snatch, tear, kill and devour the sheep ought to make us take note of the great destructive effect of false preaching. This drastic imagery ought to make churches keenly aware of the importance of

biblical teaching, correct doctrine and balanced preaching (i.e. preaching the whole counsel of God) in the churches. Yet, in our day, precision in doctrine, biblical content and theological orthodoxy are not considered very important at all. In fact, we could say that doctrinally orthodox preaching is at an all-time low for Protestant churches. The emphasis in our day is church growth at the expense of solid doctrinal preaching. The slogan “doctrine divides” has turned churches toward entertainment and programs and away from the rich biblical theology produced by the Reformers and Puritans. Today, in most evangelical circles, deviations from orthodoxy are considered quite harmless. The really important thing in many of today’s churches is not the truth, but the outward appearance of success. Jesus, however, tells us to view false teachers as savage, hungry wolves whose doctrine (or lack of it) will devour our flesh. His imagery is severe because He does not want us to go down the broad path that leads to destruction.

This sober observation raises the question as to why this warning is so often disregarded in our day. The answer lies in man’s corrupt nature, which is naturally attracted to false doctrine and antinomian ethics. In chapter thirty of Isaiah we read of the rebellious people of Judah who refused to hear God’s law: “Who say to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits’” (v. 10). The people did not want to hear God’s voice. They were not interested in hearing about their sinfulness and unworthiness before God. They wanted preachers who would lie to them and make them feel comfortable. They wanted “deceit” so they would feel good about themselves. They wanted sermons that catered to their own unrepentant character. Consequently, the popular prophets were false prophets. Hard hearts always want soft preaching.

Jeremiah encountered the same problem: “The prophets prophesy falsely...and My people love to have it so” (Jer. 5:31). “The prophets say to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place...’ The prophets prophesy lies in My name” (Jer. 14:13, 14). “Also I have seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they also strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness.... They continually say to those who despise Me, ‘The LORD has said, “You shall have peace”’; and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, “No evil shall come upon you”’ (Jer. 23:14, 17). False prophets come and try God’s people (cf. Dt. 13:3). Those who do not really love God or His law cling to false teachers. People in the visible church who are truly regenerate will be preserved by the Holy Spirit and will be led away from such deceivers.

If Jesus Christ had been willing to tell the Jewish people what they wanted to hear, they would have gladly received him. But he said to them, “Because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me” (Jn. 8:45). What a tragic commentary on fallen human nature. Most church goers today are not at all interested in learning about the gospel, or the atonement, or sanctification. No, they would rather hear about self-esteem, prosperity, angels, love and heaven. They will buy sensational books on prophecy (that are more fiction than truth) by the millions, but want nothing that challenges them to holiness. People have “itching ears” for what is new, exciting and spiritually worthless. Jeremiah said, “They make you worthless” (23:16) because their message comes from their own heart. Many modern preachers by “smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:18). Thus, we see the importance of this imperative: “Beware of false prophets.” There will always be counterfeit preachers who want to be popular and “successful,” who will pander to the carnal appetites of men and women. Consequently, we must be on guard against these deadly savage wolves. They appear to be angels of light. They are

so friendly and nice. Their message is smooth and appealing, but their doctrine will tear your soul to pieces and lead you to everlasting destruction. The devil uses them as enemies of Christ to sow tares among the wheat (Mt. 13:25).

How to Identify a False Prophet

After warning His disciples that dangerous teachers do not always appear as they really are, Jesus tells them how to identify false teachers. “You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit” (Mt. 7:16-18). Our Lord bases His argument on the biblical teaching that the state of a man’s heart will ultimately determine his thoughts, words and actions. As He says in a similar context, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Lk. 6:45). A teacher who is unregenerate and wicked on the inside may be able to fool people for a short time, but eventually his dark character will reveal itself doctrinally, ethically or both. It is simply impossible for a wicked man to counterfeit virtue over a long period of time. A pig always returns to the mire and a dog to its vomit (2 Pet. 2:22). It is impossible for a thorn bush to produce grapes; a thistle plant cannot produce figs which are good, healthy and delicious. Thorns and thistles can only tear clothes and flesh. They produce nothing good for man. It was common knowledge in an agricultural society that the easiest way to identify a tree was not to examine its trunk or bark or even its leaves, but rather its fruit.

In this passage our Lord never says what He means by “fruit.” Consequently, there are different opinions among commentators and expositors. Some insist that the bad fruit refers to heretical doctrine, while others restrict it to immoral behavior. If we interpret Jesus’ teaching within the broad context of Scripture regarding false teachers we see that there is no good reason to restrict the meaning to one or the other. A sound teacher will have biblical doctrine and lead a holy life, while a false teacher will have erroneous teaching and an inconsistent life. Bad doctrine has an influence on character and conduct.

In Matthew’s gospel, the fruit metaphor can represent both behavior and doctrine. John the Baptist challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees to bear fruits worthy of repentance (Mt. 3:8). This challenge would certainly involve a change of behavior and implies a completely new direction in teaching or doctrine. In Matthew 12:33 the fruit metaphor is used of what men *say* about Jesus Christ. The Pharisees had accused the Savior of casting out demons by the power of Satan (Mt. 12:24). Our Lord responds saying that “a tree is known by its fruits”; that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”...and “an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (Mt. 12:33, 34, 35). In other words, their evil hearts produced evil teaching about the Messiah. In the parable of the sower the good seed that bears good fruit is a life lived faithfully for Christ (Mt. 13:23).

In the Old Testament there were a variety of tests to determine a false prophet. The prophet’s predictions had to come to pass with 100% accuracy (Dt. 18:21-22). If a prophet prophesied in the name of a false god (Dt. 18:20) or enticed men to serve false gods (Dt. 13:1), then he was a pseudo-prophet and had to be executed because he was a great threat to the covenant community (Dt. 13:9-10; 18:20). The emphasis was on whether or not the prophet was really speaking God’s words and on the prophet’s theology. No true prophet of God would encourage men to violate the first commandment. The false prophet was a wicked teacher who

encouraged the people to abandon their faithfulness toward Jehovah. He wanted the covenant people to adopt the broad way of religious pluralism, syncretism and antinomianism. When God condemned the false prophets through Jeremiah, He focused on their behavior and their teaching. The false prophets are profane, wicked, adulterers and liars (Jer. 23:11, 14). They also have teaching that flows out of their evil, antinomian character.

It is very likely that our Lord's audience would have connected this teaching about false prophets in at least a tangential manner to the strong condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees found throughout this sermon. Jesus not only strongly condemns their hypocritical behavior, but also their false teaching. The religious leaders at the time were false religious instructors who led hypocritical lives. They were leading many in the Jewish nation down the broad path which leads to destruction.

Although it is not warranted to *completely* restrict the false prophet's "fruit" to either teaching or behavior; nevertheless, the main focus of application must be on teaching or doctrine. It is the false prophet's role as a supposed spokesman for God that makes him so dangerous. Bad behavior can cause strife and damage to the local church, but false doctrine can lead untold multitudes toward destruction. Moreover hypocritical teachers can often appear to be outwardly righteous before men. False teachers in the church may have a form of godliness that hides the deadly deficiencies of their doctrine. The best way to tell if a preacher is good or bad is to examine his message. Christ is not speaking of false prophets as mere church members, as private professors of Christianity, but as teachers. These ferocious wolves scatter the flock with their smooth, deceitful words. When determining the fruit of a false prophet, doctrine must hold the first place. Consequently, this will be our main focus.

Before we turn our attention to the teaching of false prophets, it is important to make a distinction between false prophets who are so heretical that they are easily identified and the more subtle dangerous false teachers. The metaphor of the wolf in sheep's clothing indicates that the latter category is what is chiefly in mind. Any Bible-believing Christian with a rudimentary knowledge of doctrine ought to be able to detect a blatant heretic. The modernist who rejects biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, miracles and the resurrection is easily identified as a dangerous wolf. The cult leader or Unitarian who rejects the trinity or the divinity of Christ is immediately recognized as a deluded crackpot. The Romanist who teaches salvation by faith plus works and worships idols should not fool any true evangelical. The scene that Jesus portrays indicates that it takes some time to recognize the bad fruit. The nature of the bad teaching may not be obvious at first. Consequently, as we look at false teachers, we want to note subtle errors. The heretic who mixes dangerous doctrines with old reformation truths or the teacher who presents a perverted picture of God, Christ and salvation by only emphasizing certain doctrines is a great danger to professing Christians.

The False Prophet's Teaching

As we consider the teaching of false prophets we will move from the general to the particular. The main characteristic of the false prophet is that he broadens the narrow gate and way in his preaching. This is clearly the pattern set forth in the Old Testament. The false teacher is one who tells the people what they want to hear so that they will not have to repent of their sins and serve Jehovah with undivided loyalty. Jeremiah says, "They strengthen the hands of evil doers" (23:14). They speak peace when there is none to the people living in habitual unrighteousness (Jer. 23:17). When God brings judgment upon the people for their sins, they tell

them not to worry. “They have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 8:11). When the true prophets were identifying sins and telling the people to repent, the false prophets were offering the people empty assurances of God’s blessing and deliverance from judgment. Instead of encouraging people to hate their sins, mourn over them and seek forgiveness, they spoke “smooth things” (Isa. 30:10). They plaster the wall with untempered mortar which results in its destruction (Ezek. 13:11ff.). With their lies, they make the heart of the righteous sad and “have strengthened the hands of the wicked, so that he does not turn from his wicked way to save his life” (Ezek. 13:22). They do everything they can to please a corrupt civil magistrate and backsliding populace. Their teaching and counseling ministries are designed to maintain the status quo of syncretism and apostasy, even to the point of opposing the true prophets of God. Their amoral optimism, implicit humanism and grasping after a sense of personal peace at any cost affects a number of crucial doctrines.

First, the false teacher holds to a deficient view of Scripture. He is willing to defend practices that are based solely on human tradition and many of his teachings come from his own heart and not God. He implicitly, and sometimes even explicitly, denies the sufficiency and perfection of God’s Word. A denial of *sola Scriptura* is the foundation of almost all heretical movements. A false teacher may not openly deny the sole authority of Scripture, but in practice unpopular sections of the Bible are simply ignored, explained away or buried in man-made traditions. For example, the scribes and Pharisees believed in the authority of Scripture, but they used what they called the oral law, which were simply human traditions, to interpret the Bible. As a result they held to a number of heresies. They corrupted true religion and turned it into a perverted and absurd legalism. They strained out a gnat and swallowed a camel (Mt. 23:24). By their traditions, they nullified God’s law (Mt. 15:3 ff.; Mk. 7:8-9). They greatly over-emphasized their privileged status as Jews (Rom. 2:17ff.) at the expense of the necessity of saving faith and conversion. Christ said that they were blind leaders of the blind (Mt. 15:4), hypocrites (Mk. 7:6), whose hearts were far from God (Mt. 15:8) and who will not enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 23:13). They were full of inner corruption (Mt. 23:27 ff.) and guilty of persecuting the true people of God (Mt. 23:34-35). Thus, they were designated as “the synagogue of Satan” by Jesus (Rev. 2:9).

In our day among professing evangelicals, the denial of *sola Scriptura* and the sufficiency of Scripture is much more subtle. Pastors give lip service to biblical inerrancy and the inspiration of Scripture, but they ignore many vital teachings in Scripture. The Bible has much to say about worship, but this teaching is generally ignored because the preacher does not want to offend the natural man or challenge his accumulated traditions. God’s moral law has much to say about sanctification and how civil magistrates should rule, but this is often relegated to a former dispensation and replaced with pluralism and the amorphic expression “old-fashioned family values.” God’s Word teaches that the Bible has the answers to every conceivable problem. But the trend among evangelicals is to reject the Bible as a source of counseling in favor of secular psychology. Worst of all, they almost completely ignore the many things taught in Scripture about redemption that are absolutely crucial for believers. Doctrines such as vicarious atonement, justification by faith, double imputation, election and regeneration are ignored and replaced with the undefined expression “Accept Jesus into your heart” or “Would you like to have a personal relationship with Christ.” Everything is so watered down and so easy and comfortable that virtually anyone can call themselves a Christian.

It is very important for us to realize that a false prophet does not have to be a blatant heretic. He doesn’t have to be a Romanist, modernist or cult leader. The man who claims to be

an evangelical pastor or leader who simply ignores what the Bible has to say about fundamental doctrines (so that people in the pew believe that redemption is some subjective mystical experience), is just as dangerous as a rank heretic because his message is primarily subjective and humanistic. Today many evangelical leaders are willing to praise the pope as a great Christian because they are so non-doctrinal and shallow that they do not even understand why the Reformation took place. These men do not deliberately set out to widen the narrow gate; but their basic ignorance of doctrine and desire for popularity makes them spiritually very dangerous. "Beware of false prophets."

We must be on guard against subtle attacks on sufficiency of Scripture. The false teacher who claims to be evangelical or Reformed will never openly say that the Bible is not adequate to meet our spiritual needs. Instead, he will argue pragmatically. He will set up other authorities next to the Bible or even above the Bible *implicitly*. He will use modern science to reinterpret the early chapters of Genesis. He may use autonomous human reason as his foundation for truth and apologetics. He will turn to secular psychology to solve marital problems. He will argue that church traditions are a good source for formulating worship practices. His preaching is founded upon *dual authorities*. He places the wisdom of this world on the throne with Scripture without even realizing it. The true prophet receives God's Word as it is, accepts it as true and teaches it to God's people. The false prophet thinks that *Scripture is not enough*. He pragmatically elevates human ideas into a new source of ultimate authority. He does not strive to think God's thoughts after Him, but rather unwittingly seeks to act as his own god. Thus, while many modern pastors give lip service to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, their churches are less and less shaped by the teaching of God's Word and more and more shaped by pragmatic, managerial, sociological, marketing, entertainment, therapeutic, self-centered and humanistic values of our modern post-Christian culture. One can go to many "evangelical" churches for years and learn almost nothing about biblical doctrine. And what one does learn is often a deadly mixture of humanism, pop-psychology and heretical, semi-pelagian theology. Beware of false teachers!

It is important to realize that the Jewish rabbis who brought in their human traditions originally did it because they thought they were helping God's people. They thought that fencing the law with human regulations would help God's people be more obedient. The end result was a religion of human pride that rejected both Moses and the Messiah. The Word of God must stand on its own. It does not need our help or ideas. "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Dt. 4:2; cf. 12:32). "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5).

One cannot mention false prophets and a deficient view of Scripture without mentioning the Charismatic movement. There are many people in this movement that claim to receive divine revelations. They believe that God speaks directly to them in the same way that He spoke to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Paul and Peter. They will even stand up in the church service and say things such as, "God has said," or "Thus saith the LORD," or "Hearken to My Word." The New Testament epistles, however, make it very clear that supernatural revelations ceased with the completion of the New Testament. Paul teaches when the "perfect" comes, that which is "partial" shall be done away (see 1 Cor. 13:8-12). Prophecy and tongues are no longer needed after the completion of the revelatory process. He also says that the church, which continues to grow, has been built on the completed foundation (*epoikodomethentes*) of the New Testament apostles and prophets (see Eph. 2:19-22). Once the foundation of the church is completed, we do not need further revelations of the Spirit. Consequently, Charismatic prophecies are not from God, but

come from some deluded soul's imagination. Such prophecies are counterfeit. "The prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak...that prophet shall die" (Dt. 18:20). The so-called prophets of the Charismatic movement must be viewed as false and exceedingly dangerous, for they turn people away from Scripture toward made-up fantasies. The Charismatic acceptance of these false prophets proves that their movement is not of God, but of man. It is one of the primary reasons that modern churches have more and more turned toward subjective personal experiences and away from the objective truths of Scripture. We must never forget that almost every cult and many deadly heresies have begun with some leader or leaders who supposedly have received some new revelation from God. Everyone from Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Edgar Cayce, Sun Myung Moon, Mary Baker Eddy, Mrs. Herbert Armstrong, Kenneth Hagan, to Kenneth Copeland has claimed some kind of revelation from God. All have abandoned the crucial doctrine of *sola Scriptura* in a quest for something new and exciting. Beware of false prophets!

Second, the false prophet presents a lop-sided, false view of God. Once again, on this doctrine it is not so much of what the false teacher says, but rather what he doesn't say. He loves to talk about the love and mercy of God, but he neglects the fact that God is righteous and holy; that God hates all the workers of iniquity (Ps. 5:5) and is angry with the wicked every single day (Ps. 7:11). We are told that our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29); that He hates sin with a perfect hatred. The Word of God emphasizes the righteousness and holiness of Jehovah far more than it does His love. The false preacher knows that the holiness, justice and fiery indignation of God are taught in Scripture, but he makes it a point to avoid these terrifying, sobering topics. Why? Because he knows that such subjects are not popular; that many people who listen will be offended or scared off. Therefore, he makes a conscious choice to conceal some of the most important doctrines about God found in the Bible. Some of the most popular pastors of mega-churches have been asked by the media why they do not discuss hell, or the wrath of God. They responded that indeed such things are discussed in Scripture; but they have decided to have a "positive" ministry. They believe they are called to focus on the good things such as God's love, personal peace, self-esteem and prosperity while leaving the negatives for others to teach. When the pastor of the largest mega-church in America was told that his preaching had much in common with the teaching of the television talk show host Oprah Winfrey, he did not deny it. He simply smiled and pointed out that Oprah Winfrey taught many biblical principles. The same pastor's television program and best-selling books are very popular with atheists, Roman Catholics and Jews. How could this be if he were preaching the genuine gospel? This would be impossible if he had not removed the offense of the cross. The unregenerate would hate him if he told them the truth about their sins and the coming wrath of God. To preach only a small sliver of the gospel is not the gospel. It rather is, in essence, a dangerous soul-damning heresy.

False preachers do not realize that neglecting important truths found in Scripture is just as dangerous and wicked as making up doctrines. "To conceal the truth is as reprehensible and as damnable as to proclaim an utter heresy; and that is why the effect of such teaching is that of a 'ravening wolf.' It is so pleasing, but it can lead to destruction because it has never confronted them with the holiness and the righteousness and the justice and the wrath of God."⁴⁹⁶ To tell an unrepentant sinner that God loves him and has a wonderful plan for his life is irresponsible and unbiblical. If people are not confronted with the holiness, justice and wrath of God against sin, then the cross of Christ becomes almost meaningless. The cross can only be understood against the background of God's righteousness and wrath. Jesus suffered and died on the cross to

⁴⁹⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:245.

eliminate the guilt and punishment for sin. God's nature and character demand that all rebellion against His throne be punished in either the sinner himself or in a sinless substitute. Once the justice and wrath of God is ignored, then the work of Christ simply becomes a smart, life-enhancing choice. People talk about the death of Christ with no content or meaning.

Moreover, false teachers in our day usually redefine the sovereignty of God in a manner that makes God impotent to save. The God that the false prophets proclaim is not the sovereign LORD of Scripture. The Bible says that "salvation is from the LORD" (Jon. 2:9). God's work of redemption in Christ is rooted in the fact that He is sovereign over everything that exists. The certainty of our salvation in Jesus is based on the biblical truth that God's purpose can never and will never fail. Paul says that true believers were predestined by God "according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11); that ultimately we were elected and saved by God, not because of our works or anything in us, but because of Him who calls (cf. Rom. 9:11). Jehovah "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (2 Tim. 1:9).

When false teachers deny the sovereignty of God and replace it with an Arminian, semi-Pelagian or open theism concept of sovereignty, they destroy the very foundation upon which the certainty of the gospel rests. They teach that God wants to save and tries to save, but the foundation of salvation really rests with sinful man. The great Reformed scholar B. B. Warfield points out that the teacher who embraces Arminianism cannot even honestly recite the Apostle's Creed. He writes, "When one says, he tells us, 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty,' he means it with reserve for in the domain of man's moral choices under grace, man himself is almighty, according to God's self-limitation in making man in his image and after his likeness. God himself, he goes on to declare, has a creed which begins: 'I believe in man, almighty in his choices.'"⁴⁹⁷ Because the false teacher denies the biblical definition of God's sovereignty, he also denies the immediacy of saving grace and the supernaturalism of salvation. He will argue that there are supernatural elements in it; but ultimately everything boils down to man's autonomous, sovereign choice. Logically, this view is the total rejection of Christianity. "Beware of false prophets."

False teachers, in their attempt to justify their unbiblical concept of sinful man having a completely free autonomous will, have dethroned God. They have stripped God of His omnipotence. Pink notes this tragic fact when he writes, "The God of the twentieth century is a helpless, effeminate being who commands the respect of no really thoughtful man. The God of the popular mind is the creation of a maudlin sentimentality. The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than of awe-inspiring reverence. To say that God the Father has purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died and that God the Holy Spirit is now seeking to win the world to Christ; when as a matter of common observation, it is apparent that the great majority of our fellow-men are dying in sin, and passing into a hopeless eternity: is to say that God the Father is *disappointed*, that God the Son is *dissatisfied*, and that God the Holy Spirit is *defeated*."⁴⁹⁸

Because the false teacher rejects the biblical understanding of God's sovereignty, he does not speak of salvation as something accomplished and applied by God. Instead, redemption is viewed as two-sided; God does His part with the work of Christ and man makes this redemption effective by appropriating it. This is a *synergistic* view of salvation. Faith is not viewed as a gift of God (cf. Eph. 2:8), but as an autonomous *work* of man. In this scheme, people are not saved

⁴⁹⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 84-85.

⁴⁹⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, 20.

by or *through* faith (in the biblical view faith is an instrument which lays hold of Christ), but rather *because* of faith. In other words, they posit that God rewards those who seek Jesus and believe with salvation *because of what they did*. According to this view, the Savior does not really save anyone. The decisive act in salvation is made man's autonomous choice of Christ. The all-powerful resurrected Lord is helpless to save sinners and thus must sit and wait for men to exercise their free will. According to the false (Arminian or semi-Pelagian) teacher, it is up to man whether or not he will justify himself by making a salvation decision. The effectiveness of God's grace as well as God's sovereign dispensing of His grace is entirely limited by or dependent upon man's "free" will. The very common idea in our day that God has somehow voluntarily ceased to be sovereign over certain aspects of His creation has resulted in a gospel every bit as false and soul-damning as the faith-works synergism of Roman Catholicism. "Beware of false prophets." Any teacher who preaches an Arminian or semi-Pelagian gospel is a dangerous false prophet who has no business whatsoever entering into a pulpit. To sit under such preaching is to place oneself in extreme spiritual danger.

Third, the false prophet presents a false gospel. The great ignorance of doctrine and negative view of theology that characterizes much of modern "evangelicalism" is a direct result of the work of false teachers. Many pastors do not understand many doctrines that are central to the gospel such as justification, expiation, propitiation, redemption and reconciliation. Consequently, people are basically told that Christ somehow died for everybody. The gospel has, in the main, been abandoned for what are considered more practical matters such as having a fulfilling life. When attempts are made to preach the gospel, the message is grossly deficient and heretical. Some of the characteristics of false gospel preaching are as follows.

The preaching of the law has been largely replaced with either a vague general reference to sin, or with a hedonistic offer of the gospel. Paul said that "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The preaching of the moral law shows us the utter sinfulness of sin, our complete guilt and unworthiness before God and our total helplessness to do anything about our own salvation. Paul says he "would not have known sin except through the law" (Rom. 7:7). The more we see the specific requirements of the moral law, the more we will understand the righteousness of God and the fact that our only hope is Christ's sacrificial death and imputed righteousness. But, tragically, due to the influence of dispensationalism on evangelicalism, the detailed, searching, convicting preaching of the law has been replaced with a detached, general appeal: "Do you admit you are a sinner?" Most people would answer "yes." They know that they are not perfect. But there is no strong conviction or sense of despair in such preaching. Moreover, if the moral law in the Old Testament was arbitrary and not based on God's nature and character and is abrogated in the New Testament era, as dispensationalists allege, then why is the cross even necessary? Without a biblical view of the law, there is really no reason why Jesus had to live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death on the cross. After all, Christ came to *satisfy* the demands of God's holy law with regard to obedience and punishment. If people deny the absolute, unchanging character of God's moral law, then eventually they will deny the biblical doctrine of justification, for an antinomian version of Christianity has no real need of any judicial act of God to achieve salvation. "The Gospel has such respect to the Law of God, and the latter is so much the reason and ground of the former, and so essential to the wisdom and glory of it, that it cannot be understood by him who is ignorant of the Law: consequently, our idea and apprehension of the Gospel will be erroneous and wrong just so far as we have wrong notions of

God's Law."⁴⁹⁹ Perhaps this explains why the modern "gospel" has largely degenerated into: "Ask Jesus to come into your heart."

The false teacher presents Christ as a Baal god who came to give people bigger crops and a more fertile livestock. Contemporary preaching is often done in the midst of an atmosphere of entertainment with rock bands, country singers, and emotional music. The presentation of the gospel is not adorned with the doctrine of God, the law or God's wrath against sin, but is accompanied with hedonistic promises about a prosperous, fulfilling life. Jesus is set forth as a cosmic Santa Claus or a mere fire escape from the great tribulation. The music, excitement and sociological pressures are followed by an appeal to "ask Jesus in" or "accept Christ as your personal Savior." "Accept Christ, and have a better life now, more money, a better car, a bigger house and more self-esteem." Consequently, people walk the isle, pray a prayer and sign a card, often with no real sense of sin or no real understanding of the gospel. They know nothing about justification by faith, the substitutionary atonement or propitiation. The first thing that is needed for biblical faith is a true knowledge about the facts of the gospel. But contemporary preaching is so shallow and so filled with worthless, humanistic gimmicks and emotional stories that people are not given enough biblical information to grasp the genuine object of faith. People end up having faith in faith or trusting in some subjective mystical experience. The preacher may have meant well and may have believed that he was really preaching the gospel; but his message has left people on the broad path without them even knowing it.

The false preacher has a heretical understanding of the effects of the fall upon man and teaches that men are saved by their own "decision for Christ." The Bible teaches that men are fallen, lost and depraved because of Adam's sin (Rom. 6:12 ff.; 1 Cor. 15:21; Gen. 8:21; Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Jn. 3:6; Eph. 2:3). It teaches that man is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-5), spiritually blind (Isa. 6:9-10; Jn. 8:43-44, 47; 1 Cor. 2:14), completely helpless (Rom. 5:6; Ezek. 16:6) and thus totally incapable of saving himself (Jn. 1:4-5; 3:19-20; Rom. 10:20; cf. Isa. 65:1), meeting God half-way or even taking the first step toward God. The false teacher says that man is not dead, only sick; that man's decision causes God to act and regenerate him; and that man begins the work of conversion. In this false system grace is no longer the unmerited favor of God to those who deserve to perish, but the aid of God so that man can save himself through an autonomous act of the will. As we noted before, the false prophet teaches that man's free will is the key which unchains God and allows Him to help man. In other words, God only helps those who first help themselves.

But the Scriptures teach that Jesus merited salvation in the fullest sense of the term by His sinless life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. He sits enthroned as King at the right hand of God. Christ sends the Holy Spirit to work directly on the hearts of His elect, regenerating dead hearts, enabling men to believe the gospel and repent of their sins (Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:11-13; Ac. 16:13-14; Jn. 1:13; Rom. 9:16; Heb. 7:24-25). Jesus said, "The wind [the Holy Spirit] blows where it wishes.... So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn. 3:8; cf. Jn. 17:8). Those who believe in Christ "were born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn. 1:13). Our Lord said, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16). "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (Jn. 6:44).

The false teacher tells man that the ground of his salvation is not the person and work of Christ, but ultimately the personal choice of an autonomous man. When people express doubts about their salvation, they are instructed to look back at their decision for Christ. God is presented as a great resource that man can tap at will. God exists to serve and glorify man instead

⁴⁹⁹ Samuel Hopkins, as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 358.

of the other way around. The doctrine of salvation is turned upside down and God is made man's servant and instrument. At every step the initiative belongs to man and not God.

The false teacher will say that Christ's death did not actually secure anyone's salvation since God can only choose those people who first choose Christ. Thus, when a typical evangelical is asked why he has a title to eternal life, he does not speak about Christ's dying as a substitute for His people or about God declaring sinners righteous on the basis of Christ's work, but rather will say, "I know I am saved because I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior" or "I asked Jesus to come into my heart." The false teacher reduces the gospel from the objective work of Christ, sovereignly bestowed by the resurrected, all-powerful King upon the elect, to sovereign man letting Christ subjectively dwell in his heart. These very common expressions "accept Christ" and "let Christ come into your heart" are not found in Scripture and were never used by our Lord, the apostles or the New Testament evangelists. Evangelicals will appeal to Revelation 3:20 where the Savior stands at the door and knocks to be let in as a justification for such appeals; but, the context clearly indicates that Jesus is asking backslidden *Christians* to repent and reestablish proper fellowship. This passage has *absolutely nothing* to do with evangelism.

Another passage used to justify modern evangelical methods is John 1:12: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." What does it mean to receive Christ? If one studies the gospel of John, does one find Christ and the apostles inviting people to receive Jesus into their heart? In the gospel of John, receiving Christ is synonymous with believing in Christ. Jesus said, "I have come in My Father's name and you do not receive Me.... For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words" (Jn. 5:43, 46-47). The only way to receive Christ is to believe in Him. To receive Christ is to believe the words which He speaks and the scriptural testimony regarding Him. Believing in Christ means trusting in Christ's person, character, work and word; one believes that Christ can carry out His promises. He can save to the uttermost. Receiving Christ is not a formula through which man sovereignly controls the Lord of lords and King of kings, but is a wholehearted trust in the divine-human mediator Jesus Christ. While, in the gospel of John, people are never exhorted to receive Christ as their personal savior, the verb *pisteuo* (to believe) occurs 98 times. In evangelism, the Holy Spirit's emphasis should be our emphasis. There is nothing wrong with the phrase, "receive Christ," as long as it is biblically defined.

The biblical passages which refer to Christ dwelling in the believer are never used in the context of an evangelistic formula, but are always used in the context of Christian sanctification and assurance (read Rom. 8:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:5). Everyone who is regenerated and believes has the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ within. We are never told to invite Christ in, but rather to believe "in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not the works of the law" (Gal. 2:19). Inviting Jesus in sounds nice, but it is very different from believing in Christ.

The terminology of asking Jesus to come into the heart as a method of salvation is contrary to Scripture and the Protestant Reformation. The Bible emphasizes that Christ's work of redemption for His people is *objective*. His perfect obedience to the law and sacrificial death took place in history *outside* of the sinner. When a person believes in Christ, he is declared righteous by God the Father in the heavenly court. This also takes place *outside* the sinner. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the *result* of justification and not the cause of it. Thus, the terminology of inviting Jesus into the heart has nothing to do with justification. The indwelling of Christ's Spirit is not what justifies. The work of the Holy Spirit in man is that of regeneration,

effectual calling and sanctification. Modern evangelical methods of evangelism do not differentiate between an imputed righteousness (justification) and an infused righteousness (sanctification). Our Lord's objective work *for* His people is confused with His work *in* His people. This is the great error of Roman Catholicism. Preaching and doctrine today is so shallow and unbiblical that redemption is seen merely as some undefined mystical existential relationship with Jesus that we sovereignly initiate. The false prophet substitutes a man-centered subjectivism for the true, objective, forensic nature of justification. This teaching is rank heresy, even though it is very common among evangelicals. "Beware of false prophets." Be on guard and watch for their doctrine can devour your soul.

The false preacher does not preach the necessity of repentance. Men are told that they can receive Jesus as Savior, while receiving Him as Lord is not necessary to salvation. If a person wants to make the Redeemer Lord of his life down the road and lead a victorious life that is fine; but, it is wrong to insist on it. In fact, a number of prominent dispensational evangelical ministers and scholars have attacked the doctrine that repentance is necessary as a dangerous heresy. But what they call heresy is simply the historic Protestant position. That repentance is part of the gospel is proven by the following considerations.

a) The message of the apostles was "believe on *the Lord* Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Ac. 16:31). Paul said, "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ *the Lord*" (2 Cor. 4:5). In the book of Acts the word "Savior" appears only twice (5:31; 13:23), while the title "Lord" occurs 92 times. The most commonly quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament are Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 2:7, both of which speak of Christ's exaltation and lordship. Paul says that Christians are to confess with the mouth "the Lord Jesus" (Rom. 10:9). The apostles and New Testament evangelists preached the lordship of Christ and obviously expected sinners to believe in Him as both Savior and Lord. The modern idea that we can only trust in part of Christ or divide Him up like a pie and take what we want so we can continue a life of sin is a deadly doctrine. We must believe in Jesus as He is revealed in the Scriptures. He must embrace Him as Prophet, Priest *and King*. We must look to His humiliation as well as His exaltation. The one leads directly to the other. They are organically connected. If we trust Him as Lord, then as a result we will repent and lay down the weapons of our warfare against Him. The antinomian false teacher who denies the necessity of repentance implicitly denies the resurrection, exaltation and enthronement of the Messiah.

b) When Paul described the gospel message that he preached, he expressed two separate elements. The apostle taught publicly, "testifying to Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ac. 20:21). There is faith which is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). This faith (which includes understanding, assent and trust) lays hold of the Redeemer and thus man is justified *by faith alone*. But saving faith never remains by itself. Although faith is *not* repentance, conversion or obedience to God's law, it inevitably leads to all these things. God always follows the gift of faith (which is the instrument by which we lay hold of Christ and all His saving benefits) with the gift of repentance (which is a fruit of our justification). The antinomian false prophets do not seem to be able to distinguish between justification (salvation in the narrow sense) and salvation in the broad sense (which includes all the other saving graces such as repentance and sanctification).

The false teacher not only turns faith into a work by making it an autonomous choice of man instead of a gift of God, but also turns right around and essentially denies that justification immediately leads to sanctification. They may give lip service to the narrow gate, but they essentially deny the narrow way. However, God has ordained that although we are saved solely

by Christ apart from any works of our own. True faith (that flows from a regenerate heart) always results in repentance, becoming a disciple of Christ, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, doing good works and persevering to the end of life. The false prophet essentially denies the teaching of Romans 6 that union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection results in a sanctified life for every true believer. How could anyone teach that we can continue a life of slavery to sin and still be a Christian when Paul says that we have died to sin's reigning power (Rom. 6:2, 6, 11)? The apostle answers both legalists and antinomians by teaching that the person justified by Christ is sanctified by Him as well. Justification and sanctification cannot be separated. There is simply no such thing as a Christian who has been justified, yet has not also been made holy by the power of our Lord's death and resurrection. The typical modern "evangelical" Arminian preacher is so full of heresy and gross error that his theological system is an irrational, unbiblical mess. "Beware of false prophets."

c) The Scriptures teach that people who habitually engage in wicked behavior are *not* Christians. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Paul says "such *were* [past tense] some of you." Many people in the Corinthian church had lived a lifestyle characterized by sinful behavior, but once they were converted, that wicked lifestyle was put off. Paul says that believers should not even eat with professing Christians who engage in such wicked behavior. "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person" (1 Cor. 5:11). Hodge writes, "A man professing to be a Christian professes to renounce all of these sins; if he does not act consistently with his profession, he is not to be recognized as a Christian. We are not to do anything which would sanction the assumption that the offenses here referred to are tolerated by the gospel."⁵⁰⁰ Spurgeon concurs, "If the professed convert distinctly and deliberately declares that he knows the Lord's will, but does not mean to attend to it, you are not to pamper his presumptions, but it is your duty to assure him that he is not saved. Do not suppose that the Gospel is magnified or God-glorified by going to the world...and telling them that they may be saved at this moment by simply 'accepting Christ' as their Savior, while they are wedded to their idols, and their hearts are still in love with sin. If I do so, I tell them a lie, pervert the Gospel, insult Christ, and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness."⁵⁰¹

We are not asserting that believers are intrinsically perfect, sinless or that their works are meritorious in any way. The Bible teaches that Christians are simultaneously sinful and justified, that even our best works are tainted with sin (cf. Lk. 17:10). We are saying, however, that the old, unconverted lifestyle of walking in darkness is broken and defeated by the work of the Spirit in us. As John writes, "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 Jn. 2:3-4). The person who continually walks in sin is lawless (cf. 1 Jn. 3:6), does not have a saving relationship to Christ (cf. 1 Jn. 3:6), is of the devil (cf. Jn. 3:9) and has not been born again. "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). In light of these and many other passages we wonder how today's anti-Lordship salvation

⁵⁰⁰ Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 [1857, 59]), 60.

⁵⁰¹ Charles Spurgeon, in *Today's Evangelism*, 25-26.

false teachers could pass off our precious Savior as a mere fire escape from hell. The idea that Jesus came so that we could have remission of sins and still live like the heathen is satanic to the core. "Beware of false prophets."

Fourth, the false prophet often is a master of using trickery and deceit in his teaching ministry. It is important that we understand how many false prophets operate. Some of their deceptive tactics are as follows. They will focus on passages that *appear* to support their position, while ignoring the many passages that refute their theology. Behind every false teacher lies an erroneous hermeneutic. Every false teacher, from Romanists, Federal Vision advocates to dispensational antinomians, refuses to use the analogy of Scripture when formulating doctrine. A man can appear quite orthodox, but if he does not preach the whole counsel of God regarding salvation then he has broadened the gate and way. Often they will use old, well-defined and accepted theological terms with a completely new and unique meaning. For example, modernists will still speak about the glorious resurrection of Christ; but by this expression, they do not mean what the Bible means. They do not believe in or speak of a literal real bodily resurrection that took place in history. Similarly, the Auburn Avenue heretic will speak about the wonderful Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, but his definition of faith is a *working* faith. Faith is not simply a mere instrument, but is inclusive of good works as well. Therefore, his doctrine has more in common with the Council of Trent than the Westminster Standards. When he says that he subscribes to the Westminster Confession of Faith he is not being honest. False teachers are very adept at equivocating.

Many false teachers will hold to teachings that are contradictory or mutually exclusive. The anti-Lordship salvation dispensationalist will insist that we are saved by grace alone but also will insist that faith is not a gift; repentance is not a gift; and perseverance in sanctification or a continued trust in Christ is not a gift. In other words, getting saved is really primarily a work of man. Many of the Federal Vision false shepherds will insist that they accept justification by faith alone, but then will completely contradict that statement within minutes. The tactic of speaking out of both sides of one's mouth has been used very successfully by the Auburn Avenue heretics. Many professing Christians cling to their statements of orthodoxy as proof that these men are still true prophets of God. But when their teaching as a whole is carefully examined, their errors are exposed. Don't be deceived by double talk, equivocations and deceptive language.

False prophets are experts at imposing their unbiblical presuppositions upon passages in the Bible that are not in accord with their system. For example, even though John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and the apostles preach the necessity of repentance, the anti-Lordship salvation dispensationalists argue that such passages only apply to a former dispensation or can only be applied to the Jews. When the Bible explicitly says that the unregenerate are spiritually dead and blind and unable to choose Christ without a prior work of regeneration, the Arminian false prophet still insists that man must have a free will in spiritual matters. Often humanistic philosophical ideas are imposed on the text of Scripture without the false teacher even being aware of it. Isaiah spoke of such blind teachers when he said, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20).

If orthodox pastors and Christians begin to point out the false doctrine of these wolves, the false teacher will appeal to the peace of the church, Christian love and the necessity of Christian unity to avoid scrutiny and church discipline. Such tactics have been very effective. Often in the modern era, men who attempt to deal with such false prophets are hated and accused of being unloving. The mushy, uninformed middle historically has almost always sided with false teachers because such men seem so nice and so loving. People who do not understand

theology wonder why these false teachers are being attacked. Tragically, we are living in a time when professing Christians are exceptionally ignorant and want to accept and welcome virtually anyone who claims to be a Christian. But men who resist the truth and teachers with corrupt minds must be opposed with true apostolic doctrine (cf. 2 Tim. 3:6-10). John writes, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 9-11). If we treat false teachers as true Christians and do not oppose them, then we increase their opportunities of doing spiritual harm to others and they will never be able to see their own errors. The “compassion” of much modern evangelical and Reformed churches is cruel, unbiblical and dangerous. “Beware of false prophets.” Our love of man cannot be separated from our love of God and truth. A love of that which is good and true cannot exist without an intense hatred of evil and all that opposes Christ.

The present state of the modern church in general is one of crisis. Many pastors and Christians are ignorant, weak and ineffective—both personally and socially. The church cannot be a salt and light to modern culture until it repents, casts out the false preachers and returns to the great Christian truths rediscovered during the Protestant Reformation. All the talk today about Jesus, a better life now, church growth, building expansions and various exciting programs is all worthless without the true gospel and the call to discipleship found in the Sermon on the Mount. May God bring revival and reformation to our land. If He does not, we may be entering a new dark age of ignorance and superstition in the guise of Christian piety.

Some Applications

In our examination of false prophets, we have seen that the greatest danger to professing Christians is their teaching. Their teaching can not only infect and destroy individual professors of Christ, but can also destroy whole churches and denominations. Therefore, it is important that we take steps to protect ourselves and our churches from these ravenous wolves. There are a number of things that can be done.

First, after examining the deceptive, subtle methodology and content of the false prophet’s teaching, we can see the vital necessity for all professing Christians to carefully study the Bible and theology. When believers have a solid understanding of truth, they have the ability to distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit, the orthodox and the heterodox. “When the understanding is dominated by the Word the whole soul is ‘full of light,’ so that all its faculties are under its beneficent influence: the conscience being informed, the affections turned to their legitimate object, the will moved in the right direction. In God’s light we ‘see light’ (Psalm xxxvi, 9) perceiving the difference between good and evil, the things to be sought and those to be avoided.”⁵⁰²

The reason why false teachers have such a wide audience today among professing Christians is the simple fact that people know hardly anything about theology or biblical interpretation. Today most people spend virtually all their spare time watching television, playing video games or engaging in other frivolous entertainments. Consequently, when a preacher comes along with some new idea that is heretical and dangerous, the people accept it

⁵⁰² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 372.

because of the “authority,” charisma and intellect of the pastor instead of the authority of God’s Word. Popery, modernism and cults can only prosper in the soil of ignorance.

The Protestant leaders of the first and second Reformation periods understood the importance of doctrine and thus the greatest theologians of these eras produced creeds and confessions (e.g., Heidelberg, Belgic, First and Second Helvetic and the Westminster Standards) so that the flock could learn the whole counsel of God in an organized, systematic form. We would do well to familiarize ourselves with these precious documents and teach them to our children to inoculate ourselves against the new, exciting, but devious false shepherds that arise from time to time.

Second, our Lord is teaching us by implication the importance of attending a faithful church. No believer who embraces the Reformed faith or biblical Christianity should attend a church that teaches or tolerates Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, antinomianism, modernism, corrupt worship (i.e. high church or celebrative worship) or the Federal Vision heresy. “Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err, and destroy the way of thy paths” (Isa. 3:12). Paul wrote, “Now I urge you brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17).

If people attend a church of compromise and declension, then it is virtually inevitable that they will compromise and decline spiritually. The deceptive systems of error, like the first lie itself, generally have something that is fascinating and desired by the sinful flesh. The only safe course, therefore, is separation from such corruption. A corrupt church may not make obvious bold departures from the truth. But rather their teaching and leadership causes the flock to stray gradually. The deviation from the straight and narrow path is scarcely noticed until it is too late and apostasy has gained a solid foothold. Jesus said, “Take heed what you hear” (Mk. 4:24). All instruction is not toward life and godliness. Teachers of evil, time servers and ministers of Satan abound. We have seen a steady decline in faithfulness in the last generation among Presbyterian communions which are regarded as “conservative.” These compromisers with sin and heresy cannot be trusted to lead the flock until they repent and return to the old paths. They subscribe to the Westminster Standards with crossed fingers and tragically most people love to have it so. The spirit of humanistic tolerance, antinomian love and post-enlightenment pluralism is guiding much of the leadership of these corrupt communions. “Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines” (Heb. 13:9). “[W]e should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Eph. 4:14). Beware of seminaries and denominations whose fruit grows more rotten and corrupt over time. “By their fruit you will know them.”

Third, it is crucial that churches and denominations not only identify false teachers in churches, seminaries and colleges and point them out to the flock; but, they also must be willing to discipline them and cast them out of the church. Paul says that such men should be deposed from the ministry: “A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Tit. 3:10-11). The word translated “reject” (the imperative *paraitore*) means that the person is to be dismissed or removed from membership in the Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Thess. 3:14; Mt. 18:17-18). The apostle tells us that refutations and warnings are not enough when the false teacher is obstinate. Church discipline must be applied in order to protect the flock from these hungry wolves.

Paul teaches that the church has a responsibility to stop false teachers from spreading their heresy among God’s people. He writes, “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been

taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers [i.e. those who contradict Scripture]. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake" (Tit. 1:9-11; cf. 12-16). When the apostle says that their mouths must be stopped he uses a verb (*epistomizein*) which has the primary meaning of to "stop the mouth either with a bridle or muzzle or gag."⁵⁰³ Such men must be silenced; they must not be allowed to teach. If they persist, they must be excommunicated. Gangrenous limbs must be removed to preserve the health and life of the body. Calvin writes,

A good pastor ought therefore to be on the watch, so as not to give silent permission to wicked and dangerous doctrines to make gradual progress, or to allow wicked men an opportunity of spreading them. But it may be asked, "How is it possible for a bishop to constrain obstinate and self-willed men to be silent? For such persons, even though they are vanquished in argument, still do not hold their peace; and it frequently happens that, the more manifestly they are refuted and vanquished, they become the more insolent; for not only is their malice strengthened and inflamed, but they give themselves up to indolence." I reply, when they have been smitten down by the sword of God's word, and overwhelmed by the force of the truth, the Church may command them to be silent; and if they persevere, they may at least be banished from the society of believers, so that they shall have no opportunity of doing harm.⁵⁰⁴

As travelers on the hard and narrow path, let us beware of those who pervert the truth and seduce professing Christians to the broad path that leads to destruction. Although they deceive many, they do not deceive God. These false teachers who produce bad fruit will be cut down, and cast into the fire. May God sharpen our perception of the truth and enable us to identify those things that are a great danger to our souls.

Chapter 36: The Danger of Self-Deception

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Mt. 7:21-23).

After warning His disciples of false prophets, Jesus turns His attention toward self-deception. There are people who are fairly orthodox in their profession of Christ who are not true Christians at all. We are called in this sobering, heart-piercing application not only to beware of false teachers, but also to beware of deceiving ourselves. Of all the applications designed to show the indispensable necessity of obedience to Christ's commands this one has the most force. This one strikes the most fear in the spiritually sensitive soul. Here we are called to examine ourselves to see whether we are really in the faith. Here we are transported to the final judgment to witness this tragic, terrifying scene where nominal Christians and false professors are confronted by Christ Himself for their lack of faithfulness. A time is coming when we shall all

⁵⁰³ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:600.

⁵⁰⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 298.

stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Then everyone will know if their faith in Christ was real or counterfeit. Self-deceived and false professors are even more dangerous than false prophets because their state is the fruit of their own depraved hearts. It comes from inner corruption. A profession of faith in Christ is not real if it is not accompanied by the *fruit* of faith, which is obedience to God's revealed will. By way of introduction, there are some things to note about this passage.

First, this pericope continues our Lord's pattern of instruction found throughout the sermon. Jesus begins each section with either an imperative (e.g., "Do not lay up..."; "Judge not..."; "Ask..."; "Beware...") or a statement of fact, truth or reality (e.g., "No one can serve two masters...") and then follows the imperative or statement with supporting arguments, illustrations or amplifications to drive home the main point. In this passage the Savior says that not all professors of Christ will go to heaven, but only those who confess *and obey*. He proves this point by showing us a brief dialogue between hypocritical professors and the Redeemer on the day of judgment. This glimpse of the final judgment is designed to obliterate any idea that His message of salvation through belief in His name tolerates or excuses antinomianism. There is no statement of our Lord that is better designed to refute the idea that salvation by grace through faith alone leads to licentiousness than this one.

Second, the teaching of this section reiterates from a different perspective Jesus' teaching on the law near the beginning of the sermon and strongly reinforces it. The statement, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20), is now examined from the perspective of the final judgment. The disciples who ignored the Savior's teaching on the law and did not practice the righteousness of the kingdom will be in for a shocking surprise on the day of judgment. They will take their place with the scribes and Pharisees in the outer darkness.

Third, it is almost certain that verse 21 and following are meant to be viewed in light of the warning on false prophets which immediately precedes it. The false prophets talked the talk, but did not walk the walk. They produced followers who reflected their erroneous preaching. The pattern of false teachers in the Old Testament was to preach sermons that tolerated and reinforced wicked behavior. The requirements of the law, as well as the sanctions of the law, were ignored. Moreover, the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day had externalized the moral law to make it easier to obey. They also nullified many laws by their human traditions. They produced people who were very religious, but who were not godly in their behavior. Given the context and Christ's charge of lawlessness to these phony Christians, we must especially be on guard against defective preaching on the law, repentance and sanctification. Modern "easy believism" leads to antinomianism and multitudes that will be cast into hell on the final day.

Fourth, it is important that we interpret this passage within the narrow and broad context of Scripture for this teaching is used as a proof-text for salvation by works or human merit. The point is made that the emphasis here is not on believing, but on doing. It is argued that we do not have a "faith alone" message for justification, but a faith plus works message. This understanding must be rejected for the following reasons.

The immediate context is on the importance of entering the narrow gate and walking on the narrow way. As we have seen, it is obvious that Jesus is not speaking about salvation in the narrow sense, but is discussing the whole life of discipleship. This involves the fruit of justification which is sanctification and a life of service to Christ. Our Lord's audience no doubt contained many people who were attracted to Jesus because of the miracles and excitement surrounding Him, but who were not really committed to Him. Consequently, the Savior wants

these professors to understand that faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:20). It is not genuine; it is not the kind of faith that truly lays hold of Christ and is saving in nature.

The Redeemer, therefore, is not denigrating or contradicting the gospel message of “faith alone” in relation of justification; but rather, like the previous section is pointing out that a tree which produces bad fruit is a bad tree. John Gill writes, “This, as it may regard private Christians, intends not merely outward obedience to the will of God, declared in his law, nor barely subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel; but more especially faith in Christ for life and salvation; which is the source of all true evangelical obedience, and without which nothing is acceptable to God. He that seeth the son, looks unto him, ventures on him, commits himself to him, trusts in him, relies on him, and believes on him for righteousness, salvation, and eternal life, he it is that does the will of the father, and he only.”⁵⁰⁵

That Christ is speaking of an obedience resulting from saving faith is proven by His statement in verse 23: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” The word “know” here refers to a saving, loving relationship, not a mere intellectual recognition. Those who never repented and continued in a lifestyle characterized by sin or lawlessness were never truly Christians and were never really part of God’s family. In other words, real faith always results in a lifestyle characterized by obedience or faithfulness to God’s revealed will.

This interpretation is supported by what immediately follows in verses 24 through 27. In verses 21 to 23 Jesus speaks against a verbal profession that does not lead to a changed life. John, in his first epistle, says that such people do not give any evidence of regeneration or conversion (1 Jn. 1:6-7; 2:3-5, 9, 15, 19; 3:3-4, 6-7, 14, 24; 4:7-8, 20-21; 5:1-5). In verses 24 to 27 our Lord speaks about people who hear His message, but do not obey it. They have an intellectual knowledge of the truth, but no real trust or commitment to it. Both of these final paragraphs teach the same truth from different perspectives. The right response is to hear, confess *and obey*, while the wrong response is to disobey or lead a life characterized by lawlessness. Therefore, instead of the Romanist or Auburn Avenue idea that good works are somehow involved in our justification, the Savior is teaching us to look at the fruit of our lives to see if we were ever really redeemed to begin with. The full salvation message is believe, repent and *follow Christ*. If we are not walking in the Spirit and endeavoring to follow Jesus the rest of our lives, then we will be cast into hell on the day of judgment.

This relationship between true faith and obedience is clearly set forth by the author of Hebrews: “And to whom did He swear that they would no enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief” (3:18-19). In Scripture there is an intimate connection between unbelief and disobedience; this is always the case. It happened when Adam fell from God; the Israelites rebelled in the wilderness and when the vast multitudes that first followed Jesus progressively fell away leaving only 120 disciples at the time of Pentecost. The message of the Bible is to trust and obey. Consequently, Jesus is not emphasizing works at the expense of faith or teaching that works must be added to faith to be justified, but that true faith always leads to obedience.

Fifth, the expression “kingdom of heaven” can refer to the kingdom of grace that Jesus set up during His first advent. Anyone who truly believes in Christ enters into the new order of things that succeeded the Old Covenant era. Because our Lord is discussing the final judgment, however, and uses the future tense (will enter, *eiscleusetai*) the meaning here is the eschatological salvation at the final judgment. On that day all genuine believers will be openly acknowledged and acquitted by Christ, received into heaven and in their glorified state will be

⁵⁰⁵ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:72.

fully freed from all sin and misery. This is our final or ultimate salvation at the end of history. Given the fact that we are discussing a dialogue on the day of judgment, there is horror and urgency on the part of those who appeal to their confession and their mighty works before the Judge.

The Self-Deceived Profession

In our Lord's assertion about a mere verbal profession and the dialogue at the final judgment that follows, we are given a description of things that men rely on for salvation that are not enough by themselves. These are things that can be the actual experience of people who are not really Christians at all; who are actually on the broad path that leads to destruction. This is a passage that every professing Christian must study carefully and meditate upon often. We need to understand what Jesus says to make sure that we ourselves are not living in self-deception regarding the most important issue we face. We should be alarmed that people who say and do many religious and "good" things that seem inconsistent with being unregenerate are in reality wicked, damned reprobates. There are many people who seem so righteous, but are really in complete darkness. May God enable us to examine ourselves in light of this astounding passage. There are some things that these reprobates say that merit our attention.

An Orthodox Confession without a Holy Life

Note, these people acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. They address Jesus as "Lord, Lord." The repetition of this title indicates urgency in the petition. "The word is repeated to show their importunity, sense of danger, the confusion they are in, the wretched disappointment they will have; and therefore speak as persons amazed and confounded, having expected they would have been the first persons that should be admitted to heaven."⁵⁰⁶ "Trembling with fear they pronounce this title with awe and reverence, pouring into it far more meaning than they had ever done before the arrival of this crisis of deepest despair."⁵⁰⁷ These words in this context carry the sense of a desperate man who is begging for his life. While alive these people spoke these words "as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal"; but now is the final day when all secrets are revealed, they are repeated with fear and trembling.

There is much that we can learn from the use of these terms in this particular context. As an address to Jesus, the word "Lord" (*Kyrie*) is quite common. It is used by close disciples as well as complete strangers. Sometimes it carries no theological significance and is simply a title of respect like our word "sir." Among the English of old, people of an inferior status would address superiors or men who had great social standing as "lord." At the very least, then, these professors are being polite and courteous as they speak to Christ.

There are a number of reasons, however, why the word "Lord" in this context means much more than a title of respect. For one, the Redeemer is sitting upon His throne as the judge of all men who ever lived. This can only mean that Jesus is the Son of God and equal to the Father. Moreover, the false professor reveals a certain amount of theological sophistication when he says that he prophesied, cast out demons and did many wonders *in Christ's name*. This can only mean that he ascribed ultimate power and authority to Jesus. Our Lord is not only supreme

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, 1:73.

⁵⁰⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 376.

eschatological judge, but also the source of miracle-working power. He is the Son of God and Savior of mankind. In addition, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostolic church knew exactly what it meant by the title “Lord” when speaking of the Messiah. It meant that, as the divine-human mediator, He had all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18). It also meant that Christ was LORD or Jehovah (“the LORD” [*ho Kyrios*] is the common Greek Septuagint translation of the divine name “Yahweh” [or “Jehovah”]).

Consequently, as shocking as it may seem, these false professors have an accurate, orthodox confession of Jesus Christ. During their life, they confessed Jesus as Lord and they defined the term “Lord” in a biblical manner. These people would probably easily have mixed with true Christians and may have been notable members of various conservative Bible-believing churches. When they prayed in public or private, they sounded just as sincere, orthodox and fervent as a genuine believer. Thus, Christ here teaches that a verbal profession about His true person is not enough to enter the kingdom of heaven if it is not accompanied by genuine repentance and a life focused on the mortification of sin. Orthodoxy in doctrine is useless if it is only an intellectual exercise with no real trust or commitment. A person can be the most orthodox, theologically astute person in the world; but, he will perish if he does not have true faith that results in sincere obedience.

This point is rather obvious when we see that demons in the gospel accounts know the truth about Jesus and confess it openly. They address Christ as “the Holy One of God” (Mk. 1:24); “the Son of God” (Mt. 8:29; Mk. 3:11) and “the Son of the Most High God” (Mk. 5:7). These expressions identify the Savior as the divine Son of God. In Acts the demons possessing a servant girl cried out after Paul and Silas, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation” (15:18). When a Jewish exorcist attempted to cast out an evil spirit using Jesus’ name as a magic formula the demon responded, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” (Ac. 19:15). The demons know and believe that Christ is Lord; that God is the Almighty and that Paul is God’s messenger who preaches the way of salvation. They know all about the truth and are willing to admit what is true; but they are evil. They are God’s enemies. When James wants to refute the dead, phony, inadequate faith of church members who refuse to do good works he says, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble” (2:19). The demons believe the truth because they have firsthand knowledge of it. They also have no problem confessing the truth about God, Jesus and the gospel; but they certainly are not trusting in Christ as Savior and Lord. An intellectual assent to the truth is the lowest act of faith. It is something that even demons and pagans can do. Bare assent to the articles of Christianity does not prove true faith. There must be assent and trust. Manton writes, “A man may be right in opinion and judgment, but of vile affections; and a carnal Christian is in as great danger as a pagan, or idolater, or heretic; for though his judgment be sound, yet his manners are heterodox and heretical. True believing is not an act of the understanding only, but a work of ‘all the heart,’ Acts viii.37.... Therefore do not please yourselves in naked assents; these cost nothing, and are worth nothing. There is ‘a form of knowledge,’ Rom. ii.20, as well as ‘a form of godliness,’ 2 Tim. iii.5. ‘A form of knowledge’ is nothing but an idea or module of truth in the brains, when there is no power or virtue to change and transform the heart.”⁵⁰⁸ Do you have faith that goes beyond devils, pagans and hypocrites? Have you truly believed in Christ and repented of your sins? Are you living a holy and humble life of submission to Jesus? Many people who call themselves Christians and have a good profession will hear those terrifying words, “I never knew you; depart from Me.” If we are to be

⁵⁰⁸ Thomas Manton, *James* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1693] 1962), 240-241.

saved we must believe, confess and *practice* the truth. Daily, we should contemplate the day of judgment. We must often examine ourselves and judge our lives to make sure that our faith and profession are real, true and sincere.

Although a knowledge, assent and confession of the truths of the gospel are insufficient by themselves, we do not want to give the impression that they are not important. No one can be saved who does not first know and give assent to the biblical truths regarding Christ's person and work. Anyone who does not accept what Scripture says about Jesus' deity, sinlessness, sacrificial death, true humanity and glorious resurrection whether Unitarian, modernist, Jewish, Muslim or atheist are obviously going to go to hell. There is no question about that. In a sense, such people are worse than demons that "believe and tremble." Make no mistake; knowledge of orthodox doctrine is absolutely essential if one is to become a Christian. We must not use this passage as a proof text for "life" over doctrine. We must embrace the historical facts of the gospel as well as a biblical interpretation of these facts if we are going to be a Christian. Christianity can never be separated from the truths set forth in God's holy Word. There is no such thing as a Christian who does not believe all of it. Jesus said to the Jews, "If you do not believe that I am He you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24). "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son" (2 Jn. 9). Anyone that departs from the biblical teaching about Christ or the truths that come from the Savior does *not* have fellowship with God. True knowledge precedes assent, trust and repentance.

We also do not want to denigrate confessing Christ. Jesus spoke of the necessity of confessing Him before men (Mt. 10:32; Lk. 12:8). If we are unwilling to confess Him before others, He will not acknowledge us before His Father. Paul says that confession with the mouth accompanies believing in the heart (Rom. 10:9) and that "every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11). John tells us, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God" (1 Jn. 4:15). Paul concurs, "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). In light of our passage this means that no one can *truly* believe and *sincerely* confess that Christ is God manifest in the flesh unless he is regenerated and enlightened by the Holy Spirit (see Mt. 16:17; 1 Jn. 4:2-3). It is absolutely essential that we publicly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Everyone who wants to go to heaven must confess that Jesus is Lord and God. No one, not one person who refuses to confess Christ as Lord will go to heaven. But there are people who say it who do not really mean it. Consequently, not all who confess Christ will enter the kingdom of heaven.

It is frightening and sobering to think that there are multitudes of people who look at Christianity as just another interesting philosophy. They examine it. They like it from an intellectual point of view; they think that it is logical, coherent and that it meets their needs. But all of this is merely an intellectual exercise. There is not a heartfelt agonizing over sin that flows from a regenerate heart; there is no real desire to integrate all of Christ into all of life. Jesus and His teachings are placed in a little side compartment of life while self remains on the throne. While lip service is given to the Savior, an examination of life reveals one's true priorities. There is a habitual pattern of refusing to bow the knee to Christ by obeying His law Word. When the person is confronted with the choice between his little idols and following God's moral law, the idols usually win. This scenario is very common in our day. It explains why all the polls in recent years taken among evangelicals reveal that in important areas, such as sexual ethics, honest business practices, divorce without a just cause, unlawful debt and so on, evangelicals are either just as lawless and wicked as unbelievers or only slightly better. Their profession of Jesus as

“Lord, Lord” means virtually nothing. Churches are often just as full of bitterness, hatred, gossip, slander, backbiting and sinful pride as the pagan clubhouse down the street. Church courts are often as corrupt and unjust as their pagan counterparts. In many cases they are worse. This tragic scene should show us the great danger of trusting in our profession instead of truly grasping Christ by faith. It demonstrates the great need to examine every area of our lives. Is Jesus really Lord? Or are we fooling ourselves? “I’m a church member. I have been baptized. I regularly partake of the eucharist.” But God desires obedience far more than an insincere and thus empty ritual. “The day of judgment will reveal strange things. The hopes of many, who were thought great Christians while they lived, will be utterly confounded. The rottenness of their religion will be exposed and put to shame before the whole world.”⁵⁰⁹

By way of application, there are three things that we must be on guard against if our profession is to be genuine.

(1) There must be a watching against a *nominal* Christianity. A nominal “Christian” is someone who professes faith only because they were born in a Christian household or a predominantly Christian nation. There are multitudes of people who fit in this category. They were baptized as infants and attended church in their youth, but the teachings of Scripture are really unimportant to them. They profess to be Christian, but they really do not care much for church, public worship, Bible reading, prayer or leading a separated life. They attend church occasionally, especially at Christmas and Easter, but they are not at all committed to leading a Christian life. These people usually know little doctrine and are indistinguishable ethically from rank pagans. They read their horoscope in the paper and get their concepts of morality from the surrounding culture. These people are obviously not truly saved or part of Christ’s kingdom of grace. This sad state describes the vast majority of Americans.

(2) There are *formal* professors of Christianity. These people seem to take Christ and the Bible much more seriously than nominal professors. They know orthodox doctrine quite well and attend church regularly. They may even like to talk about theology with others, but everything is purely intellectual. There is a commitment in words, but it does not extend to deeds. There is no love of the brethren or love of Christian fellowship. There is no enthusiasm for godliness; there is a dusty orthodoxy that does not strongly affect the life. They are happy to acknowledge Christ as Lord and seem enthusiastic for the truth, but are not willing to apply these precepts to their own experience. There is simply no fruit of the Spirit in their behavior. There is no consistent evidence of an internal work of the Holy Spirit upon their heart. When they are confronted with a serious sin in their lives, they respond by making excuses and attacking the church leadership. They often will move to a church that tolerates sin. These deceived souls will be cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(3) There are *hypocritical* professors of Jesus. Although this category encompasses the previous two groups, here we are discussing people who attend church and profess Christ, yet deliberately lead a double life. At church they are the upstanding persons who talk and act very piously; but, in secret, they are immoral and unconcerned with submitting to God’s holy Word. We have all read stories of prominent pastors visiting prostitutes or committing adultery. There are professing Christians engaged in gross lies, deceit and fraud. For some reason, these people have the need to appear as a serious Christian before others, when they know their profession is a sham. Perhaps they have deceived themselves into thinking that God will overlook these gross inconsistencies. Or, perhaps they have imbibed some form of antinomian doctrine. In any case,

⁵⁰⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 70.

these deluded fools will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone with the devil and his demons.

If any of these categories describe your experience, then your only hope is to confess your guilt before Christ and repent of your sin at once. If you want to become a true Christian and persevere as a genuine believer, then you need to not only profess, but also do the will of Christ's Father who is in heaven (Mt. 7:21). What does doing God's will involve? It involves believing in Christ and submitting to His revealed will. "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him" (Mt. 17:5). You must endeavor to shun every known sin and keep every revealed commandment. You must strive to be of one mind with God by loving what He loves and hating what He hates. There must be a heartfelt desire to obey His Word and a great fear of displeasing Him. The way of the world must be seen as complete foolishness, vanity and darkness. Like Paul, we must "delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22). Our thoughts must be in accord with David when he said, "I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right and I hate every false way" (Ps. 119:128). Moreover, we must strive to follow Christ as the perfect example of what it means to obey God's will. Jesus always submitted to God's will sincerely, quickly and completely. We need to walk, even as He walked (cf. 1 Jn. 2:6; 1 Pet. 2:21). Doing God's will involves being unselfish, meek and submissive to God's authority out of love. It involves a willingness to daily mortify our sinful desires and bring them into submission to the moral law. We must habitually say no to sin and yes to Christ's law-Word. There must be a complete surrender of our hearts and lives to everything Christ says. We must bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). "The will of the Father is that we should forsake our sins, trust in His Son, take His yoke upon us, and follow Him; to do less and yet call Him Lord is most horrible mockery."⁵¹⁰ In order to do God's will, we must become joyful slaves of Jesus Christ. The love in our hearts for our precious Savior would not want it any other way.

Is the man who does the will of God free from all sin and the presence of indwelling sin? No, not at all! It is one of our greatest afflictions that we must carry about with us the sinful flesh—this body of death (Rom. 7:24). We are constantly fighting against our sinful lusts and we sin every single day in thought, word and deed. The difference between someone who does the will of God and someone who does not is that the godly man is never at peace with indwelling sin as the unregenerate man is. He hates it, fights against it, becomes depressed over it, mourns over it, and begs God to be free of its company. He can't wait to part with it forever. Moreover, *scandalous*, high-handed sins are *rare* in the true believer's life. David committed adultery, but he didn't make a habit of it. He repented with tears. When the apostle John wrote to tell people in the visible church how to know if they were truly saved, he made a clear-cut distinction between a man who sins yet who does not make it a habitual practice and the one who continually sins. The person who lives in continuous sin is not a true Christian (cf. 1 Jn. 1:6; 2:24).

In discussing doing the will of God as it relates to entering the kingdom of heaven, it is important to note that our sanctification is a *progressive* work and an *imperfect* work. Even the greatest of saints has many defects and fails to live up to the perfection of God's holy Word. If we do not realize this and understand that we will never be what we would like to be or attain to the holiness that we strongly desire, then we will live our lives without any assurance and will be miserable, joyless creatures. Our spiritual self-examination must be honest, thorough and biblical. Yet, it must also be balanced with a strong focus on Christ, His love toward us and His perfect salvation or we will enter into despair. While many professing Christians today are

⁵¹⁰ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 383.

antinomian and do not practice self-examination, we must avoid the extreme of some of the New England Puritans, who emphasized holiness in an unbalanced manner that left many with no hope of salvation at all. Our lives consist of continual warfare against the flesh, the world and the devil. There are times when we are overcome; yet, we continually press forward with our eye of faith on Jesus. Even though in many things we offend, we must never give up the fight or forsake Christ.

The Appeal to Mighty Works

Jesus also points out that even “many” that did mighty works in His name will not enter the kingdom of heaven. “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’” (Mt. 7:22). Here our Lord describes, not professing Christians in general, but leaders in the church. These were men that exhibited supernatural gifts in their ministry. These were sign gifts that functioned in the first generation of Christians. Christ is amplifying and driving home His point that a bare confession is not enough to enter heaven. He is destroying self-deception and all false concepts of assurance. He wants His followers to understand that even those who work miracles can be self-deceived. There are a number of things that merit our attention in this verse.

First, Jesus points out that this appeal will be made by “many” on that day. This means that many leaders, pastors or teachers in the church will also be surprised on the day of judgment. We live in a time when, outwardly, Christianity looks as though it is prospering. But most churches today preach a false gospel of Armianism. Many church leaders boast of their impressive achievements, but all their building programs, revival meetings and large numbers of attenders will avail them nothing on that day because they preached a false gospel and did not do God’s will. This verse is obviously related to the one on false prophets. Mighty ministries without the true gospel that do not lead to genuine holiness are worthless and dangerous.

Second, these men had the ability either to fake or perhaps even do real miracles. They suppose that miraculous gifts prove that they must be genuine believers. They emphasize their loyalty and connection to the Redeemer by using the expression “in Your name” three times. This phrase is placed emphatically before each verb to emphasize that these miracles were supposedly done through the Savior’s own power for His own cause. Let us examine the three mighty deeds in turn.

(1) These reprobates point out that they prophesied in Jesus’ name. Although at times prophecy can refer simply to the proclamation of the truth, in this context (where it is placed next to two supernatural activities), it probably refers to speaking or to *allegedly speaking* direct revelation. These men may have predicted future events or may have set forth authoritative doctrine. There are examples in Scripture of men who prophesied, yet were not true believers. In Numbers 23 we read that “the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth” (v. 5) and that he prophesied good things of Israel (vs. 7-10), even though he was employed by wicked Balak. Although Balaam “has the knowledge of the Most High” and “sees the vision of the Almighty” (Num. 24:16), he was destroyed with God’s enemies (Num. 31:8). Peter describes him as a wicked man, a false prophet “who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Pet. 2:15). In John 11 we have the remarkable example of Caiaphas, the wicked leader of the Jews who delivered Christ over to Pilate. John tells us that “he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (vs. 51-52). Note also that wicked Saul “prophesied among the prophets” (1

Sam. 11:11). We are told that “the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them” (1 Sam. 11:10). Saul died as a God-hating reprobate.

Although there are some exceptional cases of false professors who truly prophesied, it is likely that the vast majority of people in this category are actually false claimants to the gift of prophecy. There are many men and women in history who have prophesied in the name of Christ who were never sent by God or authorized to speak in His name. Think of all the Charismatic charlatans in our own day who have built large ministries that are very gifted and successful, yet who teach heresy and live immoral lives. There are even men, who preach orthodox doctrine and who have helped many people get to heaven, who themselves come short of true belief. It is a shocking, sobering thought that there are men who are orthodox, and even fervent in their preaching, who nevertheless do not know God.

The apostle Paul seemed to be aware of this danger when he said, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). He is aware of the constant and deadly struggle against sin that is a part of every Christian’s life. He brings all the evil propensities and passions of his heart into subjection to avoid being a cast-away from the faith.

When speaking of the importance of exercising love during the exercising of gifts Paul says, “though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). If a man has the ability to prophesy, knows all the secret purposes of God relating to redemption and has an intellectual apprehension of all the truths of the Bible, yet does not have Christian love which is a fruit of saving faith, then all these gifts are worthless. Intellectual attainments and amazing gifts are of no value if we have not truly believed and repented of our sins.

(2) These deluded souls also claim to have cast out demons. The apostles and their close associates had the ability to cast out demons. This was another sign gift practiced among the first generation of the Christian church. Interestingly, Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ, completely apostatized and hanged himself, had this gift. Matthew writes, “And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease” (10:1). If Judas had not had the same gifts as the other apostles, then the others would have regarded Judas with some suspicion. But there was none. The Holy Spirit can even do works through the unregenerate. If God can cause a donkey to speak (Num. 22:28, 30), then He can also cause an unbeliever to prophesy, cast out demons or work miracles. God is sovereign, and for His own reasons, sometimes permits imposters to do amazing things. Jesus said that “many false prophets will arise and deceive many” (Mt. 24:11) and that “false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive if possible, even the elect” (Mt. 24:24). The doing of great wonders does not prove that a man is part of God’s kingdom. Sometimes God works through an unbeliever; at other times, men may do counterfeit miracles by the power of Satan. Consequently, it is important that we evaluate mighty workers by their doctrine and *by their lives*. In our day people often highly esteem so-called miracle workers, even though their teaching and lifestyle are clearly unbiblical.

(3) These people claim to have done many wonders in Jesus’ name. The word translated “wonderful works” (KJV), “wonders” (NKJV), “miracles” (NEB, NIV, NASB), or “mighty works” (ASV, RSV) is *dunameis* (from *dunamis*) which refers to a work of power. In this context it probably refers to miracles of healing. The same word is translated miracles in 1 Corinthians 12:10 and Galatians 3:5. These men not only prophesied and cast out demons, but

also had healing ministries. On the day of judgment, they will point to these healings and speak of all the good things that they have done to help others. “Certainly one such as I, who have helped so many people in time of need, must be a true Christian.” Miraculous gifts, whether genuine, as with the case of Judas Iscariot, or counterfeit, like what occurs in the modern Charismatic movement, do not prove that a person is a genuine believer.

If we take this passage and apply it to our own day, when the supernatural gifts are no longer operative, we could say that the man who preaches very effectively cannot base his assurance of salvation solely on his ability to preach. Many a preacher has ended up in hell. We could also say that a man who has a wonderful ministry to the sick, the mentally anguished and the poor has no guarantee on that basis of eternal life. Modernists and grossly immoral men have had such ministries. Matthew Henry writes, “There may be a faith of miracles, where there is no justifying faith; none of that *faith which works by love* and obedience. Gifts of tongues and healing would recommend men to the world, but it is real holiness or sanctification that is accepted of God. Grace and love are *a more excellent way than removing mountains, or speaking with the tongues of men and of angels*, 1 Cor. xiii.1, 2. Grace will bring a man to heaven without working miracles, but working miracles will never bring a man to heaven without grace.”⁵¹¹ We must not take refuge in gifts and mighty works without a genuine faith that leads to obedience to God’s law. The Jews rested in their external privileges and their many fasts, alms and rituals. But they were worldly, prideful and wicked. Beware of self-deception!

The Savior’s Declaration

In verse 23 we see the Redeemer’s terrifying statement to these false professors. “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” There are a number of profound things in this statement.

First, we cannot fail to notice that the one pronouncing judgment on the final day is Jesus Christ. Our Lord, from almost the very beginning of His earthly ministry, “laid claim to being the One to whom the entire world, believing and unbelieving, would be answerable”⁵¹² (cf. Mt. 25:31 ff.). This teaching on the final judgment is consistent with the doctrine of the rest of the New Testament (Mt. 25:31 ff.; 2 Thess. 1:7 ff.; Rev. 20:11-15). As the door to heaven (Jn. 10:7, 9) and the One who holds the keys to death and hell (Rev. 1:18), the Savior admits His own and excludes the rest. This is an aspect of His glorification. It is also proof of His divinity. Every human being who ever lived will bow the knee and acknowledge Christ as supreme Lord (Phil. 2:10). The expression “on that day” in verse 22 in the Old Testament frequently refers to “the day of the Lord” (e.g., Isa. 10:20; Hos. 2:21; Amos 9:11). Although the phrase “day of Jehovah” often refers to cataclysmic temporal judgments in history (Isa. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 7:19; 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Am. 5:18; Oba. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14, 18), all of these judgments point to the final judgment at the end of history (cf. Isa. 2:20; Zech. 14:4; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:8). As the Lord over heaven and earth, Jesus will act as judge on His Father’s authority. Although we do not want to profess the Lordship of Christ falsely, nevertheless we must acknowledge that “He is *Lord* of the universe and all it contains, the sovereign ruler of all men and of all things (cf. 11:27; 28:18; Phil. 2:11; Rev. 17:14).”⁵¹³ He is our Lord for we have forsaken all things that offend Him and we worship Him as the divine-human Mediator.

⁵¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:96.

⁵¹² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 378.

⁵¹³ *Ibid*, 377.

Second, the Redeemer declares that He never knew these people. The word translated “profess” (KJV, ASV), “tell them” (NEB), “tell them plainly” (NIV) or “declare” (NKJV, RSV) can refer to a solemn declaration. It can be translated “profess” or “confess.” This word (*homologeîn*) is used elsewhere of an open confession of Jesus before men (Mt. 10:32), confessing Christ unto salvation (Rom. 10:9); the baptizer’s public declaration that he was not the Messiah (Jn. 1:20) and Herod’s promise to Salome in the presence of his guests (Mt. 14:7). This is Christ’s open, public declaration as Judge of all men.⁵¹⁴ With public profession or confession as an element of this declaration, we have here a strong antithesis between the false profession of these reprobates and Christ’s public profession or declaration that He never knew them. “I will profess with My mouth, openly before the whole assembly of angels and all men who ever lived what I have always known in My heart. I never had a saving relationship with you.” “I knew that you professed acquaintance with Me. You used My name; but it was a mere profession. You did not know Me. You knew a number of things about Me; but you did not know Me (as your Lord, and Lawgiver, and Savior).”⁵¹⁵

The statement, “I never knew you,” is pregnant with meaning and refers to far more than an intellectual recognition (cf. Gen. 18:19; Ex. 2:25; Ps. 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hos. 13:5; Mt. 7:23; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Jn. 3:1). In Scripture it often has the sense of an intimate relationship or love (e.g., “Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived...” [Gen. 4:1]). Jesus is saying, “I never loved you or regarded you as My own. I never set My electing love upon you because you are not of My flock. I never took a saving interest in you or delighted in you because you were not chosen of My Father and you never truly believed in My Person or work.” The word “know” can also have the sense of approve or acknowledge. “The LORD knows the way of the righteous” (Ps. 1:6). That is, He approves or acknowledges their faithfulness. Of Israel God said, “You only have I known [i.e. loved and acknowledged as My peculiar people] of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2). Christ said, “I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father” (Jn. 10:14-15).

The word “never” indicates that these false professors were not at any time truly part of God’s family or the invisible church. There was never a time when they had real saving faith. This is an excellent proof text against those who believe that real Christians can apostatize and go to hell. This passage implies “that if he had ever known them, *as the Lord knows them that are his* [2 Tim. 2:19], had ever owned them and loved them as his, he would have known them, and owned them, and *loved them, to the end*; but he *never* did *know* them, for he always knew them to be hypocrites, and rotten at heart.”⁵¹⁶ We are saved and preserved in salvation only because Jesus first loved us and chose us. “Behind the free and responsible deeds of human beings lies always the sovereign will of God (cf. 11:27; 13:11).”⁵¹⁷

Third, our Lord orders these persons to go from His presence with the words: “depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Mt. 7:23). These words are the most terrifying words a professing Christian could ever hear. The verb “depart” in the original language means more than a physical departure, “namely, separation and desertion, in which sense it is the root of the noun *anchorite*, meaning one who retires, or retreats, or is secluded from the world.”⁵¹⁸ These poor souls are separated from Jesus and forever cut off from any possibility of being saved and

⁵¹⁴ See Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:51.

⁵¹⁵ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 114.

⁵¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:97.

⁵¹⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 188.

⁵¹⁸ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 213.

sanctified by His precious blood. “To *depart from* Christ is the very hell of hell; it is the foundation of all the misery of the damned.”⁵¹⁹ Those who rejected the Savior to lead their own lives of sin and autonomy are rejected by the Redeemer, cast out, and abandoned to eternal perdition. These hypocrites are abandoned to everlasting fire (Mt. 18:8), the pit of the abyss (Rev. 9:2), the lake of fire that burns with fire and brimstone (Rev. 14:10; 20:10), the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 13), the outer darkness (Mt. 22:13); the place of torment (Lk. 16:23-24) and weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 24:50-51). Separation from Christ leads to eternal damnation and suffering. It involves an incredible punishment of loss (i.e. from fellowship with God, all the beautiful things of this world and the glory and bliss of heaven) as well as the punishment of sense (e.g., thirst, pain, mental anguish and regret). Without the atoning death of Jesus to pay the complete penalty for their sins, these wicked persons will receive strict, perfect justice from our Lord. Their damnation will be an eternal display of Christ’s justice, holiness and almighty power. This dreadful scene is simply the logical and historical outworking of the truth that the soul who sins must die (Ezek. 18:4); the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23); and, God is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wickedness (Hab. 1:13).

The reason that our Lord gives for the wicked being sent into the abyss is their practice of “lawlessness” (the word used [*anomia*] means literally “lawlessness”). Their profession of Christ as Lord and their practicing of amazing sign gifts was merely a whitewash on a lifestyle that was habitually opposed to God’s moral law. This statement is probably an allusion to Psalm 6:8 (LXX 6:9). “Matthew reproduces the LXX phrase which translates ‘workers of evil’ as workers of ‘lawlessness.’”⁵²⁰ The participle “practice” is in the present tense indicating a *lifestyle* of lawlessness. These are people who never truly repented of their sins. These are people who called Jesus Lord, but who *continuously indulged* themselves in sin. A true Christian is not without sin, but he does not walk in *habitual sin*. As Paul says, “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries and the like; of which I told you beforehand, just as I told you in times past that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:19-21). “Since God’s kingdom is a kingdom of godliness, righteousness and self-control, those who indulge in the works of the flesh will be excluded from it. For such works [of righteousness] give evidence that they are in Christ.”⁵²¹ Those who live a life dictated by self obviously have never embraced Jesus as Lord.

The end of verse 23 states in negative form what our Lord had stated positively at the end of verse 21, specifically doing God’s will. We do God’s will by keeping His commandments. Once again, we see that the gospel does not denigrate or set aside God’s law, but rather exalts it. Christ came so that men would be justified by His blood and then sanctified by His Spirit applying the moral law to the heart. Therefore, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Tim. 2:19).

Summary and More Applications

We have seen that many professing Christians will be in for a terrifying shock on the day of judgment. These people have deceived themselves into believing that they were true

⁵¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:97.

⁵²⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 295.

⁵²¹ John R. W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (London: Intervarsity, 1968), 148.

Christians even though their lives were characterized by lawlessness. They practiced a form of self-examination, but focused on the wrong areas of life. Instead of looking at everyday godliness or faithfulness to the moral law, they focused on the spectacular. Instead of considering a daily, humble imitation of Christ, they were obsessed with big, dramatic acts of ministry. Instead of relying on the Savior and looking to His Word for sanctification, they placed their trust in mighty deeds while walking according to the flesh. There are some things that we can learn from this teaching that will help us avoid the often subtle way in which people deceive themselves.

First, we must beware of looking to amazing experiences as a foundation for assurance. Because of the widespread influence of the Charismatic movement in our day, people more and more have placed their faith in a dramatic experience instead of the teaching of God's holy Word. People have been trained not to examine themselves or others on the basis of obedience to God's moral law or faithfulness to apostolic doctrine, but rather look to speaking in tongues, being "slain" in the Spirit, receiving a healing or having some mystical feeling. We hear, "Reverend so and so must be a man of God; look at the wonderful healings he has done"; or, "I know that I am a true Christian because I spoke in tongues"; or, "I am positive that the sign gifts continue because I saw Mrs. Jones receive a healing." We must keep in mind that all of the things that these false professors considered to be signs of genuine faith are exalted by the Charismatic movement. When people place experiences, no matter how wonderful or exciting, above the teaching of God's Word, they leave themselves open to all sorts of heresies and self-delusions. Is our main concern Jesus Christ or are we interested in exciting phenomena? Do we live our lives to glorify and please God or are we living for the next fascinating experience? For many people religious experience has more in common with a drug trip or mysticism than practical godliness.

Second, we must beware of dead orthodoxy divorced from personal holiness. The Bible tells us what we must believe and how we must live. If we focus on doctrine without also seeking a personal application to our own behavior, then our profession is meaningless. We need to have what the Puritans called an experimental Christianity. We need to study and learn all the right doctrines and then apply them to ourselves, our families and (as best as we are able) our societies. Tragically, there are people in the church who engage in theology as an intellectual game, as a way to feel superior to others. If theology only leads to pride and an attitude of snobbery, then it is all in vain. A rich biblical theology should increase our godliness and our love of the brethren. A deep knowledge of God's law should bring humility and greater holiness. There are men in the church today who like to speak much about God's law and culture, but who are not interested in personal sanctification. This is an unscriptural and dangerous false emphasis. Before we speak to others we must first carefully examine ourselves. Are we using theology to increase our love and dedication toward Christ and the brethren? Are we applying biblical law to ourselves as expounded in the Sermon on the Mount? Are we living a life of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees?

Third, we must be on guard against theologies that embrace "easy-believism," implicitly denying the Lordship of Christ and completely divorcing sanctification from the doctrine of salvation broadly defined. Most evangelicals in our country, who are living in self-deception regarding their spiritual state, have been lulled into a false sense of security by this heretical teaching. Moreover, we must watch out for the idea that the moral laws found in the Old Testament are no longer binding. The deluded souls cast out on the final day were rejected because of *lawlessness*. This means that they were not being faithful to God's moral precepts

revealed in *both* testaments. If we do not study the moral requirements in the *whole* Bible, then how will we be able to examine ourselves properly or thoroughly? True self-examination presupposes a good understanding of biblical ethics. The man who lives for self in order to serve his own lusts will evaluate himself with an autonomous, flexible ethic. A false standard will always lead to a false evaluation.

Fourth, we must make sure that Christ is the central focus of our life and religion. Many people are attracted to church as a kind of social club. Others like volunteering for good works because it makes them feel good about themselves. Still others enter the ministry and attempt to do great things to make a name for themselves. We must watch against a form of Christianity which does not have Jesus as the axis around which everything else revolves. Our faith must be directed to Him for sanctification as well as justification. Let us beware of thinking we are secure because of our parents, or our baptism, or our supreme knowledge of theology, or our membership in an orthodox church, or our impressive works. We must always be looking to Christ with true faith and we must strive to do God's will as a fruit of our faith and out of gratitude for what Jesus has done. Let all who have embraced Christ walk as He walked, according to His Spirit. Let us demonstrate our love and dedication to Him by obeying His commandments. Let us always strive to do the will of our Father who is in heaven.

Chapter 37: The Two Builders—Doers vs. Hearers

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it (Mt. 7:24-27).

We come now to the conclusion and final application of the Sermon on the Mount: the parable of the two builders. This paragraph begins with the word “therefore” because it is the logical inference from the preceding paragraph and it amplifies the previous teaching. Whereas, in the previous section, Jesus emphasized the need to both *confess* and *do* the will of the Father, now He speaks of the necessity to both *hear* His own teaching and *obey* it. Christ is ending His sermon with a very strong double application which says that an intellectual knowledge and a verbal profession are not enough by themselves. They must be accompanied by a life of obedience to the teachings of the Redeemer in the Sermon on the Mount and the applicable requirements of the whole Word of God. The essence of true Christian discipleship not only involves listening to what the Messiah has to say and confessing loyalty to it, but also (out of gratitude for a salvation already received) a putting of everything that our Lord has commanded into practice. Whereas the previous warning focuses on a hypocritical practicing of lawlessness or a life of acts of evil or iniquity, this warning focuses on a lack of obedience. Jesus is so concerned to drive home the necessity of a genuine commitment, of true faith, repentance and sanctification, that he refutes hypocrisy from every conceivable angle.

This is a simple yet radical, solemn and sobering conclusion. Having presented the two gates and the two ways, our Lord keeps pressing two, and only two, alternatives. There are only two classes of Christian hearers. There are those who hear, but do not act upon the message. And

there are those who hear and obey. Those who hear and do nothing have built their houses on the sand. Because they have done nothing with the truth, their lives end in a total collapse. They cannot endure the trials and storms of life and they certainly will be cut down on the day of judgment. But those who obey the gospel in all its fullness, which includes the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, can withstand anything because their lives are founded upon solid rock. Such a man is not content to simply hear exhortations to repent, believe in Christ and live a holy life. He is enabled by the Holy Spirit to repent, believe and live a life characterized by obedience to God's Word. He is a hearer and a doer. By way of introduction there are a number of notable things about this parable.

First, this parable is likely an allusion to and expansion upon Proverbs 10:25: "When the whirlwind passes by, the wicked is no more, but the righteous has an everlasting foundation." "The destruction of the old world, of the cities of the plain [Lk. 17:26-29] was a whirlwind like that of Sennacherib's army [2 Kings 19:35]. But an infinitely more terrible *whirlwind* will be the coming of the Lord. 'But the one who does the will of God abides forever' [1 Jn. 2:17], as an *everlasting foundation*. Faith has fastened him to the rock of ages; has built his house upon this rock; and no storm can root him up. This is the confidence of the righteous."⁵²² What Jesus says here, in its essence, is not really new. What is new and unique about it is that it is intimately tied to His own person and teaching.

Second, the claim that Jesus is making here as a teacher is incredible and implicitly points to His deity. "Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them..." The well-being or complete ruin of every human being is dependent upon what they do with the teachings of Christ. This amazing claim could only be made by someone with a supreme authority that resides in His own being. The Old Testament prophets certainly never spoke in this manner. They always made it very clear that they were only speaking the Words that God had given them. They did not have an intrinsic authority. But the Nazarene, without argument or even a production of credentials, simply says, "I say to you, obey My Words." This humble man from Galilee stands before the whole human race and says that if anyone does not truly submit himself to His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount by obeying them, then that person is doomed to destruction. All his hopes, dreams, aspirations, achievements and efforts will be crushed into oblivion on the final day. This is an utterance that only God could make. This warning could only come from the One who wrote the Ten Commandments into stone with His own finger. Christ is not a commentator or philosopher, but the lawgiver and the very foundation of all truth and ethics (Jn. 14:6; Col. 2:3). Tragically, modernists and humanists, who simply see the teachings of Jesus as some of the wisest and most ethical that a mere man has ever invented, completely miss the climax of the sermon, for doing the Savior's words is equivalent to doing God's words. Christ is the only man in all human history who could speak with such authority. No wonder "the people were astonished at His teaching" (Mt. 7:28).

Third, as the son of a carpenter, Jesus knew all about the building of houses and knew about the importance of a good foundation. In the climate of Palestine the builder must keep in mind the rainy season. Like many arid areas in America, the land in Judea would have places that in the dry season looked like a safe and suitable area to put a house. But when the rains came, a site that was fairly flat and dry could become a torrent of rushing water from the hills or the dry river beds. A short-sighted man might build his house in such a place rather quickly, without a foundation. Then, when the winter rains came, the rushing water could pull the house

⁵²² Charles Bridges, revised by George F. Santa, *The Book of Proverbs*, 130-131.

apart because it was not attached to the bedrock, but was simply resting upon the soil. A house needed a solid foundation if it was to withstand a strong storm.

Fourth, our passage has certain similarities to the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-12. In both teachings there are two kinds of people: the “wise” and the “foolish.” In the one parable the wise dug down and prepared a proper foundation. In the other, the wise were careful to take oil in their lamps. In the first parable, the unwise did not bother to build a foundation, while in the second the foolish took no oil with them. Both parables present groups of people that on the surface appear prepared, but when the time of visitation comes are completely unprepared. Consequently, they are struck with total disaster. In both parables the issue boils down to obedience. In the first, the foolish person heard but did not obey. In the second, they were invited but did not prepare.

Fifth, the main focus of this parable is on the foundations. That is where the great difference lies. In fact, there is no indication that the houses are different in any way or that the locations of the houses are different either. The two houses are subject to identical weather conditions and, therefore, to the same flooding. These houses may have been very near to each other and may have been identical as far the appearance goes. But there is a crucial difference lying below the surface of these houses that is unseen to the naked eye. This subtle, unseen difference is a recurring theme in the context. The false prophet appears outwardly as the true one. He could only be discerned by his fruit. The false professor of Christ sounds like a genuine believer; but, behind the scenes when no one is watching he practices lawlessness. Here we have hearers represented by two houses; one has a foundation while the other does not. But this radical difference is not seen by others until the houses are battered by a severe storm. Jesus wants us to honestly and carefully examine ourselves to see if we have a foundation before it is too late. Others may not be able to tell if the foundation is there, but if the Holy Spirit opens our eyes we can tell and then repent. Our Lord does not want phony, hypocritical disciples. He wants us to count the cost and make sure we are true followers of Him.

The Hearer Who Obeys

In this parable Jesus first turns his attention to the hearer that obeys. He hears the Savior’s sayings and does them. That is, he not only listens to what Christ says, but he also understands the teaching and applies it to his life. The word “hear” in Scripture can have the sense not only to hear, but also hear and obey (e.g., “This is My beloved Son...hear Him” [Mt. 17:5]. “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them” [Lk. 16:29]. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” [Mt. 11:15].) In this passage, however, it is used in the restricted sense of hearing with the ear only. Both men hear, but only one obeys.

When our Lord says he “does them” (i.e. His sayings) we must not restrict this to obedience to the Savior’s ethical requirements or moral imperatives, although it obviously includes these things. It includes things such as mourning over sin; being poor in spirit; hungering for righteousness and being meek (cf. Mt. 5:1-10). This is an obedience that flows from a new nature—a regenerated heart. The whole inner and outer man is changed and conformed to these requirements. There is a habitual desire to abstain from those things that the Redeemer forbids and do the things He requires. The doer has embraced the gospel, repented of his sins and is endeavoring to live his life in accordance with Scripture. This is not simply an appeal to follow Jesus’ ethical code, but to embrace *everything* He said. Thus, a hearer who obeys must first embrace the gospel. He prays, “Forgive us our debts”; he also seeks to be holy

in his mind as well as his body. Our Lord is dealing with salvation in the broad sense of the term, which involves total commitment or radical discipleship.

This teaching is common in the New Testament. Jesus said, “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (Jn. 15:14). “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (Jn. 14:15). “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word” (Jn. 14:23). If a man claims to love Christ, but refuses to obey Him, then he is a liar. Our Lord’s repeated warnings are explicit. The only sure test of our love, devotion and commitment to the Redeemer is our willingness to habitually obey His teachings and commandments. Without such obedience our baptism, profession, knowledge, church attendance and religious acts are all worthless. If we do not obey Him, then we cannot even claim to be His friends. And if we are not His friends, then we are still His enemies. It is striking to note how often the Savior returns to this important teaching, that obedience is the great test of the reality of our confession. Obedience to Christ is the chief visible mark of saving faith. If we say that we are Christians and love Jesus, but continue to live in sin and refuse to obey His plain commands, then we are totally self-deceived. Such a person is clearly still on the broad path that leads to destruction. “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Lk. 6:46). “God judges of the heart, not [merely] by *words*, but by *works*. A good servant never disputes, speaks little, and always follows his work. Such a servant a real Christian is.”⁵²³

Paul teaches the same thing when he says that receiving the sacrament of circumcision (and by implication baptism) profits nothing if it is not accompanied by the new birth (Gal. 6:15). He also says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Paul says don’t boast that you are a child of God because you have received the sacrament, but rather show that you have real faith by doing loving deeds. True faith is fruitful, not barren. It always leads to righteous, loving behavior. In a similar vein he writes, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing but keeping the commandments of God is what matters” (1 Cor. 7:19). Although Paul is concerned here to refute the Jewish idea that Old Testament ceremonial rituals were to continue, he also denies antinomianism. The important thing for Christians to concern themselves with is obedience to God’s moral requirements. The true Christian transforms his heart and life to the revealed will of God. “Faith working by love” and “keeping the commandments of God” are the same activities. Our proper response to grace is obedience to the will of God. As the writer of Hebrews says, Christ is “the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (5:9). The great salvation that our Lord achieved belongs only to those who persevere in obedience to Christ. Let us not talk about our love of Jesus unless we are backing up that statement with a habitual obedience to His commandments. “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 Jn. 2:3-5).

Jesus tells us about the hearer who obeys His sayings with a figurative illustration. In this little parable, our Lord tells us about the doer of the word (he is wise). He informs us why he is wise (he built his house on solid rock). And he gives us the outcome of his wisdom on obedience (his house withstood the great storm). Let us examine each of these observations.

First, Christ likens the doer to a “wise man.” The word wise means “prudent” or “discerning.” He is wise because he meditates on Christ’s teaching and puts it into practice. He is prudent because he anticipates the final judgment and lives his life in terms of it. He looks at the

⁵²³ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: William Flint, 1868), 207.

building site and considers what will happen in the future. He does not take short cuts in building his house, but does what is necessary to prepare for the coming storms. He knows that if he does not dig down to the bedrock that all the effort that went into building the house will be in vain. The wise man lives in the present with an eye to coming tribulations and especially with an eye to the judgment seat of Christ.

If we want to be designated wise by Jesus, then we must obey Him and be ready to meet Him at any moment. In our society, people would consider someone wise if they were a great scientist or if they were good at making investments, or were rich or famous. People want to know what movie stars, sports figures and titans of industry think about a particular topic. But, if a person does not obey Jesus Christ and is not ready to stand before God on the day of judgment, he is a complete fool. Everything that he accomplished in life will be crushed by the wrath of God. It will have all been for nothing. It will be vanity of vanities.

Second, the man is wise because he builds his house on the rock. In the parallel account in Luke we are told that he “dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock” (Lk. 6:48). In the days of Jesus, a person putting up a good quality house would dig down to the shelf of limestone for a solid foundation. A sure foundation would be needed in a storm, flood or earthquake. The whole point here is not the suitability of the building materials, but the quality of the foundation upon which the whole house rests.

This raises the obvious question: what does the foundation represent? Although the term foundation can refer to Jesus Christ Himself (e.g., Isa. 28:16; Ac. 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:5-7), the divine decree (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:19) and the inspired teachings of the New Covenant apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), here the term “foundation” refers to “these sayings of Mine.” That is, the Sermon on the Mount in particular and by logical inference all the teachings of the Savior including the whole of sacred Scripture. This man did not merely listen to what the Redeemer said or talk about how wonderful His teachings were. He believed that they were absolutely true and thus acted upon them.

We do not truly believe in Christ if we refuse to accept His teachings and live by them. They must serve as the foundation of our worldview, ethics, worship and lifestyle. This teaching completely eliminates the idea that Jesus only came to die on the cross and that how we live is really of no consequence. Our thoughts, attitudes, emotions, words and actions are to be conformed to the teachings of the Redeemer. Our Lord did not come in order to give a new ethic or to abrogate the moral law; instead He came to enable us to obey it. The idea that He came to eliminate the law is a gross error. He demands obedience to the moral law as interpreted in this sermon and promises us that if we refuse to obey, we will be destroyed when He returns in judgment. Only those who hear the Word of God and keep it will be blessed (cf. Lk. 11:28).

The nature of this obedience is not hard to determine if we simply look at the Sermon on the Mount. According to this sermon, it contains a number of things.

This obedience flows from a Spirit-given sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. The doer of the Word is poor in spirit, mourns over sin, is humble before God, thirsts after righteousness and is pure in heart (Mt. 5:5-8). God has made him alive spiritually (cf. Eph. 2:1-5; Jn. 3:3-5); cleansed his heart (Ezek. 36:25; Jn. 3:5; Col. 2:11); renovated his innermost being (Jn. 3:3; Tit. 3:5; Eph. 2:5; 4:24); made him a spiritual person (Jn. 3:6); enlightened his mind to the truth (1 Cor. 2:12; 2 Cor. 4:6; Ac. 16:13-14); given him the gift of repentance (Ac. 11:18); drawn him to Christ (Jn. 6:44) and placed His law on his heart (Jer. 31:33). He obeys because he wants to. He hates sin and loves Christ. He has cast behind his back any ideas of self-sufficiency, self-esteem, pride or merit as he bows the knee to the Messiah’s royal scepter.

Does this describe your experience? Do you make light of sin? Do you intentionally grieve the Holy Spirit? Do you deliberately go out and commit sin with the idea that Christ will forgive your high-handed rebellion? Do you make peace with sin in your life? Are you a doer as well as a hearer? Everyone who does not die unto sin daily and live unto Christ will be in for a terrifying surprise on the day of judgment. Do you delight in the inner man to live in obedience to God's moral law or do you chafe at the bit like a wild horse? Because a doer of the Word has had his heart changed by the Holy Spirit, his walking according to the Word becomes a great pleasure. He is satisfied and made happy when he does God's will from the heart. He understands that "in keeping thy commandments is great reward" (Ps. 19:11). Although he still struggles with sin and temptation, he knows that Christ's yoke is easy and His burden light (Mt. 11:30). He fully embraces God's holy law and concurs with John who said, "His commandments are not grievous" (1 Jn. 5:3).

This obedience is sincere and is done in order to glorify God. This obedience is not simply a show to impress others. It is not rooted in pride and self-exaltation and it is not hypocritical. There is a real desire to please Christ. There is a consciousness of gratitude that is rooted in what our Lord has done for us. It is completely contrary to the hypocrisy and showmanship of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 6:1-8).

The doing of which Jesus speaks is internal as well as external. The genuine Christian mortifies forbidden thoughts as well as sinful acts. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees who externalized the law and added their own traditions to it to make it more compatible with the sinful flesh (cf. Mt. 5:27-48), the real believer never makes peace with inner lusts. He seeks to bring all his thoughts into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 7:1). He is never satisfied with only an intellectual knowledge of Scripture, but strives to have a practical knowledge where the truth is burned into the fabric of his being. As Spurgeon writes, "Seek an inwrought experience of Divine Truth. Ask to have it burnt into you. Why is it that people give up the doctrines of grace if they fall in with eloquent advocates of free will? Why is it that they renounce the orthodox creed if they meet with smart reasoners who contradict it? Because they have never received the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit so as to have it sealed in their hearts.... It is one thing to have a creed, it is quite another to have the Truth graven upon the tablets of the heart. Many fail here because Truth was never experimentally their own."⁵²⁴ In order to be doers of the word in this biblical and comprehensive way, we need to study, meditate upon, memorize and pray over the Word of God, so that our minds are saturated with it. Moreover, we need to put what we have learned into practice and do it repeatedly so that it becomes a godly habit. While faith precedes obedience, obedience practiced and exercised can strengthen our faith.

This obedience is comprehensive or universal. In other words, it applies to all the ethical doctrines of the Bible. Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (Jn. 10:27). Paul referred to heresy as a sin of the flesh every bit as wicked as fornication, adultery and idolatry (Gal. 5:20). If a man refuses to believe in certain biblical doctrines or rejects them, even though outwardly he leads a moral life, he is a wicked man. A man can never be a doer without first being a believer. The apostles condemned false doctrines with the same sternness and fervency as they did immoral behavior. A heart that obeys Christ is just as opposed to heresies as it is opposed to gross immorality. A person who is strongly opposed to unethical behavior, yet who is falsely ecumenical and tolerates heresy as nothing to be concerned with or argue about, is just as deceived and damned as the habitual adulterer. He is a doctrinal antinomian who extends the right hand of fellowship to vicious wolves. Christians are not given

⁵²⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 425.

autonomy in matters relating to doctrine any more than in the sphere of ethics. Unrepentant heretics must be cast out of the church in the same manner as unrepentant scandalous sinners. Both are bearers of poison and deadly fruit. Genuine repentance involves repenting of all sins and all damnable heresies.

We must also beware of a partial, insincere repentance masquerading for true biblical repentance. We do not have the option of parting with some sins while still clinging to our favorite sins. Such ungodly behavior, which is a placing of our own cherished lusts before God, is a form of idolatry. Every genuine Christian wants to be described as Luke portrayed the parents of John the Baptist: “And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Lk. 1:6). “Make me walk in Your commandments, for I delight in it” (Ps. 119:35).

Tragically, there is a sense in which much of the modern church has lost this precious foundation. Many would say that if obedience is mandatory, then the gospel has been lost and replaced by legalism. They love to quote the passage, “You are not under law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). But when Paul says you are not under the law, he either means that Christians are not under the ceremonial law (e.g., Gal. 3:23; 4:4-5; 5:18); or, believers are not under the law as a means to achieve justification before God (e.g., Rom. 6:14; Gal. 4:21). To avoid an antinomian approach to our Lord’s teaching, we must once more point out that, in this place, Jesus is not giving a lecture on justification by faith alone, but rather is describing a judgment of the works of those who hear the Savior’s teachings. The point is not that we are somehow saved by our own obedience or good works; but, rather, that those who did not obey were never really saved at all. Their corrupt fruit was evidence of an unregenerate root. The hearing and profession were worthless because they never really repented. Jesus was never their Lord. They were still wedded to their idols.

It is important that we understand that a crucial aspect of gospel preaching is setting forth “the obedience of faith.” After Paul sets forth his credentials and his commission to the Roman believers he states his goal saying, “Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name” (Rom. 1:5; cf. 16:26). “The obedience of faith is that obedience which consists in faith, or of which faith is the controlling principle. The design of the apostleship was to bring all nations so to believe in Christ the Son of God that they should be entirely devoted to his service.”⁵²⁵ Although it is proper to speak of faith alone as the sole instrument which lays hold of Christ in our justification, we cannot divorce faith from life as if it were some abstraction. True faith always leads to obedience to Christ. “In fact, so very closely are faith and obedience connected that they may be compared to inseparable identical twins. When you see one, you see the other. A person cannot have genuine faith without having obedience, nor vice versa.”⁵²⁶ Christ takes people who are unbelieving, rebellious and disobedient and makes them into believers who repent and obey. How do you know whether your faith is real? Look at your obedience toward Christ. “This is love that we walk according to His commandments” (2 Jn. 6). “Whoever has been born of God does not sin [present continuous tense], for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9).

Given all this we see that faith in Christ is not a one-time *emotional* act or experience, but a whole-hearted laying hold of Christ both initially and *throughout life* that immediately, and then continuously, leads to a whole-hearted devotion to Christ. This makes perfect sense when

⁵²⁵ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, 21.

⁵²⁶ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 45.

we understand that the gifts of faith and repentance are given when God regenerates our hearts and implants a new spiritual life. The heart that once opposed Jesus now loves Him and wants to live for Him. True believers do fail and sin because of remaining inner corruption; but, they detest it and keep following the Savior. They keep on believing and obeying. If we make the mistake of thinking that our Lord is here teaching a doctrine of entire sanctification; that real believers have the ability to render a perfect and perpetual obedience this side of heaven, then we contradict Scripture and cast every honest professing Christian into despair. God has not completely destroyed our inner depravity in regeneration and has not given us the ability to render a sinless obedience while in our mortal bodies. “Not only does every saint fail to render that obedience which is required by God’s Law as a whole, but he does not obey any single commandment perfectly, for every duty we perform, yea, our highest act of worship is marred by sin. In the most holy men corruption deprives them of the purity that ought to be there, and lusts fight against the perfect holiness they desire and strive after (Romans vii, 18-21; Gal. v, 17).”⁵²⁷

Although this inner corruption opposes the Holy Spirit and the Word of God (cf. Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:14-25), nevertheless, true believers have a victory over the power of sin in their lives. A true believer will not continuously live in unrepentant sin. A Christian may fall into sin, but it is not his lifestyle or habitual practice. The difference between sin in a true Christian life and that of an unregenerate pretender may be compared to the different attitude that cats and pigs have toward mud. If a cat falls into mud, she detests it, gets out of it and immediately begins to clean herself off. But if a pig falls into the mud, he is happy. He is in his own element; he wallows in it and relishes it. Those who think that they have saving faith, yet repeatedly disregard Christ’s commandments are fatally deceiving themselves. The end of the moral law’s condemning power must never be interpreted as the end of its commanding power.

Third, there is a positive outcome of his obedience: “And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock” (Mt. 7:25). Our Lord describes the torrential rains and strong winds that can suddenly arise in the Middle Eastern climate. The rains are so heavy that they produce rivers where formerly there were dry creek beds. These storms can be very destructive. “All three nouns—rain, rivers and winds—are to be taken as the subject of the verb *prosepesan*, ‘beat upon...’”⁵²⁸ Some expositors see different metaphorical meanings in the rain, wind and flood. The rain is viewed as affecting the roof, the wind the sides of the house and the flood waters the bottom of the structure. But the effectiveness of a roof against rain is not dependent upon a house’s foundation. It is better to see this as simply a description of all the destructive forces and challenges that fell upon the house. The dramatic imagery is designed to convey the solemn and radical nature of the events that lie in the future of every man. When the great storm was completely spent and everything became calm, the house still stood. It was not damaged or destroyed because it had been built on rock.

What exactly does this furious storm represent? Although Jesus does not elaborate on the precise meaning of this storm, it obviously refers to a time of testing. There are temporal tests that hearers will experience such as trials, temptations, persecutions and bereavements. There also is the ultimate time of testing on the day of judgment. In this context, the final judgment is probably in view. (The last judgment and its consequences have been applied by Jesus in verses 13, 14, 19, 21, 22 and 23.) People who do not really believe in Christ and, thus, do not obey His teachings cannot withstand the storms of life (that is, they are unable to respond biblically to

⁵²⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 419.

⁵²⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 191.

temptations and tragedies). In addition, they will be cast out on the day of judgment. The hearer who obeys has a firm foundation on which to withstand temptations, trials and, most importantly, the judgment on the final day.

The wise man has considered the future judgment of God and has dug deep to the bedrock of Scripture and has persevered in obedience. When the temptations of life, trials and persecutions arose, he remained faithful to Christ because he placed the word in his heart and habitually put it into practice. Being spiritually sensible, he took sanctification very seriously by repeatedly putting off thoughts, words and actions that he knew were contrary to Scripture and replacing them with wholesome, lawful activities. Looking to Christ as the source of his obedience, he endeavored to make spiritual improvements in his character day by day. He attended all the means of grace and listened very carefully to the words of Jesus and then translated everything he heard into action. He was strong spiritually because he diligently placed his faith into motion. He exercised his faith by obedience and developed godly habits. Consequently, when he was attacked with temptations and persecutions, he reacted biblically, many times without even having to think. Best of all, when the day of judgment came upon him he was ready to meet the bridegroom. He was not sleeping when his master returned. He had demonstrated that his faith was genuine by being a doer of the Word and, thus, on the day of judgment he was acquitted and ushered into paradise to behold the face of God.

Building on the rock requires care, sacrifice, pain and self-denial, but the rewards for such obedience in this life and the life to come are definitely worth it. By diligently doing so, we make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10); we have a peace which passes understanding (Phil. 4:7) and genuine assurance that brings comfort and joy into our lives. There is no greater joy and happiness to the true believer than to live in a manner that pleases the blessed Savior. Thus, we count everything as but loss and dung that we may win Christ. Moreover, being able to withstand the coming storm of eschatological wrath to be with Jesus forever should make this obedience, sacrifice and suffering sweet to our souls. As Paul says, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). “Christian suffering, however protracted it may be, is only for the present life, which, when compared with the everlasting ages of the glory to which it is leading, is but a passing moment; affliction for Jesus’ sake, however crushing it may seem, is in fact light, a weightless trifle, when weighed against the mass of that glory which is the inheritance of all who through grace have been made one with the Son of God. And this is a present reality, even though it is only hereafter that it will be experienced in its fullness.”⁵²⁹

The fact that the house did not fall is a great encouragement to all professing Christians who take their profession seriously and make many sacrifices to be faithful to God’s Word. We are not to focus on the trials and tribulations of being a Christian, but on the glorious outcome of perseverance in obedience. People who do not keep their mind’s eye on the blessings to come will be tempted to bicker, complain and murmur about the sacrifices and persecutions attached to being a genuine Christian. Mortification and self-denial in the present is a very rational, sensible and wise thing when viewed against the eternal consequences of self-indulgence. Jesus essentially says, “Keep obeying and keep suffering for My cause and kingdom and you will be safe when the great day of testing comes. If you continue to submit to My teachings as a fruit of faith, your reward will be great; yes, even beyond human comprehension.” The believer who

⁵²⁹ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 157-158.

walks in Christ's commandments is safe and secure. If we focus on the Savior's promise, then we will obey Him promptly, sincerely, consistently and joyfully. Beloved, be encouraged and move forward with a strong determination and dedication, for nothing of this world can give what our Lord here promises. Money, fame, great possessions, power, lands, popularity, stardom, kingdoms and connections cannot supply what the Redeemer supplies. We will all stand before God as naked beggars on that day. And only those who truly believed in Jesus and demonstrated the reality of their faith with a life of obedience will obtain heaven and the bliss of eternal life.

With all this in mind it is easy to see why the true believer has a completely different attitude toward all the doctrines, commandments and requirements of the true Christian religion than false professors. He does not consider them to be burdensome chores that he hates, or unreasonable demands that he wants to circumvent, or antiquated sayings that he ignores. No, they are the laws of our loving Redeemer who loved us and died for us. They are the requirements of the Author of our eternal salvation, who Himself perfectly obeyed, humbled Himself and sacrificed everything for us. He never asks us to do something He has not already done Himself and which, by His life, death and glorious resurrection, He enables us to do. A life without faith, love, devotion and obedience to Christ is a life of sand. Such a life is complete foolishness and vanity and will be blown away by the hot, fiery winds of God's coming wrath.

The Hearer Who Does Not Obey

After telling us about the wise man, Jesus tells about the foolish builder. "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall" (Mt. 7:26-27). In this description, there is a nearly exact parallel with the previous verse, except that this man is in most respects the complete opposite. We are told that the man who does not do our Lord's sayings is foolish. Then we are told why—because he built his house on the sand. In addition, we are given the outcome of his disobedience—his house is completely destroyed by the great storm. Let us consider each of these observations in turn.

First, Jesus likens the man who refuses to obey His teachings to a foolish man. He is foolish because he goes to all the trouble to build a house, but does not bother to build a foundation. The word foolish (*moros*) is a very negative term that, when used to describe a man's intellect, means irrational or senseless. When used of practical things like providing for one's security or future, it means a lack of prudence or discretion. In Scripture the term fool often has the sense of someone who is not simply stupid, irrational or unwise, but also immoral. A fool is a man who rejects the teaching of divine revelation in order to follow his own path and be his own god. "A fool has no delight in understanding, but in expressing his own heart" (Pr. 18:2). Christ says in plain language that anyone who does put His teachings into practice is a fool intellectually, practically and morally.

Second, he is called a fool because he builds his house on the sand. If the rock foundation represents obedience to the teachings of Christ, then the sand logically represents a lack of obedience to Scripture or a life lived according to human autonomy. Such a man ignores the Bible and does what is right in his own eyes (Jdg. 17:6; 21:25). The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of this because they based their lives, not on Scriptures and a devotion to Christ, but instead upon their human traditions. There was no real faith in Scripture and consequently their

lives were regulated by a foundation of sand. They did not believe Moses, the prophets or the Messiah; for if they did they would have submitted to the Savior's teachings.

In our day there are multitudes who hear Jesus' teachings, but who refuse to obey them. Some hear them and reject them outright as complete foolishness. They have no intention of becoming a Christian. Others hear what Christ has to say and make a profession of faith; but do not act upon this profession at all. They are no different than irreligious pagans. Still others hear the gospel and seem to commit themselves to it, but who never really forsake sin. The latter category describes many churchgoers in America today. They don't want to submit to Christ, so they invent heretical theories in order to set aside God's moral law. The gospel is replaced with free-will synergism. The law is replaced with man-made rules and regulations or with so-called mystical leadings of the Spirit. Biblical admonition, rebuke and discipline is replaced with pop-psychology and humanistic concepts of love. The result of all this is churches and individual professing Christians who have an outward shell of Christianity but no true heart obedience. They have not founded their lives on the rock, but upon the loose shifting sand of human opinion. They profess Jesus and in many ways look like a Christian, but they are still following the world. They cheat themselves "through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of this world and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8).

The man who builds on sand wants the benefits that Jesus has to offer such as eternal life and a life of meaning and spiritual fulfillment, but he is unwilling to place his own interests and desires under the Lordship of Christ. He does enough things to deceive himself into thinking his soul is secure such as go to church, read his Bible and pray; but, fundamentally, self is still the center of his life. He listens to the Word of God every week, but he only heeds those things that do not impede on his human autonomy. When he hears about repentance and sanctification, it goes in one ear and out the other. When he hears about the necessity of holiness and the sanctity of the Christian Sabbath, there is no connection with his heart and no conviction of the Spirit. There are multitudes of people like this who listen to the teachings of Jesus every Sunday; who have an intellectual understanding of many of the Bible's doctrines and ethics, and yet who make no concerted effort to integrate these teachings into their lives.

It is clear that our Lord hates this behavior and strongly and repeatedly warns us against it. He makes us keenly aware of the problem of false professors and hypocrites in the church. He tells us that the way to examine ourselves is to look at our fruit. Are we habitually obedient to the teachings of Scripture? He wants us to examine ourselves. He wants to eliminate all thoughts rooted in false peace, false comfort and false assurance. If we are not thinking about these things and questioning the reality of our profession, then there is something radically wrong with us. "The man who never knows what it is to have certain fears about himself, fears which drive him to Christ, is in a highly dangerous condition."⁵³⁰ If we do not have a hungering and thirsting after righteousness or a desire for vital godliness in all areas of life, then we are not true disciples. If we do not want to be like Jesus and have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, then we are not true Christians. If we look to religion as just something to make us comfortable or simply make our life more complete, then our foundation is nothing but sand. If we pick and choose doctrines and commandments in a smorgasbord fashion or accept only those things in the Bible that we like, then we are pseudo-believers. The man, who builds his house on the sand, filters and conditions the doctrine and ethics of Scripture through his own autonomy.

⁵³⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:303.

He wants the teachings of Scripture on his own terms. He will not bow the knee to Christ and, consequently, his profession and life will not stand on the day of judgment.

Is your profession of Christ and adherence to the truth built on sand? If you base your hope of heaven on a one-time “decision” for Christ, but have not followed up your profession with a sanctified life, then you have built your house on sand. Easy believism, religious excitement and having a wonderful experience do not prove that your faith is genuine. If you place your trust in the sacraments and various rituals, but do not live the Christian life, then your foundation is only sand. The scribes and Pharisees were, and papists are, ritualists *par excellence*, but they are the children of the devil. If you think that your great knowledge of doctrine without repentance and holiness is enough, then you have built on sand. Your profession is worthless. If you say that your charitable deeds and mighty works for Christ are proof, but in secret live the life of a hypocrite, then your house will come crashing down.

Tragically, the trend in many evangelical churches in the last few generations has been to abandon the kind of heart-piercing application referred to in our Lord’s sermon. Today, there is a great neglect concerning the topic of self-examination and the danger of being a pseudo-Christian. Strong, convicting preaching has, in many instances, been replaced by happy, positive, “uplifting” sermonettes. The emphasis that we have in Scripture on holiness and mortification has often been replaced with sensational prophetic fantasies about the end times. A sharp, penetrating application of the moral law to the heart and life has largely been replaced by little pop-psychology life lessons for prosperity related self-improvements. The sharp, apostolic and reformation antithesis between truth and falsehood or orthodoxy and heresy has been greatly watered down in favor of a mushy, mindless ecumenicalism. Much of what passes today as conservative Bible-believing evangelicalism has, in practice, abandoned the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount in order to be “relevant” and to “reach out” to our pagan culture. The result is syncretism. The church is becoming more and more like the world.

This situation was not always the case. The Reformers emphasized the necessity of sanctification. The early Puritans and Presbyterians were constantly preaching on the danger of being a “false professor.” The church must return to this biblical emphasis. Jesus does not want phony Christians and hypocrites in His church. He wants true disciples who will serve him in love and fear and worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24).

Third, we are told the consequences of his disobedience: “and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall” (Mt. 7:27). Unlike the true Christian who lives in accord with his faith, practices habitual righteousness and is able to stand against trials and the final judgment; the non-doer of the word gives in to temptation, withers under trials and cannot stand on the final day. He will be weighed in the balances and found wanting. He may have been highly respected by people in the church, but he is an abomination in the sight of God (cf. Lk. 16:15). There are people who prove that their foundation was but sand in this life and there are others whose sandy foundation will only be evident of the day of final reckoning.

Regarding those whose profession comes crashing down in this life, our Lord gave insightful teaching. For example, in the parable of the sower and the soils, Jesus warned of those who heard the Word and even received it intellectually but did not produce fruit. “But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a time. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of

riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful” (Mt. 13:20-22). The unfruitful or temporary believer is so rootless, sapless, and without foundation that his profession withers and his claim to be a Christian is destroyed when life becomes difficult. He loved to hear the word and even received it with joy; but, because his heart was not renewed and he was unwilling to make the sacrifices needed to follow Christ, his profession came crashing down. The house of religion that he has built is choked out by worldliness and disobedience. There is an outward show of religiosity, but the temptations and storms of life reveal that there is no solid foundation of commitment and obedience to God’s holy word. He is like Demas of whom Paul said, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world” (2 Tim. 4:10).

The main warning of this parable and this entire section focuses on what happens to false believers on the day of judgment: the coming day of Jehovah when He separates the wheat from the chaff; the sheep from the goats. Our Lord repeatedly sets before this assembled multitude the terrifying prospect of going to hell if His teachings are not carefully followed. In verse 13 He tells them about the broad gate and way which leads to destruction. Then, in the next section, He says that “every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt. 7:18). This is obviously a metaphor for being cast into hell. When He follows this teaching up by turning His attention to false professors, He declares that only those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 7:21). Then when He describes the false professors’ fate on the final day He says, “Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you, depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Mt. 7:23). Finally, in the parable of the two builders, He describes the man who did not obey His teachings. When the great storm of God’s eschatological judgment came, his house fell because it was founded on disobedience to Christ’s Words. Jesus even places a strong emphasis on the consequences of the final judgment on the disobedient by deliberately breaking the symmetrical parallelism with verse 25 by saying, “And great was its fall” (Mt. 7:27). The result of the storm was total obliteration.

Our Lord says to all those who do not act upon His teaching, “Think about the outcome of a life of disobedience. Meditate upon the consequences of a life lived for self instead of Christ. Do you not realize the terrible, terrifying outcome of such a life? Do you not understand that a life of lawlessness ends with eternal destruction and damnation?” You need to think about your coming death and the judgment to come. If you are on your death bed, will you be able to look back to a life of obedience to the Savior or will you lay there terrified knowing that your profession was a sham; that you never really believed in Jesus or submitted to Him as Lord? Do you want to look back to a life founded upon sand? Think of the despair of living a life of complete worthlessness and vanity that has no meaning or value.

Christ leaves us with only one of two possible options. We can place our faith in Him, become His disciples and faithfully serve Him the rest of our lives; or we can ignore Him and do whatever we want. He wants us to understand the importance of the gate and path by telling us what will happen to us if we make the wrong choice. For every one of us death and the judgment are inevitable. The fact that we are going to die and our bodies will rot ought to make us think carefully about what we do. Death is a tremendously terrifying experience for those who do not know Christ. The moment a person dies, he passes out of this world forever and can never return. It is so final and irretrievable; there is no way to come back. Everything in life that that person cherished is now out of sight, beyond reach and gone for eternity. But death is only the beginning of your problems if you are not saved. Death is a sting that opens the gate of hell. There you will suffer torment while you wait for the final judgment. The regret you will suffer for rejecting Jesus and refusing to obey His words when you had the chance will drive you to

weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then, worst of all, you will be resurrected and you will stand before the very One you trampled underfoot as worthless. The glorified Redeemer on His white, lustrous throne will be your judge. You would rather have mountains fall on you and be obliterated than have to face Jesus Christ and hear Him say, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt. 7:23; 25:41). Then you will be cast into the lake of fire; God’s garbage dump for all who do not embrace His Son and follow Him. There you will have eternity to contemplate your foolishness in building your whole life on nothing but sand.

Do you not see the importance of examining yourself in the light of our Lord’s teaching? Do you have a strong desire to live your life according to the Sermon on the Mount? Do you hunger and thirst after righteousness? If Jesus’ application has pierced your heart, then there is only one thing that you must do. You must trust in the person and work of Christ and must pick up your cross and follow Him the rest of your life. Be the wise man who hears His teaching and obeys it; who bases everything in his life upon it. Study, pray and strive to keep His commandments. Live every day of your life for His glory. Regard everything in your life as dung in comparison with being a faithful servant of the Savior. Don’t be deceived by false teachers and don’t deceive yourself about these crucial matters. You know what the right thing to do is. Now go out and do it. May God enable us by His grace to bow our knees before His dear Son.

Chapter 38: The Reaction of the Multitude

And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes (Mt. 7:28-29).

With the sermon now completed, Matthew turns his attention to the response of the audience. The expression “and it came to pass” (*kai egeneto*) is a Hebrew way of describing a noteworthy historical event. Here it has the sense: “the result [of the sermon] was this.” The word translated “people” (*hoi ochloi*) means “multitudes.” It is the same word used in 5:1 (“and seeing the multitudes”) and serves to tie the whole narrative together. It is interesting that the very multitudes who were our Lord’s secondary audience (in 5:1 we are told “His disciples came to Him.” Jesus was focusing on His disciples, yet the multitudes had followed Him up the mountain also) become the focus of Matthew’s attention and not just the inner circle. The multitudes had followed Christ because of His miracles and fame (Mt. 4:23-25) and probably knew very little about Him or His teaching. He looked like an ordinary peasant, had no formal training at all and had no connection to the religious establishment. Matthew focuses on their response as a way to tell his readers that Jesus is special, unique and critically important. Also, as a Jew writing primarily to a Jewish audience, the evangelist wants his audience to recognize the radical and obvious difference between the Savior and the scribes. This epilogue is a very clever way of saying, “You have heard the sermon, now consider the One who preached it.” There was never a greater sermon than this because there never was so great a preacher. Before we look at these verses in detail, there are some important introductory matters to consider.

First, the conclusion demonstrates that this sermon was delivered at one time, before the same audience, and is not a compilation of sayings as most modern scholars assert. While it is possible that more was said on this occasion, our Lord certainly did not say less. The fact that

certain portions are found in Luke's sermon on a plain and in other places in the gospels simply proves that Jesus preached similar messages to different audiences.

Second, although we are told that the crowds were amazed at Christ's doctrine and why they were astonished, there is nothing about how many people were converted to the Savior or how many committed themselves to Him. "We do not hear of any. Divine truth, even when preached to perfection, will not of itself affect the heart to conversion. The most overpowering *authority* produces no obedience unless the Holy Ghost subdues the hearer's heart."⁵³¹ "Note, it is possible for people to admire good preaching, and yet to remain in ignorance and unbelief; to be astonished, and yet not sanctified."⁵³² Given the size of the church on the morning of Pentecost forty days after the resurrection, it is likely that few souls were saved on this occasion. Moreover, Matthew's concern in this narrative is not to record conversions, but to point men to the divine and Messianic authority of Jesus.

Third, this conclusion should not be skipped over as a minor afterthought, for the question of authority in religious, ethical and philosophical matters is critical. Anyone can come up with some new teaching and make all sorts of claims. The great and deciding thing on whether or not we should listen to what someone says and obey it is: by what authority does he make such a claim? If a person appeals to his imagination, or religious tradition or some mystical mumbo jumbo, then following such a person would be irreligious, unscriptural and irrational. But what if a person had ultimate authority, the authority of God Himself? As we look at this epilogue, we will see that Jesus had an authority and sanction behind His preaching that was unique because it was intrinsic to His own person as the Son of God and Messiah. Consequently, this conclusion serves as an exclamation point to an amazing sermon. It implicitly teaches that we must heed His teachings; there is no way to circumvent sections with which we may disagree. We must consider the Preacher and bow the knee before Him.

This point is especially crucial when we see the widespread admiration for this sermon by people who reject the authority of the Preacher. Many people including modernists, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and even communists will say how much they admire and respect the Sermon on the Mount. They will speak of its message as the very pinnacle of religious and social ethics. But when it comes to the Preacher, they do not accept what the sermon teaches about Him. With their unregenerate hearts, they look at the sermon through unbelieving, humanistic glasses. They look at Jesus as a great man or a wonderful teacher or some kind of prophet. But they fail to grasp the authority of the Savior which is so clearly displayed in this sermon. They fail to understand that the radical discipleship that the Savior demands is intimately connected to His person and work. They do not comprehend the fact that, if Christ did not have the incredible and awesome authority that He claimed, then His sayings are nothing more than human opinions such as those spoken by Confucius or Buddha. Without His intrinsic authority as the Son of God, all the teachings that come from Him would be merely human opinion. One could take them or ignore them. But once God opens our eyes to exactly who this Preacher was, the call to radical discipleship makes perfect sense. To those who have been given ears to hear this teaching, there is no other choice.

Also, the fact that Jesus has this unique authority in His own person and office as Mediator is important in a time when states increasingly seek total jurisdiction over man. When governments adopt macro-evolution, secular humanism and practical atheism, they inevitably move toward statism and totalitarianism. They do not believe in a transcendent God who reveals

⁵³¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 85.

⁵³² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:99.

to man ethical absolutes, so they arrogate to themselves all power and bow to no one. They, at best, view religion as a department of state or as a corporation of fools that need to be regulated by the state. They view moral laws as flexible, changing and evolving and thus the concepts of liberty and the rule of law are progressively being redefined in terms of socialism and antinomianism. But what the state illegitimately claims, Christ has. Total power and authority resides with Him and, thus, all power on earth is limited, prescribed and resides under the feet of the Messiah. The modern state's claim of total jurisdiction is both immoral and blasphemous. The Savior is the only ultimate source of moral laws; and, the family, church and state are obligated to kiss the Son and administer and apply His laws within their respective spheres. Although we have primarily limited our study of this sermon to personal piety and the church, we must not fail to recognize the incredible implications of Jesus' claims on every area of life. "Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him" (Ps. 2:10-12).

As we look at this conclusion, there are two things we need to examine: the impact of the sermon on the hearers and the reason for that impact.

The Effect of the Sermon

In verse 28 we are told that "the crowds were astonished at his teaching." The verb "were astonished" (*exeplesonto*) is a compound word using *ek*, "out of," and *plesso*, "strike." It literally means that "they were struck out of themselves." A modern equivalent would be they were "struck out of their senses," or that the message "blew their minds." "In English it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to reproduce the exact flavor of the picturesque verb used in the original to describe the people's state of heart and mind. In addition to 'were astounded' the following have been offered: 'were awed,' 'amazed,' 'filled with amazement,' 'dumbfounded,' 'astonished.' The Amplified New Testament has 'were astonished and overwhelmed with bewildered wonder.' These renderings are all very helpful."⁵³³ The verb tense used (the imperfect) indicates that their amazement lasted for quite some time. They had sat mesmerized beneath the feet of the Savior. They had been perfectly silent throughout the whole sermon. But, when our Lord became silent, they were filled with amazed wonderment as they contemplated what they had just heard. After nearly two thousand years we are amazed also: "what incredible doctrine and authority."

To be overwhelmed with astonishment was a common reaction to Jesus' ministry. The people were astonished by our Lord's doctrine. They were not only amazed by this sermon, but also by His teaching on the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom (Mt. 19:25; Mk. 10:23, 26); the resurrection of the dead as it relates to marriage and the afterlife (Mt. 22:33); and Jesus' doctrine in general (Mk. 6:2; 11:18; Mt. 13:54). The crowds were amazed by the novelty of what they heard. They asked, "What new doctrine is this?" (Mk. 1:27). They had never heard anything like it. Christ's knowledge and interpretation of Scripture, as well as His inspired pronouncements about Himself and work, were on a completely different level than any teaching anyone had heard before. They were astonished by His understanding. They asked, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works?" (Mt. 13:54; Mk. 6:2; cf. Lk. 2:47). They were amazed by His ability to answer exceptionally difficult questions with ease. When the

⁵³³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 382.

Pharisees sent officers to arrest the Savior, they returned without Him and said, “No man ever spoke like this Man” (Jn. 7:46). Even the Redeemer’s hardened enemies “marveled” at His answers (Mt. 22:22). They were amazed by His power. He could work miracles at will and even raise the dead (cf. Mk. 1:27; 5:43; 6:2; Lk. 5:9; 8:56; etc.). They were astonished by His authority. The demons cowered before Him and obeyed His voice (Mk. 1:27; Lk. 4:32). Moreover, He taught with a divine and royal authority that no man in history ever has had or ever will have. The people recognized that there is something very different about this Jesus of Nazareth.

The Reason for the Astonishment

In verse 29 Matthew gives us the reason for their amazement: “For He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” There are two aspects to the reason. The content of the teaching and the way He expressed Himself was fully authoritative. Jesus spoke with an authority that was extraordinary and unlike other men. Moreover, He did not teach like the scribes. The scribes’ method of teaching was primarily to quote from various expositions of the law and expositors that existed in the great body of Jewish traditions. We will consider the teaching method of the scribes and then we will consider the authoritative features of Jesus’ teaching.

The scribes were the teachers and scholars on the law. Here they are described as “their scribes” (*gramateis auton*) which is equivalent in meaning to “scribes of the people” in Matthew 2:4. They were the “experts” on the Jewish religion and, for the most part, were greatly respected by the people. There were a number of things that set them apart from Christ in the content and manner of teaching. First, they were really not interested in studying and teaching God’s law itself as it had been revealed it to Moses; but, instead, they focused their attention on all the various traditions surrounding the law. They would discuss the decisions of Jewish tribunals on a matter. They would quote and analyze the teachings and traditions of notable rabbis from the past. They avoided a simple, careful exegesis of the Old Testament Scriptures and instead framed their opinions on a synthesis of past traditions. Consequently, they were always quoting famous dead rabbis as the source of their authority. Scripture was largely lost under their appeal to past traditions. “All of this appears plainly from the Talmud; e.g., ‘R. Eliezar boasted that he had never said anything which he had not heard from his teacher.’”⁵³⁴ An appeal to tradition, which changes and evolves over time, is not genuinely authoritative because human traditions are fallible and often wrong. In fact, their traditions had superseded the law and had rendered it null and void (Mt. 15:1-9; Mk. 7:1-13). There is no comparison between a supposed human authority and the authority of God speaking in Scripture. Jesus “spoke ‘with authority’ (Mt. 5:18, 26; etc.); for his message came straight from the very heart and mind of the Father (John 8:26); hence also from his own inner being, and from Scripture (5:17; 7:12; cf. 4:4, 7, 10). They were constantly borrowing from fallible sources, one scribe quoting another scribe. They were trying to draw water from broken cisterns. He drew from Himself, being ‘the Fountain of living waters’ (Jer. 2:13).”⁵³⁵

Second, their obsession with past traditions led to a corrupt and evasive style of teaching. They avoided focusing on the simple weighty matters of the law and instead concentrated on such matters as the tithing of mint and cumin, how many steps a man could walk on the Sabbath

⁵³⁴ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 172.

⁵³⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 383.

and the ceremonial washing of pots and pans. They would have endless debates about unimportant matters and would ramble on and on about trivialities. Consequently, the people were shocked by the teachings of Jesus, which focused on heavy matters such as life, death, the kingdom of God and eternal destruction. Also, they were not used to heart-piercing applications that demanded a complete and uncompromising decision. The people grew up hearing dry, dull, lifeless sermons in their synagogues. They had been bored by unbiblical, cold, disjointed and dead preaching for years on end. Then along comes this unassuming, humble, uneducated man who “spoke with the authority of truth, the reality and freshness of the morning light and the power of God’s Spirit.”⁵³⁶ His preaching was radically different and superior, for He spoke with the authority of truth. There was a wonderful simplicity, perspicuity and majesty of speech to our Savior’s preaching.

Third, whereas the scribes would go on and on with arguments from former rabbis Jesus would prove His propositions by the brilliant use of logic and plain, irrefutable examples and illustrations. The scribes simply expected people to accept the authority of their traditions as though antiquity somehow had the ability to transform arbitrary, irrational nonsense into truth. But, Christ spoke on His own authority and also often demonstrated the reality of what He said by pointing to irrefutable examples from nature and everyday life. Could anyone deny the beauty of wildflowers after a rain or the love a father has for His son? People can disagree with what the Nazarene has to say; but they can never prove that what He says is false or non-binding. Given our Lord’s marvelous teaching, they can never give an adequate reason for unbelief. Jesus’ teachings are supremely authoritative and render all men without excuse. Consequently, a person who rejects the Savior can only defend his unbelief by lying about Christ, distorting the truth and slandering His good name. Such people’s damnation on the final day will be deserved.

Christ’s Astonishing Authority

Having briefly noted the defective teaching of the scribes, we need to look at the aspects of our Lord’s sermon that would have dumbfounded a first century Jewish audience. A brief survey of the sermon reveals many amazing authoritative features. We will see statements that presuppose a unique authority, some that clearly imply it and others that are explicit and unmistakable.

The first teaching that points to a unique authority is found in Matthew 5:12, where Jesus says that men will be blessed for being persecuted and slandered “for My sake.” If Christ were simply a teacher or a prophet like Isaiah, we would expect Him to say, “Blessed are you when you are persecuted for God’s sake or the kingdom of God’s sake.” But, no, He says “for My sake.” Men ought to be willing to be slandered, beaten and even killed in the service of Jesus Christ. If the Nazarene were only a man and nothing more, such a statement would be blasphemous and exceptionally egotistical. However, He was not only man, but God of very God. As the Son of God and Messiah, He has the authority to demand total devotion and service to Himself. Once again, we see the absurdity of separating the person of Christ from the message of the sermon. If the Savior was not God’s only begotten Son, then He was a megalomaniac, a madman who deserved to be arrested. But perish the thought; He was exactly who He claimed to be.

⁵³⁶ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:63.

As we read a little further, we see another astonishing claim. Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Mt. 5:17). This is an amazing statement. Our Lord says that He came. This is not a reference to a local visit to Galilee or Capernaum, but to a coming into this world. His life and ministry was not like that of Moses or one of the prophets, for they were born into this world like everyone else. Christ, however, came from another place. He existed in the bosom of the Father eternally and then came from heaven into the world of men. He was incarnated and born in Bethlehem. This teacher is of one essence with the Father and His words carry the weight of divine authority. People who were paying close attention to our Lord’s words would have been perplexed by Christ’s reference to coming. It was implicitly a reference to His divine nature and Messianic office.

His statement about fulfilling the law and the prophets is also astonishing. He is not simply a prophet or teacher, but is the pinnacle and fulfillment of the whole Old Testament. He is the axis around which the whole Word of God rotates. He is the fulfillment of the great promise that runs from Genesis through Malachi. No wonder the first recorded words of His ministry are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:15). The Sermon on the Mount presents Jesus as the Messiah who was to come, the King of the Jews, the One of whom it is promised that His kingdom will have no end (Dan. 7:14). He is the One to whom all nations will bow and serve (Ps. 22:27-28; 72:8-11; 86:9; Mal. 1:11; etc.). He is the promised suffering servant who will redeem His people by His own sacrificial death. People, who say they like the Sermon on the Mount because it presents Jesus as just a humble teacher and no more, are completely blind to what it actually teaches. It teaches His incarnation and His great role as the Messiah-King over all.

Moreover, the statement that He came to fulfill the law must not be restricted to prophetic fulfillment. It also means that Jesus came to obey the law in exhaustive detail in thought, word and deed during His whole life. Christ here claims what no man has ever or will ever accomplish—sinless perfection. What the first Adam failed to do and what we all miserably fail to do, Christ—the second Adam—did. If people understood what the Savior was saying, they would see that the Nazarene was no ordinary human being. Here was someone born without original sin. Here was someone who came to earth to undo the consequences of Adam’s disobedience by His perfect obedience. Here is a man who came to fulfill the covenant of works and all the positive requirements of the law for us. As Paul says, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4). “For by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). And not only that, the Redeemer’s obedience led to the cross of Calvary where He paid the penalty for sin in the place of His people. He met all the obligations of God’s holy law for His people with regard both to precept and penalty. He achieved a perfect redemption by His sinless life and sacrificial death.

Christ’s awesome authority is seen as He begins to teach on the moral law and corrects the false interpretations and traditions of the scribes. In refuting false teachers we would expect someone to appeal directly to the authority of God or the Old Testament Scriptures. But the common prophetic formulas such as “The LORD says,” or “Thus says the LORD,” are never used. Instead, Jesus repeatedly appeals to His own name and authority often using the emphatic assertion, “Assuredly, I say unto you” (Mt. 5:18, 26; 6:2, 5, 16); “I say to you (Mt. 5:20, 22, 28, 32, 34, 44; 6:25); or “I tell you” (Mt. 5:39). Our Lord does not simply present Himself to the people as a better interpreter of Moses than the scribes and Pharisees (although He certainly was

the best interpreter who ever lived); but, as the lawgiver Himself who is refuting the scribal corruptions applied to *His own law*. The law that He Himself gave to Moses! Christ spoke with a clear confidence and calm absoluteness as “a Teacher who has no shade of doubt as to His hearers of the message which He brings.”⁵³⁷ Consequently, His teaching on the law was non-negotiable. Even His bare statement had absolute authority; His words were royal, heavenly words. Even if what He said contradicted several generations of rabbinic traditions, the people had to immediately submit to His authority, for every word He spoke was infallible truth.

Therefore, with perfect confidence, He can stand before the crowds and tell them plainly that their religious leaders had it wrong with regard to the law. They missed the fact that it applies to the heart as well as outward acts and they often circumvented the truth by their misinterpretations and glosses. Our Lord did not hesitate to rebuke the whole religious establishment of the nation. Here is God come to earth to correct and instruct His erring people. He did not merely speak in the name of God, but as God. This type of authoritative teaching demanded a response, for in rejecting the Savior’s words one rejects God’s own words. No wonder the people were dumbfounded. The light of the world was before them, the final spokesman of God (Heb. 1:1-2). Would they bow to this authority or remain in darkness?

His authority is exceptionally explicit when He warns the crowds of the danger of a false profession. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Mt. 7:21). Although the term “Lord” is sometimes used like our word “sir,” in this passage it means much more. Here the Savior is addressed as one who must be obeyed (see Lk. 6:46); as one in charge of the final judgment. “Thus Jesus saw himself as more than a teacher, giving advice which people might or might not heed at their discretion; he was their master, issuing commandments, expecting obedience and warning them that their eternal welfare was at stake. Clearly, in all this Jesus was no ordinary rabbi.”⁵³⁸

When our Lord spoke of the final judgment, He placed Himself on God’s throne as the very One who has the power to cast people into hell: “I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Mt. 7:23). This is an astounding statement. Every person’s eternal destiny is said to hinge on their relationship to Christ. This presupposes His divinity. If one is not known or loved by this humble Man from Nazareth, then he is rejected by God forever. Moreover, the eternal curse that Jesus pronounces is *not* simply being cast out of God’s present, but eternal banishment from His presence: “Depart from Me.” The very essence of hell is to not have love, fellowship and communion with Christ. Any man, whether the greatest of prophets, apostles, or holiest of the saints could never speak in this manner without blaspheming. But our Lord spoke this way all the time. If we do not have a relationship with Jesus, then we will suffer the worst fate possible—eternal separation from the Savior in hell. Now we understand why Christ is called the pearl of great price (Mt. 13:46), the rose of Sharon (Song 2:1) and the great hidden treasure which will cause a man to sacrifice all to get possession of it (Mt. 13:44). Thus, we see, once again, that the ethics of the sermon cannot be separated from embracing Jesus as Lord and Savior.

In describing this scene on the final day, our Lord gives Himself the role that every Jew had been taught belonged solely to God.⁵³⁹ He sits on the great white throne and examines all the

⁵³⁷ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 118.

⁵³⁸ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 217.

⁵³⁹ “According to the Rabbinic view it is exclusively God who will judge the world...In Rabbinic literature there is no passage which unambiguously places the judgment of the world in the hand of the Messiah” (H. L. Strack and P.

evidence, all the works, even the secrets of men (Rom. 2:16). Then He is the one who renders the verdict. Does not this scene presuppose the Redeemer's omniscience? Does it not assume the divinity of Christ and His exaltation as Mediator after His resurrection on the third day (cf. Mt. 25:31, 32; Jn. 5:27; Ac. 10:42; 17:31; Phil. 2:10; 2 Tim. 4:1)? Jesus tells the crowds that a time is coming when all power and authority in heaven and on earth will be His (Mt. 28:18); that He will ascend to the right hand of God and sit on His throne (Ac. 2:34-35). "There is an original, supreme, judicial power; and there is also a judicial power derived, given by commission. Christ, as God, hath the first together with the Father."⁵⁴⁰ Our Lord would elaborate on the significance of this teaching later in His ministry: "For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (Jn. 5:21-23). Before the Savior, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Jehovah (cf. Phil. 2:10, 11).

If the Holy Spirit had opened the crowd's eyes, would they not have immediately have begun to worship Him and dedicate their lives to Him? If Jesus was not the Son of God and Messiah, then this teaching would have been the delusion of a madman, an egomaniac of the highest degree. But, it is all true. The Savior proved it with the great signs that He did and with the ultimate sign—His resurrection from the dead. Given this kind of teaching and authority, it is incredible that the crowds did not become His disciples at once. But, tragically, because of their depraved hearts, men love darkness rather than light. "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (Jn. 12:48).

As our Lord drew His applications and sermon to a close, He makes the startling assertion that every person's final destiny is based on what they do with His sayings (Mt. 7:24-27). If we hear them but do not obey them, then we are doomed to everlasting destruction. Unlike the prophets, Jesus makes no attempt at assuring His audience that He is merely relaying information that He received by a vision, dream, voice or divine inspiration. His words have the same authority as the Ten Commandments spoken by God in Exodus 20. Christ doesn't merely quote or interpret Scripture, but sets forth absolute truths from Himself. He is the source for truth, meaning and ethics. He is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us "full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). Moses gave the people the law that He received from God, "but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:17). That is why He could say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn. 14:6). In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). Truth cannot exist without the Redeemer and it cannot be truly known without His Spirit. He is the divine Word who is the finality of revelation (Heb. 1). He is the light in which we see light (Ps. 36:9; cf. 119:105). Consequently, our eternal destiny depends on what we do with His teachings which describe what we are to believe concerning Him and how we are required to live our lives. He is the eternal Son of God and Messianic King who has authority to issue commands; demand an unwavering devotion and obedience; and who, as the final judge, can threaten eternal sanctions for lawlessness. It is obvious that there can be no neutrality regarding these amazing claims. The common idea among modern scholars that the Sermon on the Mount reveals only a humble Jewish rabbi who was setting forth His own view of ethics—that the Nazarene was simply setting forth His own unique

Billerback, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* [Munich, Germany, 1922-28], 2:465, as quoted in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 315.

⁵⁴⁰ Burgen as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:289.

interpretation of Judaism—is completely off the mark. His amazing claims about Himself cannot be separated from His ethical teaching. To attempt to do so is dishonest. Modernist scholars live in a fantasy land of their own creation. They are false prophets who want to strip the sermon of the gospel and the rich Christology we find throughout the New Testament.

The authority of Jesus presented in this sermon shows us that we can never make too much of Christ in our lives. We can never love Him too much or obey Him too much or worship Him too much. He is the Alpha and Omega of Christianity. He is the source of all life and the fountain of all virtue. Jesus is not just another rabbinic teacher. His authority is not founded upon the tradition of the fathers. He is not just a great expositor of the Torah. This Nazarene has an authority that resides in Himself. He is the most unique, remarkable man who ever lived. Only one time in all of human history did God come and live among men. The Savior is fully God and man in one person. That is why He can make such totally incredible exclusive claims. It is why He can present Himself as the foundation for all truth, justice and meaning. His authority is absolute, while all earthly authorities are purely ministerial. Because He is God, equal in power and authority with the Father, and the exalted-glorified Mediator, He is worthy of all obeisance, honor and obedience. He that is one with the Father, who is coming to judge the quick and the dead, tells us how we must live our lives if we are to be His disciples and enter the kingdom of heaven. Consequently, we must listen very carefully to what He says and respond to all of it with a fervent, serious dedication. Matthew the evangelist wants us to see this authority so that we would bow the knee to Christ by believing His gospel and obeying His precepts.

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