

# **THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW**

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**BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOKS SERIES**

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**THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW**

Volume Three

by

Harold Fowler

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### INTRODUCTION

#### IS THE SERMON IN PARABLES ONE UNITED WHOLE?

The Apostle Matthew has a recognizably editorial style which he puts to good use by collecting together ideas and facts that logically go together. For example, he collected together a series of fast-moving illustrations to convince his readers that Jesus possesses the divine credentials to tell men what God wants them to know (Mt. 8, 9). In these sections at least we noticed that Matthew was driven not so much by chronological considerations as by his interest in assembling those events whose unified weight would have considerable persuasive power. Since the divine inspiration of Matthew as Apostle guarantees for us the rightness of his procedure, we are not surprised whenever his method surfaces at any given point in his work.

Now, does Matthew's chapter 13 represent this procedure? Did he collect these parables into one place without regard to context? That is, is the material contained in 13:1-53 the account of one particular sermon preached by Jesus in its entirety on a given day in Galilee?

Farrar (*Life*, 254) doubts it, offering the following arguments against its fundamental unity:

It seems clear that our Lord did not on this occasion deliver all of those seven parables . . . which, from a certain resemblance in their subjects and consecutiveness in their teaching, are here grouped together by St. Matthew. (Footnote: For the scene of delivery at least changes in Matt. xiii. 34-36.) Seven parables (Footnote: . . . Eight, if we add Mark iv. 26-29. . . ) delivered at once, and delivered without interpretation, to a promiscuous multitude which He was for the first time addressing in this form of teaching, would have only tended to bewilder, and distract. Indeed, the expression of St. Mark—"as they were able to hear it" (Mark iv. 33)—seems distinctly to imply a gradual and non-continuous course of teaching, which would have lost its value if it had given to the listeners more than they were able to remember and understand. We may rather conclude, from a comparison of St. Mark and St. Luke, that the teaching of this particular afternoon contained no other parables, except perhaps the simple and closely analogous ones of the grain of mustard-seed, and of the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear, . . .

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Farrar's explanation, and any others of which his may be considered typical, does not take adequate account of the following arguments urging the fundamental unity of this discourse:

1. Matthew intentionally gives the distinct impression that he is recording both the beginning (Mt. 13:1-3), and the conclusion (Mt. 13:53) to a single discourse given in its entirety at least in the presence and hearing of His close disciples. Mark (4:1-35) and at least Luke 8:4-18 confirm this impression. (See critical note on 13:53 at that place.)
2. Again, it is Matthew himself who clearly notes the change from public discourse to private explanations and continued teaching which obviously came later (Mt. 13:36). The only problem that arises is that affecting the intervening material, i.e., "Why Jesus Teaches by Parables" (Mt. 13:10-17). "The Explanation of the Sower Parable" (Mt. 13:18-23) and probably also "The Use of Parables" (Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18). However, Mark (4:10) reveals that this intervening material, which Matthew has inserted before the end of the public discourse, was the subject of Jesus' remarks made privately to the insiders. Thus it would seem that only this aforementioned material became the private property of these intimates, whereas the parables recorded immediately thereafter are but the continuation of the public sermon. This is true, because, after the story of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26-29), of the Tares (Mt. 13:24-30), of the Mustard Seed and that of the Leaven, Matthew gives the discourse a definite rounding off: "All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables" (Mt. 13:34). Should any object that Matthew should have interjected an explanation or two out of order, when, as a matter of fact, they were given privately and later, let it be remembered that Mark and Luke do the same thing. Then, it is Mark who verifies this conclusion:

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it, he did not speak to them without a parable. But privately he explained everything to his own disciples (Mk. 4:33f).

Has anyone inquired into the psychological value of our author's making the very kind of parenthetical insertion that we find here (Mt. 13:10-23)? Since Matthew is not merely providing his reader with a full transcript of the sermon anyway, and since the readers of Matthew's gospel, faced with a barrage of unexplained parables,

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would have some of the same difficulties as the original audience to Jesus' sermon, the Apostle comes to the aid of his readers. (After all, the circumstances occasioning the sermon in the first place are changed at the time of the Apostle's penning the Gospel.) So, he furnishes early in this chapter not only the answer to the anticipated question of why Jesus used this method. He also provides an interpreter's key for the reader's appreciation of the parables that were to follow. (Cf. Mk. 4:13) So the insertion itself made by Matthew is no argument against the integrity of the discourse given that day by Jesus.

Accordingly, besides the above-mentioned material inserted out of its chronological order for psychological effect, the private explanations included the key to the story of the Weeds, and perhaps also the illustrations of the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl of Great Price and the Dragnet.

3. Again it is Matthew, an eye-witness to the event, who specifies that, besides the recorded stories, many more were delivered on the same occasion (Mt. 13:3, 34, 53). This would allow for considerable variation in reporting the stories, which, surprisingly, is limited mainly to Mk. 4:21-29, and Lk. 8:16-18.
4. The mere observation that some of these parables are to be found elsewhere, reportedly given by Jesus in differing circumstances, does not militate against their repetition on this occasion, especially since their character is general and the need for their retelling widespread.
5. The objection that a barrage of parables without explanation, delivered before a heterogeneous audience would have tended only to confuse, losing its value on listeners unable to understand, entirely misses the real purpose behind Jesus' tactics. In fact, it is His declared intentions to hide truth from some by letting each person's trust in Jesus determine how much truth he would be willing to learn. (See the section on the "Purpose of Parables.")
6. Farrar objected that the expression "as they were able to hear it" (Mark 4:33) implies a gradual, non-continuous course based upon the listeners' ability to understand, hence not one continuous sermon. However, Mark's full statement runs: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable." The "word," here, is the description of the Kingdom Jesus revealed. Thus Mark is affirming, not that Jesus doled out the spoonfuls of information gradually or on different occasions as people could swallow them,

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but the victorious truth that Jesus actually succeeded in speaking the soul-saving truth to those people in the measure to which they were actually to grasp it. All this, despite His total use of parables to communicate that truth! The proof that some really understood Jesus' parables is seen in His question of His intimates: "Have you understood all this?" (Mt. 13:51). No doubt much of their affirmative answer is based upon His private explanations, but it by no means follows that all of their understanding was so founded. Much clear, unparabolic information about the Kingdom had already been laid openly before the disciples (Mt. 4:23; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; 9:35; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 12:28; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 4:43; 8:1). Therefore, it was not impossible that some disciples who had studied His clear teaching could have seen the connections intended between His former lessons and the point of the parables. For these people, then, the parables really illustrated, rather than hid, truth. So Mark's statement affirms Jesus' success in communicating truth instantly to some hearers that day, notwithstanding the fact that many different listeners, for just as many varied reasons, were unable to grasp it.

Upon closer examination, then, there is nothing that would sustain the hypothesis of fundamental disunity in this discourse of Jesus, whereas a comparison of the related texts discloses enough satisfying proof of its unity to convince the objective reviewer.

So what if the message reported by Matthew is one cohesive unit? Many Bible students would never have thought to fragment this chapter anyway, having no preconceived notions about where Matthew must have derived his materials. It is important to see this discourse as a unit for several important reasons:

- (1) If this sermon be one continuous speech, uttered at a given historical juncture of events in Jesus' ministry, its mysterious character, half-revealing, half-hiding precious truth about the nature of the Messianic Kingdom of God, will provide further insight into the plans of God. It will become increasingly clearer to the believer why God has made the choices He has. (Cf. Mt. 11:25ff; 1 Co. 1:18-31)
- (2) If this message was deliberately organized by Jesus, more or less as the Evangelists report it, our own understanding of the Lord as a Master Teacher and strategist is sensibly increased. For if this strange assortment of seemingly disconnected stories be but one lecture, intended to keep pushy, uncomprehending

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curiosity seekers at bay, if its definitely low-key disclosures are intended to cool Zealots' nationalistic messianism, if its intriguing but unexplained stories are aimed at keeping the scholars guessing, then Matthew is absolutely right to consider the great sermon in parables as symptomatic of the growing crisis in Jesus' public relations, and right to introduce significant portions of that message at this place in his account. There were various ways Jesus maintained His "messianic reserve" (not "messianic secret," as Wilhelm Wrede would have it) such as forbidding demons and men not to inform others He was the Christ until after His resurrection (Cf. Mt. 8:4; 9:30; 16:20; 17:9) This sermon, if our reading of Mt. 13:34 and Mk. 4:34 is correct, is typical of Jesus' approach during this increasingly stormy period that would finally erupt in the crack and collapse of His popularity with the crowds. So, in this very sermon Jesus maintains His messianic reserve in the sense that He deftly defers divulging His own messianic plans in the presence of any but the most dedicated.

Consequently, we see that the question of the sermon's unity is not one of dubious, abstract value, but rather integral to a correct understanding of Jesus, His message and ministry.

## ARE JESUS' "PARABLES" PARABLES?

That depends on what we think a "parable" is. If Jesus is using the word "parable" in harmony with modern technical definitions in mind, we will interpret His stories one way. On the other hand, if the word "parable" in the usage of Jesus and His contemporaries plays havoc with modern distinctions and rules, then we must get at the thinking behind His linguistic habits and let that be our guide to understanding His stories.

One must recognize that the ancients used the word "parable" to cover a rather kaleidoscopic range of figurative sayings. Further, since they did not make, nor necessarily respect, our nice distinctions between figures, it would lead to a mistaken interpretation of the ancient figures, were we to use modern rules governing the interpretation of what modern rhetoric would call a "parable." The Bible writers use the word "parable" (Greek: *parabole*) in the following senses:

1. A proverb (1 Kg. 4:32 [= 5:12 LXX]; Psa. 49:4 [= 48:5 LXX];

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- Prov. 1:6; Eccles. 12:9; Ezek. 16:44; 18:2; 12:22, 23)
- 2. A byword (Psa. 69:11 [= 68:12 LXX]; 2 Chron. 7:20; Jer. 24:9; Dt. 28:37)
  - 3. An allegory (Ezek. 17:2; 20:49 [= 21:5 LXX]; 24:3)
  - 4. Any poetic discourse composed of poetical imagery, sustained parallelisms, brief pointed sentences. (Nu. 23:7; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23; Mic. 2:4; Hab. 2:6; Isa. 14:4)
  - 5. Didactic history (Psa. 78:2 [= 77:2 LXX]; see on Mat. 13:34, 35)  
Symbolic or typological events, things or persons. (Heb. 9:9)
  - 6. A figure of speech, a speaking figuratively (Heb. 11:19)
  - 7. A germ illustration or enigmatic speech not immediately clear (Cfr. the disciples' attitude: Mt. 15:15; Mk. 7:17)
  - 8. Of course, the familiar, classic one-point story form made famous by our Lord (although its employment was certainly known before His time, cfr. Hos. 12:10)

These broad uses of *parabolé* are really a part of the historical significance of the word, despite the contemporaneous existence of other Greek words which Jesus could have used to describe His figurative language: *allegoria* (verb: Gal. 4:24), *enigma* (Nu. 12:8; 21:27; Dt. 28:37; Prov. 1:6; Dan. 8:23), *probléma* (Psa. 48:5; 77:2; Dan. 8:23 Theod.; Hab. 2:6); *skoteindón lógon* ("dark saying," Prov. 1:6); *paroimíai* ("proverbs," Prov. 26:7); *diégema* ("story," Dt. 28:37; Ezek. 17:2)

Therefore, in the light of the broad use of the word "parable" (*parabolé*), it should be no surprise if the Savior calls an indisputable allegory a "parable" instead of an "allegory." Consequently, as we seek to interpret this chapter, we will discover that sometimes a given illustration is strictly a parable with one point and no more, whereas another story is really a short allegory with numerous points of comparison. So, rather than accuse Jesus of abusing the word "parable," we revise our definition! The "correct" definition of "parable" is the meaning the author intended to convey when he used the word. So, if Jesus calls an allegory a "parable," we must not use modern rules governing parables only to ruin the true interpretation of His allegory-parables! As in other areas of good Bible interpretation, so also here: the author's definitions and explanations of his language are sufficient and final. Some of Jesus' parables, as He explains them, are clearly allegories.

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### PARABLES AND ALLEGORIES COMPARED

A "parable" in the modern sense differs from the "allegory" in several important particulars. The parable, strictly speaking, is an illustration or a story or an event taken from everyday life, known to all, used to clarify or explain something else not understood by all, with which it can be compared. The parable generally portrays one fundamental point of comparison, and all the details serve only to make this point clear, not being intended to represent separate features of the thing the parable is supposed to illustrate. Obviously, then, the purpose of a parable, in this stricter sense, is to explain something under discussion with a view to making it clear to everyone.

The "allegory," strictly speaking, also involves one great underlying idea (like "the nature of the Kingdom of God," "the tragic folly of rejecting God's messengers," etc.). But, contrary to parables in the strict sense of the word, in allegories the various characters, events, actions and other details that interact to move the plot forward to its natural climax, actually signify, or refer to, the separate parts of the things being described by the allegory. Further, the various parts of the allegory have meaning and must be interpreted. Another interesting feature of the allegory that vitally affects our understanding of Matthew 13 and other "parables" of Jesus, is the fact that quite often allegories are intended to mask, or even deliberately hide, the meaning of the comparison, so that only the initiates, the insiders, the intimate members of a given group should recognize what is meant.

Our task, then, will not be easy, since Jesus Himself uses the word "parable" rather loosely. It may well be that, in those instances where the Lord has not furnished the interpretation, we may need to treat His stories as strictly one-point parables, lest we commit another common error in Biblical interpretation of seeing meaning in details that even the Lord Himself knew nothing about. But, regarding those for which He does provide the meaning, He obviously treats them as allegories, so detailed is His explanation of each part of the stories. (Cf. e.g. the Parable of the Sower; the Parable of the Weeds) Yet even here some of the temptingly interesting details of Jesus' original allegory are discarded in His explanation as apparently meaningless or unimportant, a fact that warns against fanciful invention of meaning for insignificant details even in allegories. As the history of exegesis would amply show, the decision just which details in Jesus' parables are to be regarded as significant, and which meaningless, will not be

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easy. In fact, in some cases it will be impossible. Our dilemma is dramatized in Jesus' question: "Do you not understand this parable (of the sower)? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mk. 4:13). It may be granted that His questions mean that the truth contained in the Parable of the Sower is fundamental to a secure grasp of everything else Jesus has to say by means of the other parables, i.e., "The reception of the message of the Kingdom depends upon the condition of one's heart and the attention he gives to the message." Still, one cannot avoid the more than probable conclusion that He intended to furnish us with a key to the interpretation of them all. (See Trench, *Notes*, 16.) If so, the key Jesus provides in the examples He gives is frankly allegorical, since He explains practically every detail in the stories of the sower and of the weeds. (See also the triad of parables in Mt. 21:23—22:14 and parallels.)

### SOME HELPFUL GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING JESUS' PARABLES

1. Approach the parables, not with a self-admiring ingenuity that would seek to discover meaning in all the minutest fibers of the narrative, but with the conviction that God's purpose for all Scripture, including the parables, is to make men holy through the truth, not to encourage them to exercise the vaunted ability of dubious value to discover hidden meanings where there were none intended.
2. Determine the one central truth which the parable intends to proclaim.
  - a. How much of the parable did Jesus Himself interpret? He may have pointed this idea out.
  - b. On what occasion is the parable introduced? This may indicate the truth it is intended to illustrate.
  - c. With what explanations is the parable introduced?
  - d. How is the parable applied in its own context?
  - e. Is there a similar parable in the context illustrating the same central point?
  - f. How do the historical and cultural circumstances indicated in the story help to underline the central thought being illustrated?
  - g. Having determined the major point essential to the comparison, all the different parts will appear in their true perspective: either as mere embellishments essential to complete the story as a story,

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or else in their true light as essential points upon which the major comparison is based. These latter must be interpreted; the former, no. Any minor points of comparison must be handled with reserve, i.e., with a rigorous hesitation to accept any minor details in the story unless they really function as part of the comparison. The very lack of connection between any details and the principle lesson of the parable is the clearest indication that they were not intended to be interpreted at all. Any interpretation inconsistent with the subject to be illustrated must be rejected.

3. Parables must not be used to furnish the basis for doctrinal argument, because their purpose is primarily to illustrate truth. They do not prove or demonstrate it. The basis of doctrine lies in the clear, unfigurative expositions of truth elsewhere in Scripture. The function of parables is to illustrate these doctrines to intimate disciples of Jesus, so the illustrations themselves are valid only insofar as they perform this function. Doctrine does not lean on parables; parables lean on doctrine. No detail may be pressed which indisputably violates clear moral principles spelled out elsewhere. No interpretation of a parable can be broader than the nature of the thing it is supposed to illustrate: a parable is not intended to say things greater than, or other than, the thing it is trying to describe. The actual extent of meaning must be determined by the author's intent and by the nature of the subject, not only on the basis of the parable considered by itself.
4. The interpretation of parables must be an easy one, a natural one, not violent or forced. This is especially true and possible for moderns with full access to the completed revelation in the broad outlines of God's plans. Since these doctrines have now been revealed in clear, unparabolic language, the parables which were once such tough going for the early disciples should require little special genius to discover their meaning. To this end, it will be found that the analogies will be real, never arbitrary.
5. No one parable tells the whole story. A parable, by its nature, is a figure of speech called *synecdoche*, by which its author indicates the whole of something by mentioning a significant part of it, or vice versa, the general for the particular and vice versa, the definite for the indefinite, etc. This is most certainly the case with Jesus' parables in Mt. 13, since no one parable exhausts the full expression or meaning of the Kingdom of God. Each parable is but a facet of a lovely diamond. Each facet is fully part of the diamond,

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but in no sense does it alone express all of the gem's beauty. This should be easy to see, since Jesus is quite obviously saying, "The Kingdom of God is like this and this and this and this." How COULD God's reign be similar to so many diverse things, if but one of them exhausted the full meaning of the whole Kingdom? No interpretation of a given parable, therefore, must be permitted to override or contradict the lessons taught by other parables.

6. Parables almost invariably are true to human experience, if not already oblique allusions to historical incidents. But details, missing from the narration, must not be supplied by the interpreter's imagination, because the parable's author selected just so many details as were pertinent to HIS purpose. To invent details, or add them out of historical research, when the author himself did not consider them necessary to the communication of his ideas, is not only to ruin his original, but become the presumptuous editor-author of a different story without any divine sanction.
7. The correct interpretation of a parable has been discovered if it leaves none of the main features of the story unexplained.
8. A clear understanding of the time-period to which many of the parables refer is necessary for their proper interpretation. Most of them are a description of times between the two coming of Christ. Others have as their objective the illustration of certain features of future eschatological events and the Christian's response to them: preparation for final judgment, the unexpectedness of the time, the exhortation to be faithful, the finality of ultimate separations, etc. Some even depict such short-range eschatological truth as the destruction of Jerusalem and the transfer of the privileges of the Kingdom from Jews to the Gentiles. In this sense, some are prophetic, and as such, would then be treated with the same rules that govern the proper understanding of prophecies, especially seeing their significance in the light of their undoubted fulfillment.

## Section 31

### JESUS PREACHES THE GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

(Parallels: Mark 4:1-34; Luke 8:4-18)

#### PREVIEWING IN OUTLINE FORM

- I. The Occasion (Mt. 13:1-3a; Mk. 4:1, 2; Lk. 8:4)
- II. The Parable of the Soils (Mt. 13:3b-9; Mk. 4:3-9; Lk. 8:5-8)
- III. The Purpose for Parables (Mt. 13:10-17; Mk. 4:10-12; Lk. 8:9, 10)
- IV. The Explanation of the Soil Parable (Mt. 13:18-23; Mk. 4:13-20; Lk. 8:11-15)
- V. The Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:24-30)
- VI. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31, 32; Mk. 4:30-32)
- VII. The Parable of the Leaven (Mt. 13:33)
- VIII. The Multiplicity of Parables (Mt. 13:34, 35; Mk. 4:33, 34)
- IX. The Explanation of the Weeds Parable (Mt. 13:36-43)
- X. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Mt. 13:44)
- XI. The Parable of the Precious Pearl (Mt. 13:45, 46)
- XII. The Parable of the Dragnet (Mt. 13:47-50)
- XIII. The Use of Parables (Mt. 13:51-53)

A word is in order here concerning the method to be followed in the study of this great sermon in parables. There can be no valid interpretation of a parable which misses its author's own meaning, ignores the historical circumstances of the story or the setting in which the teller narrates it, or otherwise fails to see his express intent for telling it.

In this sermon Jesus obviously takes no text, indicates no logical outline or specific sequence of thoughts and draws no clear-cut conclusions, a fact so remarkable that it caused some problems for His closer disciples. It was just not His usual style to teach exclusively using apparently disconnected and unexplained stories. They did not recognize that His discourse is organized according to what in good public speaking would be called "the string-of-beads outline." This outline consists in a series of illustrations strung together in no particular sequence: Even as beads are strung together on a single cord, so each story is a separate unit and pertains to the whole insofar as it illustrates the common theme running through them all. In the case of these parables, the major theme illustrated from various

vantage points is the Kingdom of God.

Since it is the Lord's declared purpose to convey meaning to His disciples, as well as to illustrate how other parables are to be understood (cf. Mk. 4:13), and in order to let Jesus' own exposition guide our thinking, in the notes which follow, each explanation He gave has been grouped with the parable it interprets. As the following interpretative outline indicates, the only parable taken out of order is that of the Dragnet which parallels and complements that of the Weeds with which it will be studied. This, because the Lord's style makes use often of two parallel stories to illustrate and reinforce the same truth from two similar standpoints, as in the case of the Mustard-Seed and Yeast Parables or the Treasure and Pearl Parables. As a partial parallel for the Sower and Soils Parable, the Parable of the Seed Growing By Itself, narrated in Mark 4:26-29, has been added to Matthew's list for completeness.

**THE FOLLOWING ORDER WILL BE THAT  
FOLLOWED IN THE COMMENTS:**

- |                                                        |                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| I. The Occasion of the Sermon (13:1-3a)                | I. The opportunity to know truth |
| II. The Message                                        | II. The truth presented          |
| A. The Problem of Kingdom Proclamation                 | A. Reactions to truth            |
| 1. Parable of the Sower and Soils (Mt. 13:3b-9, 18-23) |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26-29)           |                                  |
| B. The Problem of Evil in God's Kingdom                | B. The trials of truth           |
| 1. Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43)          |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Dragnet (Mt. 13:47-50)               |                                  |
| C. The Problem of Growth and Success in God's Kingdom  | C. The triumph of truth          |
| 1. Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31, 32)         |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Yeast (Mt. 13:33)                    |                                  |
| D. The Inestimable Value of the Kingdom                | D. The price of truth            |
| 1. Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Mt. 13:44)          |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Precious Pearl (Mt. 13:45, 46)       |                                  |

- III. Jesus' Methodology in Parabolic Instruction
  - A. The Purpose of Parables (Mt. 13:10-17)
  - B. The Multiplicity and Justification of Parables (Mt. 13:34, 35)
  - C. The Appreciation For and Use of All Truth (Mt. 13:51-53)

### HOW DID JESUS ORGANIZE HIS SERMON?

Because Matthew purposely re-edited Jesus' message (see his statements at 13:10, 34, 36; cf. Mk. 4:10, 33, 34), it might be thought helpful to attempt a tentative reconstruction of that message as Jesus might have delivered it. The only value therein would be to help the reader better to visualize the original scene. There is no intention whatever here to question Matthew's integrity as a historian or his proper rights as an inspired author. Rather, since the theorists of the *Redaktionsgeschichte*-school would reduce even Matthew's literary connectors into "unhistorical fabrications serving editorial purposes, rather than intending to register objective relationships," only a Christian who trusts the Publican-Apostle implicitly to be telling the truth could begin a serious reconstruction!

Here is the author's reconstruction:

- I. Situation (Mt. 13:1, 2; Mk. 4:1; Lk. 8:4a)
- II. Message proper
  - A. Many parables (Mt. 13:3a; Mk. 4:2)
  - B. Sower Parable (Mt. 13:3b-9; Mk. 4:3-9; Lk. 8:5-8)
  - C. Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26-29)
  - D. Weeds Parable (Mt. 13:24-30)
  - E. Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31, 32; Mk. 4:30-32)
  - F. Leaven (Mt. 13:33)
  - G. Hidden Treasure (given at this point? Mt. 13:44)
  - H. Precious Pearl (given at this point? Mt. 13:45, 46)
  - I. Dragnet (given at this point? Mt. 13:47-50)
  - J. Many similar parables (Mt. 13:34, 35; Mk. 4:33, 34)
  - K. Official end of the seaside message (Mt. 13:36a)
- III. Private Explanations to the Disciples (Mt. 13:36b; Mk. 4:34b)
  - A. Disciples request private explanations of His methodology (Mt. 13:36; cf. Mk. 4:10)
  - B. Jesus explains His method:
    - 1. The reason for parables (Mt. 13:10, 11; Mk. 4:10, 11)

- Lk. 8:9, 10)
- 2. Revelations are for publication (Mk. 4:21, 22; Lk. 8:16-18a)
  - 3. Responsibility for the proclamation (Mk. 4:23)
  - 4. Rewarding of the perceptive (Mt. 13:12; Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18b)
  - 5. Recollection of a prophecy because of a replay of perverseness (Mt. 13:13-15)
  - 6. Rejoicing in possession and the responsibilities of privilege (Mt. 13:16, 17)
- C. Explanation of the Sower Parable (Mt. 13:18-23; Mk. 4:13-20; Lk. 8:11-15) Parable of the Lamp given here? Mk. 4:21ff; Lk. 8:16ff
- D. Explanation of the Weeds Parable (Mt. 13:36-43)
- E. Conclusion: Parable of the Christian Scribe. (Mt. 13:51-53)

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### I. THE OCCASION

TEXT: 13:1-9, 18-23

(Parallels: Mk. 4:1-9, 13-20; Lk. 8:4-8, 11-15)

- 1 On that day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.
- 2 And there were gathered unto him great multitudes, so that he entered into a boat, and sat; and all the multitude stood on the beach.
- 3 And he spake to them many things in parables, saying,

### II. THE MESSAGE

#### A. PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN KINGDOM PROCLAMATION

##### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Behold, the sower went forth to sow, 4 and as he sowed, some *seeds* fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured them: 5 and others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth:

and straightway they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth: 6 and when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 And others fell upon the thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked them: 8 and others fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 He that hath ears, let him hear.

.....  
18 Hear then ye the parable of the sower. 19 When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, *then* cometh the evil *one*, and snatcheth away that which hath been sown in his heart. This is he that was sown by the way side. 20 And he that was sown upon the rocky places, this is he that heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth it; 21 yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a while; and when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he stumbleth. 22 And he that was sown among the thorns, this is he that heareth the word; and the care of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. 23 And he that was sown upon the good ground, this is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; who verily beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How does this parable show that more than the objective presentation of truth is necessary in order to convert a person to Jesus?
- b. What does the parable teach about the power and effectiveness of the Word of God?
- c. What does the parable suggest about the limitations of the power of God's Word?
- d. Does this parable prove that a person has to be "honest and good" before he can actually accept the Gospel and grow in it? I thought that it was the Gospel that makes people honest and good, not that they had to be good and honest before they could accept it. Explain.
- e. God promised that His Word would not return to Him void, but would accomplish the purpose for which He had sent it (Isa. 55:10, 11). But is it not true in this parable that many, many people made void God's Word in their own case by letting other things destroy its influence? Also the elders' traditions make void God's Word

(Mt. 15:1-20). How would you go about harmonizing God's declaration (Isa. 55:10, 11) with this seemingly contrary teaching found in the parable of the Sower?

- f. How do you account for the fact that there seems to be a boat handy just when Jesus needs it? Whose boat might it have been? Why would Jesus need it here in this incident; i.e., what tactical use of it did He make?
- g. When Jesus gives an interpretation along with His parables, what are we to do with it? But when He does not explain a parable for us, what are we to do? What were His disciples expected to do with a parable for which He gave no immediate explanation?
- h. When do you think the Apostles began questioning Jesus for further information regarding the meaning of His parables?
- i. Do you think that the people represented in the first three classes described are personally responsible for the condition of their heart at the time of their hearing the message of Christ? Why?
- j. Do you think Jesus is here condemning the various things that fill a person's life, which somehow hinder him from producing a fruitful life for God? What are your reasons for thinking this?
- k. What is the difference in definition between "good" and "honest," as descriptive of the proper sort of heart Jesus is seeking? (Lk. 8:15)
- l. What is so deceitful about wealth?
- m. What is "the care of the world"? Do you think that Jesus means: "the care, or desire, for the world"? Or does He mean "the world's cares," that is, that which the world worries about? Or is there another possibility?
- n. How is it that even those who do accept God's Word in a good, honest heart do not even produce the same results? Why should Jesus have to stress this point, after defining so sharply the difference between the hearts of those who, for whatever reason, do not produce fruit, and those who do? What is so important about even this latter distinction (v. 8) that helps us to understand the basic nature of the best, most faithful followers of Jesus?
- o. To what would you attribute the fruitfulness of the fourth class of people? State in several ways exactly what it means to have a "good and honest heart."
- p. When Jesus describes the Gospel as producing in good hearts sometimes thirty-, sixty- and hundredfold, do you think that He was stating His ideal, i.e., the goal He wished to reach in human lives, or do you think that He was stating a fact, making a true

observation about what He knew would be the result?

- q. How does the short parable narrated in Mark 4:26-29 about the Seed Growing By Itself qualify, or aid in the correct understanding of the Parable of the Sower and Soils, as well as that of the Weeds?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

That same day Jesus walked out of the house, sat beside the sea and began to teach. Such a very large crowd of people from town after town was gathering about Him that He boarded a boat and sat in it on the lake of Galilee. The whole crowd stood on the beach listening as He taught them many lessons in story form. During the course of His instruction He said,

"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. While he was sowing, some grain fell along the path and was walked on by people who passed, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground where there was not much soil. Immediately that grain sprouted, since the soil was not deep. But as it grew, the sun rose and withered it. Since there was no root, it withered away, because it got no moisture. Other grains fell among brambles. These thorns grew up with the good grain and choked it with the result that this too yielded no grain. Other seed fell into rich soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding a crop. Sometimes it produced thirty times what was sown, sometimes sixty times what was sown, sometimes even a hundred."

And as He was saying this, He practically shouted, "If you have ears to hear with, then listen—pay attention!"

.....

Later, His disciples began questioning Him regarding the meaning of this story. He answered, "You have certainly understood this illustration, haven't you? How would you go about interpreting all the rest of these stories? Listen then to the explanation of the story about the sower. The meaning is as follows: the seed stands for the Word of God. The sower, then, is someone who broadcasts the message. The people along the path when the message is preached are those who, when they hear the news about the Kingdom of God, do not understand it. Satan, the evil slanderer, comes immediately to snatch away the Word implanted in their mind, to prevent their

believing it and being saved by it. This is the meaning of the ground which was sown with seed along the path.

"In a similar way, the rocky ground which had been sown represents those people who, when they hear the message, immediately welcome it joyfully. However, since they have no deep-rooted convictions within them, they believe, but, consequently, last only for a little while. Then, when trouble comes or persecution arises because they followed the Word, they immediately fall away.

"What seed fell among brambles illustrates those people who hear the Gospel, but as they go about their business, the worries of the present age, the deceitful seduction of wealth, the desire for other things, and life's pleasures all contribute to choke out the influence of the Word in their life. Thus, they either prove completely unproductive, or else their character does not mature.

"By what was broadcast on good soil I meant those people who hear the message, understand it, accept it and hold it fast in an honest, good heart. In fact, they patiently produce the character that the Gospel in them must bring forth. They produce in some cases thirty times what they received, sometimes sixty times, and in other cases, even as much as a hundred times!"

## SUMMARY

It was the same day Jesus had held a vigorous discussion with the Pharisees and scribes over the true source of His power when He cast a demon from a blind, dumb demoniac, the same day that Jesus' work had been interfered with by His family and friends, that He went out to the beach where He taught the congregated crowds from a boat. His first story described the limitations that the individual qualities of men's hearts impose upon the effectiveness of God's Word: some reject, stifle, or else accept the influence of God's Word in their individual case in direct proportion to their character and their willingness to let God have His way.

## NOTES

I. THE OCCASION OF THE SERMON:  
THE OPPORTUNITY TO KNOW

13:1 On that day (*En tē heméra ekeīne*) is the expression whereby Matthew establishes a definite link between the Sermon in Parables and the events immediately preceding: the interference of Jesus' relatives, and, probably, also, the psychological motivation for that interference: the accusation levelled by religious leaders that He worked in secret agreement with Satan. (Cf. Mt. 12:46 and parallels; Mk. 3:19-21)

Redaction criticism would see this verse as merely a literary device having absolutely no historical value whatever, because it was invented by the anonymous editor of Matthew's Gospel, intending thereby to create a smooth connection between otherwise disconnected materials. (See also on 13:53.) But as has been noticed in the introduction to this chapter, Matthew gives the deliberate impression that he is recording one, unified discourse presented in the presence of Jesus' disciples with only one major change of locale carefully noted (13:36). It should occasion no surprise that he establish also the time, place and circumstance in which that discourse occurred. On the basis of what theory of authorship of this Gospel are we warranted to reject as unhistorical these circumstantial details, when the Gospel itself was already circulating either in Aramaic or Greek at a time when not only eye-witnesses still lived who could contradict any of these details if mistaken, and when enemies of the faith—both heretics and persecutors—sought justification for their rejection of the orthodox message believed and taught by the early Church contained therein? If we must conclude with these modern critics that the phrase *On that day* or any other connector used by Matthew is unhistorical—that is, that for some reason, the facts if really known are quite different—on what basis may we receive as genuinely historical ANY other supposed “fact” reported by Matthew, as, for example, the resurrection?

The situation *on that day*, then, is charged with high tension by four basic elements which must be understood before the Sermon in Parables can be rightly seen in its proper perspective:

1. Growing opposition from the authorities (Mt. 12:22-45)
2. Worried family and friends of Jesus (Mt. 3:19-21; see especially notes on Mt. 12:46-50)
3. Increasingly greater crowds or curiosity seekers neither disposed to think with Jesus nor ready to accept clear teaching. (See notes on Mt. 13:10-17, 34, 35.)
4. Disciples to prepare, revelations to give them before the crisis of Calvary, deadlines to meet.

**On that day Jesus went out:** Nothing stops Him: no interruptions by well-meaning kinfolks, no hard-faced opposition, no misunderstanding friends can hinder Him from pouring out the revelations He had come to earth to share! If the above-mentioned connections are all solid, then the house is probably His Capernaum home to which He returned from His Galilean tour (Lk. 8:1; Mk. 3:19b) and in which took place the healing of the blind and dumb demoniac and the fierce discussion with the calumnious Pharisees.

**Jesus . . . sat by the sea side** as He had done before (Mk. 2:13). Notice how naturally the situation evolved: having left the house with His close disciples, Jesus found a suitable position along the lakefront where He could be comfortably heard by a small group of listeners. His lesson had no sooner gotten underway when the number of new faces around the listening circle got to be too great for the limited teaching situation. In fact, Mark and Luke assure us that the crowd began to swell surprisingly quickly, not merely with local townspeople from Capernaum out promenading along the beach, but people kept coming together "from town after town" (Mk. 4:1; Lk. 8:4)! This made His words impossible to follow because of the confusion created by the unavoidable whispering, pushing and squirming into a hearing position, as the ones in the back probably complained about not being able to hear.

**13:2 And there were gathered unto him great multitudes, so that he entered into a boat, and sat; and all the multitude stood on the beach.** It is not enough that Jesus has just battered His way through a forest of Pharisean arguments and come out victorious, even though the scribes themselves remain of the same opinion still. Here are perhaps hundreds of well-wishers and curious folk out for an afternoon walk with no television for their diversion. Instead of going down to the station to watch the trains come in, or gathering at the local football stadium, these Jews of another age stroll down to the

waterfront to muse over the latest pronouncements of the budding rabbi from Nazareth. In general, or at least formally, they are committed to follow God's teaching wherever it might lead, but no doubt many of them have no specific interest in taking Jesus' message personally or even too seriously. This audience is fundamentally friendly to Jesus, but not at all committed to Him as LORD enough to let Him rule. If they link Him with the long-anticipated Messianic Kingdom of God, they probably do so only in terms of their own popular notions about it. If there is to be any ruling done, Jesus will just have to do it their way, or they will not play along with it! (Study Jn. 6:14-66.)

The first step Jesus takes is to get this milling mob under psychological control. It is impossible to teach anyone anything while thoughtless people are trying to make their own personal petitions for help and healing. Jesus' solution, so simple and so effective, was to get into (Peter's?) boat and have him shove off a short distance from the beach. (Cf. Lk. 5:1-3) This gave Him an excellent speaker's platform from which He could easily be heard, and, at the same time, it made the crowds keep their distance unless they wanted to get wet. (Cf. Mk. 3:9, 10)

13:3a **And he spake to them many things in parables.** In the light of this uneasy situation, it would appear nothing short of incredible that Jesus should meet this extraordinary challenge by telling a string of seemingly harmless little stories. *Parables*, as the anglicized Greek word implies, are comparisons between two things, one definitely known which serves as a basis of comparison by which the other, which is set along side it, is to be understood. (*parabolē*, from *paraballein*, "to compare," Arndt-Gingrich, 616; see introduction to chapter 13 for further notes.) The *many things in parables*, as the introductory words of most of the illustrations say, are various aspects of the Kingdom of God, the one subject described through this entire discourse, however, seen from different points of view. Usually, a parable is a short story which, by means of its comparison, illustrates or clarifies a concept. But, as will be seen from our present examples, Jesus' parables represent that concept obscurely, hence require interpretation for anyone not already perfectly familiar with the thing being described. *Parables*, as such, are not new in Jesus, since many such illustrations appear in His teaching before this. (Cf. Mt. 5:13-16; 6:22, 23, 26-30; 7:24-27; 9:15-17; 10:29-31; 11:16-19; 12:25, 26, 29, 43-45)

### CLEAR TEACHING PREVIOUSLY GIVEN

As will be noticed in each pair of parables that follow, Jesus is merely restating in parabolic form information that was implicit in His previous teaching, notably that of the Sermon on the Mount. From this standpoint, He is not really offering completely new revelations for the person who had eyes to see the implications of what the Lord had there suggested.

But who on earth really saw all that? The impression He made on His audience then was one of astonishment at His authority and doctrine. But is it probable that even the most intimate, most alert disciples fully appreciated the heights and depths of that grand discourse? That enormous declaration—even as it stands in its quite probably edited form in Scripture—is massive! And if we are just now growing to understand it after centuries of study by the predecessors upon whose shoulders we stand to get a better look, should we imagine that the multitudes, or even the Twelve, with minds filled with quite other notions about the coming Kingdom, should have been able so quickly to sound its depths and scale its heights or so instantly perceive the truth about the intentions of God for His Kingdom? This is highly doubtful.

And yet, from a historical perspective we can admit that the general outline of the Kingdom was there all the time, clear and right on the surface. With the notes on each pair of parables there has been included also an indication as to how the truth of those parables had already been anticipated in the Sermon on the Mount.

On this basis, then, it is possible to understand why these parables would have actually communicated meaning to some disciples, because, however unconsciously, they had really been over this ground before. These stories would actually communicate more knowledge in the sense that each would extract some principle implicit in the Sermon on the Mount (and in any other previous teaching of which that message is but a classic example), and hold that principle up for closer examination. The result is genuine progress in the revelation about the Kingdom.

### THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER IN PREVIOUS TEACHING

If in that great Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that the truly blessed do not depend for their happiness on outward conditions with which contentment in a material kingdom is associated, but rather upon a condition of HEART which causes them to be poor in spirit, mourning, meek, famished for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peaceable, reviled sufferers for Jesus' sake, we are warned at the outset that the Kingdom of God is designed to include and satisfy only those whose hearts are honest and good, unpreoccupied with other concerns. Further, if the Kingdom morality is one not merely of achieving standard Pharisaic goals, outward compliance with religious practices such as fasting, alms-giving and prayer, calculating self-interest, etc., if it is not merely superficial bending to divine revelations, if it is rather a morality of the conscience and a purity of heart that produces real piety, real love for others, then it becomes increasingly clear that the Kingdom itself is going to be found only in those whose hearts are "honest and good." Again, if the fundamental function of the Kingdom's citizens is to be salt to the earth and light to the world, it follows that one must expect an abundance of worldlings needing the proclamation of this Kingdom Gospel, many of whom would remain unconvinced. The continued presence of evil in the world will be noticed under the Parable of the Weeds, but hints of it in the Sermon on the Mount indicate that reactions to the Kingdom's proclamation would be varied, exactly as taught by the Parable of the Sower. Else, how could there be any persecutors (Mt. 5:10-12), or enemies (5:21-26, 38-48), thieves (6:19-21), "dogs and swine" (7:6), or false prophets (7:15ff)? And even more clearly, if in the Last Day even charismatic disciples of Jesus must face condemnation for evil works, then not even the former habit of calling Jesus "Lord, Lord" can be substituted for doing the will of the Father (7:21-23). This fact warns that not every disciple who begins the Christian life will finish acceptably. Even in the description of false prophets, the emphasis is on the kind of heart that produces good or bad fruits as the case may be. (See on 7:17-20.) Finally, the genuine freedom enjoyed by each individual to determine how or whether the Word of God will influence his belief and conduct is implicit in the totally unmanipulated decision which of the two ways open to man he will choose (7:13f).

## II. THE MESSAGE (13:3b-50)

### A. THE PROBLEM INVOLVED IN PROCLAIMING THE KINGDOM: VARIED REACTIONS TO TRUTH

#### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND SOILS

##### a. THE COLD INDIFFERENCE OF A CLOSED MIND

13:3b The picture is that of a farmer walking through his field with a grain-sack over one shoulder. As he walks he broadcasts seed-grain right and left. This free throwing, naturally, allows grain to fall wherever it will, although most of it would probably fall onto the good ground. Nevertheless, because no paved farm-to-market roads criss-crossed the country laying out the land in neat checker-board squares, people beat paths through the fields (Cf. Mt. 12:1). On this hard, beaten path on which nothing would take root or grow, the seed lay exposed to the feet of passersby (Lk. 8:5). The essential characteristic of this kind of soil is the fact that it remains precisely the same after the sowing as it was before: as if it had never known the sowing. In fact, not a seed penetrated its asphalt-hard surface. Rather, hungry birds quickly snatched them up.

13:18 **Hear then ye the parable of the sower.** It is important to remember here that Mark 4:10, 13 definitely places this explanation following the dismissal of the crowds, a fact which effectively keeps this information private. Matthew's inclusion of this interpretation at this point in his narrative, as suggested in the Introduction, is not intended to intimate that it was told at this point, but solely to aid the reader.

At this point in the narrative, before Jesus explains the parable, He draws attention to its typical character: "Do you not understand this parable (of the sower)? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mk. 4:13) The evident purpose of Jesus' question is to stimulate the disciples to begin developing their ability to interpret parables or any other instruction that, from their standpoint, was not clear either because of the form in which it was given, or because their own preconceptions blocked their grasp of its concept. But what did He mean?

1. Regarding the form: does He mean to introduce a rule by which to interpret other parables? If so, the point should not be missed

that Jesus' own illustration of His method of interpretation is allegorical, even though some uninterpreted parables seem to have only one point of comparison. (See introduction to Chapter Thirteen.)

2. Regarding the content: is He saying that a grasp of the Parable of the Sower is absolutely fundamental to an adequate comprehension of the content, or message, of the other parables? That is, before one can see that evil will remain in the world until judgment (cfr. Parable of the Tares and of the Dragnet), even after the beginning of God's Kingdom in the Church, he must see that the proclamation of God's Kingdom will coerce no one to enter it. This absolute freedom to accept or refuse the Word of God will, of course, mean a very small beginning because of the limited, local proclamation of that message, and because its influence can spread only gradually throughout the world by means of its power to persuade men to submit to God's rule (Parable of the Mustard Seed and of the Yeast). Likewise, to see why some accept the Word of the Kingdom and why many do not is to be prepared to understand how God's Kingdom could be a sudden, unexpected, joyous discovery worth any sacrifices to obtain it (Parable of the Hidden Treasure). Again, the appreciation of the excelling value of the Kingdom is only explicable if lesser values in life are allowed to remain, among which the individual remains absolutely free to choose (Precious Pearl). According to this view, then, the Parable of the Sower explains why Jesus chose to proclaim the Kingdom as He did: God intends to leave absolutely inviolate the human freedom to choose. This foundational fact stands in the background of all the stories which follow.

**Hear then ye the parable of the sower.** Even as the Lord draws a striking contrast between the unreceptive crowds and the willing disciples by the use of emphatic pronouns (see on 13:16, 17), so also here He underscores that difference: "**Here YE!**" The blessing He pronounced upon the disciples for their genuine experience of God's revelation (13:16) is proportionate to the extent that they truly understand what is going on. This is why He not only explains the story to them, so it would certainly become revelation, but He also calls attention to the fact by ordering: "You, then, listen to the meaning of the parable!"

Jesus entitles His story *the parable of the sower*, as if the sower

were to be the main interest, but His explanation of the illustration lays great stress on the kinds of terrain in which the Word is planted, while the sower himself plays no significant role—especially in the explanation. It would be truer to say that the sower actually disappears, while primary emphasis is placed on the soils. In fact, whereas each separate part of the story begins with mention of the seed, the very distinctions in types of soil draws immediate attention to the cause for the various types of ground's yielding as many kinds of harvest from the identically good seed faithfully sown by the same sower. None the less, with good justification Jesus entitles His story "the parable of the sower," because, by so doing, He draws attention to what would otherwise escape notice, because of the great attention given to the kinds of soils. In the Parable of the Seed Growing By Itself (Mk. 4:26-29) He will give special attention to the power of the seed to accomplish its work. In that of the Weeds He will place more emphasis on the sower, identifying him there as "the Son of man." But here, surprisingly, the sower is deliberately left unidentified except to style him generally as one who sows the Word of God (Mk. 4:14; Lk. 8:11). With this kind of introduction the Lord helps us to see that the problems involved in proclaiming the message of the Kingdom, the Word of God, are those to be faced by ANY proclaimer of that message. Whether it is Jesus Himself who proclaims the Kingdom, or whether it is His ambassadors who preach the Word (cf. 2 Co. 5:18-20; Mt. 10:40; Lk. 10:16), the hindrances that impede it, as well as the causes that facilitate it, must be understood.

13:19 **When any one heareth the word of the kingdom,** he stands in the unique, glorious position of one who can know the plans of God. Thus, he is thoroughly responsible for what he does with the information given. "The seed is the word of God" (Lk. 8:11, cf. 1 Pet. 1:22-25; Jas. 1:18, 21). So, anyone who admits the premise that Jesus' message is none other than the proclamation of God's Kingdom would be in a position to understand it, because, if it were not clear to him, he could trust Jesus to explain what was not clear. So the expression, **any one hears the word . . . and understands it not**, does not refer so much to intellectual capacity, as it speaks of a moral attitude which is the key to understanding the first basic response to the message. Such an individual, upon hearing the message, immediately loses any real grasp on it, because he did not really understand it at all. But since that message is the identical Word that produces the finest results in someone else, the fault cannot be in a

message intellectually beyond the capacity of the former. Why should this take place? How could any man be so absolutely hard that any message about the problems of the spirit, about concern over sin or about hope of redemption would be absolutely unintelligible and without meaning? As Trench (*Parables*, 30) has it, here is a man who has "exposed his heart as a common road to every evil influence of the world, till it has become hard as a pavement." Dulled conscience, jaded sentiments, perverse will, prejudiced intellect—all contribute to his inability to comprehend. (Cf. Heb. 3:13, "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"; Eph. 4:17-19) This mind could also be closed by prejudice, unwillingness to be taught, pride or fear of new truth.

But not the least of the causes of his loss are the external influences that go to work immediately upon the individual while he is still listening to the Word: **then cometh the evil one and snatcheth away . . .** From such a person it is an easy snatch, because he left the Word lying around on the surface of his life where anyone or anything could remove it. He made it no part of his thinking. Since Jesus spoke of several birds devouring the grain, one would have expected Him to interpret them as many impersonal temptations. Instead, the birds are **the evil one, Satan** (Mk. 4:15), **the devil** (Lk. 8:12). Jesus is not embarrassed by modern theories that would eliminate Satan as a personal, evil adversary. (See on 4:3.) Likewise, Paul feels the human nakedness of the unarmed individual, exposed to the attacks of the evil one. (Eph. 6:10-18 where note how he, too, speaks of the various methods, *methodeias*, of the devil, the principalities, the powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Nevertheless, for Paul, there is still but one unspeakably malicious and personal enemy who actively pursues the seduction of men and women to lead them away from a sincere devotion to Christ. Cf. 2 Co. 11:3; 2 Th. 2:10-12) The Lord makes it obvious from this first parable that no view of the Messianic Kingdom can be adequate that makes no account of a real, personal devil dedicated to hindering its progress at every step. This fact warns all starry-eyed dreamers, who expect the proclamation of the Kingdom to be crowned with instant success, that even the free, malevolent activity of God's enemy will be tolerated until the final victory (Cf. 13:28, 39).

Luke's addition to the parable, the Word was **trodden underfoot** (Lk. 8:5), though not interpreted by the Lord, might suggest that, in

the same way that the seed cast on the path lay exposed to be trod upon by any who crossed the field that way, so the Word, too, was no sooner heard than it got literally trampled in the stampede of other thoughts crowding the life of this person, regardless of the origin of these thoughts. In this case, the Word, considered as a new thought, never had a chance. While the man in Luke 12:13ff could well be an illustration of the thorny soil, his callousness to spiritual reality makes him a good example of this one too. In fact, while Jesus is pouring His heart out to get men's mind off of their earthly concerns long enough to let God have His way in everything, this individual can think of nothing else but the injustice of his brother and his own part of their family inheritance! Herod Antipas wavered back and forth from an interested listener of John the Baptist to his plotting murderer (Cf. Mt. 14:5 and Mk. 6:20). The Word of God, no matter who preaches it, just can never penetrate the surface of a mind paved over with indifference to truth, dulled by complacency and protected by prejudice. Not even Jesus Christ can get through to a man like that!

#### b. THE SUPERFICIAL ENTHUSIASM THAT DOES NOT COUNT THE COST

13:5 The picture here is of shallow topsoil covering a slab of rock, because if it were soil mixed with rocks, the seed would have found little difficulty finding a crack between the stones to reach down into good humus, were that the case. The point of the apparently rich soil covering the layer of rock is its deceptive superficiality, a fact that leads naturally into the interpretation.

13:20 Some easy, surface culture softens some people, making them seem open-hearted and good prospects for conversion. In fact, upon hearing the message, they **receive it immediately with joy**. There is real joy in knowing that we have been forgiven, real rapture in the assurance that God has adopted us. Many genuinely admire Christ, truly appreciate the beauty of holiness and sound the depths of clear emotions, but mistake all this for faith, for attachment to Jesus, for depth of godliness and for patient maturity. They **receive the word** readily, because it is objectively good and desirable (Heb. 6:5). There seems to be a poignant contrast underlying Jesus' double use of "straightway": "He . . . straightway with joy receives it . . . straightway he stumbles,"

of this type of individual who begins to make splendid progress but is hindered (Cf. Gal. 5:7). Perhaps he accepted the Gospel without weighing its consequences for the rest of his life. (Cf. the scribe in Mt. 8:19 and notes; I Th. 5:21). Easily converted by the arguments of the moment, he was just as easily disposed to change under other tensions or on the basis of other arguments (Cf. Jn. 5:35; Mk. 6:20; Lk. 4:22, 29). The shallow-minded person with no strength of character, no long-range goals, a creature of the hour, has few convictions that can override momentary difficulties or outlast short-lived whims. (Contrast 2 Cor. 4:1—6:10; esp. 3:4, 12; 4:7, 13, 16; 5:6, 11). During periods of great revival, many easily get on the bandwagon, but apostacize when their "Christianity" is put to any real tests (Cf. Heb. 3:12). The fault lies not with the seed, but entirely with the soil, not with the Word, but with the lack of depth in this impulsive person who can "go for" the Gospel or Jesus or the Church, like he would "go for" any other fad, and then reject it as quickly, because something else has caught his fancy. It was to this kind of mentality that Jesus had to address His stern challenge of the high cost of discipleship, in order to get people to consider the cost before plunging into the life of a disciple and then failing to finish (Lk. 14:25-33).

**Yet he has no root in himself:** does this expression mean to say that (1) he has in himself, i.e., in his life, no roots sunk down into, and taking nourishment and stability from, other things outside himself? or (2) that he has no roots sunk down deep in his own psychological make-up. Are the *roots* to be thought of as subjective, objective or both? When we examine a man's subjective constitution, we find the traditions that form his conscience and the sentiments that fire his emotions. Even if these are an integral part of the man that makes him what he is, their cause of stimulus is outside of him in the teaching he has received from his parents and society, and in his reactions to it and them. So, even here, we have the combination: a subjective reaction to an objective reality, and the ground in which his *roots* would have been planted. But, Jesus declares, "He has no roots," no well-trained conscience that can keep his duty clear in the face of doubts and contrary desires, no disciplined will to hold him steady under anti-Christian persecution, no practice at governing his emotions and desires, and no intellect used to facing truth and reality wherever and however it comes. (Contrast Heb. 10:32-35; 2 Cor. 4:17, 18; Eph. 3:17; Col. 2:7; Mt. 7:25.) He lacks,

in short, the very things that would have made him tenacious under fire. Result? *He endures for a while (proskairbs estin)*. The time-limit is not indicated, leaving each disciple to ask himself: "At what point am I?" Faithful until death is the demand (Rev. 2:10).

**And when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word** . . . a person under pressure must decide whether his cause is worth the trouble to die for or not. Jesus knows that too many would wait until they are put under pressure to consider this, since their initial decision was not properly weighed. If our decision to follow Christ is well taken, we need not die a thousand deaths with the arrival of each single tormenter or temptation to quit (Cf. Lk. 8:13). What would it take to tempt you to deny the Lord? Many who might actually rise to the challenges of a heroic martyrdom in the arena or suffer in the flames at the stake, forget the treacherous peril of sneers, scoffing and laughter, and to stoop to cursing and denial of their Lord. Ironically, serious opposition can produce precisely the opposite reaction: push some men back into a corner with their back to the wall and they will hold all the more tenaciously to the position for which they are being thus maltreated (Cf. 2 Sam. 17:8; Jer. 26:12-15; I Kgs. 22:1-28). But the difference lies in each individual's "gut-level" attitude toward his chosen position. That is, does his spirit really dominate his flesh, and does the Lord really govern him? At any rate, it is the same trouble, pain and persecution, the same lack of clothes and food, the same plundering of property, the same threats of death, for one Christian as for the other (Cf. Heb. 10:32ff; Rom. 8:31-39). So the fault lies, once again, not in the inquisitory fires, but in the quality of the material tested thereby (Cf. 2 Co. 4:7-12; 16—5:10; 6:4-10; 7:3, 5; 8:2; I Cor. 3:10-15; I Pet. 1:3-9; Jas. 1:2-4. See Special Study "Temptation," Vol. I, pp. 143-152.). None the less, the trial or persecution must be *because of the Word*, not because of one's own mistaken opinions or limited views of that message. (Acts 14:22; 2 Th. 1:5; see notes on Mt. 5:11.)

The only saving of this superficial enthusiast from this shallow rootlessness is to give this new convert some roots. Where is the new Christian who does not want Jesus to abide in him, who does not desire to bear fruit to the Lord's honor? Let the rich strength of the words of Jesus become part of his thinking, the source of his power, the guidance for his prayers and the stimulus to his obedience, and his initial joy need never fade! (Jn. 15:1-11; Eph. 3:14-19; Col. 2:6, 7.) Let him learn quickly that he has been predestined to be conformed

to the image of the Son of God who was persecuted for righteousness' sake and ended up on a cross (Ro. 8:29)!

### c. THE PREOCCUPIED INDIVIDUAL: TOO BUSY, DOUBLE-MINDED

13:7 What will grow thorns will also grow wheat! Here is soil with real potential, but already occupied: it could produce a great harvest, but is growing a jungle. **Upon the thorns** (or, *among thorns*, as Mark and Luke have it) zooms in on the real problem: the areas into which this portion of the seed fell were already occupied, already committed. Is there a suggestion here also that the productive power of the ground for a given year is limited, so that the ground itself, like the human heart, can support only a certain concentration of strength-consuming growth beyond which point comes exhaustion and failure?

13:22 Is this man a Christian? It is significant that the only apostolic use of a similar figure mentioning well-watered, cultivated land producing *thorns* as eventually worthless, near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned, is intended to describe Christian people "who have once been enlightened, have had a taste of the heavenly gift, have received the Holy Spirit, have experienced the goodness of God's word and the spiritual resources of the age to come" (Heb. 5:11—6:12; 10:32-39; 12:12-15). There is no denying that the thorny heart is that of a Christian, once a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ, but now in danger of falling away for many reasons before arriving at maturity. Although Jesus does not state outright that the man with the preoccupied heart had actually accepted the Word, as in the case of the superficial convert, this is a fair assumption in light of these factors:

1. The crescendo of reactions to the message rising from total indifference up to genuine faith among which the thorny heart is put after the shallow heart which had actually received the Word with joy, would lead us to see this individual as a Christian.
2. The nature of the ground represented here, while crowded with other stronger growths, can also receive the seed and permit it to start growing.
3. Luke's expression: "but as they go on their way" (*poreuomenoi*, 8:14) indicates that the choking out of the good fruit of God's Word

in their lives would have occurred sometime after they had heard it but before they normally would have arrived at maturity. It takes time to suffocate the Word, if it is going to be done by cares, pleasure, wealth, etc. So this happens gradually as these go through life, but before they reach the goal.

4. Even *the thorns* needed time to grow up with the seeds (Lk. 8:7).

In short, here is an individual unable to concentrate his entire life on God, i.e., he cannot consecrate (concentrate) it to make it wholly (holy) His (Cf. 1 Th. 5:23; 4:3). His good intentions to make an honest, all-out, positive response to Jesus and begin the life of faith are frustrated, since divided loyalties usurp his highest loyalty and so strangle his spiritual life. He is a careless dabbler in many, not immoral things, in fact, easily justifiable, reasonably good things. But his inattention to priorities permits these other preoccupations to ease out of its first place his one great preoccupation: the service of God. The little boy who prayed in a Christian service camp: "And, Lord, thank you for those boys and girls who concentrated their lives today," accidentally said more truth on the subject of holiness than most preachers can say on purpose! Here again, Jesus drives home the point: "Only the pure in heart will see God." (See notes on Mt. 5:8.)

### PALTRY PANACEAS AND PERENNIAL PREOCCUPATIONS THAT PREJUDICE PRODUCTION

What are these previous commitments that impede this man's spiritual growth? As will be noticed from the hindrances themselves, these various preoccupations may all be found in the same individual in varying degrees in some unbeatable combination, or, too, one or more single preoccupations will be more accented in a given person, bringing about his downfall. (See the Special Study on Temptations, Vol. I, pp. 143-152, for more notes on this conflict of desires.)

1. **Cares of the world** (*he mérimna tōū aiōnos*, or, as Mark has it, *hai merimnai*), because of the problem of the subjective versus the objective genitive, is handily ambiguous here: (1) "The worry connected with the times, those into which one's life is cast" (Lenski, *Matthew*, 521); (2) "the cares which the world worries about." Jesus had already warned against the insidious paganism

involved (Mt. 6:19-34). Martha was an easy target for this seduction (Lk. 10:38-42). We, like her, get worried and bothered about so many relatively necessary things and commonly neglect the one thing really imperative. The toil and fatigue of being always on the job, always plodding, gives no leisure for concerns of the spirit. Our head buzzes with our minute-to-minute problems and our schedule is full up. Within themselves, each single care is no sin, and may even be justified in Scripture (Cf. 1 Ti. 5:8; Eph. 4:28; Mt. 15:4, 5; 2 Co. 12:14; 2 Th. 3:6-13). The idolatry begins, however, when the individual seeks first the solution to these cares and then relegates the Kingdom-quest to whatever time, interest and strength is left. (Contrast Mt. 6:33.)

Lest anyone feel himself above these cares, let him count how many great things for God he intends to do before he dies, but whose daily business of living has such a grip on him that he is left simply too tired to think about these goals. Is our life so crowded that we never quite have time to get around to them? This is why the Lord dedicated so much soul-searching preaching to this single human concern: the Christian and the cares of this world. While there may be a definite ethnic undertone to the Parable of the Great Banquet and the Lame Excuses (Lk. 14:15-24; Cf. Mt. 22:1-10), the excuses given by those originally invited reveal their real preoccupation and what they really wanted out of life.

2. **Delight in riches**, or "the deceptive seduction that comes from wealth," or "the false glamour of wealth." The reason for these varied translations lies in the word *apâte*, rendered by Roccia (196): "1. deception, fraud, betrayal; 2. trick, artifice; 3. diversion, pastime; and enjoyed deception, said of theatrical spectators." Arndt-Gingrich (80) mention: "1. deception, deceitfulness; seduction; deceit; 2. pleasure, pleasantness that involves one in sin." NT texts using this word are: Mt. 13:22; Mk. 4:19; Eph. 4:22; Col. 2:8; 2 Th. 2:10; Heb. 3:13; 2 Pet. 2:13; the verb *apatao* occurs in Eph. 5:6; 1 Ti. 2:14; Jas. 1:26, where it can mean "deceive, cheat, mislead, 2 mid. enjoy oneself, live pleasurable." The more talent a man has, the more the world demands his service and the more money he can make, the more he can be deceived into believing that this world's goods are the real wealth (Cf. 1 Ti. 6:6-10). Whether we possess wealth or merely long for it, it embroils us with promises to satisfy which it cannot keep.

Remember wealth's seduction of the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:16-30). Demas fell for this trap, too (2 Ti. 4:10). Judas Iscariot had his hand in the cash register, too (Jn. 12:6). Just as surely as Jesus knew there would be some "smart boys" who would attempt to serve God and Mammon (Mt. 6:24), so here too He sounds the warning: either wheat or thorns will be the produce of one heart, but not both!

Let not the poor suppose that they are somehow exempt from this temptation, merely because they have so little as never to be free from their daily cares! They too may envy the advantages that wealth provides their richer neighbors, and, consequently, embroil themselves in the same greedy grasping for just a little bit more. Even the well-fixed gentry may presume their cares to be over, only to find it hard for them to enter into God's Kingdom (Mt. 19:16-26).

The deception lies in the hope that one's nervous quest of wealth need not destroy his faith. Should not he use his talent for making money? While he reasons this way, the bonds of slavery to his sources of wealth harden into steel. Death or judgment catches this man still dreaming that at any minute he can free himself from his financial ties. It all begins with an eagerness to acquire it, develops through a proud confidence in what wealth can do, matures in the resolve to hold and increase the gains. He perfects a flexible "honesty" and that hard-nosed inhumanity called "business is business." Ironically, Jesus was most exasperated with people who were so bent on acquiring money that they remained blind to the true wealth. They do not see that all worldly riches are borrowed goods given into man's administration, and, sooner or later, must be returned to their rightful Owner for a final accounting. The sage Preacher of *Ecclesiastes* saw wealth with the disguise removed, and he cried, "Vanity!" This is a realistic picture of a life spent without God and Christ.

3. **The desire for other things** (Mk. 4:19 *hai peri tā liopā epithumiai*). As noted in the Special Study on Temptations (Vol. I, pp. 147ff), the word "desires" (*epithumia*) may or may not have an evil connotation, a fact extremely important here. Is Jesus defining "covetousness"? *Pleonexia*, usually rendered "covetousness," as its etymology reveals, means "have-more-ishness," hence "greediness, insatiableness, avarice, covetousness." (Arndt-Gingrich, 673) This is that selfish ambition that drives for wealth, position, status,

recognition, certainly, but it is more. Paul succeeded in sorting out for himself the one essential ingredient in life, and dropped everything else, however desirable it might once have been. (Study Phil. 3:13 in context.) He felt so keenly the danger in "desiring just a little bit more" that he called "covetousness" by its right name: IDOLATRY (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5). Perhaps the printed liturgy for this religion is a full-illustrated sale catalogue of the products of American industry, its sacrifices are made on the easy-payment plan. Many get so bogged down in the hard-labor burden of keeping up the easy payments, that the husband is forced to hold down two jobs, and the wife must seek extra work away from the home, all in the name of "the desire for other things."

4. **The pleasures of life** (Lk. 8:14) Is this another name for "the desire for other things"? Is it not rather that unadulterated hedonism frankly unabashed by its own luxuriating in "the good things of life?"

While it may seem that each of these preoccupations is quite distinct from each other—does it not ring strange to hear of "pleasures," the luxuries of the affluent, mentioned as *thorns* in the same context with the daily, crushing struggle of the poor man to live?—yet there are several unifying characteristics of everyone in this class that justify Jesus' including these divergent tendencies in one group. Some, for instance, see a logical progression in this series of *thorns*: ANXIETY about things essential to one's existence leads to activity that will produce WEALTH, which, in turn, will make possible enough comforts to create a taste for JUST A BIT MORE until one's absorbing interest turns into unashamed living for PLEASURE. Whether this ascending (descending?) progression is intended by Jesus or not, wherever a man finds himself absorbed or obsessed at any of these levels, he is in trouble (Lk. 21:34-36).

Another unifying characteristic of this class is the double-mindedness of everyone in it. It is evident from Jesus' emphasis that to have any harvest at all, much less a bountiful one, the choice must be faced: either thorns or no harvest at all, or only good seed and a harvest with no thorns. These are those individuals whose interests vacillate between God and anything else, and, at this point, it really does not matter WHAT else. These doubt and hesitate about their conflicts of interest. (Cf. Jas. 4:8; 1:8 *dipsuchos*; "irresolute, vacillating, uncertain") They are neither totally confident that God can

be their all in all, nor that earth's cares and pleasures can satisfy. So they wander incessantly back and forth between these two poles, struggling to harmonize the irreconcilable demands of the flesh and those of the Spirit (Cf. Gal. 5:16-26), rather than reconcile themselves to choose. How they need Elijahs to challenge them to a decision: "How long are you going to waver between the two sides? If the Lord be God, follow Him. But if \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank) be a god, follow him then!" Whether the real dependance of everyone in this class reveals itself in religious doubts or not, they are in reality idolaters who seek the supply of all that satisfies life's needs in something else, anything else, other than the living God. They may trust God, but with inward reservations and divided loyalties (Cf. Jas. 1:5-8). John, also heard this message, indicated the "this-worldliness" of these *thorns*: "Do not set your heart on this world or anything in it. Anyone who loves the world cannot love the Father at the same time. In fact, the whole world system with its primitive desires, its enticements, and its pride in one's possessions, does not derive from the Father, but from the world itself. Further, this world and its passions is already on the way out, whereas the man who does what God desires, will last forever" (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

Here are some tests that help reveal whether these *thorns* are crowding out the Word in us:

1. How much of my income is budgeted for (1) Upkeep, (2) Recreation, (3) Savings and investments, (4) the Lord's work?
2. Can I consciously recall the content of the last Bible study or sermon I heard? What was the text studied? How was it developed? How was it applied? What was my personal reaction to it?
3. What proportion of my time may be actually said to be dedicated to learning what God wants me to know and do?
4. How easy is it for other things to interfere with my commitment to serve the Lord in the specific ways He has indicated?
5. Add also the questions listed at 6:21 (Vol. I, p. 375).

#### d. THE GOOD, HONEST PERSON

13:8 Since ancient writers speak of harvests even more abundant than these more modest yields indicated here by Christ, nothing should be affirmed in the application about the rarity of the highest

degrees of spirituality (Cf. Gen. 26:12). Trench (*Notes*, 32) cites Herodotus as saying that two hundredfold was a common return in the plain of Babylon, and sometimes three hundredfold occurred (Cf. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. I, 116f). Here is ground relatively free from previous growths, broken up, and ready to receive the seed-grain.

13:23 Is single-mindedness, or whole-heartedness, in Jesus' mind here? In contrast to all the foregoing, this person puts God's Kingdom first, last and always, because his heart is neither impervious, nor previously committed, nor superficial. Consider his composite qualities taken together, since it is not possible to argue that any one of these qualities alone distinguishes these individuals, since all are essential to a successful harvest of righteousness:

1. **He hears the Word** (Mt. 13:23; Cf. Ro. 10:14, 15)
2. **He understands it**, in contrast to the indifferent (Mt. 13:23). Plummer (*Luke*, 222) thinks that *katechousin* (Lk. 8:15), *paradechontai* (Mk. 4:20), and *sunieis* (Mt. 13:23) may all be equivalents of the same Aramaic verb, meaning "to take in." However, it is well to note the important differences of shading in the Greek verbs actually employed by our Gospel authors. Here, therefore, *sunieimi* speaks simply of comprehension of what is said. (Contrast Mt. 13:13-15, 19; cf. 13:51; 15:10; 16:12; 17:13; Lk. 24:45; Eph. 5:17)
3. **He accepts it.** (Mk. 4:20; cf. Jas. 1:21) This is a separate step beyond comprehension, since many reject the message BECAUSE they comprehend it and what it will cost them should they accept it (Cf. Acts 16:21; 22:18).
4. **He holds it fast.** (Lk. 8:15; Cf. 1 Co. 11:2; 15:2; 1 Th. 5:21; Heb. 3:6, 14; 10:23) He knows that unless he does, he can drift away from it (Heb. 2:1-4).
5. **In an honest and good heart.** (Lk. 8:15) It may be justly surprising to learn that a Gospel geared to make men good should produce fruit only in hearts that are pictured as already "good" before receiving the message. Nevertheless, even before examining the meaning of the terms, one should expect that, in the foregoing observation, the word "good" is used in two different ways. That is, Jesus' intended target for the Gospel is to make men perfect like God, not relatively good. (See on Mt. 5:48.) So, even as soil may be described as "good" for the purpose for which it is sown, so we may speak of a person as a "good prospect" for the Gospel,

although we are affirming nothing about the absolute goodness of his character or about what the Gospel will eventually produce in him. So it is that an unregenerated mind may be termed "good ground" for the Gospel, since it is specifically addressed to just such a mind. When a man has a sensitive conscience that accepts no easy justifications and an intellect that loves truth no matter the cost, he is *honest and good*. These are folks whose minds are not already filled with false notions about God and goodness, and so are ready to receive anything Jesus wants to tell them, or else they hold their prejudices lightly and so can be relieved of them. They view their vested interests as only a stewardship from God, and are happy to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and their pleasure is always to find pleasure in what pleases God.

**Honest and good** (*kalὸς καὶ ἀγαθὸς*), it is true are two separate adjectives, but, when taken together, they may become a fixed phrase, sometimes written *kalὸς κἀγαθὸς*, and are not intended to be broken up or considered as single descriptives. From the classical Greek point of view, Rocci (961, also 4) sees this combination as meaning: "respectable, honest; complete in every sense; excellent; virtuous and cultured; beautiful and precious; . . . excellent in every way."

(However, Arndt-Gingrich, 401 and 3, see these two as separate qualities. Nevertheless, even English has a similar idiom in which "good and . . ." followed by an adjective is but the reinforcement of the normal value of that adjective, e.g., "good and ready," "good and tired" "good and angry." In these cases we affirm nothing about the relative goodness of the person so described, because we intend only to emphasize the second adjective, as in the combination: "When I become good and tired, I cannot think well." Nothing is affirmed here for the Greek expression on the basis of the English idiom, except to point out the possibility of the Greek combination of two adjectives united by "and" used to express one concept.)

Trench (*Notes*, 32) sees this description "honest and good" as referring to

. . . a receptivity for the truth . . . One (division of men) was of the false-hearted, who called good evil, and evil good, self-excusers and self-justifiers, such as were the Scribes and

Pharisees for the most part. The other class were sinners too, but yet acknowledging their sins, and having no wish to alter the everlasting relations between right and wrong. Such were the Matthews and the Zacchaeuses. Nathaniel would be yet a more perfect specimen—a man of simple, earnest, truthful nature, who had been faithful to the light which he had—who had not resisted God's preparation for imparting to him His best gift . . .

6. **He produces fruit.** (Cf. Jn. 15:1-16; Jas. 1:22-27) Note that it is *fruit*, not proven sterility and indifference; *fruit*, not an abundance of promises and withered leaves; *fruit*, not immature or incomplete production however far advanced it might be; but ripe, harvestable *fruit* that proved the ground to be good. Further, *fruit* is the proper, natural product of the seed. The Gospel seed will produce only Gospel fruit in the sense that, when we think, speak and act in harmony with the Word, and because of our desire to obey the Word, we are bearing fruit. We bear fruit when we do as the Lord teaches us. (Study Jn. 14:15, 21, 23; 15:6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17.) Our actions and new thought patterns, reoriented in conformity with the Word received in our heart and life, are nothing short of the activity of the very Spirit of God at work to produce His fruit in us! (See 1 Pet. 1:22, 23, 25; Jas. 1:18, 21; 2 Co. 3:17, 18; Gal. 5:5, 13-24; Ro. 8:9-11; Phil. 2:12, 13.)

**Fruit . . . some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.** There is no indication in the text whether Jesus approves or disapproves of these differences in results. Argument for each could be made as follows:

- a. If He approves of the varied harvest, then Jesus is taking into account individual differences; even good hearts do not all produce alike. He does not expect the same level of performance from all His different disciples, because they are precisely that—**DIFFERENT.** (Cf. Ro. 12:3-8; Mt. 25:14-30; 2 Co. 8:11, 12.) But He does expect them to produce to their own individual capacity. (Col. 1:28; 2 Pet. 1:3, 4; 1 Co. 4:2; Mt. 25:15; 2 Co. 8:3, 5, 8, 12; 9:5-7). Their very difference justifies no false comparisons or easy justifications for inadequate production (Cf. Gal. 6:1-10; 2 Co. 10:12, 18).
- b. If He disapproves, these differences reveal themselves as part of the larger problem as to why the Word receives different treatment

in the heart of different hearers. In this case, one must not be satisfied to bear only thirtyfold or sixty, in the same way that one must not allow himself to remain infested with worldly pre-occupations or pleasures of life. To change the figure, as the Lord's vine, we can be pruned to bear much more fruit than we actually do (Jn. 15:1-5, 8; cf. also Lk. 13:6-9). Any diversity in our own consecration or in our understanding of the Word will result in a harvest of righteousness dissimilar to that of others. Consider Jas. 3:18 in its context 3:13-18 addressed to Christians who must make their own that true, heavenly wisdom that is "pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity." Paul encourages the rich "to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous" (1 Ti. 6:17ff). But since all such production must necessarily be relative to one's opportunities, his inclination to respond positively to each situation, his understanding of God's will in each case, etc., his reaction will obviously differ. The net result is a series of reactions which comprise the life of each individual, which, when measured comparatively with that of others, will appear to vary from a *hundredfold* to *sixty* to *thirty*.

While it may be that the Lord is happy to recognize individual differences among His disciples, can He be satisfied with less-than-perfect concentration on, and obedience to, His Word? Since it is the Word which is sown (Lk. 8:11), it is the Word which grows to maturity. Paul, besides rejoicing that "the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth," prayed also that the Colossians be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:3-14). While the Word itself may be a fixed quantity, our grasp of it and obedience to it certainly is not (Cf. Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19; 4:11-16; Phil. 1:9-11).

### e. CONCLUSION TO THIS PARABLE ON HUMAN FREEDOM

13:9 **He that hath ears, let him hear.** (See notes on Mt. 11:15; 13:43; Cf. Rev. 1:7, 11, 17, 26, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.) But ears are standard equipment! This observation turns us aside to consider the fact that, although everyone normally is furnished with a pair of ears, he may not actually be listening with interest and understanding to Jesus. Consequently, his ability to grasp the kind of Kingdom of God that Jesus is revealing depends greatly upon the concentration of his heart, upon his attitude, upon what he wants in life, because all these determine greatly whether he will be convinced by the truth when he hears it. This aphorism with which He concludes the simple narration about the Sower, Seed and Soils should prevent people's supposing that this story has no deeper meaning. It warns them to look beneath the surface, if they would not be merely mystified by it. It is significant that, according to Mk. 4:3, Jesus introduced this parable with the verb *akouete*:

1. If translated as an indicative question, Jesus is stirring up the sleepy-minded: "Are you listening?"
2. If translated as an imperative, Jesus orders: "Pay attention!" Either way, He helps men to see that the real point of His story is to show how vitally each individual's concentration affects how the Word is received and retained (Cf. Mk. 4:24, 25; Lk. 8:18).

This simple, oft-repeated invitation is so very urgent, because so much depends upon its proper understanding. DETERMINISTIC PREDESTINATION IS JUST NOT TRUE, because it sees God as sealing the inexorable fate of the damned or the unchangeable bliss of the saved, irrespective of their individual choices. Jesus cannot make such an unlimited invitation, unless men—all men—are genuinely free to hear His message and be changed by it, and so be saved. This "whosoever-type" exhortation, further, means nothing, unless men, after listening to Him, can freely choose not to accept it, and so be damned. So, God's grace is really free to all and proceeds from unbounded goodness, but He will not violate human liberty in order to force His grace upon man. Without further cultivation the terrain remains what it was. There is a sense in which God cultivates the soil in the attempt to help it to produce (Cf. Ro. 2:4; Lk. 13:6-9). However, this is not a cultivation that manipulates the free

will of the person determined not to respond. The goodness of God aims to reach the sentiments of the person, but does not touch his will at all. Man always retains the keys to his own free will and remains lord of his own destiny. Not even the loving effort of fellow Christians to help him bear fruit can force him to choose something he does not want (Cf. Heb. 6:4-6). This concept becomes even clearer when we remember the conditions that made each of the four hearts what they are:

1. The first heart did not understand the Word, but he was perfectly free to ask for further explanations from Jesus.
2. The superficial hearer believed for a while, therefore he could have believed a while longer, growing ever stronger in the faith, even to the point where he could withstand the scandal of persecutions and temptations to quit.
3. The preoccupied person, suffocated by worldly cares, by the deception of wealth, by the ambition for other things and by the pleasures of life, was perfectly free to die to the slavery to all this, suffer the consequences, but, in so doing, enjoy the life that is real.
4. Whereas the good heart depicts a generally honest person, this good character notwithstanding, he could let himself be drawn into the same deceptions that capture and destroy the other (Heb. 2:1-3a; 3:12, 13; 10:32-39; 12:15, 16).

So the will of each individual remains absolute lord of his own choice. Trench (*Notes*, 33) puts it as follows:

The disciples might have been in danger of supposing that these four conditions of heart were permanently fixed. This warning . . . obviates the possibility of such a mistake, for it tells us that according as we hear and receive the word, so will its success be—that even for those who have brought themselves into an evil condition, recovery is still, through the grace of God, possible. For, whilst it is true that there is such a thing as laying waste the very soil, yet, on the other hand, the hard soil may again become soft—the shallow soil deep—the soil beset with thorns clear.

The marvel of this unfeigned, deep respect that God has for human freedom is His unhesitating willingness to take the risk involved in letting His divine Truth be rejected because of ignorance, misunderstanding, temptations, weakness of character that leaves the individual

with no convictions capable of conquering temporary difficulties, persecutions, trials, etc., and because of that selfishness which expresses itself in the usual cares of the world, delight in riches, greed and pleasure! But God thinks that this risk is well worth taking, since He longs for men who freely choose to be His sons, not robots who could do no other.

MATERIALISTIC DETERMINISM IS JUST NOT TRUE EITHER. If Jesus' warning means to reveal anything important about man, it shouts in this unphilosophic way a final answer for all philosophers to hear: man is no machine, no part of a greater universal Machine comprising the universe as we know it. Man is not conditioned to walk lock-step with mechanical processes that force him to be what he is, for which conduct he is fundamentally not responsible, not culpable.

Therefore, let no man excuse himself, pleading irresponsibility for disobedience on the ground that he is helpless against the inclinations of his own deeply-ingrained characteristics. If he will but listen to Jesus, the Lord can help him to change all that through that radical transformation whereby he harmonizes every part of his being according to the new, living reality before Him in Jesus. He can really be born again! (Jn. 3:3-5; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:22, 23). Weak men can be made strong! What is a Savior for, if He be unable to free the enslaved, hearten the hopeless and turn the shallow-hearted into dedicated disciples who are deeply rooted and firmly established in the Lord (Cf. 2 Co. 1:21; 1 Pt. 5:10).

**He that hath ears, let him hear!** Lest we be proud because of our privileged position, and in order that we might better appreciate the mental blocks in the minds of Jesus' hearers, blocks that hindered their comprehension of messages that seem now so simple to us, let us begin to recognize some of our own! With all due respect to all unfortunate people on earth, how would you react to Jesus were He to live in your town, if you discovered that He were physically ugly? Do we not usually imagine the Lord as the very picture of our ideal of manly beauty? How would you react to Him, were you to find that He could not qualify for membership in the American cult of handsome "jet-set" young men? Think about Isa. 52:13—53:3 before answering. Here is where some so-called "faith" reveals itself for the personality cult it really is. If his loveliness were altogether spiritual glory, would you have any difficulty following Him?

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS MULTIPLE-IMPACT PARABLE?

1. Is it that Jesus intended gently to remove from His hearers' thinking the erroneous concept of a materialistic kingdom that batters its way to conquest by force of arms? Does He wish to imply that God's Kingdom does not intend to win its victories in this way? Does He want us to understand that the success of His program will depend upon the painfully slow process of planting truth in people's hearts, patiently waiting until it grows and bears fruit? If so, this story speaks directly to those disciples troubled about clouds on Jesus' horizon, because this outline of His program includes the clouds and spells out His ultimate plan for victory.
2. Or is it His design to apprise the disciples of the difficulties to be expected by any proclaimer of the Word, in the sense that they must be prepared to face these four kinds of response? If so, it must not be assumed that He thinks that 75% of their work will ultimately fail or be lost. After all, the good ground is represented as consisting of three different qualities, as opposed to the three qualities of soil that failed to produce good fruit. So, His lesson is this: the Gospel herald, since he cannot anticipate the judgment of God, must not try to calculate when to be cautious or try to choose terrain so cautiously that he evangelizes some people and rejects others as unfit. There can be no "preselected prospect lists" for his evangelism, for how could he possibly foresee, at the time of his first attempts to evangelize them, which people would be fruitful and which not? Let him be as generous in broadcasting as was Jesus the Chief Sower Himself! This requires a strategy of "open evangelism" only. No farmer expects every single seed to produce a bumper crop, but this does not keep him from sowing widely, confident that a harvest will come. (Study 1 Cor. 9:19-23; Ro. 1:13-16.) Jesus simply pictured several types of hearers without indicating the relative percentages involved in each group. If the Lord of the harvest did no more than this, who are we to identify the persons involved in each group and refuse to evangelize those in the first three groups?
3. Or is His desire to drive each single hearer to examine the character of his own heart? Even now, before judgment, Jesus would have us see the final fate of the Word in us, so that we can examine how we even now respond to it. According to Jesus, then, the chief

business of the listener is not to speculate about the varying causes behind the momentous differences in hearers, nor decide the proportionate results of Gospel proclamation, nor worry how much of it is ultimately unfruitful, nor wonder whether more abundant spiritual growth is more common than less abundant growth. Rather, each one is to answer the one burning question: "What kind of a person are you? Are you producing anything at all? Are you for Jesus Christ, or in your attempt at an unaligned neutrality, are you against Him?" The question: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" has only one answer: "What is that to you? Go all out to be among the very best!" (Cf. Lk. 13:23-30; Jn. 21:20-23.)

4. A brilliant psychological effect of Matthew's placement of the disciples' questioning Jesus about His method immediately after the Parable of the Sower is the underlining of a truth many unbelievers often miss: whether a person will be convinced by the truth or not, often depends, not so much on the weight of the evidence, as upon his mind-set, his philosophy, his desires, his traditions, etc. People just imagine the human brain as a delicate scale that will register conviction according to the weight and sufficiency of the evidence, thus leaving the individual somehow irresponsible for his beliefs. Nevertheless, by His repeated warnings—"Listen! . . . He that has ears, let him hear! . . . Take heed how you hear"—Jesus holds each listener personally answerable for his response to truth. (Ironically, this same position is taken by the unbelievers themselves when they too hold a man responsible for his beliefs, by criticizing a Christian for remaining one, when "surely he would have seen the falsity of Christianity, were his mind not clouded by his desire for security, etc.")

#### FACT QUESTIONS

1. On what "day" did Jesus teach this sermon in parables? Study the closer chronological connections found in the parallel passages to gather the various facts that occurred that day.
2. Out of what "house" did Jesus probably walk to go down to the seashore to teach? On what other occasions is this house mentioned?
3. Explain the fact that Jesus "sat" in the boat to teach the people. Could He not have stood quietly in the boat to deliver the same

message? Why sit?

4. Is Jesus' use of parables in this incident an entirely new method of teaching for Jesus? Why do His disciples ask Him about the method?
5. What is a "parable" as Jesus uses that word in this story? How does a "parable," as defined today, differ from an allegory?
6. In what does the interpretation of this parable consist? How are we to decide what the point is? What is the surest way of learning the meaning of this, or any, parable?
7. Identify in this parable the following:
 

a. The sower	e. The scorching sun
b. The seed	f. The rocky places
c. The way side	g. The thorns
d. The birds	h. The good ground
8. Explain the purpose for the expression: "He that has ears, let him hear," as a proper conclusion to the parable itself and as a key to the understanding of its meaning.
9. Explain how "persecution arises because of the word." What "word"? How "because of" the word?
10. Summarize the total message of this single parable without specific reference to the details.
11. What other parable(s) have more or less the same point of emphasis or same information about God's Kingdom as revealed in the Parable of the Sower?

## 2. THE PARABLE OF THE GRAIN THAT GROWS BY ITSELF (Mk. 4:26-29)

Several comments are in order regarding our insertion of this exclusively Marcan parable into this commentary on Matthew's version of the Great Sermon in Parables. Immediately three major objections present themselves.

First, and most obvious, is the fact that Mark does not relate this parable in any contextual way to the other stories having similar symbols, i.e., soil, seed(s), sower, harvest, etc.; since he inserts the Parable of the Lamp and its explanation between the Parable of the Sower and this story of the Seed Growing By Itself. This fact notwithstanding, it appears that Mark, like Matthew, does not aim to

indicate a strictly chronological continuity between the various parts of his version of this sermon, a supposition based on the staccato style of Mark's introductory words with which he prefaces each speech of Jesus: "And he said . . ." (*kai élegen*). The expression is so general as to leave his final result as almost, if not absolutely, devoid of strict chronological connection. (Cf. Mk. 4:2 where the very looseness of his arrangement is clearly introduced. Note especially in Greek: 4:10, 11, 13, 21, 24, 26, 30.) This observation would permit us to consider Mark's parable in a freer (looser) context to ascertain its meaning.

A second objection to consideration of the parable at this point is the fact that Jesus did not interpret this story, hence furnished no clue to its relationship to the rest of the sermon, unless, of course, it be thought to continue or develop a thought mentioned in the Parable of the Lamp immediately preceding it. Consequently, any interpolation of Mark's parable into Matthew's arrangement for the purpose of discovering its meaning is purely arbitrary, hence any interpretation based upon any such systematization must be held lightly if not with outright suspicion. And yet, despite the force of these sound hermeneutical principles, another rule of interpretation must be considered: the very literary affinities this parable shares with both that of the Sower and that of the Tares, evident in the use of many of the same symbols (however with different shadings and emphases), should give us pause before categorically denying any relationship whatever. In fact, two interesting patterns in the Sermon suggest themselves to the reader of all three Synoptics:

1. Jesus apparently told two stories to reinforce each point, even if certain details of each member of the couplet give the major point a slightly different twist. (See the revised outline at the beginning of this chapter.) However, Matthew's version of this discourse includes no direct companion to the Parable of the Sower. Is it possible that Mark's Parable of the Growing Seed IS its mate?
2. Matthew himself, while usually keeping these couplets together, as in the case of the Mustard Seed and Yeast Parables, or in that of the Hid Treasure and Precious Pearl Parables, does, in fact, separate the Parable of the Weeds from that of the Dragnet, even though these stories illustrate fundamentally the same point despite some individuality of details. So, if Matthew can separate stories of similar import, why cannot Mark?

These considerations, of course, leave open the possibility that the very similarity of symbols could be a clue to parallel ideas involved in all three illustrations taken from the field, since, as we have seen, order in the transcription of the stories is no serious objection to their consideration together or the supposition of their similarity of teaching.

A third objection to considering this parable in connection with that of the Sower arises from an exclusive interpretation that sees only Jesus as the Sower in all three field parables. Whereas He is the Sower par excellence, and is even specifically so identified in the Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:37), the precise identity of the Sower in both the Parable of the Sower and in that of the Growing Seed is left completely out of consideration. Since there is no compelling reason to believe the Parable of the Tares to have been told first chronologically, with the result that its identification of the Sower as Jesus should be thought to be normative for the others, and since the Synoptic authors are agreed that the Parable of the Sower with its anonymous "sower" probably came first, it is better to regard the positive identification of the sower in the Parable of the Weeds as a special feature of that story alone, and not necessarily to be read back into the field parables preceding it. Therefore, the appropriateness of the Parable of the Growing Seed as a parallel to that of the Sower is not at all hindered by the anonymity of its chief protagonist, the farmer who broadcasts the seed. Rather, his very anonymity argues that he is not to be so strictly identified with Jesus. So, as was noted at 13:18, although the point of the story may touch Jesus' work, and the "sower" intended COULD symbolize Him in general, nevertheless it may not refer to Him so exclusively. Although some details of the story might apply to Him, it does not follow that all details must, especially since certain characteristics, affirmed of the farmer in the Growing Seed Parable, are unworthy of our Lord (Mk. 4:27). Not all that is affirmed of the farmer in the story may be said of Jesus, because, considered as a symbol, the farmer may actually represent anyone who, like Jesus, broadcasts the Gospel.

As will be noted later, this parable develops Jesus' thoughts regarding the problems involved in proclaiming the truth of God's Kingdom, a fact which (if we have correctly understood its meaning) renders it a proper parallel to that of the Sower, and so to be inserted at this point.

## TEXT: Mark 4:26-29

26 And he said, The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, 27 and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout, he knows not how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why should we consider this parable in context with that of the Sower?
- b. What further information does this story add to the total revelation of the Kingdom of God presented in this sermon by Jesus?
- c. If Jesus did not furnish the key to the interpretation of this parable, how must we go about arriving at its meaning?
- d. Why mention the passage of time in this parable, i.e., the farmer's sleeping and rising night and day, as well as the time required for the development of the harvest? What does this indicate about the parable's main point?
- e. How far should each detail in this illustration be pressed?

## PARAPHRASE

At another point in His great sermon in parables Jesus gave another illustration: "The great Messianic Kingdom may be illustrated by a farmer who broadcasts seed in his field. Then he goes on about his regular business, sleeping well every night and rising to work each day. The seed itself sprouts quite independently of the farmer's ken and concern, because the earth produces automatically according to its own law and order: first, the blade, then the stalk with the green head, and finally the fully mature headed-out grain. Only at the time of the dead-ripe harvest does the farmer once more intervene by beginning instantly the reaping."

## SUMMARY

The Kingdom of God and the truth of its proclamation are already perfectly suited to accomplish their appointed tasks in the human heart, without recourse to artificial, humanly-devised means to make them function. Nevertheless, their own proper development requires time so that the desired results be realized according to the norms and schedule for its completion.

## NOTES

## A. THE PRINCIPLE FACTS of the parable:

1. The story intends to illustrate *the Kingdom of God*, but to what aspect of it does Jesus refer?
  - a. to the Messianic Reign of the Christ?
  - b. to the government of God in the individual disciple?
  - c. to the Kingdom of God realized in the Church?
  - d. to God's government of the universe?
  - e. to the Kingdom perfected at the close of the present age?
  - f. to all these concepts collectively?

It may be that Jesus is including most of these concepts of the Kingdom, since Jewish expectation, with its cosmic eschatology surrounding the Messiah's coming, would tend to mingle these various expressions into one overall concept of God's Kingdom. Further, as will be seen later, the main emphasis of this parable may be rightly applied to each of these concepts.

2. The farmer:
  - a. *that scatters seed upon the ground*, a reminder of the Parable of the Sower;
  - b. *that sleeps tranquilly (sleeps by night)*, because he is confident that he has done all that is humanly possible to provide suitable growing conditions for the seed he has sown, and because he is confident in the vitality of the seed itself.
  - c. *that rises by day* to go calmly about his daily business during the time when he must necessarily await the natural development of the harvest.
  - d. *that knows not how the seed should sprout and grow*. Making the seed grow is none of his immediate concern, because he could not interfere with the normal laws of its life if he wanted

to. The farmer may know a great deal about the value of preparing the ground before sowing, about fertilizers, about proper rain and sun, as well as about the removal of weeds and other harmful growth in competition for the strength of the soil. These are not the elements of the seed's germination and growth about which he is ignorant, for his farm organization can do much to prepare for and follow up his own sowing and set up the conditions favorable for a good harvest. But all his organization and any anxiety about the harvest cannot make the plants grow. This comes from the life within the seed itself.

3. *The seed:*

- a. that is *sown upon the ground*:
  - b. that sprouts and grows automatically (*the earth produces of itself*). It is *the earth of itself*, not the farmer, that produces in its own good time and according to the laws of development inherent in the soil, rains, sun and seed, totally independently of all human efforts to force the seed to grow or bring it to maturity for the final harvest. Farmers the world over can control many factors by cultivating the soil, by sowing each crop in its proper season, etc., but if the earth did not spontaneously produce of itself when sown, all would be useless. Sometimes unforeseen factors enter in to ruin the crop: new plant diseases, insect plagues, unusual weather conditions, etc., and farmers have fought these enemies of their crops for millenia. Why? Because the basic assumption behind all their efforts is that, if they are successful in controlling the controllable, *the earth will produce of itself*, because the seed and the soil are made for each other. No special adaptation or manipulation is required, since good seed faithfully sown in reasonably good soil will produce the desired harvest.
  - c. that matures according to its own natural laws and schedule of development:
    - (1) *first the blade*
    - (2) *then the ear, or head of grain (stâchus)*
    - (3) *then the full grain in the ear.*
4. *The harvest:*
- a. that must be begun *at once, because the time of the harvest is come.*

- b. that must begin only *when the grain is ripe*, not when human impatience dictates.

#### B. SOME LESSONS SUGGESTED BY THIS STORY:

1. Whereas it would seem, on the basis of the teaching in the Parable of the Sower and Soils, that the effectiveness of the Word of God is contingent upon the quality of the soil/heart in which it is planted, leading to the natural however erroneous, conclusion that human effort is required to force the seed/Word to grow and produce, this Parable of the Growing Seed corrects that impression. It teaches that, as in the natural world such effort is as unnecessary as it is impossible, so in the Kingdom of God, all artificial attempts at manipulation of spiritual growth must give way to humility, patience and gratitude.
2. Gonzalez-Ruiz (*Marco*, 121) reminds that

... the kingdom of God is a divine enterprise. While accepting human collaboration, it must always remain above every human attempt to force the progress of its operation . . . The parable, with its confident awaiting the arrival of the harvest, is directed against all attitudes that would force the coming of the Kingdom or even construct it outright, by national revolution, like the Zealots would have it, or by obedience to an absolute legal discipline, like the Pharisees demanded, or by precise calculations on the time of the end, as the apocalypticists dreamed it. The Evangelist opposes all this with an openness to the future that awaits what God Himself will do.

In fact, to Him alone belong the initiative and spiritual direction of the Kingdom. Western Christians are notorious for their confidence in human organization and what it can do to bring about greater spirituality, the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth, and other worthwhile spiritual goals. Organization can help to sustain pre-existent life, but HOW LITTLE LIFE organization can produce! Trench (*Notes*, 101) correctly sees that "Our Lord's object . . . is pointedly to exclude the continuous agency of the sower, i.e., of the same kind as he exercises at the first." Human effort, however well intentional or organized, just cannot force or manipulate spiritual growth into the likeness of God.

3. He who proclaims the message of the Kingdom, and, as a

GROWING SEED  
GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES      Mk. 4:26-29

consequence, produces a bridgehead for the Kingdom in the individual Christian, and, collectively, in the Christian congregations, must not expect to see immediate results of his work, shortly after completing it. In fact, as is the case with every worthwhile enterprise, time is needed to let things mature, and the more important it is, the more time is needed, so also is the case with the Kingdom of God. Jesus is announcing that even the Word of God requires time to extend the influence of God's good government in men's hearts.

4. He who proclaims the Gospel of the Kingdom must have confidence in the message he announces, because this Word is capable of producing the desired results without ulterior "updating" or other manipulation by the disciples to make it more effective. How striking is the contrast between our exaggerated confidence in human methods, human philosophies, human organizations, etc., and Jesus' confidence in the power of His Word in the human heart! This is easily judged by His own procedure: He too came to earth to bring spiritual life to light through the Gospel (2 Ti. 1:10). Everything that Jesus accomplished Himself or achieved through His supernaturally-endowed Apostles to establish His Truth in the world is all part of one stupendous sowing. Then, He too left the seed to grow spontaneously by itself. He will not break into the present world order until that glorious miracle of His second coming, His resurrection of all the dead to judgment and His bringing the present age to a halt before His throne. BUT IN THE MEANTIME Jesus is not personally present in the world encouraging the growth of the Gospel in the human heart. True, His Spirit is the unseen power at work helping the Word to produce its effect in men's hearts, but His Spirit leaves men entirely masters of their own will. (See notes on 13:9.) Jesus is now literally gone from the earthly scene, having firmly planted His Word and His Church in the world. Although the Church is always faced with possible extermination by persecutions and apostacy, yet Jesus has never visibly or personally returned to earth to extricate her from her torments. His confidence in the power of His Word to accomplish the work for which He set it forth has dictated a "hands off" policy. (Cf. Paul's confidence in the Word of God: Acts 20:32; Ro. 1:16.) For almost two millenia now, Jesus' confidence in the vitality of His Word and its power in the

human heart has let Him go on unhurried and unworried about other business (Cf. Jn. 14:2, 3; 1 Jn. 2:1, 2; Heb. 1:2, 3; 2 Pet. 3:3-15a). Then, when the earth harvest is ripe, He will make His second and final appearance during this epoch of earth's history to complete the marvelous task inaugurated at His first advent. Can we too, like Jesus, resist the temptation to modify or manipulate or otherwise mutilate our message, hoping for better, speedier results?

5. The Kingdom of God and its Gospel and the human heart are already adapted perfectly to one another. Consequently, no modification of either can be considered essential to make the Word of God more effective in converting the heart, or to make it possible for the heart to receive it more easily.
  - a. No changes in the Gospel can be justified on the basis of a supposed need to "update the message to make it relevant," as if its Author had not already perfectly adapted it to the needs of men of any century, any nation, any culture, any class!
  - b. No revamping of the inborn simplicity of God's Kingdom can be defended, that would organize new ecclesiastical structures to manipulate spiritual growth or accelerate the maturation of the plan of God, as if the divine means indicated in the Word itself for the realization of that plan should be thought to be inadequate!
  - c. Nor does man himself have to be specially adapted to the Gospel or somehow readied for the Kingdom of God through man-made schemes for better health, higher educational advantages or more general welfare, before the Gospel can operate in his heart or before he can respond positively to it, as if the King's message were not already addressed to Man in any social condition!

What a tragedy that the Church herself has never perfectly learned that, in the period intervening between sowing and reaping, the crop must be let alone, without insisting on speedy maturation or hasty harvesting of immature fruit! What is objected to here is none of the God-given means for edification and encouragement of spiritual growth in the individual and in the Church, but rather all those artificial, humanly devised means that express a Boanergean desire for fire from heaven and a Zealot's violent impatience with God's means and schedule

- for bringing in the Kingdom.
6. God's procedure for establishing and developing His Kingdom proceeds by stages according to fixed, orderly laws of spiritual development until the time chosen by God for judging the final results. This fact prohibits *a priori* any hasty, negative judgments about the present reality or incomplete condition of God's Kingdom on earth. Any short-sightedness on the part of Christ's followers could lead only to disappointment, doubt and unbelief, because anyone who looks at the present world condition and presumes this state of affairs to be the finished product, must pronounce it a hopeless chaos and God's Kingdom a failure! (Remember the impatience of John the Baptist? Mt. 11:3 or worse still, the scoffing question: "What has happened to his promised coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4). Instead of leaping to this unfounded conclusion, men must understand that the faith of Jesus Christ, both in the individual follower and in the Church in the world, develops according to those orderly principles that govern the progress of truth in the human mind from one stage of maturity to another, and from one person to another.
  7. The only haste manifest in the parable is seen when *the harvest harvest is come: at once he puts in the sickle* (*euthūs apostellei to drépanon*). This urgency stands out in contrast to the slow passage of time for the farmer between his sowing and the harvest, that time in which the grain matured, that time in which the farmer was helpless to hurry the crop's development. So, the Church too cannot anticipate the judgments of God. It is only when the last "fulness of time" will have arrived, that things will be brought rapidly to their natural conclusion (Rev. 10:6).
  8. Any impatience toward the means by which God has chosen to develop His rule on earth is completely out of place, as also every expression of self-reliant zeal that would abbreviate God's schedules by inventing and imposing on the Church and world artificial structures and means, rather than be content with those designed and desired by God.

C. NEW ATTITUDES INDICATED:

1. A PATIENCE that awaits the maturing of God's program according to the laws of life planned in His design (Cf. Jas. 5:7-11). John Brown (PHC, XXIII, 149) urges:

A man may be converted in a moment of time; but after he has turned right round, the development of that life must needs take many long years of discipline before it reaches the height for which God intended it. Salvation means not merely delivering a man from sin, from every evil thing, but building him up to all nobleness; not merely the putting aside of what is weak and sinful, but the attainment of all that is noble and true; and is always the work of time. You can make a man a present of some material things in a moment, but you cannot give him patience . . . purity . . . humility, in a moment of time. Faith gets grip and strength through stress of suffering; wisdom is the child of experience . . . We can never do without any of the intervening stages—never expedite the processes of God either in nature or in grace.

We can no more pray, "Thy Kingdom come" and expect God to answer instantly by giving us a fully mature Kingdom, because to do so would violate man's will and his freedom to choose the Kingdom, than we can pray, "Give me patience and give it to me now!" for the same reason.

2. A HUMILITY that admits its own inability to produce spiritual life, because this is neither its function nor responsibility. We may plant and water, but "God makes the plants grow" (1 Cor. 3:7). This humility is content that the Word should grow and bear fruit however embarrassing be its ignorance of the process by which God's Word will eventually accomplish in the world that purpose for which He sent it forth (Isa. 55:10, 11). After all, our ignorance of the psychological operations of His Word in people is nothing new, nor is our incomprehension of the final fulfillment of God's plans (Cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12; Mt. 24:36-51).
3. A GRATITUDE that we may go cheerfully about our task without the burden of an undefined, unlimited responsibility, since we know that the ultimate success of men's conversion and the development of God's Kingdom is not under our control. We may be grateful that "the power is of God and not of ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:7). After having faithfully declared the whole counsel of God and done everything in our power to evangelize the world and provide suitable growing conditions for spiritual

maturity, we can depend on God, thankful that the final victory is in His hands.

4. A SELF-DISCIPLINE in the face of temptation to demand immediate results, instant growth and measurable progress in terms of dollars and cents, numbers, institutional power and financial holdings, to the probable spiritual damage of the "little ones" in our care. Here is a self-discipline that refuses to criticize God because He seems to delay the fulfillment of His promise, a self-discipline that knows that "He is patient toward you, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the Day of the Lord will come . . ." (2 Pet. 3:9, 10).
5. A LOYALTY and a CONSTANCY on the part of the disciples in proclaiming faithfully and vigorously the Gospel as the ONLY MEANS to foster the many necessary social revolutions for the enduring happiness of man, confident in the wisdom of God that chose to use this very means. Rather than promote the Kingdom by Maccabean methods and views that can do it nothing but violence and embarrass its King, rather than endeavor to speed up the arrival of the Kingdom by organizing imposing ecclesiastical superstructures that manipulate the Church, rather than attempt social betterment by means that bypass faithful Gospel proclamation, rather than substitute political freedom for a biblically-defined liberation from guilt of personal sin, the Church of Jesus Christ is to be constant in preaching the Word of her divine Lord, confident that His Word, given time, will bring about the results HE desires, because it is HIS Kingdom, not hers, that she desires to promote.

### "HOW UNMESSIANIC!"

The cooler heads in Palestine certainly did not share the Maccabean fervor for "revolution now!", especially those elements most interested in Hellenizing (= paganizing) the population. Education and culture had long been moving toward cultural syncretism even before the time of Christ. But with the exciting preaching of John the Baptist that heralded the near arrival of the Kingdom of God, there was revived in Israel the almost-forgotten hopes for national greatness in a Jewish Kingdom

of God. Excited masses turned to Jesus of Nazareth hoping that, sooner or later, they might seize Him to make Him their King. Every day Jesus talked and men listened for some word, some clue that would indicate "zero-hour" for which they had so long dreamed. Here, as elsewhere in this great sermon (see on 13:30-33), Jesus opts, however, for gradualism and a patient utilization of God's means until He should have completed His program to bring in the long-awaited Kingdom. Not only would the hard-core Zealots and card-carrying Assassins have been disappointed by this parable of Jesus, but also all those pious, less openly political sympathizers with those nationalists, would have been left baffled, asking, "What kind of a Kingdom of God does He think to represent anyway?"

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What phase or phases of the Kingdom of God are represented by this parable?
2. What factors indicate whether this parable is to be understood as an allegory or as a one-point illustration?
3. For what mistaken attitudes among Jesus' original hearers is this parable an antidote and corrective?
4. Demonstrate the logical relationship between this parable and others delivered the same day by Jesus.
5. Identify the main point of this illustration of God's Kingdom.

### B. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE TRIALS OF TRUTH

#### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS

TEXT: 13:24-30, 36-43

24 Another parable set he before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. 26 But when the blade sprang up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. 27 And the servants

of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares? 28 And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? 29 But he saith, Nay; lest haply while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat with them. 30 Let them both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.

.....

36 Then he left the multitudes, and went into the house; and his disciples came unto him, saying, Explain unto us the parable of the tares of the field. 37 And he answered and said, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; 38 and the field is the world; and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; 39 and the enemy that sowed them is the devil; and the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are angels. 40 As therefore the tares are gathered up and burned with fire; so shall it be in the end of the world. 41 The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, 42 and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth. 43 Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He that hath ears, let him hear.

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Do you see any relationship between this parable and the age-old human problem of evil? That is, how could God be perfectly good and not want to do something about the evil in the world? How could He be omnipotent and yet not move a hand to exterminate that which His righteous character must recognize and condemn as wicked? If you see a connection in this parable, what is it? If not, explain why you think there is none.
- b. Do you think Jesus is describing the problem of evil in the Church, or in the world, or in both, or in neither? Why do you decide as you do?
- c. After what Jesus says about the difficulty of discerning the best from the worst of men, how can you still believe in a church

- discipline that excludes church members who persist in their sinning despite all the efforts of their fellow Christians to bring them to repentance? How do you harmonize these two concepts?
- d. When Jesus used the expression, "The end of the world," (v. 40), His reference was an allusion to the conclusion of the Jewish world, i.e., to the decline and final fall of Judaism as a religion and Israel as a nation. Do you think this is a fair statement of His meaning? If not, how would you correct it? If so, how would you demonstrate it?
  - e. In verse 41, Jesus promises that He will personally send His angels "to gather out of His Kingdom all things that cause stumbling and them that do iniquity." Now, some believe that once a person has become a member of God's Kingdom as a child of God, he cannot possibly be lost thereafter by sinning. Does this passage say anything on this question? If not, why not? If so, what does this text reveal about the possibility of removal of members from God's Kingdom on account of their sin?
  - f. What do you think about the following statement: Jesus came to give us just as much a revelation about Satan as He came to give a revelation about God? Affirm or deny and tell why.
  - g. Do you think it is very important to spend much time studying about the devil? Some would say that to be happy in this world and safe for eternity, it is enough to know all we can about God and that no other problem is essentially important. What is your opinion? Should we waste time studying about the Evil One, God's enemy or not? Why?
  - h. How does one become a "son of the Kingdom"?
  - i. How does one become a "son of the evil one"? Is there a similarity in process between the development as a Christian and that as an unbeliever? Think this one over carefully, because it may be trickier than it looks!

### PARAPHRASE

Here is another parable that Jesus told the people: "The Kingdom of God may be compared to a farmer who sowed select seed in his field. But while everyone was asleep, an enemy of his came and maliciously broadcast seeds of bearded darnel over the ground already sown in wheat. Then he left.

"Later, when the plants sprouted and began to head out; then the darnel appeared as well. So the owner's field hands came to him with the question, 'Sir, did you not sow quality seed in your ground? Where did all these darnel weeds come from?'

"His answer was: 'Someone has done this out of pure malice!'

"The man's field hands asked another question: 'Then do you want us to go out and pull up the weeds?'

"'No,' he replied, 'because in pulling up the darnel you might root up good wheat along with it. Just leave them as they are, growing together until harvest. Then at harvest I will tell the ones working in the harvest to gather all the darnel first, tying it in bundles to be burned. Then they can gather and store the good wheat into my granary.' "

Later, when Jesus had dismissed the crowds and gone indoors again, the disciples approached Him with the request: "Would you explain the story about the weeds of the field to us?"

This was His answer: "I, the Son of man, am the farmer who sows excellent, quality seed. My field is the whole world. The good seed here represents the people whose hearts are ruled by God. The darnel weeds are those people who belong to Satan. The enemy who scatters them throughout my world is the Devil himself! The harvest represents the end of the world. The ones who will do the harvesting are the angels. Just as in the story where the weeds were collected and burned, this is the way it will happen at the end of time. I, the Son of man, will send my angels to gather out of my Kingdom everything that causes sin and all the evil-doers. These will be thrown into the blazing furnace of hell. That will be a place where men will wail and grind their teeth in frustrated anger. Then it will be obvious who the righteous really are, for it will be just as clear and obvious as the sun who is really in the kingdom of their Father, God. So, if you have the ability to hear, then listen!"

## SUMMARY

God is not to be blamed for the problem of evil in His Kingdom in the world. Even as He began His creation with good people, so it is also with His new creation. His Kingdom, or rule, has always reflected this fact. The existence of the wicked in the world in no way denies the reality of God's control, nor in the final denouement

will they escape the justice of their fate. The extreme difficulty of deciding just who are the truly righteous during this earthly journey renders such judgments patently impossible for those who are themselves involved in the problem of evil. However, God Himself is fully capable of distinguishing the only apparently good from those who actually please Him, and at the conclusion of all earth-life will be responsible for making that separation now so difficult for us. Then, and then alone, will it become perfectly clear who, all along, were the true sons of God.

## NOTES

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLE (13:24)

**13:24 Another parable set he before them.** This generalized indefinite introduction to a story is to be expected in Matthew, since he has reworked the order of this sermon by inserting the explanation of the Sower parable out of order to place the interpretation near the story itself for sake of the reader. (See notes on 13:18 and the Introduction.) Technically speaking, therefore, the telling of the Weeds Parable actually precedes the explanation of the Sower Parable. What viewpoint of the Kingdom of heaven is represented in this parable?

1. The Church exclusively? No, because Jesus says that God's Rule, or Kingdom, is like the whole picture of two farmers competing for the same soil, each by sowing his own seed in the field. Now, if *the good seed* represents those who submit to the rule of Jesus Christ, i.e., His Church, then the Kingdom itself cannot be two separate parts of the parable at the same time. The Kingdom includes the Church, but not vice versa, since the Kingdom here is the larger concept. Trench (*Notes*, 194, note 2), desiring to apply this parable more exclusively to the Church, quotes Calvin with approval:

Although Christ adds that the field is the world, yet it is not doubtful that He wished to apply this name to the Church in particular, concerning which He had begun His discourse . . . He transferred by *synecdoche* to the world what fitted a part only.

Then Trench adds:

It required no especial training to acquaint the disciples that in the *world* there would ever be a mixture of good and bad, though they must have been so little prepared to expect the same in the Church, that it was very needful to warn them beforehand, both that they might not be stumbled, and that they might know how to conduct themselves.

But the good Archbishop is not looking at the question from the vantage point of the disciples' Jewish concept. What did THEY believe the Messianic Kingdom was to accomplish *in the world*? That is, did they expect the Messiah to usher in an unprecedented era of perfect righteousness, a paradise of holy persons whose King would instantly destroy all the wicked? If so, the startling revelations made by this parable would require that they re-evaluate all their previous thinking about the Kingdom.

2. The future reign of God after the conclusion of the present age is automatically ruled out as the exclusive meaning by the fact that the parable ends on this note, whereas it represents God's authority over the world as already having had full sway for the long interval from before the establishment of His Church in the world until the final victory at the end. Even if Jesus says, "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father," it is evident (1) that they had been in that kingdom ever since their submission to the King and this is but the moment of their glorious revealing, and (2) that God had not relinquished His right to rule nor surrendered the government of earth to anyone in the interim.
3. This parable, rather, pictures the government of God in its totality. The particular background of this story is the eschatological waiting of the people of God for the realization of the Paradise of God. The Jews would have linked this directly with the first appearance of the Messiah and establishment of the Kingdom on earth (Cf. Psalms of Solomon 17:23ff, 29). Naturally, the failure of the nationalistic triumph to materialize as a visible result of Jesus' mission would not only raise serious questions about Him, but would lead to an understandable disappointment with Him. This is the kind of tension that motivates the uneasy question of John the Baptist (Mt. 11:2-6) and that of the Apostles (Acts 1:6). Jesus would have men see that His new society of the redeemed is but one significant expression of God's Kingdom. The very fact that

God can afford to wait until that Day to destroy evil is surprising proof that His Government is supreme. The final, permanent crushing of the Enemy and those whom he deceived, is another evidence of God's invincible rule. The radiant dignity to which the saints will then be elevated is a crowning evidence that the Almighty reigns! And this carefully constructed allegory splashes all these tremendous truth before His hearers in one coherent picture.

But this is NOT new material. The truth taught about the kingdom in this parable had already been suggested by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in clear, unparabolic language.

1. Why worry, for instance, about persecution from evil men (Mt. 5:10-12), or about strife (Mt. 5:21-26) or about personal vengeance against attackers (5:38-42), or even about loving one's enemies (5:43ff), if the Kingdom of God is going to eliminate all these problems from its inception?
2. Would not the great Messianic King remove all hypocrisy by the purifying power of His presence? (Cf. Mt. 6:1-18)
3. Why then all this concern for personal purity as if the citizens of the Kingdom could somehow become contaminated by divided loyalties and worry? (Mt. 6:19-34)
4. Further, if the Kingdom is only for the pure and holy anyway, why concern oneself with "dogs and swine"? (Mt. 7:6)
5. Most significant of all is the preoccupation with false ways and false prophets, as if IN THE KINGDOM YET one could actually be duped into following them to his destruction! (Mt. 7:13-23)

Incredible? Yes, but all that is rendered explicit in the Parable of the Tares was already implicit in the clear language of the Sermon on the Mount. This is the reason Jesus now repeats these ideas in the parabolic form: the prejudices of His hearers would not permit them to detect what He was driving at even when He talked plain about these very concepts. This simple story flashes before them God's entire answer to the problems of sin and its accompanying evils in the world. The Church, of course, is not incidental, because she is the very crop for which the world's true Owner yearned to see the fruition.

## INTRODUCTION TO ITS EXPLANATION (13:36)

13:36 Then he left the multitudes, and went into the house: did he leave them or dismiss them? The Greek verb means either. Interestingly, Jesus probably did both to go *into the house*. (His own house? Cf. note on 13:1)

**His disciples came to him, saying, Explain . . .** This is the most important verse in the entire chapter and the only reaction acceptable to Jesus Christ! They proved themselves genuine *disciples* by coming to HIM and laying before HIM their ignorance and confusion. This is the verse that draws the distinction between the sheep and the goats, the truly wise and the fools, the good and the evil. There is no evil like unbelief in Jesus in Nazareth, and there is no good like that absolute trust in Him that will bring a person spontaneously to Him so that He might teach him. (Cf. Jn. 8:24; 3:36; Psa. 25:8, 9; Jas. 1:5-8; see Notes on Mt. 13:10-17.)

## THE SAVIOR'S SOWING (13:24, 37, 38)

13:24 A man . . . sowed good seed in his fields . . . 37 . . . He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man: keep that straight! The problem of evil in the world, and particularly in the institutional Church, often blinds men to the fact that only "good giving and every perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father," whereas temptations, lust, sin and death come from human desires willing to be enticed by Satan (Jas. 1:13-18; 3:6, 13-18; 4:1-10). In starting His Church as one tangible expression of His Kingdom on earth, Jesus made no mistakes. The Lord knows His own (Cf. Nu. 16:1-5; Ezek. 8:1—9:11; 2 Ti. 2:19; Jn. 10:14). On that Day the justice of His strategy will be vindicated. In the meantime, the field is *His field*, His *world*, and any evil in it is the result of *an enemy's work*, not His (13:28)!

13:38a The field is the world, not merely the Church, although this is composed of people who live in the world. He is not only affirming the world-wide character of His reign as opposed to narrow nationalism, but also that the world itself is the soil within which the life growing-cycle of the two divergent kinds of people is brought to maturity. So, as long as the world stands, the mighty Kingdom of God has a sphere of action that is coextensive with all humanity. In

unveiling this Kingdom Jesus taught His Jewish hearers to look not merely upon Palestine as the boundary of His dominion and the limit of His concern. Rather, He came to enlarge their horizons to include the utmost limits of mankind as the supreme target of His love and sphere of His good government.

13:38b **The good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom.** The expression "sons of," rather than refer here to ancestry, is rather a Hebraism expressive of a more general relationship. Sometimes the connection is membership in a guild, class or sect (Cf. 2 Kgs. 6:1; 4:38; Mt. 12:27 see note). Or else the expression indicates some characteristic quality of the persons so described. *The sons of the Kingdom*, then, are Jesus' followers, because these disciples share the goals of the Kingdom (Cf. Notes on 5:45 and 8:12). They are the true Church, hence not a hypocrite among them. Wheat plants are just the wheat seed in a changed form: that new life-character in a Christian is actually the product of the truth he has accepted. God plants truth in a man, buries it in his heart, fires his imagination with, and energizes his will with it until that man literally becomes the truth incarnate (Cf. 2 Co. 3:18; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:14-21; Col. 1:27, 28; Jn. 17:14-19; 2 Pt. 1:3, 4; 1 Pt. 1:22, 23; Jas. 1:18, 21; 1 Ti. 4:6). They are *good seed*, not perfectly matured plants ready for harvest; *good seed* with all the potentiality for producing the right results desired by the Lord of the harvest. *Good seed* is Jesus' evaluation of His Church: woe to the man who disagrees with Him!

#### SATAN'S SINISTER SOWING (13:25, 26, 39)

13:25 **But while men slept, his enemy came . . .** This taking of rest need not refer to any lack of attention or care on the part of those responsible for the field, nor is the sleeping blamed. Rather, sleep is not only proper because earned by honest labor, but may easily signify the farmer's undisturbed confidence that good seed has been sown, as in the parable of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:27). Nevertheless, it was this time that Satan turned to his own advantage.

**His enemy . . . sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away**  
26 **But when the blade sprang up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.** From these details it is obvious that the servants only discovered their presence in the field when the weeds had already begun to mature, hence not earlier. In fact, it was only when the

wheat had *brought forth fruit that then appeared the tares also*. On this basis the *Davis Dictionary of the Bible* (759) argues for the *Lolium* as the culprit:

The bearded darnel (*Lolium temulentum*) is a poisonous grass, almost undistinguishable from wheat while the two are only in blade, but which can be separated without difficulty when they come into ear . . .

It was the *fruit* that gave it away (Cf. Mt. 7:15-20). Though the fruits furnish the saints a practical clue, or test, whereby they may guard themselves from the influences of the wicked, they are not permitted to destroy them, because only at the judgment will all fruit be fully matured, rendering possible a true final decision. So, before that Day, who but God can recognize the genuine wheat from the obnoxious darnel? (In fact, some may even be charismatics. Mt. 7:21-23) Merely because God does not seem to be doing anything about rooting out the wicked now must not be interpreted by anyone as if He were doing absolutely nothing about the evil. He is biding His time until harvest when the final reckoning will reveal the drastic difference between the sham believers, the hypocrites, the role players, the shamelessly evil ones, and the genuine sons of God.

The use of the darnel weed was aptly chosen by the Lord because of its striking similarity to wheat, since the shoots of both are so alike it is next to impossible to decide which is which. The value of this resemblance for the story lies in its vivid representation of a real problem: there would be many non-Christians in the world whose honesty, integrity, generosity and other good traits often surpass the average morality of many Christians who really do believe Jesus and try to serve Him, but whose ethics are no match for those high-minded unbelievers. Or, there might be two men of equal moral worth, one a disciple of Jesus; the other, no. Many would be tempted to leap to the conclusion that faith in Jesus and justification on the basis of that faith makes little essential difference, since, they would say, "Surely God wants *good* people, not just believers whose life and morals are unspectacular for their similarity to non-believers." In fact, the whole concept of justification by faith which puts a man "in Christ" and renders him juridically perfect before God, is so unbelievable that God would have had to say it before any of us would have ever believed it possible. Man's idea of justice would

just not let him dream it up, because it involves condemning himself regardless of how good he is. Since people "in Christ" must live out their lifetime among the more-or-less good people in their community, anyone who would decide about the effectiveness of Jesus' mission to earth would be inclined to pronounce it a failure, since no noticeable difference distinguishes the one from the other. But what a difference judgment will reveal between the two!

13:38c **The tares are the sons of the evil one.** Although very few of them would openly own Satan as their lord and actively seek to promote the interests of his domain, yet in doing exactly what they want to do, they carry out his wishes (Cf. Jn. 8:44; Eph. 2:2f). This real, fundamental commitment explains the need to play the hypocrite, felt by those sons of the Devil who want to be part of the Church. While mimicking the externals of the Christian society, they cannot go all the way to fruits of righteousness, because they are already committed to themselves, which, in effect, means commitment to Satan's desires. (See Ezek. 33:30-33 in this context!) Just as *the sons of the Kingdom* are the logical, moral product of the truth that transforms them, so also *the sons of the evil one* are the product of the false, the inadequate, the sham, the deceptive, that they too have taken into their being in exchange for truth (Ro. 1:21-32; 2 Th. 2:9-12; Eph. 2:1-3; Phil. 3:19; Col. 2:8, 18; 1 Ti. 4:1, 2; 6:20, 21; 2 Ti. 2:16, 17; 4:3, 4; 3:7).

13:39a **The enemy that sowed them is the devil.** Contrary to the correct understanding of this parable, Christians are tempted to see "the enemy" as anything or anyone else! Before a successful battle can be waged, one ought at least to know who his enemies are. All of our seemingly great difficulties with people are but minor skirmishes in comparison with the bloody war with Satan himself. Nevertheless, although millions march at his orders, his ranks can be infiltrated, even as he tries to infiltrate the Kingdom of God, and some of his tools can be converted into disciples of the Kingdom (Cf. 2 Ti. 2:24-26). However, were *the sons of the evil one* to be treated as one would their father and chief, were they uprooted and burned before the time, their conversion could never take place. Our warfare, our struggle for the control of men's minds, therefore, must not mistake men for Satan, for *the enemy is the devil* (Cf. 2 Co. 10:3-6; Eph. 6:10-19)! Not even the Romans, nor the Pharisees!

This simple declaration marks the chasmic distance between Satan and Jesus Christ! No accusations of secret collusion with that sinister

demon can be sustained (Cf. 12:24; 9:34). In fact, in His most secret revelations to His intimates, the Lord bares the harsh reality of that moral struggle for world domination in which the lines are sharply drawn (Heb. 2:14, 15; 1 Jn. 3:8).

These literal words of our Lord ("The enemy is the devil.") expose as fundamental unbelief the embarrassment of people who blush at the mention of the devil. Satan is as real for Jesus as is God His Father. But, some would urge, "While I accept Jesus' words as true, should they not be understood figuratively?" No, because the words of this text are not part of a figure, picture or parable, but, rather, the literal interpretation of a parable. Jesus, who sees as clearly the invisible realm of the spirits as He does the visible world of time and sense, declares as eternal truth: *the enemy is the devil!*

### THE SERVANTS' SURPRISE (13:27, 28)

13:27 **And the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares?** Although Jesus did not interpret this verse nor the following one, it is the basic problem back of this parable to which the story is the answer. The causes of the shock in these servants are two: their confidence in their lord's wisdom in sowing good seed in his field, and their own discovery of the continued presence of noxious weeds that threatened to compromise his harvest.

13:28 **And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?** The farmer's true response not only does not solve the problem for them; it, rather, increases their anxiety to right this disturbing situation immediately.

These anxious questions would not long remain unuttered after men should have seen how Jesus intended to establish His Messianic Kingdom. Such questions, in fact, would be wrung out of the tortured emotions of embattled saints: "Lord, did you not establish your new humanity comprised of your own people who submit to your rule in the world? Why, then, are there yet so many people who obviously not only do not accept your rule, but openly belong to the ranks of Satan? Lord, if your Church is what you say it is, if we are to be as victorious as you promise, if we are to bring every tribe, nation, people and tongue to your honor, riches, praise and thanksgiving

at your feet; what are all these OBDURATE, UNCOVERTED AND UNCONVERTIBLE SINNERS doing here, still left seemingly at peace in the world? Why, Lord, are they left to pursue their own degenerate and degrading course? If you, Lord Jesus, are really the King of the world, as we believe, how is it that the 'world still lies in the power of the wicked one'?"

Who are *the servants* whose righteous zeal thus manifests itself in personal interest in the proper management and future success of their Lord's property? Interestingly, Jesus leaves us no direct clue to their identity.

1. The Church? But in this parable, the Church is already symbolized by the good seed, not *the servants of the householder*. Nevertheless, the disciples of Christ have as much need for the information given these *servants* as anyone else, even if not specifically addressed to them.
2. Angels? Since the reapers in this figure are angels, it would not be at all surprising to see also these *servants* as angels who raise the problem of the continued presence of evil in the world even after the Son of God had completed His redemptive work. However, while these servants could well be the angels, yet thoughtful men too have always been tormented by this same question of justice.

It may well be that Jesus left their identification deliberately indistinct, in order to permit none—men or angels—to make false accusations or ignorant final verdicts. But if the exact identity of these concerned servants of God is intentionally left out of the picture, the attitude expressed is strikingly typical of John the Baptist. (See notes on 11:1-6.) His heavy, thundering demands for repentance and his blazing threats of unquenchable fire practically cancelled out for John the possibility that a loving Messiah should patiently and mercifully seek the salvation of the vilest of the wicked. Nor had Jesus been sufficiently prompt in satisfying John's own understanding of Jesus' mission.

Barker (*As Matthew Saw the Master*, 60f) visualizes Jesus' immediate situation as an uneasiness about the kind of people He was attracting. He had given a blanket invitation to the human race to come to Him, and some who came had notorious reputations. Some were with Him for the wrong reasons, expecting rewards and honors. And what about the borderliners, the wobbly, superficial followers? Surely, the disciples may have been thinking, they should sort out

those who were insincere. Critical and untolerant, some mumbled to Jesus about the bag of mixed followers, around Him. Why not weed out the undesirables?

Matthew knew better than most what it was to be an "undesirable." A dubious risk with a disgraceful past, Matthew had no letters of recommendation to get him into Jesus' Kingdom. If there had been any sorting out of followers, Matthew knew that he would have been classified as "unreliable," or "offensive."

How desperately pertinent is this parable to the immediate perplexity of the Twelve themselves! How appropriate for their peace of mind! They must not only witness the desertion of Jesus by fickle, uncomprehending mobs of well-wishers (Jn. 6:66), but also face the certainty that even one of their own number would be Satan's tool (Jn. 6:70)!

God's servants are always tempted to ignore this teaching by allowing themselves to become overly alarmed by the great, powerful causes or movements of sinners united together. Consequently, abandoning the ministry to which Jesus had set them working, they set about to eradicate the evils in the world by combatting the great evil movements themselves. By contrast, the Apostles finally understood their Lord and refused to get involved in fighting totalitarian government and godless ideologies of their day, for they believed that preaching the Gospel of Christ would produce more necessary, grass-roots changes in humanity and, consequently, in its philosophies and systems, than could begin to be touched by tremendous reactionary campaigns.

#### THE SERVANTS' SHORT-SIGHTED SOLUTION SCRAPPED (13:29, 30a)

13:29 Their seemingly natural, more obvious solution is surprisingly, but wisely, rejected. Not only would the roots of the plants have become intertwined in the earth, so that the uprooting of the unwanted weeds would necessarily ruin the good stalks yet unready for harvest, but the very similarity between the good and bad plants would require powers to distinguish them that the servants did not possess.

13:30 **Let them both grow together until the harvest.** The striking likeness of bearded darnel to wheat is gone by harvest, making it

possible to distinguish the plants without difficulty.

It is this definitive, standing order of the Lord of the harvest that exhibits the true relationships: these persons, overeager to "help along" the punitive justice of God must recognize their true position as Jesus assigns it to them in this parable. They are *servants*, nothing more. It is not theirs to dictate policy to the Lord, no matter how staggered they are by the enormity of the evil in the world, no matter how provoked to demand immediate justice. (Cf. Rev. 6:9-11 and God's reaction even to those martyred for Christ.) For anyone ready to rush radical remedies to the scene, Jesus reminds that judgment still belongs to the Almighty who can well afford to wait. Even if His judgment is inexorable, His patience can take its time. If Jesus had sometimes to rebuke the all-too-human desire to call down fire from heaven upon those deemed to be enemies of Christ (Cf. Lk. 9:51-56) or reprove the attempts to hinder the efforts of anyone not a part of Jesus' personal following (Lk. 9:49, 50), here, however, He guarantees the final, impartial extirpation of the really wicked. This guarantee, however, is based on the righteous and mercifully patient justice of God, not upon the hasty elimination of all the "doubtful" on the part of "the pure." We need to feel the arrogance it would involve to propose to begin God's sentencing by using human evaluations and methods. We must learn to distrust the smug conviction of our personal purity and worth that considers itself qualified to root out all the impure and damn them to an eternal fire.

**Let them both grow together!** What an excellent combination of patient wisdom and far-reaching grace! We would have ordered an immediate quarantine of all the wicked, called fire down from heaven, burnt up all the unworthy and set up a pure, true Church. But how like God to be serenely patient! Nevertheless, His very forbearance irritates us, because somehow we just cannot see that we too would have to go, were He to give the green light to such punitive measures, because not a one of us is pure wheat, except by His patient grace. His wise mercy halts the self-extinction of the Church in its present condition of imperfection and immaturity. In one clear word He forbids all kinds of Inquisitions, Crusades and Holy Wars. If it be contrary to God's longsuffering kindness for angels to rush among an unwitting humanity with drawn sword, how much more is it wicked for the Church, God's means to save the world, to don the robes of secular power and turn her sword against heretics and execute them herself? How many Zealots, Assassins and sympathizers

in Jesus stomped impatiently for some clue from Jesus, some key phrase that would signal the zero hour to begin the messianic holy war against all enemies of the "New Israel"! And yet, He quotes with approval the words of the world's Owner: '*Let them both grow together . . . !*' He simply will not permit anyone to take over for God and begin to execute precipitate justice by slicing men out of the Kingdom. Jesus is justly optimistic about the converting power of His own gospel, because He knows what so many forget: The Gospel is God's power to save anyone who believes it. Tares can become wheat! (See notes on the Growing Seed Parable, Mk. 4:26-29.)

Here again is the Lord's option for gradualism, as opposed to instant revolution and apocalyptic judgment, a doctrine reiterated in the stories of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven and that of the Growing Seed. Although the Jewish apocalyptic wrongly imagined the fulfillment of God's plans, he was not altogether wrong to calm the impatience of the godly man, chafing for perfect justice in the world:

Your haste may not exceed that of the Most High; for you are hastening for your own self, but the Exalted One (is acting) on behalf of many. (IV Ezra 4:34)

*Let them both grow together* cannot apply to church discipline.

1. Because "the field is the world," not merely, nor only, the Church. The Church is planted in the world, and so does not include all that is affirmed of the world. The basic distinction drawn in this parable is that between those who share God's mentality and the Devil's own. Though they must all grow along together in the present age, the separation will be made later. But in the case of church discipline, the basic distinction is between the wicked and righteous within the Church itself, and the separation must be made immediately on earth.
2. Because *the reapers here are the angels*, not church members indignant about the sins of a fellow Christian.
3. Because no interpretation of this parable can be correct that contradicts the Lord's clear instructions on church discipline (Mt. 18:15-18; 1 Co. 5; 2 Co. 2:1-11; esp. 9; Tit. 3:10; 2 Th. 3:6, 14; 2 Jn. 9-11; Ro. 16:17, 18). The Church is condemned that tolerates iniquity within (Rev. 2, 3). Those individuals who demonstrate by their attitudes and actions that they are *tares* at heart, those *sons of the evil one*, however much they protest their orthodoxy or innocence,

if the facts justify their being disciplined by the congregation and if they repent not, are to be severed from the fellowship of other Christians.

4. Because Jesus is not answering the specific question about dealing with sin in the Church. The burning question on the lips of the servants is: "Why is all the evil in the world allowed to continue? Shall we begin final judgment and damnation right now?" Decisions to be handled by the Church in carrying out church discipline are not of this order at all. This is because her judgments do not carry the weight of final judgment and eternal damnation. She is merely restoring to the world those of her number who refuse by their well-known character to be what the Church is really supposed to be. Naturally, the sequel to this situation will be the eternal damnation of the ex-church member IF HE DOES NOT REPENT, but that consequence will be God's decision, not the Church's. Church discipline is so designed as to seek this very reconversion to Christ, and, if successful in its working the desired effect in the sinning member, re-embraces him in reconciliation. Even if not instantly successful in his restoration, church discipline always leaves the door open until his death, so that he can repent and return if he will. From these considerations, it is demonstrated that, in no way does this parable forbid Church members to make the necessary judgments to discipline a recalcitrant fellow Christian (See fuller notes at 18:15-18.)

#### SUBSEQUENT SETTLEMENT BY SCRUPULOUS SEPARATION OF SINNERS (13:30b, 39-42)

13:30 Note the perfect foresight and calm mastery of this situation on the part of the householder, despite the tension felt because of the apparently menaced outcome of the harvest.

13:39b **The harvest is the end of the world** (Cf. 13:49; 24:3; 29:10; Heb. 9:26, 27). What as astounding revelation, either from the standpoint of Jewish eschatology or from that of modern philosophical determinism. The former sees the coming of the Messiah as the immediate, cataclysmic solution to all problems, the precipitate punishment of all wicked, and hard on the heels of judgment, the arrival of the Jewish paradise. But, as the Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven teach, so here too, Jesus pictures the perfection

of the Kingdom through an extended time-period of internal and external development after which a cataclysmic event will finally bring everything to a sudden, abrupt halt and hale every man before God's court for judgment. (Is the Lord here reacting directly to that strand of Jewish apocalyptic that sees a necessity for the eradication of evil before something better can take its place? Cf. IV Ezra 4:22-34)

Further, in contrast to that philosophical pessimism that sees history as going nowhere, endlessly repeating itself in cycles, Jesus diagrams a scheme of history that rolls right up to its last hour and comes to a decisive conclusion. For the wild-eyed optimists who see man's travail as an upward-moving, endless spiral curving ever higher toward infinity, Jesus' incisive definition spells the same defeat.

The reapers are angels (Cf. Mt. 25:31; 16:27; Lk. 12:8, 9). Those who had been no more than spirits in the service of God commissioned to help those who are to inherit salvation (Heb. 1:14) and who have longed to look into God's plan for human redemption (1 Pt. 1:12) will consummate the last act of their service for this epoch by becoming, with regard to the vile and the unbelieving, the ministers of God's justice.

13:41 **The Son of man shall send forth his angels.** Compare the grand similarities of language and figures between Jesus' interpretative prophecy here and that ancient prophetic judgment described in Ezekiel 9! Who does Jesus think He is, since He applies such majestic language to Himself in such a way that none could miss His underlying authority? Even without any reference to echoes from Ezekiel, this impression stands solidly on its own imagery. Here is Jesus in all His divine power and majesty in full charge of the final judgment, directing *His angels*, to purify *His Kingdom*, which is, of course, the Kingdom of God.

**They shall gather out of his kingdom** what had, to that moment, actually been IN that Kingdom as it existed in the world. This obvious truism points to the fact that the presence of evil in the world and hypocrites in the Church were no surprise in Jesus. He not only knew about them all the time, but had already made adequate plans for this disposal. They could not, for all their rebellion, escape from God's Kingdom, God's control. Despite temporary appearances to the contrary, God had always been Sovereign. Despite their insubordination, they had had to live in His world with His reality. They could not even escape this! Now they shall be gathered *out of His Kingdom*.

So let not the disciple trouble himself either with the difficulty of telling the genuine from the false Christians or with the task of eliminating them, because the responsibility for this final judgment is not his. This is the Lord's right (Jn. 5:22, 27) and He has never surrendered this task to any human officers, or servants. But gather them out He will! (Cf. Mt. 15:13, 14; Jn. 15:1-8; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31)

**All things that cause stumbling:** see Mt. 18:1-35 for fuller notes. **Them that do iniquity:** may not represent a separate class, since the Lord may be speaking according to a popular Hebraistic idiom (parallelism) to repeat an idea. Rather than divide the offenders into neat groups, He actually throws them both into the same category. If any distinction is intended, He sees as damned both those who are the cause, or temptation, to sin and those who yield to the allurement, in which case none escape. No more can he who is merely the source of temptation excuse himself as being extraneous to the sins of others than can another be excused who permits himself to be beguiled into acting as if there were no laws (*anomian poioantes*). They are both *sons of the evil one*, and so must be segregated forever.

13:42 **And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** This image, squarely set as it is within the literal interpretation of the parable, must be taken seriously without hedging or watering down its force, even if human experience has never encountered a *furnace of fire* that punishes forever. (See notes on 3:12 where John the Baptist used a similar image to convey a picture of the horrible thoroughness of God's condemnation. See also 18:8, 9; 25:41, 46; Jn. 15:6; 2 Th. 1:7, 8; 2 Pet. 3:7, 10, 12; Jude 7; Rev. 20:15; 21:8.) Whatever the reality intended, it is a horrible destiny, if the language employed to picture it contemplates such a gruesome punishment! (Cf. Jer. 29:22; Dan. 3:6) *Weeping and gnashing of teeth* is an expression characteristic of bitter regret and impotent rage. (See on 8:12.) There are still only two classes of people in the world, however mixed the lines seem to be. There is no middle, no third group; just *wheat* or *tares*. Righteousness is still righteousness, even if no one anywhere seems to be practicing it, and sin is still sin and will be punished, even if it seems that everyone everywhere is doing it (Cf. 1 Jn. 2:28—3:10; Rev. 21:1-8, 27; 22:14, 15).

## THE SATISFACTION, SECURITY AND STUNNING SPLENDOR OF THE SAVED

13:43 Here, finally, is the climax toward which Jesus had been building: **THEN, and only then, shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.** Trench (*Notes*, 195) citing Calvin, rejoices that

It is a very great comfort that the sons of God, who now are either lying covered with squalor, or are hidden and unesteemed, or are even buried under reproaches, shall then, as in a clear sky and with every cloud dissipated, at once shine out brightly.

At judgment they will be as obviously recognizable as God's children as the midday sun is obvious in the summer sky (Cf. Judges 5:31; Dan. 12:2, 3; Ro. 8:19). Since the scene of this great presentation, in which the true character of the righteous will be so gloriously displayed, is set in *their Father's kingdom*, we have further proof that, when Jesus uses the expression "Kingdom of God," the Church is but a part of this great concept. Here, rather, *the righteous* are all of God's elect of all ages who acknowledg God's rule (Cf. on 8:11), including the Church of Jesus Christ, but *the kingdom* itself is greater than all these who are now thus glorified therein. *The kingdom* here, then, is God's universal rule (Cf. 1 Pt. 5:10; 2 Pt. 1:3-11).

**Then shall the righteous shine.** How and why?

1. Physically, their lowly earthly body will be changed to be like His glorious body (Phil. 3:20; 1 Co. 15:43).
2. Juridically, their justification will be complete, because they "Believed God and it was imputed to them for righteousness" (Ro. 4:3ff; Gal. 5:5). Though morally imperfect on earth, a fact which made others' prior final judgments undependable, however after God's judgment it will be absolutely clear to angels, demons and men why God saved THESE of all people (Cf. Ro. 3:21-26).
3. Morally, they will shine because the very thing that makes them *righteous* is the fact that they had already accepted into their very being the Word of that God who Himself is Light and dwells in light unapproachable. In their fellowship with Him and in their imitation of Him as His children, they grew to be like Him (Eph. 5:1; 1 Jn. 1:3-7; 1 Ti. 6:16). We shall be like Him (1 Jn. 3:1-3)!

We shall *shine as the sun*: is this some figure of speech? Read the following attractive brochure on our future and decide for yourself! (Ro. 2:7, 10; 5:2; 8:18, 21; 1 Co. 2:7; 15:43; 2 Co. 3:18; 4:17; Eph. 1:18; 5:27; Col. 3:4; 1 Th. 2:12; 2 Th. 1:10, 12; Heb. 2:10; 1 Pt. 4:14; 5:1, 4, 10; 2 Pt. 1:3) This is why we will be glorified in Him and He in us, because what we shall be will have been His work in us and our positive response to it for His sake.

**The kingdom of their Father** is the same as what Jesus had but a moment before called *His Kingdom* (13:41). The government of God belongs, therefore, to both the Father and the Son, a fact that prepares the mind to accept the concept of the Trinity, even if he cannot understand it. Also, the fact that *the Kingdom is of their Father* declares them all to be heirs of the Kingdom and royal princes (Cf. Jas. 2:5; Rev. 21:7; Ro. 8:15-17).

**He that hath ears, let him hear.** (See notes on 13:9.) Despite all that has been said about the sons of the evil one and the permanency and horror of their fate, yet all could actually hear with understanding and change their relationship to God. Notwithstanding the fact that this parable is not immediately concerned with the doctrine that even Christians that produce no fruit will also be destroyed (Cf. Jn. 15:2; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31), nevertheless, this warning, appended to the explanation given privately to Jesus' closest disciples, is particularly ominous. None can plead inability to hear and understand, since He hereby makes each one responsible to listen, understand, accept or pay the consequences.

#### APOLOGETIC VALUE OF THIS PARABLE

At first glance, it would seem that if, according to this parable, evil is never to be absent from the world, the unbeliever would have a strong argument for rejecting Christianity, because of its self-confessed inability to conquer all evil here and now. Paradoxically, however, if evil is never to be absent from the world during the present reign of the Messiah, this parable has tremendous psychological power to deal with our anxiety caused by the problem of evil and to persuade men to believe the Gospel's truth:

1. There is psychological wonder that the amount of good done is as great as it is, considering the obstacles the Kingdom must

overcome using the means within its power. To put it another way: look what God is able to do, working under the deliberately chosen handicap of leaving evil in the world! Further, when men consider that God freely elected to use only the influence of His Word to overcome sin and all its ramifications and consequences, rather than organize great armies of police to enforce His will and execute the evildoers, they must marvel. If He can do that much with His hands tied behind Him, what a great God He must be! How worthy of our praise and worship! Our God can beat Satan while letting Satan do his worst.

2. The Church affirms that men are morally free to accept or reject her message, and if this is true, then one must be prepared to expect to find at least some people left in the world who do not accept it. Even if the existence of these evil men is dreadfully uncomfortable for the godly people and makes it appear that God is powerless to do anything about them, their very existence proves the true freedom of the human will. Here, then, is real proof of the correctness of God's procedure, because this parable demonstrates just how much opportunity there is for the full development of freely chosen righteousness by its being put to real tests in an evil world where all options are live! If God were suddenly to remove all temptations and evil from the world, there could be no freely taken choice to love and obey Him, since there would be no real alternatives to do otherwise. So the very presence of unchecked evil in the world and even the very imperfection of the Church, when looked at from THIS angle, prove the truth of its message!
3. Faith is real, because even though this parable paints in some detail the great victory over evil won by the Son of God, most of us will not live to see it. So, from a purely human point of view, since that victory is not a "sure thing," anyone who stakes his life on its occurring, really does so because he trusts the word of Christ.
4. As in the lesson of the Growing Seed Parable, so also here, any precipitate verdicts critical of the present state of the Kingdom of God are just bad misjudgments. Too many facts are left out of account when men look only at the chaos and injustice in the world without seeing what God is doing about it by means of His Gospel. This Parable clarifies His total program.

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What are "tares"? What particular difficulty do they present to the inexperienced eye that observes them? What characteristic makes them especially appropriate for use as a symbol in this story?
2. What great philosophical problem does Jesus pose here under the form of a parable? How does He answer the problem?
3. What difference is there between the answers that the philosophers have given to the problem, and the answer Jesus gives?
4. State the declarations in this text that give evidence of the unique nature of Jesus as revealer of God's will.
5. What is the one principle point of this parable? State it, if possible in one well-sharpened proposition.
6. With what other parable(s) does this story show a distinct relationship as to the meaning intended?
7. What may be deduced about the Evil One from the description Jesus provides in this text? What is known about him from other passages?
8. Give Jesus' interpretation of the following points in the parable:

a. The Sower	e. The enemy
b. The good seed	f. The harvest
c. The field	g. The reapers
d. The tares	h. The fire
9. What are the "things that cause stumbling"?
10. Where are they to be found?
11. Who are those "that do iniquity"? Where are they found?
12. Harmonize the seeming contradiction between the fact that Jesus here presents the punishment of the wicked as a blazing furnace of fire, whereas elsewhere He speaks of an outer darkness. All the fire we have ever seen gives off light in the darkness, and all the darkness we have ever experienced is the absence of light. Which of Jesus' expressions is the correct representation of the facts: the fire or the darkness? What does the apparent contradiction teach us about Jesus' way of speaking about things of which we have not yet had any experience?
13. What other Scriptures speak of the punishment of the wicked?
14. What other passages speak of the future happiness of the righteous?
15. What other Scriptures describe who are the "sons of the Kingdom"?

Does Jesus always use this expression with the same identical meaning, referring always to the same people?

16. Explain "gnashing of teeth."
17. In what sense will "the righteous shine forth as the sun"?
18. Why does Jesus not refer to those in His Kingdom as "sons of the Kingdom," who do iniquity and whom the angels will eventually expel, if unfaithful Christians were really the ones intended?
19. Who are "the sons of the Kingdom"? How, according to Jesus, does one get to be one?
20. Show the relation (or lack of it) between this parable and the doctrine of church discipline.
21. To what aspect of the Kingdom of God does this parable address itself? List the possible concepts of the kingdom involved and defend or deny each one.

#### B. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE TRIALS OF TRUTH

##### 2. THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET

TEXT: 13:47-50

47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: 48 which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away. 49 So shall it be in the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

##### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What is God planning to do about all the hypocrites in the Church?
- b. For whom was this parable originally planned? What would this fact have to do with its interpretation?
- c. Is there any similarity between this parable and that of the Weeds? If so, what features are similar? If not, what differences exclude their consideration as parallel stories speaking to the same problem?

- d. Since Jesus gave a partial interpretation without defining precisely "the kingdom of heaven," what phase of the Kingdom was foremost in His mind, and how would you go about deciding that?
- e. Where do you think Jesus got this story? By direct inspiration from God or out of His personal, human encounter with real life in the midst of the daily business of living? Where was Jesus when He told this story?

### PARAPHRASE

"From another point of view," Jesus went on, "God's Kingdom is similar to a fisherman's dragnet which, when lowered into the sea, brings in a haul of all kinds of fish. When it is full, the fishermen haul it ashore. There they sit down to sort the good fish into containers and throw the unusable away. This is how it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and divide the wicked from the righteous. Then they will throw the wicked into hell, where they will know sorrow and impotent anger."

### SUMMARY

The grand scope of the Kingdom of God takes in the whole world, a fact, of course, that means the inclusion of many wicked people. Nevertheless, the final judgment will definitively separate these from God's people.

### NOTES

While covering essentially the same ground as the Parable of the Weeds, slight differences of emphasis are traceable. While the latter story sets forth the present mixture of good and evil and the necessity of allowing this mixture to stand until judgment, the Dragnet story acknowledges the mixture, but gives more emphasis to the ultimate separation. Coming, as Matthew lists it, almost on the heels of Jesus' interpretation of the Weeds Parable, this illustration is its perfect complement and parallel.

13:47 The word for *net* (*sagéne*) pictures an enormous, crescent-

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shaped seine (from the same Greek word) utilized much like a huge fence lowered into the water between two boats. With floats fastened to the top of the fence and weights at the bottom so the lower part would trail over the lakefloor, these large dragnets were then slowly towed toward shore, entrapping any fish in its path. Once near the shore the fishermen could then haul this heavy, fish-ladden fence close enough to drag it out of the water. At this point they could easily divide the unusable rejects from the good fish.

But to what aspect of *the Kingdom* does the *net* refer?

1. The Gospel and its effect in the world? The visible Church? Lenski (*Matthew*, 547, 549) so pictures it:

This net is the gospel. The sea is the world, and "of every kind" means some (partitive *ek*) of every kind, race, type, social and intellectual grade of men. Being the gospel, the net belongs to God or Christ and, of course, is handled by all who promulgate the gospel, i.e., the church. But the parable omits mention of these, as not belonging in the picture at this time. To bring them in, nevertheless, spoils the whole comparison for all the members and pastors of the church are also the fish caught in the net . . . the whole of it is one great sweep of the net through the waters of the sea. The picture is not that of repeated casting . . . The parable deals with all those who are caught by the great gospel net. All kinds and conditions of men are swept into its meshes, but these are of two classes. Here on earth both are mixed together in the outward body of the church . . . They all confess and profess faith, but not all are *vere credentes* and thus pronounced "righteous" by the divine Judge . . . Church discipline cannot eliminate them, for we cannot judge men's hearts.

Trench (*Notes*, 51) takes a similar view.

However, Lenski's admission that to mention the evangelizing Church as part of the parable, in that she manages the Gospel-net, "spoils the comparison," is really fatal to this too-exclusive interpretation. In fact, it ignores Jesus' own explanation that the fishermen who separate the fish represent the angels, who, it may be supposed, superintend the entire operation. (See below on *angels*, 13:49.)

Also his interpretation of *ek* as exclusively partitive in the sense of "some of every kind," as if Jesus did not mean "ALL of every

kind," too arbitrarily sets aside the significant class of uses of *ek* denoting the origin, family, race, city, people, etc., from which someone or something comes, hence, the kind to which he belongs. The idea of each fish's belonging to a kind, here, completely overshadows the idea of its separation from the group of his own kind. The attentive reader will notice that the translators have rightly added, not "(some) of every kind," but "(fish) of every kind."

2. He refers, rather, to the Rule of God over the world. The net, in this case, is not the visible Church in the world nor the mixed catch its true and false members. The net is the invincible power of the Kingdom of God itself. The sea is the world in which the net begins almost invisibly to exert its influence. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, but ever more certainly the Rule of God closes in on humanity bringing men ever closer to judgment. This interpretation has the advantage of including the former, in the sense that the Church and its Gospel are subsumed under the prejudgment activities of that portion of humanity under God's dominion that, in the end, will be declared "righteous." It is, in fact, the Church's proclamation of the Gospel that makes good men good, and prepared for that happy conclusion prepared for them. Nevertheless, this is but one aspect of God's Kingdom, and must not be made to overshadow what God is doing to tighten His grip on the greater majority of mankind which rejects His benign rule and so will be rejected. (Cf. Mt. 7:13, 14)

It is a fact that while the *net* is yet *in the sea*, the quality of character of its catch is yet unknown, since the fish are still free to swim around in its ever smaller radius. What they are is hidden from view until the haul is brought out onto the bank. Is this, too, part of Jesus' thought? If so, it is perfectly parallel with the striking similarity between the wheat and the tares in the companion parable. In fact, it is not until judgment that the formerly invisible distinctions in men come to light. So long as men are left together until judgment, for the present, at least, it often appears to make little difference whether a man sees the truth and goes all out to possess it. The big fish gobble the small fry, the rich get richer and the poor get trampled. It becomes an especially strong temptation to play the fool and say that truth and righteousness do not matter. (Study Psalm 73: Asaph felt this keenly.) But after the time together, the great separation will reveal what had so often been hidden before, i.e., the chasmic difference in the final destiny of men who saw, understood and made

the rule of God their own, and that of those who did not.

13:48 **They sat down and gathered the good into vessels.** This refers to nothing other than what, in other descriptive expressions, is termed "the granary" for the wheat (Mt. 13:30; 3:12), the "many dwelling places" (Jn. 14:2), "the bosom of Abraham" (Lk. 16:22), "eternal habitations" (Lk. 16:9), "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10), "a homeland; a better, heavenly country; a city" (Heb. 11:14-16).

13:49, 50 This is practically a repetition of 13:39-42 on which see notes.

**The angels shall come forth.** How could Jesus have affirmed the express activities of angels, if such beings did not exist? The skeptics who see in His teaching nothing more than accommodation to the traditional superstitions then current among the Jews will have to give this same down-grading to a wide range of situations in which He affirms their certain existence and activity. (Cf. Mt. 16:26; 18:10; 22:30; 24:31, 36; 25:31, 41; 26:53) Their reality stands (or falls) on the same basis as anything else about whose existence we cannot know otherwise than because He tells us. These heavenly ministers of God will proceed to do what His earthly ministers dare not begin: they carry out the actual work of *severing the wicked from among the righteous*. (Cf. 13:30) The great, fundamental concept of God's Kingdom pictured in this illustration is the final and full realization of its holiness. The Kingdom may be temporarily forced to tolerate the existence of the moral uncleanness and vileness forced upon it by its self-chosen commitment to use every means available to bring about the conversion to Christ of unclean, vile men. But this temporary, longsuffering toleration must never be mistaken for the final goal or confused for secret compromise with evil, for the threatened separation **WILL COME**.

This parable, like that about the tares, is Jesus' simple, unphilosophical revelation about God's ultimate answer to the problem of pain and evil in the world. Since the fundamental assumption is that the world is God's domain, this illustration deals with all evil in the Kingdom: God is neither powerless nor unconcerned about these seemingly insurmountable problems. In fact, Jesus is here shouting for all to hear that God's mercy and longsuffering gives sinners thousands of opportunities to know the truth and change before the net gets to shore. But it is also abundantly clear that God shall have the last word. The Lord **SHALL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE**, bringing

all the present confusion to an end by separating the precious from the worthless and vile. (Cf. Psa. 1:5; Heb. 10:30; Mt. 25:32; 13:39ff)

**Furnace of fire** is a picture of horrible suffering, arising perhaps from some terrible historical realities like Nebuchadnezzar's "burning fiery furnace" (Dan. 3:6) developed into a figure of Gehenna contrasted with Paradise in later Judaism. (Cf. IV Ezra 7:36) See Notes on 13:42; 3:12; 8:12.

### AN INTERESTING COINCIDENCE?

The prophet Habakkuk, inspired to prophesy the horror-provoking Babylonian invasion of Israel, and shocked by the ruthlessness and violence of those pagans rolling over the people of God, felt driven to protest. In his complaint against this apparent injustice his prayer took the form of a comparison:

Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One?

We shall not die,

Q Lord, thou hast ordained them as a judgment;

and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement.

Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil

and canst not look on wrong,

Why dost thou look on faithless men,

and art silent when the wicked swallows up

the man more righteous than he?

For thou makest men like the fish of the sea,

like crawling things that have no ruler.

He (the Chaldean) brings all of them up with a hook,

he drags them out with his net,

He gathers them in his seine;

so he rejoices and exults.

Therefore he sacrifices to his net

and burns incense to his seine;

for by them he lives in luxury,

and his food is rich.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net,

and mercilessly slaying nations for ever? (Habakkuk 1:12-17)

To the prophet the Kingdom of God was being twisted all out of shape. The victory of evil over good was too real, screwing men's

faith down to the very limits of endurance. Nevertheless, God's response to his perplexity demanded that he live by his faith. (Hab. 2:4)

Foreseeing that godly men would ever be perplexed by the apparent weakness and failure of the Kingdom of God, as they judge its progress in a chaotic world before the appointed time for judgment, did Jesus just take Habakkuk's illustration of the net and turn it right side out? The real net is not in the hands of evil men or godless empires endlessly gobbling up defenseless people, good and bad alike. The true seine is in the hands of the living God whose government slowly, solemnly draws all men closer into His control, some to their everlasting destruction, others to the eternal life of God itself. And Jesus' Parable of the Dragnet, like God's answer to Habakkuk, while revealing the final victory of Jehovah, demands that the believer bow in humble submission to His rule, even if he does not understand it all nor can see the outcome on the horizon.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. In what way is the Parable of the Dragnet similar to the Parable of the Tares? List the various points of resemblance.
2. Summarize in one sharply pointed sentence the teaching of this story.
3. Describe the net used by Jesus to create this illustration and then indicate the way it is used in fishing.
4. Explain how this parable illustrates the Kingdom of God.

### C. THE PROBLEM OF GROWTH AND SUCCESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM: THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH

#### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

TEXT: 13:31, 32  
(Parallel: Mk. 4:30-32; cf. Lk. 13:18, 19)

31 Another parable set he before them, saying, The Kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; 32 which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose that it was so very important for Jesus to reveal to His disciples, even in this veiled way, that His Messianic Kingdom would have a small, insignificant beginning? What was there in their background that would have made this special information necessary?
- b. To what extent, if at all, may we regard these parables as prophecies about the features to be expected in Christ's (then) coming Kingdom? If they are to be considered as prophecies, then what does this make Jesus? If they are not so to be considered, in which case Jesus is just telling it like it is, then what does that make Jesus?
- c. How does this story about the mustard seed contribute to the general impression of the government of God revealed elsewhere in the near context of the great sermon in parables, and in the larger framework of Scripture? In other words, how does this parable's message harmonize with, or incorporate, ideas expressed in other parables and elsewhere in the New Testament?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus set before them another story: "To what is God's rule comparable? What story would describe it? God's Kingdom is similar to a grain of mustard seed which a farmer took and sowed in his field. The mustard seed is, relatively speaking, the smallest of all the tree seeds on earth. Nevertheless, when it is sown and has grown up, it becomes the largest of all shrubs. It puts forth large branches and becomes a tree, so that birds can come and make nests in the shade of its branches."

## SUMMARY

The concrete, visible beginnings of God's Kingdom on earth will be small, but His rule will show extensive growth until its impact in the world is significantly felt.

## NOTES

13:31, 32 A grain of mustard seed . . . becometh a tree . . . *ISBE* (2101, article "Mustard") notes

Several varieties of mustard (Arab. *khardal*) have notably small seed, and under favorable conditions grow in a few months into very tall herbs—10 to 12 ft. The rapid growth of an annual herb to such a height must always be a striking fact. *Sinapis nigra*, the black mustard, which is cultivated, *Sinapis alba*, or white mustard, and *Sinapis arvensis*, or the charlock (All of N.O. *Cruciferae*), would any one of them, suit the requirements of the parable; birds readily alight upon their branches to eat the seed (Mt. 13:32, etc.), not, be it noted, to build their nests, which is nowhere implied . . .

However, the expression, the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof may rightly be rendered *make nests*, since *kataškenoūn* means "to live in or settle in a place; of birds, to nest in the branches." (Cf. Rocci, 1004; Arndt-Gingrich, 419) Plummer (*Matthew*, 194) reminds that " 'tree' (*déndron*) does not necessarily mean a timber-tree. We speak of a rose-tree and a gooseberry-tree."

Had Jesus furnished an interpreter's key to this parable, it might have sounded something like this: "The field is the world, the man who sowed the seed is the Son of man, the grain of mustard seed is the rule of God in men's hearts. Even with an unpretentious debut, it will expand throughout the world until many nations, peoples and tongues will find peace in its realm."

If, then, the mustard plant actually becomes a *tree*, the Lord does not have to extend the literal qualities of the mustard bush beyond its botanical limits in order to make a tremendous impression upon His Jewish audience. The description of something insignificant when planted, but begins "bringing forth boughs and becoming a noble tree under the shade of which will dwell all kinds of beasts and in whose shade birds of every sort will nest," is familiar prophetic language to those Jewish hearers. (Cf. Ezek. 17:22-24 in its context; 31:6, 12 in the parable of the cedar; Dan. 4:10-27) Is it possible that this choice of language is deliberately and appropriately utilized by the Lord to call direct attention to something for minds alert to such apocalyptic jargon? What would these words have communicated to readers familiar with Ezekiel and Daniel? In those prophets such

language describes the grandeur of empires magnificent enough to provide people with refuge, defense and the satisfaction of their needs. The alert listener to Jesus could not but recognize a prediction that His Kingdom, despite its inauspicious beginning, would progress by gradual growth to become an empire so vast and so powerful that it could protect all its subjects and satisfy the desires of their souls.

How desperately needed was this information at that historical moment! The thought that the Kingdom could begin small and arrive at greatness only through gradual growth is always a view totally unacceptable to people "itching to get where the action is." Had a sounding of public opinion been taken to determine popular sentiment regarding the Kingdom and Jesus, the results would have probably left many a serious disciple shaking his head. At this stage of the game the powerblock of Jerusalem and especially the Pharisees were beginning to line up a stiff, growing opposition. The "important backers" began to raise eyebrows at the trends becoming more and more visible in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom. Realistic observers could sense that Jesus had no intention of setting up a military kingdom with a fully developed power structure which would usher in a paradise of prosperity for all. And it was this very reluctance of His that would deeply trouble those who had high hopes of making a fortune in that Kingdom. A statistical review of Jesus' "hard," countable successes would confirm the unspoken suspicion that He was making no progress at all. Worse still, His message menaced judgment for all that was held dear by the various representatives of standard Judaism: the rabbinical traditions, the temple graft, nationalism, material prosperity, ostentation and class and race superiority. Rather than organize the elite and court the heads of organized labor and government, rather than rally the masses in anti-Establishment crusades, His major efforts were directed at regenerating the folks on the fringe, the ordinary, the down-and-outers, the renegades,—in short, the nobodies. Humanly speaking, this was no way to organize a mighty messianic machine for bringing in the Kingdom with its flurry of trumpets, its flash of heraldry and the stirring roll of drums. (Cf. Lk. 17:20, 21 in context) The absurdity of Jesus' being able to accomplish very much with the temperamental, ordinary, problematic people in His immediate coterie of associates, must have been staggering to the Jewish public!

The disciples themselves too, throughout their associations with Jesus, had unceasing trouble with this kind of thinking. (Study

Mt. 19:24-28; 20:20-28; see notes on 11:2-6; Acts 1:6.) Other disciples, after the feeding of the 5000, tried to take the Lord by force to make Him their kind of king, but He refused. (Jn. 6:15) The next day, when He bared the spiritual character of His mission, people abandoned Him *en masse*. (Jn. 6:22-66)

Nevertheless, as indicated elsewhere in His teaching, Jesus had been intimating His intentions to found just this sort of Kingdom, i.e., one that constitutionally strikes at the heart of material ambitions, nationalistic conquest, pampered pride and superficial religiousness. (Cf. the Sermon on the Mount as a vigorous polemic against these views.) Further, if the fundamental message of the Parable of the Sower is that God intends to use only the influence of His Word to transform men who remain absolutely free to accept or reject it, then does it require any particular astuteness to foresee that any Kingdom of God that follows such policies **MUST BEGIN SMALL, IF AT ALL?** And yet Jesus' divine foresight is evident in His unshaken confidence that His Kingdom, however discouragingly insignificant its beginnings, would grow to become a powerful, worldwide empire.

We do not esteem Jesus' words at their proper worth unless we see just how far from being hyperbolic they were. If it seemed an exaggeration that He should speak of the mustard seed as *the smallest of all seeds on earth*, when compared with the realities they symbolized they are almost an understatement!

1. Christ's Kingdom began in a very obscure way without any reasonable prospect of success, without any hope of greatness. Its King did not appear in public until His thirtieth year and then taught only two or three years occasionally in the capital, but more often in the provincial villages.
2. The Kingdom began among the Jews, a subject people chafing under the yoke of foreign lords. It began as the smallest sect among this people in a despised province of the Roman Empire. Its leader contradicted the cherished notions of His own people and, consequently, was rejected by them. He made only a few real followers among the poor and ignorant. He had no political power in His own homeland and no hope from abroad. The founder of this Kingdom was shamefully executed by His own people. Even after the day of Pentecost, the Kingdom seemed to its enemies a struggling movement crying for elimination through persecution and death. THIS is the beginning of the universal Reign of

God on earth? (Cf. 1 Co. 1:27-29)

And yet it grew and became a force to be dealt with in the world. (Cf. Ro. 16:25, 26; Col. 1:6, 23) Do you believe Paul, or is his rhetoric a bit hyperbolic for you? (1 Th. 1:6-10; Ac. 28:22; 17:6) And it is still growing!

For further notes on the impact and significance of this revelation, see after the Parable of the Leaven, its companion.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. How does one harmonize the fact that many seeds are actually smaller than the mustard seed, with Jesus' declaration that "it is the smallest of all seeds"?
2. What illustrative stories in the Old Testament furnish the imagery for Jesus' parable here? What was the major point of those stories? Did Jesus say that these are His source? If so, how? If not, what factor connects the story of Jesus with those OT pictures?
3. Describe the Palestinian mustard plant showing how it fits Jesus' use of it as a fitting symbol of His Kingdom.
4. Had Jesus presented this truth before? If so, how or where?

### C. THE PROBLEM OF GROWTH AND SUCCESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM: THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH

#### 2. THE PARABLE OF THE YEAST

TEXT: 13:33 (cf. Lk. 13:20, 21)

33 Another parable spake he unto them: The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Some people believe that yeast in the Bible is always a symbol of the far-reaching, pervasive influence of evil. Do you agree? If so,

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- on what basis? If not, why not? In what way, then, is the Kingdom of God itself like yeast?
- b. If the Kingdom of God is to progress by the most vigorous public evangelization that gives the Gospel the widest hearing possible, how can Jesus say that the Kingdom expands secretly and quietly and by intensive growth like yeast works in dough?
  - c. What is there in this parable that had already been suggested in Jesus' other messages, like, for example, the Sermon on the Mount?

## PARAPHRASE

He told them another story: "God's Kingdom is like yeast that a woman worked into three measures of flour, till the dough was entirely leavened."

## SUMMARY

The Rule of God in the world will grow quietly, without great fanfare, but its progress will not be hindered until its intensive, transforming power influences all of life.

## NOTES

Had Jesus furnished an interpretative key to this parable it might have perhaps run as follows: "The three measures of meal represents humanity. The woman that kneaded the dough stands for the Son of man. The yeast is the dynamic, transforming influence of the Word of God by which the Kingdom of God penetrates and transforms mankind." The *three measures of flour* should not be thought especially mysterious, because that may have been merely the right amount for the usual recipe for homemade bread. (See Gen. 18:6; Judg. 6:19 where 3 seahs = 1 ephah.) The idea that a woman should be used to represent Jesus is no problem, since in Luke 15 He used a man seeking a lost sheep and a woman sweeping the house for her lost coin to symbolize God's search and rejoicing over repentant sinners, without concerning Himself whether people would be confused about whether God be male or female. So, if bread-making in

the home is usually the work of a woman, and if Jesus wants to use yeast as His main symbol, it would have been more surprising to His audience were He to have inserted "man," instead of a woman. What is really startling is to hear the Lord compare the glorious Messianic Kingdom to YEAST, of all things! After all, as Edersheim comments in another connection (*Life*, II, 70, note 2),

The figurative meaning of leaven, as that which morally corrupts, was familiar to the Jews. Thus the word . . . (*Seor*) is used in the sense of 'moral leaven' hindering the good in Ber. 17a while the verb . . . (*chamets*) 'to become leavened,' is used to indicate moral deterioration in Rosh ha Sh. 3b, 4a.

This same negative feeling about yeast as a figure of speech for something corrupt and corrupting is back of the proverbial saying twice quoted by Paul (1 Co. 5:6-8 and Gal. 5:9) as well as that reflected in Mt. 16:6, 12. However, *yeast* in this parable has nothing whatsoever to do with an evil, corrupting influence, however often it be so employed elsewhere.

### SYMBOLS ARE JUST NOT UNIVERSAL.

Readers need to beware of supposing "yeast" to be a universal symbol of corruption, because Bible writers can change the "standard" symbology if they want to! The fact that Jesus Christ is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5) does not mean Peter is mistaken to call Satan "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pt. 5:8). Although Jesus is "the Lamb of God" (Rev. 5:6-12), this does not hinder His charging Peter with the care to "feed my lambs" (Jn. 21:15). "Birds" can be (1) nations at rest within an empire, Ezek. 31:6, 17; or (2) Satan, Mt. 13:19; Mk. 4:15. "Serpent" can represent (1) Satan, 2 Co. 11:3; Rev. 20:2; or (2) the only means of salvation and symbolic of Christ, Jn. 3:14; or (3) a symbol of Christian wisdom, Mt. 10:16. "Vine" can represent (1) Jesus Himself, Jn. 15:1ff; or (2) Israel, Mk. 12:1; Isa. 5:1-7; Ezek. 19:10-14. "Mountain" can suggest (1) great world empires, Dan. 2:35, 45, or (2) any apparently insurmountable obstacle, Mt. 17:20. "Shadow" can be (1) a symbol of blessing, Isa. 32:2; or (2) "protection," Isa. 49:2; Psa. 91:1; or (3) a short-lived existence, Psa. 102:11; or (4) a lack of spiritual enlightenment, Isa. 9:2; Mt. 4:16; Lk. 1:79. The

point is, of course, to let a given Bible writer or speaker use a symbol in any way that suits his subject, regardless of whether anyone else, or even he himself, ever used it that way before. Let Jesus tell His own story without anyone's dictating to Him what symbols He may utilize!

While everyone else sees in yeast a symbol of corrupting influence, Jesus, with the eye of a keen observer, can also see in that live ferment a picture of transforming power for good and for God. What a contrast! That drowsing Jewish audience, quite naturally expecting leaven to be used as a symbol of defilement and corruption, must have been brought wide-awake and to the edge of their seats to hear Jesus compare something so vibrantly glorious as the Kingdom of God with something so sinister, dark, ominous and evil as yeast! But literal yeast itself is innocent. Its permeating, transforming, ever growing character had just always furnished a handy cliché for the influence of evil among men. But Jesus turns that metaphor to His advantage by pointing out that what had served so well to illustrate the way evil increases in humanity, serves just as well to depict the growth of His own Kingdom! By so doing, He not merely rescued yeast from the stereotyped role usually assigned to it as a symbol. He flashed before His audience a picture of a Kingdom that is vibrantly alive, effectively at work, vitally influencing everything around it, and gloriously conquering until every area of human life feels its effect, even though its entire work is not readily discernible.

**Hidden in the mass.** Trench (*Notes*, 44) remembers that

In the early history of Christianity the leaven was effectually hidden. This is shown by the entire ignorance which heathen writers betray of all that was going forward a little below the surface of society, even up to the very moment (with slight exceptions) when the triumph of Christianity was at hand.

**Hidden in the mass till it was all leavened** suggests two applications:

1. The influence of God's will in human affairs through the Kingdom of Christ is the first reference. Jesus could foresee the Church's vitality and energy, her enthusiasm in evangelizing humanity and her zeal for edifying. What a transforming power He intended to unleash to disturb and unsettle the basis of despotic government, and to right the standards of ethics in human relations! (Cf. Jn. 11:45-53; Ac. 4:16, 17; 5:24, 28; 17:6; 28:22) He could see the wide-sweeping social revolutions fermenting at the grass-roots

level in men made over in the image of God's Son. (Cf. 2 Co. 10:3-6) **All . . . leavened:** what a goal: all of human life—its work and play, its philosophy and religion, its politics and commerce, its science and arts—all is to feel the pervasive, persuasive pressure of a robust, convincing Christianity that neither compromises its influence by closing itself in monastic seclusion to avoid contamination nor leaves its Christian morality behind when it enters society. *Till it was all leavened* is the prophetic past tense that speaks of as past a future event so sure to take place that even before it happens, it is declared to be a fact! Jesus guarantees us here nothing short of the final triumph of God's Kingdom and of His people. (Cf. 2 Co. 2:14; Ro. 16:19, 26; Col. 1:6, 23; Rev. 11:15; Dan. 7:14, 27)

2. The influence of God's will in the life of each individual Christian who accepts that rule. If the Kingdom of Christ is to do all that is predicated of it, then it follows that every single Christian must be a person in whom the Kingdom is a reality. The rule of God expressed through His Word when buried in a man's heart is living and powerful and persistent in bringing that entire man to obey it, transforming him completely until he becomes at last a totally new man in Christ Jesus. (Cf. 2 Co. 3:17, 18; 5:17; 1 Co. 6:9-11; what a change!)

### THE RELATION OF THESE TWO PARABLES TO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Yeast reveal little that is absolutely news to any disciples steadily "tuned-in" to Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount He had pictured the ethics of the Kingdom of God as motivated by selfless love and grounded in a single-minded devotion to God as a gracious Heavenly Father, an ethic which expresses itself in a generous helpfulness to even the ungrateful (Mt. 5:39-48), in a forgiving spirit (6:12, 14, 15), in a clemency in judgment (7:1-5) despite a proper reserve towards people with no appreciation for the holy or the priceless. That kind of Kingdom, launched in a world of dedicated egotists, cannot but progress slowly, granted, of course, that its chief Proponent could succeed in convincing even a few people that ideals of this sort will really function, convinced enough, that is, to give them a try and help Him launch

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the idea. For, unless Jesus is willing to abandon His ideals long enough to get His program underway, such a spiritual Reign could never even get off the ground. And, if it should turn out that He really inaugurate such a movement, without some artificial priming, it must necessarily have not only an embarrassingly small debut, but also undergo a painfully slow progress in the world. Any shrewd humanist who seriously weighed Jesus' words could have expected these two parables sooner or later. What he could not have expected was Jesus' bringing these dreams to reality in exactly the way He planned.

Nor had Jesus been silent about the eventual greatness and success of His Kingdom. While His emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount is decidedly on the personal implications of God's Rule, still He does not ignore the world-wide impact Christians are to make as "salt of the EARTH . . . light of the WORLD." (5:13-16) The Kingdom is the subject of prayers that it come and that God's will be done on EARTH with the same joyful seriousness it is being done in heaven. And who could be satisfied with partial success or half-way obedience to God? Those who share Jesus' views and His love must pray that the Kingdom of God cover the entire globe and affect every creature.

So these stories about yeast and mustard seed are stupendous illustrations of a spiritual kingdom that "comes not with observation, but is within you." (Cf. Lk. 17:20, 21; Ro. 14:17)

## THE APOLOGETIC FORCE OF THESE PARABLES

There is embedded in these stories a persuasive apologetic power to convince skeptics, that Jesus cannot be explained in terms of the popular messianism of His people, since it would be difficult to imagine a concept of the Kingdom of the Messiah less nationalistically Jewish than that presented here. Conspicuous for its absence is any allusion to a privileged place for national Israel in the Kingdom. These seemingly harmless little tales are on a collision course with the aims of people who desired to rush on past the judgment to introduce the Messianic Paradise. (Cf. *Sib. Orac.* lines 285-294; 652-808; *Enoch* 62:11) The meaning of these unexplained stories remained unintelligible enigmas to these Jewish hearers. Therefore, Jesus did not weave them out of theological materials lying around Him. His

revelations are made out of divine stuff.

Here again we are confronted with one of the motifs of the Gospel: the Messianic reserve, in the sense that the Kingdom will not be proclaimed in any triumphalistic sense by tyrannic force of arms, but with absolute respect for human freedom, without all of the apocalyptic artillery that many of Jesus' nationalistic contemporaries dreamed would be absolutely essential. (Cf. *Sib. Orac.* 652ff) Further, the scandalous, continued presence of sin in the world and Jesus' failure to call down heavenly fire to destroy the more obvious sinners could not help but raise many eyebrows. However, since God's judgment is not to be anticipated, men must not even conclude that the Kingdom's regenerating power be somehow not functioning to transform society as it changes the men who compose it. Rather, they must even now submit themselves to the will of the King and recognize the evidences of the invisible activity of the Kingdom which is not man's work alone, but God's, and dedicate themselves to its vigorous proclamation. They must take the long view.

These parables still shock and remain unbelieved by modern churchmen who promote great political schemes, even to the point of smuggling machine-guns to bring "peace" through peoples' movements for liberation. They would install air-conditioners and piped-in music in hell, while hoping to make it possible for more people to enjoy the questionable benefits of a conscienceless materialistic kingdom of God here on earth. (Cf. *Sib. Orac.* 657!) They just cannot conceive of a Kingdom that can operate effectively on the basis of a message patiently taught to wobbly, often undependable people, tenderly and lovingly cultivated but whose foibles and mistakes, more often than not, embarrass, rather than glorify, their Lord. Such ecclesiastical organizational procedure has little time for "bruised reeds" and "smoldering wicks" (see notes on 12:20) nor stoops to "preach good tidings to the poor" from any truly Biblical perspective. (See notes on 11:5) But do we ourselves believe with Jesus that the Kingdom of God will progress only to the extent that we care about "the lambs" (Jn. 21:15-19), "the little child . . . who believes in me" (Mt. 18:1-14), the "babes" (Mt. 11:25)? If so, we may well wish to table our grandiose schemes to bring in the Kingdom, and join Jesus in the slow, often disappointing, but ultimately fruitful, business of evangelization of the unbelievers and edification of the saints. (Cf. 1 Th. 3:10)

Jesus is to be believed precisely because He is NOT the revolutionary

wanted by the doctrinaire apostles of modern social change who would use Him as their banner for political or social subversion of the status quo. On the contrary, these parables picture a Christ who can settle for gradualism, a not unimportant heresy to those who demolish and burn in the name of instant change. While He preached a gospel capable of producing gradually the personal and social changes necessary to deal with every iniquity weighing upon the shoulders of a suffering humanity, He deliberately did NOT mount a protest against the current regime nor harrangue the crowds about the living conditions of the underprivileged. The revolution, rather, to which He dedicated Himself and to which He calls us, challenges every Christian to preach this Gospel of the Kingdom and live in conformity with it, as if that alone would bring in the Kingdom.

These parables reveal the future, inevitable triumph of the Kingdom! They speak not only of a God who triumphs over the wicked in the end. They describe also a Church that, during the progress of its history, will enjoy a glorious growth and a penetrating force throughout the world. Therefore, any hasty, superficial judgments about any given stage of the Kingdom's progress are out of place, on the part of both believers and unbelievers alike. We must not be discouraged by the temporary retreats, the heartbreaks, the battles lost, nor must we be impatient if it seems that the Gospel is not bringing immediate results. Even if it seems that God's people are not yet holy enough or numerous enough or the Kingdom not powerful enough, we may not make snap judgments about it, because we have not yet come to the end of the present age, and God's Kingdom has some more growing to do.

These parables reveal the spirit behind the Kingdom of God as a missionary spirit. Yeast cannot function unless it is living in vital contact with that which it must influence. Therefore, the monastic spirit is essentially antichristian. No true Christian can avoid human society for fear that he might be contaminated by it, because his mission, as was His Lord's, is to touch human life at every point so that every facet might come under the influence and penetrating gaze of Christian morality and ideals. Rather than take up a defensive position within which to protect what remains of our pretended humanity, our final orders are to attack! (Mt. 28:18-20)

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is the one basic point shared commonly by the Parable of the Mustard Seed and that of the Yeast?
2. In what way are these two parables different in emphasis?
3. State in one clear sentence the literal message Jesus was communicating in this story.
4. What is learned about Jesus from the fact that He taught THESE truths instead of their more popular opposite concepts?
5. Is there anything significant about the fact that it was a woman who put the yeast in the dough? Or that it was precisely three (and no more) measures of flour in which she put the yeast? If so, what is the hidden meaning? If not, what does one do with this information?
6. Had Jesus taught this same truth before? If so, where or how?

D. THE INESTIMABLE VALUE OF THE KINGDOM:  
THE PRICE OF TRUTH

## 1. THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE

TEXT: 13:44

44 The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field; which a man found, and hid; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. The long-awaited Kingdom of the Messiah was the object of the prayers and aspirations of the Jewish nation, and yet, by means of this parable and its companion, Jesus would convince His hearers to seize their opportunity to make the Kingdom their own, as if there would be some danger that they would not. How would you explain this?
- b. Jesus describes the Kingdom of God, i.e., the Kingdom proclaimed in His message and seen from His view of it, as worth all the

sacrifices we could ever be called upon to make. What should we think about Him, if He is wrong? What must we determine to do, if He has deceived us? How could we ever know, before it is too late, whether or not He has, in fact, done this? If you object to these questions, what gives you confidence to think them to be improper?

- c. Do you suppose that the man acted in perfect honesty to hide the treasure and buy the field that contained it without informing its owners about his discovery? Should Jesus use stories about people with such dubious ethics as models for our imitation? Or, is that what He did? How would you go about unraveling this mystery?
- d. What is there about the Philippian jailor that makes him an excellent example of this fortunate finder? (See Acts 16:23-34.)

### PARAPHRASE

"The Kingdom of God is similar to a treasure someone had buried in a field, which another man found and reburied. This latter, for the joy of his discovery, went and sold all he possessed in order to buy that piece of land."

### SUMMARY

The Kingdom will not be forced upon anyone now. When a man stumbles onto its inestimable preciousness and recognizes its value, he wisely surrenders all else unquestioningly and unhesitatingly to make it his own. Our service to God is worth all it costs.

### NOTES

**The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure:** this is the main point of this parable. All else may be nothing but scenery necessary to make this one point, which is perfectly parallel to that of its companion story, The Parable of the Precious Pearl. In both stories three points make this lesson clear:

1. There is first the discovery of the inestimable value of God's divine government.
2. There is the consequent desire to make it one's own.
3. There is, last, the necessity to give everything else one possesses to acquire it.

How much else is proper to interpret is debatable, as is evident from the contradictory results achieved by conscientious, believing interpreters. The following points seem to find echoes in the reality for which they are but the illustrations:

1. **A treasure hidden in the field.** In a land racked by centuries of war and harrassed by banditry, often the safest deposit for one's treasure is the earth. But what one man hid, by sheer coincidence another can find. (Long-forgotten arms caches hidden by partisans during the Second World War are still turning up in Italy more than thirty years after their hiding.)

Whatever *the field* may signify, God's Kingdom is there present, but hidden from common view. This concealment reaffirms with the Sower Parable that the message of the Kingdom, because it encounters widely varying receptiveness among its hearers, would produce varying results ranging from total failure to qualified success, leaving an uneven, spotty control of the Kingdom over the world. Neat, black-white distinctions between good and evil people are impossible, because of the presence of evil in the world, as explained in the Weeds Parable. This fact leaves the King's control over the world apparently in doubt and His Kingdom practically indistinguishable from other world systems until the judgment. So, here too in the story of the hidden treasure, He describes a state of the world where happy surprise over the unexpected discovery of the Kingdom of God is really possible.

Did Jesus mean to communicate meaning through the detail where the man purchased the field in order to have the treasure? The field itself took on supreme value for him because of the treasure it contained, as if before the discovery the field was relatively valueless to him.

- a. Some with Trench (*Notes*, 46) see *the field*, as picturing

. . . the outer visible Church, as distinguished from the inward spiritual. He who recognizes the Church not as a

human institute, but a divine, who has learned that God is in the midst of it, sees now that it is something beyond all earthly societies with which he has confounded it; and henceforth it is precious in his sight, even to its outermost skirts, for the sake of its inward glory, which is now revealed to his eyes. And as the man cannot have the treasure and leave the field, so he cannot have Christ except in his Church; he cannot have Christ in his heart, and at the same time separate his fortunes from those of Christ's struggling, suffering Church. The treasure and the field go together.

- b. Others, with Lenski, (*Matthew*, 542), think of *the field* as the Scriptures which had seemed so common and ordinary to the reader. But, suddenly, he comes alive, because he has just discovered the vital truth of the Kingdom and Jesus Christ, the Bible's grand subject. Whereas before, the Bible had been treated as if it had belonged to others, now he must make its true treasure his very own personal possession.
- c. Is it not simpler to see *the field* as parallel to the various pearl markets among which the merchant found the one pearl of inestimable value? (Cf. on 13:46) If so, we see that this *field* was not the previous possession of the fortunate finder, because his possessions and interests lay elsewhere. Nevertheless, while present in **THIS field** for whatever reason (was he plowing it or just walking through it?) he stumbled onto its treasure. Could it be that by *the field* He means to suggest the intellectual field of specifically religious ideas which a person does not necessarily make his own unless he sees some compelling reason to do so? Until this discovery, his material interests and cares could effectively block any concern for "buying" anyone's religious ideas. But when he gets a glimpse of Jesus Christ and the live possibility to realize at least in his own life the Kingship, beauty and order of God, he no longer chokes on religious ideas, but accepts them readily in order to possess Him who is the highest treasure. (Cf. Mt. 11:25; 2 Co. 4:3-6; Col. 2:3, 4; Lu. 19:42)
2. **which a man found and hid; and in his joy he goeth . . .** His unexpected discovery brings him joy, but also to the crisis of decision. No matter what made the discovery possible, he finds

himself face to face with Truth and must decide whether to seize it or lose it by default. The morality of his covering up his discovery has been doubted by some who leave Jesus' use of this story in question, despite their attempts to defend Him. They argue that the treasure belonged technically to the present owner of the field, so that the principle of personal integrity would have required the finder to inform him of the treasure. Then, they correctly insist that Jesus did not justify the man's conduct nor hold his (im)morality up for imitation. They rightly see the point of the story as the man's earnestness in obtaining the treasure. But they assume too much and thus leave the Lord open to criticism:

- a. Is the present owner of the field any more the true owner of the treasure than the happy finder? Edersheim (*Life*, I, 595f) shows that then-current Jewish law vindicated the finder as the proper owner.
- b. The treasure's original owner may as easily be presumed dead and forgotten long before the finder arrives on the scene, rather than think of him as the current owner of the field. It is not necessary, of course, to assume that the field had ANY owner. To whom belong, for instance, the treasures found on the Mediterranean Sea's floor beyond the territorial limits of any nation, treasures that once represented the wealth of Rome or Greece? And if it be presumed that the happy finder had stumbled onto a fortune in Babylonian gold coins no longer in circulation but whose intrinsic value represented a fortune reminted, all in a field whose original owner left no heirs, and if it be imagined that his nation had no laws specifically protecting its own ownership of such antiquities, then it would be possible for the man easily to pay to his township the field's value, thus clearing his title to the treasure. (Did abandoned lands revert automatically to government disposition at the death or in the absence of their heirless owners? Cf. 2 Sam. 9:9f; 1 Kg. 21:16; 2 Kg. 8:3-6) At any rate, the captivities would have effectively interrupted, if not altogether ended, the normal execution, especially in the case of some families wiped out, of the ancient patrimonial inheritance laws whereby such lands would pass to one's next of kin, thus keeping them and any improvements thereon within the ancient tribal families. (Cf. Lev. 25:25-34; 26:31, 32, 34ff; 43ff;

1 Chron. 36:21; Isa. 1:7; 6:11, 12) Because of these disorders it would be perfectly imaginable for the field to have no known private owners to whom the treasure would supposedly belong. It is unfair to judge the man's morality on the basis of modern legislation or obligations that do not represent his actual ethical responsibility in his own time-period and legal situation.

- c. The brevity of Jesus' story does not permit those who doubt the man's morality to prove that he did not in fact inform the present owners of the field's treasure. They might have let the treasure go to the new buyer, because of indifference or some other unstated technicality. (Cf. Boaz' purchase of Ruth ahead of his kinsman who had prior rights. Ruth 4:5)
- d. His reburying the treasure is no indication of immorality, but of prudence lest he lose it by theft during his absence, and of haste lest someone else buy the field ahead of him while he dallied. He honestly cleared his own title to the property before moving the treasure. In fact, his rehiding the treasure (*ékrupsen*) is merely the act of putting the treasure back exactly as he found it: hidden (*kekrumménō*, from the same verb *krúpto*).
- 3. **In his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.** Possession costs everything, but cost is no object, since *his joy* motivates him to part with whatever was dear and closest to him in order to make the field his own. **All that he hath** is the price, but how much is that if we would purchase the Kingdom? All that a person thinks important or of value: place and possessions, fame, wealth, one's former religious system, family, philosophies, etc. Any ambition, however dear, any habit or way of life that obstructs our possession of the Kingdom must go. Whatever sins a man quits for Jesus' sake are part of his price. (Cf. Mt. 10:37-39; 16:24; 19:29; Mk. 9:43ff) Often our dearest possessions are but garbage in contrast to the supreme joy of having the Father and the Son! (1 Jn. 1:3; 2:23; 5:11, 12) Listen to Paul describe His great find! (Phil. 3:1-17) Or Philip and Nathanael (Jn. 1:43-51)

By means of this illustration Jesus pleads with people not to be ashamed of the price they pay for the Kingdom of God in comparison with the value they receive. Many would refuse the fortune of Christ, because fool's gold is less expensive. Yet the only sure way

to purchase peace of mind, genuine joy, unmarred beauty, enduring righteousness and that crowning happiness to be found nowhere else is to accept the discipline, the self-denial and the cross. Any happy finder of the Kingdom should be willing to part with any prejudices, any previously dear values and ideas, in order to possess and enjoy all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ.

Matthew himself is one such "fortunate finder," because this publican probably never dreamed that one day he would look up from his ledgers into the face of a Jesus fully ready to invite him into special service in His Kingdom as an Apostle. This sudden hope so gripped him that he was willing to drop instantly and permanently his lucrative tax job and cast his lot with the Lord. **He goes and sells all that he has** for Jesus the yet-uncrowned King? Despite the apparent ridiculousness of staking everything on this one investment, something more than a good head for figures brought Matthew, wide-eyed, to his feet. It took some real vision, some true understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, and much real faith to think the yet undefined service of an itinerate, controversial Rabbi worth chucking away his cozy, materially rewarding position, in order to make his own all the Lord offered! (See notes on 9:9.)

On the basis of this man's sagacious personal acquisition of the Kingdom, Trench (*Notes*, 50) shares the following suggestive outline on buying well:

1. Purchase truth, instruction, wisdom and understanding: all things of the spirit! (Prov. 23:23)
2. Buy what has real value, ironically at no cost whatever! (Isa. 55:1)
3. Buy while there is still time! (Mt. 25:1-13)
4. Buy from Jesus the deep needs of our soul! (Rev. 3:18)

More comments on the impact of this parable will follow the Precious Pearl Parable.

#### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What single point does this story have in common with that about the precious pearl?
2. What is there in the background of the disciples that made this

- story necessary?
3. What is there in the immediate teaching of Jesus that rendered this story essential at this point in His message?
  4. Explain the historical situation of the happy finder by illustrating the customs of Jesus' time that make His story a living reality to His original hearers, and, at the same time, prove the legitimacy of that man's course of action.
  5. How does the happy finder of the treasure differ from the pearl merchant in the companion parable? Does this indicate a difference in emphasis between these stories? What, precisely, was the man doing when he discovered the treasure, or can we know this? Is this important?
  6. To what (if anything) is reference made by the following symbols:
    - a. The hidden treasure?
    - b. The fortunate finder?
    - c. The field?
    - d. The finder's former possessions? ("all that he hath")?
  7. What texts indicate that Jesus had already taught this truth before the great sermon in parables?

#### D. THE INESTIMABLE VALUE OF THE KINGDOM: THE PRICE OF TRUTH

##### 2. THE PARABLE OF THE PRECIOUS PEARL

TEXT: 13:45, 46

45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls: 46 and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why is it so very important that Jesus reveal to His disciples, even in this veiled way, that His Kingdom could only be discovered after diligent search on the world market? What was there in their background that called for this sort of information?

- b. How would you summarize the fundamental message of this story?
- c. Is the search for God's rule in your life the one absorbing passion of your existence, or does the cry of other things demand so much of your attention that you wonder who really is in control? What are you going to do about it?
- d. Are you willing to liquidate the whole collection of lesser values in your life to purchase the blessings of God's good government at whatever expense? Can you truthfully say, "When it comes to the Kingdom of God, cost is no object"?

### PARAPHRASE

"In a similar way, God's Kingdom is similar to the situation of a pearl merchant searching for exquisite pearls. When he found one pearl of inestimable value, he liquidated his entire collection and bought that one."

### SUMMARY

The Kingdom of God is worth all it costs! When a connoisseur seeks it with all diligence, its value will be so obvious and desirable that he will instantly recognize its preciousness and expend all his resources to gain it. The Kingdom consists in releasing our entire, miserable collection of lesser values in order to be filled with all of His.

### NOTES

**13:45 The kingdom of heaven is like unto a . . . merchant seeking goodly pearls.** This man, in contrast to the coincidental discoverer of the treasure in the preceding story, is an expert engaged in regular commerce on the pearl market. In his search he perhaps thought to be able to purchase the best ones with the cash he had in hand. This would leave his other possessions intact and still his own. Apparently, he had not yet imagined himself coming across a specimen so precious that it would cost him not only his present collection, but *all that he had*. That is, he could not conceive it until he saw it. But his wisdom, developed over the years in this field, recognizing

the excelling worth of this one pearl, demanded that he give up further search in order to possess this one at the expense of all else.

Had Jesus furnished us an interpretative key to this story, perhaps He would have said, "The goodly pearls are all the higher values of this life. The pearl merchant is a dedicated seeker of righteousness, service, virtue, peace, love, science, art, beauty and such. The one pearl of great price is the Kingdom of God. As the pearl merchant sold all that he had and bought it, so the disciple of the Kingdom gives up searching for satisfaction in those other worthy endeavors outside the Kingdom, only to rejoice that in possessions of the Kingdom all that was lovely or of value in them he now possesses in the Kingdom."

Here again appear the three basic steps:

1. The expert search. Do we see here Jesus' appreciation of the artists, the scientists, the philosophers, the poets, the philanthropists, etc., who are regularly, sometimes painfully, engaged in developing all that enriches life and elevates conduct, hoping to find satisfaction there? If so, each can find in the Kingdom of God that rare and infinite preciousness in comparison with which the relative value of all else pales into insignificance. Are these people well-rounded individuals who, despite their wealth in many human joys and fulfillment, suspect that some higher fulfillment, some superior happiness must exist without which all the others wane into mediocrity? Could absolute good ever become the actual experience of human beings? These hunger and thirst after righteousness (even if they cannot satisfactorily define it) and set out on an unrelenting quest until they should discover it. Perhaps they too do not yet believe, as they begin their quest, that their very search, when realized, will revolutionize their entire perspective, and, consequently, everything else.
2. The wisdom to evaluate the superiority of the Kingdom. The uniqueness of the single pearl did not deny the worth and loveliness of all other pearls, for they too had intrinsic value. All that made the smaller, less valuable pearls desirable, however, is present absolutely in this flawless exemplar. Its advantage lies in the fact that it possesses perfectly each good quality only partially or imperfectly realized in the inferior specimens. The good, however, are always the enemy of the best and we must choose between the very good and the best! We cannot content ourselves with mediocrity. This parable illustrates by contrast the case of the

Jews who had a zeal for righteousness, but who, when they saw God's most precious pearl, Jesus Christ, they refused to surrender their self-righteousness and all else they considered precious to save Him. Cornelius (Ac. 10—11:18) is a better example, as is Mary of Bethany (Lu. 10:38-42) and the Ethiopian official (Ac. 8:26-40).

3. The unhesitating readiness to release one's grip on anything else he deems of more importance or higher in value. The rich young ruler, by contrast, balked at accepting Jesus as the Lord and Master of his life, clutched his paltry collection of inferior pearls and stalked away. This is the critical decision faced by all would-be disciples. (See notes on 8:18-22.) When we have seen the supreme value of the Kingdom and the necessity of a personal response to the mercy of its gracious King, we must then, immediately, seize the opportunity before it pass forever beyond our reach—even if that means leaving the loved, the known and the apparent security of our present situation.

#### THE SCANDAL CAUSED BY THESE TWO STORIES

It must have been frankly unexpected to hear the Nazarene speak of His Truth and His Kingdom as a commodity on the world market to be handled, evaluated, bought and sold like cabbages, as if it were somehow in competition with everything else that vies for men's attention and interest. For people who had just always supposed that, at the manifestation of the Messiah, the Truth of God would be equally evident and equally precious to everyone, this parable must have been, bluntly, unbelievable. The modern reader of both these parables about the hidden treasure and the pearl can sense only second-handedly the disappointment they caused for Jesus' original hearers, primarily because he is personally living in the time-period to which Jesus alludes and, because of this fact, has become accustomed to it. But the Twelve and the others lived before the arrival of these days, and their preconceptions about them were based upon their reading of the ancient prophecies and upon the then-current popular interpretations. Whether the mute multitudes grasped the full details of these stories or not, the quicker thinking among them must have been puzzling: "What kind of a kingdom does that Nazarene intend to represent to us anyway, if its preciousness is hidden

from everyone but a fortunate finder who stumbles onto it quite by accident, or perhaps the unexpected find of one carefully scouring the market? Or if, as we have believed, the Kingdom of the Messiah is to bring unprecedented wealth to the Hebrew people after centuries of suffering and sacrifice, how can Jesus affirm that the Kingdom is so expensive to its adherents that it will actually cost them everything they can scrape together to make it their own? This exaggerated idea of continued personal sacrifice is incompatible with our ideas of the Messianic Paradise wherein everyone will sit under his own vine and fig tree to be served by the kings of the earth who pour into Jerusalem bearing their wealth to contribute their glory to the Kingdom of Israel. Besides, if God intends to give the Kingdom to Israel as a natural right, why should it be thought necessary that ANY HEBREW should be imagined as required to decide whether he would BUY the Kingdom—and at extreme expense at that!" It is precisely at this point that any given hearer must decide whether he thinks Jesus knows what He is talking about. He must overcome the disappointment of his false hopes and the Lord's rejection of is mistaken conception of the Kingdom. Tragically, many never would.

And lest we smile at their incomprehension and difficulties, let us count the Demases who are willing to resell the Kingdom to repossess their lesser values! (Cf. 2 Ti. 4:10; 2 Pet. 2:1-22) Count the Christians who rightly think that salvation is free but are aghast to learn that it costs everything we have to obtain it, and who begin to put price ceilings on what they are willing to expend to have God's best. (See Special Study "The Cost of Our Salvation" after 16:24-28.) It was to this unpreparedness that Jesus addressed His challenges of the high cost of discipleship (Lk. 14:25-33; 9:23-26; 18:29, 30). Just how far the Church is from understanding her Lord here is measurable in terms of the humanitarian projects, the philanthropic enterprises, the social welfare schemes that are substituted for, rather than occasioned by, the realization of the Christ-life in her. Such projects may be expected as the natural outgrowth of the Rule of God in and through the Church. But when these projects and their supposedly Christian proponents in the name of the Kingdom of God categorically exclude the very means by which the spreading of the Kingdom is to take place, i.e., by proclaiming the whole counsel of God, then they have at that point cashed in the Kingdom in order to purchase goodly pearls of far less value.

Consider also the fact that the glory of God's government is actually

hidden in our world even today. Men still blindly stumble past the Church, supposing it to be only another social betterment society with metaphysical overtones. Men also fail to recognize the principles, order and beauty of God's total control over the earth, because they are blinded by their own rebellion and their struggle with Nature in revolt. But, bless God, this all contributes to make faith real, since sight is impossible. (Ro. 8:18-25) Even when men come face to face with the Kingdom message they still must decide whether it is worth surrendering their partial plans, their inadequate goals, their incomplete wisdom, their transitory joys, their ethereal hopes to obtain something which their faith only partially helps them to understand! (Heb. 11:3; 1 Co. 1:18—2:10)

So the scandal is still there, because even during this Church-age, God has not permitted us personally to experience the glory of His final plans. A serious look at the world must lead to more doubts than solid optimism. But this very human uncertainty guarantees the absolute freedom of our choice and the moral quality of our decision to believe on good evidence what we can yet only imagine. (Cf. Eph. 1:17-23; 3:14-19; 2 Co. 4:16—5:7; Tit. 2:11-14; 1 Pt. 1:3-9)

### WHAT IS THE HIDDEN TREASURE, THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE?

1. The Kingdom represented in the person of the King Himself, Jesus Christ. (Cf. 1 Pt. 2:4, 7) Everything that God treasures most is bound up in Jesus. (Col. 2:2, 3)
2. The realization of the Kingdom on earth is the realization of its ideal, the developing of everything Christlike in us. Morgan (*Matthew*, 171) is right to say that "We who come to Him worthless and base, are changed into worth and preciousness because He communicates to us His own infinite value . . ." and this results in a peace of mind because we have peace with God, a clean heart, a renewed mind, a hope in death and a heaven of glory. What lay formerly so far beyond our reach is now actually attainable by faith. (Ro. 5:1ff; Col. 1:27, 28. The entire Ephesian epistle helps us to appreciate this.)
3. Since the subjective realization of God's rule in the world is to be through the Church of Jesus Christ, no one can claim to have

submitted himself to the rule of God, hence, in the Kingdom, who claims to love Jesus but detests or ignors the Church which He purchased with His own blood. (Ac. 20:28; Eph. 1:18; 2:10; 3:10, 21; 5:25-30)

4. God's government of the universe is reality, truth itself. Any world-view or philosophy that is not big enough to take in this reality nor humble enough to let God be God in every aspect of every minuscule part of His Kingdom is just not grand enough for a believer. Contrarily, the believer who has accepted this truth by faith is able to see further, learn truth faster and master reality like no unbeliever ever could. The degree to which this is not true of the believer is the degree to which he is yet controlled by something other than Truth.

The choice between these interpretations makes no significant difference, since he who has the King as Sovereign is in the Kingdom; and he who buys the Kingdom at so great expense does so by joyfully acknowledging the King. Only such a mind is open to all truth and can live as a citizen at home in the universe, because he has become the son of its Owner and Governor. And, not at all least, he engages in an active campaign with others to make men holy. This is the Church.

#### JESUS HAD SAID ALL THIS BEFORE

The supreme value of the Kingdom and the necessity that each individual make it his own by decisive action had already been implied in Jesus' earlier teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, He had insisted that men make heaven their highest treasure because of the uncertainties that attend all material wealth. (Mt. 6:19-21) Further, there is no possibility of compromise whereby one could hope to serve God while devoting himself to material wealth: they are two irreconcilable masters. Hence, a decisive choice between the two is imperative, because loving devotion can be rendered only to one. (Mt. 6:24) Then, after Jesus had assured men that the regular pre-occupations of life are already the concern of a loving heavenly Father, He ordered them to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (Mt. 6:33; 7:11) The limitation of the choices to two is understood by the Lord's description of only two ways, as well as by His closing the Kingdom of Heaven to any who do not do God's will. (7:13-23)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. State in one well-chiselled sentence the meaning of the Pearl Parable.
2. What reality is symbolized by the following:
  - a. The pearl merchant?
  - b. The goodly pearls?
  - c. The pearl of great price?
  - d. The pearl merchant's other possessions ("all that he has")?
3. What single point does the parable about the pearl share with that of the happy discoverer of the treasure?
4. What difference of emphasis is evident in the parable of the pearl?
5. What passages in the Sermon on the Mount indicate that Jesus had already taught much of this same truth before, however in unparabolic language?

### III. JESUS' METHODOLOGY BEHIND PARABOLIC INSTRUCTION

#### A. THE PURPOSE FOR PARABLES

TEXT: 13:10-17

(Parallels: Mk. 4:10-12, 21-25; Lk. 8:9, 10, 16-18)

10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? 11 And he answered and said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. 12 For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath. 13 Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. 14 And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith,

By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand;  
And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive:

15 For this people's heart is waxed gross,  
And their ears are dull of hearing,

GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

And their eyes they have closed;  
Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes,  
And hear with their ears,  
And understand with their heart,  
And should turn again,  
And I should heal them.

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. 17 For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see the things which ye see, and saw them not; and to hear the things which ye hear, and heard them not.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Should we use parables? Why, what good purpose would they serve?
- b. Some Christians balk at the idea of Jesus' coming to earth to hide truth from some, while, at the same time, revealing it to others. How can Jesus be justified in not only hiding truth from some of His contemporaries, but also in making deliberate use of a method which would continue to hide the truth from people down through the centuries? As a matter of fact, Jesus not only chose to conceal the truth, but justified His course of action as correct and cited Scripture to show how such a course fitted perfectly into the situation perennially faced by all true prophets of God. How do you explain this? Is He being fair? How do you know?
- c. From what kind of people has God, or Jesus, hidden truth? Are these people responsible for not knowing truth that they could not see? If not, why not? If so, then how can they be held responsible for something they did not, even could not, know? Or does this correctly state their case?
- d. How can something be taken away from someone who has nothing? Yet, Jesus affirms that "whosoever has not, from him shall be taken away even that which he has." How can he both have something and still have nothing at the same time? Explain, then, how Jesus can give people something, and in the very act of giving it to them, He takes away what they have? How would you solve this riddle?
- e. What vital connection exists between Matthew's report of Jesus' general explanation for hiding truth (Mt. 13:10-17) and the other

Evangelists' report of Jesus' illustration about lamps under beds? (Cf. Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18)

- f. How is it true, as Jesus affirms, that "unto them (the multitudes) is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah . . ."? Did Isaiah have Jesus' audience in mind when writing for his own generation? If not, then how could Jesus apply this prophetic declaration with any propriety to His own hearers?
- g. What is the psychological truth behind the statement of Jesus: "The measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you," a truth that pinpoints the reason why people would have trouble grasping truth? (Mk. 4:24) How, then, is this idea the very motive for Jesus' switch to the parabolic system?
- h. Why does Jesus continue to hammer on the expression: "If any man has ears to hear, let him hear"? Further, what is so important about taking heed "how you hear" and "what you hear"? (Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18)
- i. What do you think makes people so unreceptive to Jesus' message that He feels compelled to hide it from them?

#### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

It was when He was alone that the disciples in His company, along with the Twelve, approached Him and began asking Him about the stories, "Why did you address the people only in stories?"

His answer was to the point: "Because it has been granted to you to know the revealed secrets of God's Kingdom. But for those who choose to remain outside, everything is presented in the form of stories, for to that kind of follower it has not been granted to understand these things.

"After all, is a lamp that has been lit ever brought in to be put under a dish, or under a container of some sort, or even under the bed? No, it is put on a stand, that those who enter the room may see the light. I say this, because there is nothing that is now secret that shall not someday be revealed, nor is there anything secret in what I tell you that shall not later be known or come to light. So, if anyone has ears to hear with, let him pay attention. Take care, then, how you listen and what you listen to. The measure of generous attention you give to the message will be the measure of information you will receive, and you will be able to comprehend even more that will be

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given you. For to him who has some real understanding about the Kingdom will more information be given, and he will know a great deal about it. But from him who has no real understanding, even what truth he thinks he knows about it will mean little to him and he will lose even that too. This is the motive behind my speaking to the curiosity seekers in illustrative stories, since, though they have the ability to see, they do not actually see what I am driving at. Though they can listen, they still do not understand. The prophecy of Isaiah (6:9, 10) describes these people all too well:

'You shall hear, truly enough, without ever understanding,  
You shall certainly see, but never grasp what is being said to you.  
In fact, the mind of these people has become dull-witted,  
Their ears are bored from listening, they have closed their mind,  
So that they could not actually see with their eyes,  
Actually hear with their ears, actually understand with their mind,  
And actually repent, turning to me to heal and forgive them.'

"But you are to be congratulated, because you actually see and hear what is going on here. As a matter of fact, many are the ancient prophets and godly men who fervently longed to witness these events that you yourselves are seeing, and to hear the messages you are listening to, but whose death prevented it."

SUMMARY

Jesus must now explain to His Apostles the fundamental psychological truth that the mind can learn only that truth that it is willing to accept. He was able to teach His disciples in clear, easily grasped, literal language, because they had opened their mind to let Him inform them on subjects about which only He could give authoritative information. But with the masses whose minds were already full of the rubbish of the rabbis, people who felt that they already knew too much to admit the Lord's teaching, Jesus repeated the same truth in story form. This system disguised the message under the scenery of the illustrations. Nevertheless, even Jesus admits that teaching is intended to reveal, not hide, truth. In fact, He points out that even this secret message, now so carefully unveiled to only His closest followers, will eventually be widely broadcast. But even so, only those who generously give real attention to what Jesus is teaching will be

able to see His meaning. Only those who trust Him and come to Him seeking explanations will learn.

## NOTES

### A. THE REASON FOR PARABLES (13:10, 11)

13:10 **The disciples came . . . to him**, as noticed in the Introduction, "when He was alone" (Mk. 4:10), a fact which places this section probably at the same time when "He left the crowds and went into the house" at the conclusion of His public message. (Mt. 13:34-36) There again it is said that "His disciples came to Him." The reaction is natural to suppose that Matthew refers to two separate moments in which His followers sought solutions. However, the following factors are determinative for the conclusion that they did not interrupt His sermon, but held their queries until they could corner Him for this confidential information:

1. Mark (4:10) specifies that Jesus was definitely alone.
2. Luke's version of their question does not puzzle so much over the Lord's strategy as it seeks the interpretation of "this parable," i.e., of the Sower (Lk. 8:9ff) This explanation was given only once and only in private (Mk. 4:13, 10)
3. Matthew himself, who records this explanation in this place, clearly informs us that "he said nothing to them without a parable." (Mt. 13:34; cf. Mk. 4:33, 34)
4. The last objection to the view that the disciples supposedly interrupted Jesus to pose Him this half-question, half-request that the Sower Parable be explained for the sake of the people, and that Jesus did comply, is its psychological improbability from His standpoint. While they were not above interrupting Him publicly to propose courses of action for Him (cf. Mt. 16:21-23; 15:12, 15; 14:15), it is to be doubted that the Lord should have deliberately surrendered that very psychological advantage that His parables gave Him over the very public He intended to keep on the outside—unless, of course, they came in humility as disciples to seek this very help He now generously gives the others.

**Why speakest thou unto them in parables?** That Jesus should

resort to riddle-like stories to present His truth, should present no surprise to the disciples, since part of their Hebrew culture was the teacher of wisdom whose parables with hidden meaning and recondite proverbs actually invited those who desired to apply themselves to meditate on the Law of the Most High and attend to the study of the prophets. (Cf. Prov. 1:2-6; also Ecclesiasticus 39:1-11; 51:23-30) This is true, because even the prophets themselves had left no means of admonishing Israel untried, even combining prophecy with parables. (Cf. Hos. 12:10) *Why . . . parables?* What is their special value as a teaching device?

1. A parable presents truth in a neutral setting apparently nowhere near the dangerous area of the hearer's prejudices.
2. A parable fires the imagination to envision truth from a different perspective. It forces a man to discover its truth for himself, making him do his own thinking. This, in turn, not only makes the truth learned his own possession but unforgettable, because the conclusions are his. But for those too lazy to think or too prejudiced to admit its truth, the parable effectively hides information. It begins with something understood or familiar and proceeds to illustrate ideas or experiences unfamiliar to the listener —an excellent educational principle. Abstractions take on concreteness and are easier to grasp.
3. A parable appeals to a man's discernment, causing him to make an impartial moral judgment, independent of his self-defense mechanism. Later, when the story's point becomes clear to him, either he will accept the lesson and repent, or else he will be forced to repudiate his own judgment formed when he first heard the story.
4. A parable obtains from the listener a personal, sympathetic participation in others' problems before he can feel menaced by the truth thus presented and before he can erect his defences.
5. A parable completely respects human freedom, not forcing its message on anyone who chooses not to commit himself to Jesus, enter into His fellowship as a student in order to learn the truth to which the parabolic images alluded. The responsibility for such absolute liberty, however, is left strictly and rightly with the individual himself.
6. While it is right to notice with Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 63), that a parable was spoken, not read, with an immediate impact, not the

result of long study with commentaries and dictionaries, we must not forget that Jesus' parables incline toward allegorical interpretation, which requires pondering and study. It is this very element in His stories that drives the hearer to decide to go or not to Jesus for the key to understanding them.

But these men were not seeking this kind of information when they ask "Why . . . parables?" Rather, the inner circle of disciples senses a radical change in tactics and are disturbed enough about His apparent lack of communicativeness to demand explanation. Implicit in their question is the presumption that Christ did not in the beginning of His ministry make such unrelenting and exclusive use of parables as a teaching method. While there are some germ parables earlier and many others appear after this sermon (Luke 14:16 is a parable-rich section), yet they rightly notice that the wind has changed. Did they feel that the real problem was not: "Why is Jesus using unexplained stories?", but rather: "Why does this whole business about Jesus, His words and deeds, always seem to force people to a cleavage, rather than unite everyone behind Him? Some understand Him and believe; many more do not. It would seem that, since the Kingdom has arrived and the time is fulfilled; the invitation of God should be equally desirable for everyone. Instead, it seems as if He is pushing men to a decisive judgment about Him!"

At the outset of Jesus' ministry the situation was different. His evident purpose then was to get as wide a hearing as possible with a view to discipling as many as possible. This He managed with clear, initial instruction and not-too-disturbing preaching that convinced the multitudes of His authority superior to that of the scribes. However, knowing well that a milk-only diet would not train the Twelve for the demanding role of apostleship nor deepen the others, He took a second step by deliberately narrowing the field and upping the quality. This change of pace shows up in:

1. The adoption of the parabolic method to make His message temporarily esoferic, i.e., "for insiders only." (Mk. 4:11)
  2. Deliberately long trips taken into unpopulated or foreign areas for private teaching of the Twelve. (Mt. 15, 16)
  3. Intentionally scandalous sermons to keep crowds small. (Jn. 6)
- As a method for developing the Twelve and other close disciples into a world-conquering Church, this solution helps, but what of the others?

Jesus, the Teacher come from heaven, faced an extremely delicate problem. On the one hand, the minds of the people were so jammed with materialistic aims and ideas that most of them could not imagine that He was revealing a purely spiritual kingdom. (See notes on Mt. 11:2-6.) Yet, if they were ever to participate intelligently in it, He **MUST** reveal its true nature to them. On the other hand, if He bared all its harsh realities, He would succeed only in crushing out every spark of hope they had invested in Him, since, psychologically, they would not have borne the blow. Not only would they have left Him *en masse*, perhaps even dragging away with them His precious nucleus of Apostles, but they might have even crucified Him right there in Galilee! How could He possibly keep teaching them, holding them in His discipleship as long as He could, while lovingly preserving each little flicker of understanding and faith, and still hope to reveal the mysteries of the true nature of God's Kingdom which He was about to establish? The Lord was prepared. The parables are His masterful answer to this dilemma.

This is why Jesus' immediate reaction to His students' puzzled query draws attention to the strategy of the Kingdom of God. The rejection by many, and therefore the uncalculated experience of a lack of success, and the consequent need for "parables" and "mysteries," is no sign of defeat nor even something strange. It is all part of the larger strategy of God. (Cf. Col. 1:24-29; Eph. 3:7-13)

Best of all, this strategy functions marvelously! With just a simple, well-worded series of parables, Jesus the royal Judge began to divide the sheep from the goats, the true disciples from the indifferent. This is because each listener must decide whether to go to Jesus for explanations or not.

1. Those who are only idly curious do not worry about it if they cannot figure out the sense of His little stories.
2. The erudite, if they think they see what He is saying, reject His concepts as out of step with the thinking of the great rabbis in the tradition of, say, a Hillel, a Shammai, or more recently, a Gamaliel.
3. The nationalists, if they do not understand Him, may scoff at His little stories as too harmless for a great revolutionary. If they do comprehend His meaning, His anti-militaristic, non-nationalistic doctrine is a positive menace to their own program.
4. Others amble away, because no anguish, no concern for Jesus' success, no interest in learning the secrets, bothers them.

5. Only the fully committed followers ask for explanations by coming to Jesus. In fact, because of this understanding thus gained, they can go on to glorious service in the Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, all unsuspected by its very protagonists, the judgment of God has begun. (Cf. Jn. 12:46-48; 9:39; 3:18)

### WHY PARABLES? JESUS' ANSWERS SUMMARIZED:

1. Because their message is for insiders only. (Mt. 13:11; Mk. 4:11; Lk. 8:10)
2. Because their message is only temporarily hidden and to be revealed later. (Mk. 4:21, 22; Lk. 8:16, 17)
3. Because everyone is free, hence responsible, to seek and know their meaning. (Mk. 4:23)
4. Because openness to the teaching determines how much anyone can understand. (Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18)
5. Because parables effectually enrich the believer's understanding of the Kingdom while actually impoverishing the man who thought he understood the Kingdom when he really knew nothing about it. (Mt. 13:12; Mk. 4:25; Lk. 8:18b)
6. Because men close their minds to truth. (Mt. 13:13-15; Mk. 4:12; Lk. 8:10b)

**13:11 Unto you it is given to know . . . but to them it is not.** Mark's version (4:11) is most revealing:

To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may . . . not understand.

The "insider" is one who trusts Jesus, becomes His disciple and learns Christianity's secrets from the inside. Many moral lessons are understood by obedience to their dictates, rather than by pondering their meaning without ever personally experiencing their truth.

**To know the mysteries of the kingdom** is the attractive goal Jesus sets before everyone by His deliberate use of this allegorical style that intentionally hides and reveals truth simultaneously. He has an unquestionable respect for man's freedom to choose. He desires that each man receive God's truth because that man freely desires it. So,

as indicated above, a man must, because he can, freely decide whether or not he trusts the Master enough to go to Him for this "inside information." If God's Messianic Kingdom is to be understood at all, it is only visible in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Whoever stumbles on Jesus just will not be able to fathom the mystery.

Far from being actually "mysterious," i.e., incomprehensible to the average intelligence, *the mysteries of the kingdom* are simply the secret plans of God which He reveals to His people. (Cf. 1 Co. 2:6-16; Col. 1:26; Mt. 11:25, 26 notes; Eph. 3:3-6, 9-11; 1 Co. 15:51ff; Rev. 17:5-7) These *mysteries*, as judged by later revelations, were nothing but descriptions of a Kingdom whose principles, motives and rewards were so opposed to men's ideas of empire that Jesus later characterized it clearly as a Kingdom not of this world. (Jn. 18:36) The very idea that faith in God, obedience to anything but Moses, and a Kingdom admitting Gentiles on equal footing with the Jews, was not merely unfamiliar to Jesus' hearers. Such talk was positively unwanted! Anything would remain a positive mystery to people who depended upon their own technical knowledge, upon official status and upon accidental birth in the right nation for standing in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' previous, clear, literal teaching, when considered in contrast to standard Jewish views about the Kingdom of the Messiah, only became "mysterious" in direct proportion to their unwillingness to be taught. Conversely, they become clearer in direct proportion to one's openness to anything Jesus says. Eder-sheim (*Life*, I, 592) has it:

Such parables must have been utterly unintelligible to all who did not see in the humble, despised Nazarene and in His teaching, the Kingdom. But to those whose eyes, ears and hearts had been opened, they would carry the most needed instruction and most precious comfort and assurance.

Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 66) rightly reminds us that the success of a joke lies not only in the joke-telling ability of the speaker, but also in the mind of the hearer. Has the hearer a sense of humor and is he prepared to smile, or is he a humorless creature, grimly determined not to be amused? He might have noted, too, how the mood of the listener affects radically his reaction. (Prov. 25:20) This striking parallel suggested by Barclay illustrates nicely the difference in hearers faced by Jesus.

**13:11 Unto you is given to know the mysteries . . . but to them it**

**is not given.** To the question: "Why parables?" this is Jesus' first answer. But how does this explanation answer the question and show how parables, by nature, serve the purposes of God to create these distinctions?

1. **BECAUSE PARABLES REVEAL TRUTH** to those willing to seek it and submit to it. Primarily in this context it was to the Apostles that it was permitted to understand Jesus' secrets which they would later announce in the most public way possible. (Cf. Notes on 10:27) This truth is open to all who share this frame of mind found only in the committed student of Jesus. The secret of the difference between real followers and mere well-wishers is the very gesture expressed here: the disciples came and asked him, whereas the indifferent or only idly curious did not really care to know what these little stories might mean. Further, because of the multifaceted character of God's Kingdom, Jesus could continue to multiply illustrations and reveal worlds of truth by this medium, because the parables themselves would continue to teach long years after the full revelation had been given. Nevertheless, the allegorical nature of the stories themselves hid their meaning from any but close disciples who restlessly insisted upon explanations. (Cf. Mt. 7:7-11)
2. **BECAUSE PARABLES HIDE TRUTH** from those who intend to use it for their own purposes, whether their intentions proceeded from malicious motives in the sense that some, prematurely spying His meaning, would have used it to destroy everything He had been working to erect, or whether they would simply have been frustrated, because His ideas did not reflect their prejudices. In either case, the force of their opposition would be dissipated before they would have had time to recognize His intentions and, in one way or another, hinder His ministry. So He sets the unwelcome truth in a neutral setting, thus avoiding the negative emotional reactions rising out of their instinct of self-defense. Even while hiding truth from people, the Lord is mercifully helping them. He stimulated their imagination, appealed to their discernment, enlisted their sympathy and tried to encourage them to arrive on their own at an independent, impartial moral judgment without arousing their fear of being found wrong. Later, when the comparison is understood, either they can accept the teaching or be forced to act in contempt of their own judgment given when they first committed

themselves on the parable. Naturally, they may see that the Lord's ideas go against their own exalted opinions, and become antagonistic. But the Lord thinks it certainly worthwhile to approach people on their blind side, get into their brain with memorable stories which can later reveal the truth under conditions less threatening.

Now, if one of the purposes for Jesus' use of parables was to hide truth, when, by their nature, parables, in the strict sense, are intended to clarify, amplify or explain truth by providing lucid illustrations with which it is compared, how could parables ever function to mask or obscure it? Easy! Each hearer brought to Jesus his own personal set of prejudices, categories, frames of reference, philosophy of religious truth, etc., through which he filtered Jesus' words. Since Jesus explained none of His parables in public, each listener was thrown upon his own resources to try to organize in his own mind the truth thus presented to him.

- a. If at this point he discovers that he understands what Jesus is saying, but these ideas will not fit his preconceived categories or philosophical framework, the man has then to decide whether he will scrap his limited views and permit his mind to expand to let Jesus' categories and viewpoint find comfortable lodging in his thinking. This obviously depends on what he thinks of Jesus! If, however, he decides that his structures of prejudice are to be defended even at the expense of discarding, as menacing to his emotional security, whatever of Jesus' truth cannot be crammed into his biased mental orientation, then he will thrust into his intellectual limbo and forget any and every piece of information he deemed unacceptable. In this way, even this truth lying on the threshhold of his understanding remains hidden to him, because he closed his mind to it.
- b. On the other hand, if he discovers that he is not understanding anything Jesus is saying, at which point the truth is effectually hidden from him, he has to decide whether he will go to Jesus for explanations or not.
3. BECAUSE PARABLES JUDGE HEARTS. The hearer himself must decide about himself: "Do I trust Jesus to be God's true Prophet and approach Him for help, while admitting my ignorance and lack of understanding, or do I trust my traditional teachers' views to be sufficient?" Here in this very description of the Kingdom, Jesus put His own method to the acid test: He narrated the

Parable of the Sower and Soils, and almost immediately, because of the genius of the parabolic method itself, the listeners began to fit themselves into the very categories mentioned in that parable! Some understood His meaning; most did not. Some desire further clarification, others are puzzled but not interested enough to hear Him out. Still others go home because they are bored with long sermons anyway and are anxious to get on with life and good times. Thus, the parables become a test of their intellectual honesty: will they unceremoniously dismiss anything, however true, that implies unwanted duties? It tests their earnestness: will they go to any pains to solve these riddles and submit to their truth?

4. BECAUSE PARABLES SET TRUTH IN MEMORABLE FORM which will function later when the prejudices may be persuaded to surrender. To put it another way: the parables are really sticks of dynamite disguised as candy bars. They function as time-bombs planted in the mind of the listener, who at the moment does not see their purpose, but given time to be persuaded that Jesus' way was best after all, may accept their truth. Ironically, even the man who never accepts Jesus may see his own ideas destroyed by these parables even long after he forgets who told him the story. (See on 13:12.) Even the highest moral lessons preached in plain, abstract language can be soon forgotten, whereas the very same truth worked into an unforgettable illustration fastens itself in the memory and continues to do its work.

B. REVELATIONS ARE FOR PUBLICATION.  
(Mk. 4:21, 22; Lk. 8:16, 17)

His parable of the Lamp may be paraphrased like this: "Is anyone so foolish as to light a lamp to give light and then hide that very illumination under some container or even stick it under the bed, rather than on a lampstand? No, they put it up where everyone who enters the room may see the light, right? So there is nothing hidden except to be shown later. Secrets are for telling." The unspoken scruple involved in the disciples' question is: "But, Jesus, are you hiding the truth from these people forever, so that they can never be influenced by an appeal of the Gospel and be saved by it?" His response is twofold:

1. The Lord's Lamp Parable echoes His doctrine that His disciples are to be a world-wide influence for God. (Cf. Mt. 5:13-16) Thus, Jesus argues, in light of their common mission to bring God's light to the world, any secrecy could only be temporary, or for a special, limited purpose.
2. His explanation of the parable is a direct echo of His challenge to the Apostles on the eve of their first evangelistic mission in Galilee. (See notes on Mt. 10:26, 27.) He had at that time pointed to a time when what He had privately disclosed to them should be given the widest possible publicity. But this talk of privacy and "mysteries" only means that He had already foreseen an interval in which practical secrecy would mark His approach, an interval during which fuller publication of the good news would not have been possible. So, since He had already intimated it before, it was necessary only to remind them now that the moment had arrived for secrecy.

But to what phase of His own mission does *the lamp* in His humorous illustration refer?

1. To Jesus' illustrations as such? If so, He says that a parable is intended to give light, not hide truth permanently, as a lamp under a vessel or bed. In this case, the parables, when explained, throw a great deal of light on various aspects of the Kingdom. What is meant to convey information must not be left deliberately obscure.
2. To Jesus' preaching method in general? If so, then He is justifying this temporary use of obscure stories, the meaning of which is available only to the most serious students who because of this commitment to Him will come to be taught and fit into His program. In this case, He is saying, "What is a revelation for? To make it the exclusive property of the elite? The hope of glory for this dark world is 'Christ in you' (Col. 1:27), but how can that come about if men's only hope is jealously guarded from the ignorant, despised masses by an arrogant religious minority? How could any real revelation occur, if truth is always hidden inside undecipherable stories?"

If this latter interpretation reflects Jesus' intention more closely, then the exhortations which follow (Mk. 4:24, 25) might be intended to cause the disciples to consider seriously what they themselves are to do about the great secrets of the Kingdom which they had the distinct privilege to hear explained. In the words of González-Ruiz

(*Marco*, 121):

. . . if a proclaimer of the Gospel makes the mystery a secret reserved for an ecclesiastical elite, if he converts the dancing, splashing water of Life into a magic drug kept in an elegant flask to sell only to the wealthy, then that mummified mystery which he so jealously conserved in his theological museum will be stripped from him!

It is obvious that these texts (Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18) are meant primarily to explain Jesus' strategy. By extension, however, they sit in judgment on anyone who would proclaim the Kingdom message. If the Son of God used a deliberately concealing technique only for the purpose of achieving a limited objective, real disciples of the Lord today should evaluate His tactics in light of His ultimate goals, share those goals and, now freed from those local limitations, give His message the widest possible publication. Shortly, He will point to their precious personal privilege to see Him as light for which they would be held accountable, because what their eyes had seen and what they had heard Him say was to become the unshakeable testimony at the center of all their future preaching: (Mk. 4:24; Mt. 13:16, 17; cf. Ac. 4:20; 1 Jn. 1:1-4)

**Hid . . . manifest . . . secret . . . known.** Plummer (*Luke*, 223) reminds that *apokryphon* ("hidden away" from the public eye, see Lightfoot on Col. 2:3) was a favorite word with the Gnostics to indicate their esoteric books which might not be published. Lightfoot also notes that this was an honorable term to describe their doctrines and books "for members only." Is Jesus making use of such terminology to make His point? If so, Mt. 13:11 is where He indicated that the limits of His fellowship was to be the circle within which He would reveal His secrets. (Cf. *ta mystéria*) If this present text indicates that none of the Twelve or any other private group was permanently to cover up the Gospel story, and if any disciple of Jesus may know what the Kingdom is all about, still, in order adequately to appreciate it, one must be a *disciple*.

### C. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PROCLAMATION (Mk. 4:23)

Mk. 4:23 **If any man has ears to hear, let him hear.** Jesus had already said this to the crowds. (Mt. 13:9) But this is the second time

during this private discussion with His closest disciples! (Mt. 13:43) Here this oft-repeated invitation is further development of Jesus' answer to the disciples' question: "Why parables?" and proof that the Lord had not finally nor absolutely closed the doors to the Kingdom in the face of anyone sincerely desiring to submit himself to anything God requires. No man need fear that fate should have excluded him from any possibility of enjoying the mercies of God. This seemingly pleonastic expression with which Jesus concludes numerous paragraphs is not a harmless little literary device used to signal the conclusion of a thought. It is, rather, the heart-cry of God who pleads with people not to turn a deaf ear on the emphatically important message just communicated. *Let him hear* with understanding, because the mysteries of the Kingdom are available to disciples. If he cannot understand, let him give up his self-justifications, his biases, his pride and complacency and come for answers to the Lord who invites all to share in His great "public secrets."

D. THE RULE OF PROGRESS AND THE REWARD  
FOR RESPONSIVENESS (Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18)

Mk. 4:24 . . . **Take heed what you hear.** Content is so very crucial, since Jesus longs for people to get past the external form of His little word-pictures to see the reality, the real Kingdom He so urgently wanted them to understand. This is not so much a warning against the treacherous views of false teachers, as if He were saying, "Be cautious about accepting what you hear from others," as it is an urgent exhortation to pay careful attention to what they heard from Him. The content of these messages of Jesus would become for the Christians the source of their faith and the foundation of their preaching. (Mt. 28:20) So it was critical that this teaching be heard in its correct form. Because of the supernatural inspiration by the Holy Spirit which would have recalled everything to their minds and even reveal new truth where necessary, they would not be limited to a stereotyped oral tradition. Nevertheless, Jesus considers it essential that His message be correctly assimilated in order that it have a chance to function properly in transforming its hearers. He knows how dangerous would be the situation when a powerful, revolutionary message like His is only half-understood, and, so, wrongly applied by sincere people.

Luke's version, rather than emphasize content: "Take heed **WHAT** you hear," lays stress on men's personal psychological approach: "Take heed then **HOW** you hear." (Lk. 8:18) This warns against a merely intellectual interest or an idle curiosity, since men are morally responsible for what they do with what they learn. "Pay attention to the attitude with which you listen, with what attention you listen, and to what profit! Do you listen intelligently and with a good, honest heart?" Since the similarity of these two reports in such close proximity cannot be overlooked, someone will undoubtedly be tempted to accuse either Mark or Luke of not quoting Jesus correctly. The matter may be resolved in one of two ways:

1. Jesus actually made both statements, one being recorded by Mark and the other by Luke, because they are both needed to deal with the objective content of what is heard and with the subjective mood of this listener. (Later, Jesus put the "how" and the "what" in the same sentence. Lk. 12:11; cf. Mt. 10:19)
2. One of two Greek idioms may not yet have been fully understood or correctly translated, in the sense that Mark's "what" (*ti*) and Luke's "how" (*pōs*) might be discovered to be roughly equivalent, rather than the two separate emphases they are presently seen to be.

It is known, for instance, that *ti* in certain situations means "why?," functioning as a direct interrogative. (Arndt-Gingrich, 827) Is it possible that in our sentence that it be thought of as an indirect interrogative to be rendered: "Take heed **WHY** you hear!"? This scrutiny of motives is surprisingly close to Luke's version that examines one's attitude toward what is said.

**The measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.** This proverbial principle, capable of rather varied applications, has no direct connection with Mt. 7:1 where the main point was: "Personal generosity or niggardliness in judging others will be reciprocated to you by them." Here, however, Jesus' psychological principle is relevant to that degree of generosity and openness with which anyone approaches His revelations: "The amount of open-mindedness or prejudice which you bring to me will determine how much truth I will be able to give you. Small trust will be rewarded with little effective communication, since you did not let me teach you. Even great ignorance, united with great faith that comes

to me for instruction, will go home full and overflowing. You will receive from my instruction precisely that amount of information which the receptiveness you show will allow!" When will men learn that paradox: the generous man always receives far more than he ever gave away, whereas the miser who never shares has nothing! If men desire a larger measure of the Lord's truth, let them bring him a larger measure of faith to put it in! How can He load a train-load of truth into a thimble of faith?

Here in these simple words the Lord of heaven lets us choose in absolute freedom just how much we want to be blessed. How blind and miserly is the man who stubbornly limits the degree of his devotion to Jesus, saying, "I will go so far and no farther!" (Contrast 2 Co. 8 and 9, esp. 9:6-11 in this connection.) No man can outgive God, because, after all he has sacrificed for the Kingdom, even to the point of surrendering his dearest personal prejudices so that the Lord can teach him, he joyfully discovers that he has been receiving far more all the time!

Mt. 13:12 **For to him who has, will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.** (Cf. Mk. 4:25; Lk. 8:18b) Although Jesus made varied use of this puzzling dictum, nevertheless, in each case there is an underlying call for generosity and energetic activity to take advantage of an unexcelled opportunity to make progress. (Cf. Mt. 25:29; Lk. 19:26) The thing that sharpens a rather ordinary sentence into this clever aphorism is the omission of its key word. What is it that a man *has*, that makes it possible for him to *be given more* to the point of having *abundance*? And what is it that can be taken away from a person who thinks he possesses it, when, in reality, he has nothing? (Notice Luke's version: ". . . even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.")

1. Until the beginning of this great sermon in parables, everyone in Jesus' audience certainly had the OPPORTUNITY to hear and know the truth about God's Kingdom. The parables will now change all this. Whereas some disciples would seize and appreciate this unexcelled privilege offered by God, and permit themselves to be taught by Jesus and thus go on to greater heights of understanding until they enjoyed an abundance of revelations, others would not recognize what they had before them. (Cf. Prov. 17:24) Supposing themselves to have the opportunity to know the truth,

- but not recognizing in Jesus God's Teacher, even this opportunity to learn the most elemental facts about God's Kingdom would be taken away from them. And the parables accomplished this.
2. This is a sound psychological verity that can be demonstrated over and over again: the right UNDERSTANDING of one lesson puts the active, thinking listener in a position to grasp the next one. In fact, each lesson helps to explain and illustrate the other, and furnish a groundwork for all that follow. To this kind of person, education in the Kingdom's message becomes commonly easier and more enjoyable as he proceeds. But another student in the same class who did not learn the first and fundamental lesson will not only gain nothing from the more advanced lessons. He will be positively confused, rather than helped, by them and what he thought he possessed of the first lesson will make less and less sense to him. Jesus' axiom smacks of that shrewd businessman's observation: "Nothing succeeds like success or fails like failure," or perhaps, "It takes money to make money," or "The rich get richer, while the poor get poorer!" But it is true: even the simplest disciple who has accepted the fundamental lesson and has confessed to Jesus: "I know that you are a Teacher come from God, because no man can do these things except God be with him," is in an excellent position to move to the head of the class.
3. To those who have FAITH in Jesus and some understanding of His mission, the parables will provide more real information. Those who do not have so many wrong notions about what the Kingdom of God has to be can receive much from Jesus. Ideal preparation to receive the Kingdom, according to Jesus, is to take the attitude: "Whatever Jesus says, is right—whether I can understand it perfectly or not, whether it appeals to my prejudices or not, whether it has ever been preached in our church or not, whether Papa ever thought it or not—if Jesus said it, I believe it and that settles the matter!" But to those who have little faith, less knowledge and much prejudice against His ideas, even what shallow faith and limited grasp of the truth they thought they possessed will fade out. In fact, they really have no use for something that does not fit their preconceived schemes and categories into which all truth must fit or be discarded. They have little willingness to be taught by Him, no matter how good His credentials. They have little zeal for righteousness nor honesty enough to decide objectively about Jesus and His message on the basis

of the evidence. So, *he who has not* is no merely unfortunate "have-not" in the modern economic sense, hence, somehow to be excused for the accidental misfortune of being born in that class. Rather, the Lord bares their strictly personal, responsible choice: "THEY have shut **THEIR** eyes!" (Mt. 13:15) From that point on, their search for the wisdom of God is a pretense, because compromised:

A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain,  
But knowledge is easy for a man of understanding. (Prov. 14:6)  
The mind of him who has understanding seeks knowledge,  
But the mouths of fools feed on folly. (Prov. 15:14)

The entire picture of human reactions to Jesus of Nazareth may be summarized as follows:

He that corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,  
And he that reproves a wicked man gets himself bruises.  
Reprove not a scoffer, lest he hate you:  
Reprove a wise man, and he will love you.  
Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser:  
Teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.  
The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom;  
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

(Prov. 9:7-10)

TEACHABILITY is the key. What a man brings to the situation is so very critical. If he comes to Jesus with an open, honest mind ready to examine critically whatever Jesus has to say, but yet ready to think with the Lord, letting Him lead, because of what His miraculous credentials prove about His right to speak as He does, that man, says Jesus, is going to go home full and be ready for more of the same.

#### E. THE RECOLLECTION OF A PROPHECY BECAUSE OF A REPLAY OF PERVERSENESS (Mt. 13:13-15)

13:13 **Therefore speak I to them in parables. Therefore** (*diὰ τοῦτο*) summarizes Jesus' total answer to the question: "Why parables?" (See outline before 13:11.) "I do it, *because they do not see.*" (Cf. Jn. 12:37-43; contrast Mt. 13:16) For people who could not see the supernatural authority implicit in Jesus' miracles, for those who felt no divine judgment in His pronouncements, for those who recognized

no fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in His ministry, in short, for those who saw no substantial reason to permit Jesus to tell anything God wanted them to know about the Kingdom, despite the sufficiency and persuasiveness of His credentials, for such, the door to God's Kingdom is rightly closed. (Jn. 6:36; Jer. 5:21-31)

Although Matthew writes: "I speak to them in parables, BECAUSE . . .," the other Synoptics introduce the seemingly scandalous expression: "For those outside everything is in parables, so THAT they may . . . not understand." (Mk. 4:11, 12; Lk. 8:10) How explain this difference?

1. In terms of form, Matthew's report summarizes the prophecy of Isaiah which he will shortly quote. Stated in the indicative mode, he describes the facts as they are without committing himself at this point on the question of purpose or result. Mark and Luke, on the other hand, since they do not plan to quote Isaiah, telescope their quotation of Jesus' words, so as to retain much of the form and meaning of the prophecy. By so doing, they only appear to have produced an impact different from that of Matthew when they agree that it was Jesus' declared purpose to adopt a special mode of teaching to conceal truth from the outsiders. (*hina . . . mē . . . mē*, Mk. 4:12; Lk. 8:10b) This same sense, however, is implicit in Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 6:10. So Mark and Luke provide a neat condensation of Jesus' words without any loss of meaning, while Matthew's version quotes Him more fully.
2. In terms of sense, Matthew states the facts which called for Jesus' change of strategy: "I speak to them in parables, because, seeing they see not . . . neither do they understand." The construction by Mark and Luke (*hina . . . mē* and the subjunctive) indicates Jesus' purpose to keep the message private: "but for others outside everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see, but . . . not understand."

The harmonic result of these considerations is a paraphrase somewhat as follows: Jesus says, "My adoption of the mystery/parable strategy is occasioned by the fact that people, with every opportunity to understand, do not want to understand. My strategy is intended to keep things that way. They do not want to know? Fine, my method will let them have their way, because the presentation of my message in the form of unexplained mysteries guarantees that they will not understand!" So, rather than say with Edersheim (*Life*, I, 583ff)

that "the basis for the different effect on the unbelieving multitude and on the believing disciples was not objective, or caused by the substance or form of these Parables, but subjective, being caused by the different standpoint of the two classes of hearers toward the Kingdom of God," we should admit that the difference was both subjectively and objectively caused. How many of these parables, in fact, were easy to understand for even the closer, more attentive disciples? No, *the mysteries of the kingdom* were objectively genuine mysteries, i.e., unknown and unknowable to everyone, disciples and indifferent alike, until each individual decided to come to Jesus for explanations, or to disregard these dark sayings as completely unintelligible, unimportant and unworthy of further attention. Because of the barrier to understanding that most men had erected against Jesus' truth, He obliged them by erecting His own barrier between them and the truth itself. When anyone abandons his own barrier to get behind Jesus' barrier to know His truth, Jesus gladly reveals His secrets to him.

The fact that Jesus intentionally purposed to hide truth from people stuns the conscience of some, but must not be explained away as if He could not, nor should not, have done so. His historical situation demanded that He do it. Edersheim (*Life*, I, 583ff) has correctly noticed that the Lord is not simply beginning at this point to give primer lessons suited to little children. Nor is He hoping to recruit disciples by this method. Rather, He is driving adults to decide about truth already plainly taught them both in Christ's earlier teaching and in His mighty works. He knew that plain truth openly stated now would have served only to alienate any but those few genuinely committed to Him. Rather than drive them away permanently, He mercifully holds them at arm's length until the scandal of His humanness be eclipsed by the glorious vindication of His proper deity at the resurrection.

The very idea that a merciful God should play the game this way is so jolting to some that they eviscerate this bold purpose clause. They suggest with Bales (quoting McNeile, *Jesus The Ideal Teacher*, 126, italics his): ". . . in accordance with a well-known Hebraic idiom, the *result* is ironically described as a *purpose*." It is true that these debated words describe the inevitable result of Christian preaching, because when Jesus purposes a thing He produces results, especially these results! But anyone who argues that men's blindness to truth is a result of His method must admit that the Savior could

have foreseen this result. So, by His deliberate choice of the method purposely willed that result. Further, this surprise maneuver of Jesus harmonizes perfectly with God's plan to send upon men, who refuse to love the very truth that could have saved them, the full force of evil's delusion, so that they put their faith in what is false. Their condemnation is just, because they not only enjoy evil, but have no confidence in the truth. (Study 2 Th. 2:10-12.)

**13:14 Unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9, 10.** This noticeably unusual expression (*autoīs anaplerōūtaī*), unlike the more usual statements for fulfillment of prophecy, seems to suggest a framework of truth the details of which perhaps many a situation could amply satisfy. (Cf. Jn. 12:40; Ac. 28:26, 27) For further illustrations of Matthew's varied use of "fulfilled prophecy," see the special study at pp. 81-86, Vol. I, "How Does Matthew Use the Prophecies?" In fact, Isaiah did not prophesy specifically regarding the contemporaries of Jesus, but regarding those of his own generation. Nor is the Lord affirming that that ancient prophet had accurately foreseen across 750 years the very reaction to Messiah's ministry here depicted as real. Although *this people* (13:15) is the same Hebrew nation, Isaiah was simply discussing another generation. Nevertheless, as the Master hastens to show, the prophet's words so well delineate a mentality of indifference, prejudice and moral perverseness that Isaiah's expressions may be used again to picture the identical negative reactions to Jesus. The result, then, of Jesus' preaching and His contemporaries' response was the tragic replay of a scene in the drama in which Isaiah and Israel had been the earlier protagonists.

Far from being bleak and foreboding to Jesus' disciple-evangelists, these words comfort bewildered men, stunned by Jesus' apparent lack of success. By citing Isaiah's generation, He reminds them that God's greatest prophets down through the ages have encountered the same spiritual insensitivity and the same lack of response. But, far from offering them merely more company in their misery, He lifts them into the same mighty work where God's finest prophets had toiled. If this text applies principally to Jesus' relation to His listeners, it finds application over and over again in the experience of His heralds. Any unsuccess they would encounter had already been foreseen and explained by the Lord of the harvest. It was already part of the common problem of God's greatest spokesmen, all part of the program, hence, nothing new or surprising.

**Hear . . . but never understand:** why not?

1. 13:15 Because this people's heart is waxed gross (*epachùnthe* from *pachuno* whose literal meaning is "to make big, fat, solid, dense"; then by extension becomes: "to render obtuse, insensitive, stupid," Rocci, 1448; Arndt-Gingrich, 644, see the figurative meaning as "make impervious [orig. to water], make gross, dull"). They are insensitive to unwelcome truth, seek reality in unreality, and so become deaf, blind and stupid. **Their ears are dull of hearing:** bored with unwanted lessons, they listen unwillingly. What can you do with people whose eyes they have closed and whose mind is closed to evidence no matter how satisfying? This self-chosen blindness is the whole point of this entire section and the reason for Jesus' tactics. Lest the disciple become smug and complacent in his limited knowledge and understanding to the point he quit learning from the Lord, let him see that he is never beyond temptation. (Cf. Mk. 8:17, 18; Heb. 3:13)
2. Because people do not have God's Word abiding in them. (Jn. 6:38; Mt. 22:29)
3. They have no real love for God. (Jn. 6:42)
4. They aim for human praise, rather than God's. (Jn. 6:44)
5. They place ignorant hope on their superficial possession of divine revelations. (Jn. 6:45-47)
6. They are deceived. (1 Ti. 2:14; 2 Co. 11:3; 2 Ti. 3:13; Eph. 4:22; Jas. 1:13ff)
7. They are conceited. (Ro. 1:21, 22; 12:3, 16; 11:25; 1 Co. 3:18; 8:1, 2; 10:12; Rev. 3:18) They are proud of their human wisdom. (Mt. 16:22-23; Ac. 17:16-32)
8. They have no real love for truth: they just do not care about the difference between truth and falsehood. (2 Th. 2:10) They deliberately ignore facts in order to follow their own passions. (2 Pt. 3:3, 5, 8)
9. They measure themselves by themselves. (2 Co. 10:12)
10. They are unwilling to act on the ideas of another (Mt. 11:14, 15; Lk. 7:30ff)
11. They fear men. (Jn. 12:42; Mt. 10:24-33)
12. They trust themselves to be righteous. (Ro. 9:30—10:3; Lk. 7:30)
13. They seek truth in any other place than where it can be found. (Prov. 17:24; 15:14; 14:6; 1 Co. 1:18—2:16; 3:18f)
14. They lack stability. (2 Pet. 3:16; 2 Ti. 3:6, 7)
15. They hate exposure of their evil deeds. (Jn. 3:19-21)

And the list could continue to grow, but is it any wonder that people could *hear Jesus, but never understand Him?*

13:15 . . . **Lest haply they should . . . understand . . . and should turn again.** *Lest haply*, both in Greek (*mépote*) and Hebrew (*pén*), is a conjunction expressing the purpose to remove, prohibit or hinder something one fears or wishes removed, and is used following an action taken to avoid the thing feared. (Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, 678; *Arndt-Gingrich*, 521) But with what previous action in our present case is this apprehension connected? Who is taking steps to avoid the comprehension of God's message and the consequent repentance and salvation of the Israelites? We must understand Isaiah in order to understand Jesus' use made of his prophecy.

1. In Matthew's letter-perfect citation of the Septuagint translation, rather than the Hebrew as we have it today, it is the people whose mind has grown impervious, whose ears are bored with listening. It is the people who closed their eyes to what was being said, "*in order that they might not ever* (= *mépote*, "lest haply") **see . . . hear . . . and understand and repent, and I should heal them.**" The responsibility for any action taken to avoid or hinder comprehension of God's word rests squarely upon the people.
2. The Hebrew of the Masoretic text of Isa. 6:10 quotes God as commanding Isaiah to "make this people's heart fat, their ears heavy and shut their eyes," an action which would have effectively hindered their comprehension, their consequent repentance and God's healing. In this case the responsibility for everything is Isaiah's, hence, God's. Since Isaiah's mission thus conceived would seem to be an absurdity, because he would blind Israel by using the very preaching intended for their salvation, many see God's words as ironically stating as His purpose what He knew would be the tragically unavoidable result. But who can complain to the just Judge of earth that He should purposely close the doors to repentance against His people as a whole, while not precluding the possible salvation of individuals? Further, there is awesome psychological power to harden anyone who steals himself against the continued repetition of truth.

Whereas the current Hebrew text and the Septuagint represent apparently differing textual traditions and it is temporarily impossible to decide which objectively reproduces Isaiah's original, nevertheless

both readings express profound truth confirmed elsewhere on the question. (Hab. 1:5; Ac. 13:40, 41) It should be noticed that Mark's summarization (Mk. 4:11b, 12) agrees in concept with the Hebrew text by putting the emphasis on God's purpose to hinder their sight, repentance and healing. The harmonization of these two versions, i.e., the Hebrew as over against the Septuagint and Matthew, may be stated as follows: God foresaw and preannounced this self-hardening in evil that rendered men completely incorrigible, and purposely sent them a prophet to tell them truth again and again that would make them all the more determined to remain what they were. This self-induced guilt and God's judicial punishment are bound up together, because God created men's mind to work that way.

The goal, as Jesus sees it, of understanding God's revelations is not erudition for its own sake or the satisfying of an uncommitted curiosity, but repentance! Note that men must *turn again*, not "be converted" as in the King James Version, because the responsibility is fully theirs.

**And I should heal them** (*kai iasomai autois*). Juridically, they need forgiveness (cf. *afethē autois*, Mk. 4:12); psychologically, they need healing, because true sanity, health and normalcy can be found only in living in harmony with God, with His truth, in His universe, with His world and His people. (Cf. Ex. 15:26?; Dt. 28:60; Isa. 19:19-22; 30:26; 53:5; 57:14-21; Jer. 17:13, 14; 30:10-17; Prov. 3:7, 8, 16; 4:22; 12:18; 14:30; 15:13; Psa. 38:3, 7, 10, 17)

#### F. REJOICING IN POSSESSION AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF PRIVILEGE (Mt. 13:16, 17)

**13:16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears for they hear. Blessed:** the humblest disciple of Jesus who has experienced God's mercy at first-hand is better off, far happier (*makarios*, see on Mt. 5:3), than anyone else who is a stranger to God, be he among the greatest scholars or sought-after philosophers. Because *your eyes* begins the Greek sentence, it is thrown into special relief, a fact that marks the contrasting results of Jesus' ministry. These men, in contrast to all the unreceptive who refused to be Jesus' disciples, actually experienced realities quite invisible to the unseeing people all around them, because their openness to Jesus as a Teacher let them see in Him the very revelation of God. Others looking at the

same Jesus see nothing but an itinerate rabbi who perhaps should go back to his carpenter-shop.

The situation is similar to a chess-game in progress between two expert players. Beside the table is standing a child who knows the names of the pieces and some of the most elementary moves, and, because of this beginning, is curious to see how the game will proceed. The experts will battle back and forth, thoroughly understanding every move and countermove. Even though the child is watching every play, he does not "see" what is really happening on the board. By contrast, the contestants see it all, experience it all.

**Blessed are your eyes because they see!** What a joy to Jesus to find someone who really is beginning to understand Him and His mission! (Note the contrasts in Mt. 11:25-27; Lk. 10:21-24.) It should now be no surprise that Peter should have confessed Jesus to be the Christ at Caesarea Philippi, because here is the solution to the problem of how God revealed that truth to Peter. Peter arrived at that conclusion, as did the others, because he had seeing eyes to perceive the obvious: God is doing His works and revealing His will by Jesus of Nazareth who must therefore be God's Anointed and Son. It is no marvel that Jesus should again pronounce Peter "blessed" on that occasion, because it is the logical outgrowth of this one.

13:17 For the combination *prophets and righteous men* see Mt. 10:41; 23:29. How many *prophets* longed to see Jesus at work! Not only Moses and Isaiah, but all the rest of those faithful servants of God "were looking and searching hard for this salvation . . . who tried to find out at what time and in what circumstances all this was to be expected." It had to be revealed to them that the predictions they made about Christ and His Kingdom were for the Christians, not for themselves. Even angels long to catch a glimpse of these very things! (Cf. 1 Pt. 1:10-12) It is not at all surprising to feel the yearning expressed by other voices out of the intertestamental Jewish literature, crying:

Blessed be they that shall be in those days,

In that they shall see the good fortune of Israel which God shall bring to pass in the gathering together of the tribes . . .

Blessed shall they be that shall be in those days,

In that they shall see the goodness of the Lord

GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

which He shall perform for the generation that is to come,  
Under the rod of chastening of the Lord's anointed (sic,  
"Anointed"?)

. . . A good generation (living) in the fear of God  
in the days of mercy.

(Psalms of Solomon 17:50; 18:7ff)

In fact, during the period between the last of the great OT prophets and appearance of John the Baptist, the voice of God was silent. This silence was painful to the thoughtful Jew who felt abandoned in a hostile world. Contemplation of Israel's predicament in that tormented time drove him to seek answers to this chafing situation and to study all previous revelations to sieve from them the solution. This contemplation and these studies produced a body of literature practically unknown to most modern Christians, i.e., that apocalyptic literature included in what is known as the "Pseudepigraphical Writings." Whatever else may be said about or against these books, the fundamental issue in them is: "When and how will God's Messiah and His Kingdom right all these wrongs, establish righteousness, peace and blessing in our land?"

Before we leap to criticize these Jewish thinkers, let us recognize that **THEIR** question states precisely our own yearning! Some of their guesses were quite close; others were wide of the mark. If there be any similarity between certain declarations of Jesus or certain of His viewpoints of the Kingdom, and those of some of the apocalypticists, let it be underlined here that they were guessing; He was not. He was revealing the plans of God, whereas they were doing the best they could with the light they possessed, to ink in the details before the fact. Jesus is the fact. Now, in much the same way as they pondered the coming Messianic Kingdom, we speculate about the eternal Kingdom of Christ, how the Second Coming will be organized, the nature of the resurrection body, the geography of heaven and hell. And, if we are not careful, we will be unhappy with the very reality which these sincere, often mistaken, men longed to see and saw it not!

Further, how many *righteous men* down through all the ages of the Church would have rejoiced to be permitted to view even one movie of Jesus' ministry or hear one tape-recording of His voice! How much more to be there in person?

**But they saw them not**, however, not because of the stubborn,

self-induced blindness of those of Jesus' age who refused to see, but because they died centuries before His birth. Though well established by their faith, they did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not reach the goal. (Heb. 11:39, 40)

But if the Apostles and their contemporaries were privileged to witness the very events of which their predecessors could only dream and long to experience, and if the disciples could consider themselves blessed, because just five minutes with Jesus eclipses 5000 years of anticipation, what will they do about the fearful responsibility inherent in that joyous privilege? By reflection, how will the Church of Christ respond to the exceptional opportunity she has enjoyed to know not only the Law and the Prophets, not only John the Baptist, not only the Son of God on earth, not only the Apostles and their ministry, but she has been privileged to live through the very centuries that witnessed the fulfilments of many of Jesus' prophecies. She has personally experienced the execution of a major part of God's design for the Church described in the great Sermon in Parables. Can she see it all? Will she rise to the challenge of responsibility that such favor places upon her?

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Why did Jesus teach in parables? List His reasons.
2. State and explain the psychological principle behind Jesus' strategy as this is seen in His choice of the parabolic method by which He taught. Show how the parabolic method in itself proved to be a screening process by which Jesus divided the audience into two basic groups: those who followed Him out of selfish motives and had no intention of becoming His disciples; and those who, though often weak, wanted above all else to grow in His discipline and serve Him.
3. Define the word "mystery" as used by Jesus in this chapter. What are, then, "the mysteries of the kingdom"? List some of them.
4. Show why the disciples were justified in asking Jesus for an explanation of His practically exclusive use of the parabolic method in this particular sermon.
5. Explain how people who have eyes, ears and a mind can neither see, hear nor understand. What OT passage speaks of this

condition? What was there in this situation faced by Jesus that prompted Him to recognize in the situation itself a clear fulfilling of the ancient prophecy?

6. The OT passage cited by Jesus in reference to the obtuseness of the unbelieving of His generation is not quoted in the NT as you find it in your OT. How do you account for the different rendering Jesus gives of the passage? In what sense is the original author of that text to be understood? Is this difference significant? Was this difference created by Jesus, or did it exist before His time? If so, who made the change?
7. What did God expect of His people when He longed for them to "turn again"? What is involved in this turning?
8. What is the meaning of the allusion to prophets and righteous men who desired to see things observed by the Apostles?

## B. THE MULTIPLICITY AND JUSTIFICATION OF PARABLES

TEXT: 13:34, 35  
(Parallel: Mk. 4:33, 34)

34 All these things Jesus spake in parables unto the multitudes; and without a parable spake he nothing unto them: 35 that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet, saying,

I will open my mouth in parables;  
I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Do you think Jesus preached this great sermon in parables with the express intent to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy (Psalm 78:2), or do you think that His preaching of this sermon resulted in its fulfillment? Or does this question even correctly state the case? What does Matthew mean by the word "fulfilled" here?
- b. When Matthew affirms that Jesus said nothing to the crowds without a parable, what are we to understand about Matthew's own insertion of Jesus' explanation of His strategy as well as the explanation of the Sower Parable immediately following the public narration of that parable? That is, did Jesus publicly explain the

- Sower Parable? If so, how do we explain this present section (13:34)? If not, how do we justify Matthew's insertion of the explanation at that point, i.e., out of order? (13:10-23)
- c. From Matthew's assertion, "All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables . . ." and Mark's notice, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them," what should we conclude about the number of parables told that day, in relation to the actual number recorded by the Gospel writers? What would this conclusion reveal, then, about the accounts of the three Evangelists who report the event?
  - d. When compared with the Hebrew original and the Septuagint Greek version of Psalm 78:2, it appears that Matthew has altered the citation. How would you explain and/or justify this?
  - e. Since Jesus had already justified His own use of parables (13:10, 17), is not Matthew "gilding the lily" to add this additional justification? What is he really adding to what Jesus had already explained?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Using many similar illustrations, Jesus presented the entire foregoing message to the crowds. To the degree that people were able to hear it with understanding He succeeded in speaking the Word to them. In fact, He told them nothing except in a story form. However, He explained everything privately to His own disciples.

This approach fits the pattern pioneered by the prophet Asaph (Psalm 78:2) who began:

"I will speak to people, using parables.

I will declare things kept secret since the creation of the world."

### SUMMARY

The Evangelists recount only representative stories the Lord used to communicate His truth. To the extent that individuals saw what He was driving at, His message was full of information. However, He gave no public explanations. The mysteries were cleared up for anyone who trusted Jesus enough to approach Him for solutions. This tactic used by the Lord has a well-known and approved Old Testament precedent in the great 78th Psalm,

## NOTES.

**13:34 All these things spake Jesus in parables unto the multitudes.** While Matthew is consciously editing Jesus' message, putting portions of it out of its normal chronological order for reasons suggested by the Spirit, this sentence, however, signals not merely the conclusion of His discourse, but what to the original reader must have been nothing less than amazing. Jesus really succeeded in proclaiming all the preceding information to the people in story form without telling them anything that He did not want them to know. The marvel is even greater, because Mark (4:33, 34) not only agrees that this discourse was nothing but one story after another, but that the ones listed by the Evangelists are but typical samples! *All these things* are still the Word of God, whether people were able to understand it or not. (Cf. "He spoke the Word to them." Mk. 4:33)

**Without a parable spake he nothing to them.** Jesus knew His audience and followed this policy to handle the crowds on this occasion. (See on 13:1, 2.) It cannot mean that He never used another type of instruction in other situations. (Cf. Luke 12 all; 14:25; Jn. 7-10)

**13:35 that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet.** See fuller notes on Matthew's use of this expression, because our author's use of this fixed phrase is far more general than ours. (Vol. I, pp. 81-86) Matthew is saying, "What Jesus did fits perfectly (and in this sense, fulfills) the grand prophetic precedent established by the prophet Asaph in his teaching." This fact vindicates the method against any Hebrew scandalized by it.

*Through the prophet* Asaph, not "Isaiah," as several important manuscripts have it. Since the practice for restoring the original text is to prefer the more difficult reading, the inclusion of the word "Isaiah" in the original text would for that reason be preferred, since so obvious an error on Matthew's part would have been corrected by scribes. However, Matthew may have placed no name in his original text. This is a real possibility since such omissions of the prophet's name appear elsewhere. (Cf. Mt. 1:22; 2:5; 12:4; Ac. 7:48) Perhaps several copyists would have been tempted to fill in the gap by inserting the name of a famous prophet. It is conceivable that a scribe, not only aware of the original source of the quotation (Psa. 78:2) and the prophetic office of its author (2 Chron. 29:30), added "Asaph." Others,

ignorant of both, "corrected" this to the more familiar "Isaiah," thus producing the mistaken manuscript reading. (See Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 33.)

*Asaph the prophet*, famous musician contemporary with David and author of twelve of Israel's Psalms, left a high standard in educational technique. In the context of Psalm 78, as Delitzsch (*Psalms*, Vol. II, 363) observes:

He here recounts to the people their history, from that Egyptaeo-Sinatic age of yore to which Israel's national independence and specific position in relation to the rest of the world goes back. It is not, however, with the external aspect of the history that he has to do, but with its internal teachings. . . . The poet, however, does not mean to say that he will literally discourse gnomic sentences and propound riddles, but that he will set forth the history of the fathers after the manner of a parable and riddle, so that it may become a parable, i.e., a didactic history, and its events as marks of interrogation and notabene's to the present age.

So the seer Asaph was not inspired to predict anything about Christ's teaching methods. Rather, in the sense that he rehearsed Israel's past in order to point out a moral, his own method actually anticipated and paved the way for Christ to draw illustrations from nature and human life to predict and explain the nature of the Kingdom.

**I will open my mouth in parables;**

**I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world.**

Asaph had really written: ". . . I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us." (Psa. 78:2b, 3) So, here again, Matthew consciously alters the quotation to render even more precise what would have been ambiguous or even untrue had he strictly followed the standard Hebrew or Greek text. In fact, Asaph intended only to reach back into five hundred years or so of Hebrew history, but Matthew wants his readers to note that the revelations Jesus gave antedate the creation of the world and come from the mind of God! To do this he rewords the latter sentence and chops off the mention of the traditional history of Israel, because he must affirm what is true of Jesus' revelations. While His method finds its superlative antecedent in Asaph's approach, the content of His message absolutely surpasses that of the

prophet. Matthew's Lord, in contrast to the great Asaph, reveals *things hidden from the foundation of the world!* This sudden change of text is calculated to shake the complacent Hebrew reader. Matthew says, "To you who are accustomed to great teachers who reach back to the beginnings of things for their teaching (cf. *ap archēs*, LXX Psa. 77:2), I present you a Teacher who reveals things unknown even before there was a beginning, (*apo katabolēs [kōsmou]*)!" By so doing, Matthew nudges his readers to ask: "Who IS this Jesus of Nazareth anyway?"

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. How many parables did Jesus present to the multitudes in this one great sermon? How do you know?
2. Did Jesus ever explain a parable to the crowds on this occasion?
3. Name the prophet and locate his text that Matthew cites to justify Jesus' use of parables.
4. Explain why Matthew does not quote verbatim the text of the very author cited to prove Jesus' method a sound approach. In what way(s) does Matthew's version of the prophecy differ both from the Hebrew text and its Greek translation?

### C. THE APPRECIATION FOR AND USE OF ALL TRUTH

#### TEXT: 13:51-53

51 Have ye understood all these things? They say unto him, Yea.  
 52 And he said unto them, Therefore every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.

53 And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, he departed thence.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why would Jesus ask His disciples whether they understood everything He had preached that day?

- b. Do you think they really did understand? Perfectly or partially? If you think they only partially understood what He had been driving at, how would you explain their answer?
- c. If you are convinced that they understood only partially, how would you explain Jesus' immediate reaction to their affirmative answer? That is, He goes ahead with His discussion as if their answer were in some way representative of their actual situation.
- d. Have you ever heard of a scribe who ever became a disciple to the Kingdom of God? Practically every scribe in the New Testament was hostile to Jesus. Is Jesus picturing a practical impossibility, as if He were speaking humorously of a Jewish rabbi's eating a ham sandwich on the wedding day of a Catholic priest? What is there about a scribe that makes Jesus' illustration live for the disciples, and, at the same time, urges them to achieve everything implied in the images here presented?
- e. What peculiar treasure possessed uniquely by a Christian scribe would so enrich him that he could share "things old and new"?

### PARAPHRASE

"Have you understood all these stories?"

They answered Him, "Yes, we have."

Then He continued, "This is why every theologian who has trained in the disciplines of God's Kingdom, like the master of the house who can provide out of his stores what is new as well as what is old, can teach old, long-known truth as well as the most recent revelations."

### SUMMARY

Before concluding the private session with His disciples, Jesus checks the disciples' own comprehension of the lessons. Since they affirm some understanding of His meaning, He can set before them the advantages possessed by a Christian scholar and teacher.

### NOTES

**13:51 Have ye understood all these things? They say unto him, Yea.** Earlier (13:10), the puzzled disciples had questioned the propriety

of His parabolic procedure, since it tended to obscure, rather than reveal, truth. Here the Lord pushes them to re-examine their own previous evaluation, because of their now greater understanding both of His methodology and the message thus relayed to them. They confess the effectiveness of the method. The highest theological truths have just been imparted impartially to everyone by means of the simple, accessible story. These disciples must see that high-sounding theological jargon and dry, uninteresting lectures cannot stimulate the imagination nor fire the will nor challenge the mind nor smite the conscience like well-planned, pointed illustrations.

The explanations Jesus gave of some of the parables doubtless provided insight into the meaning and application of the others. (Cf. on Mk. 4:13 before Mt. 13:18 notes.) Thus, in this limited sense, the disciples could honestly answer affirmatively. Naturally, fuller perception of the deeper significance of all the parables awaited the disciples' personal experience of the truths taught. Looking back on their positive answer that day, they must have smiled at how little they had really comprehended, so inadequate had been their ability to fathom their meaning or project into the future any clear outline of what the Kingdom might be or accomplish.

13:52 **Therefore** (*diā tōūto*), "On the basis of your answer, i.e., because you have understood these truths presented in parabolic form, I can now take you one step further." As conceded before, the disciples' subjective understanding was probably far below Jesus' objective intentions. Nevertheless, the Lord does not bother at this point to chide any overconfidence evident in their words, because He wants them to arrive at another, higher point in their growth. And, if He succeeds in bringing them to that point, they will themselves fill in any gaps in their knowledge. He sets before them an ideal that, whether He ever inspired them with supernatural guidance or not, would make these men avid students of God's Word and lead them to heights of growth in holiness and wisdom they had probably hitherto imagined inaccessible except to the well-born or especially gifted.

The phrase, **every scribe who has been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven**, must have seemed to the disciples almost itself a contradiction, since at practically every point at which they came into contact with Jesus' ministry, the scribes as a class had done everything in their power to hamper Jesus' progress, and logically so, because His theological position so often collided with their own.

(See notes on Mt. 2:4; 5:20; 7:29; 8:19; 9:2, 3 and 12:38 for a description both of their origin, position and relation to Jesus.) Despite their foibles, the scribes walked in the long shadow cast by one skilled scribe whose godliness and scholarship established a high, noble tradition: Ezra! (Cf. Ezra 7:6, 10)

1. He set his heart to study (what an engrossing, lifetime job!)
2. the law of the Lord (not merely oriental wisdom)
3. and to do it (how often a rare quality in theologians?)
4. and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel. (He labored not for his own good and glory, but for others.)

Other men whose gifts differ may serve God with their hands, but the ideal scribe loves and serves God specifically with his mind. (Jewish rabbis knew that the pursuit of the Law and earning a living and practical helpfulness are not mutually exclusive, the question being one of emphasis, of zeal to study and of preparedness to teach.)

*Every scribe* that amounts to anything in Jesus' service must *have been made a disciple*. The scholar who, because of his relative achievements in the disciplines of the Kingdom of God, somehow forgets his parallel role as a **DISCIPLE** of Jesus, is a positive danger for all under his influence: he must never get to the point where he ceases to learn from the Lord! The disciple can become a scribe, but the scribe must never cease being a disciple with all the obedience and teachability that that word implies.

But when Jesus spoke of *scribes*, did He mean them as a class existent in His day, or is He speaking more generally?

1. A *scribe* specifically? If so, He means the typical Jewish rabbi already educated in the Law, when converted to Jesus' view of the Kingdom, could make a tremendous contribution. Look at the excellent work of that budding rabbi Saul of Tarsus when once he became a disciple trained in the spirit and power of God's Kingdom! What a wealth of experience and knowledge of OT religion he brought to his service as a Christian Apostle!
2. A *scribe* generically? Any disciple, well-read in the Word of the Kingdom, would be able to function as a theological teacher, expounding the Word with understanding, clarity and authority. Is Jesus, because of the disciples' theological training in His school, describing His men as God's servants at the level of rabbis? Does He mean that what the scribes were to the OT, the disciples would

become to the Gospel? (Cf. Mt. 23:34)

If He intended the former, He could hope for very few applicants from that group (however, see Mt. 8:19!), but just to mention them fixes in the disciples' mind an ideal of zealous students and defenders of God's Word and teachers of the people.

Even as a provident master of the house keeps a larder well stocked with vintage wines and cheeses, heirloom lace and silver, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables and freshly-slaughtered meat, to be served on recently acquired table service, so it is with the Christian scholar. His *treasure* is his own personal repository of information and experience, his mind and memory. (See on 12:35 for fuller notes on this psychological reality.) Any learning, acquired by special studies or gained through experience, which helps the Christian better to understand God, His Word and His creatures, is his *treasure*. Consider, then, how rich indeed must have been the experience, how thorough the education, of these very Apostles. Despite their lowly beginnings, their day-by-day experiences in the constant company of Jesus of Nazareth while learning at His feet were beginning to qualify them as *scribes discipled for the Kingdom*. Only the most spiritually insensitive could have shared what these Twelve experienced with Jesus without becoming zealous scholars and no mean teachers of the Word.

The bringing forth out of his *treasure* speaks of the altruistic and effective use of what is there, distributing according to the need. There can be no "ever learning and never coming to the USE of the truth" for the good of others. What, then, are the *things new and old* which this Christian OT scholar and teacher is to share?

1. Is Jesus still on the subject of parables considered as a didactic method? If so, the *old* refers to any previous knowledge of nature or human affairs or divine revelation that could be brought forth in the service of the Kingdom. Good parables require not only an observant eye, but also an intuitive discernment that sees in the *old*, familiar facts parallels with which to illustrate and communicate the *new*, unfamiliar ideas to be taught. As an educational methodology, the Lord's principle functions marvelously as it takes the mind of the hearer from the known to the unknown.
2. If, on the other hand, Jesus intends some more specific knowledge, then by "old" He points to the rich, many-sided revelations of God already given through patriarchs, Moses, the prophets, poets,

kings and priests, precepts and statues, miracles and signs, which, taken together, were all intended to prepare Israel for her King, Jesus. The "new," accordingly, is the Savior's teaching which leads to the proper understanding of the old and completes it. (Cf. Lk. 24:25-27, 32, 44-48; 2 Ti. 3:15) In this sense, then, the Christian OT scholar not only appreciates the ancient Scriptures, because he reads them in a new light, that of Christ, but also because he grasps clearly the new revelations now unveiled by Jesus, he can share his bountiful treasure in a way that does honor to the Kingdom and enriches all whom he teaches. (Study 2 Ti. 3:14-17 in this connection; 1 Co. 10:11; Ro. 15:4.)

So, the *new and old* are truths, as Lenski words it, "not known or taught before or long known and often taught." Many conservatives in Jesus' audience would have rejected the *new*, preferring the *old*. (Cf. Mt. 9:16, 17; Lk. 5:39) Other doctrinaire zealots of modernity would be tempted to despise the *old* in favor of the most recently revealed truth. But either choice would be equally folly, since it would involve severing ties with all the rich preparations for Christianity that old, long-known truth had made. While there was no more vigorous exponent of Christ's triumph over the Law than Paul, this scribe now a *disciple for the Kingdom of God*, like a wise householder, could bring forth the old, long-cherished, now priceless heirlooms of understanding, knowledge and experience out of the OT for the eternal enrichment of Christianity. The so-called "Jewish Gospel" of our author, Matthew, is another superb illustration of this tasteful, harmonious blending of the best of ancient Judaism in the service of NT revelation. The Epistles to the Romans, the Galatians and the Hebrews, as well as numerous sections in others, point up the glorious realization, in Christ and the Kingdom, of all the truly essential concepts not only of Mosaic religion, but of the patriarchal faith as well. This merely underscores again the fact that all that is really truth is of necessity old as well as new. Truth is ancient, because, being reality itself, it dates back to the foundation of reality, however long it had been overlooked by man because of his ignorance, neglect and sin. (Cf. 13:35) This is why it seems new when called to his attention. (Example: 1 Jn. 2:7, 8; 3:11; 2 Jn. 6) Since the *things old*, here, are the things of God's Spirit, they never become obsolete, breathing forth a new freshness and vitality with each generation of new minds that sets itself to understand them.

Woe be to the Christian preacher or teacher whose life is so full of "busy-work" that he has no time to study the Old Testament! Those who have a grasp of Christ's message will be able, out of both new and old revelations of God's will, to treasure rightly all that is of value and utility and to share its treasures with others. Granted, the New Testament is the will of Christ for the Church, but who can pretend to be qualified to expound even this document, who is an ignoramus of the great 39-stone pyramidal foundation upon which the New Testament is built and of which it is the glorious capstone? Who can read with intelligence *Romans*, *Galatians*, *Hebrews*, *Revelation*, even *Matthew*, with a view to understand just these superb volumes, who has no time for *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Daniel* and a host of others? Will we ever grow to be able adequately to appreciate and properly use every truth, old or new, that God puts into our store?

**13:53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he departed thence.** For the trusting reader, unoverburdened with scholarly prejudices, this sentence obviously signals the final conclusion of Jesus' great discourse, especially for the disciples listening in private to His explanations. But some modern scholars (e.g. of the *Redaktionsgeschichte* school) suppose that this verse just cannot be a simple declaration of fact that Jesus simply finished this series of parables and left. They see it as a literary device of Matthew (whoever HE was!) whereby the five major sections of this Gospel—i.e., 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1—are brought to an end. (See R.V.G. Tasker, *The Nature and Purpose of the Gospels*, 35.) But granted for sake of argument that Matthew, for theological purposes, includes some such sentence at the conclusion of the five major sections as asserted, what would that prove about their authentic historicity, i.e., about the objective reality that Jesus really concluded the particular message in question and left the scene for another destination? It is a false dichotomy to demand that such sentences be read EITHER historically OR theologically, when it is intellectually honest and possible to have it both ways. The deliberate bias that forces such a choice is the conclusion of some that the Gospel cannot be read as a simple, forthright historical statement where it makes historical declarations. Despite any supposed "theological overtones" in this verse (13:53), the evidence for its probable authenticity as history is seen in these factors:

1. its naturalness as the conclusion of the event narrated, which,

- without it, would have been left suspended;
2. its true chronological relationship to the subsequent events recorded by Mark 4:35;
  3. and in the greater incredibility of deception by Matthew. That is, if our author has deceived us about a simple conclusion to a sermon, upon what grounds would or could we trust him to speak truly about the resurrection, since they stand upon the same grounds for us; i.e., his testimony?

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is a scribe? What was the relation of the scribal class to the nation of Israel? What was their usual response to Jesus?
2. In what does the scribe's position and preparation consist that makes him an especially valuable asset to the Kingdom once he has become a disciple of Jesus?
3. Identify the "things new and old" which the provident master of the house could bring forth from his treasure.
4. Now that you have seen the entire sermon in parables, discuss what Jesus taught about the Kingdom, its nature and its various aspects. When did it come, or when will it arrive? Who is to be in it? Who were called "the sons of the Kingdom"? Should we pray for it to come today? What importance did Jesus attach to the Kingdom in His teaching? How important did He say it should be to His listeners? In answering each of these questions, cite key words, or, if possible, the entire texts that illustrate your answers.
5. List as many parabolic figures as you can, that demonstrate the fact that the Bible does NOT necessarily mean the same thing every time it uses the same figurative expressions. To start you out, remember that the lion can be a symbol either for Jesus, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah," or of Satan who walks around as a roaring lion. Sheep are symbols both of Jesus, God's Lamb, as well as the errant people of God. Now make your own list. Why? Because a lot of bad theology is built on mechanical use of Bible figures of speech: parables, allegories and similes.
6. When and in what way are some of the features of God's Kingdom, predicted in any of these parables, already in the process of being fulfilled, or are already complete?
7. What is proved about Jesus in this sermon?

## GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

## THE GLORIOUS LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST

*As seen in the great Sermon in Parables, Matthew 13*

While one of the distinguishing characteristics of Jesus' message is His absolute respect for human free-will, it should be equally clear to all that only He who is a true Lord can permit Himself this luxury! Only He who enjoys a position of true power could permit the following situations to exist:

1. In the Parable of the Sower and varying types of terrain, the great truth everywhere noticed is the absolute freedom of the individual who can actually accept or reject the Word of the Kingdom. This freedom to choose is also the freedom to become a rebel against God's good government, but Jesus knows that this is a worthwhile risk in view of the end He has in mind.
2. In the explanation of His own methodology (13:10-17) to whom does Jesus entrust the tremendous truths that would bring about far-reaching revolutions in the world? To a Peter, or a Matthew! But who are they? "Rustic peasants from the provinces!" many would have sneered, "A minimum of good sense would have dictated greater seriousness in choosing more qualified personnel, perhaps from the nobility, in order to propagate a message of such consequence!" Nevertheless, only a truly powerful Lord can permit Himself to use weak men do His bidding, to show that the greatness of the power is not of them, but in His own majesty and might.
3. In the Parable of the Weeds, the Lord of the field confidently orders His servants regarding the Wheat and the Tares: "Let them both grow together until the harvest; and at the time of the harvest I will say to the harvesters . . ." Evil can remain in the world clear up to the judgment, and Jesus does not feel Himself at all menaced by this fact! He will have the last word. (v. 41)
4. In the Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven, Jesus promises that the Kingdom of the great God of heaven, Creator of the heavens and the earth, will have an insignificant beginning! We usually judge the success of a thing by the auspiciousness of its beginning. Therefore, how is it born? great and powerful? or weak and hidden off in a corner somewhere? One can measure the stellar distance that divided Jesus from the politicians of this

world, on the basis of His brothers' pushy advice: "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." (Jn. 7:3, 4) Jesus, however, did not hesitate to describe His Kingdom as having a disappointingly unpromising birth. Further, He affirmed that its growth would be gradual, almost imperceptible, however sure. This was bad news for the public relations men who needed exciting material to make a sensational proclamation of the Kingdom. But this great Lord believes in "truth in advertising," even if many customers refuse to buy, because He is a true Lord who can well afford to tell people just how it is and still expect them to respond.

- 5: In the Parables of the Hid Treasure and the Precious Pearl, Jesus even pictures His precious Kingdom and His priceless truth as being discovered by chance, quite accidentally, by a fortunate person. Worse yet, He permits His truth to be freely evaluated along with all the other truth and so-called realities of this world! How confident He is that the supreme value of His Kingdom will not only be apparent, but especially desirable above everything else!
6. Jesus teaches, further, so as to hide certain truths from people, and, paradoxically, this fact demonstrates His Lordship. It is easy to feel a tender compassion for those few dear ones bound to us sentimentally. Sometimes this causes us to express an impulsive kindness toward them which actually frustrate our intentions to help them and results in positive damage to their highest good later. But Jesus was not that way: seeing the true need of every single hearer in His audience, and because of His profound love for each one, He composed a message that met their need by hiding under the parabolic form those truths that would have only been distorted by them to their ruin.

It is obvious that, in hiding these truths from people, Jesus feels Himself in a strong enough position to be able to run the risk that they would never have discovered them later when the Apostles would have revealed them in their preaching.

And so it is that Jesus does not impose His regime on anyone—yet. However, only He who enjoys a strong position can permit Himself this luxury, in the sense that He is sure to have the last word and that His truth is the only definitive reality to be reckoned with. The

## GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

humanist must ask himself at this point, "What is the basis of this confidence of Jesus—uncanny, political astuteness alone?" Even an unbeliever could admit that Jesus acted in character as Lord, because only a true Lord could be patient enough to permit everyone the possibility to accept, or else reject, His Gospel.

## WHAT DOES THIS GREAT SERMON REVEAL ABOUT JESUS?

1. JESUS WAS NO CHILD OF HIS TIMES, gathering up into one message the aspirations and philosophy of the Jewish people! Eder-sheim (*Life*, I, 597) reminds how un-Jewish—even anti-Jewish—is Jesus' teaching concerning the Kingdom. This point becomes immediately clear when we remember what Jesus did NOT say in this sermon, quite as much as what He did, A.B. Bruce (*Training*, 43) indicated that

The kingdom whereof Jesus was both King and Lawgiver was not to be a kingdom of this world; it was not to be here or there in space, but within the heart of man; it was not to be the monopoly of any class or nation, but open to all possessed of the requisite spiritual endowments *on equal terms*. It is nowhere said, indeed, in the sermon, that ritual qualifications, such as circumcision, were not indispensable for admission into the kingdom. But circumcision is ignored here, as it was ignored throughout the teaching of Jesus. It is treated as something simply out of place that cannot be dovetailed into the scheme of doctrine set forth; an incongruity the very mention of which would create a sense of the grotesque. How truly it was so anyone can satisfy himself by just imagining for a moment that among the Beatitudes had been found one running thus: Blessed are the circumcised, for no uncircumcised ones shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. This significant silence concerning the seal of the national covenant could not fail to have its effect on the minds of the disciples, as a hint at eventual antiquation.

If Bruce's observation regarding the Sermon on the Mount be proper, how much more is it true regarding the Sermon in Parables, where Jesus had every opportunity to sanction His favorite current in Jewish apocalyptic writing! In the light of His further declarations

is it conceivable that He should ever have told the following parable? "The Kingdom of heaven is like a great king who organized his followers into a strong army. Together they marched against a great city to destroy the wicked and establish there the throne of David. Having established the Kingdom by the overthrow of all his enemies, the king ordered the conquest of all surrounding countries until his vast empire covered the earth, guaranteeing thereby to himself and all Israel great wealth and happiness. All the uncircumcised were destroyed and their property was confiscated and distributed among the children of Abraham." If such an illustration seems out of place, if not inconceivable, then, with Edersheim (*ibid.*) we may ask: "Whence this un-Jewish and anti-Jewish teaching concerning the Kingdom on the part of Jesus of Nazareth?"

2. **JESUS IS A GREAT PROPHET.** In each of the parables some prediction is made relative to the (then) future character of the Kingdom:

- a. In the parable of the Sower and Soils the varying responses to the Gospel is foreseen and explained.
- b. In that of the Weeds the presence of evil in the Messianic Kingdom is accounted for and its final removal predicted.
- c. In that of the Mustard Seed the extensive growth of the Kingdom from a small beginning is foreseen.
- d. In that of the Yeast the intensive expansion of the Kingdom by the power of its inner vitality is forepictured.
- e. In that of the Hidden Treasure we see the prediction that the Kingdom's great value would be hidden from all but the fortunate ones who stumble onto it and sacrifice all to acquire it.
- f. In that of the Pearl Merchant the presentation of the Kingdom-idea on the world market of ideas is predicted as well as its superlative value for those who diligently seek it to acquire it.
- g. In that of the Dragnet the final separation of good and evil is promised.

Edersheim (*Life*, I, 597f) feels the force of this argument too:

Our second question goes still farther. For, if Jesus was not a Prophet,—and, if a Prophet, then also the Son of God—yet no more strangely unexpected prophecy, minutely true in all its details, could be conceived, than that concerning His Kingdom which His parabolic description of it conveyed. Has

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not History, in the strange, unexpected fulfilling of that which no human ingenuity at the time could have forecast, and no pen have described with more minute accuracy of detail, proved Him to be more than a mere man—One sent from God, the Divine King of the Divine Kingdom, in all the vicissitudes which such a Divine Kingdom must experience when set up on earth?

Even if, as was suggested in the notes, an unbeliever who had taken Jesus' earlier teaching seriously and studied its implications could have predicted that sooner or later Jesus would have arrived at some of these predictions implied in the parables, nevertheless the ring of divine certainty that we hear in Jesus' voice would be absent from the merely astute political sage. A mere human would have to hedge his predictions with expressions qualifying their likelihood, like: "If things turn out in a given way, then the following may be expected, etc. If not, then perhaps we will see some other phenomenon come to pass . . ." Since Jesus just tells it like it is going to be, we must pronounce Him either mad, or an imposter, or a great prophet worthy of our deepest respect!

3. JESUS IS DIVINE LORD. It is especially fitting that, in the very parable dealing with the thorny problem of continued evil in the world despite the establishment of Christ's Kingdom in it, Jesus' divinity also comes to the fore with a clarity equal to the seriousness of the evil.
  - a. The Son of man owns the field which is the world! (13:24, 37)
  - b. Jesus is Lord of the judgment who can afford to wait until both good and evil are fully mature! (13:30, 41)
  - c. "My barn" into which the righteous are gathered is none other than "the Kingdom" of God (13:30, 43), but it was out of "His (i.e., of the Son of man) Kingdom," that the evil-doers will have been cast! (13:41)
  - d. The ministers of justice directly responsible for the final separation of the souls of men are "His angels," i.e., of the Son of man. (13:41)

Plummer (*Matthew*, 197) asks: "Who is it that makes these enormous claims upon all mankind? Who is it that offers, to those who respond to the claims, such enormous rewards?" Indeed, who?

**SPECIAL STUDY: THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

Perhaps the most important question affecting the interpretation of Matthew 13, is, "To what aspect of the Kingdom of God does Jesus refer?" Unless this problem receives a proper answer, unnatural interpretations will be forced upon the stories He told to describe the Kingdom. The essential aspects of a kingdom are themselves multiple, consisting of a king, a territory over which he rules, his subjects, the constitutional expression of the king's will, and the boundaries, or limits, of citizenship in his kingdom. There may be other essentials perhaps, however this multiplicity of essentials forewarns us that, in order to reveal the full nature of His Kingdom, Jesus might make use of various parabolic illustrations to clarify the various features. A system so many-sided as God's Kingdom is just incapable of exhaustive treatment by a single illustration or symbol! If this were untrue, Jesus could have told one, all-inclusive parable and dismissed the crowds that day! (Mt. 13) Let us, therefore, begin by examining the concepts of the Kingdom of God which God had taught Israel to understand, because this instruction served as background for Jesus' use of the same terminology.

**GOD'S UNIVERSAL RULE**

It would be instructive here to recall that God's Sovereignty over heaven and earth proceeds in an orderly manner since before the creation of the earth and man upon it. (Dt. 4:32, 39; Psa. 47:2, 7, 8; 93; 95-97, 99; Isa. 66:1, 2) As Ruler, Judge, Sustainer and Creator of the universe, His Lordship is an eternal Sovereignty which He will surrender to none. (2 Kg. 19:15-19; Psa. 83:18; Isa. 54:5; Jer. 23:24; Zech. 4:14; 6:5; 14:9; Mt. 11:25; 1 Co. 10:26; Rev. 11:4) In this sense, then, God has always reigned and always will. The Kingdom of God in this sense is nothing less than His eternal sovereignty over the universe and all it contains.

**GOD'S KINGDOM OF ISRAEL**

Nevertheless, there is also a sense in which God began to reveal a new expression of His rule on earth among men. This He initiated

## GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

by establishing a covenantal agreement with Israel when He freed that nation from Egyptian slavery. (Ex. 19:6) Whereas in the civil legislation God had foreseen the desire for a human king for the orderly exercise of kingdom (Dt. 17:14-20), God Himself remained tacitly the real Ruler of Israel, as also of the rest of the world. (1 Sam. 8:7, 8; 10:19; 2 Sam. 23:3) The political principle is true even here: the king-maker is really king, for God remained Sovereign over the monarchs of Israel. (Dt. 17:15: "You may indeed set as king over you him whom the Lord your God will choose.") And every time those kings forgot the sovereignty of God, they and the whole nation of Israel paid the price of their insubordination.

Nevertheless, all the development of the Kingdom of God in Israel has as its final purpose the readying of a people through whom the coming of God's Anointed might enlarge the bounds of God's earthly rule so as to embrace all men. Predictions picturing this new expression of God's rule began to fork out in two directions:

1. God Himself is coming to earth to rule over Israel. (Zech. 2:10, 11; 8:3; 9:9; 11:12, 13; 12:10; 14:3, 4, 9) He will do this through His suffering Servant and Shepherd. (Zech. 13:7; Mal. 2:17—3:2, 5; 4:3) He would be born as a child upon whose shoulders the government would rest and whose titles, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace," identify him as truly "Immanuel, God with us" (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; 40:9-11; 42:1-4)
2. During the last of the great world empires, God, who continues to rule in the affairs of men, would "set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever." (Dan. 2:44) The Anointed King over the Kingdom of God would be one

coming with the clouds of heaven like a son of man to the Ancient of Days . . . and to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall never pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed, . . . and the time came when the saints received the kingdom. . . . And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High . . . (Dan. 7:13, 14, 22, 28)

This Kingdom of God, thus, is to be an empire that would surpass the glory of all preceding ones, and, whereas the Kingdom of God in Jewish thought had been limited to Israel, it now becomes increasingly clear that God's design includes the whole world in its scope. (Dan. 2:35)

So, within Israel and beyond it, among the nations of the world, God's Kingdom would grow, wherever His rule be acknowledged or makes itself effectively felt. A Son of David, yet David's Lord (Psa. 110:1; 2 Sam. 7:11-16) would reign over God's Kingdom, yet not over Israel alone, but growing out of Israel, His authority would extend over the last man on earth. (Cf. Psa. 18:50; 117:1; Isa. 11:1, 10; 49:6)

As is evident from this briefest of sketches, "the Kingdom of God" is an expression which was already a complex subject before Jesus ever used it with the original hearers of this great sermon in parables. If any simplistic application of that expression to a limited phase of God's rule would have missed Jesus' meaning, i.e., were a Jewish listener to have applied the message of Jesus in any given parable to, say, the nation of Israel exclusively, he would have totally misunderstood the Lord, to what extent would we blunder, were we to assume that "the Kingdom of God" must always refer exclusively to the Church?

#### EVIDENCES THAT "THE KINGDOM OF GOD" AND "THE CHURCH" ARE NOT STRICTLY SYNONYMOUS NOT TO BE STRICTLY IDENTIFIED

In the overall picture presented by the parables it must be admitted that in the Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven, of the Hid Treasure and of the Precious Pearl, Jesus seems to be talking about the effective growth of the Church in the world, as well as about her surpassing value because of the truth she proclaims. Nevertheless, even this much precision of identification is modified by emphases evident in other parables:

1. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND SOILS. If it be legitimately assumed that this entire parable pictures the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in the world as well as its continued progress through the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world,

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then it may be said that the true Church is represented by the good soil alone; those who fall from grace, by the rocky and thorny soil. But the way-side soil—or the indifferent individual,—is also part of the total picture of God's Kingdom, in the sense that the Gospel of grace was offered to him too, but he turned it down, not really caring to understand it. In the final judgment, not specifically mentioned by this parable, he will be among the evil who will not be saved (Lk. 8:12), a detail that is, however, covered by other parables. Nevertheless, this non-church member was ever under God's control or Kingdom.

2. THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS. The Kingdom is compared to the whole picture of a man who sowed good seed in his field, in which also his enemy sowed weeds. (Mt. 13:24)
  - a. *The good seed are the sons of the Kingdom*, the true Church, the saints. But they are only a portion of the total picture of God's government which includes the field, the sower(s), the reapers, the concerned servants, the harvest. God reigns over the whole situation, not permitting anyone the right of precipitate and final judgment. His Kingship is over more than just the sons of the Kingdom, since His Word governs also those who would destroy the wicked. His gracious and sagacious determination to "let them grow together until the harvest" permits time for the wicked to become sons of the Kingdom, and for the sons of the Kingdom to mature.
  - b. The harvest is intended not merely to destroy non-church members, but to "gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil-doers." Since God's Kingdom includes the Church, wicked men will be removed from the Church too, but since the Kingdom is larger than the Church and includes the world also, the final separation will snatch all the sons of the devil from every quarter, be they in the world or in the Church.
  - c. Should we interpret the Kingdom as precisely equal to the Church, this parable could not but forbid church discipline, inasmuch as the order to 'let them grow together until the harvest' would effectively prohibit any congregation of the Church to "drive out the wicked person from among you." (Cf. 1 Co. 5:13) It would also force the saints "to associate with immoral men . . . who bear the name of brother." (1 Co. 5:9, 11; Mt. 18:15-18; 2 Th. 3:6ff, 14, 15)
3. THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET. The Kingdom is again compared

to an instrument which gathers together men of every moral condition, the righteous and evil alike. Again, as in the Parable of the Weeds, the separation of the good and bad is pictured as the work of God's angels. The impression is left by the parable, although not specifically stated, that the net made one great sweep of the sea, inexorably taking with it all the fish therein, leaving none unnetted. Then, after the fishermen had separated the catch, there is no mention of further fishing to bring in those fish not previously caught. If this be important, then the implication is that the Kingdom of God includes the whole world in its scope, ruling over both Christians and non-Christians alike. The final judgment will distinguish them. Again, the Kingdom-net is greater in scope than either the Church-fish or the world-fish.

4. THE PARABLE OF THE POUNDS (Lk. 19:11-27). The kingly authority of the nobleman included even those citizens who hated him, who proved to be his enemies, because they "did not want him to reign over" them.

There could be other "Kingdom-parables," but let us now examine . . .

### THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST

As promised in the prophecies, in the days of the Roman empire there arose in Israel in the person of Jesus of Nazareth a royal heir to David's throne who set in motion the very principles which would guarantee the success of God's government on earth. Eventually, the message He proclaimed and the movement He inaugurated developed into a reasonably well-trained corps of genuine disciples ready to evangelize the world. But this is not yet "the Church," for that will be OFFICIALLY inaugurated on Pentecost. But first we must see . . .

### THE EVIDENCES OF THE PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM BEFORE PENTECOST:

1. The announcement: "Repent for the Kingdom of God has arrived," when made either by John the Baptist, Jesus or His disciples' preaching, is always expressed in the perfect tense, i.e., expressed as a fact that has taken place in the more or less recent past and

## GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

- its effect continues until the present time. It is always expressed by *ēngiken*: Mk. 1:15; Mt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; [cf. Lk. 9:2] Lk. 10:9, 11; [cf. Lk. 9:60].
2. Jesus continually announced the good news of the Kingdom of God from the very outset of His earthly ministry. (Mt. 4:23; 9:35; 13:19; Lk. 8:1)
  3. "Since the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and men of violence take it by force." (*biazetai*, see on Mt. 11:12; Lk. 16:16) There must be some sense in which, even in the days of Jesus' ministry before the cross, that these words are true.
  4. Jesus' miracles evidence the reality of "the Kingdom of God come upon you." (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 11:20; *éfthasen ef'humâs*: "arrived clear up to you, overtook you, has already reached you," cfr. Rocci, 1952; Arndt-Gingrich, 864) The defeat of Satan and his demons is evidence, says Jesus, that the Kingdom of God is not merely on its way, but, rather, evidence in every demoniac's deliverance, that God's royal government has already arrived. In fact, the defeat of Satan must actually precede the plundering of his house in the sense that God's Kingdom must have already been manifest before the demonized could be freed as Jesus Himself was liberating them. (Mt. 12:29)
  5. To hear with understanding the message of Jesus preached in Galilee is "to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 13:11, 19; Lk. 8:10) Although such explanations could well be given before the actual inception of the Kingdom, the disciples themselves were even then witnesses to the actual functioning of the Word of the Kingdom, the Word of God in men's hearts. (Cf. Mt. 13:16, 19; Lk. 8:11)
  6. The Kingdom consists of such as are like children in Jesus' day. (Mt. 18:1-4; 19:14; contrast Mk. 10:14, 15 with 23-25) "Publicans and harlots precede you (Pharisees and lawyers) into the kingdom of God, because John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and harlots believed him . . ." (Mt. 21:31, 32; cfr. Lk. 7:28-30) The Kingdom is the possession, says Jesus, of those who grasped its fundamental message. (Cf. Mk. 12:34; Lk. 6:20; Mt. 5:3, 10; Lk. 12:31, 32; 18:16, 17) Is it conceivable that some people understood this and so entered into this new relationship with God before Pentecost?

7. The scribes and Pharisees before Pentecost "shut the Kingdom of heaven in men's faces," "not entering yourselves, you forbid the ones who are entering to do so." (*oude tōū eiserchoménous afete eiseltheim*) Were there some actually in the process of entering the Kingdom before the cross? (*tōū eiserchoménous*)
8. "The Kingdom is not coming with observation," i.e., in such a way that its rise can be observed, because, "Take note, the Kingdom of God is:
  - a. "*within* you," i.e., inward or spiritual, not material, in nature;
  - b. or, "*among* you," i.e., already present in the personal presence of God's Messianic King Jesus, standing in front of the Pharisees. (Lk. 17:20, 21; cf. Jn. 18:36: "My Kingdom is not of this world.")
9. "Sons of the Kingdom" existed before Pentecost, because they had already left (*afēken*) possessions and loved ones "for the sake of the Kingdom of God." (Lk. 18:29; cf. Mt. 19:29; Mk. 10:29 "for my name's sake, for my sake and for the gospel")

None of the foregoing statements, of course, must ever be thrown into conflict with the even clearer descriptions of the external and formal realization of the Kingdom of God on earth in the Church. In fact, until the King is on His throne, there can be no formal Kingdom, however many are the loyal supporters who swear and prove their loyalty to Him by acts of service rendered even before His coronation. Further, whatever special problems arose in Jesus' earthly ministry and found their solution in the on-the-spot decisions of the King-designate, these solutions must be interpreted in the light of the King's constitutional law, once His will is ratified at His formal ascension to the throne and that will is now expressed through His new covenant with His people.

A mistaken application arising out of a misunderstanding of this evidence for the real existence of the Kingdom during, and expressed by, the personal ministry of Jesus, is that fostered by the "faith-only" branch of Christendom which urges, on the basis of examples of salvation of single individuals simply pronounced by Jesus, that such examples remain normative for the Church also after the personal ministry of Jesus, after Pentecost. They deny, thus, to baptism any relationship to salvation, simply because Jesus did not apparently require it for the salvation of any of these personal converts. (This is, of course, arguing from silence, since no "faith-only" teacher can

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prove that even one of these people had never been immersed by Jesus' disciples.) This rite, however, being a term of pardon expressed in the ratified will of the King upon the formal establishment of His Kingdom at Pentecost, is normative and universally to be required of believers to express their obedience, on the basis of which they too will be saved. It should be noted that, even thus, the terms of pardon in the Kingdom are unchanged, ever the same in every age since the time of Abel's offering: faith and obedience to *whatever* God requires —firstfruits, an ark, blood on the doorposts, the offering up of Isaac, looking at a serpent on a pole, being baptized, whatever God requires. This is why Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets and righteous men from the four corners of earth's geography and history are in the Kingdom of God, because they faithfully obeyed what was required of them in their historic situation. (Mt. 8:11, 12; Lk. 13:28, 29) And THIS is the Kingdom.

## THE INAUGURATION DATE OF THE KINGDOM

In very precise language, Jesus established the date for the inauguration of God's Kingdom on earth:

1. The preparation for the Kingdom was made by John the Baptist, Jesus and His Apostles. (Mt. 3:2; 9:35; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 12:28; 21:31; Lk. 4:43; 10:9, 11; 16:16)
2. The Kingdom was to begin during the personal absence of Jesus. (Mt. 26:29; Lk. 22:16, 18 all in connection with Jn. 14:16-18, 25-28; 16:4b-7; Ac. 1:3; cf. Lk. 19:11, 12, 15)
3. The Kingdom was to begin during the lifetime of the Apostles themselves. (Mt. 16:19, 28; Mk. 9:1; Lk. 9:27)
4. The Kingdom was to begin just a few days after the suffering, resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven. (Cf. Mt. 17:9; Lk. 19:11, 12; 24:46-49; Ac. 1:6; cf. Lk. 22:16, 18? Mt. 26:29?)
5. The Kingdom was preached throughout the world during the apostolic ministry as a realized fact even then in existence. (Mt. 24:14 [= Col. 1:6, 23]; Ac. 8:12; 19:8ff; 20:25; 28:23, 31; 2 Th. 1:4, 5?; 12:28)
6. Christ now reigns in His Kingdom. (Mt. 28:18-20; 13:37-43; 1 Co. 15:24, 25; Col. 1:13; 1 Th. 2:12?; Rev. 1:6, 9; Heb. 1:8) He shall reign until "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever." (Rev. 11:15; 12:10)

## HARMONIZATION OF THE TWO CONCEPTS

Thus far, we have the Kingdom of God as manifested in His universal government, and we have the Church sometimes thought of as an expression of His Kingdom. Someone might object: "But if the Kingdom of God is everything, what is the use for the Church then?" Edersheim (*Life*, I, 269) answers:

"The Kingdom of God," or Kingly Rule of God, is an *objective fact*. The visible Church can only be the *subjective* attempt at its outward realization, of which the invisible Church is the true counterpart.

Ideally, then, the Church of Jesus Christ is nothing less than a colony of the Kingdom of God on earth. (Cf. Phil. 3:20) Christ's true congregation (*ekklesia*) consists of those who submit to the rule of the King. Anyone else is a rebel against our Sovereign's government while camping on His land and taking ungrateful advantage of His benevolence. Also, because of the prevalence of evil in the world and its corruption even of people who have formally sworn allegiance to become subjects of the King, the boundary lines of the Kingdom are only imperfectly represented by the church-membership rolls.

The definition, which harmonizes these concepts, then, and explains how the great Kingdom of God is to be found in the heart of the Church and how anyone in the Church is a citizen of the Kingdom, is included in the following observations: The Kingdom is the total replacing of self with the will of God, even to the point of losing our lives in the service of God, losing all that matters of our lives. All that we could amass is bound up in our life, so Jesus urges us to give up our lives to receive what God would give us in its place. While our faith is important because it does things for God, it finds its highest value in what it is willing to receive from God. (Lk. 12:32 in its context!) This is a blow to man's pride, but the Kingdom is entered by self-renunciation and is often resisted by self-assertion. Asceticism, *per se*, is not submission to the King, because it may be nothing but a willful abuse of the gifts intended to be pressed into His service, and becomes but another form of self-assertion. Finally, the ultimate rebellion against the Kingdom is the demand for self-rule, motivated by self-interest, to arrive at self-complacency. But God's Kingdom is not His power over the material world manipulated for our advantage, but primarily God's control over our wills for

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His advantage. This is the Kingdom, and the reason why many Church members are not in it.

## SUMMARY

Edersheim's helpful summary bears restudy. (*Life*, I, 269ff; see his work also for Jewish views of the Kingdom.) His analysis of 119 passages in the NT where the expression "Kingdom" occurs—to which have been added eight more—, shows that it means:

1. THE RULE OF GOD: Mt. 6:33; 12:28; 13:38; 19:24; 21:31; (22:1); Mk. 1:14; 10:15, 23, 24, 25; 12:34; Lk. 1:33; 4:43; 9:11; 10:9, 10; 11:20; 12:31; 17:20, 21; 18:17, 24, 25, 29; Jn. 3:3; (18:36); Ac. 1:3; 8:12; 20:25; 28:31; Ro. 14:17; 1 Co. 4:20; Col. 4:11; 1 Th. 2:12; Rev. 1:(6), 9.
2. WHICH WAS MANIFESTED IN AND THROUGH CHRIST: Mt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 5:3, 10; 9:35; 10:7; Mk. 1:15; 11:10; Lk. 8:1; 9:2; 16:16; 19:12, 15; (Jn. 18:36); Ac. 1:3; 28:23; Heb. 1:8; Rev. 1:9.
3. IS APPARENT IN THE CHURCH: Mt. 11:1; 13:41; 16:19; 18:1; 21:43; 23:13; (26:29?); (Mk. 14:25?); Lk. 7:28; (Lk. 22:16, 18?); Jn. 3:5; (Jn. 18:36); Ac. 1:3; Col. 1:13; Rev. 1:(6), 9.
4. GRADUALLY DEVELOPS AMIDST HINDRANCES: Mt. 11:12; 13:11, 19, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52, 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1, 14; Mk. 4:11, 26, 30; Lk. 8:10; 9:62; 13:18, 20; (Jn. 18:36); Ac. 1:3; Rev. 1:(6), 9.
5. IS TRIUMPHANT AT THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST ("the end"): Mt. 16:28; (sic!); Mk. 9:1 (sic!); 15:43; Lk. 9:27(sic!); 19:11; 21:31; 22:16, 18; (Jn. 18:36); Ac. 1:3; 2 Ti. 4:1; Heb. 12:28; Rev. 1:9. (See the special study "The Coming of the Son of Man," Vol. II, 430ff, for my dissent from Edersheim's interpretation.)
6. AND, FINALLY, PERFECTED IN "THE WORLD TO COME": (Heb. 2:5) Mt. 5:19, 20; 7:21; 8:11; 13:43; 18:3; 25:34; 26:29(?); Mk. 9:47; 10:14; 14:25(?); Lk. 6:20; 12:32; 13:28, 29; 14:15; 18:16; 22:29(30); (Jn. 18:36); Ac. 1:3; 14:22; 1 Co. 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; 2 Th. 1:5; (2 Ti. 4:18); Js. 2:5; 2 Pt. 1:11; Rev. 1:9; 12:10; (11:15).

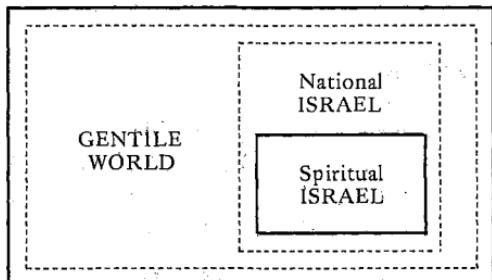
These conclusions may be represented graphically in the following way:

## KINGDOM

### THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

#### THE KINGDOM OF GOD BEFORE CHRIST

Ro. 3:29

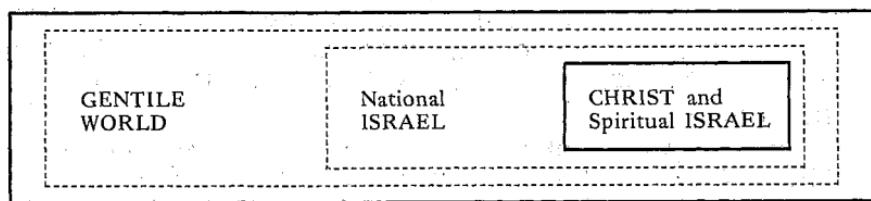


- Solid line = God's Rule
- Broken line = Rebellion against God's Kingdom

God's Kingdom rules over the entire earth and all humanity, Jews and Gentiles alike. (2 Kg. 19:15; Dan. 4:2, 17, 25, 32-35; 6:26; Jer. 10:7, 10; 27:5; Isa. 43:13; Psa. 22:28; 47:2, 7, 8; 95:6; 96:10; 103:19; Mal. 1:14) However, within national Israel, there was always a remnant of believers who acknowledge God's rule. (Cf. 1 Chron. 17:14; 28:5; Ro. 9:6-8; Gal. 3:7-9, 29; Lu. 2:25, 38; 3:8, 9; 13:16; 19:9; 23:51; Isa. 1:9; 4:3; 10:20f; 11:11, 16)

#### THE KINGDOM OF GOD BEFORE PENTECOST

Ro. 4:16



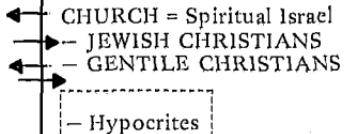
In the time of the last world empire God set up a worldwide Kingdom under the rule of the Son of man, a Kingdom of the saints, the spiritual throne of David. (Cf. Dan. 2:35, 44; 7:13, 14, 28; Jn. 18:36; Lk. 1:32, 33; Ac. 2:30-36) But the Messianic King arose from within Israel, not from the pagan world. (Mt. 15:24)

## KINGDOM

### GREAT SERMON IN PARABLES

#### THE KINGDOM OF GOD AFTER PENTECOST UNTIL JUDGMENT

- THIS PRESENT EVIL WORLD
  - NATIONAL ISRAEL
  - GENTILES



While God controls the entire world, yet by His permissive will men are permitted to choose good or evil. Most choose evil to remain in it, while a minority choose to enter that subjective expression of God's Kingdom, the Church. (Mt. 13:24-30; 47, 48; Jn. 3:3-5; 1 Co. 1:18—2:16; 3:18-23; Col. 1:13)

#### THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN ETERNITY AFTER JUDGMENT

1 Co. 15:24-28

- HELL
  - WORLD of unbelieving sinners
  - HYPOCRITES from the Church, Eph. 5:5; Gal. 5:21; 1 Co. 15:50; 6:9,10

- FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD
  - BRIDE OF CHRIST Rev. 21:1-4; 22:17; Eph. 5:22-33
- ETERNAL KINGDOM 2 Pt. 1:11; Js. 2:5
- HEAVENLY KINGDOM 2 Ti. 4:18; Heb. 12:28
- FELLOWSHIP OF SAINTS OF ALL THE AGES Mt. 8:11, 12; Lk. 13:28, 29

(Zech. 14:9; Dan. 7:22, 27; Mt. 13:40-43, 49, 50; Rev. 1:5; 11:15; 15:3)

The first thing to notice about each of these diagrams is the solid line of the Kingdom of God around every single diagram: God is **ALWAYS** on the throne! The next thing to observe in the first three diagrams is the broken line surrounding the world within the Kingdom

of God, the dotted line of evil, because the whole world lies in the evil one, but only by the permissive will of a sovereign God who has the last word. (1 Jn. 5:19) But the third thing to notice is crucial: within the evil world God has established a beachhead: spiritual Israel = the Church today. The fourth detail is the final and permanent separation of all evil doers into one place reserved for them: even Hell is positive proof of the power and reality of God's government. Note, contemporaneously, the glorious revelation of the people of God enjoying the perfect rule of the eternal Kingdom of God.

For further notes on the Kingdom and the great sermon in parables, see especially Seth Wilson's Special Study, *Mark* (Bible Study Text-book Series, pp. 499-506: "What the Kingdom is Like" and "Treasures of the Kingdom") and R.C. Foster's *Middle Period*, pp. 79ff.

## Section 32

### JESUS IS REFUSED BY HIS OWN AT NAZARETH.

TEXT: 13:54-58  
(Parallel: Mark 6:1-6)

54 And coming into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works? 55 Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joseph; and Simon, and Judas? 56 And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things? 57 And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house. 58 And he did not many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What is so significant about the amazement of these people, given the fact that it is caused by the miracles and message of Jesus?
- b. Why do you think that the Nazarenes did not know the answer

- to their own question: "Where did He get all this wisdom and these miracles?"
- c. Analyze the reasons why the Nazarenes were "caused to stumble" in Jesus.
  - d. Now, if causing someone to stumble is regarded by the NT as sin, how can you justify Jesus' doing precisely that? The Scripture says that the Nazarenes were scandalized by Jesus.
  - e. One of the accusations we often make against faith miracle workers today is that too often their miracles do not seem to want to occur in the presence of skeptics, unbelievers or other critical eyes. Here Jesus did not do many miracles because of the Nazarene's unbelief. Nay, worse, Mark (6:5) actually affirms that the Lord COULD NOT do any miracles in Nazareth. Does faith—or is it credulity?—in the miracle worker or in the recipient of the miracle create miracle-working power? Perhaps Jesus was limited by the same weakness and failure as modern fake healers. What is your explanation?
  - f. What is the importance here of the mention of Jesus' brothers and sisters?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus left Capernaum and went to His own hometown, Nazareth. His disciples accompanied Him. On the sabbath He began to teach the folk in the local synagogue. Many who listened to Him were astonished and asked, "Where did this man get all this wisdom? What great wisdom He has! What mighty works are done by Him! Is not this the carpenter, the son of the carpenter? Is not his mother called Mary? Are not his brothers named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters here with us? Where, then, did he get all this?" So they were shocked at Him.

But Jesus commented to them, "No prophet is left unhonored, except in his own hometown, among his own kin, and in his own house."

And He could not do many mighty miracles in Nazareth, because of their unbelief, except that He laid His hands upon a few sick folk and healed them. He marveled because of their unbelief.

**SUMMARY**

Jesus tried again to win His own hometown to discipleship. The result was superficial amazement at His supernatural wisdom and miracles, but no real conviction of His true position as God's Prophet. The Nazarenes were shocked at Jesus; He marveled at their continued unbelief. The townspeople gave Him little or no opportunity to work great miracles on their behalf.

**NOTES**

Before attempting to comment on this section, it is well to ask whether it be the same incident as that recorded by Luke (4:16-30). Some commentaries identify the two accounts and create thereby unnecessary problems for the reader. The coincidences which make the identification appear possible are three:

1. In both accounts the Nazarenes marveled at Jesus' ability. (Mt. 13:54b = Mk. 6:2, cf. Lk. 4:22) Is this psychologically credible especially the second time, if there were two visits? Yes, because, however well they may have remembered a supposed first visit to Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry (i.e., Lk. 4:16-30), several new factors would have contributed to occasion their astonishment: His far greater popularity in Galilee is now a fact that demanded reappraisal of His claims. New to them also would be His surprising courage in returning after the attempt on His life on His last visit, as well as the loving meekness of His manner, in contrast to their meanness, and His magnanimity in not holding their deeds against them. If "time heals things," then Jesus' absence from Nazareth for a sufficiently considerable interval would render a repetition of some of the same surprise quite credible.
2. In both accounts the Nazarenes objected to Jesus' pretended authority, because He was the son of Joseph the carpenter. (Mt. 13:55 = Mk. 6:3; cf. Lk. 4:22b) But this is only natural, since it is the basis of their refusal no matter how many times He visited there.
3. Would Jesus on two separate visits have reiterated the proverb? Although not exactly verbatim, the wording is close enough. (Mt. 13:57b = Mk. 6:4, cf. Lk. 4:24) Yes, the reverting to this proverb is not exceptional, since the general circumstances of the two visits

to the same hometown could have evoked the same general reaction in Jesus. In fact, the deliberate hammering on this particular motto may indicate Jesus' aim to reach a far higher goal than a mere accounting for local prejudices. (See below on 13:57b.)

Nevertheless, the differences are more marked than these supposed likenesses:

#### THE NARRATIVE OF MATTHEW AND MARK

1. Mark links this visit to Nazareth with the events around Capernaum following the great Parables Sermon, the trip to Gerasa and return to Capernaum. Matthew, having already told this, links this trip to Nazareth more loosely after the Parables Sermon. But these events are admittedly late in the Galilean ministry.
2. Mark notices the presence of Jesus' disciples on this visit, a natural feature to be expected, as Jesus has now developed His program more fully since His earlier visit, including a following. This argument cannot be conclusive, since Matthew is silent about disciples here, and his account alone cannot argue their absence any more than can Luke's earlier story (Lk. 4:16-30).
3. Matthew notices the paucity of miracles while Mark mentions a few.

#### THE NARRATIVE OF LUKE

Luke gives the definite impression that he is narrating an incident early in the Galilean ministry of Jesus shortly after His baptism and temptations.

Luke is silent about disciples on Jesus' first visit to Nazareth, a fact that cannot militate against their possible presence. Nevertheless, the very progress of His relationship to His immediate followers at that early period indicates that He may not yet have called them to personal discipleship. (See Lk. 5:1-11, 27-32.)

Luke not only records no miracles, but cites Jesus' words about Elijah and Elisha that seem to preclude His having done any before entering the synagogue. Certainly, none were recorded as done later.

4. Matthew and Mark indicate no specific duration of His visit to Nazareth, but they imply at least some time to do a few miracles.
- Luke tells how in the synagogue an attempt was made on His life from which He narrowly escaped by walking through the crowd and departing immediately.

These differences are explicable on the basis of Jesus' love for His own townspeople: is it like Jesus to have entirely abandoned even Nazareth after one rejection? Second, Jesus' growing popularity throughout Galilee and the healing of time might have counselled a second visit because of changed circumstances. Although time did not heal their unbelief, it may have let their offended pride cool enough to permit Him to try again.

**13:54. Coming into his own country**, as Mark connects it, means leaving the unwanted excitement around Capernaum where Jesus had just completed a series of steps to keep tight reins on His own popularity:

1. The Great Sermon in Parables intended to hide vital truth from any but the most understanding disciples. (Mt. 13:1-53; Mk. 4:1-34; Lk. 8:4ff)
2. The withdrawal from the Capernaum crowds by a stormy voyage to Gerasa and, hopefully, some tranquility was interrupted by Gerasene fearful reluctance. (Mt. 8:28-34; Mk. 5:1-20; Lk. 8:26-39)
3. Then followed the return to Capernaum and the great crowds, the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage, and the resurrection of Jairus' daughter and the injunction to the parents to avoid publicity. (Mt. 9:1, 18-26; Mk. 5:21-43; Lk. 8:40-56)
4. Although He sternly ordered two healed blind men not to publish the news of their healing, they disobeyed. (Mt. 9:27-31)
5. The crowds marvelled yet more when He freed a dumb demoniac. (Mt. 9:32-34)

These pressures on Jesus may have determined His decision to reach an area where His impularity would have granted a small respite from the constant thronging of people. Nazareth suited His requirements ideally, since the earlier disapprobation of His townsmen had been previously encountered. (Lk. 4:16-30) But Jesus' return to Nazareth is no mere avoidance of Capernaum, as if He had nowhere else to go. He strode into Nazareth, because He knew His people and loved them, despite their sins, pride and prejudices. He

had remained away from them to let them study Him at long range while He preached and healed all over Galilee. Now He must return once more to teach them, work among them and give them fresh glimpses of His true identity.

**Coming into his own country He taught them in their synagogue.**

Matthew's imperfect tense (*edidasken*) does not in this case mean to suggest that He kept this up for some time, because this is an example of the inchoative imperfect which describes an action as recently, or just begun, being in its first stages. (See Robertson-Davis, *Short Grammar*, 300; Blass-Debrunner, 169, sec. 326 call it "conative imperfect") So, Mark's expression, "he began to teach," is only the more explicit equivalent of Matthew's idiom.

So earnest and powerful, so winsome and true was His message that its immediate effect was the astonishment of the audience. But this amazement is not the marveling that leads to joyous acceptance. It arose, rather, out of what they suppose to be perfect familiarity with Jesus: they think they know Him, as their questions reveal afterward. Their perplexity, expressed in the question: **Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?**, arises out of the apparent incongruity between what they thought they knew about Him and what they were even then experiencing with their own senses. But He was, in reality, a perfect Stranger. Edersheim (*Life*, I, 636ff) rightly notices that the very events of Jesus' miraculous conception and birth were hidden from the Nazarenes, even as His earthly development was unseen by the Bethlehemites. But this fact in no way lessens the responsibility of both cities to test the claims of Jesus. In fact, the ignorance of Nazareth concerning the great fact of the Incarnation is no warrant for their unbelief. It should, rather, have spurred them on to examine all the more critically His claims in the light of His miraculous credentials. If they are curious enough to ask this kind of question, which itself contains such damaging admissions on their part, let them seek their proper answers! There was no denying that **this man has this wisdom and these mighty works are wrought by his hands!** Since their knowledge of these deeds is largely based on hearsay evidence filtering back into Nazareth from nearly every village in Galilee,—apparently He worked no miracle in His hometown prior to this historical moment,—is it credible that the popular opinions of their fellow Galileans, that Jesus might possibly be the Christ, should not also have been breathed about? They were taken aback, not because of His grace in speaking or because of the truth of His doctrine, but that these virtues should be His. Had they not

been wilfully blind, they should have understood that ANYONE so demonstrably without the preparation of academic education who proves himself so amply in possession of such unmatched wisdom and such glorious power MUST have been sent and empowered by God. Their culpability is the more inexcusable because not only were they well aware of *these mighty works*, but before He left town, they were even to witness "the healing of a few sick folk." (Mk. 6:5) Even when they saw it, they did not afterward repent and believe Him. (Cf. Mt. 21:28-32) Were they but to pronounce Him Christ, they would arrive immediately at the only satisfactory answer to their questions, but they supposed the matter settled merely by voicing a few insinuating questions.

**13:55 Is not this the carpenter's son?** For this oblique reference to Joseph, Mark has only: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary . . .?" Did Jesus so establish Himself as a worker in Nazareth during His pre-ministry days that His acquaintances remember Joseph only in passing as the man whose carpentry his son took over? Where then is Joseph? His passing may be implied in his not being mentioned in any of the events immediately concerning Jesus' family following the return to Nazareth after Jesus' birth. (Cf. Mt. 1:16, 18-20, 24; 2:13; Lk. 1:27; 2:4, 16, 33, 43; 3:23; 4:22; Jn. 1:45; 6:42 are the only references to Joseph by name in Scripture.) His absence on some occasions may be explained on grounds other than his death, for example, where business demanded that he be elsewhere when Mary and her sons visited Jesus. (Mt. 12:46; Lk. 8:19) However, if Joseph were still alive during Jesus' last visit, the unusual phrasing of some Nazarene's question according to Mark, is remarkable.

**Is not his mother called Mary?** "Is not this . . . the son of Mary . . .?" (Mk. 6:3) The simplest reading of either of these versions would lead the uncomplicated reader to think the Nazarenes are simply confirming by a negative question expecting a positive answer what they think they know about Jesus. But, some, remembering it somehow un-Jewish to identify a man by mentioning his mother's name, think Mark to be pointing to some peculiar fact.

1. These words in the mouth of the Nazarenes, says McMillan (*Mark*, 76) smell of an early rumor circulating to the effect that Jesus was illegitimate, but his proof-texts (e.g., Jn. 8:41; 9:29, etc.) do not substantiate this, being open to other interpretations. Rather, as discussed at Mt. 1:24, the very circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, in the wisdom of God, forestalled such an accusation on the

part of the Nazarenes. Further, Matthew's text, parallel to Mark, actually quotes the Nazarenes themselves as describing Jesus as "the carpenter's son," before ever mentioning Mary. If the Nazarenes believe Jesus to be Joseph's son, there can be no suspicion of illegitimacy here. Again, that these words indicate no such rumor is proved by their very vagueness, if such an insinuation were intended. Jesus' detractors did not mince words when resorting to name-calling! (Cf. Jn. 8:48, 52; 7:20; 10:20; Mk. 3:21, 22, 30; Mt. 10:25; 11:18, 19)

2. Is Mark's special wording intended to convey the concept of the Virgin Birth? That is, by saying, "Is not this . . . the son of Mary?" is he not eliminating Joseph as Jesus' real father in the same sense that Mary is His real mother? No, because Mark is citing the objections made by the Nazarenes on the basis of what they considered common knowledge. These words, far from containing Mark's doctrine, are in fact not really his at all.
3. An even simpler solution for the Marcan phenomenon is available: Mark mentions only Jesus' mother, because the people he is quoting could not, for some reason, refer directly to Joseph as any longer an active participant in Nazareth's life. Is he only remembered by some (cf. Matthew's "the son of the carpenter"), but absent from immediate concern, whereas Mary, being still alive, is very much present in their thinking? Mark's words, rather than express editorializing, may well reflect the precise situation in Nazareth and suggest the well-nigh universal supposition that Joseph had been long dead.

Contrary to Plummer, (*Matthew*, 199), this difference in the form of the questions does not at all represent redactional changes by Matthew, but rather the natural, rapid-fire questioning of excited people.

**Are not his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?** See the Special Study, "The Brethren of the Lord" after this chapter. But why do the Nazarenes bother to mention these men by name? They are proudly proving thereby to be able to remember them, since these brothers had moved to Capernaum with Jesus some time earlier. (See on Mt. 4:13; Cf. Jn. 2:12.) By proving their ability to name them one by one, they think they have thereby explained Jesus too: could He possibly be any different from those named?

**13:56 And are not all his sisters here with us?** Did these girls marry Nazarenes and so not move with Jesus' mother and brothers to Capernaum with Him? How many ladies are implied in "all his sisters"

is unknown, but, when considered as all younger than Jesus the first-born and included with four baby brothers, they certainly represented a houseful for Jesus and His (widowed?) mother. Because of the poignant note in Jesus' sad proverb: "A prophet is not without honor except . . . among his own kin, and in his own house," some have wondered whether the sisters, fearing reprisals from their townsmen who had so bitterly rejected Jesus earlier, had sought to disassociate themselves from Him, because of His apparently unwarranted assumption of superiority over His own people.

The surprise expressed by these Nazarenes in their barrage of questions indicates just how perfectly normal must have been the entire course of Jesus' life and development there. This does not deny the deep-running differences that only Mary could have known. Nevertheless, their astonishment serves to mark the perfect humanity of His maturity in wisdom and physical stature to the delight of God and man. (Lk. 2:40, 52) For, if the Nazarenes who knew His history among them best, humanly speaking, could trace no abnormality in His boyhood conduct, we are right to conclude that

1. He did no miracles as a boy, contrary to the fantastic narrations of the apocryphal gospels. His first miracle was done at Cana of Galilee and not sooner. (Jn. 2:11)
2. His anointing by the Spirit at His baptism really signalled the beginning of His Messianic mission, after He left Nazareth a few days prior. (Ac. 10:37, 38) None of His days at Nazareth before this anointing should be considered as having any relation to that commission except as they gave Him time and opportunity to mature as a perfect human being. (Cf. Lk. 2:40, 52)
3. The doctrine of Jesus' perfect humanity (cf. Heb. 2:14, 17; 4:15; 5:7, 8; Phil. 2:8) passed the test of His closest acquaintances. The Nazarenes could not tell the difference between Jesus and His four brothers and all His sisters. His humanity was convincingly real to them.
4. Their rhetorical questions are devastating to any theory of perpetual virginity for Mary, because they imply the common knowledge that Jesus is in no way different from His brothers, sisters, mother or father. Had there been some suspicion that they were but cousins, their questions would not have been able to imply so much, since He would, in that case, not have been of the same family as the brothers, hence He could have potentially been actually superior and their own argument falls. In fact, they use

the words "son," "mother" and "sisters" in their normal connotation. Why should they be thought to have changed to a larger range of meaning when they speak of His "brothers"?

**13:57 And they were offended in him.** "By what right does the village carpenter, whom we have known all our lives, rise to speak to us with an authority superior to the learned rabbis?" Indeed, what right? Their former astonishment hardened into scandal. He did not fit the slot they had carved for Him. So, rather than reject their categories, they rejected Him. But in so doing, they left themselves without any accounting for His wisdom and works, real facts that, despite the fact that they surpassed human understanding, were to be believed. Their shock, indignation and hurt was not any whit less real because Jesus, far from intending them any spiritual damage, aimed only at their eternal life and peace. Their stumbling into sin, further obstinacy and unbelief, could not be helped by Jesus, and this fact leads us to see that stumbling-blocks are of two types:

1. Sinners being offended by righteous men in the pursuit of righteousness whose godliness itself is the cause of pain, indignation, shock or disgust. Jesus, in the pursuit of His messianic mission, could not help becoming the world's greatest stumbling block! (Lk. 2:34; Mt. 21:44 = Lk. 20:18; 1 Pt. 2:6-8 = Isa. 8:14, 15; see notes on Mt. 11:6).
2. Weak, or relatively innocent people are offended by supposedly righteous men in the pursuit of their own comfort, exercising their rights or freedom while quite unconcerned for the conscience of others. (Cf. Notes on Mt. 18:5-9; Ro. 14:1—15:7; 1 Co. 6:12—11:1)

Ironically, the Nazarenes mistakenly reputed Jesus to be a stumbling block of the latter type, only to splatter their lives against the Rock of Ages!

The Nazarenes blundered by trying to account for Jesus by discussing His quite human family, but they omitted from the account the one ingredient which, though they could not have known it, would have explained Him: the Incarnation. Lest we too stumble over Jesus, we must appreciate how gross is the blunder involved in attempting to explain Him by ordinary rules. We are tempted to think that unless or until we are able to fathom the mystery of God, or, at least, solve the problem of Jesus Christ, we shall not surrender to Him. Nevertheless, even a perfect intellectual solution would not bow our heads in submission since common canons permit us to measure

other people every day, yet we never throw ourselves at their feet to become their servants. In fact, were we to succeed in reducing the Lord's Christ to a philosophical formula or a mathematical equation, He would then be unneeded, because, in our conceit, we would have thought to understand Him perfectly. He would be then useless to us as Master and Lord, since we would have then reduced Him to our own self-created categories. But His Incarnation and His Atonement are facts to be believed on the evidence He gives us of their truth, not propositions for debate the issue of which is of little or no consequence. Rather than discredit the evidence because of our failure perfectly to comprehend, let us postpone debate and submit! After all, what is faith for, if we must walk by sight?

Our scandal-level, i.e., that point at which we too are most liable to be shocked, disgusted or hurt by Jesus, is really that point in our thinking at which Jesus holds no surprises for us anymore. When our theology will have succeeded in saying all there is to know about Him, we are perfectly set up for our big disappointment in Him. We are Christians, wrote Morgan (*Matthew*, 181ff), because Jesus towers above us, impresses us, baffles us, eludes us, yet enwraps us with love and thrills us with power. We are Christians in the presence of the Infinite Mystery, infinitely more than in the presence of things that can be perfectly explained.

**But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house.** Two thrusts are noticeable in Jesus' use of this proverb:

1. He cites to the Nazarenes this true psychological observation, and by so doing, shows them that, humanly speaking, He understands them. It is genuinely difficult to appreciate the surpassing importance and real accomplishments of someone whose entire growth and development occurred before our eyes. We do have problems accepting the profound changes in people with whom we think ourselves perfectly familiar. So, the Lord, perfectly familiar with His own people, because He really knew their weakness and need, in heart-warming understanding and generous mercy, expresses this solidarity with them in their difficulty.
2. But the very proverb He selected so to express Himself speaks volumes. He could have said, "A successful man is not without honor, etc.," and have communicated the above-mentioned human comprehension. Instead, His choice of wording may be nothing less than the earnest challenge to His dear acquaintances to

re-examine the evidences that would have led them to see Him as a PROPHET. They might not understand Him to be God's Son, rather than Joseph and Mary's boy, but even so, let them think of Him as Joseph's Son the PROPHET! Let them study His message, accept His credentials as proving His right to reveal God's message like any other mighty prophet born of human parents but called by God! By this approach they might eventually be convinced to bow in humble submission of their divine Townsman. (Cf. Jesus' use of a similar approach with Judean enemies, Jn. 10:37, 38 and with His most intimate followers, Jn. 14:10, 11.)

**13:58 And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.** If it be true that faith is that positive contact which man makes with God by abandoning his self-justifications, if it be that positive living in conformity with the convictions he has about Him, then we see why these Nazarenes' unbelief caused them to stay away from Jesus. They made no contact with Him, so He did not force them to accept unwanted miracles. If they did not believe Him enough to come bringing their sick to them or ask Him to help them, then "He could do no mighty work there." (Mk. 6:6) Jesus could truly say, "I just could not help them, because they would not let me!"

Further, since Jesus had chosen to limit Himself to help only those willing to receive His blessing, He deliberately did not force either their belief or acceptance of His help. The seemingly objectionable statement of Mark ("He could do no mighty work there.") reflects only this moral commitment, not any objective ability that somehow failed in Nazareth. Rather, here is written the meekness of the Son of God: we would have been sorely tempted to rip off some stupendous wonder "just to show them," but Jesus stood firm. Again, the Lord refused to undersell the evidential value of a single healing! If the imposition of hands on a few sick folk to heal them (Mk. 6:5) will not produce the unshakeable conviction that God has sent Jesus, no mere escalation of signs and wonders could be hoped to produce it. Nor is He willing to discount the importance of believing the true testimony of others who carried the news of His miracles to Nazareth. (Cf. 13:54; Lk. 4:23)

Not only **did Jesus not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief**, but He marveled because of it. (Mk. 6:6) See notes on 8:10 where Jesus marveled at the great faith of the Roman centurion. There, marveling is described as implying some ignorance of that about which one feels genuine surprise. But who can complain if JESUS CHOSE NOT TO KNOW who would eventually believe or

disbelieve Him? This very choice, itself part of the mystery of incarnation, lets Him react genuinely, because He is truly overjoyed at excitingly real faith, or stunned and grieved at obstinate unbelief. He was astounded as He heard their reaction, because their unbelief was so unreasonable. Even though they admitted the premises for the divine origin of His mission and message, they resolutely denied the obvious conclusion to which these premises must necessarily lead.

Although Jesus' own doctrine that the quality of one's heart affects his receptivity to the truth had already been expounded in the Parables of the Kingdom, (Mt. 13:1-53), this did not alleviate His heartbreak when He too had to live with that reality embodied in the wayside hearts of His old friends and fellow townsmen. Here, again, we see that the atmosphere which a congregation brings to a message deeply affects its effectiveness, being either a stone wall of hostility through which the message cannot penetrate, or a friendly expectancy that can turn the simplest testimony into soul-stirring eloquence. Many a message has been absolutely ruined, not because it was not true and needed, but due to prejudices against the speaker. And Jesus faced this too—in His own hometown.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Is this event but another version of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth as recorded in Luke 4:16-30? What are the similarities and differences?
2. What is the point of the rhetorical questions asked by the Nazarenes in reference to Jesus' family?
3. What damaging evidence against the theory of the perpetual virginity of Mary is unconsciously provided by the Nazarenes' questions in this section?
4. Did Jesus do any miracles at Nazareth? How do you know?
5. Explain how the Nazarenes "took offense at Him."
6. Name Jesus' brothers.
7. How many sisters did Jesus have?
8. How did the Nazarenes admit as a matter of fact the miracles that Jesus did? What, then, did they reject?
9. What proverb did Jesus cite as the explanation of the Nazarenes' rejection of His person and ministry?
10. According to the best information available in the NT, how many times did Jesus visit the Nazareth synagogue after the beginning

- of His ministry? What was the response each time?
11. Explain how Jesus could marvel at the unbelief of His townspeople. Did their unbelief surprise Him? If so, how? If not, why not?

### SPECIAL STUDY: THE BRETHREN OF THE LORD

What is the real purpose of this study? Is it to discover from an examination of the best evidence available to us, whether the men who are entitled in Scripture "the brethren of the Lord," were real, natural half-brothers of Jesus, being sons of Mary; or whether they were step-brothers, being sons of Joseph by a former wife before espousing Mary; or whether they were cousins, being sons of Alphaeus (or Clopas), Joseph's brother (or else, sons of Mary of Clopas, sister of Mary, Joseph's wife)? Is this research into the semi-obscure facts surrounding the life of our Lord only for academic discussion? What could be gained by a knowledge of the answer to the proposed questions? Beyond mere acquaintance with the facts, are we any richer morally?

Or is it the purpose of such a study to affirm or deny the perpetual virginity of Mary as a dogma affirmed by the Roman Catholic denomination? Even if, after accurate study, one concludes that Mary did, in fact, have no other children after the birth of Jesus, and that the reputed "brethren of the Lord" were, in fact, sons of Joseph by a former wife named Hannah, what is gained for the Catholic position, or what is lost for those who previously objected to the idea (not to say, doctrine or dogma) of the perpetual virginity of Mary?

Or is the question even correctly put in that fashion? Could we not ask ourselves, what USE is to be made of the supposed perpetual virginity? What is the FUNCTION of such a pretended fact?

So the importance or value of this study does not lie so much in enriching our information about the private life and relations of Jesus, as in dealing with the Catholic apologists who would elevate Mary to a superhuman plane. To do this they must demonstrate three fundamental propositions, one of which this study touches directly:

1. "Mary was herself conceived without sin," or the dogma of the immaculate conception;

2. "Mary remained virgin throughout her married life," or the dogma of perpetual virginity;
3. "Mary is an object of special veneration," or the dogma of her special status in heaven whereby she is supposed to be accorded particular devotion. This last step in her exaltation involves the following unproven assumptions: (Cf. *I.S.B.E.*, 2003)
  - a. Christ's perpetual humanity (something else to prove) presumes His perpetual Sonship to Mary, as argument which implies that the glorified Lord Jesus is still subject to His mother.
  - b. Christ hears her prayers, hence she is an intercessor through whom prayers may be addressed to Jesus.
  - c. Since Mary cared for the body of Christ when He was on earth, naturally, His spiritually body, the Church, would be her special care in heaven.

Even if it were possible to establish as fact that every Church Father who supported the perpetual virginity of Mary had no ulterior theory to defend by that stand, in which case each may be regarded as trustworthy to transmit no more than simple, historical fact, and even if it were possible to establish on purely logical and exegetical grounds from the Scriptures that both Mary AND Joseph remained virgins in their marriage relationship, still much stands or falls in relationship to the moral implications drawn therefrom by the modern Christian, some of which are:

1. The medieval conception, not yet fully clarified or changed by those whose denomination officially tolerated it, of the intrinsic sinfulness of the desire for marital relations and the act by which that desire is realized. (Contrast 1 Ti. 4:3, 4; Heb. 13:4) Marriage, though a holy sacrament for many, must yet be viewed by them as inferior to celibacy and incompatible with holy living in its highest, purest sense. This conclusion must necessarily follow and certainly was the view of many, however contradictory both to Scripture and to logic. For, if, "Mary was married to Joseph and Joseph to Mary in *appearance* only, then they were recreant to each other and to the ordinance of God which made them one." (*I.S.B.E.*, 2003)
2. Must the ancient "repugnance to Christian feeling to think of the womb of Mary, in which the Word, made flesh, had dwelt in a peculiar way, as the habitation of other babes," (*I.S.B.E.*, 520) express also the sentiments of the modern Christian?
3. Must the modern Christian share the view "that Mary is not to be

considered a human being under the ordinary obligations of human life," (*I.S.B.E.*, 2003), "removed from the sphere of ordinary life and duties as too commonplace for one who is to be surrounded with the halo of a demi-god, and to be idealized in order to be worshipped"? (*I.S.B.E.*, 520)

4. Must the Scriptures continue to be mishandled in order to support an unjustifiable theory of celibacy, an unbased theory of Joseph's virginity, a distorted view of marriage and an inadequate understanding of the family? Even if it were logically conceded that Joseph and Mary chose, for whatever reasons, to abstain from marital relations after the birth of Jesus, and even if the brethren of the Lord are logically conceded to be the sons of any other woman than Mary, it is not right that Biblical texts be distorted to prove it.

It is too apparent that the presumption of perpetual virginity for Mary is an important link in her exaltation without sin to be an object of worship in her function as mediatrix, just as much as the dogma of her immaculate conception (her being born sinless so as not to transmit inherited original sin to Jesus) and the almost forgotten but necessary assumption of her immaculate life. But whatever may be the eventual use of the particular information regarding the "brethren of the Lord," the evidence for this link in the chain of Mariolatry, which binds the conscience of millions of people for whom Christ died, is as weak as any of the others.

### WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

As will be seen, the main interpretations of "the brethren of the Lord" have been three: the "cousin" theory, the "step-brother" theory and the "half brother" view. (For fuller exposition of these views and their relative literature, see *I.S.B.E.* and other encyclopedic articles on "the brethren of the Lord," on the individual names of the four brothers, on Mary, on virginity and similar topics. See especially J.B. Lightfoot's commentary on Galatians, pp. 252-291. For much of the following material, I am indebted to Lightfoot's collection of evidence, however much I may disagree with his choice of conclusion.

The basic problems involved in the identification of "the Lord's brethren" turns upon the following considerations:

1. The identification of Clopas (or Cleophas): was he the same man as Alphaeus, father of the Apostle, James of Alphaeus? Was Clopas the brother of Joseph, foster father of Jesus? Are Judas Thaddaeus or Simon the Zealot, or both, sons of this Alphaeus-Clopas?
2. Is Mary of Clopas to be identified with the Mary mother of James and Joses, hence also mother of Simon (or Simeon) Zelotes and Judas Thaddaeus? Is this Mary to be identified as the sister of Jesus' mother?
3. Is Jesus' mother's sister to be identified with the wife of Zebedee and with Salome?

In order better to see the relative connections the following charts are offered:

Chart 1: WOMEN AT THE CROSS. <i>Question marks indicate doubt about the identification.</i>			
	Mt. 27:56	Mk. 15:40	Jn. 19:25 (rearranged)
1.	Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene
2.	Mary, mother of James and Joses	Mary, mother of James the Little and Joses	Mary of Clopas (?)
3.	_____, mother of Zebedee's sons	Salome (?)	_____, Jesus' mother's sister (?)
4.	____	____	____, Jesus' mother

The identification of these women depends upon the certainty of several probabilities:

1. It is unlikely that in Jn. 19:25 the phrase "Jesus' mother's sister" is to be taken as in apposition with "Mary of Clopas," making John list only three women at the cross, since he is actually listing two pairs of women. This is shown in two ways:
  - a. He links the first two and the last two by the conjunction "and," almost, as if to indicate a separation of some sort between the two pairs.
  - b. John's well-known habit throughout his gospel of suppressing the names of himself and his relatives may be evident here, since it may be presumed that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Clopas were not relatives of John, whereas if this identification suggested above proves valid, then Mary, Jesus' mother, and Salome, John's mother, would be sisters. For this reason John leaves both women nameless, identifying them only by a descriptive phrase.
2. It is likely that John's mother is to be equated with "Jesus. Mother's sister," since John's mother was certainly at the cross and it does not seem likely that John would have omitted her.

3. Both Salome and Jesus' mother's sister remain otherwise totally unidentified and unidentifiable to the modern reader of the text, unless they are otherwise to be identified with the also unnamed mother of Zebedee's sons. This is not impossible, since "Salome" would be her name, "mother of Zebedee's sons" gives her relationship to the Apostles, and "Jesus' mother's sister" identifies her connection with Jesus and His mother.

One result of this theory, of course, is that Jesus is seen as a cousin of James and John, a theory which may also account for the definite intimacy these two enjoyed with the Lord, as well as provide a reason why Jesus consigned His mother over to John the Apostle, His cousin.

Chart 2: LISTS OF THE APOSTLES INVOLVED IN THIS QUESTION

Mt. 10:2-4

Mk. 3:13-19

Lk. 6:12-16

Ac. 1:13

9. James of Alphaeus 10. Thaddaeus 11. Simon the Cananean 12. Judas Iscariot	James of Alphaeus Thaddaeus Simon the Canaanean Judas Iscariot	James of Alphaeus Simon the Zealot Judas of James Judas Iscariot	James of Alphaeus Simon the Zealot Judas of James
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------

For a full list of the Twelve, see notes on 10:2-4.

In this chart several items are to be noted:

1. James of Alphaeus is always the principle name leading this third group of Apostles, even as Peter's always leads the first group and Philip's the second. Judas' Iscariot's name always concludes this third group, except in Acts where his suicide is already an accomplished fact, hence the omission in the fourth list.
2. The remaining two names, though reversed in the last two lists, remain together as if bound together by some unmentioned tie.
3. The identification of Thaddaeus with Judas of James is discussed under Mt. 10:2-4; so also the names "Canaanean" and "Zealot."
4. The intriguing question to be solved is which James is intended in the descriptive "Judas of James." Is Judas the *brother* of the son of Alphaeus? Or is he the *son* of another unknown James?

With these crude, rudimentary tools in hand, let us examine the evidence for each view.

### THE COUSIN THEORY

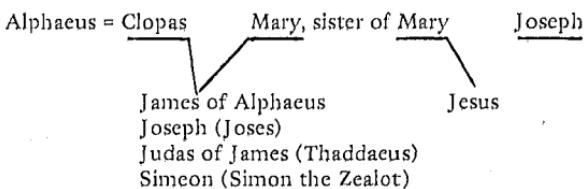
The great Jerome propounded the theory which has gained currency among Catholic commentators that "the brethren of the Lord" are, in reality, His cousins. Others have noticed certain points necessary

to sustain this suggestion and so have added features unknown to Jerome but were essential to the theory. The theory is based upon the following points:

1. James, son of Alphaeus, is thought to be the Lord's brother, James.
2. Alphaeus, the father of James, is supposedly to be identified linguistically with Clopas (or Cleophas), since *Alphaeos* is the Greek equivalent of the Aramean *Chalphai*. (On this, see Lightfoot's learned discussion, pp. 256f and footnotes, 267f.)
3. The term "James the Less," seemingly, implies only one other eminent man among the Apostolic band known by the name of James, i.e., James of Zebedee. Therefore, James of Alphaeus would be also James the Less, son of Mary, whose brother's name is Joses (or, Joseph), a name also found in the list of "the brethren of the Lord."
4. According to the theory, Mary of Clopas is said to be the wife of Alphaeus, hence, mother of James of Alphaeus.
5. Mary of Clopas (Alphaeus), being the mother of James, is said to be sister of Jesus' mother.
6. The result of this theory, that James the Lord's "brother" is really the Lord's cousin, is also based upon the loose Aramaic use of the word "brother" in Scripture for: actual brotherhood, common nationality, wider kinsmanship or only friendship or sympathy.
7. Due to the testimony of Hegesippus (cited by Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* iii, 20), some add also "Judas of James," considering him to be *brother* of James the Lord's brother, and perhaps Simon the Zealot as well, since these three names are kept together in the list of the Apostles. Not only are the Lord's "brethren" to be thought of as His "cousins," but some, if not all, of His brothers are also Apostles, according to the theory.
8. The theory presupposes also the death or incapacitation of Alphaeus (= Clopas) the putative father of these four men, as well as the inability of Mary ("of Clopas") to care for them, in which case they must have been practically raised in the house of Joseph and Mary in whose company they are often seen. (Cf. Jn. 2:12; Mt. 12:46 and par.) The Nazarenes consider these "brethren" to be as much a part of the family of Joseph and Mary as Jesus or His sisters. (Mt. 13:54-58)

Perhaps it would help to visualize the view of Jerome as it was adapted by its adherents:

Chart 3: THE COUSIN THEORY



Objections to this theory are hardly less numerous than the points on which it is founded:

1. While it may be granted that in Hebrew or Aramaic the word "brother" must do service for a wider range of relationships, it would be unnatural for the Evangelists who left their works for us in Greek to have failed to specify the exact relationship intended, especially since in Greek the words are available for *cousin* (*anepsios*, Col. 4:10) and *kinsman* (*suggenes*, Lk. 1:36; 2:44; 21:16; Mk. 6:4). Surely the very Evangelists who describe the other most intimate facts about the relationships of people in the Lord's family would not have failed to be reasonably specific about this point, avoiding those expressions which are ambiguous at least, and might be understood as implying that these men were half brothers through Mary.
2. Another serious objection to the Cousin Theory is its presumption that at least two (i.e., James of Alphaeus and Judas [brother] of James), if not three (including Simon the Zealot), of the Lord's brethren were Apostles, a conclusion inconsistent with the Apostle John's declaration (7:5) that as late as six months before Jesus' death: "even his brothers did not believe in him." Could John say this of two or three out of four "brothers," if those who did not believe were supposedly Apostles? Instead, the "brethren" are clearly distinguished from the Apostles. (Cf. Ac. 1:14; 1 Co. 9:5, Cephas' name being distinguished in this latter passage only for special emphasis, not as being separate from the Apostles' group just mentioned.) Judas of James (Jude 1:1, 17) only seems to disclaim being an Apostle, since Peter speaks the same way (2 Pt. 3:2). However, this latter part of the argument would not be conclusive.

3. The expression, "James the *Less*," implies only two of the name James, one of which is distinguished from the other by this epithet. But Mark (15:40) wrote: "James the Small, Little or Young," not "the Less." (*Iakòbou tōū mikrōū*, not *mikrotérou*) So the descriptive title usually translated as an adjective of comparative degree, which generally speaks of only two between which the comparison is made, turns out to be one of positive degree. That it certainly denotes some standard of comparison, without which it would make no sense, cannot be doubted, but that that standard has to be one, and only one other, James (and not rather two or three others) must be questioned. Besides, there might be some long-forgotten reason in the domestic life of James the Less that dubbed him with that distinctive title that even in adult life he could not shake off. (Cf. the diminutive ending on "Jimmy," or even "Jim" for James, used as names for grown men. Also, "James the Less" may have been a very tall man, earning him the humorous label "Little Jimmy.") So it may well be that the expression, "the Less," relates the James to no other James at all, but refers, rather, to some other point of comparison. Even if the comparison is with others by the name of James, these cannot be limited in number to only one other, as Jerome's theory demands.
4. According to the theory, "Jude . . . of James" is considered as the "brother," instead of *son*, of James, an interpretation which, according to Lightfoot (*Galatians*, 253), is not the proper word to be supplied in the ellipsis. It also goes against early translations which use *son*. Had these two men been brothers, it is probable that Luke would have written "James of Alphaeus and Jude his brother," or else, "James and Judas, sons of Alphaeus," as in the case of the other pairs of brothers. Also in the Apostolic lists of Luke (6:16 and Ac. 1:13), Simon the Zealot interrupts this supposed brotherhood, for, if he were not a brother, why insert his name here? If Simon too were a brother, as some adherents of this theory claim, why call only Judas "of James" and not Simon too? Further, neither Matthew nor Mark, who actually mention Thaddaeus (presumably the same as Judas of James) immediately following James of Alphaeus, show any evidence of connecting Thaddaeus with James of Alphaeus. Finally, Lightfoot remarks that since this Judas is described in so many different ways ("Thaddaeus," "of James" and "not Iscariot," Jn. 14:22), were he really the Lord's brother, as this theory supposes, it would not be thought possible that he could, in all these instances, have escaped being

described in that way, when that one designation would have immediately identified the man meant by the authors.

Of course, it must be admitted in reference to Simon the Zealot that the fact that he is not designated also as "of James," is not conclusive, since he is uniformly labelled "the Zealot = the Cananaean." This appellation distinguishes him at once from Simon Peter and, at the same time, indicates his background. Both are sufficient reasons perhaps to override the necessity to mark him as brother of James of Alphaeus and Judas of James. So the "interruption" mentioned above would not in itself be fatal to this part of the theory.

5. Another significant improbability to be noted in the Cousin Theory is the presupposition that there were two Marys in the same family: Mary of Joseph and Mary of Clopas. (Jn. 19:25, see Chart 1) The problem rests in the decision whether the expression "Mary of Clopas" is to be taken as in apposition with the descriptive: "Jesus' mother's sister," and not rather as naming another woman. The reasons offered for taking the two expressions as designating two separate women are:
  - a. It is at least reasonably improbable that two sisters should have borne the same name. Among near kin, such a practice would not be so improbable as its use in the same household for blood sisters.
  - b. John 19:25 seems to separate the four women into two pairs each by his use of conjunctions.
  - c. Lightfoot (*ibid.*, 264) puts emphasis on the rendering of the Peshito Syriac which inserts a conjunction between the two names: "his mother's sister, *and* Mary of Cleophas . . ." He says, "It is not unlikely that a tradition underlies the Peshito rendering." (*ibid.*, 264)
6. Regardless of the linguistic relationships between the Aramaic name "Cleophas" (*Chalphi*) or "Clopas," and the Greek name "Alphaeus," (*Alphaeos*), let it be remembered that perfect identification of names still does not prove identity of persons.
7. Jesus' brothers are mentioned in the Gospels in connection with Joseph and Mary, Jesus' reputed father and real mother, never with Mary of Clopas, the presumed wife of Alphaeus-Clopas. (Mt. 12:46; 13:55 and parallels) Further, these "cousins" real mother, Mary of Clopas, was very much alive even until Jesus' crucifixion. (See Chart 1: Jn. 19:25.) Why she could not have raised these boys, instead of Joseph and Mary is, of course, unknown

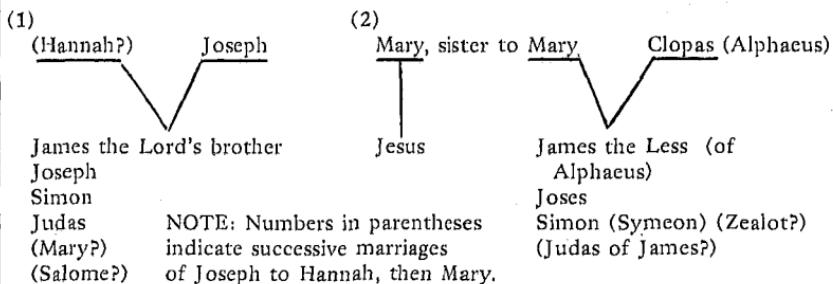
to us, but is it likely that the Nazarenes should have described them as Jesus' "brethren," in the same sense that they supposed Him to be Joseph's "son," Mary to be His "mother," and the girls in that family to be His "sisters"? Their argument, intended to account for the humanness of Jesus, implies the quite ordinary nature of these relations. (See on Mt. 13:54-58.)

### THE STEP-BROTHER THEORY

This understanding of the matter sees the brethren of the Lord as sons of Joseph by a former wife before marrying Mary. Having, as it does, the advantage of the support of the large majority of the Church Fathers would seem to give this explanation additional importance, since that fact alone would seem to signify that a nearly unanimous opinion on the subject was shared by the very men most able to testify on the subject. Various, interesting bits of "information" are supplied by those Fathers who happened to write on the subject, as, for instance, the names of Jesus' sisters (Mary and Salome, according to Epiphanius in his treatise against Heresies), the name of Joseph's former wife (Hannah, or Anna, according to Eusebius, *On the Star*) or that Joseph was at least eighty years old or past when he married Mary (Epiphanius, *Protevangelium Jacobi*). Without pretending to pronounce upon the worth of each testimony of the Fathers, a task well beyond my competence, I might just observe that the support by a large majority of the Church Fathers does not necessarily argue the validity of the view. It may only demonstrate how widespread the error was believed and handed on. So, like any evidence received from the Fathers which must be tested by the revelation they purport to explain, so this theory of theirs must face the same fire, despite the fact that some of them write as if they thought to be giving testimony to fact, not theory.

This explanation may be represented graphically as follows:

Chart 4: THE STEP-BROTHERS THEORY



Support for this theory is not so much exegetical or logical as it is traditional, i.e., based upon citations from the Fathers, who are themselves debating the issue.

The question, then, must be resolved in the same way the Fathers themselves tried to deal with it, i.e., by debating the relative points in the argument. While it seemed to Lightfoot, and certainly to others, that certain of the more informed Fathers were giving testimony to facts against which the appeal of logic or exegesis of Scripture would have no force, yet the Fathers themselves, if the citations brought forward by Lightfoot are typical examples, do not affirm the antiquity of their opinions on the basis of undoubted, uninterrupted tradition. Or, if some of them seem to do this, others of the same periods do not let this hinder their own independent investigation of the case. Although the great Jerome ultimately seems to have relinquished his position, yet at the close of the fourth century in his commentary on Matthew (398 A.D.) he does not seem to consider the question closed on the basis of traditional authority. Rather "he taunts those who considered the Lord's brethren to be the sons of Joseph by a former wife with 'following the ravings of the apocryphal writings and inventing a wretched creature . . . Melcha or Escha by name.'" (Lightfoot, 260) This state of affairs in the Fathers leaves us freer to consider the bad logic or bad exegesis involved in the problem and freer to come to our own conclusions.

The advantage of this position over the Cousin Theory is immediately apparent in that this theory takes the word "brother" seriously, giving to it a more natural meaning. These step-brothers

can be called "brothers" in the same sense in which Joseph is called Jesus' "father" (Lk. 2:33, 41, 43), even by Mary who knew the facts best. (Lk. 2:48) This view also takes better account of the fundamental Gospel description of the Lord's brothers as unbelievers distinct from the Apostles. It also connects them better with Joseph and Mary, instead of bringing them in from a completely different family.

However, several objections appear at once to this theory:

1. The "Step-brothers Theory" makes Joseph a very old man, assuming for him a previous marriage, a supposition nowhere alluded to in the canonical Gospels. The argument usually offered for Joseph's advanced age, on the basis of the NT Gospels, is these books' silence regarding the man after his appearance in the narrative of Jesus at age twelve in the Temple. (Lk. 2:41-51) From this silence it is usually presumed that he passed permanently out of the picture by death. But this very silence, offered as Biblical evidence for the advanced age of Joseph (ignoring for sake of the argument the traditions in the *Protevangelium Jacobi* and in Epiphanius), is perfectly consonant with the possibility that Joseph was killed or died a natural death while relatively young. So, silence proves nothing certain about the age of Joseph.

But granted for sake of argument that Joseph actually did die shortly after Jesus was twelve years old, this still means that Joseph lived as husband with Mary for twelve years. One of the incredible results of this fact, if the perpetual virginity of Mary be true, is that, if Joseph dwelt with Mary for twelve years yet keeping her a virgin until the day of his own death, then Joseph must be seen to have made a solemn renunciation of his own marriage rights. As far as Mary was concerned, and as far as Joseph in his new relation with her was concerned, he was virtually a virgin too. Were it possible to demonstrate categorically that the Lord's brethren were His cousins or His step-brothers, yet the words of Sweet (*I.S.B.E.*, 2003) would still ring with devastating truth: "That a married woman has no children is no proof of virginity—perpetual or otherwise." The idea of Mary's perpetual virginity demands, by the nature of the marriage relationship, the continued abstinence from marital relations with his wife on the part of Joseph, dating at least from the time of his marriage to Mary until his death.

Further granted for sake of argument that Joseph were eighty when he married Mary and died when Jesus was twelve years old,

let it not be supposed that he COULD NOT have begotten by Mary at least six children before his death. Neither the birth of Isaac (Gen. 21:1-3) nor that of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:5-24, 57-67) are ever thought of as miraculous (i.e., supernatural) conceptions, even though they were born of extremely old parents, a fact which makes the births marvellous indeed, but that fact alone would not necessitate their being considered as being supernaturally conceived. Had they been supernatural, then the astonishing, supernatural conception of Jesus would not have been at all unique.

2. Another objection that should be raised to this theory is the fact that, had these "brothers" been sons of Joseph by a former wife before he espoused Mary, then the oldest of these brothers would surely have been regarded as legal heir to Joseph, hence to the throne of David. Jesus would not be the legal heir of Joseph, as attested by the genealogies of Matthew (1:1-17, on which see notes, Vol. I) and of Luke (3:23-38), since Jesus, in such a case, would be but the youngest of five legal sons of Joseph. While it is true that these very genealogies of Jesus do not always follow the direct line of descent from father to his firstborn son, due to deaths, adoptions, etc., yet the generally established rule is to follow this direct succession, unless there be some well-known, overriding factor that prohibits this. But in the Gospel there is no such fact that would justify the passing over four older sons of Joseph merely in order to consider Jesus as the legal heir of Joseph, unless that were His rightful position because of His real primogeniture.
3. While the argument from silence can never be conclusive, yet the ancient authors, who are cited as being of the opinion that "the Lord's brethren are elder sons of Joseph by another wife before his espousal to Mary," do not take adequate account of the Scriptures' silence regarding their (supposed) existence from before the birth of Jesus until their actual appearance in the narrative. That is, where were those supposed sons of Joseph while he took Mary to Bethlehem for the census? Where were they during the flight into Egypt? Until Joseph brought the family back to Nazareth? That is, unless the testimony of Eusebius ("On the Star") be so construed, which says, "Joseph and Mary and Our Lord with them and the five sons of Hannah (Anna) the first wife of Joseph." Supposedly, the account from which this passage is taken professes to be founded on a document dating A.D. 119. (See Lightfoot, *ibid.* 283, footnote 1.) The usual assumption of the Fathers, who lean heavily upon the apocryphal gospels for

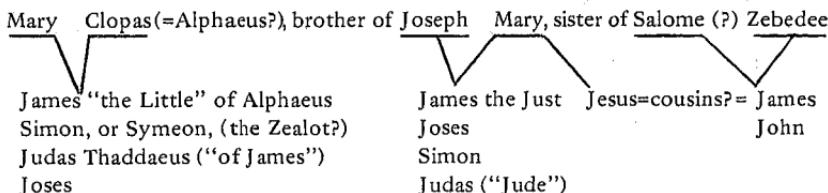
their proof of the existence of these sons of Joseph prior to Jesus' birth, is that the Gospel silence is to be interpreted as suggesting that either the brethren were present on the occasions mentioned above but escaped mention by the Evangelists because of the relative unimportance of their place in the history at that point. Or, it must be assumed that they were left at home in Nazareth, being grown up enough to care for themselves during Joseph's absence. Let it be remembered, however, that this same silence of the Evangelists is just as fully capable of being interpreted to mean that these "brethren of the Lord" had not yet been born!

### THE HALF BROTHERS VIEW

This view, in the words of Lightfoot (*Galatians*, 253), is "that the obvious meaning of the term ("brethren") was the correct meaning, and that these brethren were the Lord's brethren as truly as Mary was the Lord's mother, being her sons by her husband Joseph." Though each detail in connection with the protagonists of this question, when considered individually, "might with some difficulty be explained otherwise, the force of the argument is cumulative. There are too many items to be explained away, in order to establish any other inference" than that these people were half brothers of Jesus. (*I.S.B.E.*, 519)

This view may be diagrammed as follows:

Chart 5: THE HALF BROTHERS VIEW



Some of the points in the chart depend upon factors already discussed, such as the identification of Mary of Clopas with Mary the mother of James and Joses (see Chart 1), the identification of the Apostles

James, Simon and Judas (Chart 2 and notes under the Cousin Theory), as well as the linguistical identification of Alphaeus with Cleophas (or Clopas), hence enjoy the strengths or suffer the weaknesses of the position of these factors in the other theories.

There are, however, several new items that are derived, rightly or not, from the testimony of Hegesippus, a Hebrew Christian of Palestine living around 160 A.D. Though the testimony was cited by Lightfoot as tending to support the Step-brothers Theory, rather than the Half Brother View, since Eusebius and Epiphanius who quote Hegesippus take former view of the question, yet the objective facts which Hegesippus mentions are susceptible of another interpretation:

After the martyrdom of James the Just on the same charge as the Lord, his paternal uncle's child Symeon the son of Clopas is next made bishop, who was put forward by all as the second in succession, being cousin of the Lord. (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, iv. 22)

They say he (Simeon the son of Cleophas) was the cousin german of our Saviour, for Hegesippus asserts that Cleophas was the brother of Joseph. (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, iii, 11)

In another place (iii, 32), Eusebius cites Hegesippus' testimony to the same effect. Now, the question arises whether it is legitimate to reject out of hand the contrary testimony of the Fathers on one view and appeal to agreeable testimony for another view. It will be noticed, however, that appeal is not made here to direct testimony on the perpetual virginity of Mary or upon the relation of the brothers to Jesus, even though Hegesippus' witness contains also notice of this latter fact. Rather, the testimony is brought forward to notice the connection of Cleopas and Joseph, a relationship that, while not directly material for the controversy, yet provides a link in an otherwise incomplete chain. Eusebius himself quotes this testimony no less than three separate times as if he had no doubt about its authenticity even though he himself lived about 180 years later.

Weaknesses of this theory of the relationships immediately arise:

1. The identification of Clopas with Alphaeus, which itself, in turn, is dependent upon the following considerations: (*I.S.B.E.*, 106)
  - a. That Mary of Clopas is the same as Mary, mother of James the Less and Joses. (See Chart 1.) Impossible to prove or disprove.
  - b. That James the Less and James of Alphaeus are the same person.

- Though this is impossible to demonstrate absolutely, this identification is the absolutely necessary key to solve the problem.
- c. That Clopas and Alphaeus are different variations of a common name, variations arising out of varying approximation in Greek of an Aramaic name. Competent scholars stand both for and against this identification. But, as noted before, certain linguistic identification of the two names would never prove identification of persons.
  - d. That Clopas (or Alphaeus) was known by two names, a hypothesis not unlikely, considering the practice of that period. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to demonstrate whether he too followed this usage.
2. Also the supposition that we have correctly identified the sons of Clopas (Alphaeus?) and Mary as being James and Joses (Mt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40), Simon (Hegesippus, cited above) and Judas "of James" (or Thaddaeus). While it would seem that three out of four of these cousins of the Lord are to be numbered among the Apostles, yet the tenuous identifications are impossible to prove:
- a. While Simon of Clopas is described by Hegesippus as "the Lord's cousin," this seems to weigh against his being the same as Simon the Zealot, the Apostle, else would not Hegesippus have found it easier so to describe him? Further, Hegesippus' remark (*Eccl. Hist.* iii, 11) is found in a context where the Apostles, brethren and disciples of the Lord gather to seek a worthy successor to James, bishop of Jerusalem. Considering the particular mission of the Apostles, it would be hardly likely that an Apostle, Simon the Zealot, were he to be identified with Simon of Clopas, should have been selected to fill the episcopal office.
  - b. The likelihood of Judas' being the *brother* of, rather than the *son* of, James, has already been noticed. (See objection 4 under the Cousin Theory.) Yet, if the writer of the Epistle of Jude is the same man as "Judas of James," the identification of that "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James" (Jude 1) is reasonably assured. Unfortunately, the very fact that the name "James" was so common, reduces our certainty that the very James to whom he was brother is also James of Alphaeus.

At this point it is worthwhile to examine the objections Lightfoot (*ibid.* 270ff) offers to the Half Brother View:

3. Without stating it clearly, Lightfoot seems to suggest that since Joseph disappears from the record after Jesus' visit to the Temple

at age 12; therefore Joseph died. Hence, Mary naturally appears alone with Jesus' brethren. Lightfoot suggests (but does not state) the conclusion that Joseph could not have begotten at least six children in these twelve years. If so, this is patently impossible to prove, since Mary and Joseph could have had one baby every other year, all born after Jesus.

4. It is objected also that the perpetual virginity of Mary is not hindered by certain expressions thought to deny it:

a. According to Lightfoot, the expression "he knew her not until" (Mt. 1:25) does not imply normal marital relations after the birth of Jesus. But this is manifestly false in light of the following considerations:

(1) The very fact that Matthew made any declaration at all, short of saying, "He knew her not until her death," suggests quite the opposite interpretation. Had the Apostle Matthew considered the perpetual virginity of Mary to be so important as later to be recognized as dogma, he could not have expressed the critical information upon which the dogma depends in more equivocal or compromising language.

(2) It is often argued by defenders of the perpetual virginity myth that the Evangelist, whose purpose in this chapter (Mt. 1:25) is to bring out the supernatural birth of Jesus, clearly affirms the virginity of Mary up to the moment of birth; what occurred after that, and that which comes to us through tradition, lies outside of his present perspective. In an excellent discussion of the critical word "until" (*héos hoù*) Fausto Salvoni (*Sesso e amore nella Bibbia*) brings forward cogent reasons why the word "until" actually does deal with, or speak clearly about, that period which follows the time limited by "until." It has been thought useful, therefore, to include in summary form Salvoni's argument at the conclusion of this study.

b. As Lightfoot rightly points out, some have mistakenly supposed that Luke's (2:7) expression, "She gave birth to her first-born son," implied a "second-born" and so further. However, "first-born" to the Jewish mind had special significance. (Cf. Lk. 2:22-24) The first-born belonged to the Lord in a special way that was not true of the "second-born," or of other children born later. The term "first-born" refers, then, to a position based upon order of birth, it is true, but does not necessitate other births.

5. "Woman, behold thy son." (Jn. 19:26, 27) is thought by Lightfoot to be most devastating to the Half Brothers View, for this phrase seems to indicate that Mary did not have four grown sons who should care for her so well as John the disciple. Lightfoot argues (*ibid.* 272):

Is it conceivable that our Lord would thus have snapp'd assunder the most sacred ties of natural affection? The difficulty is not met by the fact that her own sons were still unbelievers. This fact would scarcely have been allowed to override the paramount duties of filial piety. But even when so explained, what does this hypothesis require us to believe? Though within a few days a special appearance is vouchsafed to one of those brethren, who is destined to rule the mother Church of Jerusalem, and all alike are converted to the faith of Christ; yet she, their mother, living in the same city and joining with them in a common worship (Acts 1:14) is consigned to the care of a stranger of whose house she becomes henceforth the inmate.

But Lightfoot's rejection of the Half Brothers theory is ungrounded in light of the following considerations:

- a. The supposed "unnaturalness" of Jesus' action on the cross in consigning His mother to John, were there other sons of Mary to whom He might have given her, is not formidable against His placing her in the hands of John. As a matter of fact, no one knows exactly WHERE those brothers were at that moment, just before Jesus died. Some "unknown domestic circumstance may explain the omission of her sons." (*I.S.B.E.*, 520) If, for any reason whatever, those sons of Mary were not present at the cross, Jesus COULD NOT have consigned her care to them, even had He wanted to, unless by delegation.
- b. But the very assumption by those who argue against the Half Brothers Theory on the view that these men were older sons of Joseph by a former marriage, falls at this very point. Their assumption fails to take into account the fact that Jesus, according to their theory, turns out to be the YOUNGEST of five sons in the legal family of Joseph. Hence, Jesus does not have the right to turn His mother over to anyone! That right belongs to the oldest brother, not to Jesus. If appeal is made in this discussion to Jewish custom, neither Jesus' authority nor the special circumstances under which Jesus made the statement

can have anything to do with the question. On the other hand, Jesus' action on the cross, delivering Mary into John's care, is perfectly harmonious with the view that He consistently maintained the position and performed the duties of the eldest son throughout His earthly life. "Jesus could hand over His sacred charge to the trustworthy keeping of another, because He had faithfully maintained it Himself." (*I.S.B.E.*, 2002)

Some may take exception to this view that the picture seen of Jesus in the Gospels is that of His playing the part of the eldest son, by objecting, "But does not the interference of His mother and brothers with Jesus' ministry (Mt. 12:46ff; Mk. 3:31ff; Lk. 8:19ff; cf. Mk. 3:19b-21) presuppose a superiority? This attitude of superiority is quite inconsistent with the position of younger brothers, according to Jewish customs." Jacobs (*ISBE*, 520) answers, "Those who pursue an unjustifiable course are not models of consistency."

- c. True, the mere supposition that Mary's own sons were still unbelievers, by itself, would not be completely convincing, since it was Jesus' intention to make a special appearance to James (1 Co. 15:7) who was to become such an important leader in the early Church (Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12; Ac. 15). Yet, conceding all this, it must still be repeated, they were yet unbelievers. Even Lightfoot himself admits the force of this fact: (*ibid.* 265)

A very short time before the Lord's death His brethren refuse to accept His mission: they are still unbelievers. Immediately after His ascension we find them gathered together with the Apostles, evidently recognizing Him as their Master. Whence comes this change? Surely the crucifixion of one who professed to be the Messiah was not likely to bring it about. He had claimed to be King of Israel and He had been condemned as a malefactor: He had promised His followers a triumph and He had left them persecution. Would not all this confirm rather than dissipate their former unbelief?

Lightfoot believes with us that only the post-resurrection appearances would have been sufficient to produce the great turning point in the religious life of Jesus' brethren.

Granted, then, the importance of the unbelief of Mary's own children, the extreme likelihood of a profound spiritual sympathy

and friendship between John Bar-Zebedee and Jesus and His mother, as well as a possible kinship (if John be Jesus' cousin and Mary's nephew), when considered together with the unbelief of Mary's own sons, form an almost irrefragable combination that both justifies and explains Jesus' choice.

- d. If it be objected that this view sees two families (that of Joseph and that of Cleophas, Clopas or Alphaeus) naming their sons with nearly identical names, this is no great difficulty, since these four names are all famous in Israel. (Lightfoot, *ibid.*, 268) No special claim is made for the order in which the names of the sons of Clopas-Alphaeus are given, except to show the coincidence of the first three names with those given in the Apostolic list. But, as the question marks on the graph indicate, no claim is made that all the men named were actually Apostles; the intriguing, but unanswerable, query is raised whether they might not be the same.

As Lightfoot (*ibid.* 269) notes further, the difficulty in seeing two families, possibly related, is not at all increased but actually diminished on the supposition that they were actually related, since family use of the names of common ancestors or relatives is most reasonable. (Cf. Lk. 1:59-61)

### CONCLUSION

While the view that "the Lord's Brethren" were actually Jesus' half brothers, being true sons of Joseph and Mary born after the birth of Jesus, is not without weaknesses, it appears to possess fewer weaknesses than are found in the alternate theories, while at the same time this view explains equally well, if not better, the scraps and pieces of information given in Scripture.

Also, in relation to the motherhood of Mary, it may be said that The interpretation that they are the Lord's real brethren ennobles and glorifies family life in all its relations and duties, and sanctifies motherhood with all its cares and trials as holier than a selfish isolation from the world, in order to evade the annoyances and humiliations inseparable from fidelity to our callings.

(*I.S.B.E.*, 520)

Thus, the polemic against the "perpetual virginity of Mary" is not by any means a polemic against Mary. Rather, it is the desire to

present the relations of our Lord in their proper light, in order better to understand our own position before God, for if we are ignoring a fundamental part of our mediation between us and God (the supposed mediation of Mary), then we do her injustice and weaken our own spiritual position on earth. On the other hand, since the major step in her exaltation, the human declaration of her perpetual virginity, is founded upon bad exegesis and human authority (i.e., of the Fathers who assert it), the modern Christian loses nothing to reject it.

#### "AND HE KNEW HER NOT UNTIL SHE HAD BORNE A SON"

Does the use of the word "until" in this Matthaean text suggest anything about what took place in the marital relations of Joseph and Mary after the birth of Jesus? Or, as many think, does the word "until" affirm only that Joseph kept Mary a virgin until the time of Jesus' birth, without either affirming or denying anything about his attitude following that event?

Fausto Salvoni (*Sesso e amore nella Bibbia*, 95-132) deals with the question underlying the problem of interpretation of the word "until": "Is there a defining use of the word 'until'?", by putting to critical examination the proofs offered. In reading the text of the English Bible, beware of missing the point of Salvoni's illustrations by failing to note that in English translations the word "until" might not have been used in the passages cited. However, a cognate idea is always present, even if the English translators adopted another word having the same meaning as "until."

##### 1. "Until death . . ."

Many times Fathers and theologians try to prove the definitive sense of "until" by referring to those numerous Bible passages in which it is affirmed that a given thing took place until the death of an individual. Evidently the fact indicated could not be done after his death! However, the passages of this category have no value whatever, since the situation of the individual after death was so totally altered as to impede any possibility to act. But this is not true in the case of Matthew, which puts the limitation in a period in which there was yet the possibility for conjugal relations. Now if in Matthew we should have read "until death," there would not be anything

we could object to on this subject, since any matrimonial relationship would have been evidently and forever excluded. Unfortunately, this is not the case with Matthew. It would be useless to examine such examples, which, however, will be presented, even if briefly, for greater completeness:

- a. *Until the death of the individual.* (2 Sam. 6:23; 20:3; 2 Kg. 15:5; Job 27:2-5; 2 Kg. 7:3)
- b. *Until the death of one's adversaries.* (Psa. 112:8; 1 Mac. 5:54)
- c. *Until the end of the world.* Here, too, the passages are parallel to those on the death of the individual, except that instead of one's death, the end of the world or of humanity is spoken of. (Mt. 28:20; Psa. 72:7) Such passages evidently cannot be considered as being truly parallel with Matthew 1:25, because this latter text is not discussing the end of the world or of the individual which would have rendered any conjugal relationship impossible. Rather, we are talking about a particular period prior to it, that is, the birth of Jesus, after which conjugal relations continued to remain possible.

## 2. "Unto this day"

Cf. Dt. 34:6; Gen. 35:20; Mt. 27:8; 28:15. This expression really limits the consideration of the writer to the period prior to the limit set (the defining sense), not because that limit is inherent in the word "until," but because this is required by the limit established, which is the moment in which the writer is living. He wanted to limit his statement to this instant for the simple reason that the rest of the future remained unknown to him. The reality he indicated could have continued or not, for which reason he could not predict what would have happened after the moment in which he was writing, unless he had a divine revelation. So we are not talking about a true parallel with the passage in Matthew in which he is talking about a period prior to the moment in which the Evangelist was writing, that is, the birth of Jesus. If Matthew had written: "Joseph had no relations with Mary to this day," in that case, then, he would have excluded from his consideration all the time from Joseph's espousal of Mary until the time of writing the record by Matthew.

All the passages presented up to this point do not correspond at all to the "until" used in Matthew's sentence in our study, since, at the end fixed in them, it was not at all possible to act in the manner indicated, whereas, contrarily, the action of "knowing" Mary was

always possible after the birth of Jesus. Therefore, they are not parallels to the Matthaean text. For if they were, it would be necessary to read that Joseph did not have relations with the bride until her death, or to this day, or up to the moment of the time of writing or until the moment in which such an act was no longer possible.

Let us now see the importance of the Biblical "until" in the various cases where the action indicated by the principle verb always remained possible even after the limit established. Here we are in the field more exactly parallel with the Matthaean text under study.

### 3. Until a certain moment in the past.

In all these cases the "until" always presupposes a change of situation after the limit indicated.

- a. In the case in which the indication of the principle clause is positive, "until" affirms the denial of it at the moment of the limit set by "until." Examples offered by Salvoni are: Dan. 11:36; Gen. 24:19; Ruth 2:21; Nu. 32:17; Is. 30:17; Mt. 2:15, 19; Mt. 13:33; Lk. 13:21; Mt. 14:22; Mt. 26:36; Lk. 12:50; 24:49; Ac. 21:26; 25:21; 2 Pt. 1:19; cf. Rev. 22:5. In each of these illustrations he shows how a reasonable view of each case shows that, once a change is brought about in the situation, the action limited by "until" is no longer needed, possible or reasonable.
- b. If the principle clause is negative (as in the case of Matthew), the "until" always indicates the realization of the thing denied before.

Eliezar, sent by Abraham to search for a wife for his son Isaac, said to Laban, "I will not eat until I have said (what I must say)," after which, naturally, he would eat. (Gen. 24:33) Also the Jews that intended to kill Paul "made a vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul" (Ac. 23:12, 14, 21). After the transfiguration Jesus demanded that the three Apostles present not speak about the vision "until the Son of man be risen from the dead" (Mt. 17:9); afterwards they would have been able to talk about it. When Jesus left Jerusalem He said that they would not have seen Him any more until they received Him with the cry of "Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord." In that moment, then, they would have seen Him. (Mt. 23:39) Other illustrations: Mt. 5:26; Lk. 22:16, 18, 34; Jn. 13:38; 18:27; 9:18; 1 Co. 4:5. After considering seeming exceptions to the rule (i.e., Psa. 110:1; 1 Co. 15:27f; Psa. 123:2; 1 Ti. 4:13; Lk. 1:80; cf. Lk. 3:4 and 7:24;

Gen. 49:10; Nu. 20:17; Gen. 28:15 of cf. vv. 20, 21; Mt. 12:18-21 citing Isa. 42:1-4), Salvoni concludes that, unless the action which is the logical opposite to that indicated in the principle clause is rendered impossible by death or the end of the world or a (then) unknown future, the action is to be considered possible, the limitation "until" indicating the change of what was affirmed or denied by the principle verb.

To keep from limiting the abstinence from marital relations to the period prior to the birth of Jesus, Matthew would have had to use an expression similar to that describing Judith where it is said that after the death of her first husband, "No man knew her all the days of her life." (Judith 16:22)

### THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PASSAGE

Now we need to see why Matthew should have used such a limiting formula. For what reason did he want to insist on the fact that the marital relations did not take place before the birth of Jesus?

1. Some have found the motive in the fact that Matthew wanted to use this phrase to underline the virginal conception of Mary and the purely legal paternity of Joseph. But there was no motive to take up this theme again, since it had already been clearly established by the expression "and before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 1:16), or else by the words of the angel to Joseph: "Do not fear to take Mary your wife, because what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." (1:20) Later marital relations would not have had any influence on the conception that had already taken place.
2. Others insist on the fact that Matthew wanted to demonstrate how the prophecy of Isaiah that he had cited had been fully realized in Mary: "Behold the *virgin* shall be *with child*: and she shall bring forth a son; and He will be called Emmanuel." (Mt. 1:23 = Isa. 7:14) Here the virginity of Mary is not only affirmed at the time of the conception, but also at the time of the birth. But the wife of Joseph would not have been a virgin at the time of the birth of Jesus, had Joseph had conjugal relations with her prior to that moment. Thus, those who hold this view emphasize that clear up to the moment of delivery Joseph respected the virginity of his own wife.

But as we have seen before, with this phrase Matthew hints at conjugal relations in a later period, i.e., after the birth. In fact, after having said that Joseph took Mary as his wife and introduced her into his own house, it was logical for the reader to conclude that he would have treated her as his wife. Therefore, Matthew corrects such a thought, saying that in fact they abstain from every contact until the birth of Jesus. The reader was logically led to conclude, by the normal course of marital relations, that later he acted toward her as any husband. Even if his intent had been to announce that the bride remained a virgin until the birth of Jesus, Matthew used language that clearly lets the reader catch a glimpse of a different comportment after that birth. If Matthew had been convinced that Mary remained always a virgin, he would not have expressed himself in an ambiguous, actually compromising, phrase such as he did.

Blinzler does not want to feel this difficulty and debates it by saying that inasmuch as the early Christians knew that Jesus did not have brothers german by Mary, the expression of Matthew did not cause them any difficulty. But this argument has the defect of supposing already proved what must yet be demonstrated. Who says that the early Christians, who tranquilly speak of brothers and sisters of Jesus, did not consider them as being born from Mary and Joseph? Given the fact that there were persons described as "brothers of the Lord," would it not have been much simpler to clarify yet further the fact of the perpetual virginity of Mary, if her supposed condition had possessed such importance for Christian theology? The early believers were interested in Jesus and not in the virginity of Mary, and this latter truth had value only insofar as it could document the virginal conception of the Christ. Having completed this mission, Mary returned, as far as they were concerned, to the situation of all other women.

3. Why did Joseph abstain from any marital relationship until the birth of Jesus? It is usually thought that Mary, being a temple of God, that she would be considered taboo for Joseph. But this reasoning is based upon the metaphysical concepts of much later Catholic theology that Joseph did not possess at that time. For him Mary was his own wife, for him the yet unborn babe was the fruit of a special divine intervention, after whose birth there could be no reasons for which he should regard his own wife as taboo. Given the illumination by the angel, it would have been logical, as Matthew says, that Joseph should have abstained from marital

relations as long as the unborn Babe lived in the womb of Mary, and not afterwards.

4. Fausto Salvoni's own view is that due to influences of the Essenes felt in Jewish life, perhaps Joseph would have abstained from regular marital relations during the pregnancy, even as the Essenes reputedly did. This, even though not a member or even a sympathizer with their movement. Of course, this view is absolutely impossible to prove, however attractive to some, since it is impossible to document to what extent the Essene's views permeated and affected Jewish life or to what extent Joseph or Mary would have respected those views.

Salvoni concludes by repeating that the perpetual virginity of Mary, asserted by many, creates some not indifferent Biblical problems, since it seems to be contradicted by clear New Testament testimonies. Such a doctrine obligates the believer to give to the "until" of Matthew a defining sense that is never found elsewhere in Holy Scripture, introducing into it an exception without any sure foundation.

### DO YOU HAVE THE WORD IN YOUR HEART?

#### Matthew 13

Can you remember who made each of the following statements? What was the occasion? To whom was it spoken? What did they mean by it? Are there any manuscript variations or other ways of translating it? Is it possible to apply its truth to our own day? If so, how?

1. "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given."
2. "Blessed are your eyes, for they see . . ."
3. ". . . and the thorns grew up and choked them."
4. "Let them both grow together until the harvest . . ."
5. ". . . but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath."
6. "Is not this the carpenter's son?"
7. "All these things spake Jesus in parables unto the multitudes; and without a parable spake he nothing unto them: *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken through the prophet . . ." (Deal

- particularly with the phrase *in italics*.)
- 8. "He that hath ears, let him hear."
  - 9. "The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire . . ."
  - 10. "Therefore every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like unto a . . . householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old."
  - 11. "A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country . . ."
  - 12. "He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN OUTLINES

- Section 33: Jesus Hears of the Assassination of John (14:1-13a)
- Section 34. Jesus Feeds 5000, Walks the Waves, Stills Storm (14:13b-33)
- Section 35. Jesus Heals the Sick of Gennesaret (14:34-36)

## STUDY OUTLINE

- I. JESUS HEARS OF THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN (Mt. 14:1-12; Mk. 6:14-29; Lk. 9:7-9)
  - A. Herod's opinion of Jesus (Mt. 14:1, 2; Mk. 6:14-16; Lk. 9:7-9)
    - 1. Herod hears about Jesus.
    - 2. His interpretation of the rumors
    - 3. Others' views of the matter
    - 4. Herod desires to see Jesus.
  - B. (Historical Flash Back) The death and burial of John (Mt. 14:3-13a; Mk. 6:17-29)
    - 1. John imprisoned by Herod to appease Herodias for John's accusations.
    - 2. Herodias tries to avenge herself against John.
    - 3. Herod's mixed motives blocked any effective action.
    - 4. At his public birthday celebration Herod rashly vowed anything to Herodias' daughter.
    - 5. Herodias requires John's murder which Herod reluctantly orders.

6. John's body is buried by his disciples and Jesus is informed.
- II. JESUS FEEDS 5000, WALKS THE WAVES, STILLS STORM**  
 (Mt. 14:13-33; Mk. 6:31-52; Lk. 9:11-17; Jn. 6:1-21)
- A. Jesus' Problem: need for privacy amid great excitement
  - B. Jesus' Plan: withdrawal from population centers
  - C. Jesus' Provision: feeds 5000-plus crowd
  - D. Jesus' Prayers: almost all night with the Father
  - E. Jesus' Powers: sees disciples' struggles in the storm, walks on the water and calms the storm, after empowering Peter also to walk on sea
  - F. Jesus' People: Peter and the others
- III. JESUS HEALS THE SICK OF GENNESARET** (Mt. 14:34-36; Mk. 6:53-56)
- A. The depth of the need
  - B. The trusting humility of approach
  - C. The simplicity of His method
  - D. The completeness of His results

### Section 33

#### JESUS HEARS OF THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Parallels: Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9)

TEXT: 14:1-13a

1 At that season Herod the tetrarch heard the report concerning Jesus, 2 and said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore do these powers work in him. 3 For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. 4 For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her. 5 And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. 6 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced in the midst, and pleased Herod. 7 Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she should ask. 8 And she, being put forward by her mother, saith, Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist. 9 And the king

was grieved; but for the sake of his oaths, and of them that sat at meat with him, he commanded it to be given; 10 and he sent and beheaded John in the prison. 11 And his head was brought on a platter, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother. 12 And his disciples came, and took up the corpse, and buried him; and they went and told Jesus.

13 Now when Jesus heard *it*, he withdrew from thence in a boat, to a desert place apart: . . .

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How do you explain this apparent presence of conscience in a man who had, apparently without conscience, been willing to follow the demands of his lust in order to marry his brother's wife after divorcing his own (if, in fact, he actually succeeded in divorcing her!)?
- b. Why do you suppose Herod linked the activity of Jesus with the person and ministry of John the Baptist? Had John worked any miracles? Had Jesus thundered great judgments upon Herod? From news about Jesus, then, how could the king logically be drawn to suppose that John had arisen from the dead?
- c. With so many personal spies at his service, how could Herod be so ignorant about Jesus as to confuse Him with John the Baptist?
- d. How do you explain the two apparently contradictory reports about Herod's attitude regarding John the Baptist:
  - (1) "And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people . . ."
  - (2) "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly." (Mark 6:20)  
How could both statements be true?
- e. Why should Herod, the powerful ruler of Galilee and Perea, fear the multitude of common people so much that he dared not put John to death?
- f. How would you analyze the difference in attitude toward John shown by Herod and by Herodias? Why did their attitudes differ?
- g. Do you think Herodias plotted the death of John, caused Salome to dance before Herod, thus luring him into the rash oath that would make possible the demand for John's death? Or did Herodias merely seize an unexpected opportunity suddenly presented to her

- by the puzzled daughter's request? What is your opinion?
- h. Once Herod had made the oath before God and before those men present, did he have to keep it, even if it meant he must commit a crime to maintain his word? What were the moral alternatives open to Herod when Salome returned with her criminal request? Be careful; God regards the breaking of an oath as sin.
  - i. Luke (9:9) reports that from the moment that Herod began to hear the reports about Jesus, "he sought to see Him." Why would Herod, wicked as he was, desire to have opportunity of audience with Jesus? How do you think Herod would go about seeking to see Him? Publicly? Privately?
  - j. Why did John's disciples, after the burial of their teacher's body, go and tell Jesus?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

At that time Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, heard about the fame of Jesus, the miracles and ministry of His Apostles as they went through the villages of Galilee preaching the gospel that men should repent. Jesus' name had become well-known, so the king heard about it and all that was going on. This left him perplexed, because it was whispered by some that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead. Others suggested, "It is Elijah." Still others affirmed that either one of the old prophets or one like them had risen. But when Herod himself heard it, he said to his men, "This is John the Baptist, whom I beheaded: he has been raised from the dead. That is why these wonderful powers are at work in him. But who is this man about whom I hear such news?" Herod began seeking to see Jesus.

Earlier, Herod himself had sent men to arrest John. They bound him and locked him in prison. Herod did this for Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, for he had married her. John kept saying to Herod, "It is not right for you to take your brother's wife!"

Now Herodias held a grudge against John and longed to kill him, but she could not, since Herod respected John, knowing him to be a righteous and godly man. So Herod protected him from harm. Whenever he heard him preach, he was deeply disturbed and yet he listened gladly to his messages. Ironically, though he wanted to put John to death, Herod feared the masses, for they considered John to be a prophet of God.

But an opportunity came when Herod's birthday arrived. Herod gave a banquet for his court officials, military officers and leading Galileans. When Herodias' daughter, Salome, came in and danced before the company, she pleased Herod and his guests.

Then the king promised the little girl with an oath, "Ask me for anything you desire, and I will grant it,—even half of my kingdom!"

Then Salome went out to ask her mother, "What shall I ask for?" Herodias said, "The head of John the baptizer!"

So, prompted by her mother, she came in immediately, rushing up to the king, requesting, "I want you to give me here at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter!"

The king was exceedingly sorry. However, because of his oaths made in the presence of his guests, he did not want to break his word to her. So he commanded it to be given. Without delay the king ordered an executioner to behead John and bring his head. The soldier went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl. She, in turn, presented it to her mother.

But when John's disciples heard about his murder, they came, took his corpse and buried it in a tomb. Then they went to inform Jesus. So when He heard the news, He withdrew from the Caper-naum area to a lonely deserted area on the east side of the Sea of Galilee.

### SUMMARY

The guilt-ridden conscience of Herod Antipas began to plague him more severely when he mistook the reports about Jesus' miracles and ministry for the resurrection of John the Baptist whom the king had murdered. At an earlier period John's fearless preaching directly struck the public image of both Herod and Herodias. Consequently, neither could forbear from silencing this voice of God in the land, accusing them of gross incest and adultery. Herodias wished to murder John; Herod, however, preferred only to imprison him, since the tetrarch himself highly respected the prophet. However, a thoughtless oath at a public dinner party cost Herod his desire to protect the Baptist. Ignoring all conventions, Herodias demanded the head of the great prophet be brought immediately on a charger. Herod gave the fatal order, preferring to commit murder than repent of his oath. Faithful disciples of John buried his headless corpse and reported the horrible facts to Jesus.

### INTRODUCTION: WHY DID MATTHEW INCORPORATE THIS ACCOUNT?

As with our other attempts to capture the organization and direction of Matthew's thought, so here too we ask how this narrative *as it is organized and set in this place* would have been intended to affect the original readers, and, thus, how it reveals the genius of the Holy Spirit who inspired Matthew so to order it. The striking chronological order within the narrative itself draws attention to itself:

3. Herod hears about the fame of Jesus and attributes the phenomena to a resurrected John the Baptist.
1. Herod imprisoned John for his accusations relative to Herodias.
2. Herod assassinated John against his own conscience.

Whatever motive may be attributed to Matthew for his inserting it at this point in his narrative in precisely this order, must be attributed to Mark also. Luke, on the other hand, having already spoken of John's imprisonment at an early point in his gospel, described as the capping climax of Herod's wickedness and the eventual conclusion of John's work (Lk. 3:18-20), does not inform us of the circumstances surrounding his murder, limiting himself to cite Herod's words: "John I beheaded . . ." (Lk. 9:9) from which we are to intuit what Matthew and Mark describe in their historical flash back. Their use of this literary device is completely legitimate and nicely changes the pace of simple chronological reporting. Still, the puzzle remains: why did they both use it here?

1. Was it, as González-Ruiz (*Marco*, 136) believes?

(It was) to emphasize the ridiculous attitude of that controversial monarch who was partly slave to his passions and partly interested in the austere figure of the Baptist. In the final analysis, that Herod was more consistent with himself than the orthodox Pharisees who collaborated with him while faking an extreme moral dignity.

While this latter observation is a reasonable psychological consideration, it is doubtful that Matthew or Mark is merely moralizing about wicked kings in the style of a Josephus. Their purpose is to present and expound Jesus of Nazareth.

2. Or, was González-Ruiz (*ibid.*) right to point out that this passage, as read originally, establishes the theological independence of

Christ's movement from that of John, by recording the liquidation of John and the scattering of his group, in order thereby to show that the congregation created by Jesus was completely new, while, at the same time, preserving the high honor of the martyred prophet? This would tend to discourage any who were tempted to seize upon John's style of piety as somehow normative for Christianity and canonize John himself as a representative Christian, when, as a matter of fact, John's work ended tragically before Jesus established His Kingdom. (Cf. Ac. 18:24—19:7; cf. the Mandean, or Sabian, Ebionites, who, while other Ebionites revered Peter the Apostle, glorified John the Baptist. See Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, II, 433, 434.) Perhaps the Essenic Ebionites, forced by the facts Matthew here states, could not adopt John as their saint, notwithstanding his ascetic life style. But because these tendencies did not mature until the late first and second century, some might doubt that their rebuttal were our Gospel authors' purpose. However, this would be no hindrance to the Spirit's foresight to see any future tendency where previously given information could forestall it. Besides, who today could say how many disciples of John had difficulty swinging into line behind Jesus after the demise of their master?

3. Since Matthew and Mark intend to glorify the Christ, they have omitted the circumstances of His forerunner's death until this point, because those facts were relatively less important. Now, however, in their analysis of Jesus Christ, they must picture, in addition to the religious opposition to Him, the political risks also. Further, because Herod's treacherous interest in Jesus is but another limitation of His freedom of movement from this historical moment forward, hence part of the explanation of Jesus' decisions, and because Herod's curiosity arises out of a historical fact of special interest to godly admirers of John, this is a convenient point at which to connect those otherwise disparate notes.
4. There is a lateral psychological effect of postponing any direct mention of John's martyrdom until exactly this point, when it could have been recorded earlier. The assassination of John, the great forerunner of Jesus, at the hands of impious men is but an ominous warning of what would happen to the Lord Himself just a little over a year later. Now, if this retelling of John's heroic end prepares the reader for the suffering of Jesus, a fact which the original readers probably already knew, the psychological impact of the entire episode must be another: if Jesus left John unavenged, either by miraculous intervention or revolutionary

uprising against world evil, and if Jesus Himself had to undergo such brutal opposition of sinners against Himself before arriving at His glorious goal, what must be the lot of any genuine disciples who cast their hope on Jesus? Whatever they may have seen in Him up to this point, they must recognize the unwelcome reality that "all who would live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and imitators will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and being deceived." (Cf. 2 Ti. 3:12) In this sense, then, this episode is a telling example of the kind of coexistence in the world between "the sons of the Kingdom" and "the sons of the evil one," as that concept was communicated by the Parables in Matthew's Chapter Thirteen.

5. Plummer (*Matthew*, 199), too, feels that this insertion needs explanation:

So detailed a narrative of John's death would not have been given merely to explain the craven fear of Antipas that Jesus was the murdered Baptist risen from the dead. The story of John's end is required to complete the account of his message to the Messiah and to illustrate the Messiah's eulogy of him (11:2-19); and as the one narrative begins with a message carried by John's disciples from Machaerus (11:3), so the other narrative ends with one. (14:12)

To conclude, perhaps a combination of these various factors may have decided this notable literary side-trip into a Herodian dinner-party.

#### NOTES

##### A. HEROD'S OPINION OF JESUS (Mt. 14:1, 2; Mk. 6:14-16; Lk. 9:7-9)

###### 1. Herod hears about Jesus

14:1 **At that time**, does not refer strictly to the events mentioned in chapter 13, but more generally to the wide-ranging, intensive evangelistic activities of Jesus and His Apostles in Galilee, before the crisis and collapse of His popularity near the beginning of Jesus' third year of ministry. (Cf. Mt. 14:13—15:21; Jn. 6 all) Mark and Luke connect this event directly with the mission of the Twelve in Galilee which Matthew recorded in chapter 10:1—11:1. (Cf. Mk. 6:7-14; Lk. 9:1-7) *Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, loosely called "king"*

by courtesy, not by right (see on 14:9), ruled only Galilee and Perea from his capital at Tiberias on the Lake of Galilee. In fact, it was Herodias' ambitious urging him to convince the emperor Caligula to recognize Herod officially as "king" that precipitated his ruin. (*Ant.* XVIII, 7, 2; *Wars*, II, 9, 6) If it be thought puzzling that the Synoptic authors should spend even one line on this weak, minor ruler of Palestine, let it be recalled that THIS Herod was, by a quirk of history, to become one of the judges of Jesus Christ. (Lk. 23:6-12; Ac. 4:27. See also introductory note 3 above.)

**Herod heard the report concerning Jesus** and "all that was done" (Lk.), "for his name had become known" (Mk.). He was actually hearing of the expanded evangelistic power of Jesus' multiplied preaching force represented by the six two-man teams, but the undeniable result of their magnificent work is not self-glorifying, because the attention of all Galilee—and, consequently, that of Herod,—is concentrated only on Jesus. Their mission, their labors and their attitude unselfishly held up "the name of Jesus" before Israel! *Herod heard the report*, because he would not himself go hear the itinerate Galilean rabbi, and had to depend upon the intelligence reports. He had to depend upon reports, also because Jesus deliberately avoided Herod so as not to precipitate the crisis of the cross before He had enjoyed sufficient opportunity for the training of the Twelve. The vices and vexations of court life and the uncertainties of Middle-East political relations would have more than filled Herod's major attentions, leaving minor religious figures and movements relatively in the background of his mind until their importance threatened his tranquility. Perhaps Herod's absence from Galilee on trips to Rome and his preoccupation with the war with the vindictive Arabian king, Aretas, would explain much of Herod's ignorance about the exact identity of Jesus.

## 2. Herod's interpretation of the news

**14:2 Herod said to his servants . . .** How did Matthew, or any of Jesus' disciples, supposedly far removed from any connection with Herod's corrupt court, learn that Herod was making these presumably private, self-incriminating observations? Is it possible that Chuza, Herod's steward, overheard it and reported the conversation to his wife, Joanna? (Lk. 8:3) And did she pass the word directly to the Lord? Or did this entire scene come through Manaen, Herod's foster-brother (*süntrōfros*, also rendered "familiar friend"), who later became

a noted teacher and prophet in the Antiochean church? (Cf. Ac. 13:1) *His servants* (*τοῖς paisin autoῦ*) are his courtiers. (In 1 Macc. 1:6, 8 *pals* means the generals of Alexander the Great; cf. Gen. 41:10, 37f; 1 Sam. 16:17; 18:22-26; 22:7ff, 17; 2 Sam. 3:38; 10:2; 12:15-21; 15:21, 34; Jer. 36:31; 37:2) He is not merely chatting with his household servants (*δοῦλοι, oikétai* or other); rather, he is taking counsel with responsible men in his court.

**This is John the Baptist . . . risen from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.** However wicked Herod may have been, he could not shake himself free from his own presuppositions nor his conscience. Resurrection from the dead was a fact of Old Testament history. Was Herod perhaps troubled by Jewish history of the apparition of the prophet Samuel to King Saul with the message of doom? (Cf. 1 Sam. 28:8-19) Was he troubled by reports of resurrections reportedly done by Jesus Himself at Nain just 15 miles southwest of Tiberias, or up at Capernaum 6 miles north of his capital? (Cf. Lk. 7:11-17; Mt. 9:18-26) Further, his own admission of John's prophetic greatness, when combined with a not totally unfounded fear of God's vengeance, may have pushed him to conclude tentatively that God, in fact, resurrected His great prophet.

Was Herod himself sympathetic to the Pharisean views? (Cf. Ac. 23:8) Edersheim sees the Herodian party as combining strict Pharisaic views with devotion to the reigning family. (*Life*, I, 240) But Jesus seems to distinguish the influence of Herod from that of the Pharisees and probably also that of the Sadducees. (Cf. Mt. 16:6, 11, 12; Mk. 8:15) Other commentators, perhaps harmonizing these texts cited, see Herodianism as essentially Sadducean religiously. If so, Herod's Sadduceism, which technically denied the resurrection from the dead, melted before the glaring sun of his own conscience.

While John had done no miracles during his ministry (Jn. 10:41), so powerful must have been the effect of his life and work that the tetrarch has no difficulty believing that so mighty a prophet should be risen and now working miracles too. It is unnecessary here to superimpose the idea supposedly prevalent "among the ancients that departed spirits were endowed with superhuman powers," or that "Herod therefore supposed that the risen John had brought these powers with him from the spirit world." (McGarvey, *Four-fold Gospel*, 370) Rather, if Herod's understanding of God had been at all sharpened by John's preaching (Mk. 6:20), then the ancients'

views may have had no bearing at all on Herod, since he could have truly imagined that God would raise and empower John. His actual deduction about Jesus is: "This is John . . . risen from the dead." Nor is it necessary to ascribe to him a belief in the transmigration of souls (from John to Jesus), since he is simply confused, having never seen Jesus, as had, for example, some of his own courtiers, as their arguments imply. (Mk. 6:15; Lk. 9:8)

**These powers are at work in him.** Plummer (*Matthew*, 201) rightly sees that "all these conjectures about Jesus are indirect evidence of the reality of His miracles." In fact, all that Herod heard "of all that was done," "Jesus' name" and "fame," can point to nothing less than the mighty miracles which were characteristic of the ministry of the great, ancient prophets. In fact, the counsellor's conjectures would have been meaningless, had His miracles not been of such character that their first reflex explanations of the phenomena should be "It is Elijah!" "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old!"

### 3. Others' opinions

While Matthew briefly reports only Herod's views, Mark and Luke relate the ignorant suggestions of his courtiers stabbing at an explanation of the marvel. They reject Herod's view, because they, having perhaps seen and heard both John and Jesus, would not confuse the two. So they seek another explanation.

### 4. Herod's desire to see Jesus

Herod's tormented conscience refused their comforting logic only partially, because Luke reports him as musing: "John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?" At this point Herod began seeking to see Jesus (Lk. 9:9), a fact of significance, because the suspicious king's sinister interest is now directed fully at Jesus. Perhaps it was to apply tests that would have settled in his own mind this tormenting question of identity. After all, the trouble he had suffered earlier was supposedly concluded with John's assassination, but here was an as yet unidentified person who is bringing the whole question to life again. Was his guilty conscience yearning merely to identify Jesus?

On the other hand, did the ghost of John rise in Herod's mind, not because of a superstitious dread, but rather because he desired that the Baptist rise again? What a relief it would have been to Herod

were John alive again! Trapped into slaying him, John's murderer must have been haunted by the deed. The news about Jesus may have temporarily awakened that vain, impossible desire to right what had been done. But, since Jesus was not John, Antipas remained an unpardoned murderer with no way out, but to repent. When a man refuses to be ruled by God, he begins to be ruled by tyrants a thousand times worse, even though they be but the ghosts of his own imagination.

While Luke 9:9 seems to point to some definite endeavor to get to see Jesus, it is to be doubted that Herod himself would stoop to wandering about among the multitudes to hear Him—unless he were so desperate as to attempt something incognito. Was he hoping that the Lord would visit Tiberias so that, without too much trouble, the encounter with Him could be arranged? If so, the silence of the Gospels regarding any such visit to Tiberias on the part of Jesus suggests that Herod kept waiting in vain until the very end, because Jesus, fully aware of the king's treachery, deftly avoided all contact with him until the Last Week trials. (Study Jesus' movements after the crisis and collapse of the Galilean ministry: Mk. 7:24, 31; 8:13-15, 27; 9:30; Lk. 13:31ff; 23:7-12)

## B. THE HISTORICAL FLASH BACK: THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF JOHN

### 1. John imprisoned by Herod to appease Herodias

**14:3 For Herod had laid hold on John.** (Mt. 4:12; Mk. 1:14; Lk. 3:19, 20) The Synoptics clearly link John's arrest with the general period following Jesus' baptism and before He moved from Judea to Galilee. John (3:22-30) pictures the Baptist as free to evangelize in the Aenon-Salim area until Jesus' trip to Galilee through Samaria. (Jn. 4) From this point John disappears into Herod's prison whence he sent his last recorded message to Jesus. (Mt. 11:2ff) The apparently easy access enjoyed by his disciples is explicable on the basis of Herod's own capricious attitude. (Mk. 6:20; see also on Mt. 14:12.)

## WAS JOHN EVER AT MACHERUS FORTRESS?

Josephus (*Ant. XVIII*, 5, 2) locates John's prison as in the castle

at Macherus, 20 miles southeast of Jericho on the east of the Dead Sea, about 100 miles southeast of Galilee. Several supposed discrepancies in this construction of the events have been noticed. (Cf. Kraeling, *Rand-McNally Bible Atlas*, 385; also *ISBE*, 1959a)

1. Josephus himself affirms (*ibid.*, 5, 1) that "Macherus . . . is a place on the borders of the dominions of Aretas and Herod . . . Macherus . . . was subject to her father," Aretas. But Aretas the Nabatean king is the outraged father ready to make war against Herod for the insult of discarding Aretas' daughter in favor of Herodias. Although the fortress was in the territory inherited by Herod Antipas from his father, Herod the Great, having actually been fortified by the latter (*Wars*, VII, 6, 1-2), it may have been held by Herod and Aretas conjointly by some unrecorded agreement. Thus it may have been in Aretas' hands when his daughter fled to him there before Herod was aware that she had already privately learned of his infidelity to her in favor of Herodias. Consequently, John the Baptist who piqued Herod for his stern denunciations of this infidelity would not have been imprisoned in a castle that AT THAT MOMENT was subject to the embattled father, Aretas!
2. The birthday party to which the principle men of Galilee were invited would probably have been held, not 100 miles to the south of their Galilean homes, but most likely at Tiberias, Herod's capital on the Lake of Galilee.
3. Further, there is no hint in the Gospel story that any significant time elapsed between Herod's order to execute John and the actual presentation of his head on a platter as requested by Herodias and Salome, i.e., time required to send a soldier from Galilee down to Macherus to return with John's head.

#### ANSWERS TO THE OBJECTIONS

1. Josephus can make mistakes, but the alleged error of his placing Macherus in Aretas' dominion while affirming that Herod beheaded John at Macherus, as if the castle were under his own influence, is an affirmation that he makes within two consecutive paragraphs. (*Ant.* XVIII, 5, 1-2) The close proximity of the two expressions which supposedly create so glaring an error would represent an unusual inadvertence on

the part of Josephus, or else it would be a historical fact so obvious to him that he saw no need to clarify what appears to us to be a discrepancy. The quirks of reality are often stranger than can be invented.

Aretas apparently did not himself live at Macherus, but in Arabia, because Josephus affirms that his daughter, to anticipate Herod, made as if she were going to Macherus, but upon her arrival there, she just kept traveling until "she soon came to Arabia . . . and she soon came to her father, and told him of Herod's intentions."

The solution may be that, though Macherus was officially within Aretas' jurisdiction, it may have been available by special treaty to Herod by virtue of his marriage to Aretas' daughter. If such an agreement provided for common access, then until Aretas declared war on Herod (shortly after John's death?), Herod could use the Macherus castle as if it were his own. (Study the relation of his grandfather, Antipater of Idumea, with the Arabians: *Wars*, I, 8, 9)

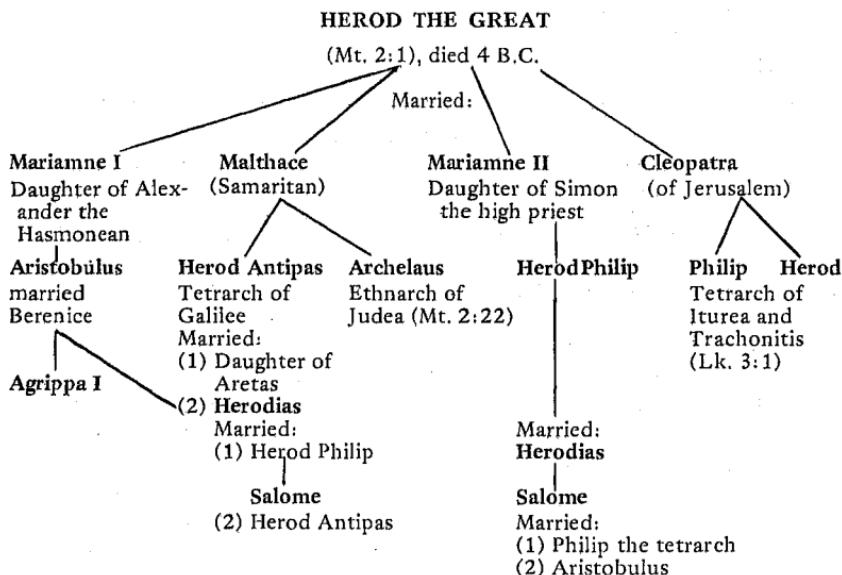
Was Herod, even at the time of John's murder, living in this border fortress to direct the war with his offended former father-in-law, Aretas?

2. What if Herod, in a gesture of personal bravado, paid the round-trip travel expenses of his Galilean princes clear down to Macherus just to combine a military and political visit to that castle, and, while there, to celebrate his birthday with a feast?
3. The assumption that time would be required for the executioner of John to travel from Galilee to Macherus to behead him and return is eliminated by the above-mentioned considerations.
4. If Edersheim (and others, see on 14:6) is right in thinking that the banquet in our text is not merely a birthday party, but rather a grand feast celebrating Antipas' accession to the tetrarchy, such a trip from Galilee to Macherus as that demanded by the facts related by the Evangelists and Josephus, would not at all be unfitting.
5. Since the very war with Aretas was not merely over Herod's repudiation of Aretas' daughter, but also a border dispute with a king who lived at Petra (*Ant.*, XVIII, 5, 2-3), where could Herod better pursue his battle plan than from a fortress on the Nabatean frontier about 88 miles from Aretas' capital? What

more logical headquarters could he find where he could gather "his courtiers, officers and leading men of Galilee" to counsel him in the prosecution of the war?

Despite the conjectures, the hypothesis of Josephus' credibility is the better, because the above suggestions show a possible harmonization of the Gospel accounts and Josephus, thus helping us better to visualize the situation and assure ourselves of the Evangelists' accuracy in describing John's death as a historical fact.

**For the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.** 4 For John said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." A simplified version of the Herodian family tree will show the relationships on which John's charge was based:



Josephus (*Ant.* XVIII, 5, 4) explodes:

Herodias, their sister, was married to Herod [Philip], son of Herod the Great, who was born of Mariamne, the daughter of Simon the high priest, who had a daughter, Salome; after whose birth, Herodias took upon her to confound the laws of our

country, and divorce herself from her husband, while he was alive and was married to Herod [Antipas] her husband's brother by the father's side; he was tetrarch of Galilee; but her daughter Salome was married to Philip, the son of Herod, the tetrarch of Trachonitis.

The bracketed additions to Josephus' text are by the translator Whiston, wisely added because of the multiple confusions created in Herod the Great's family by the latter's using the same name to name different people. Negative critics could accuse the Synoptic authors of a historical blunder wherein they seem to confuse Philip the tetrarch for the first husband of Herodias, when in reality he later became her son-in-law. In this case Matthew and Mark would be guilty of confounding the Herod of Rome, mentioned by Josephus, with his half-brother, Philip the tetrarch of Trachonitis, as well as of making the latter Herodias' husband. But Whiston's additions are perfectly justifiable for the reasons collected by Edersheim (*Life*, I, 672, note 2):

1. Among the eight sons of Herod the Great, three are also named Herod. Of only one, i.e., Herod Antipas, do we know the second name. It is not very probable that the other two did not also have some distinguishing name. While Josephus speaks of both Herodias' first and second husbands as simply "Herod," the Evangelists use only the distinctive name of the former: "Philip."
2. Herod the Great must have named two sons "Herod Philip" by different mothers, which, though problematic, is not impossible, because:
  - a. He had two sons named "Antipas," or "Antipater," sons of different mothers, Doris and Malthace. "Antipas" may be a short form of "Antipater." (See Arndt-Gingrich, 75; cf. *Ant.* XIII, 14, 1!)
  - b. He had two wives of the same name: Mariamne.

While as yet non-Biblical historical documentation is lacking to prove that Herodias' first husband was named "Philip," as the Evangelists affirm, the above-mentioned considerations definitely lift the Gospel narratives above the suspicion of inaccuracy levelled at them by the detractors. There is no confusion in the Gospel narrative over the identity of Herodias' first husband, as some critics allege, (Cf. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 35) In fact, the "Philip" in question here is never termed "the tetrarch," as is his half-brother

in Lk. 3:1. Thus, Matthew and Mark are as knowledgeable as Josephus on this point. (Contrast Emil Kraeling, *Bible Atlas*, 385.)

On the basis of the foregoing it is now possible to see why John charged: **It is not lawful for you to have her.** The legal points in his accusations are two:

1. INCEST: as discernible from the genealogical chart above, the relation of consanguinity between Antipas and Herodias was within the forbidden limits, because she was his own step-niece, being the daughter of his half-brother, Aristobulus. (Cf. Lev. 18:16; 20:21) The only exception to these laws was the levirate marriage in the event of the death of a childless brother. (Dt. 25:5ff) However, Herodias had already borne one daughter to Philip, i.e., Salome, moreover Philip himself was still alive. The crime, then, is incest. Farrar notes (*Life*, 296, note 2):

Even the Romans regarded such unions with horror; and never got over the disgust which the Emperor Claudius caused them by marrying his niece Agrippina; but they were almost the rule in the Herodian family.

2. ADULTERY: Herodias' husband and Herod's wife, daughter of Aretas, were both still alive. (Cf. *Ant.* XVIII, 5, 1-2) John interpreted the marriage institution as did Jesus. (Mt. 5:32; 19:3-9; Lk. 16:18; Mk. 10:11, 12) In fact, Mark's version (6:18) clearly quotes John as labelling Herodias as "your brother's wife," as also Lk. 3:19. Even though Herodias succeeded in divorcing her husband, Philip (or Herod) of Rome, it appears that Herod Antipas himself had not been able to effect his divorce from Aretas' daughter, because she outwitted him before he could legitimize his separation from her. But that annoying detail did not hinder the lusty tetrarch from taking up his adulterous-incestuous union with Herodias in open defiance of truly Jewish sensibilities.

These particular charges, added to the other public rebukes of Herod's misdeeds (Lk. 3:19), blew the safety valve by exposing the tetrarch and his lover as common sinners before the Jewish law. Herod Antipas himself had not a drop of Jewish blood in his veins, being the son of Herod the Great, a pure Idumean (*Ant.* XIV, 7, 3 also 15, 2), and Malthace, a Samaritan woman (*Wars*, I, 28, 4). Whereas the Idumeans "submitted to the use of circumcision, and the rest of the Jewish ways of living; at which time therefore this

befell them, that they were hereafter no other than Jews" (*Ant.* XIII, 9, 1), yet the Herods could be reproached for being but "an Idumean, i.e., a half Jew" (*Ant.*, XIV, 15, 2). John's attack is legally based on the Mosaic legislation to which the Idumean Herods never gave anything but the most distant attention. But the very Jewishness of John's rebuke can easily be construed as a political threat, because it exposes Antipas' unwillingness to be governed by those laws to which truly JEWISH kings must submit.

**14:4 For John kept saying to Herod** (*élegen*) on what occasions? Is the direct statement, "It is not lawful for you to have her," a summary of the Baptist's message addressed to Herod's face? While the Gospels do not affirm that John uttered this blistering condemnation either in the wilderness before the approving multitudes or in the audience of the tetrarch himself, it would seem more consonant with John's known character to envision him fearlessly denouncing the prince personally. He had not feared to expose the hypocrisy and iniquity of the religio-political power-bloc at Jerusalem. His single-minded fearlessness and sense of right and duty probably drove him to encounter Herod head-on.

## 2. Herodias tries to avenge herself against John.

Mk. 6:19: "And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him, but she could not for Herod . . . kept him safe." Accustomed to the self-importance of the royal house, the grandeur of Rome and the broadening of travel, Herodias was not about to permit a brassy-voiced backwoods revivalist to call her—even by implication—an incestuous adulteress! While as fully pagan as Herod, she apparently had less conscience. Stung by John's condemnation, she took it as a personal affront, flew into a terrible rage, screaming fiercely her hatred and demanding John's execution.

She is under stress not only because of John's publicly denouncing her as an adulteress. She is also menaced, because if she must return to her first husband, or at any rate, leave Herod, to whom she has attached her ambitions, these very ambitions must be immediately relinquished, and her personal struggle for supremacy must begin all over at a time when she sees herself beginning to arrive at her goals. Quite insecure since her childhood, being the orphaned daughter of Aristobulus who was murdered by her grandfather, Herod the Great, murderer of her grandmother, Mariamne I, she had been married to her half-uncle, Herod Philip, only son of Herod the Great

and Mariamne II, even before she was of age. (*Ant.* XVII, 1, 2) This would have guaranteed the throne to her husband in the event of the unforeseeable death of Antipater, the heir apparent, because Herod the Great's will set Herod Philip as next in line. (*Ant.* XVII, 3, 2) Unfortunately for Herodias, Herod Philip's mother, Mariamne II, was caught in a plot to murder Herod the Great, for which the latter "divorced her, and blotted her son out of his testament." (*Wars*, I, 30, 7) Herodias thus found herself married to a Herod, who, however wealthy (*Ant.* XVII, 8, 1; 11, 5), had become just another private citizen who could not even boast a portion of a semi-royal position. Now that she is finally enjoying her first ladyship, i.e., married to Antipas, John's righteous sentence threatens to snatch it from her. No wonder she was nervous!

Lest our self-righteousness blind us to the "Herodias" in our own spirit, have we never felt the same bitterness and anger toward someone who challenged our goodness and rebuked us for some cherished sin? Our mere shock at committing murder to turn off the embarrassing accusation must never blind us to what the Lord thinks about our hatred and desire for revenge, since the spirit behind both is essentially the same, and will be judged accordingly. (See on Mt. 5:21, 22.)

"Herodias . . . wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod . . . kept him safe." Did Herod's self-estimate of his own goodness grow in direct proportion to his effectiveness in blocking Herodias' agitated urging? Did he satisfy himself for yielding to one temptation (to live with her) by reminding his conscience that he did not yield to the other (to surrender John to her)? Was this his attempt to bargain with Divine Justice?

### 3. Herod's mixed motives blocked any effective action.

**14:5 And though he wanted to put him to death he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.** Herod makes an interesting character study because of the contradictory elements that constitute his personality:

1. Sheer political expediency demanded the death of an enemy so dangerous to the crown as John, and yet extraordinary measures must be taken to avoid public displeasure on the part of a nation conscious of the divine call and the righteousness of that enemy's accusations. Josephus (*Ant.* XVIII, 5, 2) writes:

. . . Herod . . . feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late.

Herod feared the nationalistic Zealots, because of his collaboration with Rome; he feared the Romans because his tenuous power depended upon their good grace as long as he preserved order in his realm; therefore he feared John, because the latter could easily, by inciting the Zealots and others of Herod's political enemies, dynamite everything Herod had so laboriously constructed. In fact, but for the refusal of Jesus to head such an insurrection after John's murder, Herod would have quite probably faced the violence of civil war, precisely BECAUSE he murdered John! (Jn. 6:15; Mt. 14:12, 13) Ironically, from a purely self-serving political standpoint, to eliminate John meant political suicide for Antipas! The notorious scarcity of genuine prophets in Israel for centuries made it a particularly serious matter to manacle, much less murder, this rare man. Further, the Herods in general, primarily because they were merely tolerated Idumeans, had followed a very astute policy of seeking to ingratiate themselves with the Jewish people. To hinder this holy man, from the people's standpoint, meant to outrage public opinion and reverse the pacifying policy to a most dangerous degree.

Note a similar mental block in the minds of the Jewish authorities when Jesus quizzed them about John's authority: "If we say, 'From men,' we are afraid of the multitude; for all hold John to be a prophet . . ." (Mt. 21:26) Fear of public opinion, more than fear of God, keeps men from acting consistently with their real views, reducing them to moral cowards and hypocrites.

Matthew's statement of Herod's murderous intention toward John may reflect Antipas' original reflex action before actually hearing John on numerous occasions and, because of which preaching, mellowed for the other motives mentioned by Mark (6:20):

2. "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man," despite his own political conviction demanding his death.

What a contrast: the ragged prisoner in Herod's presence stood free and uncondemned by a holy God, while the richly-robed monarch himself grovelled in his own moral filth in the presence of the same God John so valiantly proclaimed! Herod feared John, because he feared John's God. In fact, John made his God so real to the vile tetrarch that the latter could not but bow his crowned head in awesome respect at the unsullied sincerity and unrelenting courage of the prophet. He possessed not even the suspicion of a defense against the truth of John's accusations. Herod was conscious that before him stood a MAN whose soul was honed razor-sharp by constant communion with God, a man who knew precisely what he thought and where he was going, and for whom the reality of righteousness was his daily bread. Here stood a mighty rock of a man whose moral power laughed at all the waves of shame and insults beating helplessly against him, whom the threats of imprisonment and death could not shake and the bribes of office, wealth and glory could not buy. Herod's court was filled with enough "reeds shaken by the wind," time-serving, self-seeking "men clothed in soft raiment," who pliantly bent morality and truth whenever Herod willed. But here is a giant of a man who is not afraid to live the life of the living God in the presence of dying men, and the tetrarch could not but admire this rare specimen. Though Antipas pile up defense upon defense against the forerunner's message, no vindication could satisfy even the corrupt tetrarch himself, because he sensed that he had at last come face to face with reality itself, the truth of God incarnate in one single man who would not budge. Either Antipas must surrender to God and to John, or . . .

Whereas Mark mentions only Antipas' conviction that John was a righteous and holy man, it is evident, from Antipas' surmise about Jesus, that the former considered John to be the kind of man from whom not even the performance of miracles to almost any extent—even his resurrection from the dead—might not be reasonably expected. Either Antipas too sees John as a prophet of God, which is more likely, or his surmise about Jesus reveals a paganish superstition, which is not altogether unlikely either.

3. "Herod kept him safe" (Mk. 6:20) probably includes the ideas involved in the alternate textual reading included in the KJV: "he did many things," now corrected to "he was much perplexed" (the difference between *epeoiei* and *ēpbrei* in the next phrase). The verb *suntereo* means not only "to protect, defend against harm,"

contextually pointing to protective custody from Herodias' murderous clutches, but also "to keep in mind; be concerned about," and "to hold or treasure up (in one's mind, memory)." This latter significance suggests that he treated John with respect and a kindness limited to their respective positions and circumstances. It appears, thus, that Herod's official stand on John collided with his personal concern. Whereas he must officially silence that embarrassingly public accusation that menaced his throne, yet, once John was securely locked in Herod's dungeon, the king could safely be generous with him whom he really respected. But Herod was unwilling to do the one thing that would free him from his guilty conscience: break with his beloved sins and Herodias. Did he hope that such kind treatment shown John could atone for his adultery, or be substituted for doing the very thing God demanded of him? But in the long view, what became of the king's sollicitous carefulness for the wilderness preacher, his eager listening to his message? The inadvertence of an unguarded moment and a rash promise wiped it all out! And even later, his alarmed conscience, shaken by news about Jesus, did not lead to any deep repentance either.

4. "When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly." (Mk. 6:20b) Herod's perplexity was caused, on the one hand, by his unwillingness to make a break with the luxury and licentiousness he desired, and, on the other, by his consciousness of the rightness of John's denunciations and his fear of God's wrath. The word rendered "perplexed" (*aporeō*) beautifully sketches his embarrassment, uncertainty and mental inability to resolve his dilemma. Here is a man whose will is completely blocked in the presence of clear-cut choices, because of the contradictory demands of his desires.

a. "He heard him gladly," perhaps because John was a link with a better past. Herod too had been a boy once, trying to make sense out of the world, and had perhaps set higher ideals for himself than were common among the corrupt Herodian courts. Later, gradually slipping and finally plunging to the hilt in the powerful vices which his unique position offered him, and even now, compromised completely by his incestuous paramour, he cannot shake that lingering appreciation for integrity, principle and the service of God in the life of another young man who made it.

b. "He heard him gladly" perhaps for a more sinister reason. Did

Herod frankly enjoy the verbal beatings John gave him? That is, because of the vicarious punishment he received thereby, did he actually like to hear his sins aired and condemned? His guilty conscience would not let him rest, but his desires would not let him repent either. Is it possible that the more John leveled his fiery denunciations at Herod, the happier Herod could feel psychologically? Naturally, since this type of catharsis does not lead to repentance and restitution, the temporary feeling of psychological cleansing lasts only until the whole scene is forgotten under the rush of other interests, other lusts, which, in turn, bring on the felt need for another "blistering" by John's fearless declaration of divine truth and righteousness. In this sense, Herod NEEDED John, keeping him on call for his private catharsis.

(Compare the mixed motives of another ruler and his preacher. Acts 24:24-27, Paul and Felix)

4. At his public birthday celebration Herod rashly vowed anything to Herodias' daughter, Salome.

14:6 But when Herod's birthday came (*genesiois dē genoménois tōtū Herōdou*), the tetrarch "gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee." (Mk. 6:21) Some, with Edersheim (*Life*, I, 672), doubt that what is involved here is a simple birthday party for a few choice guests. They think it, rather, the anniversary of the death of Herod the Great and, consequently, the anniversary of the accession of his son Herod Antipas to the tetrarchy. The debate revolves around the word *genésia* and the probabilities of Herod's character; the outcome of the discussion strengthens the Gospels' position.

*Genésios*, according to Rocci, 381, refers either (in the neuter plural as in our case) to "the anniversary date of the death of a parent," or to "the feast for the anniversary of the birth," but in Mt. 14:6 Rocci prefers "birthday." Arndt-Gingrich (153) also think it means "birthday celebration," but point out that "*genésia* earlier . . . meant a commemorative celebration on the birthday of a deceased person." Vine (*Expository Dictionary*, 128) notes that the interpretation "the day of a king's accession . . . is not confirmed in Greek writings." The irrelevance of this latter remark is illustrated by the fact that we are not dealing

only with Greek writings as such, but with Jewish Greek of the LXX (cf. Gen. 40:20) as well as the Jewishness of both our Gospels and of the situation described. Edersheim (*ibid.*) cites the Rabbinic equivalent in Abod.Z. 10a where *Yom Ginuseya* is expressly and elaborately shown to be the day of accession. He further shows that "the event described in our text certainly took place *before* the Passover, and this was the time of Herod's (the Great) death and of the accession of Antipas."

It is impossible to establish the likelihood of the celebration of Herodian birthdays, because of the unpredictability of the human personality, and because Herod, with perfect consistency, could be deliberately affecting imperial manners where he could manage it. Plummer (*Matthew*, 202, note 2) cites Origen as arguing that birthday celebrations are wrong, affirming that "we find in no Scripture that a birthday was kept by a righteous man." Pharaoh and Herod Antipas are the two examples he offers, a fact which argues that Origen translated *genésia* "birthday" rather than "accession day."

The foregoing conclusionless debate only demonstrates the probable authenticity of the Evangelists' narrative against any who would question their veracity by doubting that Herod would drag his courtiers clear to Macherus for a little birthday party. Further, as suggested above ("Was John ever at Macherus?"), the tetrarch and his court may have been at Macherus, as Josephus informs us, on quite other business than birthday parties, in which case, Herod may have wished to combine several things together by uniting the celebration of his accession to the throne (or his birthday) with the presence of his courtiers and generals at his southernmost military post.

Mark notes that the opportunity Herodias had so diligently sought, came. While Herod dallied, wavering between the threatenings of his conscience and the satisfaction of his desires and the day-to-day prosecution of his reign, Herodias singlemindedly plotted the venting of her rage. Was it at her insistence that Herod should give a banquet on his birthday? Did she draw up the list of big names to invite as witnesses of her vendetta, choosing men whose doubtful moral fiber could be counted upon not to quail at murder? Did she groom Salome for her chorus-girl act so as to entice some rash promise from Herod? Did she leave Salome deliberately uncoached as to what to request, or was this feigned unpreparedness also part of the act? Josephus' attitude toward Herodias describes her as an ambitious plotter, fully

capable of managing from offstage every move in the scene the Gospels describe here. (Cf. *Ant.* XVIII, 7 1-2; *Wars*, II, 9, 6) Or, did Herodias merely seize an unexpected opportunity suddenly thrust into her hands by the puzzled request of her daughter? Her quick-wittedness to grasp this unparalleled opportunity is certainly the deliberately sought outlet for months of frustrated revenge.

**The daughter of Herodias danced in the midst and pleased Herod.** The girl, Salome, was also daughter of Herod Philip of Rome, apparently brought along with Herodias when the latter divorced her husband for Antipas. (*Ant.* XVIII, 5, 4) The attentive reader of the Greek in Mk. 6:22 will notice what seems to be a mistake on Mark's part:

1. With the reading *autoū* in the text, the girl is described as Herod's daughter: "his daughter came in." In verse 24 she is correctly described as Herodias' daughter, whom Josephus identifies as step-niece of Antipas. But Mark makes no blunder here, because, in the wider Jewish usage, any younger female relative may be called "daughter," or else, because, by virtue of Herod's illicitly contracted marriage to Herodias, Salome became the "daughter" of Herod.

However, Metzger (*A Textual Commentary*, 89f) believes that according to this reading the girl is herself named Herodias, i.e., *Herodiādos* is taken as an appositive genitive with "daughter," thus naming her "Herodias." However, in light of the historical and contextual difficulties such a translation causes, it is better to consider *Herodiādos* to be a genitive of origin or relationship, thus identifying Herod's unnamed "daughter" as "of Herodias," without naming her. (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, *Grammar*, Sect. 162, 168) The interpretation would be stronger, however, had Mark added the article *tēs* before *Herodiādos*, but such a solecism as the text now stands might not overly trouble a Hebrew writing in Greek as he constructs this concatenation of genitives with different meanings.

2. With the reading *autēs tēs*, however, the situation becomes more picturesque and significant: "the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced." This reading draws instant attention to the shocking lowering of this girl of rank who thus displays herself in this dance. However, the former textual variant must not be ignored, because of the strength of its external attestation.

*The daughter of Herodias* is described later (14:11) as a "girl" or *korasion*, a diminutive form of *kore*, "a girl; maiden; virgin," or even a "married daughter, or bride," hence *korasion* would indicate "a little girl, a child." (Rocci, 1073) Nevertheless, we have no way of ascertaining her exact age, nor, on that basis, what kind of dance she did, nor, on the basis of this, how *she pleased Herod and his guests*. Various commentators have pictured, not impossibly, a lascious teenager doing something like an Egyptian belly dance. However, is it possible that we have a mere child doing some more innocent presentation particularly well, who rightfully deserves the applause she received? Then, after taking her bows, did she wiggle into her new daddy's arms for a kiss of approval and the promise of some future bauble? It is psychologically possible that Herod in his (drunken?) exuberance would have made just such a promise to this child just to see if her young mind were as keen as her ability to perform. This, if it turns out as Herod desires, would become one more way of showing off Herodian pride, since she is his grand step-niece. Unsuspecting the outcome, Herod may even have thought her taking counsel with her mother a mark of maturity.

**14:7 So that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask,** to which he rashly added: "even half of my kingdom." (Mk. 6:23) Is Herod's swaggering manner a conscious imitation of real emperors? (Cf. Esther 5:3, 6; 7:2; 1 Kg. 13:8)

About this same period, Caligula was making this same kind of patronizing promise to Antipas' step-nephew, Agrippa I, at Rome. On that occasion, too, Caesar felt he could not back down from his promises, because of so many witnesses to his promises. See *Ant. XVIII*, 8, 7.

The inconsiderateness of these oaths, however often repeated for emphasis (cf. "oaths" 14:9), becomes apparent from the fact that they were never made with that seriousness of purpose, that consciousness of God and that appreciation of truth and righteousness that must always accompany a proper oath. (See on 5:33-37.) Otherwise, when confronted with such a request as Herodias demanded, which took such unfair advantage of the broad terms of his promise and oaths, he would not have been caught so completely off guard.

5. Herodias requires John's murder which Herod reluctantly orders.

**14:8 Prompted by her mother** summarizes a short, behind-the-

scenes conversation narrated by Mark: "She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask?' And she said, 'The head of John the baptizer.' And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.'" The words "at once . . . here on a platter" point to the nearly immediate possibility of instant compliance with her request, hence to the nearness of John's prison.

This gesture of asking her mother is absolutely no indication of Salome's chronological age, since psychological subjection to an ambitious, domineering mother is possible from the cradle to the grave. It is perfectly natural for a little girl to ask her mother, but it may also have been perfectly natural for a *Salome* to suffocate her own desires in favor of a *Herodias'* ambitions. Agreed, she was not mature enough to make her own decisions, but what does THAT tell us about her age?

14:9 **And the king was** (Mark: exceedingly) sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests, he commanded it to be given. Did Herod's oaths really obligate him to grant this criminal request? No, he had two valid options:

1. The actual request made was not contemplated in the oath-covered promise. Despite the exceedingly general nature of his promise, he might honorably have declared that his generosity implied, so necessarily that it needed not be expressed, an intention to give her an expensive gift, or at any rate, what was lawful and proper. So, when she demanded that a crime be committed, the oath was no longer valid and his obligation to keep it ceased.
2. Even if all the men present had objected that the very generality of his promise should be interpreted to include even this request, Herod Antipas could have REPENTED of his oath. An oath is a solemn promise guaranteeing the seriousness and certainty of its fulfillment because of man's awareness of God's presence to witness the affirmations. But this very awareness of God's concern in the transaction must remind the swearer of God's interest, not only in the validity of human promises, but also in the sacredness of human life. Ethically, the choice between the murder of an innocent victim of an adulteress' revenge and the possible embarrassment because of a broken oath, should have been easy to solve on the basis of moral priorities. But this awareness of God and this sense of ethical priorities was notoriously absent in the case of Antipas. From this standpoint his oath and what it should

have stood for was better honored by being broken than by being kept. To have repudiated the hasty oath would not have been sin, but repentance. If the oath must be considered valid, repentance was his only way out, but it WAS a way out! (Lev. 5:4, 5) Despite John's preaching, Herod had so long followed a pattern of refusal to repent that, now when he needs desperately to respond better to this crisis of conscience, he cannot. Though his conscientious awareness of John's righteousness, holiness and innocence threw him into deep grief (*perilupos genomenos, lupetheis*), other factors blocked any effective decision to repent of his oaths.

Herod is an example of the supposed "necessity" for sinning. Though stricken with a feeling of grief at what necessity made him do, he felt the apparent validity of his reasons: "For the sake of his oaths . . ." But these are the justifications of a man whose conduct was governed, not by the unchanging ethical principles of right and wrong, but by a vague sense of honor and a flexible, dubious conventionalism derived from his own profligate society and its traditional customs. So, the snare which entrapped Antipas was of the flimsiest quality, because he could have repudiated his oaths, and because he knew he was gratifying a cruel hatred with which he did not really agree.

Herod's conscience was dead to real crimes like adultery, incest and murder, but supersensitive to the point of scrupulousness about a broken oath! What moral blindness to uphold a dubious point of honor at the expense of elementary justice!

The second factor blocking Herod's decisive refusal of so wicked a request is his guests. *His oaths and his guests*, as factors, must be taken together, because of the unspoken social pressure these witnesses supplied. His oaths had not been spoken in a vacuum nor merely for the sake of Salome. He intended to impress *his guests* and now their very existence pressured him, as if they said, "Can Herod's word to any of us be trusted, if here in his presence he breaks his most solemn oaths?" The king's fear of being disgraced in their presence proves that both his oaths and Salome's request were heard by the entire group. The moral immobility of each single guest at this sudden turn of events which unavoidably involved the life or death of God's prophet, is the more eloquent against them, because of their unpreparedness to impede the tragic conclusion of a merry feast brought on by Herod's cowardly acquiescence. It is unfair to believe that all the guests were cutthroats, because the politician in

Herod may have invited some reasonably good men for political "window dressing." Even Herod himself had balked at killing John before this. But in these few seconds after Salome delivered her mother's demand, no voice of protest, no remonstrating with the tetrarch to repent of his oath, is recorded. How mistakenly Herod read the thoughts of the most reflective among them: "Let Herod show us by royal example for once the high regard with which the life of an innocent private citizen in his realm is to be regarded! Even at the doubtful cost of temporary embarrassment! Let the king repent of his oath, refuse the iniquitous request, spare the life of God's prophet, and his kingdom may stand forever!" Nevertheless, the order was given and executed before they reacted, and a valiant, innocent victim lay dead because of this inaction. Would Herod have repented of his oaths, had but one or two brave men stood up to defend John? (Contrast Eph. 5:3-18; cf. Jer. 26 all; 36:25; 1 Sam. 14:43-46.) Certainly it was too much to hope that Herod himself should have correctly read the thoughts of any men of character in the group, for how could a man, so habitually insensitive to other people, hope to understand their deepest thoughts at a crisis like this? Or, on the other hand, did those guests, with their consciences deadened and reflexes slowed by wine, actually express their insistence that he maintain his oaths? The monstrousness of his distorted ethic is well-measured in Edersheim's exclamation (*Life*, I, 674):

Unfaithful to his God, to his conscience, to truth and righteousness; not ashamed of any crime or sin, he would yet be faithful to his half-drunken oath, and appear honourable and true before such companions!

Mark (6:26) underlines another deciding factor that tipped the scales in Herod's mind: "He did not WANT to break his word to her." (*ouk ethēlesen athetēsai*) His desires, or wishes, conspired against his conscience, will and intelligence, and because he was accustomed to do whatever he wished, he simply did what instinctively seemed most natural to him. He could have repented, objected and refused, but he did not want to.

What irony: some men defy the blazing judgment of an angry God rather than face a snicker from an unpredictable crowd, or a tongue-lashing from their women! Herod was just another weakling like Ahab, who although they recognized the divine mission in God's prophets, John or Elijah, and gestured with the pride of a Xerxes,

meekly folded before those vicious wretches, Jezebel and Herodias, to whom they were slaves!

**14:10 he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. 11 and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.** What a dainty dish to set before the king! Yet from that platter the now lifeless eyes of the holiest man Herod had ever known stared at him. Sinners like Herodias and her dancing daughter seemed momentarily to have conquered by silencing the prophet's voice, but too late. John had already indicted them of evil, already thundered the judgment of the living God in their hearing. Already their consciences had been warned. John had won, because by lifting his head, they only hurled him into the presence of his Vindicator and their Judge!

Ironically, their crime precipitated the very security crisis Herod and Herodias had hoped to avoid, because to their publicly condemned adultery is now added the infamy of murdering a popular holy man.

6. John's body is buried by his disciples and Jesus is informed.

**14:12 And (Mark: when the disciples heard of it) his disciples came and buried it (Mark: in a tomb). And they went and told Jesus.** When John's followers heard of it, who told them? Was Chuza, Herod's steward (Lk. 8:3) also present at that fatal banquet and a horrified witness to the scene when John's disembodied head was presented to the tetrarch? Was he the contact in the Herodian bureaucracy through whom John's disciples could be assured of access to their master in the dungeon? It is not unlikely, because Herod needed not only fawning pawns who would bend truth and righteousness at his demand, but also a few dependably upright, godly men to whom he could entrust the administrative oversight of his affairs. Where would he have been able to find a more faithful manager than among those men with ability who possessed the undoubted character of a John the Baptist? Was Chuza perhaps a disciple of John, whose wife had already swung over to Jesus, and whose own sentiments agreed with everything John stood for? If so, he may have moved rapidly and certainly to contact other godly men to come to prepare the corpse for a proper burial "in a tomb." Did Chuza, himself a conspicuously wealthy man, provide the tomb, in somewhat the same way Joseph of Arimathea offered his for the entombment of the Lord? Too many unknown factors prohibit any

certainty. In fact, perhaps even the remorse of Herod himself played some role here too, facilitating the burial.

**Then went and told Jesus: why?**

1. They have no decent alternative. While some disciples of John had chosen previously not to follow Jesus in order to remain loyal to their master (see notes on Mt. 9:14-17), now they have no other option to their dark despair and heartbreak but to seek Him out who was now their last hope. This significant choice to go to Jesus throws light upon John's attitude toward the Lord. When he received the Lord's answer to his impatient question, apparently he was satisfied. (Mt. 11:2-7) This contentment with Jesus was communicated to his disciples and in their blackest day they turn to Him.
2. Did they go to Jesus to prod Him into action? In the same way John had sent to Jesus, hoping He would do something immediate about the wretched state of the nation, perhaps these disciples go to the Lord, hoping He might be more ready to do something about John's death. If He had not hurried the beginning of the Messianic Kingdom when the Baptist had challenged Him earlier, perhaps John's tragic end would shock Him into instant action. Would He raise John from the dead, as He had others?
3. Did these disciples believe that the Messiah's kingdom must automatically mean the overthrow of Herod's? Does their move indicate a positive political switch of allegiance from their late master, and a readiness to crown Jesus their king in order to revolt politically against Herod? Were these very disciples of John among those who fomented the grassroots movement to proclaim Jesus the Messianic Sovereign? (Jn. 6:14, 15) What a task Jesus must have had to cool their bitternesss and calm their demands for revenge! As righteous Judge of the world and grateful Kinsman and Friend of the great martyr, in this case He could sympathize perfectly with the rightness of vengeance. But here Jesus could not violate His own priorities by turning aside from His goal to save the world, in order to satisfy a definitely secondary priority, that of avenging John.
4. Or did they hurry to warn Jesus who was even then evangelizing in Herod's Galilee, lest He too fall by the butcher's sword? The reality of the danger to the Lord is measured by His instant move to push His popularity to its logical climax and collapse, and subsequently, by His constant movement to outmaneuver His enemies.

5. Whatever their specific motive, they probably felt that Jesus would be understanding in their grief.

**14:13a Now when Jesus heard it, he withdrew from thence in a boat, to a desert place apart.** What a blow against truth and righteousness had been struck: the voice of the Messiah's forerunner and the message of this great prophet had just been forever silenced on earth! This tragedy was not altogether unexpected, since Jesus had forewarned His disciples that all who would be faithful to God may expect similar rejection. (Mt. 5:10-12; 10:14, 16-39) But this is a personal loss to Jesus: His cousin, John, has just been mercilessly chopped down in a tyrant's dungeon! (Cf. Lk. 1:36)

*When Jesus heard it,* He had been evangelizing mainly in Galilee west of the Jordan, as were also His disciples. (See on 14:1.) If John was decapitated in the Macherus prison, several days would have elapsed before common travelers could have brought the news the 100 miles from that fortress east of the Dead Sea to central Galilee. *When Jesus heard it,* He withdrew? The disciples of John, Jesus' own followers, and a shocked nation were impatient for Jesus to denounce that dastardly deed in a declaration of holy war against all wickedness in government and religion. But Jesus is deliberately silent, as far as His official, public pronouncements go. Nothing more striking, nothing more out of step with human politics, could be imagined. Nevertheless, here is written the patience, meekness and wisdom of the Son of God who must firmly resist the almost overwhelming temptation to turn aside from His unique mission, in order to avenge His beloved herald. And yet this silence, so frustrating to those who expected decisively crushing vengeance from the Lord, is the divine self-government that keeps God from bludgeoning every sinner instantly whenever he tramples truth and mercy underfoot. There must be time to repent. If the Apostles and disciples are going to "be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them" (Mt. 10:18), this moment of mercy offered the highest authorities in the land must not be snatched away from them by hasty vengeance, no matter how justified. But the silence of God, seen here in Jesus Christ, must not be mistaken for apathy, because His silence is but that ominous quiet that precedes the violent firestorm of divine justice that must finally break over sinful men. Jesus, further, understood perfectly the principle of escalation: to become even distantly embroiled in a holy revolt against Herod must necessarily enflame to fever pitch the emotions of the nation to the

*—Continued on page 245*

King Herod Antipas	A KING AND HIS PREACHER John the Baptist	Herodias
A. A Guilty King 1. His conscience was awakened by another voice of righteousness proving that God's voice could not be stilled by murdering His prophets. 2. Awakened by a nearly forgotten remorse over John's murder.	A. A Fearless Preacher 1. Not only before the nation of Israel, making holiness a way of life among a degenerate people. 2. But also before the King a. No soft, easy sermons b. Rather, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife!"	A. A Vindictive Woman 1. Justly condemned for her incestuous adultery, 2. Out for revenge on John, 3. Cared not what measures she took.
B. A Weak-willed Adulterer 1. Divorced own wife without just cause ( <i>Ant.</i> , XVIII, 5, 1) 2. Seduced and married his brother's wife 3. Beguiled by Salome's dancing 4. Feared John ( <i>Mk.</i> 6:20) 5. Fear the people ( <i>Mt.</i> 14:5) 6. Feared official scorn ( <i>Mt.</i> 14:9; <i>Mk.</i> 6:26)	B. A Strong and Righteous Man 1. By Jesus' estimate ( <i>Mt.</i> 11:11) 2. Even in Herod's eyes ( <i>Mk.</i> 6:20) 3. Afraid of no one but God	B. A Woman of Loose Morals 1. Not satisfied with own husband, 2. Accepted Herod's advances and hand in marriage ( <i>Ant.</i> XVIII, 5, 4) 3. Unrelenting murderer of John
C. Openly Confused and Confusing 1. Herod desired John's death but feared men 2. Herod feared John 3. Herod protected him 4. Herod heard him gladly although much perplexed 5. A rash, foolish oath: a. Made in haste in dubious circumstances to a dancing girl while himself perhaps half-drunk	C. Openly Convinced and Convincing 1. Absolutely certain of his divine commission 2. He spoke God's word, not his own opinions, regardless of personal cost or danger.	C. Openly Corrupt and Corrupting 1. Corrupted Herod further after immoral beginning 2. Corrupted her own daughter for her own nefarious purposes: (assuming her majority) a. Salome, shameless like her mother, b. Danced, though improper for a princess so to expose herself, c. Collaborated with her mother,

A KING AND HIS PREACHER		A KING AND HIS LORD	
King Herod Antipas	John the Baptist	Jesus' Attitude Toward Herod	Jesus' Attitude Toward Herod
b. Could have been broken by repentance but kept to avoid scorn.	D. A Glorious Martyrdom 1. Not only preceded Jesus in life, but also in death. 2. Also preceded Him into the regions of light where God awaited this faithful prophet!	D. A Disgraced Consort 1. Her high-vaulting ambition overreached itself: jealous of the glittering kingship of Agrippa I, she pushed Antipas to seek the title "king." A suspicious Caligula banished Antipas. 2. Herodias faithfully followed Herod into exile, ( <i>Ant.</i> XVIII, 7; <i>Wars</i> , II, 9, 6)	A. He left Herod's curiosity forever unsatisfied. 1. By apparently shunning Tiberias altogether 2. By refusing to do miracles for Herod.
D. A Bitter Remorse 1. The king was exceedingly sorry, but did not repent. 2. The king lost last voice of God, since Jesus would not speak to him but once, and then through Pharisees. (Lk. 13:31) 3. The king lost all but the woman who ruined him. ( <i>Ant.</i> XVIII, 7; <i>Wars</i> , II, 9, 6)	A. Avid Curiosity (Lk. 9:9; 23:8) 1. Perhaps to hear the more humane message of Him who was the opposite of John (cfr. Mt. 11:18, 19) 2. To see miracles (Lk. 2:38) 3. To have a new confessor?	B. Fear of Jesus' Influence, Covert Hostility 1. Did he use the Pharisees? Lk. 13:31 2. His fear was due to the popular influence of Jesus' ministry.	B. He eluded Herod's opposition Morgan ( <i>Matthew</i> , 187): "He passed with quiet dignity out of the reach of the man, left him to his terror, his fear and his frenzy; abandoned him." C. He never feared Herod 1. Neither his influence (Mk. 8:15) 2. Nor his power (Lk. 13:32, 33)

—Continued from previous page—

point of violent explosion and national upheaval and, at the same time, involve Rome by whose grace Herod ruled. In the certain war, any hope of establishing a spiritual kingdom on earth would be completely wiped out. In short, it would be totally self-defeating. For the sequel, see the next section which flows directly out of this one.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Explain the intensity of the impression made upon Herod by Jesus' miracles.
2. How long did John the Baptist's ministry continue?
3. When did he preach to Herod? Publicly in the wilderness or privately before Herod himself?
4. Why was John imprisoned? When? i.e., what other major incident(s) helps to coordinate our data and establish this general period? Where was he imprisoned, and where do we learn this detail? How long was he in prison?
5. What message did he send to Jesus while he was in prison? How did Jesus answer it?
6. When, how and why was John killed?
7. How many miracles did John the Baptist perform? List them.
8. Which of the Herods killed John? What is a "tetrarch"? In what sense was he called a "king"?
9. Explain how Herod could be so ignorant about Jesus. Then explain how Jesus' name could have become known to Herod.
10. Explain why Herod could feasibly expect John to rise from the dead. Would Herod have believed in life after death, if, as some believe, he were a Sadducee?
11. Who was Herodias? What was her character? What was her role in this drama? Who was "Philip" her former husband, i.e., what was his exact relation to Herod Antipas? Why was this marriage to Antipas unlawful?
12. Who were the guests at the birthday dinner party of Herod?
13. List the OT passages that Herod could have cited for repenting of his oath.
14. State whatever principles of right and justice apply to Herod's case, that should have caused him to break his oath rather than keep it in this case.
15. What happened to the body of John after he was beheaded?

16. What does the action of John's disciples after John's death indicate about the relations between John and Jesus, especially after John had sent Him the great question about Jesus' Messiahship?
17. According to the Synoptics, where were Jesus and His Apostles when word came of John's murder? What were they doing? How did Jesus react publicly to the news?
18. Much intimate detail of Herod's private life is reported in this section. Where could the Apostles and Jesus have learned this information, without making use of special inspiration that would reveal these otherwise unknown facts?
19. Luke (9:9) reports Herod's desire to see Jesus. When and where was this desire fulfilled?

### Section 34

#### JESUS FEEDS THE 5000 AND WALKS UPON THE WAVES

(Parallels: Mark 6:30-52; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-21)

TEXT: 14:13-33

13 Now when Jésus heard *it*, he withdrew from thence in a boat, to a desert place apart: and when the multitudes heard *thereof*, they followed him on foot from the cities. 14 And he came forth, and saw a great multitude, and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. 15 And when even was come, the disciples came to him, saying, The place is desert, and the time is already past; send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves food. 16 But Jesus said unto them, They have no need to go away; give ye them to eat. 17 And they say unto him, We have here but five loaves, and two fishes. 18 And he said, Bring them hither to me. 19 And he commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass; and he took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitudes. 20 And they all ate, and were filled: and they took up that which remained over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And they that did eat were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

22 And straightway he constrained the disciples to enter into the boat, and to go before him unto the other side, till he should send

the multitudes away. 23 And after he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into the mountain apart to pray: and when even was come, he was there alone. 24 But the boat was now in the midst of the sea, distressed by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came unto them, walking upon the sea. 26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a ghost; and they cried out with fear. 27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. 28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee upon the waters. 29 And he said, Come. And Peter went down from the boat, and he walked upon the waters to come to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, Lord, save me. 31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and took hold of him, and saith unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? 32 And when they were gone up into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And they that were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. If Jesus loved people as much as you say, why would He want to get away from them, as He obviously intended to do on this occasion?
- b. Why would so many people follow Jesus such a long distance from home without bringing any food along? Is it reasonable that they forgot this item essential to existence?
- c. How do you harmonize the apparently contradictory reports of the Synoptic writers who say that the crowds ran on foot to where Jesus was going and actually got there ahead of His debarkation at the place (Mk. 6:33), whereas John (6:5) clearly states that when Jesus had already gone up into the hills and sat down with His disciples, then He looked up and saw the crowds coming to Him?
- d. Matthew (14:13) says that Jesus took His disciples "to a desert place," whereas John (6:10) affirms that there was "much grass" there and Mark (6:39) notes that it was even "green." Make up your mind: how can it be "a desert place" and there still be much green grass?
- e. Jesus' deep need for privacy as well as the Apostles' need for rest

caused Him to leave the Capernaum area abruptly. Many would probably have been angered at the selfish persistence of the people. But what effect did this persistence have upon Jesus? In what likeness did He see them?

- f. How much food did the Apostles think to be needed to feed such a crowd? What is the relative value today of what they considered necessary to purchase that quantity of food?
- g. Can you suggest an explanation why only one lad had food when no one else did?
- h. Why did Jesus command that the multitudes sit down in orderly groups of fifties and hundreds?
- i. Are the Apostles to be condemned for their lack of vision when they faced the prospect of having to feed thousands of people with little or no provisions? If so, on what basis? If not, why not?
- j. Where did the power to meet the need really lie? Was a miracle absolutely necessary? Some feel that the real miracle was the change in human hearts as Jesus called the unselfish lad with the lunch forward as an example of the unselfish sharing that the multitudes could imitate. Everyone then took out his own lunch and shared with those who had none, so that everybody ate all he needed to get back home. Do you agree with this solution? If not, why do you feel it inadequate to explain the phenomena reported in the Gospels? If so, how do you answer those who affirm that a miracle has indeed taken place?
- k. If you believe that the people had not brought along their own lunches, then kindly explain where the twelve baskets came from, into which the Apostles gathered the broken left-overs. Where there were twelve such kosher-food baskets, there could have been more, no?
- l. Why would Jesus be so interested in gathering up the left-over fragments? He who has limitless power to provide such miraculous meals would certainly not need to be so frugal, would he? Could it be that Jesus realizes that His power is limited, and so He is here saving up the scraps against a future shortage just in case His power should fail? Why do you answer as you do?
- m. What principles of crowd control do you see displayed in Jesus' tactics in this incident?
- n. What importance would you attribute to this event when considered in context with the circumstances leading up to it and the aftermath that follows it?
- o. Why do you think Jesus refused the popular crown that was offered

Him on this occasion? Could He not have kept this movement under control and led these blindly enthusiastic followers to understand His real purpose? If Jesus could not have kept such a movement under control, then what does this say about Him? Does this not make the damning admission that, after all, Jesus is not like God—omnipotent? Examine the alternatives that lay open to Jesus, forcing Him to make the choice He did.

- p. If Jesus is God, why did He have to go pray most of the night? What did He hope to gain from prayer? If He is God, to whom was He praying?
- q. What do you envision as the reason why the multitudes were planning to take Him by force to make Him their king? How could they have done this?
- r. After the feeding of the 5000, Jesus rushed His twelve Apostles away in a boat: how do you explain this?
- s. After rowing most of the night against the heavy wind and waves, why did the disciples keep rowing instead of turning back? What lesson do you see in this for your own life?
- t. Why did the disciples, when they saw Jesus walking on the water, think that what they saw was a ghost? Are they superstitious?
- u. Why did the disciples cry out in terror? Had they not yet learned not to fear?
- v. Why do you suppose Jesus began to walk past the boat, instead of coming directly up to it? (Mk. 6:48)
- w. What do you think motivated Peter to want to meet Jesus out there on that rolling water?
- x. Do you think Jesus rebuked Peter for wanting to walk on the water? If so, on what basis do you say this? If not, then why did He rebuke him?
- y. Is it psychologically reasonable to accept the idea that this seasoned fishermen who had spent his adult life out on this lake should so completely panic when he began to sink, that he would forget how to swim? (See John 21:7.)
- z. What part did doubt play in causing Peter to sink?
- aa. How do you harmonize the apparent contradiction between the statement of Matthew (14:33) where he reports the disciples' reaction as one of worship and confession, with the declaration of Mark (6:51, 52) where this latter writer declares that "the disciples were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened"?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Upon their return from their evangelistic tours the Apostles met with Jesus to report all that they had done and taught. However there were so many people coming and going that the Apostles and Jesus had no opportunity even for meals. So when Jesus received the news about the death of John the Baptist, He told them, "Come on, let's go off by ourselves to an unfrequented place to rest awhile." Accordingly, He took them and privately withdrew from the area around Capernaum, setting sail in the boat toward the east shore of the Lake of Galilee (which is another name for Lake Tiberias). Once across, they retired to a remote area near a town called Bethsaida Julias. Ashore, Jesus climbed the hillside and sat down there with His disciples. (Incidentally, the Passover festival of the Jews was soon to take place in Jerusalem.)

Meanwhile, many of the people saw them going and recognized them. Consequently, when the rest got word of His departure, they hurried around the lake, coming by foot from all the towns. Some arrived ahead of Jesus and His disciples. They all came because they were impressed by the miracles that He had been doing for the diseased people.

By this time the crowds began to arrive where Jesus was. Looking up as He came out of His retreat, His gaze took in this great throng of people approaching. The sight caused Him to be filled with compassion for them, because He saw them as a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Then He turned to Philip with the question: "How can we buy bread to feed these people?" He said this to test Philip, because He Himself already knew what He would do.

Philip answered, "It would take over six months' wages and it would never be enough for each of them to get even a little piece!"

So the Lord welcomed the people and began to teach them many things about God's Kingdom. He also cured those who needed it.

The day began to draw to a close. So, in the afternoon, the Twelve approached Jesus with the proposal: "This is a deserted spot and the hour is now late. Dismiss the crowds so they can go to the surrounding farms and villages to find themselves lodging and buy food: there is nothing around here."

But Jesus' reaction was: "They do not need to leave: you give them something to eat!"

But they responded, "Shall we spend our two hundred denarii for bread to give them something to eat?"

So Jesus opened a new approach, "How many loaves do you have on hand? Go look!"

When they had found out, one of His disciples, Andrew—that's Simon Peter's brother,—reported, "There's a lad here who has five barley buns and two little fish. But what's the use of that to feed so many?"

"We have no more than those five buns and a couple of fish," the others commented, "that is, unless we are to go and buy food for all these people!"

"Bring them here to me," was Jesus' reply. "Direct the people to sit down for a meal on the grass, grouping themselves in parties of about fifty each."

Now there was plenty of green grass around there, so the disciples organized that vast crowd to sit down in groups of fifties and hundreds. Just a total of the men numbered five thousand!

At this point Jesus took the five buns and the two fish in His hands. Looking up toward heaven, He thanked God for the food, asking His blessing upon the meal. Then He broke the buns and began distributing them to the disciples, who, in turn, served them to the crowds who were reclining there. He then divided the two fish among them all, as much as they wanted. They all ate their fill and were satisfied.

Afterwards, Jesus directed His men, "Go gather up the left-over pieces, so that nothing gets lost or wasted."

So they picked up the leftovers, loading twelve picnic baskets full of the broken pieces of the barley buns and fish over and beyond what had been consumed by the crowd! Now those who ate numbered about five thousand, not counting the women and children! And when the people realized the miracle Jesus had done, they began commenting: "This man is the Prophet, the Coming One!"

For this reason, because He sensed that they were about to come take Him against His will to make Him their king, Jesus immediately ordered His twelve disciples to board the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side of the lake, i.e., over to Bethsaida, while He sent the crowds home. After He had said goodbye to the people, Jesus got away again: He went off up into the hills for private prayer.

When night fell He was there alone, since His disciples had gone down to the lake, boarded the boat and pushed off toward Capernaum on the other shore. Even though it was now dark, Jesus had still not rendezvoused with them. The sea grew rough, because it was blowing up a real gale out of the northwest. The boat by this

time was roughly halfway across, battered by the waves. Jesus was alone on the land, but He was aware that they were straining at the oars against a strong headwind. When they had rowed about three or four miles, sometime between three and six o'clock in the morning, He came to them, walking across the lake. They sighted him approaching the boat. Although He meant to go along beside them, when they caught sight of Him, they were terrified, for they thought Him a phantom. In fact, they cried out, "It's a ghost!" for they all saw Him and were gripped with terror.

But He immediately began talking to them, saying, "Cheer up: it's me! Stop being afraid!"

Peter tested Him, "Lord, if it is really you, call me to come to you on the water!"

Jesus shouted, "Come on!"

At this, Peter climbed out of the boat and walked toward Jesus atop the waves. But when his attention was diverted by the wind-tossed whitecaps, he panicked. Starting to sink, he shouted, "Lord, help me!"

At once Jesus reached over and grabbed Peter, saying as He hauled him out, "O man of such limited confidence in me: why did you doubt?"

Then the other disciples were glad to take Jesus into the boat. When He and Peter climbed into the boat, the wind dropped. The men in the boat were utterly astounded. Although they worshipped Him, confessing, "You really ARE God's Son!", they still did not understand what the feeding of the five thousand meant, for their minds were slow to learn.

In no time at all the boat beached at the land they were making for.

### SUMMARY

Just at the moment that Jesus' disciples began reporting back to Him the happy news of their successful ministry in His name, the disciples of John the Baptist brought Him the heart-rending news of John's murder. To gain both rest and solitude for body and soul, Jesus sailed with the Twelve east to the deserted country south of Bethsaida Julias. But the multitudes, electrified by the momentous events then occurring in Galilee, followed them. Jesus' compassion for people would not permit Him to leave them again without helping. After He had spent the day teaching them and curing their illnesses,

the disciples pointed out the shortage of both food and time to procure it unless Jesus dismissed the crowds immediately. Instead, He chose to feed the assemblage miraculously with a lad's lunch. The effect on the already excited throng was the confirming of their conclusion that Jesus was truly the coming Messiah. To head off a run-away attempt to make Him a worldly messianic king, Jesus divided the Apostles from the tempestuous crowds and ordered them to leave by boat. Then He dismissed the enthusiastic multitudes to go home and cool off. Finally, Jesus hiked off alone in another direction, into the hills, to pray.

Meanwhile the Apostles battled the stormy sea, trying to row across the Galilean Lake with but little progress. Noting their distress, the Lord walked out across the lake to them. The specter terrified the men, but He spoke to them, restoring their calm. Peter made bold to meet Jesus on the water, but lost confidence and had to be rescued. Together, Jesus and Peter boarded the boat. The astounded Apostles worshipped Him, still unaware of the full impact of His identity even after the miracle of the multiplication of food.

## NOTES

### I. JESUS' PROBLEM

To appreciate adequately this crucial moment in Jesus' ministry, we must grasp the factors that made it what it was:

1. Jesus and the Apostles had just finished wide-ranging evangelistic efforts in Galilee. (Mt. 11:1; Mk. 6:12, 13, 30, 31; Lk. 9:6, 10) Hence, they needed privacy for rest and discussion of their work, results, mistakes and successes.
2. Passover crowds started gathering in Galilee, massing around Jesus, not only because of the excitement aroused by the just-finished evangelism in Galilee, and the effect of the miracles (cf. Jn. 6:2), but also because of the shocking news of John's murder. (Jn. 6:4; Mt. 14:13 see note.) Hence the need to escape to rest from the insistence of the ever-present crowds.
3. The need had also arisen to react to Herod Antipas' suspicions, based as they were on his information about Jesus' popular ministry and that of His disciples, rather than that of the murdered John the Baptist. (Mt. 14:1f, 13; Mk. 6:14; Lk. 9:7-9) While

personal fear of Herod does not motivate Jesus' withdrawal, prudence dictated that He forestall any decisive action by Herod to hinder His mission. Fear is not involved, because after the popularity-bubble burst, He could move more freely throughout Herod's jurisdiction both in some traveling in Galilee as well as His later Perean ministry.

4. Jesus probably sensed a grassroots movement afoot to establish Him as Messianic King over Israel, principally among the Zealots (Jn. 6:15) and augmented by the multitudes generally (Jn. 6:14), a movement that came to a head immediately after the supernatural feeding of the 5000. These suspicions, if relayed to Herod, would have stirred that ruler to fear a popular revolt that must inevitably involve Rome by whose grace he held his throne. (Cf. *Ant.* XVIII, 5, 2) His disciples, however, must be saved from the influence of such wrong-headed thinking.
5. The need for privacy with God. (Mt. 14:23; Mk. 6:46)

## II. JESUS' PLAN

While the Synoptics indicate the above-mentioned variety of motives for Jesus' movements, Foster (*Middle Period*, 151, 160f) is probably correct in laying emphasis on Jn. 6:6 as the key to understanding His tactics, not only with reference to the immediate problem of food for the crowds, but also in dealing with the larger problem of His popularity: ". . . he himself knew what he would do." This comes into sharper focus if we see the deliberate steps Jesus took to bring these unwieldy forces under His control. Each step is a pressure-point intended to concentrate the attention of everyone on Jesus and push each one to some point of decision:

1. **PRESSURE:** Jesus took a leisurely, easy-to-follow boat trip in full view of the crowds, sailing east toward Bethsaida Julias rather than south or southeast, almost suggesting thereby that they follow Him.
  - a. By sailing unexpectedly He drew the crowds into a deserted place where no food was readily available, a fact that would later become another pressure-point.
  - b. So doing, He sifted the most interested followers from the less ambitious who remained at home. If Josephus' figures are even roughly indicative of the total Galilean population which he

establishes at over three million people (240 villages the smallest of which numbered 15,000 inhabitants), the crowd that actually followed Jesus around the lake would hardly have filled one small Galilean village! (Cf. , III, 3, 2; , 45)

- c. By deliberately sailing to a deserted place, He frustrated any efforts of the Zealots to build a revolutionary mob spirit in the more populated areas.
  - d. The large result of the miracle that followed was the building of faith in Jesus in the heart of those who could be saved for His spiritual Kingdom, by being able to withstand the blow He must give to the materialistic designs of the popular, but wrong-headed nationalistic liberation groups and parties. The total effect of the miracle prepared superbly for His discourse on the Bread of Life (Jn. 6:25-66) in which He applied maximum pressure on everyone to leave Him if they were not interested in letting Him be their true nourishment.
2. PRESSURE: Taking the initiative, Jesus pushed Philip: "How are we to buy bread so that they may eat?" (Jn. 6:5) This question, connected by John with the arrival of the multitudes at the beginning of Jesus' working day, pressures Philip to begin thinking about the problem and perhaps discuss it with the others in order that, when the need actually arises, they might arrive at the correct solution.
3. PRESSURE: Jesus taught the crowds the rest of that day until evening, healing some, but apparently giving no opportunity to go for food.
4. PRESSURE: When the worried disciples bring the plight of the famished crowds to Jesus with their suggestion that He dismiss them as the only working alternative, Jesus throws the problem back into their laps. "You give them something to eat." (Mt. 14:16)
5. PRESSURE: When they argue their shortage of money for an adequate meal for all, He ordered them to check out their actual resources. (Mk. 6:38)
6. PRESSURE: In seeking any available food, the Apostles drew the attention of the entire crowd both to the need for food and encouraged them to expect Jesus to do something about the need. But the Apostles, too, are under pressure to obey Jesus by going through that crowd calling out, asking if anyone had perhaps a handful of food, to enable Jesus to feed that multitude, because the Twelve themselves probably did not know Jesus' plan.

(Jn. 6:6)

7. **PRESSURE:** When Andrew turned up only five buns and two fish, he was doubtful of the significance of his find (Jn. 6:8, 9), and the others repeated their only apparent alternative: buy bread. (Lk. 9:13) Hereupon, Jesus sent the Apostles to bring the food to Him, a mission that required faith in His wisdom. (Mt. 14:18)
8. **PRESSURE:** In order to draw full attention to what He was about to do, He ordered the Apostles to organize the crowd into orderly groups for a picnic on the grass. (See note on 14:19.) The effect of this command is most fully felt when all that anyone could see was some sandwich ingredients in the hands of the Lord.
9. **PRESSURE:** When the hushed expectancy of the crowd permitted Him to speak again, in a dramatic gesture full of significance, He blessed the food, began breaking the loaves and fishes, and distributed it among the Twelve for redistribution among the multitudes.
10. **SOLUTION, OR RELEASE OF PRESSURE:** They all ate to the full.
11. **PRESSURE:** Jesus ordered the Twelve to gather up the leftovers to avoid waste, but the psychological effect on all pushed each to decide about the magnitude of the miracle, and, hence, of Jesus' power, since even the estimated size of the group, easily figured by tallying the orderly groups, adds to the psychological pressure too. (Jn. 6:12; Mt. 14:21)
12. **REACTION:** Discussion and conclusion of the crowds about Jesus: "He is the coming Prophet: let us make Him our King!" (Jn. 6:14, 15)
13. **PRESSURE:** Jesus then made the disciples embark for the west shore of the lake, although the crowd was growing restless with ignorant messianic enthusiasm. This tested the Apostles' obedience severely, since they must leave when popular excitement was the highest, and the moment to declare the Kingdom the nearest. In fact, John (6:17) suggests that they did not immediately comply, but dallied offshore, waiting for Him to sail with them. When He did not show up, they started across.
14. **PRESSURE:** Jesus dismissed the crowds and walked away from His Galilean popularity forever, leaving them to go their separate ways. He had deliberately rejected their crown, their ideals and their popular support.
15. **PRESSURE:** The next day, Jesus mercilessly pressured the people to decide about Him and His Word as their only hope of Life

and Strength from God. (Jn. 6:25-66) Even the Apostles faced the choice of desertion. (Jn. 6:67ff)

From the foregoing evidence, it becomes clear that the climax and collapse of Jesus' great Galilean ministry was not a crisis in which He became the helpless victim of circumstances. These pressure-points are all His doing: He is the Lord and Master of His circumstances, carefully guiding even the smallest detail so that all the various factors should collaborate to arrive at the result HE desired. (Cf. Notes on Mt. 11:25, 26)

14:13b Now when Jesus heard about the murder of John the Baptist, as well as for the other reasons mentioned in the other Gospels, He withdrew from thence. *From thence* means from Galilee on the west side of the Lake of Galilee, since the following geographical limitations locate His movements toward the **desert place apart** on the Golan side:

1. To a **desert place apart**, when compared with populous Galilee, clearly points to the less densely populated zone east of the lake. (Cf. *Wars*, III, 3, 3)
2. Although John had recorded a conversation Jesus held with the Jews in Judea west of the Jordan Valley (Jn. 5), here he simply expresses himself like an old inhabitant of the Bethsaida-Capernaum area: "After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee." (Jn. 6:1) For a non-Galilean, such a reference would be ambiguous: "WHICH other side?" he would have to ask. But for John, "the other side" is the east side, where else?
3. Luke registers their general destination as a town named "Bethsaida." (9:10) Since they embark on the western, or Galilean, side of the lake where another Bethsaida is located near Capernaum to which they would return after the miraculous feeding (Mk. 6:45; Jn. 6:17), the "Bethsaida" on the other side is Bethsaida Julias, developed from a local fishing village into a beautiful city by Philip the Tetrarch. (*Ant.*, XVIII, 2, 1) This Gaulonite city must not be confused with the Galilean fishertown home of the Apostles, Peter, Andrew and Philip. (Jn. 1:44; 12:21) The name "Bethsaida" simply means "House of Fishing," a Semitism for a place where fishing takes place. Since the Galilean lake was famous for its fish (*Wars*, III, 10, 7-8), it is not at all surprising to find several "Bethsaidas," or fishing villages, around the lake, either separate or connected with some larger town or city.

Thomson (*Land and Book*, II, 29-32), on the other hand, argues

not for two Bethsaidas, but for one major settlement by that name, however located on both banks of the Jordan River where it enters the Lake of Galilee. Accordingly, when viewed from the site of the miracle, the disciples could actually have sailed generally toward Bethsaida (both towns), and still be roughly en route toward Capernaum, by hugging the shore while waiting for Jesus to arrive to be taken aboard at some point along the coast.

In answer to Thomson, it might be asked whether it be possible, that, in the same way in which Jericho has occupied several sites not far from each other over the centuries, Bethsaida too was originally located on a site west of the Jordan near Capernaum,—the birthplace of several Apostles,—whereas Philip the Tetrarch moved its location to a site east of the Jordan and dedicated it to Caesar's daughter, Julia, hence establishing it in his realm? History is not ignorant of such city movings for topographical, political or military reasons. (Cf. "Neapolis" or "new city" in the history of that word! Naples is the new Parthenopea in Italy; there is the Neapolis in Macedonia, Ac. 16:11; and Neapolis, or Nablus, is Shechem in Palestine. All refer to the "new city" constructed in the area of an older one.)

Further, Jesus' command to the disciples to cross over "to the other side to Bethsaida" (Mk. 6:45) is understandable only if that town in question is actually on the western shore of the lake. Therefore: two towns of the same name, however located on opposite sides of the point where the Jordan empties into the lake at its north side.

4. The landing point where the disciples with Jesus beached on the day after the miraculous feeding is described as "when they had crossed over, they came to the land of Gennesaret" (Mt. 14:34; Mk. 6:53), i.e., on the western side, and "on the other side of the sea" from where those who remained on the site of the miracle. (Jn. 6:22, 25) Gennesaret was opposite the eastern side.

**He withdrew from thence in a boat to a desert place apart.** McGarvey (*Lands of the Bible*, 327f) describes the area east of the point where the Jordan enters the Sea of Galilee, as follows:

East of the Jordan, at its entrance into the lake, there is a plain called *Buti'ha*, whose shore-line curves around the northeastern part of the lake about four miles, while its width, from the shore

back to the hills, is somewhat more than a mile. The plain is larger than that of Gennesaret, but much like it in shape and surface. . . . On the east bank of the Jordan, and at the foot of the hills which bound the plain in that direction, are the ruins of Bethsaida Julias. . . . At the southeastern end of this plain, the hills which bound it approach within less than half a mile of the lake-shore, where they form an angle with those which extend due south along the eastern side of the lake. At the foot of the high hill at this angle is located the feeding of the five thousand, for here alone all the characteristics of the spot indicated in the sacred text are found. Here is the smooth, grassy plain on which the vast multitude could sit by fifties and hundreds while the disciples served them with the bread and fish. Here is the lake-shore, close at hand, whence Jesus and the twelve had gone forth when the multitude met him, and where the boat lay into which the twelve entered when the feeding was concluded. Here also, rising abruptly from the spot, is the mountain into which Jesus went up after he had dismissed the multitude. A spot farther east or north would not meet these requirements, while one farther south would fail to meet some others. It would not be "a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida"; nor could the people whom Jesus had left on the western shore have gone to it around the head of the lake while he and the twelve were crossing in their boat. Finally, if the place had been farther north, the disciples, in starting for Bethsaida or Capernaum (Mk. 6:45; Jn. 6:17) could not have been said to have gone "to the other side," seeing that they would have been going only from the head of the lake to one side of it, and not from one side to the other.

See also Mt. 14:34 where their return to the west side at Gennesaret is spoken of as their having "crossed over." (Mk. 6:53)

The point of the above is to absolve the Gospel eye-witnesses from critical attacks that would accuse them of confusing names and locations, leading to the insinuation that the "real editors" back of the present Gospels were neither eye-witnesses of the facts nor even remotely familiar with the geography. Further, the traditional location of the supernatural multiplication of the loaves and fishes at a site south of Capernaum on the road to Gennesaret is entirely incompatible with the information given above. (Cf. *Rand-McNally Bible Atlas*, 376, 386)

**To a lonely place apart** (*kat'idian*) is the same expression Jesus used to describe the kind of rest needed for which they embarked on this voyage across the lake. (Mt. 6:31, 32) Since the expression means "privately, by oneself" (Arndt-Gingrich, 371), the first impression is that Jesus intended to avoid all multitudes, despite the view of many that He deliberately sailed slowly across the north end of the lake in full view of any interested watchers who could easily follow Him around by land to meet Him on the other side. Which view is correct? Did He change His mind upon seeing the crowds whose arrival He had not desired, hence postpone His sincerely desired retreat? Or did He actually plan to offer some rest to His disciples, while AT THE SAME TIME use a baiting tactic that would draw the crowds away from the Capernaum-Bethsaida area? If so, then "rest awhile" must mean literally "rest a short while." (*oligon*) In fact, the moments of privacy in the boat had to suffice, because, until the problem of the crowds was permanently settled, there could be no real leisure for the task of developing the Twelve.

**But when the crowds heard (it), what did they hear?** McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 130) thinks that they learned of the death of John the Baptist, not Jesus' departure: "When Jesus heard of John's death, He departed . . . when the people heard of John's death, they followed Jesus." However, Luke, in his parallel expression (Lk. 9:10, 11), connects what the crowds heard, not with a message about John's death—about which Luke tells nothing,—but with Jesus' withdrawal with His Apostles. So it is better to see the crowds as learning of Jesus' movements by word of mouth from those who saw Him sail. (Mk. 6:33) Matthew's descriptive expression, "a great throng," (v. 14) raises the problem: how is it that so many people were free to go traipsing about over the countryside in pursuit of local attractions? This 5000-plus crowd of men is particularly free from normal business pursuits because "the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand." (Jn. 6:4) Shortly thereafter the entire group would be journeying to Jerusalem for that festival. That this was to be no merely local picnic is spelled out in Mark's vigorous language: "They ran there on foot from all the towns . . ." (Mk. 6:33) Even so, to hear Josephus set the population of Galilee at 3,600,000 people (*Wars*, III, 3, 2; *Life*, 45), would lead one to conclude that only a small group from Galilee eventually followed Jesus around the lake, i.e., only 1/600th of the total population.

**They followed Him,** "because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased." (Jn. 6:2) That they hoped for more of the

same is evidenced by the number of sick they brought with them. (Mt. 14:14; Lk. 9:11) Although there may have been fishing boats tied up at Capernaum and Bethsaida, the entire crowd remained on land, running around the north shore of the lake, fording the Jordan near Bethsaida-Julias, and continuing on around the lake-front plain, Jesus' obvious destination. The five-mile run from Capernaum would be nothing for people planning to walk the 100-mile jaunt to Jerusalem for the Passover!

## II. JESUS' PROVISION

14:14 **And he came forth, and saw a great multitude.** Matthew telescopes the information, because . . .

1. He omits the fact that some of the faster runners in the crowds arrived on the scene before Jesus and the Twelve could go ashore. (Mk. 6:33) This would not mean that the entire 5000-plus crowd stood panting on the beach as Jesus disembarked. In fact, Mark only says that "many saw them . . . ran . . . and got there ahead of them." Lenski (*Matthew*, 563) rightly objects that "we have no right to reduce 'a great multitude' to a few fast runners who arrived ahead of the rest of the crowd." These earliest arrivals apparently were also privileged to be with Him during that semi-private period before the excitement of teaching and healing began with the arrival of the main body of people.
2. He omits the fact that, immediately upon disembarking, "Jesus went up into the hills, and there sat down with his disciples" (Jn. 6:3), which suggests that He spent some time up there with them before "lifting up his eyes, He saw a multitude coming to Him." (Jn. 6:5) This impression of time spent alone with His disciples before the bulk of the crowds arrived is further confirmed by Jesus' return to the hills "again" (*pàlin*) by Himself. (Jn. 6:15) Coincidental confirmation of this retreat is the time required to bring the slower-moving sick people into that uninhabited area for Jesus to heal them. (Cf. 14:14; Lk. 9:11)

From the foregoing it becomes clear that Jesus, IMMEDIATELY UPON DISEMBARKING, did not see a great throng, as some translators render it. (Cf. RSV, Jerusalem Bible, NEB, et al.) Others, more sensitive to the above-mentioned problems of harmonization, render the phrase (*kai exelthòn eîden*) as follows:

1. Either as a temporal participle of nearly contemporaneous action, but in contextual relation to Jesus' successful retreat upon the hill: "And when He came out, He saw a great multitude . . ." (New American Standard) "When Jesus emerged from his retreat he saw a vast crowd." (J.B. Phillips)
2. Or as a circumstantial participle which does not define any time sequence or causal connection or even the means by which the action of the principle verb (*eîden*) occurs, but simply adds an associated fact. Equivalent to a coordinate verb with "and," it may be resolved: *kai exelthôn eîden* = *kai exéithe kai eîden*: "And Jesus went forth, and saw . . ." (KJV), or "Jesus got out of the boat, and when he saw . . ." (TEV) Cf. Burton, *Moods and Tenses*, p. 174; Robertson-Davis, p. 382; Blass-Debrunner, p. 217f. In this sense, then, Matthew telegraphically states two facts which are not immediately connected, being very loosely related.

So, if we connect *he came forth* with Jesus' disembarking, we must not believe Matthew in contradiction with John who is more complete in recording what occurred between the time of the disembarking and the arrival of "a great throng," and, consistently, we must object to all translations of this verse that, while objectively possible within themselves, ignor the problems of harmonization. On the other hand, if we connect *he came forth* with Jesus' return from His retreat in the hills, then the problem of His seeing "a great throng" precisely "as He went ashore," no longer exists.

Notice the close psychological progression of events:

1. **Jesus saw a great throng** coming to Him. This is the moment of decision: shall He place His disciples' need for emotional rest and physical refreshment and recital of their efforts, ahead of the needs of helpless, leaderless people, or must He continue pouring Himself out for them? If Jn. 6:6 be the key to the understanding of Jesus' plans for this entire day, then perhaps this decision was already forming: "He Himself knew what He would do." But even this decision is but the practical application of a higher commitment: "Christ pleased not Himself." (Ro. 15:3) **He saw the multitude**, because He had eyes to see, a sensitivity to feel, a conscience that would not let Him forget how many eternally precious people out there in that group would be lost. Despite the fact that only He could truly appreciate them for what they were—people who were shepherdless sheep because they would reject His spiritual goals and the means He taught to achieve them—still He saw His

duty clear.

John informs us that it was precisely this moment when "seeing that a multitude was coming to him," that Jesus tested Philip's grasp of the situation by raising the question of food for everyone. (Jn. 6:5-7; see note at Mt. 14:16.)

2. **He had compassion on them**, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd. (Mk. 6:34a; see fuller notes at Mt. 9:35-38; cf. Mt. 15:32.) Rather than treat them as bothersome intruders who had thoughtlessly interrupted His sorely needed rest and retirement with the Twelve, as also His sorrow over John's assassination, "He welcomed them"! (Lk. 9:11) Rather than let their persistence rule Him, He took charge of the situation, took decisive action, and remained in control of both Himself and others. Tragically, they had lost their other great shepherd, John the Baptist, and would soon be on their way to a Jerusalem that sheltered the hirelings and false shepherds, the haughty scribes, Pharisees and corrupt priests who despised the ordinary people and, when attempting to instruct them, only led them further from the truth. How badly they lacked instant help! and that from a true Shepherd who could minister to their hunger of soul! No wonder people flocked around a Leader so sensitive and responsive, who would not avoid helping them, so obvious to Him was their distress! Had not Jesus possessed a warm, shepherd's heart, the story would have ended right there. His eye was neither on the clock nor His attention fixed on His comforts.
3. "He began to teach them many things" (Mk. 6:34), speaking "to them of the kingdom of God." (Lk. 9:11) Although His announced topic is manifestly quite general, its very mention was enough to spark revolution, because it was the hottest topic of discussion in Galilee. However, in light of Jesus' contextual situation, it is quite probable that He used His opportunity well to cool tempers ready to march against Herod for that tyrant's part in the assassination of John the Baptist. He may well have hammered hard on the kind of Kingdom God has in mind for His people. It is, of course, not His fault that His ideas did not get through to the majority of His audience. (Cf. Jn. 6:14, 15) But, in the same way He thought it worth the effort to try to get people to understand His great Sermon in Parables on the Kingdom, but failed to penetrate their prejudices (see on Mt. 13), so also here He thought it definitely worth the effort to try again to salvage the saveable.
4. **He healed their sick**, never forgetting their bodies while ministering

to their spiritual needs. Many had followed Him only for instant cures, and He knew it. But this did not hinder Him from sharing the generous love of God with them, despite their calculating selfishness, their ignorance of His real blessings and their ungratefulness. (Cf. Ro. 5:6-11) We follow Him, not only because of the supernatural evidence of His identity these miracles provide, but also because He kept giving help where most of us would have already driven off that unthinking mob of insensitive, unthankful people! He acted in character as God would.

The fact that the prevailing excitement had not caused some to forget to bring along their sick for healing, while contemporaneously forgetting any food preparations, may indicate something about the time when they left home, i.e., during the morning when it may have been supposed there were plenty of time to procure food when needed.

**14:15 And when even was come**, as an expression, does not define the time of day, because, after what must have been a long process of distributing the miraculously multiplied food to the 5000, Matthew (14:23b) again adopts this same expression (*opsis genoménes*), at which time John (6:17) notes: "darkness had already come." Critics, noting Matthew's repetition in both 14:15 and 14:23b, could accuse him of imprecision. Matthew's idiom, however, intentionally sets the stage for the disciples' dramatically urgent advice, and mirrors precisely the Hebrew distinction between "the two evenings." Inasmuch as agreement is wanting among the Jews themselves about the precise limits of "the two evenings," only approximations may help us here:

1. The first evening began after noon and lasted until about three o'clock.
2. "Then began the period known as 'between the evenings,' which would be longer or shorter according to the season of the year, and which terminated with 'the second evening.' " (Edersheim, *Life*, I, 681)
3. The second evening began at "the time from when the first star appeared to that when the third star was visible." (*ibid.*; cf. Keil-Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, II, 12 on Ex. 12:6; also *PHC*, II, 226)

It is important to repeat that other Jewish authorities think of sunset as the dividing point between the two evenings. However, Josephus (*Wars*, VI, 9, 3) provides us a testimony

contemporary to the time of Jesus that circumstantially corroborates Matthew's language, since the Jewish historian pictures Passover slaying, which according to the Law must be done "between the two evenings" (Ex. 12:6), as beginning at three o'clock and lasting until eleven p.m. (See also Gesenius, *Hebrew-English Lexicon*, 652.)

In light of the above-mentioned data, therefore, it may be supposed that the boat-trip began from Capernaum in the morning. Then the multitudes, in order to hear Jesus, left home hurriedly without food. Now, after a morning of messages and healings, noon came and went without any respite. Thus, the disciples' observation, *The time is already past*, refers to the dinner hour. Evidently, since they themselves had already missed some meals because of the crowds, they knew that, unless something was organized rather soon, not only they, but the people themselves would be facing a trip back home on an empty stomach.

**The disciples**, i.e., the Twelve (Lk. 9:12) **came to him**. If it be correct to interpret John's organization of the events to mean that very early in this episode Jesus planted in Philip's mind the problem of food to which they all began searching for a solution, then this verse (14:15) represents their frustration and inability to come up with anything short of miraculous. Further, their conclusion is not hasty: if Philip shared Jesus' conversation with them, they would have been thinking about it all morning, and especially so as "the day began to decline." (Lk. 9:12) Their arguments are those of good sense, discretion and consideration, but not of faith:

1. **This is a lonely place:** no grocery stores or restaurants or even homes to offer some simple hospitality. "Desert," as some translate it, means "deserted," not sandy wasteland. See on 14:19.
2. **The hour is already past** to do what? For the noon meal? The Greek expression (*he hora éde parēlthen* = Mark's *éde hora pollé*) need not be pushed so far as does the RSV's "the day is now over," since the "hour" involved may be nothing more than the usual dinner hour, so that, from that standpoint, Mark's expression, "It is already a late hour," refers primarily to the time to eat and only secondarily to the conclusion of some period of the day. (Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 631, 904) The Apostles' concern is that the people start for home with some hope of arriving in time for the evening meal. Some exaggerate the need of these people who are NOT starving, even though understandably hungry.

In fact, they are accustomed to fasting, many of them twice a week, and traditionally, in connection with the annual feast of atonement. (See notes on 6:16, 17.) They had eaten the day before this day, and would eat on the following day, so would not have been nearly as hungry as the 4000 Jesus fed later. (Cf. Mt. 15:32; Mk. 8:2, 3)

3. Solution: **Send the crowds away:**

- a. "to go into the country" in hopes of buying some food from farmers. (Mk. 6:36; Lk. 9:12) **Buy themselves food;** i.e., so we will not need to buy them food with our limited means.
- b. **to go into the villages** round about, and **buy food for themselves** from shopkeepers not yet closed for the night by the time they arrive.
- c. "to lodge" in the event they are too far from their own town. (Lk. 9:12)

This solution was not at all unreasonable, because, if we have correctly located the site of the Miracle of the Loaves and Fish on the Plain of Buti'ha, or even nearby, the crowds had only about four or five miles to walk to make it into Bethsaida Julias before the stores closed. Since Peter, Andrew and Philip, as well as James and John, were former residents of the area, they would know how and when food could be purchased and how much time would be required to do so (1) if they themselves were to go and bring it back; and (2) if the crowds merely picked up some groceries on their way home.

Just how much presumption is involved in their advice to Jesus? Their command, "**Send them away,**" may be less imperative in spirit than the verb-form seems to imply. (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, sec. 387, p. 195; Burton, *Moods and Tenses*, sec. 182f; Robertson-Davis, sec. 407, p. 312) Did they suppose that anything were "too hard for the Lord?" The presumption is not in the verb-form but in the attitude. They are probably not ordering Him, but in coming to advise Him, because they feel a need He is apparently ignoring, they are presuming to lead the Lord who "knew what he would do."

14:16 **But Jesus said unto them, They have no need to go away,** even though your arguments for their doing so are quite plausible. **YOU give them something to eat,** is an order that deliberately throws the Apostles upon their own resources. This sudden pressuring them to provide what they seemingly could not, was intended to push them to think: "But it would take a MIRACLE to feed this crowd! Say, that is what you have been empowering us to do during our own evangelistic efforts! Sure, why not? Only a lack of vision and faith

on our part would hinder it, if you desire that the miracle be done." From this standpoint there is a direct comparison between their failure properly to respond here, and their failure to heal the epileptic, demonized boy later. (Cf. Mt. 17:14-21 and parallels.) **You give them something to eat**, makes all the group immediately responsible for the problem, and indicates the moment at which their faithfulness and helplessness begins to reach its climax. In fact, up to this point, apparently only Philip had been specifically under pressure to seek a solution. Now, however, every single Apostle is being tried.

Clearly, then, Jesus' demand is neither unfair nor unreasonable, because it pointed to some overlooked source of supply. After all, they had all just returned from a successful, miracle-working evangelistic tour that had stirred all Galilee to rally around Jesus. (Mt. 14:1; Mk. 6:12-24; Lk. 9:6-9) So, when He turns this practical problem over to them for solution, they should have forgotten neither the implication of everything they had just accomplished in His Name on their personal tours, nor that of the turning water into wine at Cana. (Jn. 2:1-11) So, Jesus' surprising demand was no mere strategem whereby attention would be drawn solely to Himself. Rather, it was a practical method for them to rise in great faith to multiply the loaves and fish themselves—by His power working in them as before! Or, at least, they could rise out of their blindness and frustration to exclaim in faith, "Lord, if you desire, you can feed them all!" So, He successfully tested their understanding and confidence, and sadly found them staggered at the thought of feeding such a mass of people, because their vision of His power was too limited.

The disciples' response merely repeated Philip's earlier suggestion: "Shall we go and buy 200 denarii-worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" (Mk. 6:37) But not even Philip considered the sum sufficient to "buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." (Jn. 6:7) Does the 200-denarii figure represent the actual state of their common treasury? (Judas Iscariot carried the bag, Jn. 12:6, which contained gifts made for the financial support of Jesus' ministry, Lk. 8:3.) Yes, it would be a reasonable amount for the apostolic group to be carrying at the time, since a denarius represented a day's wage for a working man (cf. Mt. 20:2), and, when divided among the Twelve plus Jesus, the 200 denarii amounted only to the equivalent of just a little over two weeks' wages per man. So it was no great sum. That this figure actually pinpointed their on-the-spot financial condition is suggested also by their report: "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people."

(Lk. 9:13)

On the other hand, their discussion about their financial resources for buying bread significantly reveals another side of the usual mode of life among the Apostles and Jesus: Jesus did not turn stones into bread everyday even to keep His Apostles alive. They lived on the financial support for their ministry that others provided, or on the hospitality offered, or they went without. This regular modus operandi used in their own operations may have unduly influenced their thinking, even in a situation where they could have justifiably used God's miraculous power for the definite benefit of others in such a way as to bring Him glory. Mention here of their life-style does not justify their doubts or lack of vision; it only attempts to understand their otherwise inexplicable lack of ideas in the face of the crisis into which Jesus thrust them by ordering them to provide food for the crowds.

**They need not go away** seems to point to Jesus' loving unwillingness to send them away hungry: "Why I do not send them away will become evident when I show them that I care, not only to bring them sermons, but also to provide them daily bread." However, strictly humanitarian considerations, such as the emergency involved in the urgent need to feed the 4000 (Mk. 8:1-3), may be inadequate to motivate the miracle that follows here. Nor is it only Jesus' generous unwillingness to calculate whether the people are hungry enough to justify exerting some supernatural power to feed them. In fact, He could have dismissed them without losing one iota of public respect for His character. Rather, His planned miracle (see Jn. 6:6) is aimed to start the sifting process which would separate the spurious disciples from the genuine. Bruce (*Training of the Twelve*, 119-121) points this out:

No better method of separating the chaff from the wheat in that large company of professed disciples could have been devised, than first to work a miracle, which would bring to the surface the latent carnality of the great number, and then to preach a sermon which could not fail to be offensive to the carnal mind.

The Twelve were stymied by the problem. The multitudes could not foresee His plan. Therefore, Jesus was willing to submit Himself publicly to a new testing of His power, because His very success in passing the test would, in turn, test the people themselves on what they understood about Him from what they saw.

When the disciples express their financial inadequacy to feed the crowd, Jesus pushed them to investigate their actual food supply:

"How many loaves have you? Go and see." (Mk. 6:38)

14:17 **And they say to him, We have here but five loaves and two fish.** It was Andrew who turned up the lad with the lunch (Jn. 6:8, 9). But even his attitude reflects the consensus of pessimism among the others: ". . . but what are they among so many?" His observation is fundamentally, though not intentionally, unbelieving. He simply did not take into consideration Jesus' power, even though both he and Philip had experienced it so long. (Cf. Jn. 14:9)

*Five loaves:* we must not judge these by the size of American loaves of bread and conclude that the boy was making a major bakery delivery! The barley flour loaves (literally "breads") were, rather, more probably the size of hamburger buns, only flatter, more like pancakes. (See Lk. 11:5, 6 where three are considered enough for one late-night guest.) The very attitude toward the use of barley flour for making these flatcakes, however delicious, tended to consider them as "poor folks' food." (Cf. Judg. 7:13; 2 Kg. 7:1; Ezek. 4:12 in context) *The fish* were no whoppers either, because John the fisherman called them "little fish" (Jn. 6:9). In fact, he used a word, *opsaria*, which means "tidbits to be eaten with bread," perhaps even the same hors d'oeuvres for which Tarichea ("Pickletown," or a fish salting establishment) was famous over on the west side of the lake.

**We have here but five loaves and two fishes:** this is the woeful result of a thorough search for food ordered by the Lord. (Mk. 6:38) It is quite possible that He deliberately insisted upon this search in order to foredoom any slander that would discount the miraculous by insinuating that there was actually more food available than just a mere lunch. (Cf. Barclay, *Matthew*, II, 114, who reduces the miracle of multiplication of food to an act of sharing by changed, now unselfish people.) If such were the case, both the search and this dismal report would be utter fiction!

14:18 **And he said, Bring them hither to me.** Does this mean that the disciples were to buy the food from the lad, or encourage him to loan it to the Lord? At any rate, it must have required some open-handed generosity on the boy's part to turn his entire lunch over to Jesus when he could probably guess that, normally, it would have filled only him up, but would not be near enough for many others. *To me:* how often had Jesus been table guest of others? None the less, here He provides a needed meal at His own expense for thousands, and, incidentally, provided simple proof that, though others provided Him some financial support (Lk. 8:3), He accepted

it not because He was otherwise unable to provide for His needs and those of His companions. Not only did He refuse to work miracles for His own benefit—and, by extension, for His closer followers,—rather, He humbled Himself to the real level of our common human experience, yes, even to the point of becoming dependant upon the financial support of others. But in our text He rises to the full height of His lordly power by supplying the needs of others by the full exercise of the power of God! Little is always a great deal when Jesus gets hold of it.

**14:19 He commanded the multitudes to sit down** by ordering the Twelve to organize the well-nigh unmanageable people into orderly groups of fifties and hundreds. The language Jesus used indicated to people definite preparation for a picnic on the grounds: "Cause them to lie down to eat (*kataklinātē, anaklithēnai*) in dinner parties (*sympōsia, sympōsia; klisias*; Mk. 6:39; Lk. 9:14). The number of guests was easily tallied from the orderly arrangement which also facilitated the rapid serving and simplified its completion. It also eliminated the usual selfish thoughtlessness of those who would crowd around those who were distributing food. Jesus first mastered the confusion by organizing the people who would have caused it. Here, too, is thoughtful consideration for the weak.

**Sit down on the grass**, because "there was much grass in the place." (See on 14:13b for McGarvey's argument and description of the area.) Thanks to Mark's adjective, "green grass" (Mk. 6:39) and John's "much grass" as well as his note that this incident occurred around Passover (Jn. 6:4), we may date this incident in the spring about two weeks after the full moon. McGarvey (*Evidences of Christianity*, 87) points out that "a few weeks before this, grass is not abundant, and a few weeks later it is dry."

**He took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven . . .** Whether or not He had before this moment mentioned His intention to multiply the food miraculously, His pantomime speaks eloquent volumes. **Looking up to heaven** certainly draws everyone's attention to the Heavenly Father as Provider, giving Him glory before eating at His table as in His presence. (1 Co. 10:31; Ro. 14:6) But it also argues for that openness with which Jesus the Son could communicate with the Father, as if He were just looking right into the Father's face. (Cf. Jn. 11:41; 17:1) **He blessed:** Matthew used *blessed* (*eulōgesen*) without an object that would indicate what Jesus blessed, a usage which might be better rendered: "He gave thanks and praise." (Arndt-Gingrich, 322) However, if the food

be inferred as its object, as in fact Luke states (*eulògesen autoùs*), Jesus' prayer in reference to the food is the typically sacerdotal act of every believer who eats his meals with thanksgiving, and so consecrates it by the word of God and prayer. (Cf. 1 Ti. 4:3, 4) John (6:11) speaks of Jesus' prayer as a remarkable giving of thanks (*eucharistésas*), remarkable because worth mentioning again as having importance in the working of the miracle. (Cf. Jn. 6:23) Jesus' thanksgiving, however, is not faked: He was glad to receive this simple fare from the Father's hand. Certainly He would and could do more with it than any other man, but this does not detract from the sincerity and simplicity with which He depends upon the Father's provision and power. HERE is the power and secret of faith: that open-hearted, confident dependence upon God, that giving God glory before the people. (Contrast Numbers 20:1-12.)

But is it necessary, or even possible, without debasing the Gospel writers, to affirm so confidently, with Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 216) that

it is impossible to deny an allusion to the Eucharist, especially if attention is given to the words *looking up to heaven, He pronounced the blessing and broke the bread and gave it to the disciples*, (v. 19) desumed certainly from ancient liturgical formulae?

Even McMillan's comment (*Mark*, 85) assumes this connection as proved:

The terminology closely approximates the last supper (Mk. 14:22). Either the incident has been retold to bring out its anticipations of the Lord's Supper, or the actions of Jesus were familiar things which he then endowed with new significance in the last supper.

And yet, there is absolutely nothing in this text that could be explained as indicating any direct connection with the Last Supper except the coincidental similarity of Jesus' taking food and praying. The words cited by Cuminetti are completely explicable, not only in terms of habitual actions of Jesus, but especially in terms of the normal way a master of the house acts in two similar situations, by giving a benedictory prayer and beginning to share the food with his guests. (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, I, 683)

**He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.** "And he divided the two fish among them all, as much as they wanted." (Mk. 6:42; Jn. 6:11) Trench's excellent apologetic

*Notes on the Miracles* (167) bears repeating:

This miracle, even more than that of the water changed into wine, when we endeavor to realize to ourselves *the manner* of it, evermore eludes our grasp, and baffles imagination. Nor is this strange; for indeed, how can it be possible to bring within forms of our conception, or in thought to bridge over the gulf between not-being and being, which yet is bridged over in every creative act? And this being so, there is no force in the objection . . . against the historical truth of this narrative, namely, that "there is no attempt by closer description to make clear in its details the manner and process by which this wonderful bread was formed." It is true wisdom, to leave the indescribable undescribed, and without so much as an attempt at the description.

Indeed, would not the critics pick at the description too?

When Jesus multiplied *the bread and fish*, however superior the quantity, the multiplied food remained *bread and fish*, i.e., the same delicious, however common, food it was. He could have created a feast of the finest delicacies. Is there something to learn here?

1. Contentment with the fare we receive from the Father by whatever means He chooses to provide it?
2. A principle of parsimony in miracles? That is, the miracle involved only what was strictly necessary to achieve the purpose for which it was done. For example, it was not produced in monstrous excess of the actual need: only twelve baskets of left-overs. It was not brought down miraculously from heaven: Jesus broke it Himself. Nor was it miraculously distributed: the Twelve had to do the leg-work.

**The disciples gave them to the multitudes:** the waiters at this banquet are none other than those reasonably successful miracle-working evangelists who had so stirred Galilee! (See note on 14:16.) Certainly, the food distribution was most easily handled by a few men directed by Jesus as fast as He multiplied the food, but were the mere mechanics of efficient distribution what interested Jesus? Did He not, rather, desire that the implications of their lack of vision and faith, and the implications of His presence and power dawn upon them? But note how He honored His men by making them respected co-laborers with Him, even though their faith was sagging. This notwithstanding, they were generously rescued from embarrassment and despair without a certainly deserved word of

rebuke from Him: what mercy!

Did the Twelve use the baskets, later so useful in collecting the leftovers, to distribute the food in the first place? This is more likely than that each disciple used only his hands to carry what he could to the hungry people in hundreds of trips.

To be able to increase the physical quantity of molecules of bread so as to feed such a multitude to satisfaction is to exercise the power of the Creator Himself. Anyone who could do this could have created a world out of nothing. Even if we could not witness that creation, this one, however, gives us a glimpse at what it means to possess nothing less than full creative power. Who is this Man who enjoys such power?

**14:20 And they all ate, and were filled.** All four Gospel writers lay stress on the abundance of the sandwiches: everyone had all he could eat. (Jn. 6:11; cfr. *echortàsthesan, eneplésthesan*) This means second and third helpings: no miserliness here. What a contrast to Philip's estimate that a large purchase of bread would be insufficient "for each of them to get a little!" (Jn. 6:7) What a contrast to Andrew's pessimism: "But what are they among so many?" (Jn. 6:9) These people had been waiting all day to eat too! What a travesty on truth to suggest, with some, that the miracle consisted merely in making a small amount of food seem enough for them to nourish them sufficiently to arrive clear home! This kind of comment clearly ignores the witnesses and their unequivocal testimony.

At this point Jesus ordered the re-collection of the left-overs (*tà perisseùsanta*). Several motivations for this move suggest themselves:

1. His major purpose is stated: "that nothing be lost." (Jn. 6:12) Merely because He could endlessly multiply miracle-food is absolutely no reason for wastefulness of even the left-overs! Lenski (*Matthew*, 567) reminds that "some people always take too much. So here, some took pieces from the disciples of which they could not take even a bite, being so filled." Plummer (*Luke*, 245) notes that details of this character guarantee against the possibility that the entire story is a deliberate fiction or a myth, because of the incongruity of representing "one who could multiply food at will as giving directions that the fragments should not be wasted (Jn. 6:12). The possessor of an inexhaustible purse is never represented as being watchful against extravagance."
2. Further, be it a result and not a prime motive, it is a fact that *twelve baskets full of sandwich makings* are take-home evidence

that the miracle was real and abundant. After seeing those brimming baskets, no one could sneer that Jesus had made "just enough," but certainly could have made no more!

The *baskets* in question (*kōfinos*) were the picnic variety used by Jews on a journey to carry kosher food to avoid purchasing ritually unclean food from pagans. Such baskets were thought by the latter to be characteristic of Jews, as illustrated by the following quotations collected by Plummer (*Luke*, 245):

Juvenal: ". . . the Jews whose equipment is a basket and some hay." (*Sat.* iii. 14)

Martial: ". . . thou, Gellia, hast married a basket-carrier (=Jew)" (*Epig.* v. 17. 4)

As is clear from these pokes at the Jews, such satire would be impossible if the majority of the audience did not instantly recognize the basis of these jokes, were it not characteristic of the Jews to carry such baskets.

3. Lenski (*Matthew*, 568) suggests that the *twelve baskets full* were intended for the Apostles themselves, because, having fed all the others, they may now finally sit down around Jesus with ample provision for their needs. All they had shared with others had, by Jesus' power, now returned to them with interest, and by that same supernatural might, they could still share this food with thousands more, if need be, and give God thanks.
4. The *twelve baskets full* were probably carried by twelve red-faced men who had earlier balked at the seemingly impossible challenge: "You give them something to eat!" with no more real working materials than their own faith in God's miraculous power and a handful of sandwiches. They finished the evening with more groceries than they started with, and ironically, at the beginning, even with Jesus present, even with their own miracle-working power, they had dared to think that they had nothing! Compare their lack of confidence with the quiet reliance of Elisha. (2 Kg. 4:42-44)

**14:21 And they that did eat were about five thousand men, besides women and children.** Why bother to take a count even for the record?

1. In order to furnish the reader an adequate conception of the magnitude of this miracle. It is noteworthy that Luke and John mention the massive numbers during the conversation between Jesus and the Twelve at the time of their disturbance over their lack of resources. It would seem that these Gospel writers chose

that moment to indicate the greatness of the crowd to impress the readers with the magnitude of the PROBLEM to be solved. Matthew and Mark, on the other hand, apparently reserved mention of the number until the close, in order to present the greatness of the SOLUTION.

2. The count is perhaps recorded, in order to forestall doubts about the miracle's real occurrence, because Matthew cites how many male witnesses were present and qualified to testify to its reality. The very astronomical nature of the number challenges the dubious reader to begin immediately to seek out some of these men for an on-the-spot verification of the account. That many available witnesses and so precise a figure become powerful psychological stimuli to begin checking into the whole story of Jesus of Nazareth.
3. By counting only the men, the Gospel writers deliberately understate their evidence, and the resultant psychological effect on the reader is far more stunning upon reflection: if the women and children were omitted from the count, then the exact total must be considerably greater than 5000. The result (or was it purpose?) of mentioning only the men as *they that did eat*, is the disarming of any critics who would diminish the magnitude of the miracle by alluding to "the eaters" as a cluster of dainty women and little children who could manage on far less than hungry men.

**14:22 And straightway he constrained the disciples to enter into the boat, and to go before him unto the other side, till he should send the multitudes away.** The reader of only Matthew and Mark would find quite inexplicable this urgency of Jesus that pushes His inner circle of disciples to embark, leaving Him on the land alone with the crowds. John furnishes the precious explanations:

1. "When the people saw the sign which He had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' " (Jn. 6:14) "And so the Baptist's last inquiry, 'Art Thou the Coming One?' was fully and publicly answered, and that by the Jews themselves." (Edersheim, *Life*, I, 685) This confession which apparently swept the crowd was formerly the very faith Jesus had sought to establish, yet its content was so badly confused about what the Messiah and His Kingdom should be, that He could not but respond negatively to their eagerness by hurrying them to leave for home.

This popular inference, perhaps even grounded in a tradition that the Messiah would feed Israel with bread from heaven (Cf.

2 Baruch 29:8; Sibylline Fragment 3:49; see Edersheim, *Life*, I, 176) was no surprise to Jesus, because He had deliberately planned for it. Everything had conspired together to lead people to this conclusion. Nevertheless, grounded as it was on good, undeniable evidence, it would prove the damnation of most of those who made it. They did not take the next step: "If He be The Prophet, let Him teach us! Whatever He says, however strange, disagreeable or untraditional, we will submit, because His message is the voice of our God who sent Him!" Their shallowness is measurable in the inconsistency between this confession made in the heat of popular enthusiasm one day, and their rejection of His doctrine on the next. (Cf. Jn. 6:25-66)

While their confession is grand enough for what they think they are saying about Jesus, they probably did not see that in this miracle He acted as the Lord of nature, multiplying its elements to supply the needs of His people.

2. "Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king . . ." (Jn. 6:15) These wrong-headed messianic king-makers not only burned to see the Messianic Kingdom materialize; they were clamoring to make it materialistic! The Passover festival to take place shortly in Jerusalem nicely suited their plans for a triumph in the capital with Jesus as their Messianic King, acclaimed by these paschal pilgrims thoroughly excited and ready to march in His cause at a moment's notice.

*Send the multitude away* had been the disciples' advice (14:15) based on their ignorance of Jesus' intentions and power. Now, precisely because the Lord knows His own mind, He **MUST send the multitudes away**. This literal dismissal has the force of a symbol, because, due to the motives for which He sends them away, He personally marked the climax of the popular enthusiasm for Him. His refusal to accept the Zealot crown is, in their estimation, to commit political suicide, to ruin His image by extinguishing the hopes of all who, in sympathy with the nationalistic liberation party, had been expecting the Messiah to play the role of a God-sent neo-Maccabean to deliver Israel from all oppressors, establish a state that would rule the world and bring unprecedented wealth and glory to Israel. That He actually intended to drive away the unwilling and the unthinking is evident from His handling of a majority of these same people the next day in His Sermon on the Bread of Life in Capernaum, where, almost systematically, He unmasked their crassly materialistic reasons

for following Him, and bared the hard spiritual realities of His real Messiahship. (Jn. 6:25-66; cf. Ro. 16:18) Nevertheless, this attempt to make Jesus a political king will explain many of the unusual attempts to avoid publicity, His trips to foreign areas and deserted zones, and His desire for privacy. (Cf. Mt. 16:20; 17:9; Mk. 7:24, 36) In fact, although Matthew does not affirm it, this incident marks the acme and end of His great popularity with the Galilean crowds.

Jesus' reaction to the turbulent fanaticism was rapid and decisive: He instantly dampened all enthusiasm in three lightning moves:

1. He ordered the sudden sailing of His disciples to separate this precious nucleus from the well-nigh overpoweringly passionate enthusiasm of the crowds.
2. He calmly but decisively dismissed the crowds.
3. He hiked up into the hills alone.

Without violence, in this one unhesitating move He saved His disciples, avoided the wrong crown and made no one particularly angry. After all, the picnic was over and it was time to go home anyway.

*Till He should send the multitudes away* sounds like the Twelve were to await His arrival at the beach after the dismissal, and as suggested at 14:24, they may have so interpreted it. However, He had not specified HOW or WHEN He would rejoin them, so there is no promise implied here that Jesus did not keep, because He DID rejoin them before they could arrive at their destination anyway.

However, the Apostles sailed because of sheer obedience, not because what He required of them made any sense. After all THIS was the moment for which they had prayed, the moment when He would accept the Messianic Crown and popular acclaim, and proclaim the Kingdom. Instead, if He sends them away in a boat this way, they will miss it all! Yet their obedience is remarkable for its reality, despite their seemingly justifiable reasons to do anything but what He ordered.

#### IV. JESUS' PRAYERS

14:23 **H**e . . . sent the multitudes away, and, in fact, most of them did depart outright. Nonetheless, some lingered around the area overnight, hoping to encounter Him as He returned from His mountain vigil. Next morning, when He did not appear, they boarded some boats from Tiberias to sail for Capernaum in search of Him.

(Jn. 6:22-25)

In the meantime, however, **He went up into the mountain by himself to pray.** (Cf. Lk. 6:12) From the plain at a level nearly equal with the surface of the Sea of Galilee, the hills that form the backdrop for the plain would seem like mountains seen from below. In fact, the Bashan hills rise nearly 3000 feet above the surface of the lake. *To pray* nearly all night, i.e., from the fall of darkness when He sent the crowds away, until sometime after three in the morning. (14:25) McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 132) is so right to rebuke our surprise that the Son of God should spend so much time in prayer, since our astonishment only measures our ignorance of the life of Jesus, and our under-valuation of prayer.

About what Jesus prayed the text does not say, but did He not mention . . .

1. **THE WANTON WICKEDNESS OF THE ENEMY:** Could He have released all His bottled-up emotions about the assassination of John? Who could not grieve when the holiest man in all Israel, the very messenger of Javeh, Jesus' own cousin, had been ruthlessly chopped down in his prime by the wicked?
2. **WRESTLING WITH HIS OWN SOUL:** Would He not also have prayed for more self-discipline to withstand the temptation to accept an earthly crown and plunge personally into campaigns to right earth's wrongs, and vindicate John? John's death for righteousness only brought the cross more vividly before the Lord Himself. How real this was becomes more evident in His somber allusion to Judas Iscariot whose character, Jesus knew, all too well matched Satan's designs and who would betray Him. (Jn. 6:64, 70f) Next day in His scandalous sermon on the Bread of Life, He would exclaim, "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is MY FLESH! (Jn. 6:51)
3. **WEAKNESS OF HIS DISCIPLES:** Surely He interceded for His tiny nucleus of disciples who were so exposed to His same temptations. The passionate patriotism of the nationalists could not but touch these disciples too whereinssofar they shared those ideals. If the motives that once moved Simon the Zealot to cast his vote for violent revolution should infect the entire apostolic group, Jesus could see all His efforts to establish a spiritual Kingdom mercilessly wrecked from within.
4. **WORLDLINESS OF THE CROWDS:** And was there no prayer that the mind of people, blind to the spiritualness of His teaching

and Kingdom, should be opened to the realities He had tried so hard to depict? Was He even then rehearsing the thoughts that would burst forth in that career-ending sermon to be preached the next day in one mighty push to drive them, in despair, to request explanations as would real disciples?

5. WAITING UPON THE FATHER: But all these prayers—and more—keep His mind centered on the great God before Whom all human praise, honors, powers and crowns fade into insignificance. Was it only during the Gethsemane experience that He “offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death” or in which “he learned obedience through what he suffered”? (Cf. Heb. 5:7-9)

#### V. JESUS' POWER

14:24 **But the boat was now in the midst of the sea, distressed by the waves; for the wind was contrary.** The boat did not arrive *in the midst of the sea* instantly upon the disciples' embarking and setting sail. In fact, John (6:16-18) recounts the disciples' hesitation that caused them to dally offshore, perhaps debating whether they should wait on Jesus' arrival or not. His demand that they sail for Capernaum had been clear enough, but His words had apparently not indicated whether or not they were to wait for Him offshore until He should have dismissed the crowds, in order to be free to come aboard and sail with them. The expression, “It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them” (Jn. 6:17b), suggests that, whereas they had decisively embarked in the general direction of Capernaum, they may have been hugging the eastern shore, scanning the plain for any indication of His arrival. But then it became too dark to see, and there was nothing left to do but obey His specific order to sail—with or without Him. Their expectation was mistaken, because He intended to pray alone. Even if they had been correct, their dallying offshore would have encouraged the crowds to believe that Jesus intended to embark as well, thus encouraging some to hang around Him until He did, thus slowing their eventual dispersing in the dark toward their homes. (Cf. Jn. 6:22)

The expression, *in the midst of the sea*, has been corrected by textual editors to “The boat was already many stadia from the land,” which agrees with John’s remark shortly afterward: “When they had rowed about 25-30 stadia,” or roughly three or four miles on a

lake that is but six miles wide. (Cf. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 37) "The sea rose because a strong wind was blowing" (Jn. 6:18), out of the northwest, *for the wind was against them* as they sailed northwest toward Capernaum from the supposed site of the miracle of the loaves on the eastern lake-shore plain. (Jn. 6:17) The next day they disembarked south of their destination, at Gennesaret on the mid-western shore. (Mt. 14:34) Some mistakenly think the wind was out of the east-north-east and that it blew the ship in a south-westerly direction toward Gennesaret, for which explanation they must argue that the disciples were rowing eastward to keep themselves near the eastern shore to meet Jesus, but that the wind eventually nullified their efforts. (Cf. G.A. Frank Knight, *PHC*, XXIII, 245) This view pictures the disciples as never really attempting to go to Capernaum-Bethsaida, hence inexplicably insinuates an insipient disobedience to the Lord's specific orders to do so, excusing them for loving the Lord while disobeying Him. For a description of a storm similar to that faced by the Apostles, see Johnson-DeWelt, *Mark*, 184f, and notes on Matthew 8:24.

Sailing, at this point, against such a wind *and beaten by the waves*, was out of the question, so they turned to the oars. Their best efforts notwithstanding, "the disciples were straining at the oars" (*basanizoménous en tō eláunein*, Mk. 6:48) or, battered in rowing, because the boat was battered by the waves (Mt. 14:24: *basanizómenon*).

As Bruce (*Training*, 126) believes, if these men thought this literal storm terrible, they had yet to experience another spiritual hurricane the next day when they were to watch the fickle crowds who had the day before attempted to crown Jesus their Messianic King, turn abruptly away from in shock, disappointment and disgust. This sudden and violent apostasy would require gargantuan effort on the part of the Twelve to maintain their own headway against the waves of unpopularity and unbelief.

**14:25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking upon the sea.** The Romans divided the night guard-duty into four watches of three hours each, beginning at 6:00 p.m., thus the *fourth watch* ran from 3:00-6:00 a.m. So, calculating that the Twelve had actually started across at just after sunset, and that they had made no more than three or four miles by three o'clock in the morning, we must conclude that they had fought that storm for no less than six or seven hours, and probably more! This is obedience, because these men, accustomed to such storms, could well have turned the boat to run with the wind: their whole trouble was caused

by their insistence (in obedience to Jesus) in continuing against the wind. Their loyalty to Jesus kept them rowing. However, their fatigue was even greater, because of the lack of proper food and rest that had occasioned their escape from Capernaum, and because they had worked steadily with Jesus at least since their arrival at the scene of the multiplication of the food. These factors help to explain their reactions to what follows.

Why did Jesus come to them, *walking upon the sea?* Merely to take a short cut across the sea, rather than walk around the land?

1. Jesus decided to help them in their plight, because, as Mark (6:47, 48) describes the scene: "When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and He was alone on the land. And HE SAW that they were distressed in rowing . . ." The reader must ponder how that could be humanly possible if Jesus did not use superhuman vision. Two factors must be remembered here:

a. At Passover time the moon is full, lighting the entire lake.

During the period March-April the Tiberias area sees an average of only eight rainy days. Besides, the storm wind does not necessarily presuppose any clouds to obscure the bright moonlight.

b. Further, Jesus stood on an excellent point for observing the entire scene: the hills into which He had retreated after dismissing the crowds are the same hills used as observation points by Arab gun spotters on the Golan Heights in the Arab-Israeli wars.

In the same way that He saw the need of the multitudes and had compassion upon them, now, rather than send an angel to help them or calm the storm from where He was, compassionately He chose to come to them through the tempest Himself.

2. Their very circumstances furnished Him the opportunity to demonstrate even further His essential Deity in a manner, however incomprehensible, that was absolutely undeniable and real. Though the masses think of Him as some great Messenger come from God, His immediate disciples must know Him as the indisputable Lord of Nature. They need to understand that what Jesus can do with the molecules of five buns and two sardines, He can do with the molecules of a roaring sea beyond their control. In the one case He multiplied them; in the other He transformed them into a walkway that supports His weight. This nature miracle, like the transformation of water into wine, must lead them to conclude that He who comes to them, making the water support Him as

would any terrestrial surface, can be only He who created the seas and the dry land in the first place.

**He came to them, walking on the sea.** The only alternative to accepting this crisp, simple sentence as the expression of a historical miracle that actually occurred is either to deny the total history, because the witnesses are impugned as incredible, or follow those who, like Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 117) profess inability to decide whether a miracle occurred here or not. He argues that, since the Greek expressions *epi tēs thalassēs* and *epi tēn thālassan* CAN mean the same thing, i.e., "upon the sea" or "on the sea," or also "at the sea," "over the sea," or "towards the sea" respectively, and since *peripateīn* means "to walk, walk around," he concludes that Jesus walked around the head of the lake, saw the boat fighting the waves and came down toward the shore to help. Walking through the surf on the shore and the waves toward the boat, He came so suddenly upon them that they were terrified when they saw Him. While admitting that the above-mentioned Greek expressions may also describe a miracle in which Jesus actually walked on the water, he affirms that whatever interpretation of the Greek is chosen, it does not matter. While his own comments on Peter's walking on the water quite ignor the problem, that very incident is described in Scripture in such a way as to remove every ambiguity and reflect back on Jesus' walk on the waters. That disciple requested permission to "come to you upon the waters" (*eltheīn prōs sē epī tā hūdata*). Then he, too, "walked about on the water" (*periepātesen epī tā hūdata*). Here it is clearly impossible for a disciple sitting in the boat some distance from any shore to "walk around . . . towards the water!" It is dubious translation or interpretation to presume two distinct meanings for the same words in so close a context unless moral or material considerations render identical translation impossible. Worse, such an interpretation as Barclay's ignors the eyewitnesses' location of the boat in the middle of the lake. Further, it ignors Jesus' intention to "pass by them" (Mk. 6:48): why should He do this, if, according to the theory, He was coming to help them? Again, it is everywhere presumed that Peter, in requesting to go meet the Lord, wanted to do precisely what he saw the Lord doing, and that, upon the Savior's invitation, he actually did so until the moment when his fear of the new element in which he found himself broke his confidence in Jesus and down he went. If he were only wading toward a shallow beach, he was in no need, no real trouble and needed no faith at all to do what Jesus

did. Therefore, Jesus' rebuke of his little faith is out of order. Finally, the Apostles' reactions to the whole scene is life entirely without explanation, were there no miracles here. (14:33; Mk. 6:51f)

14:26 How long had these men ardently desired Jesus to be with them as they battled the waves during that interminable night? Suddenly, **the disciples saw him walking on the sea**, and, ironically, their reaction to what they thought they saw was anything but relief. However, for a group of men caught in a potentially disastrous sea-storm at night, struggling at the oars to keep their boat afloat and make any headway against adverse winds, fatigued by their lack of rest for all the hours spent fighting the storm, their reaction to Jesus' appearance is quite natural: **they were troubled, saying, It is a ghost; and they cried out for fear.** Their fear is real, given the state of emergency: they are physically exhausted, unnerved by the persistence of the tempest, hampered by the darkness, when suddenly, unexpectedly someone sights the incredible, but perfectly visible, form of something or someone moving toward them on the water. Our condescending toleration of "their ignorance and superstition" is a comfortable criticism made in the tranquillity of our study, but shows little sensitivity for what real men felt in that careening boat.

The observation made about Jesus' ability to see the disciples' struggles with the storm (at 14:25 regarding Mk. 6:48), also permits us to see how **the disciples saw Him walking on the sea**. In the half-light of the paschal moon they could make out a shadowy figure striding across the waves, perhaps rising with each crest, drawing ever closer (Jn. 6:19). Mark's puzzling remark, "He meant to pass by them," has been variously interpreted:

1. He did it so that in their terror they would not abandon the ship to escape from this unnameable terror, and so drown before He could calm their fears. So, He did not approach the boat directly, but only on a parallel course.
2. Foster (*Middle Period*, 170) sees this tactic as showing Jesus to be perfectly independent of the boat in every sense. He is not saved by them: it is He who must save them.
3. Plummer (*Matthew*, 208) sees it as His desire to cause them to feel their need to cry to Him for help. He does not automatically help until they have identified in Him their only help.

Naturalistic attempts to discount this eyewitness account proceed by various routes:

1. By supposing that Jesus walked merely on the land, but it **SEEMED**

to the disciples that He walked on the sea itself, because they were closer to the land than they thought. (Cf. Jn. 6:21) However, is it credible to believe that they could make out the dim figure of a man walking along the shore, and yet be unable to distinguish the land itself on which he walks? Could they have been close enough to him to communicate with him and yet be unable to measure their distance to the shore with reasonable accuracy? For the interpretation of Jn. 6:21, see on Mt. 14:33. Further, if by "the fourth watch" we are not to understand its beginning, i.e., around 3:00 a.m., but, rather, its middle or end, i.e., around six o'clock, then predawn light may have permitted even better visibility, hence, more than ever precluding the possibility of honest error.

- To accept the conclusion that a myth about a miraculous walking on the sea could have grown up around so common an experience as walking along the shore is to admit an absurdity greater than the hypothesis of the story's truth. Further, the myth-hypothesis leaves Peter's walk (in, at, near, or toward?) on the water completely without either justification or explanation.
- 2. By supposing mass hallucination: "they all saw him, and were terrified." (Mk. 6:49, 50) Men in this state of mind, it is said, would not have been calm, objective observers of the phenomena, and the excited shout of one could easily suggest to the others the subjective vision of something that, objectively, just was "not there." However, supposing the other details of this account to be true, which is perhaps asking too much of some critics, the detail about Peter's failure to walk all the way to Jesus on the water is left unexplained, as is also their embarking at the conclusion of Peter's walk with Jesus. Do hallucinations become so concrete as an additional Passenger in the same boat, whose very presence could be verified at will?
- 3. By supposing that the disciples, by their cry: *It is a ghost!* reveal an ignorance and superstition that would disqualify them as observers prepared to identify and report this strange phenomenon. (Cf. Lk. 24:37; Ac. 12:15) Several answers may be suggested:
  - a. The Evangelist reports them as shouting, as their first reaction, a hypothesis which was subsequently discredited by the facts. Had they first shouted, "It is the Lord!", we might have had more reason to suspect their psychological reaction, for, in that case, they would not have examined the possibility that they

- were themselves subject to the fear of ghosts. But, because they themselves eliminated the ghost-hypothesis, suggesting it as their most natural explanation, we do not have to suggest it.
- b. Only the determined antisupernaturalist (who is himself biased by that position) could fail to admit that the Apostles had, in their national historico-theological literature, Scriptural antecedents for seizing upon this explanation of that eerie figure moving across the waters now along side them. (Cf. 1 Sam. 28:8-20; Job 4:12-16)
  - c. Nor is it a necessary disqualification of the observer when he experiences terror without explanation when some unearthly figure appears to him. (Cf. Dan. 10:5-11; Rev. 1:17; Lk. 1:11, 12, 26-30; 2:9, 10) Rather, the terrified observer compromises his credibility when he DENIES his fear. Whatever the Twelve thought about the phantasms of others (cf. Wisdom 17:3, 14), their own immediate circumstances offered no direct explanation when they find themselves confronted with the weird figure now before them.
  - d. Finally, were the above-mentioned objection of real weight, is it likely that the early Christians (not to say: Matthew too) bent on glorifying the Apostles by the creation of myth around them, should have left in their tradition what to critical minds must reduce them here to "ignorant, superstitious men," unless this experience were so unquestionably authentic that no amount of Christian whitewash could cover their embarrassment? So; the accusation of disqualification because of the Apostles' cry of "Ghost!" is surprising evidence of the historicity of the account, since, as they recount it, they must objectively and dispassionately include what, to the critics, must appear a defect.

Whereas the expression, *It is a ghost*, implies to the English reader that the Twelve thought they were beholding a disembodied spirit, however, *ghost* translates *fàntasma*, a word used by the Greeks to express several ideas. It means "a phantasm, a false appearance, a specter; a vision, a product of phantasy, as in a dream; celestial phenomenon; a prodigy, a portent; a reflection (as in water); a semblance, an apparition; an image, a phantom" (Rocci, 1941) Which of these is nearest to the mentality of the Apostles in this instance?

1. The manner itself in which He approached them explains their bewilderment. They had never seen Him control the normal procedure of natural law in relation to His own body. Since the concept of His walking across the sea had never entered their minds, in the absence of any other rational explanation, they shout the first explanation that comes to mind. They might have meant no more than: "It is a marvel! It is a prodigy!"
2. Apparently everyone in Judaism believed in the reality of the spirit-world, except the Sadducees against whose position Jesus would both warn His disciples and later argue this point. (Cf. Ac. 23:6-9; Mt. 16:12; 22:23-33) It should not surprise anyone, therefore, that these Jewish Apostles should blurt out a perfectly Jewish explanation. It would, rather, be far more perplexing if they did not. In fact, for them, *fântasma* may be equal to "spirit," *pneûma*. (cf. Lk. 24:37)
3. From the standpoint of the rebuttals previously suggested (under 3a-d) there need be no prejudice against the rendering "ghost," since the facts subsequently verified cleared up any misunderstanding this word might imply.

**14:27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.** He humanized even this stupendous miracle by His infectious good humor, greeting His friends, "Cheer up, boys, it's I Myself: no need for nervousness here!" Haggard eyes and worn muscles do not permit the most cheerful responses, but the Lord knew that the relief He brought them was capable of injecting adrenaline vigor into those tired bodies through a new positive excitement. He had not yet promised the end of their struggles, but they can take courage in His encouragement. When they recognized that familiar voice and could shout, not "It is a ghost!," but "It is the Lord!," their fear no longer had a basis, even though the wind continued to blast over the lake and the spray from the waves smashing the boat continued to dampen them.

## VI. JESUS' PEOPLE

**14:28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee upon the waters.** What a mad mixture of motives

must have pushed Peter to blurt out this impulsive request!

1. Was there none of that boyishness that, without calculating consequences or implications, always wants to try anything someone else is doing?
2. Was there also impatient joy to run meet his Lord after a night of anxiety in the face of death on the sea? (Cf. Jn. 21:7) This impetuous demonstration of affection is really welcome to Jesus. Its only fault is its failure to weigh the consequences of its reaction. His is a psychological rebound from utter despair and fear to the opposite extreme of reckless joy and confidence.
3. There must have been also the conviction that Jesus' power was sufficient to permit him to do exactly what the Lord Himself was then doing. This is real faith, because it awaits an order to overcome this natural impossibility, because it is fully convinced that Jesus' power to make him do it is only limited by His will that he do so.

In the larger picture of Peter, that includes also his doubt and failure, we have that "combination (so strange and yet so natural) of confidence in the Master and confidence in himself. There is the usual impulsiveness (partly good and partly evil) . . ." (Plummer, *Matthew*, 209)

From this standpoint, then, Peter's *If it is you . . .* does not mean to doubt Jesus' identity, but rather state: "Since it is you, Lord . . ."

Since there is no indication in the text that Peter is trying to outdo and outdare his fellow-disciples by leaping to a mightier proof of his faith than the others, it is better to leave this out of the picture. After all, Jesus does not, in His later reproof, make any comparisons, as, in fact, He had to do after Peter's denials. (Cf. Jn. 21:15-19 in contrast with Mt. 26:33-35) It is unfair to Peter to read his later boasts back into this text when in fact they are absent.

Some redactionists just cannot conceive of Matthew's including this story about Peter as an event containing tremendous teaching power, without any intention to glorify Peter also. Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 218) exemplifies this:

To Mark's account, Matthew adds three verses about Peter vv. 29-31). Precisely because this attention is given to him, one cannot deny the important place Peter had in the primitive church, at least in the Judeo-Christian congregations; this will be confirmed by later passages in which Peter will appear as he

who speaks in the name of all the apostles (16:15-19, 22, 23; 17:24-27). However, another hypothesis cannot be excluded, that could easily be complementary to the one just mentioned: Peter is placed in the foreground because of his attitudes that set him forward as a prototype of the believer, full of enthusiasm and love for Jesus, however with an ever insufficient faith.

Is it not just as easy to interpret these same facts as tending to de-mythologize Peter the man and disarm any tendency to elevate him to honors belonging only to the Lord? In trying to ascertain any theological motive for this incident registered by Matthew alone, we should not overlook other possible apologetic motives:

1. Did he intend to show Jesus' power, not only to walk on the sea, and so reveal Himself as Lord of creation, but also His power to cause others to do it too? Great is the power to work miracles. Greater still is the power to confer power. (Cf. Notes on Mt. 10:1)
2. Was Matthew's intention for including Peter's walking on the water to show how Jesus' walk on the waves is to be understood, i.e., as a literal miracle, not otherwise? (See the naturalistic objections at 14:26.)

**14:29 And he said, Come!** Here is the gracious invitation given in response to a request for a sign of Jesus' identity based on the disciple's determination to trust Jesus, whereas the unbelieving Pharisees, attempting the same, were drowned! (Cf. Mt. 16:1-4) Admire the generosity of the Lord: He who could have foreseen Peter's failure of confidence in Him, still permitted His friend to share His divine power in this way. Jesus lost nothing of His uniqueness by letting Peter walk on the lake surface too, because He knew that the power to walk on the surface is one thing, while the power to cause others to do so too, is further evidence of His uniqueness and power. But even if these distinctions do not seem apparent, Jesus did not refuse Peter, saying, "No, stay in the boat, because if you walk on the water too, someone might think your power somehow equal to mine, and rob me of my proper glory!"

Further, as Lenski notes (*Matthew*, 573),

The faith which Peter manifests Jesus accepts and justifies. If it had not been true faith, or if wrong and foolish motives had prompted Peter, Jesus would never have given this command. Those who criticize Peter ought to see that their criticism really strikes Jesus who consents to Peter's proposal.

On the other hand, is it not possible that by this experience Jesus wanted Peter to learn his own character and his need for more dependence upon Jesus? If so, Peter's faith was not so well-developed as he supposed. Hence, the Lord consented to Peter's exposing his faith to this testing, to reveal to him the immaturity of his confidence in the Lord.

**And Peter went down from the boat, and walked on the waters to come to Jesus.** It takes courage to step out on a heavy sea. In fact, who could say, on the basis of Matthew's information whether the lake is not still in turmoil precisely as before Jesus' appearance walking on its surface? Lenski (*Matthew*, 571, 574) unnecessarily creates for Jesus a path level and smooth through the waves so that, whereas the boat is at first being pounded by the waves and roller-coasting, Jesus Himself is walking sedately on a level path through the waves. Then, accordingly, he sees the boat as entirely entering that calm path in front of Jesus, no longer wallowing as Peter calmly disembarked and started down the "path" toward Jesus, the "path" remaining calm while the lake still roared all around. But what is mistaken about seeing Jesus earlier, and now Peter too, as walking on the surface of the cresting waves with deep troughs that make walking difficult, even though Jesus' powerful will makes the surface to support their weight? It is more consistent with the data not to create such "paths":

1. It was when Peter saw the wind that he was afraid and began to sink (14:30), but if there had been a level path in front of him, the wind was not affecting at least this much of the sea.
2. However, the wind ceased only when they got into the boat. (Mt. 14:32; Mk. 6:51)

How and why did Peter *walk upon the waters*?

1. Was it PETER'S FAITH that worked the miracle by that power which Jesus had bestowed upon all the Apostles for their own evangelistic ministry? (Cf. Mt. 10:1, 8; Mk. 6:12f; Lk. 9:6) If so, his failure is perfectly understandable, even as was that of the nine Apostles who could not cast out the demon from the epileptic boy. (Cf. Mt. 17:16-21) The exercise of such power is entirely dependent upon the individual miracle worker's trust in Jesus (God), and where that confidence is weak or fails, for whatever reason, then he is unable to work the desired miracle. The Twelve had worked the same miracles as Jesus before. Here, then, Peter is seen doing the same miracle of walking on the water as does

the Lord, not, as we shall see, by his own independent power, but by faith sharing what the Lord offers him of His own power. (Cf. Jn. 14:12)

2. Or, on the other hand, did JESUS' POWER instantaneously cause the water to support Peter's weight in direct proportion to Peter's trust in Him? Was it Jesus' will alone that intended to work the miracle of which Peter was only the passive, however confident, participant?

To raise these perhaps inappropriate questions is to begin to grasp the relationship between the power to work miracles of the Apostles and that of Jesus. Between the Apostles' faith and will to do the miracle there had to be a perfect collaboration with the power and will of Jesus. This, in turn, was affected by the Apostles' concentration upon what Jesus is, and what He could do through them. In other words, their confidence in Him predisposed their entire being to become a channel through which He could function, but their will expressed itself in stepping out of the boat onto the water, anointing the sick with oil, casting out the demons, etc. On other occasions, where Jesus was absent, prayer aided this concentration upon God (Jesus) from whom all power comes. (Cf. Mk. 9:29; Jn. 11:41-44; Ac. 9:40ff; however, other miracles do occur where prayer is not specifically mentioned.)

14:30 **But when he saw the wind whipping the water into mountainous waves, he was afraid.** Admit it: his experience was absolutely unique among men! It is one thing to brave a storm from the inside of a relatively safe fishing boat one had used all his life. It is quite another to brave the same storm walking right out on those same mountainous waves, exposed to its full fury. Put yourself in his sandals and step out of the boat yourself before criticizing his terror. See yourself too far from the boat to brace yourself and not yet near enough to the Lord to grab His hand. Look around at the next wave towering over you, and try to remember what it was you were going to say about Peter! It was not a mere taking his eyes off Jesus that occasioned his fright and failure, as if all depended upon staring at the Lord. His MIND was taken off the Lord by turning his ATTENTION to the dangers that whirled around him. It was this distraction that fixed his mind on the hazards, that left him dizzy, helpless and fearful. Was he thinking about how deep the sea must be at the very point where he was walking? At this moment, total, unquestioning confidence in Jesus was replaced with dependence upon

upon his own feeble powers. But Jesus' powerful will made the water solid only for Peter's confidence in Him and only in relationship to the reality and strength of that trust. So, when fear took faith's place, the conditions Jesus placed upon the miracle were no longer met, the solid sea surface under Peter's feet melted into its normal state, and down he went. (The foregoing is not an attempt to explain the mechanics or the physical processes involved in this miracle, because, how Jesus did it, the Scripture does not inform us. It is only an attempt to understand the relationship between confidence in God and the power to work miracles.)

**Beginning to sink**, he did not swim, even though he probably knew how. (Cf. Jn. 21:7) Rather, his instinctive reaction is that of a believer,—desperately afraid, but a believer: **Lord, save me!** His faith becomes clearer to us if we imagine him turning away from Jesus and trying to reach the safety of the boat.

**14:31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and took hold of him.** Lenski (*Matthew*, 576) makes the interesting suggestion that Jesus, in taking Peter by the hand, was not merely hauling him bodily out of the water. The fact that Peter was to walk with Jesus back to the boat on the water's surface indicates that he was to do so once again by faith in the power of the Lord. Therefore, says Lenski, Jesus did actually more than save Peter from going to the bottom. By His handgrip on Peter, He focussed Peter's attention entirely upon Himself, thus restoring in Peter that confidence which had been temporarily lost. As his confidence in the Lord's power is once again restored, so also the condition for which Jesus had originally exerted His power to help Peter walk on the waves.

Jesus' gentle rebuke is instructive for what He did not say: **O man of little faith** (not: "O man of no faith"), **why did you doubt?** (not: why did you attempt to come to me on the water?") Peter's mistake was not in boldly stepping out on faith when the Lord bid him do so, but in forgetting that his bold venture depended entirely upon the power and wisdom of Christ and his own unwavering confident dependence upon Him. Jesus sensitively points to the cause of Peter's trouble: "Your courage has already returned: your doubt is in the past; **why did you doubt?** You walked on these waves before doubt and fear of danger crowded out your courage. See, now that your confidence has returned, you are striding on their surface again. Because all things are possible to him who trusts me unreservedly, you, too, see that it was not impossible. In fact, everything depended on the steadiness of your nerve (= endurance and resolution.)

**Little faith:** cf. Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 16:8; 17:20; 28:17! These amazing references to the "little faith" of the early disciples stimulate us to understand that, though these people were unquestionably believers in Jesus at the intellectual level, their DEPTH OF CONFIDENCE in Him was far too shallow. This expression of faith is not that intellectual assent to evidence for the Messiahship and divine identity of Jesus that confesses Him as "Teacher come from God." (Cf. Nicodemus' attitude: while making this confession, he had not personally sounded the depths of his own conclusion. Jn. 3:1ff) Great faith, rather, is that unlimited confidence in His being able to do everything He leads us to believe He will, a confidence that surpasses our intellectual decision that He could do it, a certainty that permits us to do our part without distraction, regardless of the difficulties to overcome. Great faith, then, overcomes those mental reservations or psychological doubts about Jesus' (God's) care, power or willingness, once He has clarified what He desires. **Little faith**, then, still lives on the plane of the non-disciple in his concern with the worries of human beings unaided, uncared-for, unprotected by God's promises or Jesus' abilities. So doing, they bare their real confidence in their own, or in others' ability, care and wisdom. (See notes on Mt. 6:19-34; 8:10.)

Jesus did not rebuke Peter for daring more than the others, because, from the point of view expressed above, all Twelve Apostles, had they but so dared, could have confidently stepped out of that boat and walked to Jesus without a word of rebuke from Him. Hypothetically, their joining Him out there on the water could only have caused Him to exult in the depth of their reliance upon Him! In this sense, then, their remaining in the boat measures the limits of their vision, their confidence, their boldness, and, contemporaneously, exalts that of Peter. Jesus' rebuke, however, was intended to push Peter to reflect the next time. Bruce's sad comment is so appropriate (*Training*, 130):

But Peter was not to be made wise by one lesson, nor even by several. He would go on blundering and erring, in spite of rebuke and warning, till at length he fell into grievous sin, denying the Master whom he loved so well. The denial at the final crisis was just what might be looked for from one who so behaved at the minor crisis preceding it. The man who said, "Bid me come to Thee," was just the man to say, "Lord, I am ready to go with Thee both to prison and to death." He who was so courageous

on deck, and so timid amid the waves, was the one of all the disciples most likely to talk boldly when danger was not at hand, and then play the coward when the hour of trial actually arrived.

Defense of the account of Peter's walk on the water is the same as that for Jesus'. Either the whole story is to be embraced as historic fact, or it must be wrenched from the narrative as being totally false. It cannot be thought of as "a parable told for the spiritual lessons it contains, constructed entirely by some unknown editor of this Gospel quite unbeknown to the Apostle whose name it bears." Plummer (*Matthew*, 208) decides,

We have no means of knowing how the Evangelist became acquainted with the incident respecting Peter; but it was probably current among the circle of first Christians who had known Peter.

Was Matthew himself not in the very boat from which he personally witnessed the entire episode, and did he not record it in his Gospel? Plummer himself answers (*ibid.*, x):

The answer therefore to the question, Who was the author of the First Gospel? is a negative one. It was not S. Matthew. The writer was an early Jewish Christian, not sufficiently important to give his name to a Gospel, and in no way desiring to do so.

Such a position, based on the false presuppositions of modern critical schools, insinuates the doubtful authenticity of the report, hoping thereby to save the less problematic, or perhaps the more intellectually acceptable in the Gospel narrative for subjective faith, but the effort is vain. Although Plummer himself is assured that this narrative cannot be invention (*ibid.* 209), the seed is sown for doubting it. The position taken here is that of its perfectly tenable authenticity.

**14:32 And when they were gone up into the boat, the wind ceased.** John who omits Peter's walk on the water, adds here: "Then they were glad to take him into the boat" (Jn. 6:21: *éthelon oûn labein*, they desired to do so, and so did it. Cf. Jn. 8:44: *thèlete poieîn*) Their previous terror of the ghostly figure has been completely replaced by the old familiar confidence in their Friend and Lord. How or why *the wind ceased*, or even its connection with the *time when they were gone up into the boat*, is not clear. Did Jesus rebuke the wind as He did on another occasion? (See on 8:23-27.) What is easily inferable is that the storm stopped because Jesus willed it. One more miracle is certainly not impossible after so many that day!

Even the comment at Jn. 6:21 that "immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going," reports what seems to be another miracle. However, this translation, while perfectly correct within itself, is ambiguous enough to leave the negative critic with a seemingly plausible argument for the conclusion that "the miracle happened near the shore and therefore was confused for a miraculous water crossing by a group of excited folk, or else elaborated by later myth-formation." Unless we are to conclude it as intentional fraud the earlier notice that Jesus approached the boat when it was "in the middle of the sea" (Mk. 6:47) "when they had rowed about three or four miles" (Jn. 6:19), hence many stadia from land in any direction (Mt. 14:24), then we must decide that the expression in question, "the boat was immediately at the land," refers only to a rapid arrival at the destination. Since John does not state nor necessarily imply a miracle, we are not obligated to affirm it. His language only suggests that, in contrast to the night-long fatigue of hard rowing into the wind, they were able to make such easy headway after the wind ceased, that it took practically no time at all to arrive in port. It is as if John were saying, "After our fatigue and fright, we took Jesus on board, and suddenly we were there!" John's telescoping must not be used against him, as if his testimony should be thought to contradict that of other witnesses.

**14:33 And they that were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.** This confession by the Twelve, so rich in significance, is not the spontaneous invention of the moment. There had been precedents that must have surprised them, but remained in their minds and surfaced here as the men find in this experience reason to voice their conviction. (Cf. Jn. 1:49; Mt. 8:29) Did their present sea-storm experience remind them of the earlier trip on which Jesus calmed the tempest, after which the demoniacs addressed Him as "Son of God"? The similarity of situations may have evoked the details of the other incident and suggested the majestic reality couched in the demons' mysterious form of address.

The ASV translators are probably right to render the disciples' anarthrous confession (*alethôs theoû huiôs eñ*) as they did: "the Son of God." Whereas it appears not to say, "You are THE Son of God" in the unshared sense intended by Peter later (cf. Mt. 16:16), nevertheless, when taken together with their mental attitude of worship when they said it, it leads to the conviction that they consider Him far more than a supremely godly man (= a son of God). However, their faith's foundation was less than it should have been, "for they

did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." (Mk. 6:52) This is because all foregoing miracles, expressly that of the supernatural multiplication of food, should have prepared their minds to consider nothing Jesus did as utterly incredible, since they would have been emotionally and intellectually prepared to see not only miracles like His bold walking on the water or His masterful calming the sea, but even His majestic ascension into heaven. (Cf. Mk. 6:51; Jn. 6:62) "Their heart was hardened," in this case, is not a symptom of opposition to Jesus, or that obduracy we associate with determined unbelief. Rather, in light of their relative opportunities, they are surprisingly slow to perceive that He possessed all the power He needed to do anything He willed. The very conclusion to which these breath-taking miracles should lead, but unfortunately was not yet part of their understanding, is that in these mighty works He is acting as the Lord of creation, altering and using its elements for His purposes to help His people.

It is important to note that Mark's record of the disciples' slowness to comprehend is not mere theological redaction (alla Wrede and disciples!), but a strong guarantee of the narratives' historical truth. A mythical representation would not so quickly admit such damning evidence of the Apostles' slowness, were the editor's intention to glorify those men whose position in the early Christian congregations was almost next to their esteem for Jesus. Rather, their remarkable slowness to understand and grow in confidence is the more psychologically plausile as we consider how painfully parallel it is to our own. We would have been far more skeptical perhaps had we read of ready confessions, easily arrived at with no hesitations or doubts. Their slowness to understand not only encourages us in our toiling to understand too. It also gives us confidence in these records of real people with real problems even in the presence of the Son of God!

Despite the admittedly less-than-perfect understanding of the disciples, several technical details need also to be weighed into the picture before we decide the content of their confession:

1. Nouns that designate persons of which there is only one of a kind, and come very close to being a proper name, do not require the article to make them definite; the article appears when the specific Jewish or Christian God or Lord is meant, but it is sometimes missing, especially after a genitive which depends on an anarthrous noun (especially a predicate noun)

as in our case: *alethôs theoû huios ei.* (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, sec. 254, p. 133) From this standpoint, therefore, the disciples no more intended to say, "You are A son of God," than they meant, "You are a son of A God," because, for them, the absence of the article did not indicate a multiplicity of gods of which Jesus were a son.

2. The very addition of the genitive to modify a noun makes that noun definite, especially where a Semitic influence can be traced behind the Greek being used, because in Hebrew the noun governing a genitive would appear in the construction or with a suffix and hence would be without the article. The article is also omitted with the genitive noun in such cases (which was not required by Hebrew, but rather by Greek). (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, sec. 259, p. 135; However, see Robertson-Davis, 388.)
3. Colwell's rule, further, shows that definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article. (See Robertson-Davis, 283; Blass-Debrunner, Sec. 273, p. 143.)
4. If "Son of God" would not seem unambiguously definite on the basis of the foregoing, it must be recalled that even the Jewish enemies of Jesus so considered it when applied to Him. (Cf. Mt. 27:40, 43; Jn. 10:36; 19:7) Perhaps they did it on the basis of Psa. 2:7 which is anarthrous too. (cited also in Ac. 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5.)

Therefore, *huios theoû* in the minds of these Apostles is as specific and definite as "God's Son" is in ours. (Lenski, *Matthew*, 578)

The very existence of this confession in a Jewish book raises the question whether the Twelve were hereby confessing Him to be "Messiah." Whereas the unique, unshared title "Son of God" speaks of a unique begetting by the Father, one of the concepts that is the stuff of Johannine theology, when found located here in a heavily Jewish apologetic, draws attention to its Jewish expectation as an appellative of the Christ. (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 716, demonstrates that Psa. 2:7 is quoted by the rabbis as Messianic.) But the distinction between "Son of God" and "Christ," as two separate titles for the same person, must be respected, since they refer specifically to two not necessarily connected aspects of His earthly mission: His unique generation and His anointing. Nevertheless, the net result of this confession for Matthew's Jewish readers is the conviction that here is one more convergence of reasons for considering Jesus in the way

His disciples confessed Him, i.e., as "God's Son" and worthy of worship. Later this same day, Peter gave fuller expression to this same confession. (Jn. 6:68, 69)

### FACT QUESTIONS.

1. Why did Jesus go away to a desert place? List carefully all the various independent factors that led to this move.
2. What is a "desert"?
3. Where was this desert located?
4. Where was the city called Bethsaida? Which Bethsaida was this?
5. How did Jesus succeed in going to sit on a mountain to await the coming of the multitudes, if the crowd preceded them to the place? (Mk. 6:33)
6. In what likeness did Jesus see the crowds?
7. What did Jesus teach the crowd?
8. Who first mentioned the crowd's need for food?
9. What did the disciples advise Jesus to do with the hungry crowd?
10. How many people were there to feed?
11. How much food was found and brought to Jesus? Describe it.
12. Who found the food that was given to Jesus?
13. How did Jesus organize and carry out the feeding of so large a crowd?
14. How much bread was thought to be needed for such a crowd?
15. What was the reaction of the crowd to this miracle?
16. Why did Jesus send the disciples away *in a boat*? When did they leave?
17. Where did He tell them to go?
18. At what time of day did they leave?
19. What did Jesus Himself do after they left? Where did He do this?
20. What happened to the disciples on the sea? How far across the lake had the disciples travelled when this occurred?
21. How can we determine which way the wind was blowing that night?
22. What was Jesus doing when they next saw Him?
23. About what time was it when they saw Him?
24. What was their reaction to Him?
25. What did He first say to them?
26. What did Peter answer?
27. What did Jesus tell Peter to do?

28. What did Peter see that frightened him?
29. What uncomplimentary title did Jesus call Peter?
30. What did those in the boat call Jesus?
31. What amazed the disciples after Jesus got in the boat with them?
32. Why was this lake called "the Sea of Tiberias?"
33. What time of year did this event take place and what does this fact contribute to our understanding of specific details in the narrative?
34. Harmonize the variant accounts that describe the arrival of the crowds to the place to which Jesus led them for teaching, and, ultimately, the feeding of the people.
35. Give the evidences, drawn from the eye-witness testimony itself, that answer the purely naturalistic attacks which reduce the narratives of this miracle to common fiction, or legend, or worse.
36. List the facts or declarations made in this section that prove the supernatural identity of Jesus.

## SHARING THE BREAD OF LIFE

### A Non-expository Sermon

**INTRODUCTION:** Since Jesus Himself drew upon this event to present His message on the Heavenly Bread, in which He presented Himself as the Bread of Life to a dying world, we cannot be too far from the proper application of His teaching, if we see beyond the original, historical implications of the feeding of the multitude to grasp our part in His work of bringing His Life to a perishing world. The following message is NOT an explanation of the text, but an attempt at recognizing in our own situation our need to react as did He, but with the power He makes available to us.

### I. JESUS' PROBLEM—OUR PROBLEM

**14:13b The multitudes . . . followed him:** what a picture of the heterogeneous mobs that compose our society! All of the sanctity, selfishness, sordidness and sadness that He faced comprises our society too.

**14:14 He had compassion on them, and healed their sick.** Until we too can sympathize with the world's pain and weakness among people whose misfortune to be sick or old or weak is held in contempt

by the young, the powerful, the rich, we will not, with Jesus, believe in the usefulness of the rejected refuse of society nor attempt to reclaim for God those individuals sacrificed to the claims and interests of an indifferent society, insensitive to anything but its own pleasures and programs. We will not readily enter into Jesus' ministry until the pathos of life is vivid to us, until we appreciate the multitude of broken, disordered, disappointed and disappointingly wretched lives, until we see how much of childhood gladness crumbles, time-worn with grief, until we understand how much sin ends in misery and death. Nor will we be of much use unless we KNOW and USE the power at our disposal in deeds of real helpfulness and Gospel proclamation that brings joy, light, order, confidence and peace with God and men.

**14:15 And when even was come, the disciples came to him, saying, The place is desert, and the time is already past; send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves food.** How often we are staggered by the magnitude of our task, the inadequacy of our means and the shortness of the time to act! How often, when looking into such an ocean of faces, we conclude that our wisdom and knowledge is totally inadequate to work all the renovation needed to save them! In our despair we too are tempted to send them away to others seemingly more qualified or reputedly better able to solve their problems.

## II. JESUS PLAN—OUR PLAN

**14:16 But Jesus said unto them, They have no need to go away; give ye them to eat.** The Lord has ordered us to care for the spiritual nourishment of the world, and too often we forget the power at our disposal: the transforming power of divine truth! All the insight, sympathy, delicacy and preaching power we can muster can never be enough to effect the revolution needed. The most needed preparation of Jesus' servants for their world-wide ministry is their discovery that their own scanty resources are totally inadequate. Only thus can we be convinced to distribute from His inexhaustible supply.

**14:17 And they say to him, We have here but five loaves and two fish.** We too complain how little we possess for our task. Our Bible, for example, is so small in size, that it would seem to many as meager a resource as five barley buns and two sardines to feed thousands. Yet how many thousands upon thousands have been nourished thereby, and how many more it will feed until Jesus comes again, if only

shared with Jesus' blessing!

14:18 **And he said, Bring them hither to me,** With what is brought to Jesus, He works His miracle. In fact, He sets before each of us the tremendous responsibility of communicating His life and His message to men. However, He does not demand from us power, results and deeds that we cannot produce. He invites us, "Come to me as you are, however ill-equipped; bring to me what you have, however little, and I will use it greatly in my service." Little is always much in the hands of Christ. (Barclay, *Matthew*, II, 113) Jesus could save the world by quite other means than by its evangelization, by simply commissioning angelic messengers to speak peace to every last man on earth, or even more astonishingly, He could forcibly change each man's mind for him. But when we examine what God's word in His hands has already done, we cannot but appreciate His wisdom in choosing to do it this way.

### III. JESUS' PRAYERS—OUR PRAYERS

14:19 . . . **He took the five loaves, and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he blessed.** The Son of God glorified the Father as the Giver of the food, and, by reflex consequence of the miracle that followed, the Power behind it. Contrast Moses and Aaron's miracle of bringing water from the rock, who without prayer nor mention of God's Name, struck the rock. (Num. 20:1-12) Remember God's rebuke: "Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel . . ." Consider the disciples' impotence because of their little faith and prayerlessness. (Mt. 17:19, 20; Mk. 9:29) We, too, attempt great things for God, and yet we have not always the good sense nor the genuine confidence in Him to consider even the simplest blessings, as a means of achieving precisely the goal we seek. Nor do we always remember that all our greatest attempts are vain unless we actually glorify God in the minds of the people we attempt to bless by what we do.

### IV. JESUS' PROVISION—OUR PROVISION

**He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitudes.** Jesus could Himself go into all the world with His saving Gospel, but He has chosen to use men, His disciples, as the channel to bless others. But these disciples must give to others only what they have first received from Him.

14:20 **And they all ate and were filled.** What a mixture of theologies, ideologies and ignorance constituted the mind of that group Jesus so generously helped! No limitations were placed on previous affiliation, no embarrassing questions, no demands were made that those needy people prove themselves worthy of His blessing. They only needed to recognize their desperate need and accept the provision He supplied them. His Word is inexhaustible to bless any one who willingly submits himself to devour its contents to fill the need of his soul.

14:21 **They that did eat were about five thousand men, besides women and children.** Even in the same way that more food was available at the finish than at the beginning of the meal, so also the more people the Gospel is made to feed, the more people can actually be fed, since the more people become disciples to feed thousands of others in an almost infinite multiplication of the power of the Gospel outreach!

#### CONCLUSION:

1. Rather than retreat behind lines of safety to conserve jealously what little reserves of Gospel power we suppose ourselves to possess,
2. Rather than use violent measures to drive away the unthinking, ignorant masses whose presence and failure to respond rightly to God's message not only embarrasses and frustrates us, but often outright hinders the work we are trying to do,
3. Let us plunge actively into the business of feeding the world with the Gospel means at our disposal.
  - a. We may not possess the same miracle-working potential Jesus shared with His Apostles and the early Christians.
  - b. But we can use every legitimate means at our disposal to make the Bread of Life available to the world. (Printing press, radio, television, conferences, conventions, evangelistic campaigns, personal witness, letters, etc.)
4. Are we praying in faith that God will work through us?
5. Are we exploring the use of every means that can be turned to useful service for God's glory?
6. Are we conscientiously and generously sharing with people what Jesus so unselfishly distributed to us?
  - a. Physical, material food, clothing and shelter, jobs and proper self-respect? God is concerned about men's bodies too!

- b. The problem-solving, soul-transforming victorious Gospel that alone can make men over again.

## THE EMBATTLED CHURCH

### A Non-expository Sermon

As with the preceding message, the following is NOT an explanation of the text, but a recognition of two parallel situations, one in the life of the Apostles, the other in our own ministry to Jesus. During that sea tempest, these disciples in that frail fisherman's boat constituted the heart of everything Jesus had accomplished on earth at the moment: His Kingdom and its future expansion, its victory or its failure were bound up in that small group straining at the oars, seemingly making no headway toward their ordered goal. Is not this a picture of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world today? Let us see how, out of their problems, come suggestions that help us to solve ours:

#### I. THE PROBLEM: DIFFICULTY IN OBEDIENCE

14:22 And straightway he constrained the disciples to enter into the boat, and to go before him unto the other side, till he should send the multitudes away. Often we, too, find ourselves where we do, because duty and love to Christ puts us there, even though everything is not clear to us. We question: "Why should we HAVE to live and work here without Jesus' personal presence?" Yet He has ordered us to set sail on our voyage to the port He indicated. Although we, too, long to be with Him immediately and forever, we embark and set sail, not because we understand His plans perfectly, but because HE is our Lord and He has given us this duty to perform.

14:23 And after he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into the mountain apart to pray: and when even was come, he was there alone. His very absence is part of our problem: Jesus seems to us quite far away, so far, in fact, that not only do we have only the slightest notion where He may be, but also it may seem that His absence itself is evidence of impassive indifference to our needs, our desires, our fears, our dangers and our prayers. But He is our Mediator, interceding on our behalf before the Father. (1 Ti. 2:5; 1 Jn. 2:1, 2; Jn. 14:16) He is busy preparing us a place in our Father's house. (Jn. 14:1-4)

**14:24 But the boat was now in the midst of the sea, distressed by the waves; for the wind was contrary.** Even though we have Christ's own orders under which we sail, we are not therefore exempt from danger and trouble. We too must battle the elements that constitute our life situation. Rather, we should expect such trials, because of the moral opposition that our very existence and preaching must arouse. (Jn. 15:18—16:4) Also, our physical and personal moral weakness will plague us until the final victory, even as those storm-tossed sailors fought their little faith and great fatigue that night.

## II. THE SOLUTION: THE COMING OF THE LORD

In this solution to our problems, we see three elements that counsel patience and stedfast hope, despite the continuation of our trials:

### A. THE CERTAINTY OF HIS CARE

**14:25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came unto them, walking upon the sea.** For good and sufficient reasons best known to Jesus, He does not always come to our aid when we most desire it, but rather in His own good time. It may be not only that He desires that we learn patience by the things we suffer. He may also see the need for time for certain situations to mature before He can answer our prayers as we prayed them. **BUT HE DOES SEE OUR NEED:** (Cf. Mk. 6:48 He **DOES** care and He **WILL** help! He is the Lord of difficulties, coming to us, walking over the very waves and against the same wind that so distressed us!

**14:26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a ghost; and they cried out for fear.** Too often we too form a stereotyped conception of the Lord and picture His help to us only in terms of this idea. Should He approach us in some way other than unmixed blessing, we do not recognize Him and become afraid. Should He come multiplying blessings, He is easily recognized and welcome, but somehow we suppose it cannot be the Lord if He arrives on the very waves of our misfortune. And yet it is He!

How often do others reduce Christ Jesus to a phantom, a delusion produced by a lively imagination and projected upon the minds of a gullible, superstitious mob! No longer the Son of God for them, His historical figure is little more than an unprovable, deliberate forgery, barely visible through the shimmering mists of legends, editorial

rewriting and pious misunderstandings. And yet it is He!

Far too often we do not recognize our truest Friend! We mistake Jesus for a jailed prisoner, a hungry, homeless, unhealthy beggar, unkempt and ill-clad, rather than welcome such as we would serve the Master Himself. (Mt. 25:31-46) Instead, we turn from them in disgust and horror, afraid to take them aboard our already battered craft. And yet it is He!

**14:27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid.** Suddenly the mask of the specter is ripped away, and He who seemed a terror greater than all the dangers of our existence, is no other than the Lord Himself! The earth and sea all around us continue to rage, but at the decisive moment all of this will be overcome by the cheerful, all-powerful word of the Lord of the Church. Everything will turn out quite differently from what we had feared, and certainly quite differently from all unbelievers supposed!

### B. THE CONFIDENCE TO DARE

**14:28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee upon the waters.** When the entire Christian experience is considered from a human standpoint, when the work of the Kingdom of God is evaluated, human judgment must pronounce the whole thing as impossible as walking on the sea. In fact, we labor for results that go beyond human nature and we utilize means that function beyond human reason. Heroic souls, however, have always risen spontaneously to the challenge to enter into Christ's walk and work and dare to do the impossible, just to be with Jesus in His. Peter did not sin by daring great, impossible things for the Lord, nor do we!

**14:29 And he said, Come. And Peter went down from the boat, and walked upon the waters to come to Jesus.** A caution is in order here against a danger in our boldness. Note that before Peter hazarded stepping out onto the water in faith, he awaited the Lord's specific permission, and yet some bold Christians, without waiting for Jesus' orders, presumptuously and rashly dash into situations, expecting the Lord to support them in their folly. This service is not a willingness, but a wilfulness, because He did not command it. Naturally, we must not expect the Lord to speak from heaven to each of us as He did to Peter on the sea. Rather, we must judge each particular case by the general directives indicated in His Word, using our

common sense to evaluate what He, in His wisdom, provides. Our decisions, contrary to the certainty of Jesus' call to Peter, will be far less certain, and about which we must be far more humble and cautious.

14:30 **But when he saw the wind, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, Lord, save me.** We too, must severely count the cost of our decision to undertake the impossible with Jesus, before bouncing out of our relative security into the arena of His activity. We may not be able to foresee certain dangers and threats before they arrive, but the relative certainty that we **MUST** face them should forearm us to concentrate our attention and fix our dependence upon Jesus as we leap out to join Him. In fact, it was when Peter shifted his confidence from Jesus to his own frail powers that he went down. But risk we must, if we would attempt great projects for the Lord. But we must be assured that we are doing His bidding and not our own. Nevertheless, all our boldness will be to no avail, if after having dared the impossible in the name of Jesus in obedience to His call, our underlying confidence shifts from Him to human means and strength.

14:31 **And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and took hold of him, and saith unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?** The confidence in Jesus to dare great things for God is limited only by our concentration upon Him as the source of our power. All our activities for Him in this present age must be done out of confidence in His wisdom and might. Otherwise, nothing can be dared, or what is dared fails, because the bold ones, no less believers in Jesus than before, like Peter, place their confidence in anything else but Him. But thank God for the mercifulness of a Lord that restores our sagging strength and substitutes our misplaced confidence, and causes us to stand once again as we call upon Him!

### C. PEACE AND JOY IN HIS PRESENCE:

14:32 **And when they were gone up into the boat, the wind ceased.** In answers to prayers, even now He comes to calm temporary storms. One day His majestic presence and lordly power will eliminate **ALL** that curses, He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for these former things have passed away!

14:33 **And they that were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.** In the same way that this

deliverance from a raging sea convinced the Twelve even more of Jesus' divine identity than the miraculous multiplication of food for the 5000 in relative calm, sometimes rescue from sure death speaks more convincingly of God's power, divinity and tender care to the menaced person than even His more spectacular works seem to those who think themselves in no immediate danger.

Though now we walk by faith, living on hope, believing that Jesus will come to our rescue, one day He will! Worlds afire, the elements aflame, the whole thing ready to blow . . . , and Jesus will appear to take His own to eternal safety. That will be a glorious moment when we can rejoice and throw ourselves at His feet in willing worship, confessing: "Lord, you really are God's Son!"

#### CONCLUSION:

Let us even now row against the wind and waves of our lives until we drop, not giving in to any of the temptations to give up and coast with the current!

Let us continue, whether He rescues us personally and miraculously in this life or not!

Let us continue to long for, and look for, His glorious coming when His omnipotent word will guarantee our eternal security, and His personal presence will assure our inexpressable joy and imperturbable peace with Him forever!

### Section 35

#### JESUS HEALS SOME SICK AT GENNESARET

(Parallel: Mark 6:53-56)

TEXT: 14:34-36

34 And when they had crossed over, they came to the land, unto Gennesaret. 35 And when the men of that place knew him, they sent into all that region round about, and brought unto him all that were sick; 36 and they besought him that they might only touch the border of his garment: and as many as touched were made whole.

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**

- a. Jesus' original purpose for the disciples was that they sail for Bethsaida near Capernaum. How is it that they disembark so far south of that city?
- b. If Jesus had already performed so many miracles of healing in the general area of Gennesaret, how do you account for this report of so many people needing to be healed?
- c. What evidence of generosity do you discover in the inhabitants of Gennesaret shown in what they did?
- d. Why do you suppose they chose the particular method by which they would be healed, i.e., why try touch only the border of His robe?
- e. Matthew reports that "as many as touched" were healed. Does he mean to imply that there were others who did not come to Jesus? Did Jesus ever heal each and every diseased person in any single area of Palestine? If not, why not? If so, how do you know this?
- f. Do you think the Apostles helped Jesus with the healing done at this time? Or did they let Jesus do all the work of healing? If they did help Jesus, what is your proof that they did? If they did not, why do you think they did not? What was their relationship to Jesus at this moment, in contrast to their work during their own first evangelistic tour in Galilee?
- g. What do these miracles prove about Jesus?

**PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY**

When Jesus and His Apostles had crossed over the Sea of Galilee, they beached at the plain of Gennesaret, mooring the boat at the shore. When they disembarked, at once the people recognized Jesus. The men of that area ran through the entire neighborhood to bring to Him all the sick people on their pallets to any spot where they heard He was. Wherever He went, whether in villages, cities or in the countryside, they laid their sick in the market places, begging Him that they might only touch the fringe of His garment. And as many as touched it were healed.

## SUMMARY

Although it had been Jesus' order to sail for Bethsaida near Capernaum after the feeding of the five thousand, the strong north-westerly winds had blown the Apostles further south, so that shortly after Jesus boarded the boat, they beached at Gennesaret. They were recognized at once by the local people who began collecting their sick along the road Jesus must travel. He healed them all, as He made His way to Capernaum.

## INTRODUCTION

### WHY INCLUDE THIS SECTION AND OMIT THE CLIMAX AND COLLAPSE?

As a matter of fact Matthew and Mark pass over in silence the stunning rejection of Jesus' spiritual mission by the crowds that abandoned Him after the Capernaum discourse on the Bread of Life. (Jn. 6:25-66) It would hardly be thought likely that BOTH Matthew and Mark ("the interpreter of Peter") should have neglected to describe an event that must have tested their personal loyalty to the limit. Unfriendly commentators see this section as "just one of Matthew's almost colourless little connecting passages" with no definite connection with his general presentation of the Messiah:

After a few, brief summary verses (34-36), composed on the model of those which we found in 4:23-25 and in 9:35, we find the discussion with the Pharisees and the specialists in the law, placed here because it belongs to the section on the bread.

This comment by Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 220), while reducing our text to a brief summation serving only a literary function, ignores the true, historico-theological editing by Matthew. His purpose is not to fill space nor simply to indicate chronological connections at this point. The very fact that two major eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry (Matthew and Peter, if we may presume to include his message as standing back of Mark's Gospel) produce a version different than a third major eyewitness (John), a version which does not contradict the other two in any detail, should lead the reader to expect a difference in evaluations on the part of the witnesses, which, in fact, we have here.

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 6-36) takes the view that Matthew and Mark approach the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry from quite another angle than that of John. Whereas John deals with the critical message that widened the crevice between Jesus and the *multitudes*, Matthew and Mark deal with the critical position taken by Jesus that deepened the abyss between Himself and the *champions of Jewish orthodoxy*, the Pharisees. Edersheim endeavors, then, to harmonize the two presentations quite tightly, concluding that the reproof of the religious leaders (Mt. 15; Mk. 7) preceded the Discourse on the Bread of Life (Jn. 6). However, even a looser harmonization than he produces would still permit us to consider Mt. 15 and Mk. 7 as those Evangelists' treatment of Jesus' deliberate conclusion of His popular ministry in Galilee. That is, even if we place the attack of the Pharisees as occurring after the Passover and return of the pilgrims to Galilee, or about two weeks after the feeding of the 5000 and the scandalous Bread of Life discourse, it could still be considered as the *coup de grace* of Jesus' popularity.

On this basis, then, we may sense that Matthew and Mark intend only to omit the clash of popular views with those of Jesus, in order to illustrate the collision between Jewish official doctrine and the spiritual nature of Jesus' doctrinal position. In effect, then, these two Evangelists do actually include the climax and collapse of Jesus' popular ministry. If so, then what role does this present section play in their outline?

1. This section, when coupled with the following clash with the Pharisees (Mt. 15:1-20; Mk. 7:1-23) gives the impression that, while Jesus intended to sift the superficial from the serious followers (see Notes at 14:13b), He did not ever intend to "turn off" the mercy of God from anyone. Rather, He kept right on showing men that God cared about them in practical ways. Thus Matthew and Mark, in this vivid scene at Gennesaret, clarify Jesus' position before they record His verbal broad-sides levelled at the Pharisees' representation of traditional orthodoxy.
2. This impression is heightened if we consider the pathos of the scene before us. Here Jesus appears only as a Healer of the sick. There is not even a suggestion that these healings were possibly accompanied by teaching. Other considerations would easily explain this absence of instruction, as for example, Jesus' haste to return to Capernaum to strike the final blow to His popular following before Herod Antipas could effectively move to hinder Him,

or perhaps He wanted to deliver the Bread of Life sermon before the people left for the Passover at Jerusalem, or in order to begin the private Training of the Twelve so much sooner, or in order to avoid the continuation, by a popular ministry in Gennesaret, of the very thing He must now bring to a close. Nevertheless, the sensitive reader can probably sense the grim fact that something is amiss, even in reasonably tranquil Gennesaret, because Jesus does not pause to teach this generous, solicitous folk. Why does He keep moving, pausing only long enough to cure this or that sick one and move steadily on to Capernaum? (Cf. Jn. 6:24, 25, 29).

3. Is it possible that Matthew is pushing forward a theme he introduced earlier in his gospel? (Cf. Mt. 8:17; 12:18-21) Jesus is the healing Servant of Jehovah who moves steadily toward victory while steadfastly avoiding riots and demagoguery, mercifully helping the weak and making truth and righteousness to triumph. He could easily have avoided the Gennesarenes by ordering an immediate sailing to Capernaum without going overland and risking the loss of valuable time. Psychologically, then, Matthew's presentation is essential to the overall picture of the Messiah, because he inks in this detail of Christ's merciful kindness, before he sketches His terrible judgment of Phariseeism and rabbinical tradition.
4. The apologetic value of this miniature lies in its presentation of one more grand proof of Jesus' right to reveal God's message to the Jewish people, hence all the more reason why they should listen to Him, even if He turns immediately thereafter to cut official orthodoxy to pieces.
5. Then, conversely, the reader who reflects upon this scene and the one following, could appreciate the absolute sterility of Pharisean ideals when thrown into contrast with the concrete, down-to-earth practical human kindness exemplified by Jesus who continued showing the love of God to people who desired Him all too often for what they could get out of Him. The miserable helplessness of the Pharisees makes a striking antithesis to the vibrantly alive, openly caring and morally alert personal godliness of Jesus of Nazareth! No sooner did the Lord appear than people began to come to Him as a magnetic source of Life and Power; no sooner did the Pharisees begin to teach than the Law became an intolerable burden. Joy in righteousness began to drain out of even the simplest acts of life. (See Notes on 15:1-20.) The reader cannot miss the implication: righteousness is not something abstract and

purely philosophical, but a message believed and acted upon that brings with it happiness, harmony, and healing to the soul, if not also to the body. And it is to be found in Jesus, not embalmed in tradition nor debated among the rabbis.

## NOTES

14:34 **And when they had crossed over** is Matthew's way of concluding the incident where Jesus walked on the water, not an independent introduction to an unrelated section. John's conclusion to the same event reads:

Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going, (Jn. 6:21; cf. Note at Mt. 14:32)

This arrangement is better than Lenski's arguments for placing this event after the Bread of Life Sermon, because the most natural connections indicated by Matthew and Mark suggest the natural conclusion of the overnight boat trip from the east side of the lake. *Diaperāo* means "to cross over."

Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 186; Rocci, 459, while admitting an extended sense: "to go through" in a figurative sense, however gives "to pass across, to traverse, to cross, to ferry from one bank to the other" as the literal meaning.

After the crossing they moored to the shore at Gennesaret. (Mk. 6:53) Lenski's view demands too much not in the text: (1) a supposed landing at Capernaum after the walking on the water, although John's remark (6:21) that they arrived "at the land to which they were going" need not mean "Capernaum," as opposed to "Gennesaret," but "Galilee," as opposed to "Gaulonitis"; (2) the Bread of Life Discourse after which most of Jesus' followers left Him; (3) an unrecorded sailing to Gennesaret, because Lenski used the aorist participles (*diaperāsantes*: "crossed over") to cover the trip to Capernaum, leaving the sailing to Gennesaret unrecorded in Scripture. (4) Then, because the collapse at Capernaum is thought to have occurred first, the enthusiastic reception at Gennesaret, only a few miles south, is strangely inexplicable except on the supposition that Jesus had never been there and the Gennesarenes completely out of touch with events at Capernaum: The facts are more easily

harmonized as follows:

1. Jesus walked on the water to the boat in mid-lake; called Peter to Him; walked with him back to the boat. The wind dropped (He calmed it?) and in no time at all the boat arrived on the west side of the lake. (Mt. 14:24-33; Mk. 6:47-52; Jn. 6:19-21)
2. The crossing concluded (*diaperàsantes*), Jesus and the Twelve find themselves immediately at the shore on the Gennesar Plain and moored the boat there. (Mk. 6:53)
3. Immediately recognized upon disembarking, Jesus walked through the Gennesaret region, healing as He went. (Mt. 14:35f; Mk. 6:54-56)
4. He gradually made His way to Capernaum where He concluded His teaching in the synagogue. (Jn. 6:59)
5. Later—how much later no text informs us,—Jesus was attacked by the Pharisees from Jerusalem. (Mt. 15:1-20; Mk. 7:1-23) Eder-sheim makes an interesting case for reversing these latter two items. (*Life*, II, 6-36)

On this view the enthusiasm of the Gennesarenes and the tolerant attitude of Jesus are perfectly explicable, because He had not yet so forcefully, nor so publicly, declared that crucial position that eventually ruined His public image in the minds of His superficial disciples.

**They came to the land, unto Gennesaret.** The boat came into port (*prosormìsthesan*) presumably early in the morning after the night voyage across. The Plain of Gennesaret is located on the west side of the Galilean lake about two and a half miles south of the Capernaum-Bethsaida area, the original destination Jesus ordered the Apostles to reach when they sailed the day before. This coming to land so far south of their intended goal suggests that the wind they fought during the night blew out of the north-north-west. On the other hand, it might be rightly objected that after Jesus calmed the storm, they could have rowed (or sailed) to any destination He then chose. If so, it is interesting that He should have chosen Gennesaret: was it simply the closer shore? After breakfast did He desire to make good use of His time while deliberately staying away from Capernaum during at least the morning hours, in order to give people adequate time to collect back into Capernaum for the final show-down in the synagogue there?

*Gennesaret* is glowingly described by Josephus (*Wars*, III, 10, 8) in a paragraph that would do honors to the local tourism office of

the Gennesaret Chamber of Commerce. The plain itself is about 3.7 miles long and 2.5 miles wide, but its fertility and fruitfulness more than compensate for its diminutive area. On its southeast corner was located the village of Magdala, the home of Mary the Magdalene. Was the woman whom Jesus healed of the hemorrhage also from this area? (See on 9:20-22; and note on 14:36.)

14:35 **And when the men of that place knew him**, i.e., immediately recognized Him as soon as they disembarked (Mk. 6:54), they sprang into action. Their attention would have been drawn originally perhaps by the fishing boat full, not of fish, but of men. Upon closer investigation, they recognize Him who could bring instant aid to all their sick. The decision and instantaneousness of their reaction is perfectly understandable on the supposition that:

1. they had known Him from contacts with Him up at Capernaum, if He had never come to Gennesaret before;
2. they had their mind firmly decided upon this course of action in the event He should ever pass this way;
3. His arrival only triggered their reaction.

**They sent into all that region round about and brought unto him all that were sick.** Mark (6:55f) emphasizes the extensiveness of their preparations:

They ran about the whole neighborhood and began to bring sick people on their pallets to any place where they heard he was. And wherever he came—in villages, cities or country—they laid the sick in the market places, and besought him. . . .

Because the precise sequence of events from this point to the end of the Sermon on the Bread of Life and the Attack of the Jerusalem Pharisees is difficult to establish, we may assume that the urgency of these Gennesarenes is not based upon any declared intention of Jesus to be in Capernaum for the day, unless, in some unrecorded statement of His, He had warned them to hurry because of His scheduled stop in Capernaum. If Mark's language, that speaks of a considerable healing ministry, seems too elaborate for one day's activity, as if Jesus needed to spend more than one day in the Gennesaret area to accomplish all that is here affirmed, it must be remembered that John did not specify that the people found Jesus on the day following the miracle of the loaves. We merely interpret it so. (Jn. 6:22, 25) John may not have intended the tight chronological connection we think we see. However, Mark's language is

not objectively overstating the case, because, by planning His itinerary carefully, Jesus could well have worked His way through lots of people all the way from Magdala, at the south end of the Gennesaret Plain, clear to Capernaum, two and a half miles north of it, arriving at the synagogue in time for His decisive sermon on the Bread of Life,—all on the same day.

What a contrast distinguishes the Gennesarenes from the Gerasenes, their neighbors on the opposite side of the Galilean Lake! Whereas the latter, upon His arrival there, fearfully rushed Jesus away (see on Mt. 8:28-34), the inhabitants of Gennesaret joyfully welcomed Him. The Gerasenes felt no need of the Lord; the men of Gennesaret not only recognized their own deep need, but also that of their sick folks at home. Mark's language suggests that the Lord made a loop through the villages and towns in the Gennesaret area, making His way to Capernaum. Because His route was more or less clear to the local people, they could more easily run ahead of Him and anticipate His approach to a given point and assemble their sick there.

**14:36 And they besought him that they might only touch the border of his garment.** What a contrast distinguishes the men of Gennesaret and the Nazarenes, their inland compatriots to the west! Whereas the latter were so totally indifferent to Jesus as not even to trust Him enough to ask Him to bring merciful healing to their people (see on 13:54-58), Gennesaret's people gratefully rushed as many infirm people as possible to every possible point they imagined He would pass!

What a contrast between these people of Gennesaret and the woman healed at Capernaum when *she touched the border of His garment*: these men openly requested Jesus' permission but she did not and had to be called from hiding to open discipleship and blessing. (See notes on 9:20-22.) The amazing request that they be permitted to touch His garment is the more curious, because nowhere else is it recorded that so many people desired that they be allowed to use this method to contact His power. Is it possible that news of the healing of the woman in Capernaum a short distance north of here encouraged them to request that they too be permitted to do so likewise? (Cf. by contrast Mk. 3:10; Mt. 8:8) Their magnificent respect for the Lord manifests itself, as Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 208) said it so succinctly: They approach Him

with great humility; they came to him as those that were sensible

of their distance, humbly beseeching him to help them; and their desiring to touch the hem of his garment, intimates that they thought themselves unworthy that he should take any particular notice of them, that he should so much as speak to their case, much less touch them for their cure; but they will look upon it as a great favour, if he will give them leave to *touch but the hem of his garment.* . . . With great assurance of the all-sufficiency of his power, not doubting but that they should be healed, even by touching the hem of his garment; that they receive abundant communications from him by the smallest token or symbol of communion with him. They did not expect the formality of striking his hand over the place or persons diseased, as Naaman did (2 Kings 5:11); but they were sure that there was in him such an overflowing fulness of healing virtue, that they could not fail of a cure, who were but admitted near him.

In light of these suggestions, it is probably too low a view of their confidence in Jesus to affirm that their choice of the garment-hem by which to contact His power indicates an "imperfect faith."

**As many as touched were made whole.** It is important to remember here that the modern expression: "We are but touching the hem of the garment" has nothing essential in common with this story, because that expression means to imply that "we are only beginning to tap the potentiality of something." There is no connection between that notion and this story, because the people of Gennesaret experienced the full total cleansing, healing power of God by that touch, because theirs was a touch of humble, expectant, trusting faith! There is no indication whatever in the text that they would have been more greatly blessed, or would have tapped greater spiritual resources, if they had touched Jesus somewhere else, or approached Him in some other fashion. From this standpoint, Jesus granted their request with the same generosity with which He responded to Peter's spontaneous proposal to come to Him on the water. His permission must not be construed as the superior condescension to ignorance and superstition, as if they thought His tassels to possess some magical power. It is, rather, His friendly bending to an enlightened request made in a climate of confidence. Who would not want to work with people like that? But these very open-hearted people will stand out in sharp contrast with the beady-eyed, narrow-minded, small-souled Pharisees and their selfish, contracted religion in the next section.

**FACT QUESTIONS**

1. What major events precede this incident?
2. What major sermon follows this incident?
3. How had Jesus and His disciples come to Gennesaret?
4. Locate the plain of Gennesaret and describe it.
5. Analyze the attitude of the inhabitants of this area toward Jesus.
6. How many people did Jesus heal in this area?
7. What method of healing did the people themselves prefer that He use?
8. Trace the general travel plan of Jesus from the time He left the Capernaum area by boat until He returned there. (Jn. 6:59)

**EXPOSITORY SERMON:****"JESUS CAME TO OUR TOWN"****I. THE DEPTH OF OUR NEED (v. 35)**

- A. Gennesaret, however fertile, however fruitful, could not assuage the grief and heal the sick with its choicest food within their reach! Environment, however fine, is not everything!
- B. So, upon His disembarking in our country we recognized Him.
  1. We recognized that our day of opportunity had come.
  2. Jesus had evangelized elsewhere in Galilee, but this was His first real visit, and perhaps His last, in Gennesaret, for all we knew, so we must seize the moment.
  3. Application: Jesus was recognized because He was known; He was trusted and appealed to, because He was known. Men will be able to appeal to Him only to the extent that they know Him. If His disciples neglect to make Him known, how can men call upon Him? (Ro. 10:14-17)
- C. Our men spread the good word that the Great Healer had come to our land.
  1. We knew that Jesus' power was great enough to be shared with all.
  2. We chose not to monopolize Jesus on the beach, but share Him in the neighborhood.
  3. Unselfishly and quickly, our sick were assembled along His route in order not to have to ask Him to turn aside for anyone.

4. Application: If you have tested the goodness and power of Christ, you too will want to take the trouble to share that goodness with everyone around you, bringing them to Him to be saved. We can show no better love to our own people than by opening up to them all the benefits of the knowledge and power of Christ!

## II. THE TRUSTING HUMILITY OF OUR APPROACH (v. 36a)

- A. We brought nothing to Jesus when we let Him know of our need:
  1. No external inducements were offered Him, except the reality and extent of our need, to stir His compassion.
  2. No certificates of faithful attendance at synagogue were offered as proof of our worthiness—those who approach this holy Lord must do so out of real humility!
  3. We made no appeals to His pride; ours was an appeal to His mercy and an appeal that was fully confident of and totally dependent upon His power.
  4. We offered Him no money: what earthly treasure could we pay to equal the value received when He turned the miraculous power of God to bless and heal us?
- B. All we sought was the privilege to bring our sick into contact with His power.
- C. Application: This is the only approach acceptable to Jesus Christ: we have no righteousness worth mentioning and must depend entirely upon His grace!

## III. THE SIMPLICITY OF HIS METHOD: a mere touch of the tassel on His robe! (v. 36)

- A. We knew that there was no particular efficacy in the robe itself, but in the Lord whose robe it was.
- B. What an amazing condescension to the desires of this humble people!
- C. This request is the more astonishing because of its universality: was the woman who had been healed earlier of the twelve-year hemorrhage from this area? (See on 9:20-22.) At any rate, had news of her healing encouraged these people to request that they too be permitted, in faith, to touch His tassel?
- D. Application: While we should beware of mindless imitation of the formal patterns of someone else's successful approaches to Christ, yet their experiences can be valuable encouragement to

us too. We may well make use of those methods of devotion which others before us have found so rewarding, i.e., Bible reading, regular prayer, fasting, giving, etc. Even so, we must choose among those means He has promised to honor, if we would come to Him and be blessed. Nevertheless, we must never despise even the humblest approach: some must look upon a brazen serpent to live, others must paint blood on doorposts, others must be immersed in water, others touched His garment, but all who did were blessed. And those who did not?

#### IV. THE COMPLETENESS OF HIS RESULTS (v. 36b)

- A. The sick were universally healed:
  - 1. There were none who were given only temporary relief.
  - 2. There were none whose complaint was rejected as too difficult for Jesus to correct.
  - 3. There were none who went away hopeless, saying He could not help them.
- B. All were thoroughly cured: Jesus stopped nothing short of banishing all existing sickness out of our land in the case of everyone brought to Him!
- C. Application: He who can miraculously heal the body proves by that act that He can save our souls too. (Cf. Mt. 9:6; 12:28; 11:2-5) If a word or a touch can heal our bodies, our trust in His powerful word can bring healing to our sin-sick spirit, if we but earnestly turn to Him to request and so receive His gracious blessing! (Phil. 1:6) If He can save the chief of sinners, He can save the tribe! (1 Ti. 1:15, 16) "He is able to save for all time those who come to God through Him!" (Heb. 7:25; 2 Co. 5:21)

#### CONCLUSION:

In that day of judgment, will the men of Gennesaret stand up and condemn our generation, for they graciously and gladly brought their sick to the great Physician, whereas we could bring our friends and neighbors to the Prince of Life, so that they may have eternal salvation, but we have not done it? Are we consistently anxious for the whole neighborhood to have the joy of preparation for Jesus' coming to our world?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

- Section 36. Jesus Debates With Jerusalem Pharisees about the Elders' Traditions (15:1-20)
- Section 37. Jesus Liberates Syrophoenician Woman's Daughter (15:21-28)
- Section 38. Jesus Feeds 4000 and Heals Many of Decapolis (15:29-39)

### STUDY OUTLINE

- I. JESUS DEBATES WITH JERUSALEM PHARISEES ABOUT THE ELDERS' TRADITIONS (15:1-20; Mk. 7:1-23)
- A. The attack led by the Pharisees (Mt. 15:1f; Mk. 7:1-5): "You break our rules!"
  - B. Jesus counterattacks (Mt. 15:3-20; Mk. 7:6-23)
    - 1. Before the Pharisees themselves (15:3-9; Mk. 7:6-13): "You break God's Law to keep your rules!"
    - 2. Before the multitudes (15:10f; Mk. 7:14-17): "Real defilement is not external, but spiritual!"
    - 3. Before the disciples privately (Mt. 15:12-20; Mk. 7:17-23):
      - a. "Human tradition does not possess God's authority, so will finally be eradicated."
      - b. "Nothing eaten affects the soul; defilement proceeds from an unregenerate heart."
      - c. "Sin defiles man like no ceremonies, foods or other externals ever could."
- II. JESUS LIBERATES A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S DAUGHTER (15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30)
- A. Situation: Jesus desires privacy (Mt. 15:21; Mk. 7:24)
  - B. The Request by faith (15:22; Mk. 7:25f)
    - 1. She came out of the depth of her distress.
    - 2. She came despite the distinct disadvantages of her position.
    - 3. She came despite her meager knowledge of Jesus.
  - C. The Relentlessness of faith (15:23-27; Mk. 7:27f)
    - 1. Her resolution undaunted by Jesus' seeming indifference.
    - 2. Her resilience seen in her steady good humor despite desperation

- 3. Her reserve seen in her proper humility.
- D. The Rewarding of faith (15:28; Mk. 7:29f)

### III. JESUS FEEDS 4000 AND HEALS MANY OF DECAPOLIS (15:29-39; Mk. 7:31—8:10)

- A. Situation: Journey through Decapolis from Tyre and Sidon to Lake Galilee (Mt. 15:29; Mk. 7:31)
- B. Many miracles of healing (Mt. 15:30f; Mk. 7:32-37)
- C. Jesus feeds the 4000 (Mt. 15:32-39; Mk. 8:1-10)

### Section 36

#### JESUS DEBATES WITH JERUSALEM PHARISEES ABOUT THE ELDERS' TRADITIONS

(Parallel: Mark 7:1-23)

TEXT: 15:1-20

1 Then there come to Jesus from Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes, saying, 2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.

3 And he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? 4 For God said, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, He that speaketh evil of thy father or mother, let him die the death. 5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me is given to God; 6 he shall not honor his father. And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition. 7 Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying,

8 This people honoreth me with their lips;

But their heart is far from me.

9 But in vain do they worship me,

Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.

10 And he called to him the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: 11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man; but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man.

12 Then came the disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard this saying?

13 But he answered and said, Every plant which my heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up. 14 Let them alone: they are blind guides. And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit.

15 And Peter answered and said unto him, Declare unto us the parable.

16 And he said, Are ye also even yet without understanding? 17 Perceive ye not, that whatsoever goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? 18 But the things which proceed out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and they defile the man. 19 For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings: 20 these are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands defileth not the man.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How can we distinguish good traditions from bad ones?
- b. Why were there scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem here in Galilee? What was their purpose for prowling around so far from home, precisely at this time and place?
- c. It is a matter of observable fact that the disciples of Jesus did in fact eat with defiled hands. Why do you think they did this? Do you think the multitudes ceremoniously washed their hands before eating the bread and fish miraculously provided by Jesus? Why did not Jesus insist on their washing their hands?
- d. John 7:1 says that about this time "Jesus went about in Galilee; He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him." This very clearly was the time of the Passover (Jn. 6:4). Does John mean to suggest that Jesus Himself did not attend the Passover feast in Jerusalem? If so, what does this reveal about Jesus? If not, what do the available facts mean? Did Jesus, as God in the flesh, need to attend such feasts, commanded for all Jews, even though He Himself was Hebrew? Or, to put it another way, does Jesus violate Mosaic Law as well as the traditions of the elders?
- e. If you take the view that Jesus did not attend the feast, because for good and sufficient reasons He was exempt from attendance, do you think that He would keep the Apostles away from the Passover? If so, why? If not, why not?
- f. At what point, do you think, does tradition make void the commands of God, or make worship "vain"? Use the illustration in

the text to help you formulate your answer.

- g. Jesus called the Pharisees "hypocrites." Wherein did their hypocrisy lie?
- h. Do you think that what had been declared "Corban" was actually given to God? That is what the word means, but did the children really turn it over to God? What is your opinion?
- i. What do you think the command "Honor your father and mother" includes? Did Jesus Himself honor His own earthly parents in this way? If so, when or how?
- j. Do you think that Isaiah had the Pharisees in mind when he penned the words quoted by Jesus in reference to them? If not, how could Jesus affirm: "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you"? If so, what is the message intended for the people of Isaiah's own day?
- k. Can you explain why a religion, or worship, based on human commandments is useless?
- l. Can false religious teaching or religious leaders with faulty ideas actually lead sincere followers to destruction? Is not sincerity a sufficient safeguard against that eventuality?
- m. But, all that the Pharisees and scribes were doing for the Jewish people was interpret the Mosaic Law and the prophets for them, so that they could know God's will. Do you think it is right, then, to interpret the Scriptures for other people?
- n. Explain how BOTH of the following mottos would have helped to prevent the Pharisees from making the mistakes of which Jesus accused them:
  - (1) "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak.  
Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."
  - (2) "Where the Scriptures speak, we are silent.  
Where the Scriptures are silent, we speak."
 Do not choke on this second expression of the same profound truth! Study it to see its genius, then show how both propositions would have helped even the Pharisees to handle God's Word more worthily.
- o. Do you think Jesus could contradict Old Testament teaching by the principles He espoused? If so, how could He do that—had the OT been wrong? If not, then how is His teaching in this section to be understood?
- p. Were the Apostles being defiled according to the OT Law when they ate without washing?
- q. According to the principles of Jesus, does ANYTHING, either eaten or drunk, ever defile a person? If so, what? If not, why not?

- r. Would you drink blood or eat things strangled, i.e., with the blood in it, or any food made with blood? Why? (Cf. Ac. 15:20, 29)
- s. Why should the disciples be so concerned about how Jesus talks about the opinions of the learned Pharisees?
- t. What, do you think, is the relative responsibility before God of a "blind guide" and a "blind follower"? Is one more responsible than the other, or are both equally guilty? Are they equally lost?
- u. Does it really matter much whether one is defiled by what comes out of the heart? Are you personally concerned about being defiled in the sight of God? What does defilement mean to you?
- v. Why could not the disciples understand the teaching Jesus gave regarding the true source of defilement, i.e., what factors would have hindered their grasping His meaning immediately?
- w. Can you explain why the Law of Moses contained such regulations about defilement by eating or touching certain things which the New Testament definitely and clearly allows? Did God change His mind in the meantime?
- x. What is so earth-shaking, from a religious standpoint, about Mark's inserted comment (7:19): "Thus He declared all foods clean"?
- y. Is Jesus defending as "clean" food or drink that would be destructive to the human body? In what sense are we to understand Mark's word "all foods"? What about foods to which one is allergic? What about foods or drink which leave one stuffed or drunk?
- z. Is Jesus teaching us to tolerate others more than the Pharisees did, or to reject and condemn such unscriptural practices in religion like theirs?
- aa. If Jesus is more concerned about the condition of a man's heart, why does he pointedly list so many outward manifestations of what He calls real defilement, or sin? Why does He still list murder as defiling, when He is really concerned about the hate that prompts it, for example?
- bb. Is pride always wrong? How and when does it defile a man?
- cc. What kind(s) of foolishness defile a person?
- dd. Why list three kinds of sexual sins: fornication, adultery and lasciviousness? Are they not all sexual sins? What is the difference between them?
- ee. If the Pharisees were able to pervert a God-given religion like Judaism, what are our chances of twisting a beautiful relationship with God like Christianity into something that Jesus Himself would

not be able to recognize? What if we have already made this fatal switch? What remedy is open to us to correct whatever is false or perverted in our religion, in order to bring ourselves back to Jesus' original plans for His people? A more important question is: what are the unchanging marks of true religion whereby we can judge ourselves and recognize the degree of truth or falsity in our religion?

- ff. What is the psychological danger in that unsound compensation made by an individual who deliberately sets aside a commandment of God, because it does not suit him to observe it, and then thinks he can make up for it by being extra careful about something else? The Pharisees were past masters at this sort of dodging their moral responsibility. Do you know any Pharisees in your circle of acquaintances? What do you think about people who preach a lot about baptism but ignore Jesus' orders to evangelize the whole world? What about Christians who are especially punctilious about the form of baptism, but are not especially bothered by the selfishness and indifference to others' needs seen among their members?
- gg. Do you think the Pharisees brought this question to Jesus because they hated sin, or because they simply hated to see any of their opinions or traditional views discounted or put in doubt? Why do you bring up objections in a discussion of religion or morality? Is it because you hate sin, love sinners and long to save them from the consequences of a false philosophy, or do you bring up arguments in order to bolster your confidence in the views and conclusions held by some revered teacher in your acquaintance? Are you a Pharisee?

#### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

A group of Pharisees, along with some doctors of the law who had come up from Jerusalem, approached Jesus. They noticed that some of His disciples ate their meals with "defiled" hands—in other words, without washing them in the ceremonial way. (In fact, the Pharisees and the Jews in general never eat unless they have washed their hands in a particular way, following an old, established tradition. It is their practice never to eat anything upon returning from the market place until they have sprinkled themselves for ceremonial purification. There are many other points which they consider essential on which they have a traditional rule to maintain, for example, the immersing

of cups, jugs and copper basins.) Accordingly, the Pharisees and lawyers challenged Jesus, "Why do your disciples not follow the ancient tradition, but eat their food with 'defiled' hands? In fact, they do not wash their hands when they eat."

Jesus answered them, "And what about you? You have a fine way of rejecting and breaking God's clear commandment in order to keep your tradition! Because God, speaking through Moses (Ex. 20:12; Dt. 5:16), commanded: 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Anyone who reviles his parents must die.' (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9) But you say, 'If a person tells his parents, Anything of mine which might have been used for your benefit is now vowed to God,' then you permit them no longer to do anything for their parents. And so, by your man-made rule, you render God's direct command null and void. This is typical of your procedure! You hypocrites: Isaiah (29:13) beautifully described your kind when he said:

'These people say they honor me;  
But their heart is somewhere else.  
When they worship me, they are wasting their time,  
Since they just teach men's ideas for divine law.'

Then Jesus called the people around Him again and exhorted them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand this: there is no defilement so damaging in what one eats as that moral contamination involved in what one says or does!"

Later, when Jesus had gone indoors, leaving the people outside, the disciples approached Him with the question, "Do you realize that you have horrified the Pharisees with this sort of talk?"

His answer was: "Every plant that my heavenly Father did not plant will be pulled up by the roots; so ignore them! They are blind guides leading the blind: anyone who follows them will fall into a pit with them!"

But Peter demanded, "Explain what you meant by that enigma."

Jesus responded, "Are you all also still unable to grasp this? Do you not understand that what you eat will not harm your soul, because food does not come into contact with your innermost being, but simply passes through your digestive system and out again?"

(By saying this, Jesus declared all foods kosher or ceremonially pure.)

He went on: "But what a man says, comes from his soul. This is what really pollutes a man. For from within the man, out of his own

mind, arise evil thoughts like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, slander, greed, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, arrogance and folly. These things come from within a man's mind. These are the things which make a man unfit for God, but there is no defilement in eating without first washing your hands according to some ceremonial ritual!"

### SUMMARY

After the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry, He was attacked more vigorously by the Jewish authorities on the basis of His failure to demand that His followers obey the traditions of the fathers. He counterattacked by pointing out the fundamental danger in following human tradition at all: it can very easily take precedence over clear commands of God. Further, human tradition leads people into a useless worship based upon what are thought to be God's commands when they have only human authority for their practice. The specific charge of the Pharisees and theologians was a clear case of exaggeratedly externalized ceremonialism. Jesus counters by showing with undeniable clarity that real religion is that of the heart, and that the real defilement or pollution is that of the heart and soul of a man, not merely of his body. The nervous disciples feared the consequences of Jesus' severe teaching upon the Pharisees. Jesus retorted that the Pharisees' ideas were, after all, of human origin and worthless, but dangerous enough to destroy both the blind leader as well as all who blindly follow him. When the Twelve asked for further clarification, Jesus patiently explained that eating *per se* is a purely physical process that leaves the soul totally unaffected. Contrarily, the products of a man's mind, the expression of his wrong desires, in short, his sins, really corrupt a man.

### NOTES

#### A. THE ATTACK LED BY THE PHARISEES: "You break our rules!"

**15:1 Then:** because the Synoptic writers' time-connections are difficult to ascertain with precision, we are limited to the supposition that this attack took place while Jesus was in Galilee sometime either

before or after the Passover mentioned in Jn. 6:4 in connection with the feeding of the five thousand. Perhaps the exciting rumors about the feeding of the 5000 men had been spread around at that feast in Jerusalem, spurring the national leaders to move decisively to block Jesus' mounting popularity and theological influence. **There came to Jesus from Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes:** this fact harmonizes well with John's comment (7:1): "After this (the feeding of the 5000 and the Sermon on the Bread of Life preached at Capernaum) Jesus went about in Galilee; He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him."

Whether or not John means to imply that Jesus did not attend the Passover mentioned in Jn. 6:4, is not clear, because the Apostle uses *peripateîn*: "to walk around, to circulate in an area," perhaps in the sense of evangelistic tours in Judea. However, he may be implying that Jesus actually attended the feast, merely mingling with these masses rather than doing any attention-getting public teaching and miracles. (See Arndt-Gingrich, 654.) Nothing positive is affirmed about whether Jesus hindered the Twelve from attending the feast, if He himself remained in Galilee. There is wisdom in avoiding a fatal conclusion of one's ministry when he who does so knows there is yet work to do. He told the Twelve: "When persecuted in one town, flee to the next" (Mt. 10:23). When the time came, Jesus did not avoid death. There is a day to flee and a day to die. See Thought Questions d. and e. for further problems involved in this question. The Synoptic Gospels record the travels (cf. John's *peripateîn en tē Galilaia*) Jesus took during the period between the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles that year, a period which perhaps began with Jesus' debate with the Pharisees in this chapter.

**From Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes** is significant, because, whereas every city of Jewish population had its Pharisees from almost every walk of life, these guardians of righteousness stir forth from the capital with their own theologians in tow. However, this is not the first time these bloodhounds trail Him. (Cf. Mk. 3:22; Lk. 5:17) Pharisean views were popularly held, because these rabbis, as Bowker (*Jesus and the Pharisees*, 31) observes,

. . . went as far as possible to make Torah practicable for all the people, but they nevertheless insisted ultimately on the observance of Torah. The people welcomed the assistance of the Hakamim

[i.e., scholars] in alleviating the strictest interpretations of Torah and in defending their traditional ways, but many of them were by no means prepared to submit their lives to the whole detail of Torah . . .

Bowker (*ibid.* 30) also notices the tension existing between the scholars and the common people who by no means necessarily went all the way to accept every detail of scholarly interpretation in their own lives: Since it was the scholars' design to define the Law so that, theoretically, ordinary people could actually achieve a condition of holiness as defined in the Law, and since they extended their influence over the people through education in the synagogues whereby their exegesis and applications of the Law molded the popular mind, naturally, any evidence of weakening or lowering of the traditional interpretations or standards would be viewed by the Pharisees as an instant threat to the holiness of Israel. As our text will amply demonstrate, Jesus posed a grave menace to the Pharisees on the following grounds:

1. He ignored tradition as a question of conscience. This is no small issue, since, as Bowker (*ibid.* 17f, emphasis added) points out:

The basic obligation of searching out the meaning and application of Torah was no easy matter. It was assisted by the recognition that Torah had already been applied and "lived out" by earlier figures from the time of the prophets, pre-eminently exemplified in the restoration of Torah under Ezra. Thus the notion of "Scripture" was as important as the acceptance of Torah, since with the writings coming from the later period, the first interpretations of the meaning of Torah could be found. Yet of course there was no reason in principle to stop at Ezra. [From OUR standpoint, however, it should be remembered that all previous men were inspired in various ways, hence, authoritative interpreters, whereas those following the time of Ezra, were neither inspired nor authoritative. HEF] In practice it proved necessary, not least because of the proliferation of "scriptures"; but in fact the important point was that *the earlier writings recorded the first implementations of Torah, and tradition continued the record in the "post-scriptural" period*. From this point of view, *the long tradition of what it has meant to obey Torah (and, equally, to disobey Torah) is in a sense as important as Torah itself*. Torah and

Scripture have a distinct status, but *the tradition of what Torah means in practice continued to be an essential part of exegesis.*

Thus, for Jesus to ignore tradition meant to reject, as it seemed to the scholars, one of the most essential tools of Biblical Interpretation.

2. Jesus seemed to side with the Sadducean philosophy of tradition. Surprisingly enough for Bible readers, the very fact that Jesus should reject tradition seemed automatically to align Him with the Sadducean attitude toward tradition. Bowker (*ibid.*, 18) notes that "the Sadducees denied the validity, both of the methods of Hekamic exegesis, and of the support which they gave to traditional ways of doing things, and . . . they insisted on the application of the literal text of Torah wherever possible . . ." (See also Josephus, *Ant.*, XIII, 10, 6.) Edersheim (*Life*, I, 313f) cautions that it would be a great historical inaccuracy to think that the Sadducees had no traditions at all, for "the Sadducees did not lay down the principle of absolute rejection of all traditions as such, but that they were opposed to traditionalism as represented and carried out by the Pharisees." (See also note on 15:9.) And, while Jesus' theology was not at all materialistic like that of the Sadducees, certainly He too opposed traditionalism as fostered and practiced by the Pharisees. They could not but feel that His anti-traditional attitude swung too much weight behind their opponents' policy.
3. Jesus was popular. Among all the preceding leading lights in Judaism the Pharisees enjoyed the popular vote and the deepest influence. (Cf. Mark's expression: "Pharisees and all the Jews," 7:3) But with the advent of Jesus, however, public opinion had begun to swing away from those Separatists and their minutiae. As Morgan (*Matthew*, 194) preaches:

The attractive power of Jesus Christ did not lie in the accidentals which appealed to a few; it was rather that of His essential humanity, which found an answer in all human life, notwithstanding the accidentals of birth and position and education.

So, when Jesus' prodigious popular ministry numbered thousands in His audiences and when He publicly flouted time-honored traditions, His fame and influence plainly signalled a revolution in public thought.

An exquisite passage in Josephus (*Ant.*, XIII, 10, 6), himself a Pharisee (cf. *Life*, 2), summarizes the Pharisean position as he understood it.

This "congressional investigating committee from Jerusalem" sought and soon found an opportunity to open fire. Because of the specific accusation involved in their attack and because their aggression begins in such close proximity to the feeding of the five thousand, it would be easy to consider their assault as somehow related to that event. The Jerusalem rabbis may well have remained stupefied by the magnitude of that miracle and all its glorious implications, until one of them, trying to imagine the event, wondered how such a mass of people could properly prepare themselves to eat by doing the prescribed washings. When he struck upon the probability that, out there in the wilderness, they could NOT have washed their hands in the "right" way, all the majesty of God that had been revealed in that stupendous miracle lost its luster in the (for them) more glorious discovery that Jesus' *disciples transgress the tradition of the elders, for they wash not their hands when they eat!*

The timing, if we have correctly understood it, as Matthew and Mark record it, coincides generally with the great Sermon on the Bread of Life delivered in the Capernaum synagogue. (Jn. 6) It was at the conclusion of that soul-testing pronouncement that Jesus' popularity in Galilee collapsed. In perfect concord with John's representation of that popularity crisis, the former Evangelists describe the theological issue of that same climax. (See the introductory critical notes on 14:34-36.) Their point is simple: the ultimate crisis of the cross arises out of this fundamental clash between Jesus' authoritative representation of God's will and His unequivocal rejection of Jewish tradition as inimical to proper fulfillment of God's will.

Mark (7:3, 4) provides the explanation of their contention, a fact that incidentally helps to determine to which readership Mark addressed his Gospel. Matthew omits entirely all explanations about Jewish purification rites, because they would have been perfectly familiar to those whom we have supposed to be his readers, the Hebrews themselves. Mark, in this case, probably needed to explain such matters to his audience, i.e., non-Jews. Because Mark asserts that "all the Jews do not eat unless they wash . . .," we may ask how many among Jesus' associates participated in God's laws on cleanliness and defilement?

1. Lepers kept themselves at a distance from people and cried,

"Unclean," not merely because their disease was contagious, but because of ceremonial defilement of others contacted by them. (Lk. 17:12f; Lev. 13:45f)

2. Mary and Joseph kept the law of birth purification. (Lk. 2:22f, 39)
3. A Jew argued with John's disciples about purification. (Jn. 3:22-30)
4. At the wedding feast in Cana plenty of water was furnished for the Jewish rites of purification. (Jn. 2:6)
5. Peter habitually ate "kosher" food. (Ac. 10:14)
6. The Pharisees themselves strictly avoided defilement and expected others to do the same. (Cf. Mt. 23:25ff; Lk. 7:39; Jn. 18:28)
7. Regulations about food, drink and various washing were a characteristic part of Judaism. (Cfr. Heb. 9:9f)

Because such ceremonious cleansing and ritual purity was so common in Jewish households, Mark's statement that "the Pharisees and all the Jews . . . wash" is not at all extreme, but historically exact. For interesting notes on the historical position of the Pharisees in Judaism, see Lynn Gardner's summary at the end of this chapter.

**15:2 saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.** Note how astutely their denunciation is worded: they consider Jesus' disciples to be the living fruit of His ministry, the exemplification of His doctrine, almost as if they turned Jesus' own words against Him: "By their fruits you shall know them (false prophets)." This charge is serious, because it implies that Jesus Himself teaches His disciples to violate the rules, because the followers undoubtedly reflect Jesus' own views. (Cf. Lk. 11:38) On other occasions they had attempted without success to expose His miracles as worked by secret agreement with Satan. (See on 12:24ff; cf. 9:33f) Having been thoroughly embarrassed by His answers there, these experts now apparently make no effort to deny or "explain" the reality of His supernatural credentials upon which the authority for His claims and practice was based. These critics now blast the Lord where they suppose they can hurt Him worst: His disregarding their revered traditional practices. To believe wrongly is bad enough, but to teach others to ignore the accepted norms is infinitely worse. So, had the Pharisees only been theologically correct, their attack would have been rightly ordered and truly devastating.

This debate is fundamental, not peripheral, regardless of our western attitude toward the specific tabus involved here. Back of both Jesus' and the Pharisees' arguments is the basic concept of CLEANNESS

and **DEFILEMENT**. We must never lose sight of the fact that the fundamental idea of defilement by eating "unclean foods," or by contact with "unclean objects or persons" was actually part of God's Law. (Cf. Lev. 5:2f; 7:19-21; 11; 13-15; 17:15f; 18; 19:31; 21:4, 11f; 22:1-9; Nu. 5:3; 6:9; 9:6f; 19:13, 20, 22; Dt. 21:22f; 14:3-21; 23:10-14) Once these laws are understood, the modern surprise that smiles at such carefulness in washing as that practiced among the Jews becomes unnecessary and unjustifiable.

Cleanness, simply stated, is that state in which man might not only worship or approach God, but also in which he might live in fellowship with his human society. Contrarily, uncleanness, impurity or defilement mean that he is in a state where this kind of worship or approach to God is impossible and his social relations with his fellows are hindered. So, this whole concept of clean and unclean has little, if anything, directly to do with physical cleanliness or hygiene, except perhaps indirectly and subordinately.

(Is it possible, on the other hand, that God considered literal, physical cleanness and hygiene, **ALONG WITH MORAL, SPIRITUAL PURITY**, as not only a condition of fellowship with Him, but also conducive to man's deeper happiness in his earthly condition? That is, is it possible that physical filth and corruption are also abhorrent to God because unrepresentative of His perfect creation in which "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good"? According to this understanding, then, even physical hygiene and removal of material filth become man's responsibility in order to keep himself physically proper for God's sight and ready for human comradeship. This view, while not at all denying that God has always intended that man keep himself morally pure, hence fit for divine and human fellowship, intends only to picture some of the Levitical washing laws as also intended to remove real dirt, germs and other filth that defile, disease or otherwise render a person unready for divine and human fellowship. Further, this view has the advantage of seeing the human being as a whole, composed of body and spirit, *both of which* must be pure and undefiled before God's holy presence and, thus, ready for human society.)

The concept of moral filth is also important to our understanding. (See Isa. 4:4; 64:6; 65:5; Lam. 1:8f, 17; Ezek. 22:15; 24:12f; 36:25; Ezra 9:11; Prov. 30:12) However, a careful examination of these passages and the above-mentioned laws will not render any specific

law that requires any Hebrew to wash his hands before meals. It is understandable, however, that the learned concept of a defilement that must be removed by washing should affect Jewish thinking so deeply as to find expression in the desire to eliminate even potential defilement. Nevertheless, GOD DID NOT COMMAND THE HANDWASHING RITUAL.

Its institution was attributed to Solomon (*Shab.* 14b; on washing in general, cf. *Hag.* 2.4f; *Ber.* 14b, 15b, 22a; *Shab.* 14b) However, in a comment on Num. 18:7 in *Sifre*, sec. 116, it is argued that if a priest must bathe his hands before service in the Temple, so he must sanctify his hands before eating holy things in the country. For him to eat holy things is like the service in the Temple. Therefore, it is concluded, handwashing to eat food sanctified is required by the Torah. It should be noticed here that the very necessity to argue the case of handwashing puts in doubt the presumed Solomonic, hence, inspired, origin of the custom, as if it were not so Solomonic after all, despite the fact that it is said that, when he instituted handwashing, the Divine Voice (*Bath Qol*) came forth giving approval. (*Shab.* 14b) Bowker (*Jesus and the Pharisees*, 70) notes, further, that handwashing "was a matter of continuing controversy: even as late as the compilation of *B. Hull.* 105a it was not determined how much of the washing of hands was obligatory and how much meritorious"; and one man was treated as apostate because he threw doubt on cleansing of hands. (See *ISBE*, 415 on "Bath Kol" for an excellent discussion of the so-called "Divine Voice" concept that arose in Judaism after the cessation of true prophetism.)

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 13) agrees that immediately prior to Christ, Hillel and Shammai agreed on hand-washing and fixed the rabbinic views on this subject, even though it did not take on the force of universal authoritative tradition until the time of Christ. In this case, the hand-washing ordinance would have been a recent enactment which, by specific rabbinic rules, could not be questioned or invalidated.

Further, the precise report of the scribes' attack "affords most valuable indirect confirmation of the trustworthiness of his Gospel, as not only showing intimate familiarity with the minutiae of Jewish 'tradition,' but giving prominence to what was then a present controversy—and all this the more, that it needs intimate knowledge of that law even fully to understand the language of the Evangelist." (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 14f)

However much in harmony with the concept of Biblical cleanliness and defilement the hand-washing ritual may have logically fit, it is of human, not divine, origin. However well it may have seemed to instill in people a sense of what was common, profane or unclean and what was sanctified or holy (cf. Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26), still it was human judgment that decided it so. Further, whereinsofar each single Hebrew freely chose to wash his hands before eating food in full awareness of the contamination that pollutes the soul and can only be washed by the blood of perfect sacrifices and as a symbol of that cleansing, there could be no valid argument against such a free, independent, personal decision. Here, even the Christian laws of personal liberty would fully permit this personal choice. However, the rabbis had elevated their interpretation to the status of authoritative custom possessed of special value or merit within itself in the service of God, and by this move they took the act out of the realm of free, personal choice and placed it in the realm of law.

To appreciate the seriousness and apparent justice of the Pharisees' question, we must see that Judaism in general viewed the Mosaic Law as consisting of two equally essential parts: the written Law, i.e., the Pentateuch, and the oral, or traditional, Law. The former was penned by Moses and commented upon by the prophets. The latter; or oral law, was supposedly whispered by God to Moses and handed down only in oral form, never reduced to writing until the second century after Christ in the Mishnah (collected around 132-200 A.D.) and developed by "Haggadah" or additional comments, illustrations, anecdotes and wise sayings, "Halakah," or casuistry, traditional ordinances, logical legal deductions and finally collected in the "Talmudim" in the third and fourth centuries after Christ.

The essential difficulty of the Jews lay in their undifferentiated view of traditions. They could rightly cite "prophetic precedents" for some practical interpretations of the law, as, for example, Nehemiah's city ordinance that protected Sabbath observance in Jerusalem (Neh. 13:15-22), Ezra's marriage reforms (Ez. 10; Neh. 13:23ff), Malachi's pronouncements on divorce (Mal. 2:13-16) and others. These illustrate how the Law was to be interpreted. However, they failed to see that THESE "traditional interpretations" were made by prophets or by inspired men, an observation that cannot with justice be made for those traditions born of common, uninspired attempts to interpret and apply the Law. It was the assumption that the intertestamental elders' opinions carried as much weight as that of inspired prophets that got them into this difficulty. This

is the reason why the *Bath Qol* concept was so malicious a doctrine: it gave apparent divine sanction to purely human notions!

Jesus' entire argument, that their traditions (on hand-washing supposedly attributed to Solomon) annul the Word of God, flatly denies the Solomonic paternity of that custom, hence of the traditional authority upon which it was based. Affirmations that these oral traditions were given by God to Moses and handed down unerringly and uninterrupted by Jesus' contemporaries, must, of course, be documented. But the bad joke on "oral tradition" is that when it is documented, it is no longer "oral" but written, and, if written, subject to the same tests as any other written document, subject to the same historical verification as any other report of things that are said to be. Unconfirmed Mishnaic affirmations that the traditions were handed down through a given chain of authorities must not be accepted without proof. (Cf. *Aboth*. 1:1-4 or *Tosefta: Yad* 2:16) Other than these allegations, is there any trustworthy documentary evidence that PROVES a greater antiquity for these traditions than the post-exilic period? This is not to say that the rabbis did not even try to document and/or antedate their traditions. In fact, rabbinic defence of oral tradition as "essentially Mosaic" took the route of:

1. Warped exegesis of texts like Dt. 4:14 and Ex. 24:12, whereby the attempts are made to identify the Mishnah and the Talmud hidden in words of these texts. Hosea 8:12 is supposed to mean that God did not write all of His Law, hence, if He wished Israel to know it, it was passed down by oral tradition, i.e., unwritten, and nonetheless authentic and authoritative. (Edersheim, *Life*, I, 99)
2. Confusion of local judicial decisions for revelations from God forever binding the conscience of all succeeding generations. (Study Dt. 17:8-13)

But this is far from proving Mishnaic assertions, like those of *Aboth*. i.1-4, or *Yad*.ii. 16 (*Tosefta*), that presume to list a few of the "elders."

This is why the Pharisees' charge must never be dismissed as simple sectarian punctilio, as if they could not find any greater misdemeanor than this, whereas the disciples of Jesus truly conducted themselves so inoffensively that this was the very worst accusation that could be levelled against them. To think this way is to miss the point of what it means to BELIEVE IN "INSPIRED TRADITIONS!" Equally erroneous is any sniggering about a Rabbi Joses' determination "that to eat with unwashed hands is as great a sin as adultery,"

because his view is perfectly consistent with his belief in the divine origin and authority of both ordinances, the former being decided by a Voice from heaven (*Bath Qol*), the latter by a written commandment at Sinai. He is not seeking to distinguish what is essential from what is non-essential in what he believes (wrongly, we think) to be God's Word. The rabbi's mistake is in believing that God inspired or authorized the tradition about hand-washing.

### B. JESUS COUNTERATTACKS (15:3-20; Mk. 7:6-23)

1. Before the Pharisees: "You break God's Law to keep your rules!"

**15:3 Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? Ye also:** this is no mere *ad hominem* argument whereby Jesus defends the practice of His disciples by pointing out that the Pharisees are also culpable. *Ye also* admits the disciples' guilt, but with the vast difference that, whereas the disciples were confessedly guilty of ignoring human traditions, the critics themselves were liable for a far more serious crime, not against men, but against the living God! Morgan (*Matthew*, 196) is right to observe that, had He excused the disciples or suggested that, after all, they had not violated tradition, He would tacitly have admitted that tradition as such was not so blameable, but was, rather, the commonly accepted norm. But by saying "*Ye also*," He admitted this violation of tradition, thus opening the way to attack tradition as normative. Note that He never objects to the traditional hand-washing as a custom. Rather, He firmly refused to recognize it as a conscience-binding rule of religion.

An important question to consider now is whether the Pharisees of any age set out deliberately to *transgress the commandment of God in order to keep their traditions*. There is a type of Pharisee that finds it undesirable to observe some command of God, and so deliberately sets it aside, hoping to make up for his failure by being extra scrupulous at some other point. This, it is assumed, will compensate for his refusal to observe the other precept. At last, this kind of compensation can so deaden his conscience that it no longer rebukes his disobedience, since, after all, it is supposedly covered by his severe strictness elsewhere. But may it be assumed that this kind of deliberate disobedience is intended here? Since Jesus is dealing with people whose reliance is upon the Law and whose boast is

their relation to God, who know His will and approve what is excellent (cf. Ro. 2:17ff), their failure may well be found in their blindness, i.e., their inability to conceive the possibility that their own rules, invented to "protect and correctly apply" God's Law, could actually transgress that Law. (However, see also on 15:6.)

It may be that these legalists were not at all intending to ignore any part of God's Word in their attention to tradition, because their declared purpose for creating these "fences to hedge in the Law" was to protect it against violation. However, their scrupulous observance of human traditional practice led surely and directly to a corresponding negligence and unscrupulousness regarding God's Word. Thus, the entire procedure was a question of ATTENTION. (Cf. notes on 13:9) By their elaborate arguments they gave close attention to human procedures, debating trifles and treated as matters of conscience what could never affect nor effect inward purity. But, by so doing, they unconsciously turned their attention away from the very laws of God they proposed to interpret and obey! Here is another case where, had they given attention to God's preferences for "mercy and not sacrifice" (see on 9:13 and 12:7), they would not have forgotten nor ignored true morality by insisting on such arbitrary interpretations and rituals.

It is because of this "traditionalist mentality," this inability to see how far human rules and attempts at interpretation can really supplant God's will, that Jesus attacks the whole system of tradition. The key to understanding this entire discourse and its proper application in our own case lies in 15:9. What is perhaps most damning is that attitude taken in the Mishnah (*Sanh.* xi. 3): "It is more punishable to act against the words of the Scribes than against the Scripture." (quoted by Edersheim, *Sketches*, 223) This explains why Jesus could never treat traditionalism with indifference! (Cf. Jer. 8:8) Not only was failure to comply with their rules perfectly legitimate: direct opposition to them was a duty! At every point where human authority competes with God's, it must not only be accepted. It must be resisted.

By saying *your tradition*, the Lord renders those rabbis immediately and personally responsible for the customary usages they hold and teach as conscience-binding rules. Even though these impositions are the inventions of others (*the elders*), those who uphold and pass them on are equally liable for having followed their guides. (See on 15:14; cf. Mich. 6:16.) By characterizing their procedure as *transgressing the commandment of God*, Jesus warns His followers against

the evil consequences of men's imposing their strictures upon others, because, while initially seeming only to restrict the freedom of action enjoyed by Christ's disciples, they proceed to become laws where God not only made none, but deliberately left men free to decide spontaneously and responsibly.

While it is certainly true and probably right to affirm, with some, that while Jesus' clash with the Pharisees is a collision between two views of religion, between externalism and spiritual religion, and while the great defect of rabbinism was to make sin so merely external that an act was considered right or wrong depending upon the presence or absence of some external condition, yet the fundamental problem, according to the Lord, is not externalism as such. This supreme religious contest is waged over the fundamental problem of AUTHORITY IN RELIGION: shall it be human or divine? Shall we break God's Law to keep men's or vice versa? Externalism is but one symptom and a result of the even greater defect, i.e., teaching as obligatory what is but the precept of men. Externalism is only admissible where human authority has already begun to take precedence over God's.

**15:4 For God said, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, He that speaketh evil of father or mother, let him die the death.** (Ex. 20:12; 21:17) *For God said* is Jesus' final word on the divine paternity of the passages in question. His word cannot be laughed off as mere "cultural accommodation to the popular prejudices and traditional understanding of Pentateuchal authorship." For those who have ears to hear Jesus, He makes a clear-cut distinction between human traditions, as followed by the elders of the Pharisees, and the Word of God as a divine, infallible guide. This should warn all scholars everywhere that for Jesus Christ the indisputably right author of Exodus is really Moses (Mk. 7:10) and God (Mt. 15:4). It would be crushingly ironic, were Jesus, in His argument against human traditions that He regards as mistaken, however well received on ancient authority, to cite what, according to modern criticism of the Old Testament, turns out to be nothing better than human tradition! By such standards, Jesus Himself must be seen to fall into the same confusion of which He accused His opponents! (See also on 15:7 where He points to Isaiah as the real author of his prophecy.) But if the Lord may be credited with even average rationality, He could have seen that the validity of His arguments DEPENDED upon the unquestionably divine origin and traceable transmission of the citations He adduces. It is in this kind of context that the afore-mentioned

thesis of some "scholarly" criticism fails its most crucial test by refusing to permit Jesus to testify in an area where He is most qualified to speak. Either Jesus said this or He did not. If He said it, then the critics cannot affirm that His quotations and indications of prophetic paternity and divine inspiration of the OT books represent merely the traditional beliefs of the Jewish people. It is false to accuse the Lord of having refused to declare Himself on such critical Old Testament questions, thus leaving such matters for the relatively recent European scholarship to decide, when, as a matter of fact, He is actually discussing traditions.

For Matthew to quote Jesus as saying, "For God said . . .," while at this same point Mark (7:10) says, "For Moses said . . ." creates no contradiction, because the Lord may have actually said both; "For God through Moses commanded, saying . . ." In this case, the Evangelists simplify these introductory words, since both recognize Moses' divine mandate and God's human agent.

**Honor thy father and thy mother**, according to Jesus, is a command with life-long obligations. No amount of physical maturity can ever release the children from due respect for their parents, because *honor* has no terminal limits. In fact, *honor* means, among other things, to maintain them with daily sustenance. (Cf. 1 Ti. 5:3-17; Eph. 6:1-3) Jesus honored His earthly parents and cared for His mother as best He could. (Lk. 2:51; Jn. 19:26f) **He that speaketh evil of father or mother, let him die the death.** Edersheim, (*Life*, II, 21) notices this typically rabbinical method in Jesus' answer by which He mentioned, along with the precept, the penalty for its transgression. This detail has evidential value in that it reveals the Master's intimate knowledge of His people's traditional manner of teaching the Law. He is no ignorant iconoclast. Rather, He meets the scribes on their own grounds, reads them their own Scriptures and leaves them self-condemned. Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 211) reminds:

The sin of cursing parents is here opposed to the duty of honouring them. Those who speak ill of their parents, or wish ill to them, who mock at them, or give them taunting and opprobrious language, break this law. If to call a brother *Raca* be so penal, what is it to call a father so? By our Saviour's application of this law, it appears, that denying service or relief to parents is included in cursing them. Though the language be respectful enough, and nothing abusive in it, yet what will that avail, if the deeds be not agreeable? It is like him that said, *I go, Sir, and went not.* ch. xxi. 30.

God had placed reverence for parents on the same level with Israel's national and personal holiness and in context with the sanctity of the sabbath and with the proper worship of God. (See Lev. 19:3f.) It is because the majesty of God, violated in this disrespect for the persons of the parents that the sin of cursing them is made punishable with death. All of God's representatives are to be served with honor and fear, because in this commandment lies the foundation for order in the whole social realm. Here God teaches us to acknowledge rightful authority by showing proper reverence in thought, word and deed. Out of this understanding of the true positions of father and child grows our appreciation of, and demand for, good government and, consequently, our grasp of the Kingdom of God. This relationship is so fundamental, because it gives moral character and stability to a nation, and prosperity and well-being to its people. Thus, the failure adequately to value this parent-child relationship, especially through the grown son's refusal to support his aging parents, is direct evidence of a fundamental moral decline in appreciation for the majesty and authority of God. Not only is the image of God in the parents no longer kept sacred, but the Word and authority of God are also ignored. This is why refusal to support one's parents in their helplessness and senility is a sin worthy of capital punishment under the Mosiac sysstem.

15:5 **But ye say:** Here is written the condemnation of every false religion, because, notwithstanding the fact that God has spoken, men think they can still have their say! By so thinking, they permitted a scribal rule to wipe out one of the Ten Commandments! Here Jesus quoted God's Law, and then threw the rabbinical position into sharp contrast with it. Consider, however, what is involved when He quotes a command of God and then throws His own word into contrast with it. (Cf. Mt. 5:21f, 27f, 31f, 33f, 38f, 43f) In the former case, the Jews had no divine authority to make any alteration in God's Law; in the latter, however, Jesus Himself was God's Word come in human flesh to reveal God's changes of emphasis. (Cf. Jn. 1:14, 17f)

Why Jesus should select this particular illustration to deal with the rabbis' attack is understood differently by commentators. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 134) thinks:

This example did not touch the question of uncleanness, but it proved that tradition was an unauthoritative and mischievous guide, and as the objection of the scribes was based on the

authority of tradition, it destroyed the force of an objection. The particular tradition about eating with unwashed hands is discussed on its merits in the next paragraph; principles are settled first, and details afterward.

However, Edersheim (*Life*, II, 19), on the basis of a Talmudic comment that may well represent earlier rabbinical thought, believes Jesus to have seen an association of ideas between the Pharisees' accusation about washing of hands and "the hand of Corban":

The Talmud explains that, when a man simply says: 'That (or, if) I eat or taste such a thing,' it is imputed as a vow, and he may not eat or taste of it, 'because the hand is on the Qorban' (*Jer. Nedar.* 36d, line 22)—the mere touch of Qorban had sanctified it, and put it beyond his reach, just as if it had been laid on the altar itself. Here, then, was a contrast. According to the Rabbis, the touch of 'a common' hand defiled God's good gift of meat, while the touch of 'a sanctified' hand in rash or wicked words might render it impossible to give anything to a parent, and so involved the grossest breach of the Fifth Commandment! Such, according to Rabbinic Law, was the 'common' and such the 'sanctifying' touch of the hands . . .

In any case, the fundamental principle involved is the concept of vows. Mark (7:11) underlies this by bringing into his Gospel a Hebrew word he then has to translate for his uninformed readers: "Corban (that is, Given to God)." What is this *Corban*-concept? Was the *Corban*-clause a deliberate ploy to avoid responsibility to parents, or was it not, rather, just another apparently correct application or interpretation of divine Law, that, however apparently orthodox in intention, was used in actual practice to justify just this same sort of inhumanity scored by Jesus here? Thus, regardless of its original intention or regardless of the sincerity of the human authors who started this tradition, it was used to subvert God's commands. If we would avoid the same trap, we need to understand:

1. The Biblical revelations that formers of the *Corban*-clause could cite for its correctness. Consider the following passages and see if you too come out with any other conclusion than that, once a person has promised to give God something, he is duty-bound to do so: Num. 30:2; Lev. 19:12; 27; Dt. 23:21-23; Prov. 20:25; Eccl. 5:2, 4-6; Zech. 8:16f.
2. The human arguments for the *Corban*-clause. Since it would be

necessary to distinguish between a loosely-stated half-intention and a solemn promise, it may be that the Jews decided that a vow had not been made unless the person should affirm: "It is given" (=Corban). This would establish clearly in the minds of all that a solemn oath has been pronounced. Naturally, no one who made this serious affirmation before God would consider breaking the oath once made. Therefore it stood as valid, and any failure to maintain it would be equal to taking God's Name in vain and so the man would be held liable before God.

3. The fatal flaw in the *Corban*-doctrine. The precepts governing oaths presume that a person is actually free to give to the Lord what he voluntarily promises. (Dt. 23:23) But, if God has already obligated a man to use his possessions differently than he might have vowed, then is he no longer free to vow them to the Lord. He must use them as God commanded, as, for example, to care for his aged parents. He must not vow them at all, for to vow them brings them under the law of oaths which require that he pay what he had no right even to promise, thus bringing one of God's laws into contradiction with another of His laws. But God had left a way out: REPENTANCE of the oath and SACRIFICE for the sin of having thus to break it! (Lev. 5:4-6) Further, the possession thus vowed could actually be redeemed from the Lord by adding 20% to its value, (Lev. 27) These two steps made it possible to obey God and care for one's parents, despite the ill-taken oath.

(The fact that a father might cancel a vow made by a daughter, by forbidding her fulfilling it, suggests the principle that filial obedience to a father stands higher in God's eyes than carrying out her self-imposed religious service. See Lev. 30:3-5)

4. The positive perniciousness of the *Corban*-doctrine: The fact that God had not revealed the *Corban*-concept should warn against its ever being considered all-inclusive and absolute, lest anyone abuse God's other revelations in ways of which he may yet be unaware. This *Corban*-concept, when blindly and absolutely carried to its severely logical extreme, could not but actually encourage people to neglect morality because of a religious quibble; a punctilious principle, and so pave the way for that spiritual deterioration that ends in unembarrassed iniquity.

Is it true that the man who pronounced the magic word, *Corban*,

not only avoided thereby his obligation to support his parents, but could at the same time continue to enjoy the comforts and use of his own possessions although vowed to the service of God? If this sham dedication was as common as the real, Jesus' denunciation adequately touches both cases.

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 18ff, emphasis added) states that what might be suspected about the common usage of language, held true even in the case of Corban. "It must not be thought that the pronunciation of the votive word 'Qorban,' . . . necessarily dedicated a thing to the Temple. The meaning might simply be, and generally was, that *it was to be regarded like Qorban*—that is, that in regard to the person or persons named, the thing termed was to be considered AS IF it were Qorban, laid on the altar, and put entirely out of their reach." Accordingly, what is involved here is not so much a consecration to God, but an oath of personal obligation, and binding, even though it involve a breach of the Law. (*Nedar*, ii, 2)

If no real service to God is intended, how much more wicked is the selfish son who talks this way!

So, human need, according to Jesus, takes precedence over any rites and ceremonies, especially those of admittedly human origin. For God is not so much interested in precise and punctual performance of ceremonies as He is in relieving human suffering and making men over in His image. It is increasingly important today to remember that God thinks SOME ceremonies to be beautifully fitted to accomplish these high goals. He admits no false dichotomy between ceremonies and merciful helpfulness, because He knows that He can have BOTH. (See notes on 9:13.) Jesus' words must never be distorted to mean that ceremonies, like baptism, the Lord's Supper, congregational worship and such, may be safely dispensed with as somehow unimportant, and perhaps even detrimental because susceptible of becoming empty ceremonialisms. In the case of ceremonies which God has ordained, a Scriptural case could be made for the spiritual benefits accruing to the sincere disciple who participates in them. (Cf. Psa. 51:16-19) So, before concluding that we may decide to sacrifice ceremonies to morality on the basis of something we think Jesus means in this text, we must recall that He intends "morality" in the sense of what God defines as morality. No arbitrary decision of ours about what constitutes morality may disagree with His, for to ignore His decisions about ceremonies is immoral.

Note the general principle that not even gifts given to God Himself can close His eyes to the inhumanity and disobedience of selfish hearts. (Cf. Dt. 10:17; 1 Sam. 15:22) Here were men who were trying to be so holy that they could not use their "holy" money to obey the command of God! Any money given to God today usually and rightly goes to help some human being. He does not need our money. (Mic. 6:6-8; Psa. 50:10-15) So, logically, it must be used to help people. Further, in the sense that the aged parents had the right to expect filial support, the traditional interpretation of the rabbis was a violation of human rights.

15:6 **He shall not honor his father.** These words belong grammatically to the words of the traditionalists, but it may well be asked whether they ever said this in so many words.

1. Lenski (*Matthew*, 585) comments that "the remark that the Pharisees would scarcely have contradicted the Fourth (sic) Commandment so flatly does honor to Christian feeling but fails to understand the Pharisees."
2. Farrar (*Life*, 338, note 2) notes that "some of the rabbis had expressly taught that a vow superseded the necessity of obedience to the fifth commandment." That they actually so taught is documented in the Mishnah, (*Nedar*, ii. 2; ix. 1; v), only collected in the late second century A.D.

Accordingly, it is possible to credit the Pharisees with having taken the extreme position whereby the *Corban*-principle actually transcended the Fifth Commandment and codified it into law by the time of the Mishnah collection, whereas in Jesus' time it may have been in the formative stage. Had the common non-Pharisee said in so many words, *He shall not honor his father*, his rejection of God's commandment would be obvious, because expressed in language so nearly equal to God's that it called attention to it. Rather, in Christ's time, they may have decided simply: "Anyone who pronounces 'Corban' over his property is obligated thereby not to use its value for any other purpose not consonant with its dedication to the Temple." If this were the case, then Jesus slices away all the rule's apparent legality by pointing to an application so evident, so practical and so vicious, that none but the willfully blind could deny it. The purpose of God's Temple is to express His concern that men learn to live not only holy lives before God, but also to learn to love and honor one another. What a tragedy that one's own parents should be shut out of God's plan for their care in their senior years by a

deliberate misuse of God's plans! Knobel Staton (*Perfect Balance*, 83), applying this text, rightly challenges:

Do we consider a person's provisions to his needy parents a part of "church" giving? (Read 1 Timothy 5:1-16) What kind of witness do Christians give to unbelievers when we turn the care of our parents over to the government? Is God happy that our faith-promise pledge is high while our care for our parents is nil?

Unless we remain sensitive to what God desires, we too may buy the rubbish of the rabbis by letting some magic oath, some home-made, ax-grinding rule release men from a God-ordained obligation.

Jesus' conclusion: **And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition.** Again Jesus' emphasis is on the personal responsibility of those who follow the tradition: "*your tradition* which you hand on. And many such things you do." (Mk. 7:13) Edersheim (*Life*, II, 17) notes that

It was an admitted Rabbinic principle that, while the ordinances of Scripture required no confirmation, those of the Scribes needed such, [Babylonian Talmud, *R.H.* 18b; cf. Bowker, p. 135] and that no Halakhah [i.e. traditional law] might contradict Scripture. (*Jer. Taan.* 66a)

From this standpoint, therefore, Jesus not only proved that on this critical issue and in many others (Mk. 7:13), the scribes' traditional views contradicted or vitiated the Law of God, but He was also arguing on grounds perfectly acceptable to the scribes themselves, and by their own rules they stood self-condemned!

**Your tradition:** points to the human origin and transmission of such rules. Accordingly, not every traditional practice comes under the condemnation of the Lord, because there do exist good and true traditions, defined as such by their ORIGIN. (Cf. 1 Co. 15:3 "I delivered = *parédoka*"; 11:2, 23; 2 Th. 2:15; 3:6; Jude 3 "delivered," *paradostheise*; 2 Pt. 2:21 "delivered") This very distinction in ORIGIN signals the chasm that separates acceptable from unacceptable traditions: are they from God, i.e. delivered (or handed down) by the prophets and apostles? If so, accept and obey, cherish and teach them. Are they products of human reasoning? If so, beware of elevating them to the level of divine authority, since they may be found to promote violations of God's Word. Of course, they may not too, since they may be nothing more than the good, practical ways of understanding and applying God's Word in a given period.

Their ever-present weakness is their humanness.

A modern illustration may serve here. The Holy Spirit describes Christian baptism in the New Testament as the burial in water of a penitent believer for the forgiveness of his sins, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16; Ac. 2:38; 8:38f; 22:16 *et al.*) Over the centuries, however, it has become traditional to acknowledge as valid baptism some other act:

1. which consists in nothing more than a sprinkling of water on the head of a baby that cannot believe, repent or confess personal faith in Jesus Christ;
2. or, which, in other cases, while being performed by immersion has no vital connection with a salvation that has, according to its practitioners, already occurred in the believer, hence is not absolutely essential to receive remission of sins, the gift of the Spirit, eternal life, etc.
3. or is eliminated altogether as a superfluous relic of a bygone age.

Whenever human traditions dare say that anything else is just as good as, or just as saving as, what God requires, they fall under the same condemnation Jesus levels against those who *made void the word of God because of their traditions*. We ought therefore to have a holy fear of any religious system that affirms that ANYTHING is required for our becoming Christians or for maturing our spiritual life, more than the commandment of Christ or the Apostles. Not even men's best applications or extension of meaning of Scripture will do, because no time at all is required for these to become a tradition which rivals God's Word, no matter how well grounded in good reasons those applications might once have been.

**15:7 Ye hypocrites** is Jesus' epithet for them, perhaps to avoid calling them moral imbeciles. The justifications for His judgment are multiple:

1. They had condemned Jesus' disciples for ignoring human traditions, while they themselves, because of their devotion to those human opinions, disobeyed God's Word, while pretending great devotion to God!
2. So painfully careful about ceremonial defilement of hands and household articles, they ignored the real pollution of the heart by their sins and their bold contradictions of God's Word.

3. They pretended to the teaching, judging office, whereas they had become incapable of discerning what is vital in morality! Intolerantly, they made mere trifles into matters superior to justice, mercy, faith and obedience to God! Morality was sacrificed to ritual.
4. By their attitude they were expecting that men consider them as holy as they ought to be before God, but they were not. In their self-deception they had arrived at the point where they actually considered themselves to be what they only pretended to be.

**Isaiah prophesied well of you hypocrites**, not in the sense that he said something predictive about the Pharisees personally, but in the sense that what he affirmed of the hypocrites of his own day, taken as a class, so well describes you, because, by your actions, you have placed yourselves in that class. **Ye hypocrites** form a class so large that your colleagues were the object of God's reproof in Isaiah's day, and what He said about your crowd rings true about you younger members of that notorious crew! How unchangeable is God's ethics: seven centuries had not made any difference in morality: hypocrisy was an abomination to God in the historical context of both Isaiah and Jesus Christ. Here is evidence of an underlying unity in the moral realm that should give us pause when we boast of great moral achievements, lest we think we have discovered something the prophets were already preaching centuries before Christ!

**Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites:** "Before attaching so much weight to the beliefs and doctrines of the ancients which you cite against me, you should honestly and critically examine what God's inspired prophets were saying about them when those ancients actually lived!" The ancients had failed to grasp the futility of punctilious performance of HUMAN prescriptions and commands as if they were the expression of true worship and submission to God's Word. *The elders* and their children had followed them blindly, disregarding how far those human regulations led them away from the way of righteousness and true godliness. Therefore, because the Pharisees pretended to accept the prophecies of Isaiah, it was easy for the Lord to destroy the presumed authority of the elders who had ignored God's revelations, since Isaiah had already scored their blindness in his day. His accusations are multiple:

1. **HEARTLESS FORMALISM:** **This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me.**

**2. SELF-DECEPTION and consequent FUTILITY: In vain do they worship me.**

**3. SUBSTITUTION: Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.**

What was wrong? Missing were the essential ingredients of true worship and a right approach to God: concentration on God and His revealed will.

**1. They did not approach God in the right spirit (Jn. 4:23f)**

- a. There must be a longing love to meet God in Christ through real adoration. Hypocrites have less interest in obedience and loyalty to a revelation than they do their own ideas. In effect, they worship self when they give absolute value to their own exalted opinions.
- b. There must be a consequent humility that permits a true self-evaluation before God. Hypocrites' prayers no longer evidence their dependence upon God, because THEY need no grace, no power, nor guidance. (Cf. 2 Ti. 3:5; Isa. 1:11-20; 1 Sam. 15:15, 22f; Psa. 51:16f; Prov. 21:3, 27; 15:8; 28:9)
- c. There must be a capacity to be compassionate toward any of God's creatures who is lost without God or who otherwise needs God's merciful help expressed through His people. Hypocrites can only look down in unmoving pity upon such unfortunates beneath their level. They think: "If God blesses the good and curses the bad, then to help those staggering under the curse of common human problems which I don't have would overturn God's judgment against them. Better leave them alone to suffer!" We must not put religious pride above human need by caring only about the rigid preservation of our system. (Jas. 1:26f)

**2. They did approach God in truth. (Cf. Jn. 4:23f)**

- a. We must approach God according to the truth of God. This means, therefore, the right use of those forms of worship and service that are acceptable to God. A real love for God expresses itself, among other things, by adoring and serving Him by observing those ceremonials which He has instituted. (Cf. Ac. 17:30f; Ro. 10:1-3) Hypocrites, on the other hand, lay great stress on these ceremonials, because, being external, they can be counterfeited, thus gaining for those who do them credit for holiness in the eyes of those they seek to impress. (Cf. Ezek. 33:30-33; contrast Jeroboam's false worship: 1 Kg. 13:25—14:6) But where man's heart truly seeks the living God, even the

- external forms are acceptable and accepted because founded upon God's truth. (See 1 Co. 10:14-33; 2 Co. 11:1-15; Gal. 1:6-10; 4:1-11; 5:1-14; Col. 2:16-23; Jude; Mt. 23:1-39; Lu. 11:37-52.)
- b. We must approach God in sincerity, with a true heart, in truth.
- (1) The presence of sin in one's life indicates a heart that is far from God. (Mt. 5:19f; Isa. 59:2) Every failure of self-discipline that refuses to eliminate the causes of true impurity invites self-corruption and, at the end, self-destruction. We must learn to hate sin's power to corrupt our conscience and pollute our motives and undermine our will.
  - (2) True purification of heart must eliminate the true uncleanness, sin. (Heb. 9:13f; 10:14, 22; Ac. 8:22; 1 Pt. 1:2, 22; 1 Jn. 1:5-9)

**15:9 But in vain do they worship me.** *In vain* (*måten*) is an expression rich in significance to describe human worship founded solely upon human precepts: It is "vain, wrong, useless, stupid, without motive, reason or wisdom; audacious, false, deceitful" (Rocci, 1186). Such religion is specifically folly, because it imposes upon its adherents a carefulness and rigor that accomplishes precisely nothing except make them uncomfortable, sensitive to trifles, ascetic, hyper-critical and intolerant. Further, because such severe self-abasement has no relation to reality, because only what God says is reality, these human demands leave men ignorant of reality, subject to self-deception and superstition.

But why should the spiritually withering and eternally unsatisfying external ceremonies commanded by *the precepts of men* be actually preferred to the wholesome requirements of God?

1. Because ceremonies can be seen and experienced by him who does them, and they satisfy him more easily and sooner than the slow, inner, invisible growth in godliness.
2. Because ceremonies are visible to others, there is also self-satisfaction in being praised as godly by them.
3. Observing rites is far easier than the slow maturing in righteousness and walking with God, having the courage to repent and deny oneself of such easy satisfactions.

**15:9 But in vain do they worship me:** Isaiah and Jesus pronounce the unmitigated futility of such hypocrisy, because great zeal for *precepts of men* can never guarantee anyone that God is pleased or served. (Cf. Ro. 10:1-3) Here is written also the final doom of such hypocrisy, because, since it never produces any result that pleases

God, He has, in effect, never been worshipped nor served by such people. Why should He embrace them in His Kingdom?

While it is well to see that Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 29:13 differs from the standard translation as we have it directly from Hebrew in our Bible, it should be remembered that two factors enter in to explain the difference:

1. Jesus is giving an interpretative paraphrase of Isaiah, showing, even while quoting, how the quotation itself applies to the situation. Such interpretative quotations were common in Judaism, the so-called Targums. (See ISBE, 2910ff; Edersheim, *Life*, I, 206)
2. Since His quotation, with but minor changes in word order, approximates more closely the Septuagint, we must remember that the LXX translates into Greek a Hebrew text that, being far more ancient, hence even more accurate, than our available Hebrew manuscripts of this passage, Jesus might thus be quoting the more accurate reading.

Compare them together:

ISAIAH (Hebrew)	ISAIAH (Greek)	JESUS
Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote.	This people draws near me. They honor me with their lips, But their heart is far away from me, In vain they worship me Teaching commandments of men and doctrines.	This people honors me with the lips, But their heart is far away from me, In vain they worship me Teaching (as) doctrines commandments of men.

The critical question raised by these readings is: who are the "men" whose commandments are intended: mere humans who never enjoyed inspiration, or God's men treated as mere humans? The implications of either reading are the same, because, following the Hebrew, God's religion ("Their fear of me"), as far as an annoyed Israel was concerned, had become nothing but a boring series of commandments, just a lesson to be memorized. Consequently, their religious practice

was purely perfunctory and habitual, without conviction, because the majesty and authority of God had been forgotten and the words of His prophets were then treated at the merely human level. If we follow the Greek, the prophet is complaining of human opinions being exalted to the level of divine doctrine. Either way, therefore, whether God's Word is debased to the human level, or human doctrines are enthroned beside divine revelation, the same tragic results occur.

As noted above at 15:1, the Pharisees are not alone in following human doctrines, because the Sadducees had their own real traditions too. (See Edersheim, *Life*, I, 313f and note 1.) It would have been impossible, in fact, for Luke (Ac. 23:8) to state so clearly their distinctively unbiblical position, had they had absolutely no opinions, no interpretations of Scripture, no philosophy of Law, etc., that marked them out as a separate school of thought (*hairesis*) among the Jews. Whether they accepted ALL the OT or only the Pentateuch, they too come under Jesus' condemnation, because there is enough in those five books to demonstrate the fallacy of their stated views on angels. (Cf. Gen. 16:7-11; 19:1, 15; 22:11, 15; 32:1f; Ex. 3:2; Nu. 22:22-35) Jesus argued against their rejection of the resurrection, from Ex. 3:6 (Mt. 22:32 and par.). Even a later Pharisean rabbi, Gamaliel II, argued from Dt. 1:8 that a resurrection would have to be implied, since the promise was made, not "to you" but "to them." (See Edersheim, *Life*, I, 316; II, 403 for *Sanh.* 90b where another rabbi argued the same from Ex. 6:4.)

**Teaching as doctrine the precepts of men** is the precious key to understanding this entire discourse, and, consequently, the clue to its proper application in our own case. This, because even in the law of Christ revealed in the NT, there are many, many details that Christ and the Apostles have not revealed; details that we would like to know in order to complete our obedience to that Law. Thousands of questions arise because of the Lord's deliberate silence in many areas. However, it should be obvious that, since the Lord Himself chose not to reveal His specific will in those areas, He did not consider it important for us to be precise there either. Therefore, whatever we decide to do about matters He has not revealed cannot ever become *precepts* or *doctrines* to be taught to others as law. However, the mere fact that our opinions cannot be taught as *doctrine* is, in itself, insufficient to condemn our decisions, if we recognize

them for what they are, i.e. human opinions. It is, rather, when we begin to TEACH AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN that we automatically fall under Jesus' condemnation. As pointed out in the special study following this chapter, "The Law of Christ—How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee," in areas where God has not commanded or prohibited a given thing, He has left us free to have private opinions, so long as these opinions do not nullify His commandments and are not considered as equal to His Words.

One illustration may serve here: Whereas the Lord requires that Christians sing Him their "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" heartily with thankfulness to God (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), He did not specify whether in every case those musical expressions are to be accompanied by any or by many musical instruments. His silence leaves Christians free to decide. However, no Christian is free to decide that his decision must become law for others. Nor may he expect their compliance, except insofar as they share his opinion. All, however, must recognize that any opinion in this area is purely human and can never become *doctrine*, either for or against the musical instrument. Therefore, anyone who commands the use of an instrument, or demands its removal, does so on the basis of the same human logic that got the ancient Jews into the moral bind we see in our text, by exalting to the level of teachable *doctrine* what they themselves decided should be *precepts*. To avoid becoming Pharisees when we learn that some sincere disciples of the Lord are using (or not using) a musical instrument to accompany their corporate singing, we should always investigate whether they *teach as doctrine* what, in the final analysis, can be nothing but the opinable *precepts of men*. On the other hand, if their choice is not being taught as divine law, but recognized as a simple expression of human freedom, without any pretense to a more sacred origin, so that any subsequent alteration or difference in the use of, or non-use of, these things produce no division or contention in the Church, they are free to make use of them or not as things of a purely relative utility.

Protestant traditionalists are perhaps less explicit in their affirmation that their own distinctive doctrines are divinely inspired, than are the Roman Catholic authorities, but are none the less in perfect harmony with the Jewish traditionalistic approach condemned here by the Lord. (See special notes on the inspiration of Catholic tradition, 15:13.)

2. Before the multitudes:  
"Real defilement is not external, but spiritual!"  
(15:10, 11; Mk. 7:14-17)

15:10 **And he called to him the multitude, and said unto them.** Had this crowd been gathering, but politely ignored during what seemed to be a private conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees? Now, however, He deliberately includes them, as if they, too, had heard the major charge levelled by the Pharisees. Otherwise, this startling declaration (15:11) would seem too much out of context for it to be understood instantly and without further explanation.

Despite the real probability that the "reverend doctors from Jerusalem" would be humiliated by this deliberate escalation, and despite the noticeable embarrassment of the Twelve who felt themselves publicly trapped between the official doctrine of the recognized scholars in Judaism and their Master's pronouncements, the Lord Himself cannot further tolerate the substitution of God's truth by whatever means. He must show compassion upon the masses who were led to their spiritual death by these blind, spiritual guides. When the Master turns to the crowds—the non-specialists in Judaism, the multitudes despised by the proud scholars,—this is glorious mercy. The obstinate, unteachable chiefs are bypassed for those who, however weak and unfit in other ways, were far more open and teachable. (See notes on 11:25-30.)

**Hear and understand.** How many of the merely curious and careless would actually ponder His meaning? Here is the acid test of His audience, used in precisely the same manner as in His great Sermon in Parables. (See Mt. 13:9-22 and relative notes.) Man's morality is deeply affected by his own receptivity to truth, because he can decide whether to listen to Jesus or not. By attempting to influence His hearers, He refutes the excuse that sin is somehow necessary under certain circumstances for which the individual is somehow not responsible, because in precisely the same way man can shut the doors of his mind to truth, he can shut them to temptation! So, man is liable for all that comes out of his own heart, because he can decide which way he will permit himself to be influenced, for good or ill. Consequently, every man is the final source of his own character. This is why practical discipleship to Jesus is so vital, because what we let Him teach us affects our attitude toward all else that enters our lives. This urgent invitation to *hear and understand* is rightly addressed, not merely to the scholars, but especially to the "ordinary

people," who must dedicate themselves to study and understand what the Lord means.

Nevertheless, it may be fairly asked to what extent the Lord expected ANY disciple—Apostle or otherwise—to understand and apply His Law-changing, revolutionary declaration about ceremonial purity? (15:11) Since the Levitical system, upon which such distinctions were based, would not be cancelled until His own sacrifice at the cross (Heb. 7:11ff, 26ff; 9:15ff, 24ff; 10:9f; Col. 2:13-15, etc.), did He really expect at least some of them to stop washing themselves after ceremonial defilement, or neglect to eat only kosher foods, and the like? Or, is not this lesson much like that on the new birth of water and the Spirit, presented to Nicodemus? (Cf. Jn. 3:1ff) If so, then, Jesus is enunciating a principle that, however much in advance of its actual promulgation it were stated, would not actually take effect until the Holy Spirit should have come on Pentecost to execute Jesus' will. His teaching given in advance of that moment, then, served to bring His disciples' thinking back to the profounder OT teaching; lest the apparent newness of the revelations to be given later by the Apostles under the guidance of the Spirit be too totally unfamiliar.

Thus, the following statement is Jesus' revelation of how God really regards the dual question of external and spiritual defilement and purity. In this light, then, if the Lord does not expect His people to begin at once to act upon His revelation by their rejecting kosher distinctions, they are at least to begin thinking about it, so that the New Covenant revelations will become the welcome confirmations of these previews.

**15:11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man.** The revolutionary significance of this statement can hardly be overestimated, because it amounts to a practical abrogation of the Levitical distinction between clean and unclean foods. (Mk. 7:19) Whereas the abrogation itself would not take effect until Christ's death removed the entire Law of Moses (cf. Ro. 3:20f, 28; 6:14; 7:1, 4, 6; 8:1-4; 10:4; 2 Co. 3:3, 7, 11, 14 etc.), nevertheless, here in the ministry of Jesus is another clear statement of His intent to rescind that ancient norm. And yet, nothing could be clearer, from a careful reading of the OT Law on defilement, than that the physical contact through touching certain objects or eating certain foods definitely defiled the one who did so. (Lev. 11; see note on cleanliness and defilement at Mt. 15:2.) The Law included these rules which are altogether ignored by the NT, for these reasons:

1. Because God was dealing with a nation in its infancy with a view to bringing it to maturity and preparedness for the final, perfect revelations of Christ. (Gal. 3:23—4:7)
2. Because Jehovah was dealing with Jews in a specific historical setting in which they were literally surrounded by idolatry with its abominable regulations and orientation, which would compromise the distinctiveness and moral growth of Israel. (Dt. 7) The purpose of the laws of purity and defilement had no immediate or primary connection with either sanitation or health, although these might certainly be secondary considerations. The primary concern was always: "Consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any (thing) . . . you shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine." (Cf. Lv. 11:44f) Any Hebrew who was really listening to Moses could understand that ceremonial cleansings and abstinence from certain foods had value only insofar as these expressed this fundamental concept. Where the heart was holy, even the ceremonies had value, because God commanded them. Alone, however, these rituals were impotent to produce holiness, since the separation unto the Lord of man's heart is the key factor. If the heart belongs to God through man's personal consecration, all his deeds are clean. (Cf. Tit. 1:15)
3. Because God was furnishing the Christian Church with a foundational vocabulary that defined the concept of personal holiness. (Cf. Peter's citation of Lv. 11:44f in 1 Pt. 1:16; see 1 Th. 4:3-7)

The Law (Word of God) temporarily required these regulations until the time when, having accomplished their purpose, they could be replaced by a more permanent Word from God. Who is this Jesus of Nazareth, then, if He, towering above God's Law, dares to change it? Here is implicit evidence of His essential deity as Author of the OT, evidence that is in perfect harmony with His more explicit claims.

Contrary to the view of some, this passage does not represent a psychological or religious revolution in terms of what God reveals about the things that really affect human existence, because God, both in the Law and through the Prophets, was constantly hammering on the eternal importance of the conditions of man's heart. In fact, Jesus' declaration is but the summation of hundreds of OT sermons which would actually prepare the Hebrew mind to accept just such a statement as that of Jesus here. (Cf. Psa. 5:9; 50; 51; 58:2; 78:36f; Isa. 1:10-20; Jer. 2:22; 4:14; 6:19f; 7:21-26; 11:15; 13:27; 14:9-12; 33:8) How many great prophets and godly men before Jesus had

lamented and condemned Israel's hypocritical ceremonialism because the nation had no vital confidence in God, no real concern to be holy! Remember the great religious reforms of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 29:32) and Josiah (2 Chr. 34, 35) and the prophetic preaching like that of Micah (3:11; 6:4-6) or Malachi. (Cf. Am. 4:4f; 5:21-24; Joel 2:12-14; Ezek. 14:11; 20:7, 26; 22:24; 23:13, 17, 30; 24:9-14; 33:30-33; 36:17, 20, 24-27)

**15:11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man; but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man.** This is but one sentence, one pithy, memorable proverb, directed to the people, the meaning of which Jesus will later explain to the disciples. (See on vv. 18-20.) Is this verse the substance of an entire message delivered by Jesus at this point? This might be admitted, because it would seem less likely that He would have drawn the crowds into His conversation with the Pharisees just to hear this single sentence. Yet, He could have intentionally thrown this mysterious maxim into the crowd like a live hand grenade, to stir them to reflect on its meaning, question Him further and thus deepen their discipleship as well as their understanding. (See on 13:10; 15:12.) The fact that the Twelve later ask about it proves not only their personal loyalty but also that He had not made it clear to them in the presence of the multitudes.

The Apostle to the Gentiles will develop this concept in the concise Christian axiom: "The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Ro. 14:17) By affirming that real purity or defilement is not merely external, but of the heart, the Lord established a principle so fundamental in its application that it not only expressed the radical character and grandeur of Christian freedom as this contrasts with Mosaic restrictions, but it also warns that the standard by which men will be judged is not merely by their outward deeds but by the character of their heart.

### 3. Before the disciples, privately (15:12-20; Mk. 7:17-23)

"When He entered into a house away from the crowd, His disciples questioned Him." (Mk. 7:17) This decisive move permitted the concerned to draw Him out and receive the help His surprising declaration

made necessary.

15:12 Then came the disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard this saying? The fact that they are worried enough to warn Jesus about possible evil consequences of His position shows that these are real men with real confusions. They are not story-book characters whose bad side should be glossed over. This is a mark of authenticity. Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 214) wonders whether the disciples themselves might not also be scandalized by Jesus' extreme statements. After all, if they had begun to see that Jesus, in theory at least, is removing the proper, Levitical boundaries between clean and unclean meats, even if on any other ground they had no quarrel with Jesus because of the solid character of their trust in His divine credentials that proved His right to speak for God, yet here He dares lay hands upon already well-authenticated revelation from God. So, even though the Pharisees had attacked the disciples personally, still, from the point of view of what the unquestionable Law of God had taught, they surprisingly found themselves on the defensive against Jesus who now seemed to negate a significant part of God's Word. From this standpoint, they found themselves effectively thrown onto the same side with the Pharisees! Their worry is twofold:

1. The question of authority: "In the face of this open rejection and refutation of the Pharisees' position with its consequent affront to these men of light and learning, as well as the religious power of the day, do you adhere to your position?" Here is the fundamental question: who really represents God here? The Pharisees and their traditional theologians who, without any demonstrable evidence of divine authority for nullifying God's explicit orders by their interpretations, or Jesus of Nazareth "a man attested to you by God by many mighty works and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know"? (Cf. Ac. 2:22) How much weight should be given to His credentials, if His message seems to detract from the authority of well-attested revelations in Leviticus? (Cf. Dt. 13:1-5; Isa. 8:20) Humanly speaking, their position is not an easy one.
2. The question of favorably religio-political support: "These are men of considerable power and influence in the nation. Can you successfully wage a significant campaign for religious reform in Israel without their patronage and influence? Must you, through lack of sufficient foresight and tact, lose the all-essential support

of backers like these?" The disciples' view of the Kingdom is measurably mistaken if they believe that the Kingdom's interests can be rightly served by men who habitually nullify the Law of the King, and whose best service to the King is dictated by their own tastes, customs and rules!

Having seen Jesus deliberately break with the popular nationalistic principles of the Zealots' cause (see on 14:22), the disciples probably fear that to enrage these influential scholars would precipitate a tragic end to His program.

**The Pharisees were offended.** Indeed, they had every reason to be shocked and angered, because He dared teach the people doctrine that put in doubt the traditional basis of their customs by exposing revered rabbinical opinions as absurd and ungodly. He discredited their pretended scholarship and popular authority. If He is right, their entire theory of piety is wrong. The rightness of His opposition is in exact proportion to the arrogance of their self-assertion, self-worship and self-complacency. But here is a proper test-case of scandal. (See on Mt. 11:6.) Jesus MUST teach the truth and do His duty. If anyone is scandalized by His actions, it is the fault of that individual, but not of him who, in obedience to truth, does his duty. Jesus' justification which follows, explains His attitude toward those theologians.

**15:13 But he answered and said, Every plant which my heavenly Father planteth not, shall be rooted up.** Two views of the *plant* are possible: (1) traditions; (2) traditionalists.

1. If Jesus means the figure of the *plant not planted* by God, to represent people who nullify God's Word in their teaching and/or practice, then He may be referring to a fact which would actually occur when these very false teachers, who had seemed so formidable to the Apostles, would one day be removed from their positions of influence and authority. In this light, the Lord is warning the Apostles that "the reverend gentlemen from Jerusalem," because they rejected God's truth, would one day be rudely uprooted from their glorious position, whereas, if the Apostles themselves shall have truly honored God's will, would remain in God's field.
2. If, on the other hand, Jesus means to refer to the human traditions, then He is saying that since human tradition does not possess God's authority, it must be eradicated, whereas His own teaching will stand that test. (Cf. Jer. 23, esp. vv. 28, 29) Here Jesus underscores the important distinction between one tradition

and another: who started it? Who or what is its ORIGIN? If God planted it, it will endure. If, on the other hand, it can claim no more than human authority, it is destined to be removed from consideration and must be evaluated from that standpoint. Its value is decided on the basis of origins.

In practice, it is unimportant which of these interpretations is the better, because beliefs can never really be distinguished from those who teach them, because what they believe makes them what they are. People are to be identified with, and judged by, the doctrines they say they believe in. (Remember what Jesus said about the interrelation of heart and doctrine in Mt. 13. See notes on 13:38b, c.) Jesus had already taught that not all the plants growing in the Kingdom are of His sowing, hence, not all please Him. (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43; cf. 1 Th. 2:15)

Is it urgent here to decide WHO would do the uprooting? Is it God? Jesus? the apostles? Time? In our text Jesus Himself furnishes the sickles and shovels whereby the Apostles and Christians anywhere might *root up* ALL teaching that does not square with God's Word, is done without divine authority or approval, by comparing it with the Bible, by recognizing the tendency of human opinions to nullify some Word from God. Further, by implication, Jesus defends His duty to attack and root out what is false, corrupting and positively dangerous for the growth of *what my heavenly Father planted*.

In fact, implicit in Jesus' words is the suggestion that there is at least one kind of plant which the heavenly Father DID plant, that shall never be rooted up. Is it not the Kingdom with its doctrine and its believers? It is to be a Kingdom in which Mosaic legislation about impurity of any sort other than moral is to have no part. In contrast to rabbinic notions of the importance of their own hoary traditions, it is to be a Kingdom in which the Father's Word is to be the only standard. In contrast to scribal contempt for publicans and sinners, Samaritans, Gentiles and women, it is to be a Kingdom that embraces all who bow before the King and joyfully do anything He says. Naturally, as Maurice (*PHC*, Vol. XXII, 382) has it,

The most natural and necessary antagonists of it were the sects; that Sadducees and Pharisees hated it equally; that they saw in it the destruction of the sect-principle. . . . There is a plant in your heart and mine which our heavenly Father has not planted, and which must be rooted out. It is that same plant of self-seeking, of

opinionativeness, of party-spirit, which has shed its poison over the church and over the world.

### NOTES ON CATHOLIC TRADITIONS

Study the "new" Catholicism as this denomination is revealed in her *Documents of the Second Vatican Council*. Following is my translation from Italian of excerpts from the document *Dei Verbum*, Chapter II: "On the Transmission of the Divine Revelation." Compare these assertions with Judaism's attitude toward tradition and traditional authority to teach God's Word.

... The Apostles, so that the Gospel might always be preserved complete and alive in the Church, then left the Bishops as their successors, entrusting to them their own personal position as teachers (*suum ipsorum locum magisterii*). This Sacred Tradition, therefore, and the Sacred Scriptures of both testaments are as one mirror in which the Church, pilgrim on earth, contemplates God . . . Meanwhile, the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, had to be preserved by continuous succession until the end of time. Therefore, the Apostles, committing that which they themselves had received, admonish the faithful to hold to the traditions which they had received either by word of mouth or by letter (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15), and to contend for that faith which had been once for all delivered to them (cf. Jude 3) . . .

This Tradition of apostolic origin progresses (*proficit*) in the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (*sub assistentia Spiritus Sancti*): in fact the comprehension grows both of the things as well as of the words handed down, both by means of the meditation and study of the believers who meditate upon them in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:19 and 51), and by means of the experience that derives from a deeper understanding of spiritual things, as well as by the preaching of those who, along with the episcopal succession, received a certain charisma of truth (*ex paeconio eorum qui cum episcopatus successione charisma veritatis certum acceperunt*). The Church, that is, in the course of the centuries, incessantly tends toward the fulness of the divine truth, until the words of God be brought to (or come to) perfection (*donec in ipsa consummentur verba Dei.*).

The assertions of the Holy Fathers attest the life-giving presence of this Tradition, the riches of which are transfused into the practice and life of the Church that believes and that prays. It is the same Tradition that causes the Church to know the entire canon of the Sacred Books, and, in her, causes to understand more profoundly and animates the Sacred Letters themselves (*et indesinenter actuosae reddentur*); thus, God who spoke in the past, does not cease to speak with the Bride of His Beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit, by means of whose voice the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, by whose means (it resounds) in the world, leads the believers to all the truth and causes the word of Christ to dwell in them in all its richness (cf. Col. 3:16).

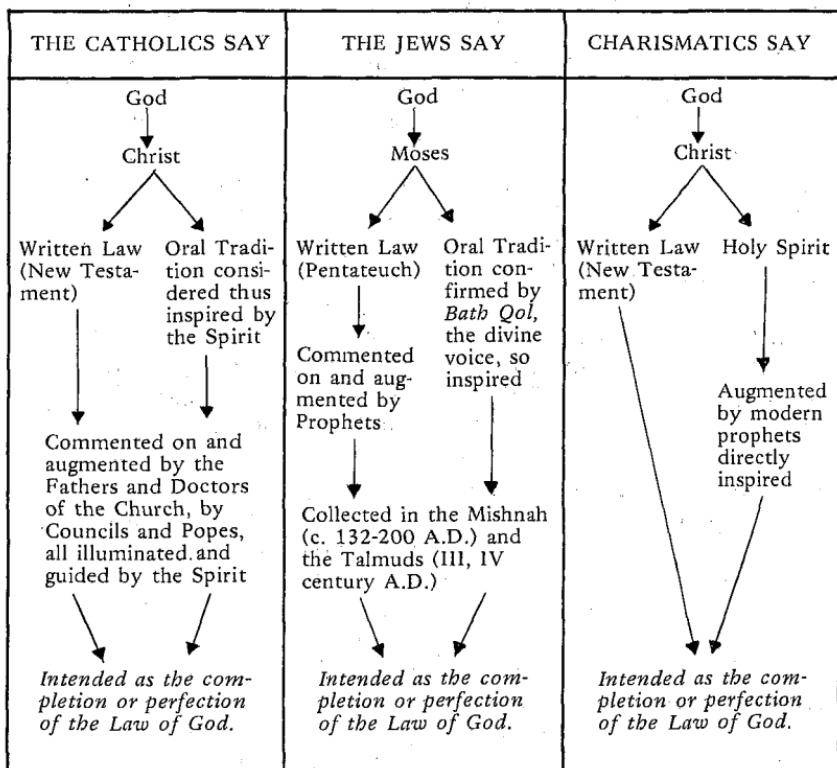
The Sacred Tradition therefore and the Holy Scriptures are bound closely together and are communicating between them. Since both spring from the same divine origin, they form, in a certain sense, one thing and tend toward the same goal. In fact, the Sacred Scripture is the word of God, because written by the inspiration of the Spirit of God; the word of God, entrusted by Christ and by the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, is entirely transmitted by the Sacred Tradition to their successors, so that these, illuminated by the Spirit of truth (*praelucente Spiritu veritatis*), might preserve it faithfully by their preaching, expound and publish it; and thus it is that the Church bases its certainty about all the things revealed, not upon the Scripture alone (*non per solam Sacram Scripturam hauriat*). Therefore the one and the other must be considered worthy of veneration with equal pious affection and reverence (*Quapropter utraque pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia suscipienda et veneranda est.*).

The Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Scripture constitute one sacred deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church . . .

The Office of interpreting authentically the word of God, written or handed down (*verbum Dei scriptum vel traditum*) is entrusted only to the living Magisterium (i.e. Teaching Authority) of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This Teaching Authority (Magisterium), however, is not superior to the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed down, since, by divine mandate and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (*ex divino mandato et Spiritu Sancto assistente*), it piously heeds, holily guards and faithfully expounds that word, and from this one deposit of the faith draws forth all that it proposes to believe as revealed by God.

It is clear, therefore, that the Sacred Tradition, the Sacred Scripture and the Teaching Authority of the Church (Magisterium), by the supremely wise counsel of God are so thoroughly connected and joined together as not to be able to stand independently, and all together, each in its own way, under the action of one Holy Spirit, effectively contribute to the salvation of souls.

Compare the Catholic, the Jewish and the Charismatic views;



15:14 **Let them alone.** (*afete*, 2 Aorist imperative, 2nd person plural of *afemi*) This expression is made problematic by the broad meaning-potential of the word: "let go, send away; 2 cancel, remit, pardon; 3 Literally; leave, abandon; Figuratively, give up, abandon; 4 Let, let go, tolerate; allow, let, permit." (Arndt-Gingrich, 125f)

Because the verb-form is second plural, we must reject with reluctance the construction, suggested by A.B. Bruce (*Training*, 84), whereby these words are seen as the disciples' advice to Jesus: "Let them alone, Jesus!" Otherwise, the words bounced back to the disciples would have probably been expressed in the second person singular verb-form. We must understand the plural as really addressed to the disciples.

Jesus' meaning, based upon the meaning-potential of this verb, might be:

1. *Divorce* them from your thinking. Their doctrine is not permanent, because it is not God's.
2. *Pardon* them their offense at the truth I teach. They are wrongly scandalized, but I am not backing down. From this standpoint, He not only places Himself above the scribes, i.e. in a position to overlook their offense; He actually requires that the disciples rise to the position where they can remit or cancel, as far as their own feelings are concerned, this false scandal of the rabbis. Jesus Himself certainly did not hold this particular attack against the Pharisees, because He continued vigorously to attempt to convince them, even if this meant exposing their hypocrisy and opposing their doctrine. The Apostles would later be engaged in public debate with Judaizers clear until the fall of Jerusalem.
3. *Give up* on the Pharisees, because they are incorrigible. Stop worrying about what they think, because there comes a time when you must "shake the dust off your feet against them" and abandon them to their wilful blindness and self-chosen fate.
4. *Tolerate* the Pharisees as individuals, because we are dealing with the evils of their system, not attacking them personally. By temporarily tolerating them, we may actually grant them the mercy to reflect and repent, if some of them will. (Cf. 13:30!) *Tolerate* them until their blindness reaches its culmination and they are toppled into destruction along with all who agree with them.

Does it matter which of these suggestions is correct? In all of them runs Jesus' sound advice: "Do not be overly excited about their approval or unfavorable opinion of my teaching or program, for they shall fall. God guarantees their condemnation, regardless of their apparently powerful influence and their presently great authority. Above all, do not fear them!" (Cf. Lk. 12:1-12; Mt. 10:16ff, 26-33) The Pharisees' spiritual condition, with its self-willed blindness and

stubborn hypocrisy, its deliberate adherence to human traditions rather than love for God and His revelations, fully justifies His (and, consequently, their) abandoning them to their just condemnation.

**They are blind guides.** Jesus never once denied that these Pharisees are *guides*, furnished with scholarship, credentials and an impressive following. What is really comforting to the disciples is His confident assertion that they, who claim the exclusive vision of the truth and the unique right to lead Israel in her worship and service to God, are really *blind*. (See notes on 13:13-17.) *Blind*, in this case, means biased, prejudiced so as to be unable to grasp truth, however evident it might be. Truth, according to these imperturbable bigots, is not to be found outside their vain opinions. This assertion of Jesus comforts the disciples, because they begin to see that the formidable specter presented by these religious scholars did not represent ultimate reality, because **THEIR EYES**, and those of their followers however numerous, **WERE CLOSED TO IT**. The real issue is always whether Jesus' disciples really believe that Jesus is the God-sent Guide who can see to lead His people safely back to God.

*Blind guides:* if their boast of their knowledge of the Law qualified them to be Rabbis, "a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness" (Ro. 2:17-24), what a shock to hear them described as the tragic perversion of their high calling! Worse still was their total unconsciousness of their self-chosen blindness, confounded by their pretense to be able to see. (Cf. Jn. 9:40f) What blindness to be unable to discern the futility of zeal and diligence in activities intended to justify oneself before God but which were totally uncalled for by God! They were *blind guides*, because they knew perfectly well what God said in the Law, but still thought they had a right to have their own way. ("God commanded . . . But you say . . ." vv. 4, 5) The Apostles had not yet understood that all that even great, learned authorities affirm with unhesitating confidence must be compared with God's message, and should their notions be found inconsistent with His, they may be safely discarded without fear of losing something of value or permanence. (Cf. Ac. 4:19f)

**And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit.** The crushing irony here is that these very *blind guides* are themselves *the blind* followers of those ancient elders whose traditions they held in such reverential honor, because they followed them blindly, unconcerned about how far from the way of truth, righteousness and true godliness those completely human ordinances would lead them.

**Both shall fall into a pit.** Blind followers **ARE** responsible for what

they believe. However much they may be influenced by false leaders, they are lost. Thus, false religious teaching or mistaken religious leaders actually take sincere followers along with them to their destruction. (Study notes on 7:13-24, 28.) If a man believes himself to be in need of leadership but freely and deliberately chooses as leader another man who himself needs correction, he deserves the tragedy that will be his. (Jer. 14:14-16; 20:6; 28:15f; Isa. 9:16; Ezek. 14:9-11) McGarvey (Matthew-Mark, 136) rightly counsels:

He should choose a leader who can see, and as there is no leader who can see all the way that we have to travel except Jesus, let us take his word as our only guide, going only as it leads us.

Despite our felt need for human teachers to help us along toward truth (cf. Ac. 8:31; 1 Co. 4:15; Eph. 4:11), we should follow no man, except as he follows Christ. (1 Co. 11:1; 4:16)

**15:15 And Peter answered and said unto him, Declare unto us the parable.** Evidently, Peter is the spokesman for the disciples who had become uneasy about Jesus' indifference toward the violent reaction of the religious leaders. In fact, the sharp rebuke Jesus administers is in the plural ("ye"), hence, addressed to the group Peter represents. (15:16)

What expression of Jesus' seemed so obscure to Peter that he described it as *the parable*? Whereas in Matthew there are two germ parables in the context, i.e. that of the rooted up plants (v. 13) and that of the blind guides (v. 14), Mark's version omits these two by passing directly from the public statement about internal defilement to the explanation of this *parable*. (Mk. 7:14-17) So Peter is requesting clearer information about this enigmatic public statement. (Mt. 15:11 = Mk. 7:15)

**NOTE:** Here is further evidence that *parable* in NT language, does not always refer necessarily to a one-point illustration, as required by modern rhetoric. The *parable* referred to by Peter is: "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." (v. 11) The only way to consider this a one-point illustration is to suppose either that Jesus actually said more, which is, of course, possible, or that Peter sees this sentence as picturing an incomplete story teaching a moral about a man who ate some food that did not defile him. Then there was that unclear part about what came out of his mouth that defiled him. It is better, however, to see *parable* in

Peter's usage here as meaning: "a terse, ingeniously expressed thought, whose meaning is partially hidden by its brevity and partly by its form and content." What Peter does not understand—for whatever reason—he calls a *parable* (*parabolén*).

Nevertheless, in the declaration referred to (v. 11), there is a feature that is common to parables: real truth is expressed by literal symbols, invisible ideas are symbolized by visible images. In this case moral defilement of the heart is symbolized by something coming out of one's mouth. Peter's question is not totally groundless, because, without further explanation or previous insight, it would not be clear what it is that comes out of a man's mouth, when it was food that went in.

**15:16 And he said, Are ye also even yet without understanding?** If Jesus' rebuke seems exaggerated by contrast to a simple request for information of what was unclear, it must be measured against the much private information and exceptional opportunity that had already been given these very close disciples. (Cf. 15:12) They are not simply part of "the people" (Mt. 15:10; Mk. 7:14, 17) whom Jesus often left on the outer fringe so long as they chose not to become closer disciples. (Cf. Mt. 13:10-17) There is an emphatic sting in each of the words: *Are you also—even yet—without understanding?* because of the implied contrast with all others. Despite the pretended authority of the Jerusalem scholars, these refused to learn from Jesus, so remained *without understanding*, and rightly so. The crowds who asked no questions and wanted no answers were *also without understanding*. But what justification could the Apostles muster for their inability to see the far-reaching implications of His great revolutionary declaration? Even if their main difficulty is their inability to admit that this basic element of Mosaic legislation can be eliminated once the fundamental purpose for its original enactment had been fulfilled, what excuse could cover their failure to admit Jesus to be the Lawgiver Himself and fully empowered to change, correct or even abolish His own Law? Or should they fail to hold so exalted an estimate of their Master, they are also *without understanding* of even the basic concepts taught both in the Law and prophets which God intended all Israel to understand. (See on 15:10f.) Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 216) is right to admonish: "Christ expects from us some proportion of knowledge, and grace, and wisdom, according to the time and means we have had. See Jn. 14:9; Heb. 5:12; 2 Ti. 3:7f."

15:17 Perceive ye not, that whatsoever goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? The Lord describes here the normal functioning of the alimentary canal: common food passes from one part of the digestive system to the other and what cannot be assimilated is eliminated. Because He is speaking generally, those substances that are positively harmful to the body are not considered here. However, normal food is used in the body for its strength, but this process does not defile the body, because the moral state of a man is not really based upon the material or the mechanical. That is, purely physical processes, which have no relation to the will, the intellect, the emotions, or the conscience, can never really pollute or profane the heart. There is no proper connection, no real affinity between material food *per se* and the soul.

It is because of this objective lack of affinity, therefore, that Jesus can affirm that food, any food, is objectively "clean, pure." The Levitical system was, thus, an arbitrary law that forbade the eating of certain foods so that the Israelites might learn holiness through obedience to these arbitrary laws. The defilement, involved in eating foods declared unclean, lay not in the objective impurity of those foods, but in a Hebrew's disregarding God's law by requesting and justifying his eating of that food. Lenski (*Matthew*, 589, 592) is right to say that "forbidden meats could be eaten only by a Jew who was set on disobeying God's Levitical law," but he draws a wrong conclusion therefrom when he denies that Jesus intended "no abrogation of the Levitical laws concerning meats." In fact, when Jesus declares the objective purity of ALL foods (Mk. 7:19), He says the opposite of the food laws which said "SOME meats are impure." So He is actually undermining any consideration of the Levitical distinctions as absolute. By going back of the subjective impurity of certain foods to the objective purity of all foods, Jesus is going back of the Levitical rules that established that subjective impurity, and effectively cancels the distinctions they created. But, by so doing, He rises above the Levitical system and dares say something different than it had said. Mark (7:19) does not want his readers to miss that connection, but Matthew, sensitive to the biases of his readership, does not want to close their mind to the more important truth he wants to get across. He knows that if they accept Jesus as Lord, Messiah and revealer of God, they will, in time, see that He can erase Levitical rules too. (Cf. Ac. 10:10-16; 11:9)

Jesus' declaration expresses His fundamental confidence in the basic goodness of God's creation, as over against an ascetic tendency

to suspect certain aspects of God's creation as intrinsically contaminating or profaning: (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-5; Gen. 1:31; 9:3; Ro. 14:2, 6; 1 Co. 10:25-30; Ac. 10:28)

True enough, "an inordinate appetite, intemperance, and excess in eating, come out of the heart, and are defiling." (M. Henry, Vol. V, 216) Further, while it is true that foods do have their effect on the body and cannot be regarded as having absolutely no effect, Jesus, however, is discussing what will defile man's soul, not discussing health or simple sanitation. Even if the precise food laws affected by Jesus' declaration might yet be followed as a question of "health and hygiene and common sense and medical wisdom" (Barclay, *Matthew*, II, 131), after they were abrogated at the cross, they could never remain in vigor as a question of conscience to disturb the soul.

This basic character of Judaism, as opposed to true, OT religion, whereby the former pitted ritual purity against ethical purity at the expense of the latter and seen in the tendency to multiply regulations for external self-abasement, is all too easily reproduced in the Church. (Study 1 Ti. 4:1-5; Col. 2:8-23.) Paul's whole argument in Col. 2, 3 is that man cannot achieve life with a holy God by strict adherence to human regulations, precepts and doctrines which, however wisely they appear to promote rigor of devotion, self-abasement and severity to the body, have no value in dealing with the root cause of fleshly indulgence. This must come from a new mind-set.

**15:18 But the things which proceed out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and they defile the man.** This is probably the profoundest declaration on mind-pollution. Nothing pours out of the mind through one's speech but what was first put there. The great issue, then, is what is getting into a man's mind? This is why propaganda in all its forms, both good and bad, is a life-changing activity, since man's conduct is deeply affected by whatever is in his mind. (Cf. Staton, *The Perfect Balance*, 79f)

What does this say about the Pharisees' failure to let the Word of God so completely permeate their thinking that they were able to miss seeing their flagrant violation of God's holy commandment? Where had they failed to teach the proper concern for one's aged, needy parents? They had failed to keep ALL of God's message in mind, both with its emphasis on parental care, as well as its emphasis on giving to God what had been promised. These theological bunglers failed to maintain that nice balance which God had placed in tension. Consequently, they concentrated on only a portion of the truth, and

this imbalance produced the travesty of truth that Jesus exposes here. He attacks it because He is sure that half-truth cannot make a man whole, and the resulting self-deception, ignorance and conceit is the fatal source of sin in all its expressions. (Study Psa. 119:9, 11, 44f, 104, 130, 165; Col. 3:16; Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19.) The Pharisees were so terribly wrong, because they had filled man's vision of God with a dedication to ceremonials, externals and details, rather than with the knowledge of God, mercy, justice and faithfulness. (Hos. 6:6; Mt. 23:23; Phil. 4:8)

**The things which proceed out of the mouth** means "words," of course, and these really *defile the man*. Man's thoughts and intentions shape them into the creatures they are before they are ever expressed verbally. In fact, it is not essential that one's plans ever be vocalized for them to pollute his heart and life. (Cf. Mt. 5:22, 28) Whereas by the very nature of food, whatever does not assimilate into the body is eliminated, the nature of sinful words and attitudes produces, unfortunately, quite another result, because whatever is produced in the soul (*psyche*) influences the character and blights every human expression. This finds confirmation on the positive side of human experience, because Jesus states it as a general rule that a "good man out of his good treasure brings forth good." (Mt. 12:33-37) Good also begins in the mind. (Phil. 4:8; cf. Mt. 7:17f; Lk. 6:43-45) *The heart* is all that, taken together, composes the entire man: his desires, his conscience, his will, his intellect, his memory, his habits, his temperament. *They defile the man*: the only defilement worth discussing is that of an evil, unregenerate mind, because this is the true source of those thoughts, words and deeds that offend against God's Law. (Cf. Jas. 1:13-15; Jer. 17:9; see on 15:19.)

Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 214) astutely notices that "it is not the disciples that defile themselves with what they eat, but the Pharisees that defile themselves with what they speak spitefully and censoriously of them." It is so easy to defile ourselves by transgressing God's Law against censoriousness, while we criticize others for their transgressions of His Law. There are no neutral words that do not count: they must positively bless others or they defile the person who says them. (Col. 3:16; 4:6; Eph. 4:29; 5:4; 1 Pt. 3:15, 16; Jas. 3:10)

**15:19 For:** the principle stated in v. 18 is now to be explained and amplified. **Out of the heart come forth evil thoughts:** this does not state a law of permanent depravity that excludes the possibility of any good as coming from the heart as such, because the Lord Himself

also affirmed the latter. He means here that evil thoughts and all their effects come from the heart, not from some missed ceremony or bungled ritual. Since a wicked heart is the poison fountain whence this pollution pours, if His hearers desire to alter the character of what comes from their hearts, they must have a NEW HEART! Jesus' statement only becomes an unchangeable law for those who refuse to change the character of their entire being by total conversion to Christ. (Cf. Heb. 3:12f)

**Evil thoughts** are the father of the deeds that make up this defiling catalog. In fact, were these never the subject of man's daydreams nor the object of his desires, they could never surface as deeds, because they would have died abortively.

**NOTE:** Mark introduces only "evil thoughts" with definite articles ("the thoughts, i.e. the evil ones") whereas he seems to place all the other sins in apposition to them, hence without articles, as if the latter are to be considered as the natural expression "evil thoughts," which is, of course, what Jesus affirmed explicitly.

Since the sins listed begin with, and are the expression of *evil thoughts*, we must beware of "an itching interest" in them, lest our own steadfastness be compromised by our own apparent conscientiousness which may be nothing but a lusty curiosity that loves to dwell on the details. (Eph. 5:12 in context) For this reason we must be set straight by Jesus on these subjects, that we might have His power for our self-defense against them.

In order to include Mark's additions, Matthew's list has been reorganized to capture certain groupings that reveal how the acts externalize the *evil thoughts*:

1. **HATEFUL THOUGHTS.** *Murder* is but the external manifestation of hate latent in the heart. (See notes on 5:21f; cf. Jas. 4:1f; Psa. 55:21; 1 Jn. 3:15.) An *evil eye* (*oīthalmōs ponērōs*) means that jealous envy that broods hate, because unable or unwilling to rejoice in the good fortune of another and wishing to deprive him of it.
2. **SENSUAL THOUGHTS.** *Adultery* (*moicheīai*) differs from *fornication* (*porneīai*) in that the former refers in this context to extramarital sexual relations, while the latter refers to premarital relations, but both are natural products of a lusty heart. (See notes on 5:27-32.) Mark (7:22) adds "licentiousness" (*asélgeia*) whose

range of meaning includes: "debauchery, sensuality, especially of sexual excesses" (Arndt-Gingrich, 114) as well as "dissoluteness, insolence, shamelessness, courseness, arrogance" (Rocci, 277). See 2 Pt. 2:14a.

3. DISCONTENTED THOUGHTS. *Theft* (*klopai*) is born of a desire to possess something without which it cannot rest content until it is taken. Mark (7:22) adds "coveting" (*pleonexiai*), which is the insatiable greed that leads to *theft*, and many other soul-piercing evils as well. (Cf. 1 Ti. 6:6-10) There are degrees of greed in everyone, that are in direct proportion to the degree we content ourselves with what God provides. (Heb. 13:5f) Greed expresses the real idolatry in the heart. (Col. 3:5) The whole spirit of "covetousness" defiles, because people do not want to be satisfied to live without all the products promoted by industry. They must "have more" (*pleon + exia*), even if someone else must pay the bills.
4. UNCHARITABLE THOUGHTS. *False witness* (*pseudomartyria*) may be prompted by inner fear to represent openly what is known to be otherwise than is declared, as well as by the hate that gives testimony that deliberately damages an innocent person. Mark (7:22) notes also "deceit" (*dòlos*) which points to that cunning treachery and stealth by which one intentionally deceives others. (See 2 Pt. 2:14; Psa. 62:10.)
5. BLASPHEMOUS THOUGHTS. *Slander* (*blasfemiai*) is a degrading, derogating kind of speech often produced by maliciousness or bitterness, whether directed at God or man. (cf. Jas. 3:9) At its heart is pride and censuring criticism. (See on 7:1-5.) It engenders and is also produced by false witness to which it is necessarily kin.
6. PERVERSE THOUGHTS. "Wickednesses" (Mark 7:22 *poneriai*) in the "plural speaks of various kinds of evil-mindedness and individual expressions of it, malicious acts" (Arndt-Gingrich, 697); "perversity" (Rocci, 1539)
7. VAIN THOUGHTS. "Pride" (Mk. 7:22, *hyperefanìa*) refers to haughtiness and arrogance (Arndt-Gingrich, 849) which includes insolence, contempt and scorn (Rocci, 1895). Pride is always wrong when it is pride in man, his position, his accomplishments—anything but the living God. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:31)
8. THOUGHTLESS THOUGHTS. "Foolishness" (Mk. 7:22, *afrostùne*) speaks of a lack of moral and intellectual sense that borders on insanity, but is caused by indifference and imprudence. (Rocci,

326) Moral recklessness is not merely foolish; it is sin. (Prov. 24:9)

From the above it is evident that, whereas human law can judge a man on the basis of what he actually does, never on the basis of his attitude except as this expresses itself in deeds, God's judgment tests everything by man's motives or intentions before they ever lead him to act or speak as he does.

15:20 **These defile the man**, says Jesus. God is no ogre who forbids something conducive to man's well-being and best interest, when He demands moral purity. He knows that this contributes to what is right for man, his health and strength. Therefore, that lack of self-discipline which refuses to remove these causes of real defilement invites not only self-pollution, but, finally, self-destruction. This is why we must learn to hate sin and its defilement of our conscience, its pollution of our dearest relationships, its vitiation of our highest motives. The trouble with the Pharisees was that they did not hate sin. They only hated to see any of their opinions discounted. Since their conscience had been so long accustomed to insist upon ceremonies of human origin and to being intransigent sticklers for something that never really mattered at all, their mind was impossible to arouse by any discussion of real defilement. But are we moderns personally concerned about being defiled in the sight of a holy God? Do we really glorify God for His power to cleanse us? (Cf. Psa. 51)

Merely because the NT repealed and removed the OT legislation on defilement and cleansing, it did not thereby make everything right and innocent without qualification. Study the following texts: Ro. 14:14, 20 and Tit. 1:15 in harmony with Jas. 3:6; 4:8; 1 Co. 3:17; 8:7; Heb. 12:15; Ro. 1:24; 6:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3, 5; Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5; 1 Th. 2:3; 4:7; 2 Co. 7:1; 12:21; 2 Pt. 1:4; 2:10. Again, since sin *defiles the man*, real cleansing must be able to remove this real defilement. (Study Ac. 8:22; 15:9; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 2:14; 3:5; Heb. 9:13f; 10:14, 22; 1 Pt. 1:2, 22; 3:21; 1 Jn. 1:5-9.) The OT legislation merely furnished us the vocabulary and strengthened our moral muscles to walk and talk with God in perfect sanctity of flesh and spirit. The concept of purity and pollution taught us in the OT Law has not been forgotten, but elevated, strengthened and made far more imperative. The details whereby the concept is to be practiced differ, because we are not under the Mosaic Levitical system, but the concept of personal holiness is as fully obligatory as it is fully Christian.

J. Parker (*PHC*, Vol. XXII, 383) summarizes the proper application of this section to Christian practice:

So long as we think we can wash the evil off our hands in any one of the world's rivers, we do not feel our want of a gospel. That want is felt only in proportion to our conviction that sin is in our very souls, that it penetrates every fibre, and poisons every spring and energy of our being.

This is why this section is so fundamental: modern Christians may not observe a hand-washing tradition whereby they hope to justify themselves before God and be able to live among men, but whatever they invent or accept as handed down to them from "the fathers" is totally inadequate to make them all God wants them to be. It may be positively damaging in that it nullifies what God required, and, as a religious exercise, it threatens to blind their mind to what really separates man from God and destroys human communion.

We would entirely miss the real meaning of this passage if we but substituted other human rules whereby we would avoid becoming Pharisees, but failed to do the one thing necessary for real, lasting cleansing from all defilement of flesh and spirit. Morgan (*Matthew*, 197) ponders:

Is our religion a thing of the heart, a communion between our inner life and God, a force that drives us to the watch-tower in the morning to catch a gleam of the glory of the pathway of His feet, a passion that sends us back to Him with shame and disgust when we have sinned? That is the true religion. If Jesus in all the virtue of His life and love sits sentinel in our heart, we shall guard our lips, and be careful as to what we eat or drink . . .

We shall be careful to do anything He asks, without artful dodging our duty by sham regulations and great zeal for meaningless rituals invented to measure our piety.

**But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.** Merely because Jesus placed hand-washing as a religious ritual in the category of things indifferent is no excuse for "hippy Christians" as if what is important is what people do, not what they look or smell like. In no sense did He approve of indifference to the use and abuse of food and drink, or indifference toward personal cleanliness and filth. Rather, His principle means that all these matters are fully expressions of our tastes, inclinations, desires, choices and will—in short, the character of our heart. The very reasons why some choose to be

filthy in dress or hygiene may be very defiling because these involve the sins of lack of concern for the conscience and feelings of others, the refusal properly to reflect the image of God in one's own person, and perhaps other sins as well."

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the worship of God. What is worship? What kind is acceptable or unacceptable to God? How did Old Testament worship differ from New Testament worship? What are the essential elements of worship?
2. Describe briefly the Jewish traditions concerning purification. Include Mark's brief summary. What was the original foundation of these ideas? Why did Jesus violate them? Was there any difference between Jesus' teachings on defilement and the God-given teaching in the OT? How much and why?
3. What was the OT teaching concerning defilement and purification? Was ceremonial defilement a serious matter in the OT? What was the usual method for obtaining cleansing from defilement under the OT Law?
4. Why and how did Jesus violate the traditional rules of the elders? Who were these elders?
5. What did Jesus say was wrong with the Jewish traditions?
6. What are traditions? Are there some that are good to keep? If so, which? If not, why are there none which are good?
7. Where did the Pharisees and scribes come from who place this critical question before Jesus? What is significant about their presence in Galilee at this time? What is significant about their attack now?
8. Outline chronologically the events that occurred during this general period from the Sermon on the Mount up to and including the clash with the Pharisees over traditions. Where did this latter occur?
9. What does the word "Corban" mean and how was it used by the Jews?
10. How did Jesus offend the Pharisees? What does the word "offend" mean?
11. List the statements or facts in this section that reveal the unique, supernatural identity of Jesus.
12. Whom did Jesus call "blind guides"? What does Jesus mean

by telling His disciples to "let them alone"? Was He letting them alone?

13. What did Jesus mean by the parable about blind followers of blind guides?
14. Summarize the total answer Jesus gave to the question of the Pharisees: "Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?"
15. What did Jesus say really pollutes, or defiles, a man? What is the real source of all wickedness? List the things which Jesus named that actually defile a man and give a clear, brief definition of each.
16. What other NT passages discuss cleanness, pollution, purity and filth? Are there any things that are now tabù in Christianity?
17. Make a list of American tabùs that have found their way into American Christianity, but have no necessary origin in the religion of Jesus. This requires more insight than most of us think or have, but give it a try. But once you have finished making the list, realize that this is but a modern, American version of "the traditions of the elders."
18. What is the point of Jesus' statement about plants that God did not plant?
19. What method of cleansing is available to us, or is there anything we can or must do to be cleansed of our defilement?
20. What is the significance of Mark's statement (7:19) about Jesus' "making all meats clean"?
21. Describe pure, undefiled religion.
22. What opinion did the Pharisees have of Jesus to attack Him as often as they dared? Why did they feel this way?

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Who would **WANT** to be a Pharisee after all Jesus had to say about them? Ironically, however, for all our abhorrence of their mentality, we may well find ourselves entrapped by inattention to what made the Pharisee what he was. What element(s) stand out; what factors best describe the hideous distortion of true religion that we should identify with the Pharisean mentality? Is it hypocrisy? Superficiality? Pride? Self-worship? Punctiliousness? Proselytizing? Self-righteousness? But are not all of these and more but indications of a fault

far deeper and more essential, a fault so basic that facilitates all the others? That fault is the fundamental confusion of one's own opinions and traditions for the Word of God. Therefore, if we would avoid the rise of Phariseism in our selves, we need to take the following steps:

#### I. WE MUST BE ABLE TO RECOGNIZE THE TRADITIONALIST MENTALITY.

What is the "traditionalist mentality?" How do wrong traditions get started and perpetuated anyway? Someone gets a good idea about how to understand or apply God's will. Others like it, and soon it becomes the POPULAR way to interpret the passage. It is only a small step for this understanding to become the ONLY way to think about that particular point or the only way to do it. In time, the good reasons for the ideas are forgotten or become unimportant, or, they may even be no longer valid. The idea, however, continues to be promoted and perpetuated for itself, with no more support for it than its antiquity or its acceptance by people whose opinion is valued. Neglect of the idea becomes equivalent to neglect of the very Word of God it was intended to interpret and apply. At this point it is nothing but a habitual, ritualistic way of reacting. In fact, no thinking dare be done about it, for this would compromise one's orthodoxy in the eyes of those who unquestioningly accept the idea. Rethinking or re-evaluating the idea is the ultimate heresy, because to do so appears to question the goodness or rightness of the idea at its inception: "After all, our authorities must have had a good reason for accepting the idea in the first place, or they would not have taught it!" First, then, we see the unwillingness and/or the inability to examine critically the validity of one's own traditions, customs, opinions or interpretations. But the "traditionalist mentality" involves something more deadly than this.

The "traditionalist mentality" expresses a deep-rooted indifference toward those means whereby men may recognize the Word of God, distinguishing it from every other communication. The confirmed traditionalist cares more about maintaining the status quo than about distinguishing good traditions from those which are tendentious and false. In short, he presumes that everything he believes, does or teaches is automatically guaranteed valid by divine inspiration and enjoys the same divine authority characteristic of well-authenticated

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revelations, even though his views do not possess all the qualities demanded of messages revealed by authentic prophets. God has taught us, however, that His genuine revelations will be unveiled by prophets possessing the following characteristic credentials:

1. The true messenger of God must speak in the name of the Lord God of Israel, Javéh, in contrast with so-called "revelations" coming from any other source. (Dt. 18:9-22; Jer. 26:16)
2. The true prophet will offer supernatural credentials that cannot be falsified, either in the form of immediate, visible miracles, or predictive prophecies which, when precisely fulfilled, provide indisputable proof of the prophet's divine mandate. (Dt. 18:22; Ex. 4:1-9, 21, 29-31; 1 Kg. 18:36-38; 13:1-6; 14:1-18; Mt. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 12:12; Jn. 10:37f; 14:10f)
3. The true messenger of God must speak in harmony with the well-authenticated revelations which become the norm by which to judge all new revelations. (Isa. 8:16, 20; Jer. 26 esp. vv. 18, 20; 1 Co. 14:29) The older revelations constitute a "prophetic context" within which to evaluate all later ones. Remember the appeal of Jesus and the Apostles to the harmony existing between their own affirmations and the message of Moses and the prophets. (Cf. Ac. 26:22f; 17:11; 13:27-41; 15:15; 17:2; 18:28; 26:6f; 28:23; Ro. 1:2-5; 3:21; 2 Pt. 3:2)
4. The personal morality of the prophet should harmonize with his message. (Cf. 2 Co. 12:12; Mt. 7:16-20; Jn. 8:46) However, this characteristic may not always be present, since, for specific purposes and situations, God can make use of those who, at last, turn out to be wicked prophets. (Cf. Dt. 13:1-5; Nu. 22-24; 1 Kg. 13:11-32; Ezek. 14:1-11; Mt. 7:22f; 1 Co. 9:27)

What does not occur to the traditionalist, who imagines his human opinions, interpretations and traditions to have been inspired or dictated by God, is the fact that the original proponents of these very traditional opinions not only did not possess the above-mentioned prophetic credentials, but actually opened the door to direct apostacy from the living God and His true word. But the traditionalist seems immune to the following God-given defences against imposture:

1. If a predicted sign or wonder does not occur, the prophet has spoken presumptuously. (Dt. 18:21f; contrast 1 Sam. 3:19f)
2. If a prophet dares speak in the name of some other deity, he has not been authorized by Javéh. (Dt. 18:20)

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3. Notwithstanding the verification of a true miracle done by a given prophet, if that prophet teaches apostacy from the Lord, he is false. (Dt. 13:1-5) This is also true of every type of false or wicked counsel or counsellor who, however, not possessing divine credentials, already enjoys the confidence of those who must decide about him. (Dt. 13:6-18) "Apostacy" may include his ignoring the well-established "prophetic context" of genuine revelation. If his message will not harmonize with the undoubted Word of God, he is false.

Worse still, the traditionalist who embraces uncritically the claims or opinions of ANY so-called prophet, "inspired" tradition or "teaching authority guided by the Holy Spirit," by that act unwittingly relinquishes the definitive character of the Christian Gospel as the normative revelation of the will of God, i.e. as the now finally completed "prophetic context." The NT speaks of:

1. Itself as "the sound doctrine," "the pattern of sound words" (1 Ti. 1:10f; 4:1-6, 11, 16; 5:21; 6:1-4; 2 Ti. 1:13; 4:3f; Tit. 1:9; 2:1, 10, 15)
2. The importance of holding fast to the Apostolic documents and messages. (1 Ti. 1:3; 3:14f; 2 Ti. 2:2; 3:16f; 2 Th. 2:14; 3:6, 14)
3. The authority of the Apostles' doctrine. (Ro. 16:17; 1 Co. 2:6-16; 14:37; 2 Co. 12:1-12; Gal. 1:6-9, 12; Eph. 3:3-5; 1 Th. 2:13; 4:2, 8, 15, 18; 2 Pt. 3:2, 15f; 1 Pt. 1:12; 2 Jn. 10)
4. The decisive, conclusive and final character of the revelation completed during the lifetime of the Apostles themselves: (Heb. 1:1, 2; 2 Pt. 1:3f, 12; Jude 3; Ro. 16:17)
5. The danger of accepting as apostolic tradition some declaration that never was taught by any apostle. (Ro. 3:8; 2 Th. 2:2; Jn. 21:23)

Now, while there could be more texts, at least these teach that the Apostles expected their revelations to be received as normative for the Church, as sound doctrine, as the last word from God. And, while no clearcut statement of Scripture indicates the date "when the perfect comes" to take the place of "prophecy (which) will pass away; tongues (which) will cease; (miraculous?) knowledge (which) will pass away" (1 Co. 13:8f), nevertheless, nothing is ever to be received uncritically as from God. Rather, everything is to be judged and only what is decidedly from God is to be loved, practiced and taught. (Cf. 1 Jn. 4:1; 1 Th. 5:19-22; 1 Ti. 4:1; Rev. 2:2; 2 Th. 2:2)

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It just may be that God gave no date for the cessation of genuine prophecy, in order to be able to test every believer's faithfulness to that message "once for all committed to the saints." (Study Dt. 13:1-5.)

The key issue is, then, not "tradition versus tradition," i.e. ours against yours, because we all have traditions. Rather, the issue is good traditions as against bad ones, an issue that can be decided by seeking to know the ORIGIN of the traditions: "Are they of God, or are they of men?" (Study Mt. 21:23-27, esp. v. 25.)

But the attitude of the traditionalist effectively blocks any serious examination of his own intricately entangled beliefs and practice, because any admission that he really needs to rethink anything becomes a menace to his own psychological security based upon his belief system. But God intended that man's real certainty be based upon the very elements mentioned above that distinguish God's Word from every other! This is why the traditionalist deserves to be damned: he depends for his salvation upon his own unexamined belief system, rather than trust and utilize God's tools to correct his belief system so that he may have only divine truth to fill and transform his soul and save him for eternity!

But what of the traditionalist that is not merely indifferent and lazy, but sincere and conscientious, who wants to obey every detail of God's Law in order to please Him? If we would avoid becoming Pharisees, . . .

## II. WE MUST ALSO BEWARE OF THE THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF TRADITIONALISM.

Do traditionalists also have identifiable theological presuppositions? While there may be other factors that make a traditionalist what he is, for our purposes here, the key issue is this: what are the arguments behind the formation of traditions, arguments which urge the teaching and practice of the traditions once formed? Here are some:

1. Obedience to God means precise, conscientious and faithful performance of His Law. This good principle, however, is interpreted by the traditionalist in the sense that only punctilious of minutiae can satisfy the demands of God and is the only service pleasing to God.

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2. Traditionalism must presume that God's will, as He left it for men in the Bible, is deficient, because it does not inform men about every detail he must know in order to be sure that he has observed God's Law in every detail.
3. Since obedience totally based upon law is not perfectly possible where God has not legislated every detail whereby the godly may know when they have faithfully, conscientiously and precisely fulfilled His Law, it becomes the supposedly essential function of pious scholars to formulate the missing details in order to supply the supposed deficiency in God's Law. The spectacle of a supposedly imperfect Law from a perfect God is an embarrassment which, according to the traditionalists, can be corrected only by supplying the missing details through the use of the best logic of which the sanctified human mind is capable.
  - a. This presumes, of course, that one man or any group of men is both capable and qualified to perfect the deficiency by using fallible human reason.
  - b. Those who sense the fallacy of their following human conclusions reached in this fashion yield to the temptation to attribute divine authority to the conclusions, even though the scholars themselves lack the aforementioned prophetic credentials absolutely essential to stamp their words as divine.
4. Next, the traditionalist presumes that the final result of this pious and scholarly "closing of the loop-holes" in God's Law can yet please God, bless mankind and still do so without adding any negative side effects, like, for example, breaking God's Word to keep these human rules. The essential reason for the existence of these traditions is the attempt to fill the empty spaces, the silence, the loop-holes in the Law of God, notwithstanding such warnings as Dt. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5, 6! Rev. 22:18f and similar.
5. Finally, when once the missing details are furnished in this fashion, they take on the force of divine law. Their observance has the force of obedience to God; their neglect means unfaithfulness to God. Otherwise, why bother?

The great, damning assumption behind all this kind of thinking is its fundamental criticism of God: "He did not tell us all that we believe we need to know—or desire to know—in order to do His will." There is also that presumption that sighs: "So WE have to supply God's deficiencies!"

To measure just how real all this is, just think of the challenge

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thrown down at Jesus by the Pharisees: *Why transgress the traditions of the elders?* Implied in this challenge are the following offensive propositions, all of which express the essential diversity between traditionalism and the religion of Jesus Christ:

1. There is a body of doctrines which is officially described as *of the elders*, of the Jewish Magisterium ("Teaching Authority"), but the question means: "Why transgress the doctrine of God as this is interpreted and taught by the elders?"
2. Whereas this doctrinal corpus is without authentic prophetic credentials and so is of human origin, it is nevertheless elevated to the level of divine revelation, a fact made clear by the nature of the test question itself, as well as by the motives of the examiners who so formulate it. It may even be exalted above it, as illustrated in the following quotations from the Palestinian Talmud (*Ber.* i. 4 in Bowker, *op. cit.*, 154):

The words of the scribes are related to the words of Torah [the Law of Moses] and are to be loved like the words of Torah. . . . The words of Torah include both prohibitions and permissions; they include commands both of light and weighty importance, but the words of the scribes are all weighty. This can be known from the saying, "He who says that there should be no *tephillin* [phylacteries], thereby contradicting Torah, is without guilt, but [he who says] there should be five compartments thereby adding to the words of the scribes is guilty." . . . The words of the elders are weightier than the words of the prophets..

3. To violate, ignore or otherwise transgress the traditions of the elders is equal to a violation of God's Word. (Some extremists held that violation of the tradition was actually far more culpable than transgression of God's Word. *San.* xi. 3; *Ber.* i. 4)

The blindness of the traditionalists' philosophy lies in their inability seriously to question the rightness of these propositions.

In all fairness to the "elders" themselves whose traditions are so blindly followed and passed on by their disciples, we may well ask: "Did these 'fathers,' who are cited as originators and/or bearers of the sacred tradition, or who are cited as illustrations of the 'teaching authority' at work, did they consider themselves to be PROPHETS with the necessary credentials in order?"

1. If they actually considered themselves as prophets, where is the

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- historical documentation of their credentials?
2. If they did not consider themselves prophets, by what criteria should their disciples attribute them such authority? If a given Jewish Rabbi or a given Church Father knew himself to be uninspired by the Holy Spirit with that special inspiration whereby God speaks to men by the prophets, by what right do later generations attribute it to him?

The "Fathers'" written opinions and interpretations of Scripture do contribute to the growth of tradition, but they are not therefore any more inspired or more divine than other men, despite all the wishful thinking of their disciples.

So, since we must beware of the "traditionalist mentality" and avoid the theological presuppositions of traditionalism, what is our salvation? What will keep us from becoming Pharisees?

### III. WE MUST CONSTANTLY COMPARE OUR BELIEFS WITH THE LAW OF CHRIST AND PRACTICE IT ONLY.

Before rejecting this truism as an oversimplification of the problem; let us at least examine it. The great issue before every conscientious soul is what to do with the "loop-holes in God's Law," or, to put it another way, how to deal with God's silence. That God has not spoken on many subjects is no surprise to anyone who has read the Bible.

In fact, most Christians are fairly familiar with God's revealed will when it comes to obeying the specific commands and the well-known prohibitions in His Word. But how should we go about solving the billion and one problems about which He has chosen not to speak in the Bible?

1. Should a Christian take any part in military service?
2. What precise definitions will establish a distinctively Christian style of dress, length of hair, etc.?
3. Should a Christian dance in any form of dance, anywhere?
4. What about birth control?
5. What should be our approach toward extracongregational ecclesiastical organizations?
6. To what extent is mourning for our dead a Christian expression and at what point does it become pagan?
7. Is it possible for a Christian to please God and smoke?

This list is but a beginning, but it indicates areas of discussion where

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God has chosen not to reveal His specific will on these and many other specific subjects.

At this point we ask, "But doesn't God's Word cover **EVERY** phase of our lives? Isn't the Bible complete? Couldn't God foresee these problems and resolve them for us in His Word? How do we deal with them?" Others are tempted to answer, "Just pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in such matters," without realizing that the Law of Christ we are about to study is THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT for just such decisions as we must make.

### A. HOW IS THE LAW OF CHRIST EXPRESSED?

1. It is expressed generally in the word **LOVE** (Mt. 22:34-40; Ro. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13f)
2. It is expressed in some detail in the form of:
  - a. Clear, positive commands, exhortations, good examples and lists of virtues to imitate;
  - b. Express prohibitions, exemplar punishments, long lists of sins to eliminate;
  - c. Rules that govern our Christian liberty to act on questions not specifically treated in the other revelations of Scripture, i.e. in the areas where God has chosen to be silent.
    - (1) *Necessity.* These rules are needed in order to eliminate the need for a gigantic library of canon law that deals with every single case of every single individual ever to live on earth.
    - (2) *Nature.* These rules are a collection of directives to help us arrive at a suitable conclusion about matters that God has not discussed in His Word. However, THESE DIRECTIVES ARE HIS WORD intended to cover such cases, therefore we may not treat these rules with indifference nor ignore them as somehow unessential. They are the revelations of the Spirit purposely made to "close up the loop-holes."
    - (3) *Purpose.* God wants to leave Christians *genuinely free to decide and act responsibly.* So He liberates us from slavery to a detailed system that would compromise our freedom by dictating our everyday decisions. Again, He frees us from that slavish attention to legal detail that exalted law as a principle of self-justification. Finally, any law can command and prohibit many things, but no law yet written can describe in sufficient detail all the possible

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positive deeds and attitudes by which the man of God should react rightly in response to his God and his neighbor.

- (4) Here are some of these directives: 1 Co. 6:12—11:1; Ro. 14:1—15:7; Gal. 5:1-25. From these texts we derive the following:

### B. THE PRINCIPLES OF CONTROL BY WHICH WE DECIDE about matters God has not decided for us, i.e. THE DIRECTIVES THAT GOVERN CHRISTIAN LIBERTY:

1. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY STATED: "All things are lawful for me" (1 Co. 6:12; 10:23), except what God has ordered or prohibited, because our freedom can never be an excuse to disobey Him. Beyond what He has expressly forbidden or commanded, "nothing is unclean of itself" (Ro. 14:14, 20). "To the pure all things are pure" (Tit. 1:15), because "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." (1 Ti. 4:4f; 1 Co. 10:26; Mk. 7:19) So, we are really free to decide about such matters.

2. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY DIRECTED by the following principles:

- a. *Pragmatic utility*: "Not all things are helpful," BUT SOME ARE. (1 Co. 6:12) If the thing under discussion fails to do the job for which it is intended, why use it?
- b. *Enslavement*: "I will not be enslaved by anything." (1 Co. 6:12) We are morally obligated to acknowledge no other lordship than that of the Lord Jesus. (Consider the enslavement to habits that rob us of our spontaneity, intimacy and awareness of others. Think of enslavement to drugs, or worse, to unexamined ideas!)
- c. *Honesty in the application of these rules*: "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh." (Gal. 5:13) "Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God." (1 Pt. 2:16) Shun immorality, idols, etc. (1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14; Ro. 3:8) No dishonest use of these rules can ever justify sin.
- d. *Effect on others*: "Cause no stumbling" (Mt. 18:1-14; 1 Co. 8; 10:31—11:1)
- e. *The right to dispense with our rights*: Any undeniable right may be dispensed with for sake of our neighbor, particularly

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- where the use of that right scandalizes a brother for whom Christ died. (Ro. 14:13-16; 1 Co. 9:12, 15, 18-23; 6:7)
- f. *Edification of others* is a positive good that should be sought in every decision: "Let us pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding." (Ro. 14:19; 15:2) "Not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor." (1 Co. 10:23f) "I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." (1 Co. 10:33; cf. 1 Co. 8:1; Ro. 15:1f)
  - g. *Recognize the liberty of others to decide for themselves before God.* All decisions are strictly personal, not universal: "Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. . . . The conviction that you have keep between yourself and God." (Ro. 14:5b, 22)
  - h. *All decisions must reflect the true nature of the Kingdom of God* which does not consist in "food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Ro. 14:17f)
  - i. *Always decide a question leaning to the side of mercy.* (Mt. 5:7; 6:9, 12f; 9:13; 12:7; 18:15-35; Jas. 2:12f; 3:17)
  - j. *Do everything "for the Lord"* (Ro. 14:6-9), "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17), "as serving the Lord and not men" (Col. 3:22-24; Eph. 5:22, 25; 6:1, 5-9), "to the glory of God." (1 Co. 10:31)
  - k. *Accept as a brother in Christ everyone who is genuinely in Christ,* regardless of those differences of opinion that distinguish you. (Ro. 14:1; 15:7)
  - l. The last rule is that there may be more rules! There may be more directives in God's Word that should go on this list. These listed, however, are typical, but they are mandatory and not opinionable nor optional. They are God's revelations about how to deal with subjects about which He has chosen not to make His specific will known in each and every case.

It becomes increasingly clear, then, that decisions made on this kind of basis are going to vary from person to person, from congregation to congregation, and from century to century. According to this view, therefore, God has built into His system some directives that actually permit differences of opinion. This, then, is one area where complete uniformity is decidedly impossible. And God wants it that way! This is the reason behind the excellent motto:

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"In essentials, UNITY. In non-essentials, LIBERTY. In all things, CHARITY."

We must be perfectly united in the essentials, proclaiming with one voice what God has expressly commanded or forbidden, as well as the above-listed rules which direct our free decisions as we express our Christian liberty. However, nothing God has omitted from His revelations can be considered essential, so in these very non-essentials we are truly free to exercise our liberty and grant the same freedom to others. But in our obedience to the essentials, as well as in our decisions about the non-essentials, the fundamental principle is always love.

To put it another way: "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak. Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." This means that, when the Scriptures order or prohibit something, we must require only that which the Scriptures authorize, because these are the essentials. If the Scriptures require nothing for a given case, we may impose nothing either.

This same principle can be applied to the non-essentials by expressing it inversely: "Where the Scriptures speak, we must be silent and give our whole-souled obedience without complaint or objection. Where the Scriptures are silent, only then may we speak our opinion, for God has left us free to decide and act responsibly."

Since these rules require that we think and act responsibly, some Christians in their immaturity are bound to reject them and never make use of them, choosing rather to let others do their thinking and deciding for them, or else continue in their traditional habits, indifferent to new truth and changing conditions, insensitive to people and, most tragically of all, insensitive to the normative revelation of the Word of God.

But our God has chosen to set us free from bondage to men and slavery to detailed systems, so that we might act in character as His sons. So, for those who love Jesus and are willing to submit to His will, even that part of His will where He would push them out of the nest to try their wings and learn to fly in the boundless liberty of the sons of God, their course is clear! And there is not a Pharisee among them.

### Section 37

## JESUS HEALS A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S DEMONIZED DAUGHTER (Parallel: Mark 7:24-30)

TEXT: 15:21-28

21 And Jesus went out thence, and withdrew into the parts of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out from those borders, and cried, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a demon.

23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

24 But he answered and said, I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

25 But she came and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs.

27 But she said, Yea, Lord: for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was healed from that hour.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. It would appear that a person, who desired to be known by as many of the world's people as possible, would go where the most people are, especially those who would be prepared to grasp his message. (See Jn. 7:3f.) But here Jesus deliberately leaves Palestine for Phoenicia seeking PRIVACY. (Mk. 7:24) How do you account for this apparent inconsistency in Jesus' conduct?
- b. Though Jesus sought privacy, "He could not be hid." How do you explain this?
- c. Mark says that the Syrophoenician woman "heard of Him." How would she have heard about Jesus?
- d. Why do you suppose this Gentile woman addressed Jesus by that strictly Jewish title: "Son of David"? What could she possibly understand by the use of such a title?

- e. Is it not courteous to reply when spoken to? Yet Jesus did not answer her one word. How do you account for such conduct?
- f. Can you explain how Jesus could be so anxious to speak to the Samaritan woman but was so reluctant to take time for the Syro-phoenician?
- g. How do you account for the disciples' insistence that Jesus "send her away"? Had not Jesus helped Gentiles before? Had they themselves not learned to show merciful helpfulness to those in need? What could have motivated these closest followers of Jesus to talk this way?
- h. After Jesus explained to the woman His basic mission to earth, why then did she not leave? Was there something in His manner that indicated to her that, when He said "no," He really meant "yes"?
- i. By implication of Jesus' figure of speech, He was calling the woman a dog. Do you think this was right? Is not this kind of treatment cruel? Do you think it right to tax this poor woman's feelings this way?
- j. Why is Jesus so overjoyed at the greatness of this woman's faith? What is so unusual about her faith that makes it great in Jesus' judgment?
- k. Although no text specifically describes the activity of Jesus and His Apostles during this journey outside of Palestine, after considering not only the events that immediately preceded the trip as well as the critical moments in the larger context, would you suggest what Jesus and His men might possibly have done while gone from Palestine? What specific needs could this trip have met, that, until the journey was made, could not have been satisfied?
- l. After explaining to the woman His basic mission to earth, which limited Him to the Jews, why then did Jesus go ahead and cast the demon out of this Gentile woman's daughter? What would you think if Jesus had absolutely refused? What would the Apostles or the woman have thought?

#### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus and His disciples went away from the area around Capernaum and withdrew completely out of Galilee to the foreign district of Phoenicia around Tyre and Sidon. There He entered into a house because He would have liked to remain incognito. But to remain

hidden proved impossible, for a Canaanite woman from that region, whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean demon, heard about Him. Now the woman was a Greek, or pagan, and Syro-phoenician by birth. Right away she approached Him, calling out, "Have pity on me, Lord, David's Son: my daughter is severely tormented by an unclean demon!"

But Jesus gave her no reply—not one word.

So His followers crowded around Him urging, "Do send her away, Lord, because she is continuing to follow us shouting."

Jesus objected, "But I was sent to help the Jews, not the Gentiles."

But the woman came around in front of Jesus, fell to her knees at His feet, begging Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. She pleaded, "Help me, Lord!"

To this Jesus answered, "Let the children first be fed! It is not right, you know, to take the children's bread and throw it to the puppies."

"Yes, Lord, however, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's scraps that fall from their masters' table."

"Lady, you've got a lot of faith! For an answer like that, what you desired shall be done for you! You may go home content, because the demon has already left your daughter."

Thus was her daughter healed instantly. Her mother went home and found her child lying quietly in bed, the demon gone.

### SUMMARY

Travelling incognito in Phoenicia, Jesus and His Apostles encountered a mother whose daughter was demonized. Jesus preferred anonymity, but the woman recognized Him and immediately sought His supernatural aid in behalf of her daughter. Jesus parried her pleas with the objection that the purpose of His ministry was primarily in behalf of the Jewish people, even though this Gentile woman had called Him the Christ. She insisted. He seems to object again, but leaves the door open to further appeal, since He neither sent her away nor flatly refused to help. She seized upon a part of a figure of speech He had used, turning it to her credit. Admiring her motherly determination and indomitable confidence in His ability, Jesus granted her request. Instantly the demon departed from the daughter, leaving her in peace, resting in bed.

## NOTES

## WHAT IS MATTHEW UP TO NOW?

No Bible student may forget that each of the Gospel writers is independent of the others, even though much of what he includes shares striking verbal similarities with that recorded by the others. This fact raises the question concerning the purpose for each author's including this or that fact, as well as the significance of certain unusual omissions or inclusions. Even as the Apostolic Epistles were written to deal with needs in the early Church, the Evangelists intend to present a picture of the Lord Jesus that will not only be adequate for all time, but will meet needs in their own century. This is why only the Holy Spirit can be the editor-in-chief of these materials, because only He is sufficiently far-sighted to know what will accomplish these two divergent purposes.

Now, while it is certainly true that the Hebrew Christians and those yet unconverted Jews of the first century would need to grasp the universality of the Christian Gospel, is it necessary or even possible to see in each single difference between the two narratives we have of this event, some key to the individual emphasis of Matthew or Mark? For example:

1. Is the fact significant that Matthew, not Mark, records Jesus' affirmation: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"? (15:24)
2. Is it important that Matthew does not say, with Mark: "Let the children (Jews) first be fed"? After all, if Matthew's point is to teach precisely this conclusion that the Gospel is for the Jews first and then for the Gentile, how could he have omitted it? Or, did he, as a wise master teacher, prefer to suggest the conclusion without stating it? (See notes before 8:18: "What Is This Text Doing Here?")
3. Is it true that Matthew's quotation: "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," while also quoted by Mark, since it stands alone in Matthew's context with Jesus' earlier statement of His Jewish mission (v. 24), leads to the conclusion that the pagans have no right to help whatever? If so, upon first reading, such a view would have been acceptable to the Jewish reader. Nevertheless, the whole impact of Matthew's entire section is the moral impossibility of being deaf to their cry.

4. Matthew, not Mark, cites Jesus' praise of this Gentile woman's faith (v. 28), whereas Mark emphasizes the brilliance of her trusting response with no special mention of her faith.
5. Of less importance is Matthew's omission to mention that Jesus entered a house in a heathen land (cf. Ac. 10:28; 11:3), because not even Mark who mentions it affirms that it was a pagan's house, since it could have been one belonging to a Jew living in Phoenicia.
6. Whereas Mark, using normal Jewish parlance, describes the woman as a "Greek," which would mean "gentile" to anyone even distantly familiar with the paganizing influences of Hellenism in Israel and would remind the orthodox of the nationalistic struggles of the Maccabean period, yet it is Matthew that calls the woman a "Canaanite," a word almost impossible to overload with connotations: "pagan, ignorant, godless, superstitious, damned Gentile."

Whatever the details, that Matthew should have seized upon this one incident to illustrate Jesus' trip abroad, merits attention because of His meaningful encounter with this non-Hebrew. Because of the apparently casual nature of this meeting, it would be risky to affirm that He was laying the foundation for later evangelization among the Gentiles. His personal intention is another. (See Mk. 7:24.) However, Matthew's inclusion of this incident, because of the evident trust of this woman in the Hebrew Messiah, would undoubtedly argue the rightness of including also others of "like precious faith" in God's Kingdom, even though they be of heathen background.

This is evidence for seeing the proper place of this narrative in the general Matthaean apologetic for the place of Gentiles in the New Israel. Whereas Jesus intended to initiate no personal mission to the Gentiles, as He Himself indicates in the text, still His reactions demonstrated toward them an openness that taught Matthew to open His heart to them too. Now, the cosmopolitan outlook of this Apostle gently nudges his "kinsmen according to the flesh" to reconsider their understanding of the Messiah. Though this entire period spent by the Lord outside of Palestine probably offered excellent opportunities to give the most concentrated attention and teaching He was ever able to provide His Apostles in private, nevertheless, Matthew leaves that possibility entirely out of the picture. Rather, he deliberately records for his readers just this one incident,—and the lady and her daughter are CANAANITES! This fact might sail over the heads of Gentile readers, but it could hardly do less than stun

a Hebrew leaving him wide-eyed with wonder in the presence of a universal Messiah. (See on 15:22.) A Gentile Christian might impatiently ask, "Couldn't Matthew have played down her unsavory past and gotten on with the Gospel?" Matthew seems to answer: "But this is Gospel! When the Messiah of Israel blesses a Canaanite, this is the most glorious news I can think of! When the Servant of Jehovah becomes the servant of the servant of servants, what glorious grace and mercy must be available to men!" (Study Gen. 9:25-27; 10:6, 15.)

Another direct connection Matthew may intend is that between the preceding discussion with the Pharisees about ritual purity and (by implication) clean and unclean foods, and this section that deals with unclean and defiling people. This same approach is used by God in teaching the Jewish Peter to admit Gentiles into the Kingdom. He does this by first demanding that the Apostle eat unclean food and then sends him to unclean people. (To appreciate this relationship, study the [to us] odd connections between Peter's vision and the conclusions he drew from it. Acts 10:14f, 28, 34f) This, then, is the type of argument that Matthew's Jewish readers could best appreciate and arrive at the right conclusion: if ritual purity is not the main issue, and if the heart purity is the essential, it may be true, then, that even Gentiles, who know nothing of Levitical ceremonies, but who have genuinely pure hearts and trust the God of Israel, may be considered clean and candidates for membership in the New Israel too.

Beyond Matthew's personal purpose for including this section, we should also enjoy the psychological study this narrative provides for examining the interplay of personality as Jesus deals with this woman, and as she deals with Jesus. Stay alert, because He MAY deal with us in just this same way!

#### SITUATION: JESUS DESIRES PRIVACY (15:21; Mk. 7:24)

15:21 **And Jesus went out thence, and withdrew.** (*exelthōn ekeīthen ho Iesoūs anechōresen*) Reasons for this strategic journey must be decided in the light of His larger situation. (Mt. 13-17. See notes on 14:1, 13, where Jesus' problem and plan are more fully discussed.)

1. His primary reason: "And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and would

not have anyone know. Yet he could not be hid." (Mk. 7:24) From this it is concluded that He desired privacy, not merely from the Jews whose land He had left, but even from the Gentiles in whose country He now sojourned. Out of this grow the following surmises:

2. The entire band needed relaxation from the strenuous activities of the preceding weeks: the evangelization of Galilee, the feeding of the five thousand, the emotional strain after the murder of John the Baptist, the concern about Herod Antipas' undesirable curiosity about Jesus, the pressure of the Pharisees' attacks, the unbelief of the people.
3. The Twelve needed opportunity to evaluate their own evangelistic attempts concluded just before the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Before this there had been no significant time for that.
4. The Twelve needed relief from the pressures of Israel's majority rejection of Jesus as Messiah, so they could more objectively weigh Israel's unbelief against the total picture of their Master's unassailable prophetic credentials.
5. Since Jesus had dealt with Tyrians and Sidonians before, even if these were Jewish residents of Phoenicia (cf. Mk. 3:7; Lk. 6:17), could He have realistically hoped to travel through that region with the Twelve and remain unrecognized? This consideration renders it difficult to exclude a half-veiled intention to show by this one incident that, while His mission was specifically to the Hebrews, nevertheless His blessing and power is eventually for the Gentiles also. Morgan (*Matthew*, 202) may be right to suggest:

Perhaps He took His disciples there that they might see the thing He had not been able to show them in the midst of His own people with their traditionalism and ritualism; that *they* might see faith working free and untrammelled; and as He took them there He revealed to them the force of faith in contrast with the barrenness of ritualism.

Could He not have foreseen that "He could not be hid" (Mk. 7:24) and forestalled any and all contact with needy pagans, had He really wanted to avoid that? If so, then His desire to remain in the background is directly related to His intention NOT to begin a foreign-based Gentile ministry, while any personal contacts are to be exceptional.

**Tyre and Sidon** are located roughly fifty miles south of Beirut, Lebanon. This is Jesus' second physical presence in a foreign country, occasioned now, as upon His flight to Egypt (Mt. 2), by the suspicion of a Herodian king and the lack of spirituality among God's people. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 37f) disagrees that Jesus is out of Israel, because:

1. Jesus withdrew from the Capernaum area to "the borders of Tyre and Sidon" but did not cross the border. (See Mk. 7:24.)
2. He "entered into a house" which would undoubtedly be a Jewish home. (Cf. Ac. 10:28; Mt. 8:8)
3. The Canaanitish woman "came out from those borders" to seek Jesus' help in extreme northern Galilee. (Mt. 15:22)

However, none of these arguments are conclusive because:

1. While Mark's *tà hòria* does mean "boundaries," however in our literature it is used exclusively in the plural to mean "region, district." (Arndt-Gingrich, 584f; cf. Mt. 2:16; 4:13; 8:34; 15:22, 39; 19:1; Mk. 5:17; 7:31b; 10:1; Ac. 13:50) If interpreted strictly as "borders," all these cases would prove that the events narrated occurred on the border, never within the given district. But these are not "borderline cases"! Further, Matthew's *tà mère* agrees perfectly with this understanding, since his *tà mère* refers to "the parts of a country, hence, region, district" (Arndt-Gingrich, 507; cf. Mt. 2:22; 16:13; Mk. 8:10; Ac. 2:10; 20:2)
2. Who, in the light of the vastness of the Dispersion, can prove there were no Jewish homes outside of Palestine? (Ac. 2:5-11; 14:21) On the other hand, to avoid the need for Gentile hospitality, could not Jesus have hired a house for His stay? Were there no funds at His disposal? (Cf. Lk. 8:3 and notes on 14:16)
3. The Greek word order of Mt. 15:22 may well represent a quite different nuance captured by the RSV: "A Canaanite woman from that region came out." "Came out" refers, not to her departure from Phoenicia, but from her own home in that area in which Jesus now finds Himself.
4. Mark (7:31) is conclusive geographic evidence that Jesus is definitely out of Israel, because Jesus "returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon" (*éλθεν διὰ Σιδῶνος*), hence traveled even further north from Tyre before turning back eastward, and south toward the Decapolis. (See on 15:29.)

## I. THE REQUEST BY FAITH (15:22)

**15:22 And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out.** Sidon is one of the most ancient Canaanite cities in the world. (Gen. 10:15-19) Compare the history of Elijah in this same territory during a period of great Jewish unbelief where he too found great faith in another Syrophoenician woman (1 Kg. 17). That well-known event in Hebrew history should mitigate the surprise of pious Hebrews who would be tempted to be offended by the Messiah's travels and sharing God's gracious power beyond the physical limits of Israel. (Lk. 4:24-26)

A. Her request came out of the depth of her distress:

1. The failure of her pagan religion to meet the crisis of her demonized daughter only exacerbated her disgust for its empty, powerless idolatry. Her pagan faith had sufficed until that dark day when only **REAL** power could answer her need. The presence of the demonic in the little Gentile girl provides further evidence of the objective reality of demons, because not limited by nation, age or sex of their victims.
2. Her own vicarious suffering was great in proportion to the love she felt for her child. (Cf. Mark's picturesque *thugàtrion*: "little daughter.")
3. She had to come alone, unable even to bring her afflicted child before Jesus so as better to be able to plead the depth of her need by showing Him the distressed girl personally.

B. Her request came despite the distinct disadvantages of her position:

1. She is a woman. Could she have known about Jewish prejudices that frowned upon a woman's talking with a rabbi, or the reluctance of a common rabbi to be addressed by a woman? (Cf. Jn. 4:7-9, 27) Still, she approached THIS Rabbi, confident that He is potentially so much more than the run-of-the-mill Jewish teacher, calling Him "Lord, Son of David."
2. She, a Gentile, came to this Jew:
  - a. She was Greek by culture and language, but to Hebrews, mindful of the earlier Maccabean struggles against the paganizing tendencies of Hellenism, "Greek" means "pagan." (Cf. Ro. 1:13-16; 2:9f; 1 Co. 1:22-24)
  - b. She was Syrophoenician because of the geographical position of her home. Syro-phoenicia means that part of Phoenician domain that lies west of Syria and is connected with it, as opposed to Phoenician colonies of Lybia, or Libophoenicia.)

- c. She was a Canaanite by ancestry, and perhaps also by religion. This fact inserted into a Jewish Gospel rings alarm bells everywhere, because she is a remnant of the accursed race of Baal-worshippers with which Israel was to have absolutely NO DEALINGS. (Gen. 9:25-27; 10:6, 15; Ex. 23:23-33; 34:11-16; Dt. 7:1-5, 16; 20:16-18)
- 3. Her right to petition Jesus was very much in doubt and only negatively admitted:
  - a. He did not answer her (15:23), but no answer is better than no.
  - b. He did not send her away as urged by the disciples. (15:23)
  - c. He did not admit her prior privilege to receive His help, but having said that others came first, He did not deny she came second. (Mk. 7:27)
- C. Her request is based upon some knowledge of Jesus, however meager.
  - 1. Whereas Jesus' intention was to gain privacy, someone recognized Him anyway. To imagine that some residents of Phoenicia had been present to hear the Sermon on the Mount and go home amazed to tell about it and Him is not difficult. (Cf. Lk. 6:17; Mk. 3:7) However much we would wish it otherwise, this incident provides no firm basis for believing in a widespread Gentile expectation of a Jewish Messiah, that is, an expectation totally unconnected with Jewish expectations based on prophecy. Mark (7:25) says she "having heard about Him . . . came," without stating how or from whom she learned it. It is more likely that some Jewish neighbor living in her Phoenician town told her what they had learned on their festal trips to Israel. (Cf. 2 Kg. 5:2-4)
  - 2. The address with which she presented her case to Jesus is not the sort of appellative to be expected in the mouth of a totally ignorant, superstitious pagan. Just how much understanding does it reveal she had? This would probably depend upon the testimony of those (Jewish?) fellow-citizens who informed her about Jesus: did they use this title with all the understanding we expect of spiritual Jews, hence, did they communicate to her something of Jesus' great mission?
    - a. Lenski (*Matthew*, 594) suggests that "when the woman combines 'Lord' with 'son of David,' she understands 'Lord' in the higher sense as being in fact the Messianic title . . ." (But see on 15:25.)

- b. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 39) believes that she could not have had full spiritual understanding of the world-wide bearing of the Davidic promises, or of the world-embracing designation of the Messiah as the Son of David. Hence, **Son of David** may have been for her but a popular, political title that certainly elevated Jesus to earthly power and glory as a supremely powerful man, but, because it was devoid of the rich content such a title must express to be used rightfully, it treated Him as a political, Jewish superman. However, Jesus helped others who had not all that understanding. (Mt. 9:27; 12:23; 20:30f)
- c. Unfortunately for her, to call Him all that this title implies can never make her a member of the covenant people. If He is really **Son of David**, the Messiah of Israel, then she can claim no rights inherent in her use of that title, because she is not Hebrew. Mere use of glorious, complimentary titles as such can never guarantee her participation in the covenantal relationship to Abraham—i.e. unless, by an expression of great faith, she prove that she possesses that dependence upon Jesus that would constitute her a true daughter of Abraham by faith. (Cf. Ro. 4:11, 16) If so, then she would be amply qualified to receive anything destined for those who hail Him **Lord, Son of David**. But until this latter truth is fully evident, by the terms of His own mandate and because of the confusion He would cause by appearing to reverse His position taken in Israel against uninformed appeal to His messianic powers without appreciation of His true messianic identity and Lordship, He cannot grant her request.

## II. THE RELENTLESSNESS OF FAITH (15:23-27; Mk. 7:27f)

15:23 **But he answered her not a word** is totally contradictory to what we would have expected from a tender, compassionate Savior, who, without compromise to His Jewish mission could have symbolically pictured the future universality of His Kingdom by responding positively and instantly to her request. In fact, would not His positive response to this appeal for help from Israel's Messiah be the better type of that future expansion into all the world? This very feature that, at first, disappoints our expectation is another evidence that our story is not the sort of thing Christian sentiment would have

dreamed up. Rather, it demonstrates that in our hands is no dubious tradition or Christian myth, but authentic history. Its authenticity, in turn, invites us to dig deeper to discover whether our disappointment be groundless or not.

**He answered her not a word.** Some object to the explanation of Jesus' attitude as intended to test the woman, because incompatible with His divine purity and rectitude, especially should she, in her weaknesses, have failed the test. But this underevaluates Jesus by supposing that He would not have mercifully come to her rescue, as He did in the case of Jairus (Mk. 5:35f; Lk. 8:49f) or that of Peter (Mt. 14:30f) or that of the nine Apostles (Mt. 17:16ff). Is it more credible that Jesus should not have helped even this smoldering wick of faith, however ignorant or unqualified? (Cf. Mt. 12:20) And, for the perfection of her understanding and faith, who can say that Jesus cannot use precisely a method that seems an unspeakably cruel trial, but, because He knows how far He can test, proves to be precisely the best means of teaching her what she must learn and leading her to greater heights of faith?

It is a wrong view of God that supposes that He cannot, or does not, try us by delaying answers to prayer or by acting in some way that appears to us to be His willing affliction or His disguising His loving purposes for us, in order to produce some effect in us. It is also a limited understanding about God that fails to appreciate His love to be wrestled with by His people. (Cf. Abraham, Gen. 18:16-33; Jacob, Gen. 32:22-30; Moses, Nu. 14:11-20; Ex. 32:9-14, 31-35)

- A. Her **RESOLUTION** remained undaunted by Jesus' seeming indifference and her apparent temporary failure.
  - 1. Unsatisfied to cry to Him from afar once or twice, she continued to appeal.
    - a. The perplexed disciples, aware of Jesus' purpose for this journey and His desire for anonymity, probably worry about the woman's continual shouting, since her calling attention to the presence of the *Son of David* in this area could easily compromise everything Jesus intended to accomplish toward the training of the Twelve. Ironically, however, part of their discipline must consist in the lesson that showing compassion upon a needy person who is a nuisance just to get rid of them is not Christian compassion. Nevertheless, His silence is so unlike Jesus that the Twelve immediately notice it and are

- openly embarrassed by it.
- b. The disciples' solution is to urge the Lord to send her away. Even though they counsel the Lord to end her persistent, nerve-racking pleading, their advice is not entirely heartless, because the men probably remember that Jesus had helped Gentiles before. (Mt. 8:7ff) So it would not be wholly unreasonable to expect Him to be merciful to this foreign woman too. If so, not totally unsympathetic to her cries, they excitedly advise the Master to get it over with, cast out the demon and send her on her way. Their intercession, even in this negative way, encourages her to hope.
  - c. His seeming discouragement served only to intensify the warmth of her pleading (15:25). How long did she follow this group of thirteen men down the road, attracting attention to herself as she cried after Him? Her determination is being tested to the limit by these circumstances.
2. This quick-witted mother noticed that Jesus, in ignoring the Apostles' complaint, offers her a glimmer of hope. If she dare not hope that "silence gives consent," at least His silence was not a cold nor final refusal. It may also be that His own unruffled manner, despite His seeming stand-off attitude, and the total absence of any evidence of displeasure at her insistence, communicated more to her than His reported words tell us.
  3. Jesus demands simply that all embrace the divine plan for His personal mission. (Cf. Ro. 15:8f)

**15:24 But he answered and said, I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** This answer is addressed primarily to the Twelve who urge Him to send her away. On the assumption that they counsel Him to grant her request so as to hurry her away, Jesus is seen as explaining to them why He should not grant it without clearing up the essential issue involved. If their advice be based upon Jesus' miraculous help and limited sharing of His truth with Gentiles and Samaritans prior to this event (as e.g. Mt. 8:5ff; Jn. 4:7ff, 42), in those cases, however, His Jewish mandate had not been in doubt, probably because He was then within the physical borders of Israel. Here, on the other hand, He is in Gentile country.

**I was . . . sent . . . unto the lost . . . of Israel.** This is the definite principle and the proper method guiding His ministry, divinely determined for the purpose of bringing it to a successful and right conclusion. This is why it is not easy to ignore it. Yet it could be

departed from, if the reason were valid to justify it. It was not an inviolable law admitting of no exceptions. Nevertheless, because of its fundamental character, it could not be ignored, except for unusual circumstances. Whether or not this situation qualifies as exceptional, had not yet been demonstrated.

**I was not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** This is true in two senses:

1. My personal mission is only to the Jews in the sense that I will live, work and die among them only. My followers will evangelize the Gentiles too, but the peculiar demands of my mission limit my work to the Jews, in order to guarantee salvation to all. For this reason I cannot labor extensively among Samaritans or Gentiles until my mission to Israel will have been fully executed. This is the tactic of limited objectives. Time is too precious to permit me to neglect the very people whom God has been preparing for centuries for just this moment when I may win and train Hebrew disciples to become missionaries to the entire world. (Indications of His sense of world mission are: Jn. 10:16-18; cf. 11:52; 12:32; 17:20f.) Further, any extensive ministry among pagans could so alienate my precious Hebrew following that all past teaching would be lost. (Study the continuing racial problems in the life of the early Church to appreciate Jesus' practical dilemma here.) Some fail to see that Jesus' motive for refusal to enlarge His ministry to include Gentiles would have prevented His acceptability as Messiah to the Jews, since, they say, His nation had already rejected Him. But this objection overlooks the prejudices and limited understanding of those genuine disciples who had truly accepted Him, but still could not accept the evangelization of Gentiles. (Cf. Peter in Ac. 10; 11:15; Gal. 2)
2. Figuratively: only those who are willing to become *lost sheep of the house of Israel*, can come under the terms of my mission. That is, if you really understand that the Davidic reign and the promises include Gentiles too, if you confess your lostness without the grace of the God of Abraham, and if you admit your trust in anything He reveals, then you can enjoy the right to call me "Son of David" in its fullest sense and reap the benefits of your confession. In fact, you, too, will have thus become a true child of Abraham by faith. This explanation, however, stretches the literal use of the phrase which definitely limited the evangelistic outreach of the Apostles when Jesus sent them to preach just a few weeks earlier.

(Mt. 10:5f) Hence, to have expected any Gentile to understand this extended sense is asking too much comprehension on their part.

While Jesus' answer is primarily directed to the Twelve, it is for her ears too, because she must probe her own understanding of the situation: "You call me *Son of David?* Then you admit that I am the Messiah of Israel. Since you are not a Jewess, how can I help you?" Jesus insists that the woman recognize the sacred distinction between God's chosen people and all others. This is not racism, but reality, since it helps her to recognize that "salvation is of the Jews" (Jn. 4:22). In fact God had already spent two thousand years to develop a system of belief, a vocabulary of faith and an understanding of God upon which men of all nations could set their hopes and by which they could recognize the incarnate Messiah when He came. It has now come to its fruition in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of ISRAEL, and men must come to Him and be united together in the New Israel, if they are to receive the blessing for which they yearn.

Is Jesus TESTING this woman at all? It is doubtful that He intended so to test her patience as to make her value His blessing, because His arguments are theologically, not psychologically, oriented. He does not doubt her objective sincerity nor argue against the rightness or depth of her motherly concern. Rather, He argues against His own subjective right to extend the terms of His own personal mission and mandate to include Gentiles. His objections are right and proper within themselves, even if He should never grant her request. It is a matter of tactics that His ministry had to be severely limited to accomplish the specific goals of His incarnation, and this meant strategic limitations of His efforts to Israel. Thus, the blessing of any Gentile, who happened to come into contact with Him, was purely incidental to His main purpose. Nevertheless, despite the primary thrust of these objections, whereby He explains to all present why He cannot consider an extensive Gentile ministry, the very act of stating these reasons produced in the Syrophenician a secondary result: they tested her understanding and her determination to continue. In fact, since these objections do not categorically refuse her, she is left free to respond to them as she will. The sense and flow of this conversation may be outlined as follows:

- a. Lord, Son of David, help me!
- b. But my mission is to the Jews.
- c. Lord, help me!

- d. My mission is properly and primarily to the Jews.
- e. I accept your mission and see my place in it.
- f. Good, I'll help you!

Notice, therefore, that, because He graciously condescended to teach her what she must know in order rightly to call Him *Son of David*, and because He has already begun the lesson, there is more real mercy in His refusal than in the Apostles' well-meaning advice to ignore the lesson, get on with the healing and hustle her away, so terminating the embarrassing situation. They intend only to relieve a temporary aggravation to themselves. The Lord is already at work to save a soul for eternity!

Further, His tender affection for His own nation and His single-minded determination to save His people from their sins, revealed in the expression (15:24), underscores His deep Shepherd's care and concern for their lost condition. (Study Mt. 1:21; 9:36; 10:5; Cf. Lk. 19:41ff) Though these words are intended for Jewish ears and Jewish readers, they certainly cater to no nationalistic prejudices, for they imply the damnation of the Hebrew flock: they are the *LOST* sheep of Israel's house. So, unless a given Hebrew says to Jesus: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant, for I do not forget thy commandments." (Psa. 119:176), he cannot be saved. This establishes once more the righteous condemnation of the self-righteous who have no need for Jesus! (See on 9:13.)

B. Her **RESERVE** is shown by her proper humility, despite the rightness of her request and the painful desperation of her need, should Christ refuse. 15:25 **But she came and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.**

1. She always recognized Jesus as *Lord* in all her addresses. Her own understanding of the word may well not equal what a Christian now means when he confesses "Jesus as Lord to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:10f; 1 Co. 12:3; Ro. 10:9) Nevertheless, her considerate humility requires of her that she address Him as "Sir," whether she knew all about His true authority or not. On the other hand, when she couples *Lord* with "Son of David," she may mean to acknowledge His true Lordship.
2. She did not argue with Him whether His Messiahship ought to be international or not, however biased or prejudicial His affirmation of His Jewish mandate may have sounded to her.

Rather than argue, **she came and worshipped him.** Mark (7:25) notes: "She came and fell down at his feet" (*elthoûsa prosépesen pròs tòus pòdas autoû*), as if she had been following (cf. Mt. 15:23), crying after Jesus, and now runs around ahead of the group, practically blocking their passage by kneeling before Him. She apparently just could not permit herself to entertain the opinion that He was a sectarian Savior, however rightly His mission be directed toward the Hebrew people.

3. She focused attention, not on her nation, but upon the crying need of her single human problem: "Help ME!" At this point she has dropped the Jewish title, "Son of David," as though she recognized her lack of right to use that nomenclature. Even this seemingly desperate act is not devoid of genuine faith, because where her lack of qualification is greatest, she hurls her case, her lack of qualification—herself at Jesus' feet, as if to say, "Lord, help me to qualify!" If this is not total, believing dependence upon His grace, what could be? If this is not the finest expression of Abrahamic faith that qualifies one as a child of Abraham, what could be?
4. She could focus others' attention upon her problem, because it was so much at the center of her own. This woman, as Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 136) puts it: "had the one supremely effective quality in prayer—she was in deadly earnest. Prayer for her was no ritual form; it was the outpouring of the passionate desire of her soul, which somehow felt that she could not—and must not—and need not—take no for an answer." When one knows he can turn to no other for help, he wastes no idle words in expressing his urgent need.

15:26 **And he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs.** Since the following evidences prove that Jesus knew all along what He was doing, we can stop worrying whether His methods seem right and loving or not:

1. Although He had earlier answered her not even a word (15:23), His statements proved He had been listening and understood her pleas.
2. Although He gave her no direct encouragement to continue, still He did not send her away nor concur in the Apostles' counsel.
3. Although He declared that His ministry was **PRIMARILY** for the Jews ("Let the children first be fed . . ." Mk. 7:27a), He did not entirely shut the door to the Gentiles.

How, therefore, should Jesus' answer be interpreted? Two views of dogs are common:

1. By referring to Gentiles even as animals under the table, Jesus really intends to bring out the classic Jewish-Gentile prejudices without subscribing to them Himself. That is, whereas *kunārion* is admittedly diminutive, still puppies are animals, not people. But because He said "puppies," not "dogs," He is seen as arguing good-naturedly with her about the usual mutual contempt between the two peoples.
2. The other view sees nothing of this partisan byplay. Rather, Jesus' exquisite choice of words flashes pictures all over the screen of her mind. In fact, even though this woman's little girl may not have owned a puppy (*kunārion*), the lady herself was certainly familiar with house-dogs hopefully wagging their tails for a tidbit (*psichion*) "accidentally" dropped by their little masters. Thus, Jesus' words intend only to picture a situation without any reference to traditional biases. In effect, they become a germ-parable that continues to insist upon a sense of fitness or appropriateness: "Children are fed in one way and time, while the puppies are fed differently and generally later. They are not permitted to act as if they too were children, however hungry they might be for even the meagerest morsel intended for their owners. The normal order is: first, the children are fed, and then the house-dogs. (Mk. 7:27) Nor is the children's food to be taken from them and given, instead, to the house-dogs. (Mt. 15:26) Neither of these possibilities would be proper (*kalón*)."

If Jesus had no intention of helping her at all, there is no excusing Him for leading her on, opening up so many doors to hope. Only the long-faced, dull commentators fail to see the twinkle in Jesus' eyes or miss the kindness of His voice, and so can only quarrel about the bitterness and contemptuous arrogance of the word "dog." Had Jesus really said "dog" as the common versions generally render it, then the commentaries would have some reason to mention "dogs" as a derogatory term for foreigners and others of ill-repute. Although Arndt-Gingrich (458) say that *kunārion* can also be used with no diminutive force at all, the only mention of *kunāria* in the NT is in this text, whereas all references to "dogs" in the NT are only in Mt. 7:6; Lk. 16:21; Phil. 3:2; 2 Pt. 2:22; Rev. 22:15, and the word there is always *kùon*, never *kunārion*. Jewish-Gentile prejudices do not even enter into Jesus' meaning, because His argument is against the

impropriety of taking what has been especially prepared (bread) for a particular people (Jews) and giving it, instead, to another group (Gentiles) for whom it was not immediately intended. The whole question revolves around the planning of the Master of the house (God), who ordained that the normal procedure should follow the proper order: (1) Children (Jews); (2) House pets (Gentiles). The decision about what is "good, fair or right (*kalōn*)" is decided by the Master of the house, not by hard feelings and prejudices between those who, in this figure, turn out to be the children and the dogs. (Study Ac. 3:26; 13:26, 46.)

**"Let the children first be fed"** (Mk. 7:27a) is a theme developed in the Roman epistle by Paul, who, though fundamentally determined to expound the universality of the salvation in Christ, cannot set aside this rigorous precedence: "The Gospel is the power of God to save anyone who believes it, to the Jew first and then to the Greek." (Ro. 1:16) For eight chapters Paul presents justification by faith as quite unconnected with any sacred pre-existing conditions such as possession of the Law or descendence from the right nation through the patriarchs, etc. Immediately thereafter, however, in chapters 9-11 even he too deals with Israel's preciousness to God in the universal plan of salvation.

Whereas Jesus had presented to the lady an "either-or" dilemma, i.e. either children or puppies; or, at least, first children, then puppies, she briskly turns it into a "both-and" proposition, i.e. both children and puppies. Watch how she does this:

15:27 **But she said, Yea, Lord: For even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.**

C. Her RESILIENCE is shown by her steady good humor though she was desperate.

1. Her obvious humility admitted the truth of whatever name Jesus applied to her. Her quick-witted tact helped her to grasp her relationship with God's plans for Israel and act immediately to take advantage of what she now understood as her relationship. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 41) says so well:

Heathenism may be like the dogs, when compared with the children's place and privileges; but He is their Master still, and they are under His table; and when He breaks the bread, there is enough and to spare for them.

2. By finding her place in His mission to the Jews; she implicitly accepts the limitation of His personal mandate to that nation. Whereas Jesus had raised the objection that in a household the proper feeding order is first the children and then possibly the dogs (Mk. 7:27), never rightly reversed, she answered with the undoubted fact that, even before all the children's needs are met, the puppies are permitted a few crumbs **CONTEMPORANEOUSLY** with the feeding of the children. In this way she argues the rightness of her hope to be blessed even before Jesus completed His ministry to Israel. Therefore, she consents to God's limitations of His Messiah's mission to Israel. She has now learned what she needed to know.
3. She did not ask great things: only a *crumb* of His power. Whereas her request is of inestimable value to her, she pictures His bountiful power as so great that, by comparison, her request is really insignificant. This is genuine understanding of His power, because the common human impotence in the presence of demon-possession made anyone who could exorcize demons appear great, and yet she considers such a marvelous miracle as mere "crumbs" for Jesus.

This gallant woman acquiesced in everything He revealed, but persisted in finding her place in His plans. Because she kept bouncing back after each seeming rebuff, He was able to verify for all time the excellence of her faith, build her understanding, strengthen her faith, and, at the same time, justify His temporary stepping outside His strictly Hebrew role.

### III. THE REWARDING OF FAITH (15:28; Mk. 7:29f)

15:28 **Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt.** Mark (7:29) connects this response of Jesus directly with this indomitable woman's marvelously brilliant attitude: "He said to her, 'For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.' " Nothing conquers Jesus' heart faster than that faith that says, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him!" However, why should we think, with some, that Jesus allowed Himself to be worsted in argument, when He has been skillfully guiding her into this situation where she can rise in faith to this glorious conclusion? Plummer (*Matthew*, 217)

is right to say that

. . . He at once accepts her interpretation of the metaphor as proof of her insight and faith. With doglike perseverance she had excelled even the children in trust, and assuredly she might receive what the children would never miss.

**Great is thy faith:** by His treatment, Jesus had personally sounded the depth of this gallant woman's character, and His conclusion is well-founded:

1. Doubtless, her excellence of character had a great deal to do with the toughness of her faith. (See notes on 13:23.)
2. If her trust in Jesus at the beginning only thought of Him as a local Jewish Messiah, it has now grown to see all nations blessed by Israel's Christ, even if only as undeserving "dogs under the table." No one can rightly approach God without this fundamental understanding of his own need for grace.
3. Like the Gentile centurion, she also believed that Jesus could heal at a distance. (Cf. Notes on 8:5)
4. The Lord had thrown up barrier after barrier, yet she brilliantly hurdled them all with keen wit, steady resourcefulness and genuine humility and finally with real understanding of what Jesus taught about His mission.
5. Jesus' verdict is further vindicated by her instant obedience to His command to go home to find her daughter free from the demon.

Whether Jesus so intended it or not, this incident well illustrates the justice of His condemnation of Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum. In fact, He had pointed out that, had those ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon enjoyed the opportunities for faith that the Galilean cities had known, the former would have long ago repented in deep humility. Whereas one example does not establish a rule, still she is genuinely typical of the joyous reception the Gospel later received among outcasts and pagans. (Cf. Ac. 8:4-8; 13:48; 16:34)

**Be it done unto thee even as thou wilt.** Note Jesus' total confidence in His own authority over demons not even present. Without prayers, without orders directed to the demons, without exorcism, by the simple exercise of His mighty will, the distant demon leaves the girl.

Did Jesus' acquiescence to the woman's wishes constitute a contradiction of His own objection in v. 24?

1. No, because to help this one woman as an exception would not

- interfere with His fundamental ministry to the Jews. Because it is truly an exception to the rule, it demonstrates the reality of the rule.
2. No, because Jesus had helped Gentiles before. (Mt. 8:5-13) Even if the strict wording of His divine mandate had read: "Jews only," He knows that God "desires mercy and not sacrifice." (See notes on 9:13; 12:7.)
  3. No, because she had not asked Him to forsake the Jews that He might dedicate Himself exclusively to the Gentiles. She had requested only a little help for one Gentile.
  4. No, because her present understanding and faith may be seen as qualifying her to become a real daughter of Abraham, the larger target of Jesus' mission. (See on 15:25.)

**And her daughter was healed from that hour.** i.e. *healed* of every symptom and result of demon possession. With characteristic confidence in Jesus, the lady went directly home, certain of the truth of His affirmation. Mark (7:30) narrates how she "found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone." It is unnecessary to interpret the Greek phrase *bebleménon epi tēn klinēn* as referring to the violence with which the demon left, for this is a regular idiom for "lying in a bed." (Study Mt. 9:2; 8:6, 14 in Greek. Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 130; article *bállo*.)

If there had been any doubt in the mind of the Jewish reader about the rightness of the Messiah's dealings with a Canaanite woman, Jesus' instantaneous liberation of the demonized daughter is supernatural proof of His right to bless any Gentile He chooses, even if they be descendants of the cursed Hamitic race.

Why not start a collection of stories illustrating the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" that show how gently He dealt with foreigners and outcasts, like this Phoenician lady, the Roman centurion, the schismatic Samaritans (Jn. 4:7ff, 30, 39ff), and the excommunicated Hebrew (Jn. 9:35-37) and others?

### LESSONS FOR APPLICATION

1. What this incident meant to race relations between Jews and Gentiles in the first century, it signifies for all race relations today too. If the severely limited Son of God can appreciate and bless this foreigner, a member of an accursed race, what of His followers

now freed from racial restrictions and specifically ordered to love and evangelize the whole world?

2. Jesus answered the believing request of this woman who was not even a member of the covenant people. Beware of believing that God must answer only the prayers of "our people," if He finds great faith outside the New Israel!
3. During His earthly ministry, Jesus chose to be guided by the methodological principle of His own Jewish Messiahship. This placed relative limits on what He could accomplish in terms of Gentile evangelization and blessing. Today, He has established spiritual guidelines by which He judges and blesses. Only those who align themselves with His plans, qualify themselves by faith, may hope to receive His bounty. He longs to bless men, but their dams of lack of faith and hope in His mercy hold back His generosity. If He chooses to distribute His gifts according to rules which He chooses not to disobey, who can complain? He is Lord. If man is disappointed with God's choices and wisdom, it is man's fault, not God's. This text, however, encourages us to bring our wants to Christ, however unworthy or unqualified we might be, but with a faith that lets God be God and lets His rules stand.
4. Morgan (*Matthew*, 203) exhorts: "In our relation to Jesus Christ as His messengers and workers, let us look for faith in unexpected places. Let us not keep out of Tyre and Sidon because there are no good people there. There is a freshness of faith everywhere waiting to surprise us if we will only venture to cross the line."
5. If God be determined to bless us, nothing can prevent us from receiving the answers to our prayers but our own unbelief, misunderstanding or ignorance of God's plans.
6. God's silence must never be interpreted as indicating His willingness to answer our prayers. Even while He is silent, He may be working out the very answer we seek. His silence may indicate His desire that we learn the discipline of patient prayer and humble waiting. God answers our prayers, however perhaps not according to the time schedules we try to impose upon Him. (Cf. Lk. 18:1-8)
7. Nor should we be discouraged from continuing our prayers merely because of a lack of sympathy in the attitude of Jesus' disciples.
8. Not even the difficult or unclear messages from the Lord should deter us from seeking His blessing and remaining His trusting followers. There may be Bible texts and commands that seem to contradict reason or common sense; but they are revelations of what is otherwise unknowable and must be grasped by trusting

- God to be telling us the truth.
9. Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 136): "So many people . . . pray really because they do not wish to miss a chance. They do not really believe in prayer; they have only the feeling that something might just possibly happen, and they do not wish to miss a chance. This woman came because Jesus was not just a possible helper; He was her only hope."
  10. *PHC* (Vol. XXIII, 266): "We too are living under certain definite laws of God; and if we transgress them, then under all ordinary circumstances we must expect the consequences, and we make a grievous mistake in appealing lightly to the mercy of God. Doubtless His mercy is infinite; but so are His truth and justice, and His determination to uphold the laws He has laid down. Our Lord longed to help the woman, but it was hard for Him to infringe the rule which He had laid down for His own guidance."
  11. *PHC* (Vol. XXIII, 268) commenting on Mk. 7:28, notices: "This verse contains three important principles for our guidance in the spiritual life. 1. Agree with the Lord, no matter what He says. "Yes, Lord." 2. Think of another truth, and urge it with Him as a plea. "Yet." [i.e. open your eyes to other alternatives or other facets of His will.] 3. Whatever happens, have faith in the Lord, and possess thy soul in patience. His dealings may be unscrutable, but the foundation of them all is love."
  12. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 42): "To how many, not only of all nations and conditions, but in all states of heart and mind, nay in the very lowest depths of conscious guilt and alienation from God, must this have brought unspeakable comfort . . . Be it so, an outcast, 'dog,' not at the table, but under the table. Still we are at His feet; it is our Master's Table; He is our Master; and He breaks the children's bread, it is of necessity that 'the children's crumbs,' fall to us—enough, quite enough and to spare. Never can we be outside His reach, nor of that of His gracious care, and of sufficient provision to eternal life."
  13. Edersheim (*ibid.*): "Yet this lesson also must we learn, that as 'heathens' we may not call on Him as 'David's Son,' till we know why we so call Him. If there can be no despair, no being cast out by Him, no absolute distance that hopelessly separates from His Person and Provision, there must be no presumption, no forgetfulness of the right relation, no expectancy of magic-miracles, no viewing of Christ as a Jewish Messiah. [i.e. as a

Hebrew superman, a political hero.] We must learn it, and painfully . . . that . . . what we are and where we are, that we may be prepared for the grace of God and the gift of grace. All men—Jews and Gentiles, 'children' and 'dogs' are as before Christ and God equally undeserving and equally sinners, but those who have fallen deep can only learn that they are sinners by learning that they are great sinners and will only taste of the children's bread when they have felt [their need]."

14. Galilee's loss, when Jesus left, is the Gentile woman's gain. (Cfr. Ro. 11:11f) We must take warning from His departure from His own who rejected Him because, although they had almost been moved to yield allegiance to Him, they would not. So He finally abandoned them to their own worst enemy, their own unrealizable personal and national dreams. He can abandon us too, to our own miserable self! (Cf. Ro. 11:17, 24)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. From where had Jesus come when he entered the foreign territory mentioned in this section?
2. Locate geographically the foreign territory where this event occurs.
3. Summarize the travel plan Jesus followed from the debate about traditions until the demand for a sign from heaven. (Mt. 16)
4. What was the stated purpose for this trip? How does this purpose harmonize with the events immediately preceding the trip?
5. List several reasons why Jesus must abide by His original mission to earth by refusing to begin a ministry among the Gentiles.
6. List the various factors that increased the discouragements which the Syrophoenician woman must overcome.
7. List the various factors that make the woman's faith "great."
8. Explain Jesus' figure of speech about the dogs under the table.
9. What additional statement does Mark record that might indicate Jesus' willingness to help the woman?
10. How did the woman turn Jesus' figure of speech to her credit, indicating that what she requested was still possible within the express limits of His personal mission?
11. In what condition did the woman find her daughter when she returned home?
12. What evidence is there in this section of Jesus' supernatural identity?

## Section 38

**JESUS HEALS MANY IN DECAPOLIS  
AND FEEDS FOUR THOUSAND**  
(Parallel: Mark 7:31—8:9)

TEXT: 15:29-39

29 And Jesus departed then, and came nigh unto the sea of Galilee; and he went up into the mountain, and sat there. 30 And there came unto him great multitudes, having with them the lame, blind, dumb, maimed, and many others; and they cast them down at his feet; and he healed them: 31 insomuch that the multitude wondered, when they saw the dumb speaking, the maimed whole, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing: and they glorified the God of Israel.

32 And Jesus called unto him his disciples, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I would not send them away fasting, lest haply they faint on the way. 33 And the disciples say unto him, Whence should we have so many loaves in a desert place as to fill so great a multitude? 34 And Jesus said unto them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven, and a few small fishes. 35 And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground; 36 and he took the seven loaves and the fishes; and he gave thanks and brake, and gave to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitudes. 37 And they all ate, and were filled: and they took up that which remained over of the broken pieces, seven baskets full. 38 And they that did eat were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And he sent away the multitudes, and entered into the boat, and came into the borders of Magadan.

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**

- Why do you think Jesus spends so much time outside of Palestine on this trip without even beginning a special ministry among Gentiles? How could Jesus, the Savior of the world, refuse to teach any part of the world's people? Yet, in this section, He obviously and deliberately intends to hide from the Gentiles in Phoenicia and Syria through which He travelled. How do you justify this omission?

- b. Earlier when Jesus went to the Decapolis and cast demons out of the Gadarene demoniacs, out of fear the countrymen of the demoniacs flatly asked Jesus to leave. Here, however, the people in this same area welcome Jesus joyfully. How do you account for this change in reception?
- c. Why does Matthew completely omit the mention of the healing of the deaf mute, as recorded by Mark? Or is there any evidence in Matthew that shows that he knew about it and just chose not to record it?
- d. Why do you think Jesus took the deaf mute aside for a more or less private healing? Why do you think Jesus used the method to heal the deaf mute that He did? Could He not have simply spoken a word to cure Him? Why all the pantomime? (See parallel in Mark.)
- e. How could Jesus hope for privacy and silence from the cured deaf mute, with more than four thousand people in the immediate vicinity? Does not His demand that the immediate friends or family of the man, as well as the man himself, not tell anyone seem rather futile, if not foolish, in view of the crowds? If Jesus is not doing something useless or stupid, then, what is the meaning or purpose of His charge to the healed that they should not tell anyone?
- f. Why did people stay with Jesus so long that they ran out of groceries? Had they not brought any along with them?
- g. Why had not the Apostles yet learned that Jesus has power to feed multitudes in a wilderness with only scant provisions? How many times must they see the evidence before they will be certain that Jesus can and will do it? How many times did you hear about Jesus' wonderful power before you were compelled to accept it as a matter of fact? If you feel that the Apostles were not unbelieving in His power, what evidences do you see in the text that indicate to you that they had really learned?

#### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Soon after the incident involving the Syrophenician woman, Jesus traveled on north from the neighborhood of Tyre, passed through Sidon then turned eastward to the area east of the Sea of Galilee known as the Decapolis. Skirting the Sea of Galilee, He climbed up one of the hillsides and sat down.

Great crowds began to flock to Him, bringing with them their lame,

their crippled, their blind folk; those who could not hear, as well as many others. They lay them before Jesus at His feet and He healed them.

They brought Him, for instance, a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. They requested Jesus to lay His hand on him to heal him. The Lord took the man aside, away from the crowd. Jesus put His fingers into the man's ears, spat and touched the man's tongue. Then, looking up into the sky, He sighed. Next He said to the man in Aramaic "Ephphatha," a word which means, "Be opened!"

With that he began to hear and, at the same time, the speech defect was removed and the man spoke normally. Jesus gave him and his friends strict instructions not to tell any one about this incident. But the more He forbade them, the more they broadcast it.

The crowd was absolutely amazed. They kept saying, "All that He does, He does well!" "Why He even makes the deaf people to hear again and the dumb speak." Consequently, the people were simply astonished at seeing the formerly dumb people speaking; the maimed now whole, the crippled walking naturally and the blind seeing. They gave the credit to the God of Israel.

During that same period of Jesus' Decapolis ministry, another huge crowd had gathered around Jesus, but they ran out of food. It was then that Jesus called His disciples over to Him to inform them, "I feel sorry for all these people, inasmuch as they have been with me three days now and are completely out of food. I am unwilling to send them away to their homes hungry; they might just not make it there. In fact, some of them have come a long distance."

"How and where can we find enough food in this forsaken place to feed all this crowd?" was the answer the disciples gave Him.

Jesus insisted, "How many loaves of bread do you have?"

"Seven," they counted, "and a few small fish."

Then Jesus told the people to sit down on the ground. He took the seven loaves of bread in His hands along with the fish and gave thanks for them. Next He broke them and distributed them to His followers for distribution to the crowd. Everybody ate all he wanted and still they collected seven hampers full of scraps left over. That day there were about four thousand men in the crowd that ate, not counting the women and children too.

After dismissing the multitudes of people to return home, Jesus Himself immediately boarded a boat with His men and sailed toward the area of Magadan-Dalmanutha.

## SUMMARY

After casting the demon out of the daughter of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus and the Twelve followed a round-about route to re-enter Palestine, concluding their journey in the Decapolis area east of the Sea of Galilee. Great crowds gathered around Him for healing. Three days they stayed, during which time Jesus healed a deaf and dumb man thus amazing the crowds who glorified Israel's God. When the food shortage became acute, Jesus miraculously fed at least four thousand men, not counting women and children, with only seven buns and some little fish. Then He and the Twelve sailed southwest to Magadan-Dalmanutha.

## NOTES

### THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THIS ACCOUNT

The key position of this account in the argumentation of Matthew is worthy of notice. Although his introductory geographical notes are less precise than Mark's, anyone familiar with Mark's Gospel could know that the incidents recorded in this section took place on the Decapolis side of the Galilean Lake. (Cf. Mt. 15:29 with Mk. 7:31) But even without this valuable piece of information offered his readers, had Matthew really intended to describe nothing more than a series of miracles worked for a strictly Jewish group, he could have shown more caution against misunderstanding. Instead, he drops clues that help the reader to decide that the Messiah is ministering to a mixed Jewish-Gentile group:

1. The response of the multitudes to Jesus' miracles now differs from that recorded when Jesus fed the five thousand. The latter, a predominantly (if not entirely) Jewish group, immediately express a Jewish reaction by identifying Jesus as "the Prophet who is to come into the world" (Jn. 6:14). Contrarily, the present crowd express their marvel at Jesus' miracles by "glorifying the God of Israel," a fact that suggests the predominantly Gentile character of this group. (See on 15:31.)
2. The "baskets" are different. For the five thousand, they were food baskets considered typical of the Jews, because they carried kosher food when on journeys through Gentile country (*kōfinoi*);

Arndt-Gingrich, 448). For the four thousand, however, they were big wicker baskets, or hampers (*spuridas*; see *ISBE*, 413; however see on 15:37.) This distinction is maintained even in Jesus' rehearsal of the two miracles. (Mt. 16:9f; Mk. 8:18f) Were the latter baskets typical of Gentiles merely because they were not specifically typically of Jews?

3. Jesus' handling of the situation is relaxed and natural, without the tensions and pressure noticed during the feeding of the five thousand Galileans. (See Jesus' Problem and Plan, 14:13.) Unless some radical transformation has taken place in those politically volatile Galileans, there is no adequate explanation for Jesus' unforced decision to feed these people now gathered, unless it be that He is dealing with completely different people. In fact, He is probably standing in Decapolis, surrounded by a crowd well-mixed with a heavy pagan constituency, among whom He can freely move without involuntarily inciting Zealots to riot against Rome.
4. Whereas we are unable to identify Magadan-Dalmanutha with certainty, to which Jesus sailed after the miraculous multiplication of food for the four thousand, this would have been less a problem for the original readers who could easily deduce where Jesus would have been, and conclude that He had been among the half-heathen population of the Decapolis.
5. It is also a temptation to follow Edersheim's suggestion (*Life*, I, 684; II, 65) that notes Jesus two prayers for the loaves and the fish (Mk. 8:6f) on this occasion, but only for the bread at the feeding of the five thousand because it was the main article of food, a typically Jewish distinction. Nevertheless, while solidly based on John's wording (see Jn. 6:11), the Synoptic evidence is not so clearly unequivocal, since they indicate that Jesus had both bread and fish in His hands when He blessed them. (Cfr. Mt. 14:19 and par.) Even so, why did Jesus pray once for each item now?

Admittedly no single factor mentioned above, taken alone, is convincing, but seen in combination with the others, might be understood as leading to the conviction that Matthew is describing a series of miracles done by the Messiah for people less than 100% Hebrew.

Now, if Jesus is pictured here as ministering to a mixed Jewish-Gentile group, where JEW AND GENTILE SIT DOWN TOGETHER TO EAT A COMMON MEAL IN FELLOWSHIP WITH THE MESSIAH AND PROVIDED BY HIM, then Matthew's purpose for recording this incident

in precisely this chapter becomes acid-clear. In effect, he teaches that standard Jewish ceremonial separation is finished as a useful concept. Purity, which had been fundamental motivation for national separation and personal holiness, is now decided by quite different criteria such as human need, the condition of men's hearts, and their relative distance from God. Israel, says Matthew, transgressed God's commandment to keep human rules and so was liable for all the impurities that came out of Israel's heart (15:1-20). Genuine faith in Israel's Messiah can be found even among Canaanites (15:21-28), and, finally, Gentiles can sit down with Israel to feast on the Messiah's bounty even in this world (15:29-39). What a challenge to a lot of Jewish theology this chapter must have been! Although Matthew has written pro-Gentile statements before (see on 12:21), this enacted lesson must have struck home to Hebrews hearts with sledge-hammer force, especially as this event stands out in startling contrast to standard Jewish apocalyptic views of what the Messianic banquet should be.

Even if that half-heathenish population could hardly have perceived it, Matthew's attentive reader must certainly feel that when this Son of David goes beyond the geographical and spiritual borders of Israel and becomes a blessing to all nations—after all, to the Jews, ANY move beyond Israel practically opens things up to just everyone!—He is moving toward the fulfillment of God's intention that His Christ reach out to all nations, making it possible that in Abraham's true Son all the families of the earth be blessed. (Cf. Mt. 1:1; Gen. 12:3; 22:17f; Gal. 3:16)

A. SITUATION: JOURNEY THROUGH DECAPOLIS  
FROM PHOENICIA TO GALILEE  
(Mt. 15:29; Mk. 7:31)

15:29 **And Jesus departed thence**, i.e. from the district of Tyre, passing north through Sidon by a circuitous route which took the group east over the Lebanon mountains, across the Beqa'a Valley (= Leontes River), then south through the region of the Decapolis in the tetrarchy of Philip. He would thus approach the Sea of Galilee on its east side. (Mk. 7:31) He deliberately followed this round-about route in order to skirt Galilee and avoid inevitable clashes there, deliberately lengthening this trip as much as possible to gain maximum opportunity to be with His men before the final skirmishes that would

precede the crisis in Jerusalem. He **came nigh unto the Sea of Galilee;** how *nigh* is not told, because this may be only a relative geographical notice, not intending to affirm that He was even then seated on a hill overlooking the lake. At the conclusion of the feeding of the four thousand, true, He embarked to sail for Magadan-Dalmanutha, but this need not be conclusive in determining how far from the lake and how far into the Decapolis region Jesus was during the intervening period before sailing. **And he went up into the mountain, and sat there.** Which *mountain* (*tō òros*) is not identifiable, because the area east of the Sea of Galilee, and standing out in contrast with it, is marked by heights rising to 1000-2000 feet. (Cf. Golan Heights)

The Decapolis area is essentially pagan country, consisting of ten free Greek cities within the territory of ancient Israel, mostly located east of the Jordan Valley. (See note on 4:25 and map, Vol. I, p. 181.) Why, them, should Jesus be so ready to help people among that not strictly Hebrew population, especially after His rigid stance on helping Gentiles in Phoenicia? Two factors help solve this puzzle:

1. Because this mixed Jewish-Gentile population dwelt in at least a nominally Israelite territory, there would be less confusion about the primary goal of His mission.
2. Having clarified once for all His truly Jewish Messiahship and mission, the Lord now generously illustrates its intended ramifications by blessing both Jews and Gentiles together. Because of the mixed character of the Decapolis population, Jesus can easily carry out the Syrophenician woman's principle without compromise, even if on the drastically limited scale we see here. He can "let the children first be fed," while "the puppies under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Although the commentators are undoubtedly correct in imagining this period as one of great training and strengthening for the Twelve, yet Matthew and Mark relate nothing of their lessons, pausing only to tell, in this terse, summary fashion, about His ministry among the bi-racial dwellers of the Decapolis.

**NOTE:** It just may be that these non-Jewish or mixed racial situations furnished opportunity for precisely those lessons that the congenitally biased Apostles needed in order to appreciate even distantly a Kingdom of God in which Jews and Gentiles alike could receive one another for Christ's sake. To put it another way, our Gospel writers, rather than omit any mention of

the training of the Twelve during this long journey abroad, may be actually intending to communicate the content of the lessons learned, using the recorded events as illustrations. That is, was the Lord slowly but deliberately exposing His narrow-minded Jewish followers to the reality of human need beyond the borders of Israel? If it seems that the texts of the events that transpired abroad hardly justify such an emphasis, let it be remembered how gently the Lord would have to move to remove long-standing, deep-rooted prejudices against any consideration of Gentiles as possible candidates for the Kingdom.

While there were many pagans who dwelt in the independent Greek cities of the Decapolis, it should not be thought that there were no Jews at all. Nevertheless, even these Hebrews, whose daily business brought them into constant contact with their pagan neighbors, probably tended to be far less rigid than their more fervent Galilean compatriots, who in turn were despised by their Judean coreligionists as ignorant and unworthy representatives of purer Judaism.

In fact, the importance of the events in this section is best seen by the way it contrasts with the unbelief and rejection that Jesus had experienced among the Jews of Galilee and the religious bigots from Jerusalem. Morgan (*Matthew*, 202) comments graphically:

All the difficulties were in Jerusalem among those men who were always washing their hands! Christ has no difficulty with the man who is polluted with sin, when that man signs his soul to Him in faith. But He has a good deal of difficulty with the traditional ritualist. It is the man who comes with the great burden, who in faith commits his need to the King, that feels all the virtue of His healing pass into his life. There is no difficulty with these people when they believe.

Although Jesus had been rejected in the Decapolis area earlier (see notes on 8:28, 34), yet in mercy He forgives and forgets their past ingratitude and welcomes their change of heart, however late it comes.

#### B. MANY MIRACLES OF HEALING (Mt. 15:30f; Mk. 7:32-37)

15:30 **And there came unto him great multitudes.** Where did all these people come from?

1. Was it the news of Jesus presence heralded by those who knew of

the Syrophenician woman's daughter's deliverance? The distance is great enough to render this possibility less likely. Also, her understanding of His Jewish mission and the exceptional nature of His blessing this one Gentile would probably have counselled her silence, even if He had never so requested.

2. Is the deaf stammerer (Mk. 7:32-37), because of his disobedience to Jesus' injunction to silence, not merely one example of the great number healed, but also one of the sparks that ignited the excitement that swelled the crowd? If so, it is not all his fault, since, to be healed, he was taken aside from the multitude already present. (Mk. 7:33)
3. Hardly a year before, Jesus sent one of the former demoniacs at Gergesa (Gadara, Gerasa, see Mt. 8:28; Mk. 5:1) throughout this district, telling what great things God had done for him. But the ex-demoniac, whose very life was a living monument to Christ's compassion and power, had proclaimed not only in his home city, but throughout the Decapolis, how much JESUS had done for him. It may be that many of those people he influenced, upon hearing about the personal arrival in the Decapolis of a Person so wonderful as that described by the former demoniac, immediately flocked to Him. In this case, the Lord is merely taking advantage of the excellent advance publicity provided by His humble servant.
4. The very Gerasenes (or Gadarenes), also inhabitants of the Decapolis, are perhaps just as glad to see Jesus back as they had been for Him to leave earlier. (See notes on 8:34.)
5. The subjective reason for their coming was their faith in Jesus:
  - a. Not a theoretical conviction crushed by traditionalism and ritual;
  - b. Nor a creed to be received, recited and promptly forgotten;
  - c. But trust in a Person whose ability was unlimited. Their act of bringing their sick folk to the Lord was a venture of faith.

**Having with them the lame, blind, dumb, maimed, and many others.** (Cf. notes on 11:4; 4:23f; 8:16) **And they cast them down at his feet:** this surprising verb "cast them down" (*rhipto*) may also be used with no connotation of violence in the sense of "to put or lay down" (Arndt-Gingrich, 744), which is probably the nuance intended here. (Cf. its synonym *bâllo* in Mt. 9:2; 8:6, 14; cf. LXX: Gen. 21:15) This, because of the very slight probability that the sick accepted their being tossed around without complaint, and because the tender concern of their kinfolk already manifest in bringing them

to Jesus probably would not permit them to treat them in a manner incongruous with that concern. **And he healed them.** Jesus generously responded to their enthusiasm and concern to bring their sick to Him: whoever they were—Jew or Gentile, **He healed them.** What glorious completeness: everyone laid at Jesus' feet felt the power of His own healing energy surge through their body, making them well again! How Jesus' time would have been occupied in these three days, otherwise in healing sick folk, neither Evangelist tells us. Is it possible that the Savior could stay three days with people and NOT teach them? This would be determined in each case not only by the urgent needs of the people, but more especially, as here, by the schedule and planning of Jesus. If He saw that popular preaching to that group could cause no serious interruption of His timing, there is no compelling motive to prohibit Him from so doing. Foster (*Middle Period*, 203ff) imaginatively suggests that Jesus led a three-day summer camp meeting with typically Jewish crowd participation. However, if we have correctly guessed the large pagan character of this group, then total group participation in Jewish Psalms and other expressions of popular worship would necessarily be limited.

15:31 The results of Jesus work: **the multitude wondered**, and well they should, **when they saw the dumb speaking.** Whereas Matthew passed over the healing of the deaf stammerer (Mk. 7:32-37), he evidently knew about it, even mentioning such cases first in his summary. **They saw . . . the maimed whole:** deformed cripples now enjoyed the normal use of their limbs. Two excellent results occurred when Jesus worked:

1. Astonished crowds: "He has done all things well!" (Mk. 7:37) Contrast the commonplaceness with which Jesus' miracles would be seen over in Galilee around Capernaum. The extraordinary nature of Jesus' wonders is still fresh, still news here in the Decapolis. Contrast this reaction with that of roughly the same populace after the liberation of the Gadarene demoniacs. (Mt. 8:34 and par.) Their reaction seems almost self-accusatory: "Look what we've been missing all this time!" Every human weakness to which He turned His attention became strength. Not only did He succeed in curing brilliantly every case brought to Him, but the humble, generous, personally tender way He went about it set Him worlds apart from all others.
2. God was glorified: **They glorified the God of Israel.** Contrast the repeatedly fruitless prayers of many of these benighted Gentiles

offered to Greek or Syrian deities. Here, without fanfare or blustering argumentation, Jesus sounds the defeat of idolatry on a practical level that anyone can verify, and He causes men to rejoice in the undoubted victory of Jehovah! These humble people discern the evidential value of Jesus' miracles combined with His forgiving, generous love, and conclude that such rich gifts can come only from *the God of Israel*. What a contrast to those venomous critics who could see no more than Satan's power behind all that He did!

Is McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 404) right to believe that "the people whom Jesus healed were Jews, but daily intercourse with the heathen of Decapolis had tended to cool their religious ardor. The works of Jesus revived this ardor and caused them to praise the God whose prophet they esteemed Jesus to be"? Regarding the probability that Jesus stirred the ancient fervor of the Jews themselves, yes, however, it may be too much to believe that He healed ONLY Jews. In fact, although *the God of Israel* be a common title for *Jawéh* (Lk. 1:68; Ac. 13:17), it instantly distinguishes Him from the gods of the gentiles. (Cf. Ex. 5:1; 1 Kg. 11:9 et al.)

This implied contrast is not without profound theological implications, when penned in this context by a Matthew. Whereas an orthodox reader might tend to be scandalized by the undifferentiated banqueting together by Gentiles and Jews, Matthew shouts that the evident psychological result of Jesus' miracles was definitely not undifferentiated, but gloriously specific and theologically correct: *men glorified the GOD OF ISRAEL!* "Salvation is of the Jews!" (Jn. 4:22) But even so, Matthew's emphasis is not triumphalistic nor boastful of his nation's glories. Rather, he draws the readers' mind to his nation's God who is busy lowering segregation barriers without compromising His own high holiness, since it was *the God of Israel* who was at work in Jesus of Nazareth.

### C. JESUS FEEDS THE FOUR THOUSAND (Mt. 15:32-39; Mk. 8:1-10)

The similarities between this miraculous multiplication of food and that of the feeding of the five thousand are so many that it is not necessary to repeat what has been written about the essential features. Comments on analogous features are limited to a reference

to the earlier notes. Differences in details become important as we respond to cynical students who believe both Evangelists to have fallen prey to two confused accounts of but one incident garbled in oral transmission. Beyond the formal differences involved in the numbers (i.e. 5000 versus 4000 men; 5 loaves as against 7 loaves; 12 baskets in contrast to 7 baskets), there are other evidences that this is not the same event as the former miracle:

1. Matthew (16:9) and Mark (8:19f) both affirm indirectly the differentiation of the two events by quoting Jesus' use of the two separate miracles as the basis for His argument. If there were but one event, not only would Jesus Himself be pictured as confused, but both Evangelists could be reprimanded for gross oversight, since they both cite His words.
2. While the geographic location is somewhat the same, the circumstances that convoke the multitudes are quite dissimilar. The five thousand came over from Galilee to the eastern side of the Lake of Tiberias, and returned there after the miracle. (Cf. Notes on 14:13, 14; and Jn. 6:1-5, 22-25) The four thousand, on the other hand, are residents of the Decapolis region.
3. Whereas the five thousand sat upon the grass around Passover time (Jn. 6:4, 10; Mk. 6:39), the four thousand sit "on the ground," a fact possibly indicative of a later period when the grass would have been dried up in the summer heat.
4. Consider also the differences mentioned earlier under "The Critical Importance of this Account," where clues to the mixed half-Jewish, half-pagan character of this episode are noticed.

Objectors may ask why Jesus should repeat a multiple miraculous feeding, since, after all, had He not already demonstrated once and for all His power to do this? Would not a repetition tend to cast doubt on, rather than confirm, His mastery? No, Jesus chose to repeat this miracle for several reasons:

1. Because of His own compassion for the human weakness of these people. (15:32)
2. Because it could serve as a test of His disciples' learning by probing their memory and comprehension. This repeated miracle and the lessons it carried with it would serve to drive the disciples to an unshakeable conviction of Jesus' power. (But see 16:4ff.) As they reflected on it later, it became the second solid hammer-blow that drove home the nail of conviction.

3. Because, if there were many Gentiles present, perhaps even more than Jews, He could unobtrusively give them a liberal demonstration of the power and tender consideration of the God of Israel.
4. Because the repetition of a miracle just does not weaken the force of its first manifestation, any more than the raising of Lazarus should somehow be thought to adumbrate or undermine the raising of Jairus' daughter.

15:32 Cf. notes on 14:14. Again Jesus initiates the move to solve the crowd's food needs, but this time, rather than put pressure on the Twelve to solve the problem, His decision grows out of His own feeling for them: **I have compassion on the multitude.** When people hurt or have needs, the Lord responds with the strength, the kindness and the thoughtfulness of a gentleman. These people He helps are not Christians, as we would esteem them, but just frail human beings many of whom are outside the limits of revealed religion. Nevertheless, He shared with them His bounty, not stopping to check their synagogue attendance record or ask to see their baptismal certificate before providing them a crust of bread and some fish tidbits. They had not even asked for food, just help and healing; He lovingly gave them more than they imagined He had!

**Because they continue with me now three days and have nothing to eat: and I would not send them away fasting, lest haply they faint on the way. With me now three days,** by the usual Jewish reckoning, means "since the day before yesterday." Since He does not affirm that they had fasted three days, it appears that the people had dined on the first day, picnicked on the second, but now find themselves without provisions. Their continuance with Jesus is explicable on the basis of the many miracles He worked on their behalf, even if the entire time had not been consumed in healings.

The unusual Greek nominative *hemérai treis* ("three days"), which is not the grammatical subject of *prosménousin moi* ("they have been with me"), is not unknown in Biblical literature. (Cf. LXX: Josh. 1:11; Jonah 3:4)

15:33 And the disciples say unto him, whence should we have so many loaves in a desert place as to fill so great a multitude? (Cf. notes on 14:16) The repetition of the disciples' lack of believing certainty in so analogous a circumstance and consequent to such a grand miracle as the feeding of the five thousand such a relatively short time before, is not so shocking as it would appear on the surface.

Rather, it is but evidence of the authenticity of the narrative, in that it is so psychologically true to life in the straightforward manner it depicts their hesitation. How frequently is a crisis met with forgetfulness of past blessings which should have taught men to know God and never falter or hesitate where He is in charge? (Cf. Moses' reaction, Nu. 11:21-23; Israel's, Psa. 78:19f, 32) Why did not the Twelve expect Jesus to supply food miraculously as before?

1. They may have considered Jesus' prudent limitation of His supernatural power, because He had not supplied miraculous bread for their travels either before or after the feeding of the five thousand. Farrar (*Life*, 362) reasons thus:

But surely here there is a touch of delicacy and truth. They knew that there was in Him no prodigality of the supernatural, no lavish and needless exercise of miraculous power. Many and many a time had they been with multitudes before, and yet on one occasion only had He fed them; and moreover, after He had done so, He had most sternly rebuked those who came to Him in expectation of a repeated offer of such gifts, and had uttered a discourse so searching and strange that it alienated from Him many even of His friends. For them to suggest to Him a repetition of the feeding of the five thousand would be a presumption which their ever-deepening reverence forbade. . . . But no sooner had He given them the signal of His intention, than with perfect faith they became His ready ministers.

2. Further, having noticed the Gentile character of a significant portion of the crowd, especially after spending the better part of three days with these people, the Apostles may have wondered whether He would provide miraculous bread to be eaten together by Jew and Gentile at the same table.
3. But even their own question does not necessarily express doubt about Jesus' power, rather, merely about their own incapacity to supply food themselves. Note their emphasis: **Where are WE to get bread?** (*Pôthen hemîn en eremîa ârtoi tosoûtoi k.t.l.*) They may well have remembered their past failure, so phrased this question so as to leave Jesus entirely free to choose His course of action.

Lenski (*Matthew*, 604) justly warns: "To say that the reply of the disciples gives no evidence of the knowledge of a previous miraculous

feeding and betrays nothing but complete perplexity, is to misread not only this reply but also all that precedes this reply." In fact, Jesus is not recorded as having scolded them for lack of faith or foresight. Although Scripture's silence can never offer positive testimony, yet in the absence of a firm word to the contrary, we may assume that the Evangelists intend to convey the impression that He did not reprobate them for failure to trust His power.

15:34 **And Jesus said unto them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven and a few small fishes.** (Cf. Mk. 6:38 and notes on Mt. 14:16) This time, rather than appeal to others, they apparently check their own food stock left from their provisions for the journey just completed outside Palestine.

15:35-37 Cf. Notes on 14:17-20. **Seven baskets full:** Much ado is made over the size and significance of the baskets used to collect the left-overs, without asking the insoluble, but vital, question: to whom did the baskets belong? If these hamper baskets (*spuridas*) belong to the people in the crowd, they may indicate the non-Jewish character of the people who ate. On the other hand, if these baskets were specially acquired by the Twelve for their long journey into Gentile territory, then the baskets themselves tell nothing about the multitude. Or would the Twelve have only carried kosher food wallets (*kōfinoi*)? If so, then these baskets (*spuridas*) may belong to the multitude.

Whereas there is a fine discrimination in words at 16:9f (= Mk. 8:19f) that carefully retains the distinctions in *baskets* for the five thousand and the four thousand respectively, this distinction should not be pushed too far, because Rocci, (1696) cities illustrations of "basket dinners" in connection with *spuris*: e.g. *spurisi deipnizein*, "dine" . . . , Arriano Epictetus 4, 10, 21; *apὸ spuridos despna*: "dinners from the basket." Ateneo, 365.

15:38 Cf. notes on 14:21. **Four thousand:** Is the argument airtight to say that, had this incident been born out of mythical and unhistorical traditions, the miraculous details of this second miraculous feeding of the multitudes would certainly have surpassed those of the first? In fact, would not a clever forger foresee this argument and deliberately reduce the second myth to more believable proportions to promote an intentional fraud? Granted, the psychological impact of a second, somehow less spectacular miracle is to us anticlimactic. It is not, however, more or less believable because of that fact. Rather, for Matthew and his Hebrew readers, this miracle

may have been ANYTHING BUT ANTI-CLIMACTIC! In fact, if Jesus fed Jews and Gentiles that day at the same banquet in the desert, this is an exciting climax, even more glorious than the feeding of the five thousand that ended in the Capernaum synagogue debacle. (Jn. 6)

15:39 See notes on 14:22. **And he sent away the multitudes**, because it is not Jesus' purpose now to begin a wide-ranging, popular public ministry in the Decapolis, and because of the live possibility that His own popularity should become the involuntary means of its untimely realization. **He entered into the boat** (*enébe eis tō plōton*): whose boat? Did they watch for Zebedee's fishing group to cross to the east side in order to seek passage across the Galilean Lake? (Cf. Mk. 1:20) Might *the boat*, so definitely indicated by the article, have been Peter's, having been sent for earlier? **He came into the borders of Magadan**, a locality that must be sought on the west side of the lake, because they embark on the Decapolis, or eastern, shore. After the later encounter with the Pharisees (16:1-4), they sail for "the other side" arriving at Bethsaida (Julias? Mk. 8:13, 22), when they travel to Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:13). When Mark (8:10) says "Dalmanutha" in place of "Magadan," we may assume that these different names are but two ways of referring to the same locality, or perhaps two nearby towns in the same district, or one a place name and the other a descriptive as yet undeciphered.

#### SIMILARITIES TO THE FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND:

1. This text shows the holy consistency of Jesus as Savior. *PHC* (Vol. XXII, 389) comments:
 

Wherever He is (so this repetition shows us) there is the same depth and spontaneity of compassion; the same discrimination and considerateness of affection; the same recollection as well of the temporal as of the spiritual needs of His hearers; the same marked disapprobation also (with all His fulness) of waste; and the same resolute avoidance, also, when the multitudes have been fully met, of idle wonder and fame."
2. Foster (*Middle Period*, 206) argues brilliantly that Jesus' objective for this repeated miracle was two-fold, i.e. not merely to minister to the body by restoring health and strength, but also to meet the spirit's needs by producing faith:

Is faith demanded before miracles, but not afterward? Is lack of faith in the hearts of men not a "human need" to which miracles may minister? The repetition of miracles to bring faith to the hearts of men is as logical as repetition of teaching to bring understanding.

### LESSONS

- a. Jesus challenges those who are content with doing nothing merely because they have little with which to work. "How many loaves do you HAVE?"
- b. Jesus would not do all this work Himself, nor would He summon even one of the angels in heaven to do what His human helpers could.
- c. Jesus did not use heavenly means to provide the need until the full extent of earthly provision could be ascertained and provided.
- d. Jesus taught by practical demonstration that Jews and Gentiles can sit down in peace to eat bread together in His Kingdom, their only points of common interest being their own deep need and His invitation and provision.
- e. If we see the Gospels as living lessons on "What It Means to Be the Body of Jesus Christ on Earth Today," the Church, then, must express the compassion of the Lord for people, not by sentimentalities more or less hypocritical, but by swift action to correct the needs of people in each situation faced. Jesus always left men with strength for the way: does the Church do as well?
- f. *PHC* (Vol. XXII, 390):

We must not tempt men to adopt religion by bribery; we should thus encourage hypocrisy, promote indolence, give a premium to iniquity. But as Christians we should relieve temporal want, and with due caution and discretion use this as a means of imparting spiritual good. Our Lord fed the multitude on this occasion though He well knew that their motives in following Him were far from being pure. We should distinguish between vulgar bribery and Christian benevolence. In any case it were better to do good to men's bodies than do no good at all.

- g. Even as those who had earlier rejected Jesus' help and hurried Him away now gladly receive His help, we may learn that there is

mercy with the Lord, even though we ignorantly and temporarily send Him away. Let us thank Him for the privilege of repentance, because He longs to return to us with an abundance of rich gifts.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF DEITY WE SEE IN JESUS IN MATTHEW 15

1. Law-Giver and Judge: "Ye hypocrites!" The Law-Giver can set aside Moses' Law. (15:1-20; Mk. 7:19)
2. Conqueror of Evil: He cast out a demon without even a verbal order! (15:21-28)
3. Creator: Healer of His maimed creation (15:29-31)
4. Sustainer: fed 4000 on practically nothing (15:32-38)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Explain the vital need for this trip that Jesus takes with the Twelve. Refer to any facts of significance drawn from earlier periods that give clues.
2. Show on a map, or indicate the travel plan that Matthew and Mark describe. Into the area of what two famous cities did Jesus lead His men? According to Mark, through which one of the two did they travel?
3. Is there any record of Jesus ever making another trip out into Gentile territory? When? Under what circumstances?
4. Name the major area where the events of this section occurred. On what other occasion(s) had Jesus been in this area? What had He done there previously? What had been the reaction of the populace to His earlier ministry there?
5. What changes are obvious in the response of the people of this area to the ministry described in this section?
6. Matthew describes this ministry in general terms, while Mark gives a specific incident. Describe this incident, explaining any problems arising in connection with Jesus' method.
7. What psychological preparation had been made for Jesus' service in this area, between His first visit here and the ministry recorded in this text?
8. Describe the religio-political makeup of this crowd now gathered around Jesus. List the reasons you conclude that the group was

- of this nature.
9. List any significant differences between the two miraculous multiplications of food to feed large multitudes. Some unbelieving theologians feel that the Gospel writers confused two separate legends that centered around one fundamental incident. Give, therefore, the evidence that proves the Gospel writers saw a clear distinction between the two miracles.
  10. List the facts or statements within this section that lend insight into the personal character or supernatural identity of Jesus.
  11. Quote the two separate statements that describe the crowds' reaction to Jesus' ministry in this section.

## THE SECTS OF THE PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES CONTRASTED

by Lynn Gardner

A political or religious movement in time usually results in two groups, a liberal and a conservative party. Judaism followed this pattern as a study of Jewish sects and denominations reveals. The Pharisees formed the right wing and the Sadducees the left wing of Judaism. We can see the contrast in these terms: the Pharisees were separatists and the Sadducees were collaborators; one nationalistic, the other internationalistic; one orthodox and fundamental, the other modernist and liberal; one supernaturalistic and the other humanistic. Neither party was free from error, as both, at times, felt the censure of Jesus.

### *Origin and Early History*

The Babylonian captivity taught the Jews to be monotheistic [i.e. true to their God-given ideals to which they had been unfaithful before the captivity and brought on this punishment. HEF], gave them the synagogue and increased interest in the Scripture and the religious practice enjoined therein. The reformers, Ezra and Nehemiah, possibly were forerunners of the Pharisees. It is also possible that the priestly court party under Zerubbabel foreshadowed the Sadducees. When Jerusalem came under the power of Alexander

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the Great, the pressure toward Hellenization became strong. After Alexander's death his kingdom was divided into four segments, Palestine was a political football, first ruled by the Ptolemies of Egypt, then the Syrian rulers of Antioch. "The rise of a Hellenistic party among the Jewish priestly aristocrats threatened the utter destruction of the Old Testament religion. Hellenistic culture, customs, and idolatry along with the use of the Greek language threatened to inundate the nation. Countering this infidel and pagan movement among the priesthood, there arose a group of pious Jews full of devotion to the law, and fierce in their opposition to the corrupting Greek influences."<sup>1</sup> When the Syrians were attempting to force the Jews to accept Hellenization, in 167 B.C., Mattathias, the father of the Maccabees, headed a rebellion. The Pharisees supported the Maccabeans in their campaigns, but John Hyrcanus, when in power, formed an alliance with the Sadducees, who remained the party supporting the government so long as the Maccabeans were in power. In 37 B.C. when Herod began to reign, he promptly executed forty-five of the most powerful Sadducees, thus bringing the Pharisees back into power. In the days of Christ the Pharisees had more religious influence and the Sadducees had more political power, as we shall see.

### *Significance of Their Names*

The term "Pharisees" means "the separated ones." It is not known whether this title was self-assumed or was given them by enemies. Earlier they had been called the Hasidim, then came to be called Pharisees because of their separatism. They were an exclusive group, while the Sadducees were inclusive in their fellowship. They even separated from those of their own race who did not accept or follow their interpretations of the law. We can see the intense prejudice against "publicans and sinners" in Luke 15:1, 2; 18:9-13.<sup>2</sup>

The Sadducees either derived their name from Zadok, who was high priest in the days of David and Solomon and whose sons were

<sup>1</sup> R. C. Foster, *An Introduction to the Life of Christ*, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Edersheim believes that the name Pharisees was given to them by their opponents. He states that they called themselves Chasidim, or "the pious." *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. I, p. 323.

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the priestly hierarchy in the time of the captivity,<sup>3</sup> or from the word meaning "righteous." Edersheim asks, "Is it likely that a party would have gone back so many centuries for a name, which had no connection with their distinctive principles?" He further argues that the name is a derivation from the word for righteous:

While the Pharisees would arrogate to themselves the Scriptural name of *Chasidim*, or "the pious," their opponents would retort that they were satisfied to be *Tsaddiqim*, or "righteous." Thus the name of *Tsaddiqim* would become that of the party opposing the Pharisees, that is, of the *Sadducees*. There is, indeed, an admitted linguistic difficulty in the change of the sound *i* into *u* (*Tsaddiqim* into *Tsadduqim*), but may it not have been that this was accomplished, not grammatically, but by popular witticism? Such mode of giving a "by-name" to a party or government is, at least, not irrational, nor is it uncommon. Some wit might have suggested: Read not *Tsaddiqim*, the "righteous," but *Tsadduqim* (from *Tsadu*) "desolation, destruction." Whether or not this suggestion approve itself to critics, the derivation of Sadducees from *Tsaddiqim* is certainly that which offers most probability.<sup>4</sup>

### *Their Power and Influence*

In the New Testament the Pharisees are the most prominent, as they were in the entire first century. They were the unrivaled teachers of the people because the common people recognized the Pharisees as the true and loyal standardbearers of traditional Israel. Josephus said of the Sadducees, "They only gain the well-to-do; they have not the people on their side."<sup>5</sup> "This doctrine has reached few individuals,

<sup>3</sup> These scriptures give historical Biblical background for Zadok and his sons: II Chron. 31:10; Ezek. 40:46; 44:15; 48:11. This hypothesis for the origin of the name is a Jewish legend of about the seventh century A.D. It receives no support from Josephus or early Jewish writings. [Other rabbinic works, however, identify the Sadducees' forefather as Zadok, disciple of Antigonus of Socho (*Aboth de Rab. Nathan*, cap. 5; cf. Bowker, 162; 6:1, 2) who was himself a disciple of Simeon the Just, "one of the remnants of the Great Synagogue." (Mishnah: *Aboth*, i, 1-4; cf. Bowker, 109; 2:26) This Antigonus lived about 250 B.C. (ISBE, 2659), which would date the above-named Zadok after that date. HEF]

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. I, 323, 324.

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, XIII, 10, 6.

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but these are of the first consideration."<sup>6</sup> Levison says concerning the Sadducees:

That they did not find followers among the working classes is not to be wondered at. The Pharisees had politically a Utopia to promise. The Messiah was their offer to the people. And if not the Messiah, a resurrection after death which would bring with it material bliss. In these matters the Sadducees' platform was poor; all they could afford was a satisfaction that comes from a consciousness of having done one's duty, and the rest must be left to God.<sup>7</sup>

Josephus says of the Pharisees: "Whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers and sacrifice, they (the people) perform them according to their direction."<sup>7a</sup>

The Sadducees did not make the strict profession of religion current among the Pharisees unless they found it profitable in securing and retaining a place of power among the people. They were moved by policy continually, and usually adopted the principles of the Pharisees when they secured an official position.<sup>8</sup> This could be illustrated by this story: according to the teaching of the Sadducees the incense was to be lighted outside the Holy Place and carried burning within; according to the Pharisees, on the contrary, it must be lighted inside. Once a young priest—a Sadducee—performed this function in the manner approved by the Sadducees. Later his father admonished him, "Though we are Sadducees, we must do as the Pharisees teach, for they have the people behind them."<sup>9</sup>

In the days of Jesus and during the rise of the church they [the Pharisees] constituted the backbone of Judaism. Firmly entrenched in their religious leadership, revered by the masses, with synagogues virtually in their control, they alone of the groups known to us survived the dreadful years of revolt against Rome.<sup>10</sup>

The Pharisees excelled in popularity with the people and religious

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII, 1, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Levison, *Jewish Background of Christianity*, p. 162.

<sup>7a</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, 1.3, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Morton Scott Enslin, *Christian Beginnings*, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

influence in general. But in the area of political power and influence the Sadducees are in the forefront. Foster shows this distinction:

They (the Pharisees) believed in a "theocratic democracy"; God was their sole king. But they bowed to the Roman rule as a punishment for the sins of the nation. They were a religious rather than a political party. Nevertheless, they looked for a Messiah to lead against Rome; and when they thought the proper time had come, they revolted with the rest. Josephus says there were more than six thousand Pharisees, but not all the Pharisees were scribes, and had supplanted the priests as instructors of the people when the Pharisees gradually won the favor of the masses. The scribes rule in the synagogue, as the Sadducees in the temple.<sup>11</sup>

Actually the Pharisees took little interest in politics as long as the government did not interfere with their religious pursuits. But the Sadducees were more concerned with political affairs than with religious.

Since Jerusalem functioned as the political capital of Judaism, and the Temple the headquarters of Jewish government, the interests there became dominantly political. These worldly and political interests controlled the Sadducees.<sup>12</sup>

They possessed the political power and were the governing group in the civil life of Judaism during the days of Christ. The New Testament (Acts 5:17) and Josephus (*Ant.* xx, 9, 1) testify that the high-priestly families belonged to the Sadducean party. The Sadducees were the dominant group in the Sanhedrin, which was the "supreme court" of Judaism.

### *Doctrines*

There was disagreement concerning the law and traditions. Josephus says, "The Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses." Their theory of tradition was that these additions to the written law and interpretations of it had been given by Moses

<sup>11</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 75f.

<sup>12</sup> H. E. Dana, *New Testament Times*, p. 57.

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to the elders and by them transmitted orally down through the years. They taught these traditions as binding upon Jews and having equal and sometimes greater authority than the law. It must be recognized that the Sadducees were not opposed to traditions as such but they were opposed to the principle and practice of traditionalism of the Pharisees.

And that there was sufficient ground for Sadducean opposition to Pharisaic traditionalism, alike in principle and in practice, will appear from the following quotation, to which we add, by way of explanation, that the meaning of phylacteries was deemed by that party of Scriptural obligation, and that the phylactery for the head was to consist (according to tradition) of four compartments. "Against the words of the Scribes is more punishable than against the words of Scripture. He who says, No phylacteries, so as to transgress the words of Scripture, is not guilty (free); five compartments, to add to the words of the Scribes, he is guilty."<sup>13</sup>

The Sadducees recognized only the written law as binding and rejected the entire traditional interpretation by the Scribes. Josephus said, "The Sadducees say, 'Only what is written is to be esteemed as legal . . . what has come down from tradition of the fathers need not be observed.' "<sup>14</sup> Scholars differ on whether they accepted all the Old Testament or only the Pentateuch. They were liberal in their attitude toward, and interpretation of, the law, but they were literal and conservative in its application.

Another doctrinal difference concerned the period "after death." "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all." (Acts 23:8) The Pharisees believed that there was to be a final judgment with its consequent eternal rewards and punishments.

There was disagreement upon the doctrines of predestination and free will. Josephus called the Pharisean view "fatalism."

But, properly understood, the real difference between the Pharisees and Sadducees seems to have amounted to this: that the former accentuated God's preordination; the latter, man's free will; and that, while the Pharisees admitted only a partial influence of the human element on what happened, or the

<sup>13</sup> Edersheim, *op. cit.*, I, 315.

<sup>14</sup> Josephus, *Ant.*, XIII, 10, 6.

co-operation of the human with the Divine, the Sadducees denied all absolute preordination, and made man's choice of evil or good, with its consequent misery or happiness, to depend entirely on the exercise of free will and self-determination.<sup>15</sup>

Yet at times the Pharisees carried the idea of Providence to the verge of fatalism, as Edersheim admits. The absolute and unalterable predestination of every detail of every event is insisted upon. Some affirmed that every incident in the history of Israel was foreordained, and the actors in it—for good or for evil—were only instruments for carrying out the Divine Will. Yet their insistence upon man's freedom of choice and his personal responsibility and obligation modified their view of fate. Akiba stated it this way, "Everything is foreseen; free determination is accorded to man; and the world is judged in goodness."<sup>16</sup>

The Pharisees preached and looked for the Messiah, while the Sadducees did not. The Pharisees expected Him to be a political Messiah. (Cf. Lk. 17:20; 19:11; Jn. 12:32-34) They expected Him to glorify them and bring all nations to their point of view. The Sadducees were too well off and trusted themselves too much. They felt that the order of things which they had made was good enough for them and they neither wanted or needed a Messiah.

They also had some distinct differences concerning ceremonial and ritual and juridical questions.<sup>17</sup>

### *Characteristics*

Because of their scrupulous obedience to the letter of the law the Pharisees became fussily self-righteous. Often in highest hypocrisy they considered themselves the only pious and righteous souls. Levison makes this comment concerning the self-righteousness of Sadducees.

They believed in themselves, and did not see the need for any change in the affairs of men. Their view of their own importance led them to take a very strong view of the freedom of the will;

<sup>15</sup> Edersheim, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 316, 317.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 319.

<sup>17</sup> Edersheim, I, pp. 319-322. [Cf. also Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, esp. pp. 53-76.]

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they believed themselves to be capable of acting rightly without being helped or coerced by God into doing so. We usually think of the Pharisees as the self-righteous. Their self-righteousness was based upon the belief that they were doing the will of God; but the Sadducees were far more self-righteous, for they believed that they do and will rightly by personal effort. The Temple was not so much the dwelling-place of God as a place in which they allowed God a share with them in their special domain. As priests they saw to it that they shared with God in their sacrifices that were offered and in the glory of the offering.<sup>18</sup>

The Pharisees were over-zealous in legalism. They would restrict liberty for the sake of security and protection. This was called the "hedge about the law." The principle is the same which provides play pens for children and safety zones on city streets. They would build a fence about the Law to prevent one from transgression. Deut. 25:3 set the limit of punishment at forty lashes. The Pharisees reduced it to thirty-nine, lest it be accidentally exceeded. The elaborate fences about the commandments made the law a tedious and burdensome task. They seemed to think that the more difficult the commandments, the more merit they would receive for observing them.

### *Relationship of These Sects to Jesus*

#### *Attitude and Action of the Pharisees toward Jesus:*

1. They disliked His claim to forgive sins and considered it blasphemy. Mt. 9:3f; Mk. 2:6f; Lk. 5:21
2. They objected to His social freedom with publicans and sinners. Mt. 9:11; Mk. 2:16; Lk. 5:30; 15:1
3. They complained that the disciples of Jesus did not observe stated fasts. Lk. 5:33
4. They accused Him of being in league with Satan. Mt. 9:34; 12:24ff; Mk. 3:22ff; Lk. 11:14ff.
5. They attacked Him for violating their rules of sabbath observance. Mt. 12:2, 10; Mk. 2:23f; 3:2; Lk. 6:2, 7; 13:14ff; Jn. 5:10, 18; 9:13ff.
6. They joined with the Herodians to kill Him. Mk. 3:6.

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<sup>18</sup> Levison, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

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7. They joined with the Sadducees to test Him. Mt. 16:1; see Mt. 22.
8. To entrap Him Pharisees and Sadducees plotted His death. Mt. 27:62; Jn. 18:3.
9. They charged Him with planning the destruction of the Temple. Jn. 2:19; Mt. 26:59-61; 27:39, 40.
10. They accused Him of being a deceiver. Jn. 7:12; Mt. 27:62-64.
11. They ridiculed Him. Jn. 7:48.
12. They accused Jesus of being a Samaritan and having a demon. Jn. 7:20; 8:48; cf. 10:20.
13. They charged Jesus with treason against Caesar. Lk. 23:1f.
14. They mocked Christ on the cross. Mt. 27:41ff.  
(There were some honest and [some relatively] friendly Pharisees. Lk. 7:36-50; 14:1ff; Jn. 3:1, 2; 7:50-52; 19:39.)

*Jesus denounced the Pharisees as:*

1. Hypocrites. Mt. 15:7; 23:13.
2. Offspring of vipers. Mt. 12:34; 23:33.
3. Inwardly wicked. Lk. 11:39-41.
4. Adulterous generation. Mt. 12:39; 16:4.
5. Blind guides. Mt. 15:14; 23:16, 19, 24, 26.
6. Whited sepulchres. Mt. 23:27.
7. More careless of the kingdom than publicans and harlots. Mt. 21:31f.
8. Unworthy of Moses' seat, which they held. Mt. 23:2ff.
9. Loving praise. Mt. 23:6ff.
10. Making proselytes worse than they were themselves. Mt. 23:15.
11. Unworthy of the kingdom which shall be taken away from them. Mt. 21:43ff.
12. Being tradition-bound. Mk. 7:3-13.
13. Self-righteous. Lk. 18:9.
14. Being prejudiced against Him. Jn. 5:39, 40.
15. Blasphemers. Mt. 12:22-32; Mk. 3:19b-30.
16. Rejecters of God. Lk. 7:29, 30; 10:16; Jn. 12:48-50.

*Rejection of Christ by the Sadducees:*

(They are mentioned by name only on three occasions in the Gospels, but they are referred to by the term "chief priests.")

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1. They tempted Jesus by demanding a sign from heaven. Mt. 16:1.
2. They tried to arrest Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles. Jn. 7:32, 45.
3. The raising of Lazarus angered them very much. Jn. 11:47.
4. Caiaphas (a Sadducee) called for the death of Jesus for a personal and political reason. Jn. 11:48-50.
5. They were enraged by the triumphal entry and entrance into the Temple itself. Mt. 21:15.
6. The cleansing of the Temple caused them to challenge the authority of Christ. Mt. 21:23; Mk. 11:27ff; Lk. 20:1ff.
7. They sought to entrap Jesus in a question about the resurrection. Mt. 22:23; Mk. 12:18; Lk. 20:27.
8. They took a leading part in the condemnation of Jesus.  
Annas. Jn. 18:13, 19.  
Caiaphas, chief persecutor. Mt. 26:57, 63, 65.  
Brought charges before Pilate. Mt. 27:12; Mk. 15:3.  
Stirred people to ask for Barabbas instead of Jesus. Mt. 27:20; Mk. 15:11.
9. They mocked Jesus on the cross. Mt. 27:41; Mk. 15:31; Lk. 23:35.

### *Jesus condemned the Sadducees:*

1. He warned the kingdom of God would be taken away from them. Mt. 21:43ff.
2. He told them they were wrong about the resurrection and did not know the Scriptures nor the power of God. Mt. 22:29.
3. He called them an evil and adulterous generation. Mt. 16:1-4.
4. Jesus warned the disciples to beware of their bad influence. Mt. 16:5-12.

Both conservatism and liberalism tend to pride and prejudice. One trusts himself concerning his interpretation of religion and the other trusts himself to determine his religion. The religious climate of Jesus' day is strangely familiar. Today we can see in religious thinking the same attitudes and tendencies only in different garb. We must not allow the Devil to push us off on the one side into exclusive sectarianism nor off the other side into inclusive latitudinarianism.

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For Further Study

Bowker, John. *Jesus and the Pharisees*. (Cambridge University Press) 1973. Bowker collects together in one volume translations of the relative literature and discusses the problems involved in identifying the Pharisees, the emergence and development of the Hasmonean movement and its divisions, Jesus and the Pharisaioi, and their charges against Him.

Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Vol. I, pp. 308ff. See also his opening chapters VII and VIII in which he discusses the Jewish attitudes about separation from Gentiles, traditionalism: its origin, character and literature.

DO YOU HAVE THE WORD IN YOUR HEART?

Give the context, problems, meaning and application of these phrases:

1. "Of a truth thou art the Son of God."
2. "It is not lawful for thee to have her."
3. "It is I; be not afraid."
4. "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore do these powers work in him."
5. "But in vain do they worship me, teaching *as their* doctrines the precepts of men."
6. ". . . and they glorified the God of Israel."
7. "Every plant which my heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up."
8. "Whosoever shall say to his father or mother, That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me is given *to God*; he shall not honor his father."
9. "Let them alone: they are blind guides."
10. "It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs."
11. ". . . but to eat with unwashed hands defileth not the man."
12. "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? . . . Ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition."
13. ". . . but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man."
14. "And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### PREVIEWING IN OUTLINE FORM

- Section 39. Jesus refuses to give additional signs from heaven to religious leaders (15:39b—16:4)
- Section 40. Jesus warns disciples against the influence of popular leaders and parties (16:5-12)
- Section 41. Near Caesarea Philippi Jesus tests and teaches His disciples (16:13-28)

### CONTENT OUTLINE

- I. RELIGIOUS LEADERS DEMAND ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION OF HIS AUTHORITY: JESUS REFUSES (15:39b—16:4; Mk. 8:10b-12)
- A. Situation: As if Jesus had given no previous supernatural credentials, the religious leaders demand them.
  - B. Response: The critics are criticized.
    - 1. "Although naturally capable of reading relatively dependable weather signs, you are morally unqualified to demand signs when these times are full of them, signs either unread or deliberately misunderstood!"
    - 2. Reminder of sign already given: "Jonah!"
- II. JESUS WARNS DISCIPLES AGAINST INFLUENCE OF POPULAR LEADERS AND PARTIES (Mt. 16:5-12; Mk. 8:13-21)
- A. Situation: Jesus and disciples sailed from Magadan-Dalmanutha, leaving the hyper-critical theologians behind. Having sailed without purchasing bread, they had only one loaf aboard.
  - B. Jesus' cryptic warning: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod."
  - C. The disciples' gross literalism: "He means the leaven of bread."
  - D. Jesus' rebuke (16:8-11; Mk. 8:17-21)
    - 1. Accusation of inadequate faith.
    - 2. Reproach for limited spiritual insight.
    - 3. Reminder of two stupendous miracles in the same area of their doubts.
    - 4. Repeated statement: "Not *bread*, but *leaven*!"
  - E. The Apostles finally understand. (16:12)

**III. JESUS TESTS HIS DISCIPLES ON HIS IDENTITY, SHOCKS THEM WITH NEWS OF HIS FUTURE SUFFERING AND DEMANDS SUPREME LOYALTY (16:13-28; Mk. 8:27—9:1; Lk. 9:18-27)**

- A. The Good Confession (16:13-20; Mk. 8:27-30; Lk. 9:18-21)
  - 1. The disciples are questioned about public opinion.
  - 2. Popular answers reviewed.
  - 3. The disciples' answer given by Peter.
  - 4. Jesus' joy and promise to Peter.
  - 5. Secrecy required because of timing.
- B. The Way of the Cross (16:21-28; Mk. 8:31—9:1; Lk. 9:22-27)
  - 1. Revelation of Jesus' Approaching Death.
  - 2. Peter's rebuke of Jesus
  - 3. Jesus' rebuke of Peter.
  - 4. Jesus demands absolute loyalty and unflinching self-sacrifice as the cost of discipleship in the Kingdom.

**THE LITERARY UNITY OF THIS CHAPTER**

Beyond the fairly tight chronological connections evident in Matthew's narration of the events in this chapter, there are deeper, theological ties that bind the internal sections together in a marvelous unity. Although there are many interesting side-trails to follow, there is but one major problem in focus throughout the entire chapter: **THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIVINE CREDENTIALS.** This is clear from a consideration of the part each section plays to bring this major theme to the fore:

- 1. Popular leaders and parties demand divine credentials, as if all previous signs Jesus had given were either non-existent or unworthy. Jesus repulsed their demand because of the adequacy of previously given evidences. The resurrection-sign was repeated as a credential to be waited for. (16:1-4)
- 2. Jesus then warned against the doctrinal influence of popular leaders and parties who had rejected the evidential value of divine credentials, and reminded His men of the divine credentials exhibited in the feeding of the 5000 and of the 4000. The Apostles themselves were in danger of forgetting the implications of His divine credentials. He rebuked them as men of little faith and limited understanding, since they had as yet failed to comprehend the grand significance of His stupendous miracles of creation. (16:5-12)

3. Jesus then tested the Twelve about His identity, as if to say, "What have the divine credentials proven to you about me?" (16:13-20)
  - a. Various popular answers were given, because people in general were unwilling to admit the implications of divine identity evidenced by Jesus' credentials. That is, if Peter is especially blessed because he accepted what God revealed through Jesus' divine credentials, then the people who thought Jesus to be Elijah, John the Baptist or Jeremiah, must have done so because of their unwillingness to discern that the signs given them pointed to Jesus as God's Messiah. Despite opinions that accepted Him as a prophet, Jesus is not satisfied with being taken for anything less than what His credentials revealed Him to be.
  - b. Jesus blessed Peter for following the leading of the divine credentials.
  - c. He then provided further prophetic credentials: He would build His Church, and Peter would have the keys of the Kingdom. This too would prove His identity, for what if He should fail to fulfil either of these promises?
4. Jesus then tested the disciples' real grasp of the implications of the divine credentials by giving them unwelcome, but essential, revelations. Peter's discipleship was immediately thrown into crisis because of his refusal to accept unpleasant truth, however valid for him Jesus' credentials might have been. (16:21-26) Any man's discipleship, in fact, is valid only to the extent that he accepts the cross-revelations, and thus implicitly embraces the implications of the divine credentials of Jesus who requires that he so believe.
5. Concluding signs to warn and comfort His disciples (16:27, 28)
  - a. A future sign that would undoubtedly establish Jesus' identity beyond all doubt for everyone, which, however, would come too late for anyone to be able to make any changes on the basis of it: the Second Coming of Christ in glory to judge every man. (16:27)
  - b. A future sign that would also establish Jesus' identity and could help to convince the ones who were slow to believe: the glorious beginning of Christ's Kingdom on earth, a fact which would occur in the lifetime of Jesus' followers. (16:28)

Although Matthew has been gently leading his readers to some critically examined conclusions about Jesus, as we have seen in earlier chapters, he cannot have been unaware of the potential effect this

chapter would produce in the heart of his readers, if they have followed him this far. Some of his material is absolutely unique, being omitted by either Mark or Luke. Although there are substantial, theological lessons implicit in the progression of events in this chapter, we must not accuse the Publican-Apostle of being an innovative theologian, because he does not superimpose a theology about Jesus onto the facts. Rather, by means of his narration of the facts he permits his theology to shine through. This is the way that he too learned the majestic identity of Jesus of Nazareth, and now he offers his readers the same privilege. As the Holy Spirit leads him to include each section with his own variations (i.e. differences from Mark and Luke), the Apostle pushes his reader to ask himself: what do *I* think about Jesus? What do His divine credentials say to *me*? Am I willing to stake everything I have on Him? Dare I too believe that He alone will judge me in the end? As in chapters 8 and 9, Matthew again leaves Jesus' magnificent challenge ringing in the ears of his hearers, without telling us what each chose to do about it. After all, what *they* did is not so important. What counts is, what must *I* do about these same divine credentials historically recorded and presented to me in this way?

### Section 39

#### JESUS REFUSES TO GIVE ADDITIONAL SIGNS TO DOUBTERS

(Parallel: Mark 8:10-12)

TEXT: 15:39b—16:4

39 And he sent away the multitudes, and entered into the boat, and came into the borders of Magadan. 16:1 And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and trying him, asked him to show them a sign from heaven. 2 But he answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, *It will be* fair weather: for the heaven is red. 3 And in the morning, *It will be* foul weather today: for the heaven is red and lowering. Ye know how to discern the face of the heaven; but ye cannot *discern* the signs of the times. 4 An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of Jonah. And he left them and departed.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you think the Sadducees would join with the Pharisees in bringing this attack against Jesus?
- b. What was there in Jesus' ministry or message that collided with Sadducean tenets?
- c. What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the religious leaders' demand: did they want Him to work *more* miracles than He had already done? Did they want *more stupendous* miracles? What do you think they expected?
- d. Mark says Jesus refused to give any sign to these Jewish leaders, while Matthew affirms that He gave the sign of Jonah. Which is right? How do you know?
- e. Why is the Pharisees and Sadducees' question important to us today?
  - (1) Why is it important precisely as asked by these theologians?
  - (2) Why is it important as Jesus answered it, but not as intended by those leaders?
- f. In your opinion, what forced these religious leaders to reject or ignore the evidence of all of Jesus' other miracles as "signs" of His identity and consequent authority?
- g. Today, would we be tempted by obstacles in our minds which are similar to those in the minds of the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus? If so, how? If not, why not?
- h. Does the expression "the signs of the times" have anything to do with current events in our day? Why do you answer as you do?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Immediately following the feeding of the four thousand, Jesus boarded a boat with His disciples and sailed for the region of Magadan-Dalmanutha. It was there that the Pharisees and Sadducees approached Jesus together and began an argument with Him. To put Him to the test, they told Him to demonstrate the authority of His ministry by showing them a special signal from God.

Sighing deeply within Himself, Jesus answered them, "When night falls, you say, 'It will be fine weather, for the sky is red.' In the morning you observe, 'It will be stormy today, because the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the look of the sky, and yet you cannot interpret the most obvious signs given in our times?! Why

are these people always asking for more evidence? It is only an evil, unfaithful people that demands more proof! Furthermore, I tell you no other demonstration of my authority shall be provided these people, except 'the sign of Jonah.'

Jesus left them, boarded the boat again with His Apostles and sailed for the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

## SUMMARY

Jesus dismissed the Decapolis crowds and sailed west to Magadan-Dalmanutha. There, representatives of both religious parties, Pharisees and Sadducees, demanded that He produce some special miracle to prove His right to speak authoritatively for God. But Jesus' answer showed that, given their native ability to interpret weather signs, they ought to be able to interpret something as clear and evident as the miracles He had already done that identified Him as God's spokesman. Only those unfaithful to God and fundamentally evil could dare ask for more evidence when enough had already been given to convince less biased people. Nor would further, special evidence be given, other than Jesus' resurrection. Then Jesus turned His back on His attackers and strode back to the boat.

## NOTES

**15:39b And he entered into the boat, and came into the borders of Magadan.** If He embarked on the Decapolis side of the Sea of Galilee (see notes on 15:29) where He fed the 4000, then **the borders of Magadan** (Dalmanutha, Mk. 8:9) would be sought on the western lakeshore, or possibly on the far south side. Presumably, He would normally have walked to any site on the eastern shore, unless impelling reasons forced Him to do otherwise, i.e. reasons such as those surrounding the abrupt conclusion of the feeding of the 5000. Unfortunately, positive identification of Magadan-Dalmanutha is lacking today.

### A. THE CHRIST CHALLENGED (16:1)

**16:1** For fuller notes on the ideas contained in this section, see

comments under 12:38-40. **Pharisees and Sadducees came:** what were these bitter, long-time rivals for the religio-political control of the Jewish mind, doing TOGETHER? This unholy coalition is as unlikely a union of forces as could be imagined. (See Special Study on these sects at the end of chapter 15 and on 16:6.) Here they temporarily join forces to battle a common enemy. In fact, Jesus' supernatural message radically threatened the Pharisees' preference for human traditions. (See on 15:1-20.) Again, His attacks on profitable Sadducean rackets in the Temple (cfr. Jn. 2:13-18) and His teaching about resurrection, angels, spirits and other supernatural phenomena supported the Pharisean views against the Sadducees; consequently, these latter felt menaced. Politically, neither could ignore Him, because the common people heard Him gladly. (Jn. 4:40-42, 45; Mk. 1:36-38 = Lk. 4:42f; Mt. 4:23f; Lk. 4:15; 6:17; Mt. 7:28—8:1; Lk. 15:1; Mk. 10:1; Lk. 19:48 = Mk. 11:18; 12:37; Lk. 21:38) They must react with speed and efficiency or lose their grip on the nations, even if later they must battle it out with each other for supremacy in their incessant power struggle.

From the standpoint of their official responsibility to protect the flock of Israel from false prophets, it was their proper duty to demand precisely such evidence as they now require of Him. (Cf. Dt. 18:9-22; Jn. 2:18f; Mt. 12:38ff; Lk. 11:16, 29f) Whereas Jesus definitely dissected their motives and unmasked their lack of moral qualifications to judge Him (Cf. Mt. 21:23-27 and parallels), He never objected to the request when made honestly with the intention to know.

**Trying Him:** i.e. not a court trial, because the impression left by Matthew and Mark is that Jesus and His group never got far from their boat beached on the shore after disembarking, before these theologians made their attack. Rather, this is but one more attempt to discredit Him publicly by challenging Him to provide credentials they hoped He did not possess. Such bloodless ordeals were the enemies' only real strategy short of the violence that surfaced in Jesus' final arrest and crucifixion. (Cf. Lk. 10:25; 11:53f; 14:1; Mt. 19:3 = Mk. 10:2; Mt. 22:15-40 and parallels.) Their intention not to accept whatever evidence He might give is evident in their argumentative spirit in which they approached Him. (Mk. 8:11)

**Asked him to show them a sign from heaven. From heaven** probably means from God: what did they expect? Fire to fall, unconsumed burning bushes, great plagues, suns standing still, moons turning into blood, hail from a cloudless sky, voices from the Throne? But

that this demand, while formally correct, is really hypocritical, may be seen against the background of those who formulated it:

1. From the Sadducees' point of view, no such supernatural interventions would really take place. However, if the ignorant populace and the hated Pharisees want to believe in such, then let the Nazarene discredit Himself in the eyes of His followers by failing to produce them!
2. From the Pharisees' standpoint, *He* of all people, could not do them, because God would not sanction nor authenticate the message or ministry of one who regularly contradicted their cherished traditions and standard messianic notions, so certain were they of the divine approval of their views. (See notes on 15:2; cf. Jn. 9:16f, 24-34)

Although they secretly desired His public exposure as a fraud, the form of their demand suggests that they expected to see some feat of such supernatural proportions that they could do nothing but believe.

#### B. CHRIST CRITICIZES THE CRITICS' CONSPICUOUS CALLOUSNESS (16:2, 3)

2 But he answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather; for the heaven is red. 3 In the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the heaven is red and lowering. Ye know how to discern the face of the heaven; but ye cannot discern the signs of the times. The textual validity of these verses should be noticed: did Matthew write them, or did some scribe copy them into his text from elsewhere? Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 41) informs us:

The external evidence for the absence of these words is impressive, including Aleph, B, f13, 157, *al. syrc,s, copsa,bo, arm,* Origen, and, according to Jerome, most manuscripts known to him (though he included the passage in the Vulgate). The question is how one ought to interpret this evidence. Most scholars regard the passage as a later insertion from a source similar to Lk. 12:54-56, or from the Lukan passage itself, with an adjustment concerning the particular signs of the weather. On the other hand, it can be argued . . . that the words were omitted by copyists in climates (e.g. Egypt) where red sky in the morning

does not announce rain. In view of the balance of these considerations it was thought best to retain the passage enclosed within square brackets.

Beyond Metzger's conclusion, it is well to note that Luke's Gospel cannot be the source for Matthew's 16:2, 3, because of the following considerations. In the actual weather information (Mt. 16:2b, 3a; Lk. 12:54b, 55) there are 39 Greek words that neither Evangelist shares in common with the other, out of a total of 52 words thought to be parallel. In the rebuke (Mt. 16:3b; Lk. 12:56b), despite some parallels of thought, only 2 Greek words are actually parallel in the two Gospels (*dè* and *ou!*), out of a total for both Gospels of 31 words! One must pronounce the two passages in question as relatively similar in thought, but hardly verbatim repetitions to the extent that one should be thought the literary origin of the other. Because the omission of these verses is easier to account for than is their insertion, their probable authenticity is the better conclusion.

The particular weather signs mentioned by Jesus are characteristic of Palestine. The particular meteorological phenomena in other places might well be different. The Lord is arguing this point with dwellers in Palestine to whom these data would be common knowledge. He is not describing world-wide meteorological information. Had copyists realized this, they would have been less ready to suppress these verses, expunging them from the text.

Rather than meet their challenge with a blazing burst of supernatural power, Jesus refused to grant them additional signs. His reasons are multiple:

1. Because they already possessed abundant and conclusive evidence, but deliberately misread it. Jesus' criticism, spoken as it was in deep sorrow of spirit (Mk. 8:12), has a light touch of satire in it which is neither coarse, cruel nor brutal: "You are experts at seeing the cause-and-effect relationships in the natural world, yet you cannot discern the same kind of relationships in the very area where you claim to be authorities, i.e. in the world of the spirit, signs and God! You thereby disqualify yourselves to ask me for signs." Though naturally able to read so undependable an indicator as that of the weather, yet they were wilfully blind to the more numerous and far more certain signs Jesus had already furnished. This explains their obvious lack of moral qualification to demand more evidence when their own epoch was replete with

signs as yet unread or deliberately misinterpreted by them.

They had demanded a **sign from heaven**, so He bases His rebuttal on their wording. His answer repeats **heaven** (*ouranos*) three times as if to say: "The very heaven whence you demand that my proof must come, condemns you for making such an ultimatum, for if you can predict weather on the basis of its observable phenomena, you could also decide about me on the basis of the observable phenomena that characterize this age: the mission and message of John the Baptist, as well as my own ministry and miraculous works predicted by John."

They already possessed the **signs of the times**, i.e. the evidence that they were then living in the days of the Messiah. These are the same evidences that continued to convince the Apostles and other open-minded people that Jesus was really God's Anointed. (Cf. 16:16f) The difference in ability to decide about the signs, therefore, lay not in the miracles themselves, but in the beholder. To what extent would each single observer determine to grasp, or release, his prejudices in favor of new truth? Consider:

- a. What could be more indicative than the spiritual revival of the nation during the ministry of John the Baptist? (Cf. 3:5, 6; Jn. 5:35; Mt. 11:7ff)
- b. What more spectacular indication of God's merciful presence and approval of Jesus' ministry could be desired than instant healing of so many and so varied human diseases, raising of the dead or multiplying food, as Jesus Himself did? (Cf. Mt. 12:28)
- c. What could stir the Hebrew heart more deeply than the evidence that the ancient prophecies were now being fulfilled in often surprisingly new, but certain ways? (Cf. Jn. 1:45; Mt. 11:4, 5)
- d. What could be more surprising than the sheer multiplicity of His signs? (See on Jn. 7:31!)

The Lord rightly insists on the word *signs*, although He could have referred to His mighty works as "wonders" or "miracles," because these deeds are not important merely for their mere display of supernatural might, but primarily because of that which they signify: God's gracious mercy at work among men to deliver them from their various bondages. This observation fully justifies Jesus' damning the disbelievers, because of their hypocritical claim to be unable to detect the hand of God at work in Jesus' miracles of mercy, redemption and healing. (Cf. Mt. 12:22-36) Their demand, as well as Jesus' reference to previous miracles, shows that the previous miraculous deeds of the Christ had not convinced them,

although they had been objectively both countless and conclusive. This inability to see God at work in anything He had done previously is but the old sin against the Holy Spirit all over again. (Mt. 12)

2. Another motive for His refusal to provide further signs is the evidential value of all preceding miracles. The endless multiplication of one's credentials will never convince the doubters, if the first copy be rejected. Why should Jesus appear to downgrade His own preceding demonstrations of divine power, by no longer mentioning their evidential force, while, at the same time, producing miraculous works that would, hopefully, win over the skeptics now? Had He done so, it might have been thought that there were something unworthy, unreal or unacceptable about all that He had done previously. No, there comes a time when the skeptic must face the adequacy of the evidence God gives, and either bow before it or else deny himself, saying he did not see what, in fact, he saw. **The signs of the times** were really sufficient, had they but eyes to see it. First, let them interpret the signs already given, before coming to demand others!
3. A third motive for refusing to grant them a sign was the fact that He had already conceded them a spectacular sign: "**the sign of Jonah.**" (Mt. 12:39f) Here the Lord put these callous critics on trial, because, on their own premises, they must actually await the verification of the sign He gave. So, by giving them **THIS** sign which promised His own future resurrection, He literally beat them at their own game. Technically, therefore, He was under no obligation to furnish any immediately verifiable miracle. Nevertheless, by reminding them of even this sign, He tested their conscience: would they finally admit the weight of ANY God-given proof of His identity and consequent authority? Or would they continue to reject the obvious direction of all His evidence? It is now their CONSCIENCE, not their intellectual equipment, that is put on trial.
4. Another motive for not granting the demanded credentials, although not mentioned in our text, lies in the very nature of Christian discipleship.
  - a. Had Jesus shown them a heaven full of angels with a vision of the Son of man as glorious as the sun, a heavenly exhibition of such magnitude and glory as to exceed their wildest expectations, would this have produced in them the kind of faith He expects in His disciples? If the discipleship of Jesus is to be founded upon a faith that trusts Him on the basis of the evidence He grants, and does not whine to behold His glory as triumphant

- and realized (cf. 1 Pt. 1:8; Jn. 20:29), is it psychologically probable that they would have been great believers, had He actually granted their wish?
- b. And if faith is to be founded upon evidence that can be verified, but yet must have some unseen, yet hoped-for object, for it to be faith (Heb. 11:1; Ro. 8:24f; 2 Co. 4:18; 5:7), how could a celestial demonstration foster real faith, if its effects would have been so imposing on the mind as to render unbelief so impossible that the denial of the evidence would be absolute folly? If Jesus had rendered faith really impossible, how could He hope to consider the witnesses of such a supernatural extravaganza as believers or disciples? They would not be believers, for they would know what now in this life they must yet believe, trusting the evidence to be true.
  - c. Further, if faith is to be a personal, free decision, then overwhelming revelations of such magnitude that would nullify the power or reality of personal decision, eliminates each man's free will. This would make God responsible for their salvation, since none could refuse to follow Jesus. It would also compromise God's impartiality by representing Him as granting overpowering evidence to some and not to all, as saving some against their will and despite their lack of personal faith, and as damning the rest to whom He gave no such overwhelming evidence.

### C. CONCESSION OF CONVINCING COUNTEREVIDENCE TO CULMINATE CHRIST'S CLAIMS (16:4)

16:4 **An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign.** His analysis was two-pronged:

1. They were **evil**, because they were deliberately evading the plain evidence of His previous miracles which revealed God's will. They resisted the force of empirical proof upon their minds, although it was such evidence as would appeal to the unbiased researcher. What kind of mentality does it take to be far more impressed by thunderbolts from heaven, than by the restoring of usefulness to earth's suffering humanity? or by fire from heaven, than by miraculous provision of food to feed thousands of hungry and tired men and women? Their hypocrisy revealed itself in their despising the credentials that God had ordered and in demanding other evidence more in line with their own dictates.

2. They were **adulterous**, or unfaithful, because they loved something other than God. They were not seeking God's will and approval. (Jn. 5:38-47) Their disposition proved they did not adore God; they bowed before the false gods of their own mind, their own concepts of what God's will and God's Messiah must be. They flattered themselves to be wiser than John the Baptist or Jesus. (Cf. Mt. 11:7-19)

**There shall no sign be given unto it.** What they lacked was not a *sign*, but sight, i.e. the desire to see the obvious. But these men were blind to the moral glory of the Lord. In fact, in contrast to the capricious weather signs, His were not at all difficult to fathom, if the heart of the interpreter be good and honest. (Cf. Lk. 8:15) The very moral character of Jesus' miracles, demonstrating the fact that a holy, loving God was at work in the person of His Son, tests the character and conscience of the observers. Since every type of truth has its own proper evidence by which it is demonstrated, Christ and His truth must be verified by the proper proof. Rather than be tested by mathematical or musical evidence, the truth of Jesus and Christianity has a double foundation: a historical, or empirical, foundation, and a moral base. But, if the critics themselves are not morally qualified or capable of judging the evidences, they will never see the meaning of His signs, regardless of how strong the historical evidences might be. Not even the best evidence can win over those who have stubbornly decided not to be convinced!

The simple fact that Jesus refused to work a miracle in the presence of His enemies is no sign of weakness or inability. Rather, it evidences His confidence in the adequacy and validity of the miracles already provided, as well as of the prophetic sign He did give. Any imposter can also refuse to furnish credentials to his critics, but only a real prophet can risk his reputation on the precise fulfilment of a future sign, since the imposter who attempts the same is only postponing his own day of reckoning and exposure as a fraud. Also, His refusal to be bullied or frightened into rash miracles is proof of His self-mastery.

**No sign . . . but the sign of Jonah.** Apparently, on this occasion the Lord did not explain the sense of the prediction, as He had done earlier. (Cf. Mt. 12:39f) Rather, He simply refers back to it. Not only were the former miracles enough; what He had already told them was enough too! Why keep adding word upon word to convince the wilfully deaf? When He had given them *the sign of Jonah* in the past, He had furnished **EVERYTHING** they really demanded and needed.

So, this time He just dropped the enigmatic sign in their midst to discuss among themselves. Its very obscurity and its importance as a sign such as they demanded would have spurred them on to debate its meaning until its future fulfilment made its meaning understandable. Then, when the Apostles began preaching the resurrection of Jesus as an indisputable fact, the realization that He had furnished them such unforeseeable information in advance would surprise them with factual evidence that He had known all along what no mere human could have known. This fact throws light on the depth of the leaders' obstinacy and guilt when, despite their inability to answer the Apostles' affirmations and proof, they continued to reject Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

This exception ("no sign . . . but that of Jonah") is no new method being attempted after all other signs had seemingly failed to convince the skeptics, because . . .

1. Jesus had not failed. THEY had failed to admit what other impartial witnesses could see.
2. This exception, i.e. the proof inherent in Jesus' resurrection, is the proper climax of all His other signs, since a permanently dead miracle-worker is less startling evidence of divine approbation than is a resurrected Lord.
3. This exception underlines once again Jesus' patience. In infinite mercy, He continues to leave them evidence when, according to strict justice, they deserved no more.
4. When Jesus originally gave them this sign, it was sufficient then, and it is sufficient now, no matter how impatient they be to see its realization. Therefore, in the future moment when it would have been fulfilled, they would then be basing their conviction upon evidence already given prior to the resurrection, thus upon evidence they possessed even at this moment. So, let them believe that.
5. On the previous occasion they had not insisted that the sign come "from heaven," as they now required. Nevertheless, by referring them back to the sign of the resurrection, He is giving them precisely what they asked for. Since the resurrection of Jesus would be brought about by the direct intervention of God, rather than by any human agency, this proof would be exactly what they now had requested: "from heaven."

This man, whose voice condemned the traditionalism of the Pharisees and whose miracles damned the antisupernaturalistic rationalism of the Sadducees, would be silenced in death by these very clergymen.

But He would rise from the dead to wreck their rationalism by His resurrection and topple their traditionalism and theories by His truth. This was His sign, but they must wait for its fulfilment.

**And he left them and departed.** For the man or group that refuses to recognize God's hand in all that Jesus was, did or taught, but obstinately insists that God furnish other reasons to believe, the only alternative remaining (short of immediate, judgmental punishment!) is to abandon such to their self-chosen fate. (Cf. Mt. 4:13; 10:14f; Ac. 13:44-51; Ro. 1:24, 26, 28; Jdg. 16:20; 1 Sam. 15:35; 16:14; 28:6; Dt. 31:17; 2 Kg. 21:14; 2 Ch. 15:2; 24:20; Psa. 78:60; Isa. 2:6) So, by the very act of turning on His heel and striding back to the boat, Jesus continued to instruct His disciples: that is, there comes a time even for Jesus Christ to leave the critics and their haggling. Not even the Lord would force their will not to believe. He refused even to render it impossible NOT to believe His precious truth! **He left them** His truth to do with it as they pleased. Now it was up to them to submit to the guidance of the light available to them, or stumble in the dark.

### EVIDENCE OF HUMAN FREEDOM

This section underscores once more the absolutely inviolate freedom of the human will. The Pharisees and Sadducees were really free to accept or reject Jesus' revelations. God coerces no one to believe against his own will. However, He does furnish man with evidence that is the kind of proof that allows him to be voluntarily willing and obedient, the kind of evidence that is sufficiently convincing to encourage man to exercise his will and choose the right. But none is compelled against his will. The very certainty of God's evidence, however, gives a moral quality to man's decision about it. And yet, if man cannot come to God by his own power or on his own terms, neither is he forced by irresistible evidence. Still, the light is sufficient. Therefore, men who love darkness rather than light because their lives are evil, deserve the condemnation that is theirs. (Jn. 3:16-21) Responsibility is always commensurate with the opportunities to know the truth and the favor enjoyed.

## APPLICATIONS

SHALL WE PUT GOD TO FURTHER, USELESS TESTS, OR ACCEPT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE EVIDENCES ALREADY FURNISHED? In what way(s) is it possible for us to demand signs from God in this same illegitimate way? The analogy between our situation and that of those who lived in Jesus' time consists in recognizing that:

1. To us, as to them, have been already granted multitudinous motives for deciding whether or not God has really spoken through Jesus of Nazareth.
2. To us, as to them, falls the responsibility for weighing the evidences and letting ourselves be guided by their force and direction, be it material or moral.
3. Neither we nor they have the right to pretend OTHER proof DIFFERENT from what has already been granted. Rather than criticize the proof, we must examine the heart that will not admit such proof.
4. We too, like they, may have personal or group prejudices that block our ready acceptance of something God says that seems unreasonable, unreal or otherwise unacceptable. Nevertheless, we too humbly submit ourselves in willing obedience to what is revealed to us, without complaining that God should give something other than what He has.

### THEREFORE:

When we sigh for miracles to give us more confidence, ignoring those ancient demonstrations that authenticate our faith once and for all, or when we are reasonably certain about a given duty and yet remain unmoved, hoping earnestly that God will provide some spiritual light or emotional stimulation that would blast us into action, then we are demanding that God prove to us what we should already admit. We are haggling over a sign when we already possess sufficient reasons and guidance for moving out in obedience.

We must not let ourselves be hindered by the fact that there is always a multiplicity of opinions and differences of interpretation regarding every Christian duty. Rather, we must ask ourselves why SOME cannot see the truth involved in such questions, and seek to know that truth for ourselves with a view to obeying it.

He who chooses to remain in doubt, after all that God has said and done to convince the common man, acts in bad faith and merits what he will get! When, in order to justify some decision, we say,

"If God would just give me some sign, then I would do what He says," we are putting Him to unnecessary tests, and fall under the just condemnation of Jesus! Rather than fall victim to the temptation to say, "Oh, if God would just give me some further sign, assuring me of His will regarding some choice I must make, I would be happier, surer, more willing to do my duty," let us walk in the light we have, by faith, not by sight.

The original readers of Matthew's Gospel had to decide whether to put God to further, useless tests, demanding more proof of Jesus' Messiahship, or embrace the evidence already furnished. Can we, will we, decide about His revelations to us?

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Where had Jesus come from and what had He done just before boarding the boat to sail for Magadan?
2. Locate Magadan-Dalmanutha geographically on the basis of the information in the text.
3. Who are the Sadducees? What is their theological position in Judaism?
4. What does this collusion between the Pharisees and Sadducees against Jesus prove about them? What was their more usual attitude toward each other?
5. What was the semi-official position in Judaism of the Pharisees and Sadducees which would require of them that they ask precisely the question they now place before Jesus?
6. What is a "sign"? What part did signs play in the identification of God's messengers? What are "the signs of the times" to which Jesus made reference? What are "the times" intended?
7. What was Jesus' inner reaction to this request for signs? (Mark 8:12)
8. Harmonize the differing answers reported by Matthew and Mark: "No sign shall be given this generation," and "No sign shall be given it, except the sign of Jonah." How can both answers be correct?
9. Explain Jesus' point in mentioning the reading of weather signs. Are these weather signs mentioned universal, i.e. true all over the world?
10. Explain the "sign of Jonah." On what other occasion did Jesus explain its meaning?

11. On what other occasions did people request signs of Jesus and what answers did He give them?
13. Explain the peculiar immorality of asking for signs in the spirit in which this was done by the Jewish theologians.

## Section 40

### JESUS WARNS DISCIPLES AGAINST INFLUENCE OF POPULAR LEADERS AND PARTIES

(Parallel: Mark 8:13-26)

TEXT: 16:5-12

5 And the disciples came to the other side and forgot to take bread. 6 And Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. 7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, We took no bread. 8 And Jesus perceiving it said, O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have no bread? 9 Do ye not yet perceive, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? 10 Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? 11 How is it that ye do not perceive that I spake not to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. 12 Then understood they that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How do you harmonize the apparently conflicting reports that the disciples "forgot to take bread," (Matthew) and "they had only one loaf with them in the boat" (Mark)?
- b. What was there that was so dangerous about the influence of the Pharisees, the Sadducees and Herod that Jesus needed to make so specific and so stern a warning to His disciples against it? Deal with the influence of each group separatively.
- c. What "leaven" did Herod have? (cf. Mark 8:15) He was no religious teacher! Or was he, in a certain sense, one whose views

affected the religious tenor of the Jews? If not, why not? If so, what religious influence did Herod wield?

- d. Because of their constant exposure to the contradictory and openly antagonistic views of the religious leaders, Jesus' disciples ran the risk of discouragement. Why do you think Jesus was willing to let His own disciples run that risk? Was not Jesus Himself risking the loss of some of His Apostles either to the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herod, or some other force active in Palestine at that time?
- e. If you feel that there was great risk in the constant exposure to the harassing tactics of the enemies of Jesus, then what measures do you see in Jesus' method that were calculated to strengthen and protect the disciples against the psychological drumming on their minds that these attacks must necessarily cause?
- f. How are we "leavened" in our world? Are there "leavens" in our world about which the Lord would probably warn us today? If so, what are the measures in Jesus' method of dealing with us, His disciples, that strengthen and protect us against the insidious dangers of these influences? If you feel there are no "leavens," then perhaps you have already been leavened!
- g. What are some expressions used in the twentieth century for the same idea meant by Jesus when He warned against the "leaven of" certain leaders and parties? Think of the working and effect of yeast in dough as you answer. Why does Jesus compare doctrine to "leaven"?
- h. Can you explain why the Apostles, having heard Jesus' somber warning, did not discuss the question immediately and directly with Jesus, but rather talked it over among themselves?
- i. Can you see the apparent reasonableness in their (mistaken) conclusion that He was discussing food when He made that serious warning? Show the rationality of their conclusion, from a Jewish, human point of view, even if their conclusion is mistaken. They were reasonable men, even though wrong.
- j. Was it possible for the Apostles, of all people, to have "hardened hearts"? How?
- k. Why do you suppose Jesus brought up the two miraculous feedings, in order to deal with the Apostles' confusion of His meaning?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus turned on His heel and left the Pharisees and Sadducees that had tried to put Him to the test by demanding that He show them a supernatural sign from God. He and His disciples reboarded the boat and sailed for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. When the disciples sailed, they forgot to bring along any bread with them. There was only one loaf in the boat.

Jesus began cautioning the men, "Keep your eyes open: watch out for the 'yeast' of the Pharisees, the Sadducees and Herod!"

Because they had brought no bread, they then began discussing Jesus' enigmatic words among themselves.

Jesus knew about it, so He asked them, "Men, where is your faith? Why all this discussion about the fact that you forgot to bring the bread? Don't you have the slightest idea about what I meant? Are you so slow to grasp it? You have eyes to see with, but can you not see? You have ears to hear with, but can't you hear? Have you already forgotten how many baskets of left-overs you men gathered up when I broke the five barley loaves of bread for the five thousand?"

Someone replied, "Twelve baskets."

"And how many baskets were there when there were but seven loaves to feed four thousand people?"

"Seven, Lord."

"Do you not understand it yet? How could you miss my point then? I was not talking about BREAD at all. I said, 'Be on your guard against the LEAVEN of the Pharisees; Sadducees and Herod.' "

Then the Apostles realized that He had not been talking about literal yeast for bread at all. Rather, He meant the psychological influence of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod.

## SUMMARY

Jesus and the Twelve left the sign-seeking Jewish leaders and sailed northeast across the Galilean Lake. Under way, Jesus warned the Apostles about the leaven of popular leaders and parties. They took His word literally, hence misunderstood Him by thinking He referred to yeast and/or bread contaminated by contact with the proscribed leaders and parties. Since they had only one loaf, which they had already in the boat and had bought none from any of the offending parties, whence any of the danger of contamination supposedly would

come, they could not understand His point. They apparently also thought that the one loaf was insufficient to feed the entire group, because Jesus then rebuked them for their insufficient faith and their short memory that forgot the great miraculous multiplication of food for huge crowds on two occasions, facts that should have permanently removed any further worry about food! Then Jesus explained that His warning concerned the influence, views and opinions of those religious and political parties.

## NOTES

## A. SITUATION (16:5)

16:5 **And the disciples came to the other side and forgot to take bread.** **Came to the other side** (*elthôntes . . . eis tò péran*) need not mean more than "when they went to the other side," since the verb translated "came" means either "to come or go," depending on the point of view of the user. In fact, Mark connects "to the other side" with Jesus' departure.

If they had just sailed from Magadan-Dalmanutha, presumably on the western or south-western shore of Lake Galilee in the general vicinity of Tiberias, then they are sailing toward the eastern shore. Matthew's next geographical notice is in the district of Caesarea Philippi, north and east of the Galilean lake. Mark (8:22-26) records the intervening event of the healing of a blind man at "Bethsaida," which may easily have been the famous Bethsaida Julias located near the northeastern end of the lake and right on Jesus' route north toward Caesarea Philippi. (Cf. Lk. 9:10 and Jn. 6:1)

They had sailed hurriedly, as appears from the detail that they had left without purchasing a sufficient supply of bread. It is probable that the disciples' entire attention had been focused on the clash between Jesus and the clergy, causing them to **forget to take bread**. Mark, however, adds that "they had only one loaf with them in the boat." (Mk. 8:14) Although the chronological connections are not as tight as would be desired to make the conclusion certain, would that one loaf be a remainder from the miraculous feeding of the 4000? (Study Mt. 15:37 = Mk. 8:8; Mt. 15:39 = Mk. 8:10; Mt. 16:4f = Mk. 8:13f) If so, the particularly vigorous scolding Jesus gave the Twelve (Mk. 8:17f) becomes so much more comprehensible. (See on 16:8.) **They forgot to take bread:** was it their normal practice to

furnish themselves with picnic baskets full of provisions for their journeys? If so, at least part of the baskets used to collect the leftovers after the miraculous feedings may have belonged to the Apostles themselves. Further, since the Apostolic group had been only recently travelling through Gentile country (Phoenicia) or through more sparsely settled areas (Decapolis), and since they had deliberately sought privacy for study, it is quite likely that they had grown accustomed to providing their own food supply during this time. So, for these reasons and that given below, we conclude that the disciples literally were so distracted by the debate as to forget to refurnish their dwindled supply at Magadan-Dalmanutha.

Foster (*Middle Period*, 212) sees the consternation among the Apostles caused by Jesus' withdrawal from His enemies as the psychological explanation of this section: "It must have been with a heavy heart that the apostles saw Jesus retreat again from another encounter with His foes." Of course, as we have already seen, Jesus did NOT retreat out of fear or failure, but His disciples, longing for more decisive victories, must have interpreted His hasty departure in this way. Accordingly, Foster then connects Jesus' warning (16:6) with whatever unwholesome thoughts they might have had about it, whether "bitter disappointment over broken dreams, frustration and retreat." He imagines a venomous Pharisean sneer levelled at some Apostle: "I suppose you men will be disappearing again? Why does not your Master stand His ground?" And, because the Apostles had been embarrassed by His apparent indifference to the Pharisees' reactions in the debate over traditions (15:12f), He was now compelled to rebuke their kowtowing to those bigots.

### B. JESUS' CRYPTIC WARNING (16:6)

**16:1 And Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.** This rebuke is intended to counterbalance the negative effects of the recent encounter over signs. **Leaven:** see on 13:33. Matthew explains the figurative meaning of yeast at 16:11, 12 as "teaching." **Take heed and beware of the leaven . . .** What is the main thrust of this warning?

1. Does He mean: "Beware of the corrupting influence the doctrine of these leaders exerts in your own lives and thinking"? In the sections which follow, the disciples amply demonstrate how deeply

affected they were by what would be thought acceptable to others or beneficial to themselves—an attitude which would have certainly guaranteed them some relative calm away from the tempests that would be hurled at them by the unbelieving clergy. But this attitude, arising out of compromise with Jesus' enemies, could only mean the loss of their eternal life, since it meant the end of their discipleship.

2. Or does He mean: "Beware of the deadly influence these leaders will exert in others to turn them against you, i.e. recognize who your real enemies are. Hitherto, as leaders of Israel, they have been religious guides far more dependable than any outside the circle of true religion. Now, however, you must consciously beware the secret and devious ways these politicians operate." Whereas the Twelve finally understood that He referred to "the teaching" of these popular groups and leaders, it would seem that it is not merely their official doctrines that were directly under fire from Jesus here. In fact, if "leaven" connotes every expression of their influence, then He is warning everyone to look beneath the doctrine itself to see the disparity between official pronouncements and real practice, and the hypocrisy of public doctrine in contrast with secret strategies.

Either way, He warns against their general drift and tendency that sways men's thinking.

**The leaven of the Pharisees:** hypocrisy in all its forms (Lk. 12:1), i.e. traditional religion that emphasizes outward purity regardless of the heart's condition, and substitution of human regulations for God's requirements, often involving outright cancellation of God's. (Cf. Mt. 15:1-20) They were notoriously greedy lovers of money. (Lk. 16:14f) They clung to their confidence in human righteousness as an adequate basis for God's approval.

**The leaven of the Sadducees:** a rationalism that refused to believe reliable testimony to the supernatural authentication of God's prophets, resulting in a materialistic philosophy in practice. (Cf. Ac. 4:1-6; 23:8) A mockery of all that was holy, all the high priestly family was Sadducean. From a comparison of the parallel text (Mk. 8:15), some have supposed that the "Herodians" were merely Galilean Sadducees, since Matthew repeatedly speaks of "Pharisees and Sadducees," whereas Mark, after "Pharisees," says not "Sadducees," but "Herod." If they are to be identified with each other, then they may have been Sadducees religiously, but Herodians politically,

which, considering the this-worldly concerns of each group, is not at all an unlikely combination. So we may have here a question of dominant emphasis, rather than one of real distinction. Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 146) comments:

(Sadducees) were wealthy and aristocratic, and they were deeply involved in politics. So Jesus may well have been saying, "Take care that you never identify the kingdom of heaven with outward goods, and that you never pin your hopes of bringing it in with political action." This may well be a warning against giving material things too high a place in our scheme of values, and against thinking that men can be reformed by political action. Jesus may well have been reminding men that material prosperity is far from being the highest good, and that political action is far from producing the most important results. The true blessings are the blessings of the heart; and the true change is not the change of outward circumstances but the change of the hearts of men.

"The leaven of Herod" (Mk. 8:15), if we should distinguish it from that of the Sadducees, then, may refer to the doctrine of Hellenism with its paganizing tendency to compromise pure Judaism with its faithfulness to Javeh and its necessary separation from paganism. The influence of the Herods was one of conscious innovation, intentionally attempting to make Jews over according to Greek models. Also, the Herodians, as a party, would reflect something of the Roman influence filtered through their puppet-kings, the Herods. Did Jesus also mean to expose the political maneuvering, the jockeying for power, so often characteristic of Herodian family politics? The disciples certainly proved themselves prime targets for this kind of influence, as they fought to decide who among them should consider himself the greatest, who should have the prime seats in the Kingdom, etc. This spirit renders partial judgments and vitiates the persuasiveness of men whose ostensible goal is to make all men holy and godly regardless of their former background or relative position or stature.

However, regardless of their superficial differences, they represent just one deadly influence, because there is one fundamental characteristic common to all: they were all obstinately hostile to the Kingdom of God. Their entire thinking—as this was revealed in their practice—was geared to this world. They were insensitive to truth. Bruce (*Training*, 154) scores their "ungodliness, blindness and deadness of

heart to the divine. They did not know the true and the good when they saw it; and when they knew it, they did not love it." They all demonstrated a common disgust for and distrust of anyone who sincerely dedicated himself to truth and righteousness. One common trait, shared by all these divergent philosophies, has just been illustrated in the previous section. Neither the Pharisees, Sadducees nor Herod could bring themselves to relinquish their pride, position, power and personal opinions long enough to admit the obvious significance of Jesus' Messianic signs. (16:1-4; 14:1 and par.) Their unwillingness to submit to the testimony of the evidence, if ever admitted as a norm by the disciples, would become a creeping, skeptical disease that would wither the spontaneous enthusiasm of true belief. ("Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" (Jn. 7:48) There is always danger of being shifted into line with false principles and philosophies so subtle and so pervasive that we are unaware of their sway.

### C. THE DISCIPLES' MISUNDERSTANDING (16:7)

**16:7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, We took no bread.** Jesus' words were taken literally: "He must be talking about the leaven of bread." (Cf. 16:12) In this sense, their discussion may have gone something like this: "If bread is pure or unclean on the basis of the yeast's contact with contaminating objects or persons, then He is warning us against buying bread from the parties mentioned, due to its possible ceremonial defilement by them." If this correctly reconstructs their conversation, then **we took no bread** may mean:

1. "At least we are safe from contamination by the leaven of unfriendly leaders and parties, since we brought none of their bread with us."
2. Or, in the light of Jesus' further argument, this is their expression of anguished realization that, because of their preoccupation with His clash with the clergy, they had neglected to make the purchases necessary for their sustenance during their journey. It is almost as if, when Jesus mentioned "yeast" they thought of "bread," because they realized it was too late to provide themselves any.
3. Worse still, they deemed the one loaf they had with them in the boat to be insufficient for their total need. (Cf. Mk. 8:14) And, if there were danger that any bread they should buy in the future

be polluted by contact with the above-mentioned parties, then, by Jesus' warning (as they understood it), they would be forced to do without bread entirely.

Since apparently nothing had been said during the embarkation that would have linked His present warning with the previous clash with the hierarchy, the Twelve, themselves concerned with the mechanics of getting the boat under way, see no immediate connection between **the Pharisees and Sadducees** who asked for a sign and **the Pharisees and Sadducees** whose leaven is to be avoided. Hence, because they were on a different wavelength than Jesus, they did not receive His meaning.

#### D. JESUS' REBUKE (16:8-11)

##### 1. The indignant accusation of inadequate faith.

**16:8 And Jesus perceiving it, said, O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have no bread?** Had it been true that Jesus really meant literal bread yeast—as the disciples had supposed—, they still demonstrated a gross lack of genuine trust in the power of One who could turn stones into bread or multiply food endlessly for thousands! **Little faith:** although in verses 9 and 11 He scolds them for their inability to understand, there is no inconsistency involved, since their obtuseness is caused by their lack of faith. They did not understand, simply because they lacked the confidence in Him they should have had.

##### 2. The reproach for limited spiritual insight. (16:9a)

Mark (8:17f) reports Jesus' battery of questions as follows:

Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread?

Do you not yet perceive or understand?

Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?

And do you not remember?

When I broke the . . . loaves, how many baskets did you take up? . . .

And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets . . . ?

Do you not yet understand?

Their lack of spiritual perception lay in thinking that the one presumably "kosher" loaf remaining in the boat should somehow be thought inadequate to feed them indefinitely, although Jesus was present to multiply it if He so willed. Even if they could not fathom His creative power to turn even stones into bread, they should have at least reasoned: "With Jesus along, all we need is the one loaf we have here in the boat!" Thus, even their confusion about literal yeast should never have blinded them to Jesus' true meaning about the leaven of the Jewish leaders. That Matthew should have ignored the one available loaf, does not argue that he knew nothing about it, because, while Mark's reader might deduce the reasoning pattern suggested above, Matthew's reader, on the other hand, unaided by the notice of even one loaf, is led by its absence to imagine that Jesus could have sustained His men by creating food out of nothing! Either way, therefore, the readers are inexorably led to see Jesus' power as Creator.

Bruce (*Training*, 156) blames the disciples' confusion on their treating . . .

. . . the incident on the other side of the lake too lightly, and . . . their neglect to provide bread too gravely. They should have taken more to heart the ominous demand for a sign, and the solemn words spoken by their Master in reference thereto; and they should not have been troubled about the want of loaves in the company of Him . . . Their thoughtlessness in one direction, and their over-thoughtfulness in another, showed that food and raiment occupied a larger place in their minds than the kingdom of God and its interests.

Another motive for their hardness of heart (Mk. 8:17), or closed-mindedness, is the fact that their mind was still bemoaning His refusal of the Messianic crown and His stedfast refusal to baffle and wipe out His opposition by some majestic display of supernatural fire-power. With this kind of mentality in the disciples, it is understandable that they would not arrive at spiritual solutions that reflect a believer's heart and comprehension.

3. The reminder of two stupendous miracles in the very area  
of their doubts. (16:9b, 10)

This reminder is significant for the following reasons:

1. Both miracles had taken place in Herod's territory (see on 14:13b

and on 15:29). So, the disciples' concern not to buy Herod's leaven would be ill-founded, since Jesus could have sustained them indefinitely at any place in Herod's realm without recourse to bread made impure by that king, had that been Jesus' real intent when speaking about Herod's leaven. And by reflection, the same could also be true of the leaven of the other parties.

2. This reminder serves also to distinguish the two great miracles for all future ages that might tend to confuse the two and doubt both. (See "The Critical Importance of This Account" before 15:29 where some differences between the two miraculous feedings are noted.) Beyond the obvious differences in numbers of people, bread, fish and baskets, the kind of baskets is different. The 12 baskets (*kōfinos*, v. 9) would have been of any size, but were considered typical of the Jews, i.e. suitable for carrying kosher food. The 7-baskets (*spūris*, v. 10) were large hampers for edibles and other purposes.
3. **How many baskets did you take up?** By pushing them to provide these numbers, He is impressing upon them the liberality of His supernatural ability when the occasion for its display requires. It really mattered not *how many*, because ANY left-over fragments is proof enough of His power. What mattered now was that "you took up so many baskets, and yet you now worry that you have no bread?!"

#### 4. Jesus repeats His statement about leaven. (16:11)

Lest the result of these statements of Jesus come as a surprise to the unwary reader, to whom v. 12 seems not to follow from v. 11, let it be noticed that Jesus does not merely repeat His former statement about leaven. (v. 6) Rather, the two sentences in v. 11, taken together, form an antithesis: "NOT BREAD, BUT LEAVEN!", an antithesis confirmed by the disciples' conclusion. (v. 12) So, if *leaven*, according to Jesus, stands in contrast to *bread* which is usually made with leaven, then *leaven* must be understood in its figurative sense, rather than literally, as the Twelve had done earlier.

Jesus repeated His metaphor, because "leaven" conveys His meaning a bit better than does the literal word "teaching," since it carries the nuance of a corrupting spirit and example so subtle that the damage would be done before it could be recognized for what it was. Bruce (*Training*, 155) defines it:

The spirit of unbelief which ruled in Jewish society Jesus described as leaven, with special reference to its diffusiveness; and most fitly, for it passes from sire to son, from rich to poor, from learned to unlearned, till a whole generation has been vitiated by its malign influence. Such was the state of things in Israel as it came under His eye. Spiritual blindness and deadness, with the outward symptom of an inward malady,—a constant craving for evidence,—met Him on every side. The common people, the leaders of society, the religious, the skeptics, the courtiers, and the rustics, were all blind and yet apparently all most anxious to see, ever renewing the demand, 'What sign shonest Thou, that we may see and believe Thee? What doest Thou work?'

#### E. THE DISCIPLES FINALLY UNDERSTAND (16:12)

Now they are doubly sure they needed His warning to realize that they are in a world which could so easily influence them as to leave them useless to Jesus.

1. In fact, they had been so blinded by their own thinking which had arisen out of their associations with Pharisean thought and practice, that this kept them from grasping instantly the simplest metaphor Jesus lay before them! Their hypothetical conversation reconstructed at v. 7, assumes this Pharisean mentality and ambient at every turn. Ironically, from this standpoint, then, they actually proved their deep need for His warning, even as they discussed its meaning! The leaven of the Pharisees was even then at work in their midst, because they argued like Pharisees!
2. He had patiently led them to the correct understanding not only of His warning, but also of their own blundering logic about bread. Sadducean unbelief in the supernatural had reared its ugly head in their little faith to trust Him to multiply food miraculously if necessary.

Since this verse indicates that the Twelve should have understood "**the teaching**" from the first, and not **the leaven of bread**, is McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 408) correct in thinking that "Jesus had resorted to metaphor because the word leaven better expressed his idea than did the word teaching"? Should we conclude that the disciples still missed something of His meaning, since they concluded

that He meant **the teaching**, and not the influence? No, because, as all great teachers know, the power of influence, spirit and example is as truly **teaching**, or doctrine, as all the dogmatic formulas pronounced in official, formal instruction. Although such is not "taught," it is "caught," just as truly and surely as if it had been taught.

## APPLICATIONS

### THE SUBTLE INFLUENCE OF EVIL

1. We too can be influenced by men of influence in our society who have such a subtle sway over our thinking that we may be unconscious of it at all.
  - a. Perhaps they never sit in the official seats of learning to diffuse their doctrines, but their corrupting power is nevertheless real. Life cannot be lived aright, if the beliefs which lie at the base of its moral character are mistaken, misleading or false. But these beliefs are none the less doctrines, regardless of their origin or method of propagation.
  - b. Again, there are other reputable gentlemen who are too clever to commit themselves publicly on the side of immorality or in favor of ideas tending toward apostacy from the living God. Yet, the spirit and essence revealed in their way of expressing themselves, and the imperceptible spell of their personal example, seduces the unaware into infidelity.
  - c. The persuasiveness of the peril is greater than it seems, because there is usually just a grain of truth in every mistaken concept which seems to depend upon it, just enough truth to make the whole mistake palatable.
  - d. The pressure to embrace the false or wrong-headed thinking is further enhanced by the prestige and apparent rectitude of those who hold such opinions.
2. Like the Apostles, we too can place such an emphasis upon the physical cares and concerns of this life, that the most solemn words of our Master upon problems of vastly greater importance fade into insignificance, be misunderstood and wrongly applied.
3. Now, as then, it will always be tempting to follow the modern religio-political scholarship and modes and moods popularized by men of note:
  - a. By supposing that the right rites, the correct phrases, and the

proper traditions can please God and bless mankind.

- b. By identifying the Kingdom of God with material wealth or by promoting its advancement by political activism, hoping to reform men by substituting social change for personal conversion.
  - c. By not caring about the paganizing propaganda that bombards us daily, threatening our separation from the world for God's use.
4. What is our salvation and protection from the ascendancy of these insidious inducements?
- a. We must never forget that it is Jesus who admonishes us against these infernal masteries. It is His word that defines the danger.
    - (1) Therefore, let His sure word penetrate every part of our being, so that His will might be the only power active in our lives. His truth in us can empower us to take the offensive against the malignant sway of evil. Look what His Word did to the early Christians as they launched their counterattack against all the leavens in their day!
    - (2) Let us choose our most intimate friends with great care, since even our own loved ones exercise an influence upon us that is not always edifying. (1 Co. 15:33; cfr. Mt. 16:22f!) Choose friends that love Jesus; let His Word be the norm by which our close companions are chosen.
  - b. It is the patience of Jesus Himself that can save us! Morgan (*Matthew*, 207) says it so well:

He Who turned His back in satirical scorn upon the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come for no other purpose than to tempt Him was very patient with the blundering disciples and waited for them. Oh He is a wonderful Master! He will say it again if we do not understand it the first time. If you are a Pharisee or a Sadducee with your animosity, and your criticism and your cleverness, He will laugh at you in high heaven, and He will turn His back upon you. But if you are a weak, trembling, foolish, frail child, thinking about loaves when you ought to be thinking about spiritual things, He will say it again . . .

- c. But we too must watch, standing guard against every influence in our life that could compromise our position in Christ and our usefulness in His hands!

5. WE CAN BE LEAVENED:

- a. By the attitudes of the church in which we grew up without ever realizing that its attitudes were not always necessary expressions of true Christianity. This is not to undermine the ancient merely because of its antiquity, but to challenge us to examine the positions and attitudes of fallible human beings, because they are human.
- b. By the atmosphere of the world which we absorb like the air we breath. The moral pollution is as real as the material sort, and often we are just as unconscious of the effect of the one on our spirit as we are unaware of the damage to our body of the other.
- c. By OURSELVES! Blessed is the man who is so alert that he cannot be fooled by the falsehoods he is tempted to believe true about himself! Blessed is the man who can not be deceived by his own self-righteousness!
- d. By men who walk with God: look at Moses and Abraham, David and Isaiah, Daniel and John the Baptist, Peter and Paul. They knew more about heaven than most, because they knew God. (Cf. 1 Co. 11:1; Phil. 4:9!)
- e. By the God who is the final, real satisfaction of the soul. When God who created a world full of so many satisfactions, calls us to what He says is far better, we must be willing to sacrifice all of earth's satisfactions for one day with Him. We must never compare the paltry interests of earth with the glories of a heaven we have never seen or have only heard about.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is "leaven"? Explain its literal and figurative uses. How is it used in our text?
2. State all the similarities and differences between the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000. Show how these two separate miracles become important in the context of this discussion about the Apostles' misunderstanding of certain words of Jesus.
3. Regarding the provision of bread for the traveling group of Jesus, what was their usual method of operation? How did they generally procure food on their evangelistic tours? Did this trip differ from their usual practice? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. How many loaves of bread were in the boat? Who tells us this? Of what importance is this fact?
5. When did the disciples discover that they had forgotten to buy

- bread for the trip?
6. Define the "leaven of the Pharisees." Why was this dangerous to the Apostles?
  7. Define the "leaven of the Sadducees." Why was this dangerous to the Apostles?
  8. Define the "leaven of Herod." Why was this dangerous to the Apostles?
  9. Explain why Jesus gave this warning at this particular time. What events led up to and called for this warning? What actions and attitudes in the Apostles' lives shortly *after* this proved the timeliness of this warning?
  10. List three other retreats before this one, where Jesus deliberately left a public ministry to take His Apostles away for awhile.
  11. From what and to what was Jesus withdrawing each time?
  12. In what sense does Jesus intend the expression: "Are your hearts hardened?" Is this the same sort of hard heart found in a determined sinner? If so, explain how the Apostles themselves could be in danger of this condition. If not, explain how Jesus' words are to be otherwise interpreted.
  13. Why did Jesus make reference to the two miraculous multiplications of food for the multitudes? What connection is there with Jesus' warning about leaven?

### Section 41

#### NEAR CAESAREA PHILIPPI

#### JESUS TESTS HIS DISCIPLES

(Parallels: Mark 8:27—9:1; Luke 9:18-27)

TEXT: 16:13-28

13 Now when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Who do men say that the Son of man is? 14 And they said, Some say John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. 15 He saith unto them, But who say ye that I am? 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. 17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter and upon

this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 20 Then charged he the disciples that they should tell no man that he was the Christ.

21 From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples, that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up. 22 And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee. 23 But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men. 24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 25 For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it. 26 For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? or what shall a man give in exchange for his life? 27 For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then shall he render unto every man according to his deeds. 28 Verily I say unto you, There are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose Jesus examined the convictions of His disciples at this time? In this way? In this particular place?
- b. Can you suggest what might have been the reason Jesus was praying before He tested His men? What would have been the subject of His prayer, the concern that drove Him to His knees before the event that follows? (Lk. 9:18)
- c. What was there about the ministry of Jesus, or His personality or message, that caused people to remember John the Baptist? Elijah? Jeremiah, or one of the other ancient prophets? Why were there so many opinions held about Jesus? Could they not admit that He was the Messiah and be done with it?
- d. Why do you think it should have been Peter to answer Jesus' question? Did not the other apostles believe this too?
- e. Why should Jesus be so thrilled with Peter's conclusion that He was

God's Son and Messiah? Had not these same Apostles made similar statements before this?

- f. What does it mean to confess Jesus as the Christ and Son of God in the twentieth century?
- g. Is not God being partial to Peter, since He revealed this majestic truth to him? Had God revealed it to anyone else before this? If so, to whom? How?
- h. Almost all commentaries notice the play on words in Greek where Jesus said, "You are Peter (*Péters*) and on this rock (*péttra*) I will build my church . . ." (Mt. 16:18) Centuries of church history have witnessed the bitter debates that have raged around those two words and their meaning. The Catholic interpreters have argued that this linguistic play on words proves that Jesus intended to constitute Peter as first pope and hierarchical head of the Church. Protestants, generally, see the differences in grammatical gender a real difference in meaning between *Péters* (masculine) and *péttra* (feminine). Do you not agree that Jesus should have been more careful in His use of words at such a critical moment in His teaching about the true foundation of the Church? Could He not have foreseen the difficulties such a play on words would cause? Now, if you think that He was careful and that there is no difficulty here, would you explain Jesus' play on words? To do this, you will need (1) to clarify why Jesus says "You are Peter." Did not Peter already know his symbolic name? (Cf. Jn. 1:42) Then, why bring his name up now, if Jesus did not intend to make some allusion to it? Then, (2) you will need to show how the word "rock" (*péttra*) is or is not related to Simon's name "Peter" (*Péters*).
- i. Since Jesus used the word "church" to describe what it is that He intends to construct, what do we learn about His plans? What did He mean by that word? How does it differ from His other expression: "the kingdom of God"?
- j. What was so vital about Jesus' assurances that even death itself ("Hades") could not hinder His Church? Why mention it to these disciples at precisely this time?
- k. How can Jesus practically hand over the keys to God's kingdom to human beings like Peter and expect that what they permit or require of others will be precisely what God wants?
- l. Why should so marvelous a truth as that confessed by Peter be hushed up by Jesus right on the heels of its pronouncement? Why would it have been politically most inexpedient to publish Jesus' Messiahship during this portion of His earthly ministry?

- m. What does the precision with which Jesus predicts His demise and resurrection tell you about Him?
- n. What was so wrong with Peter's rebuking Jesus? What do you think prompted him to do it?
- o. How do you think Jesus must have felt to have His solicitous friend express his concern in this way? What was so viciously diabolical about the fact that Peter *lovingly* rebuked the Lord?
- p. Why was it so important that the Master expose Peter's anxious consideration to such scathing criticism? Where had he gone wrong?
- q. Why do you think it was so important that Jesus demand the death to self of all who would follow Him? First, why was it important to demand it of those followers during that particular historical moment? Second, what connection is there between self-renunciation and repentance and salvation, if any?
- r. Is not Jesus using double-talk when He promises that those who "lose" their life for His sake will actually find it, while those who would "save" their life will "lose" it? Or is there some deeper paradox involved here? Explain.
- s. Is not Jesus being a bit impractical to suppose that the average man on the street is even vaguely concerned with "gaining the whole world"? Who among the common people is even bothered with this problem? Or is this really what Jesus was thinking? What is this "whole world" He had in mind?
- t. How can a person "forfeit his life" in gaining the whole world?
- u. List some of the things that people are already giving in exchange for their life.
- v. What part of man is referred to by the expression "life," or "soul"? In other words, what is really at stake in losing or gaining it? Use other language to describe just what it is in each of us that is threatened by bad choices or saved by the right decision in the area mentioned by Jesus.
- w. Why would anyone want to be ashamed of Jesus or His message?
- x. Is not Jesus just being vindictive to threaten anyone who is ashamed of Him with repayment for what he has done?
- y. Matthew reports that Jesus' disciples would live to see "the Son of man coming in His kingdom," while Mark says they will see "the kingdom of God come with power," but Luke only mentions "the kingdom of God." Which of these three is right—that is, what did Jesus actually say? Could He have said and meant all this? If so, what did He mean? How do the three different phrases

relate to each other?

- z. What do you think Jesus intended to accomplish by promising that some of His disciples would live to see the Messianic Kingdom arrive in power? How would this statement tend to take some of the sting out of previous demands for "blood, sweat and tears"?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Leaving Bethsaida Julias in the company of His disciples, Jesus continued His journey on north toward the villages in the district of Caesarea Philippi. On the way there, while Jesus was away from the crowds, praying by Himself with only His disciples around Him, He quizzed them: "Who are people saying that I, the Son of man, am?"

"Some say you are John the Baptist," they began. "Others think you are Elijah. We have also heard some say that you are Jeremiah or one of the ancient prophets come back to life."

"But what about *you*?" He persisted, "Who do *you* think I am?"

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Then Jesus continued, "What a fortunate man you are, Simon, John's son! You did not get that information from any purely human source. Rather, it was my heavenly Father who revealed this truth to you. Now, I too have something to say about you: you are what your name "Peter" implies—a rock. Further, your name symbolically suggests the kind of rock upon which I will found my congregation of the new Israel, the Church, and death itself will be powerless against the Church. Further, Peter, I will give you the right to open God's Kingdom to men: what you forbid men to do will be what God wants forbidden. Whatever you permit people to do will be what He wants permitted."

But then Jesus gave the disciples strict orders not to reveal to anyone that He was the Messiah. Further, it was from this very period that Jesus began to impress upon His followers the divine inevitability of His going to Jerusalem where He would go through a great deal of suffering and be repudiated by the Jewish supreme court, the hierarchy and the theologians, and finally be murdered. "However," He continued, "three days later I will arise from the dead!" He made this statement quite bluntly without any reserve.

At this, Peter took Jesus to one side and began to take Him to task, "May God in His mercy spare you this fate, Lord! Nothing like this

must ever happen to you!"

But when Jesus turned, He saw His disciples. So He reprimanded Peter in their presence: "Get moving, Satan-like adversary! Behind me! Presuming to direct me, you have become but the trigger of a trap! Once a precious rock, you are now a stone to cause me to stumble! Once instructed by God, you now follow human thinking. You may have expressed a popular viewpoint, but you have totally missed God's!"

Meanwhile a crowd was gathering, so Jesus summoned these people to join His disciples to hear Him say: "Anyone who plans to be **MY** student must give up all right to himself, disown himself, leave his own ambitions behind, yes, say of himself, 'I never knew him,' Day after day he must shoulder his cross, yes, say of himself, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' He must come with **ME**, wherever I wish to lead him. The prudent are damned: whoever cares more for his own safety than for my service is lost! But anyone who will let himself run the risk of losing everything he ever thought dear, giving up his right to it for **MY** sake and for the Gospel, that man is the only one who is really safe and can really protect his life and save his soul!

"In fact, in the balances of eternity, what advantage is there for someone to conquer everything he aims for, only to find that it cost him his **SOUL**?! Or what could a man give that would buy his soul back, once it is irretrievably lost?

If anyone feels ashamed of me or my message during these days of faithlessness and sin, I, the Son of man, will be ashamed of him when I return! In fact, I will come in my **GLORY**, in the **GLORY** of my Father with the **GLORIOUS**, holy angels. Then I will give each man what is coming to him on the basis of what he decided and did.

"However, I can assure you that some of you very people standing here today will live to see it. You will see me coming in my Kingdom, yes, God's Kingdom! And when it comes, it will come with **POWER**!"

## SUMMARY

Jesus tested the Apostles concerning their personal grasp of His mission and message. Peter, responding for the Twelve, showed deep understanding by confessing Him to be God's Son and Messiah. Overjoyed, Jesus made truth incarnate in human personality the basis of His new community and Peter a principle spokesman in it. When Jesus then made the bold declaration of His coming suffering and

resurrection, Peter, horrified, rebuked Him. After reprimanding His friend, the Lord pointed out that all true followers must expect to undergo whatever is the lot of their Master. Although there is suffering and shame ahead, there is also victory in the end and hope for the near future: Jesus' reign will soon have its powerful, glorious beginning.

## NOTES

## A. THE GOOD CONFESSION (16:13-20)

## 1. The disciples questioned about public opinion. (16:13)

**16:13 Now when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi . . .**  
 Should we attach any special significance to His choice of sites for this critical conversation? Concerning *Caesarea* (= Paneas) Plummer (*Matthew*, 224) observes the following coincidences:

The name Paneas came from the grotto of Pan, which represented the elemental worship of the old inhabitants, close to which Herod the Great had built a temple in honour of the Emperor Josephus, *Antiquities*, XV, 10, 3; *Wars*, I, 21, 3); and this represented the most modern of heathen cults. Thus, just where Judaism touched both the worship of nature and the worship of man, Jesus called upon His disciples to answer for mankind and for themselves as to what His claims upon the conscience were as against the claims of these conflicting worships.

These coincidences are interesting, but not essential, since Mark (8:27) locates the following conversation as taking place "on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi (*eis tὰ kōmas K.t.Ph. kai en tē hodō*), and Matthew loosely places the event somewhere *in the district of Caesarea Philippi* (*elthōn . . . eis tὰ mēre K.t.Ph.*). This observation weakens the surmise that they were necessarily standing in sight of the city of Caesarea, supposed figurative basis for Jesus' remarks at 16:18, 19.

The timing of this event is more significant than the place. The Twelve had now completed nearly two and a half years of daily, close personal association with Jesus, learning from Him. By this time they must have formed a mature opinion of His true identity. This

test came approximately six months before the cross.

This calculation is based on the following data: this conversation occurred at least one week before the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1; Lk. 9:28). A trip to Capernaum took place thereafter. (Mt. 17:24) There were discussions and a sermon at Capernaum. (Mt. 18) Then Jesus' brothers say, "Why not go to feast of Tabernacles?" (Jn. 7:2, 3) Later, Jesus attended that feast (Jn. 7:14) in the fall, six months before the last Passover on which He died.

This exam was prepared in the prayers of Jesus. Luke (9:18) reminds us that "He was praying," and out of these supplications came these critical questions. How His heart must have ached as He considered the consequences of this test, earnestly pleading that they be given the grace to decide rightly. At that moment the Lord prayed alone, only His Twelve being around Him. Although a crowd began forming later (Mk. 8:34), some arrangement for privacy may have been made, similar to that in Gethsemane. (cf. Mt. 26:36-39, 42, 44) Not only would He pray for their good confession despite His rejection by the majority in Israel, but also that they would accept His revelations concerning His humiliation at Jerusalem.

What motivated Jesus to question His disciples in this way? The possible motives are many:

1. He must deal with the undeniable pressure brought upon His disciples by the opposition. The antagonism is growing among leaders who everywhere attempted to undermine His teaching and authority. Part of the low opinions voiced about Jesus, and reported by the Twelve (vv. 13, 14), may well be the tangible results of hostile undercurrents that viciously undercut His claims. Such unbelief must be met solidly, lest its intimidation begin to tell upon His precious nucleus of followers (cf. 16:12) The site chosen for this examination is remarkable only for its distance from the center of orthodox Judaism: Judea and Jerusalem. This factor is more understandable when we notice its position in Jesus' travels abroad, or else on the periphery of the Holy Land. (See notes on 15:21.) He has been deliberately avoiding frontal conflicts with the hierarchy since His collision with the Pharisees over traditions. (Mt. 15:1ff) The refusal to cater to the sign-seeking critics abruptly concluded that interview too. (16:1-4) So, whereas the choice of THIS particular district for the examination may not be particularly significant (i.e. Caesarea Philippi, as opposed to Damascus or

Pella or some other semi-Gentile center), its distance from the pressure-points of His opposition is. Further, He had been giving His disciples every opportunity to grow in information and experience, so that they would be able to withstand the tension of opposition, because they could not long remain unaffected by the majority rejection of their Master.

2. These men who will become the divine missionaries to carry Jesus' Kingdom to the ends of the world must now face their semi-final exams. If the unexamined life is not worth living, the untested faith is doubly so, because it is in graver danger of presuming to be above trial. Precisely because the disciples cannot envision the approaching cross, the Lord must reveal His approaching death, and He understands how difficult this will be for them to accept. Therefore, He must first sound their commitment to Him by testing how far they are willing to identify Him as God's Ambassador and Revealer, God's Messiah and Son.

How did He proceed? **He asked his disciples saying, Who do men say that the Son of man is?** For maximum contrast between their own personal commitment to Him and the popular evaluations, He first focuses their thinking on what others were saying, before laying the vital question on the table. Tolbert (*Good News From Matthew*, 141f) rightly analyzes the first question:

The question about the opinion of others is, however, a basic question of tremendous importance to one's own faith. The disciples did not live in a vacuum. They lived in a society where people held many conflicting opinions about Jesus. They needed to be aware of the options. They needed to recognize that they had to live out their own faith among people who did not agree with them.

Although He deliberately helps them to bring their own thinking into sharp focus by first eliminating all lesser theories about His identity, this does not mean, however, that many disciples, previous to this, had not already begun to form some very solid conclusions about Him. (Cf. Jn. 1:49; 3:2; 4:42; Lk. 5:8; Jn. 6:14, 68, 69)

**The Son of man** (see on 8:20) Although He had used this title in connection with divine prerogatives (see on 9:6), its relative indefiniteness as a Messianic title makes it appear here that He intends to keep His humanity before the disciples. In fact, had **Son of man** been completely unambiguous, He would have been loading His

questions in favor of His Messiahship, and thus predetermining the disciples' answer. There would be no point in asking, "Who do men say that the Christ (= "Son of man") is?" if He expected Peter's actual answer. Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 43) notices this:

... The expression "Son of man," often a synonym for Messiah, is often reduced in value to a simple pronoun. [i.e. "I," HEF.] That this is the case in the present text is evident from the fact that Jesus could not have asked what the crowds thought of the Messiah, because, in that case, the answer would have been different. He asked, rather, what they thought of Him. (Cf. also Mk. 8:31 and Lk. 9:21 with Mt. 16:21.)

## 2. Public Opinion (16:14)

**16:14 And they said, Some say John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.** And these are just the good opinions! There had been other choice expressions: "Beelzebul!" (Mt. 10:25); "Blasphemer!" (Mt. 9:3) "Glutton and drunkard, a friend of sinners!" (11:19) Jesus' townspeople at Nazareth had marked Him down as nothing more than "the carpenter's son," but were left without a satisfactory explanation of His wisdom and mighty works. (Mt. 13:54ff) The speculations now reviewed by the Twelve quite vividly represented the confusion rampant in Galilee in that period. (Cf. Mt. 14:1f = Mk. 6:14ff = Lk. 9:7ff) As usual, public opinion is divided:

1. **John the Baptist:** the fear of Herod. (Mt. 14:1-11, see notes.) Anyone who really knew the life-style of the two men would never have confused the ascetic John and the perfectly normal Jesus. (Mt. 11:18f, see notes.) However, it is right to remember the similarity in the fundamental doctrines taught by both, at least at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. (Cf. Mt. 3:2; 4:17)
2. **Elijah** (Cf. Mal. 4:5; Jn. 1:21) This view, although based upon prophecy, was an ignorant conclusion, because John the Baptist had personally fulfilled all that Malachi had intended. (Cf. Mt. 11:14) Later, even the inner Three needed repeated instruction to clarify the issue. (Mt. 17:10-13)
3. **Jeremiah** (Cf. 2 Macc. 2:1-8; 15:13, 14; 2 Esdr. 2:17f) Whereas these books are not Scripture, yet they report traditions known to the Jews of Jesus' day, who, in turn, would be encouraged by

such statements to think of Jesus as "the Jeremiah." Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 44) expands this:

Although the Jewish legend sees him as having hid the sacred fire, the altar and the Tent of meeting in a cave before the sack of Jerusalem, Jeremiah never assumed an important position in Jewish apocalyptic. (2 Macc. 2:1-8) It was logical, however, for the common people to think that Jeremiah—who had already appeared in a vision to Onias to give him a gold sword (2 Macc. 15:3-16)—should reappear before the Messiah, to reveal the cave and return to the Hebrews the objects necessary for worship.

McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 143) sees Jesus' characteristic denunciation of the sins of the age, combined with the genuine sorrow He felt for His people, as suggestive to some that He were Jeremiah.

4. **One of the old prophets** "has arisen." (Lk. 9:19; cf. the exact words of Herod's courtiers, Lk. 9:15) This indefinite suggestion shows a perplexity about Jesus that may reflect the hopes of 1 Macc. 14:41: ". . . until a faithful (genuine?) prophet should arise (from death?) *héos toû anastênai proféten pistòn*." Or, is it only Luke's intention to clarify for his Gentile readers, to whom resurrection would be a new concept, how it could be thought that an ancient prophet long dead could return to earth? Its very indefiniteness makes this last alternative sound like the usual 14% of the population that is always undecided!

The confusion evident in current speculation about Jesus' true identity has a dual basis:

1. The time and opportunities to know Jesus better differed from person to person according to the amount and kind of exposure to Him they had enjoyed. Jesus' travels throughout Palestine evidently permitted only some teaching and some miracles in any given place. Although what He gave them should have sufficed, nevertheless, people, whose tenaciously held preconceived notions do not permit them to admit the evidential force of His words and works, require more time and situations to permit Jesus' loving self-giving to infiltrate their barriers of prejudice and convince them. This, of course, does not excuse their lack of hunger and thirst for righteousness and truth that would have spurred them to get to the bottom of the problem.
2. Jesus' multifaceted ministry presented varying aspects of His

true identity. Thus, in Jesus the true prophet, men could discern uncommon greatness that convincingly reminded them of the GIANTS of Old Testament history. But, even so, to refuse these evidences of His supernatural identity and His messianic claims as incredible, however well established they might be, is to say: "We do not believe."

While there was something in Jesus that reminded them of something mighty in each of the prophets mentioned, yet there was something in the people themselves that blocked their comprehension from going any further! The opinions listed are high, noble and respectful. Yet, however complimentary any of these theories may have been intended to be, to say anything less about Jesus than confess His rightful position as God's Son, the Messiah of Israel and Lord of the universe, is to "damn Him with faint praise!" Everyone must decide about Him whereinssofar the evidence permits, but to continue demanding proof in the face of conclusive evidence, or to refuse to admit that His credentials substantiate His claims, is to defame Him, and deny His claims to deity. (See "The Deity of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount," Vol. I, 185; Jn. 5:17f; Mt. 9:3-6)

So, when Jesus lay this first question before them, He was pushing them to face the following hard realities:

1. That an abyss separates them from the contrary and conflicting views of their own countrymen. To continue this way will mean the loss of their friendship, support and popularity.
2. That the judgment others pronounce upon Jesus must have no effect upon their decision. Their choice may be painfully and rigidly personal. Public opinion, itself divided, cannot be trusted to give a united, unequivocal answer on this vital issue. Therefore, the well-known differences of interpretation among the scholars do not dispense anyone from making his own personal research to find for himself the truth about Jesus. After all, everyone must finally answer the question: "But who do you say that I am?" The divergent interpretations exonerate no one from committing himself personally.
3. That the most favorable estimations, whereby many ascribed to Jesus prophetic authority, actually rejected Him. It is absolutely unpardonable that anyone should honor Jesus as a prophet, while rejecting the declarations He made regarding Himself. In fact, they did not embrace His claims as the words of a true prophet. Otherwise, they would have admitted the Messianic claims He

made. These statements were treated with the same indifference one would show to those of a common imposter or of someone unbalanced. Thus, the "esteem" for Jesus, that does not lead to submission to His word as the prophetic voice of God, must be considered a rejection.

3. Jesus pushes the Apostles to confess their personal position.

(16:15)

16:15 **And he saith unto them, But who say ye that I am?** Having given them opportunity to consider the alternatives and form a mature judgment, He now directs the critical question to His men. Even without one direct suggestion on this occasion, He is giving His students all the help to do well that He can. Whereas they had undoubtedly compared notes among themselves before this moment, still they had not been pressed to commit themselves so deeply as now. Whereas all earlier confessions were prompted by the spontaneous reaction of some disciple to some evidence of Jesus' greatness, the solemn moment has now arrived for them to answer a question Jesus had never asked before, but toward which all His activities had been directed.

These are men who had enjoyed superior opportunities to know about Jesus, having been His close associates for more than two years now. They had eaten and slept and ministered with Him. Because of their personal attachment to Him as itinerate Teacher, they had sacrificed family, comforts of home and business to be His understudies. What they conclude from these associations with Him is of more than academic importance and interest to the reader. In fact, the earlier half-hidden hints and proofs of Jesus' Messiahship and supernatural character have all been leading up to this chapter. What have these closest observers of the Jesus-phenomenon to say about Him?

Note that Jesus cannot make the best use of people who have no clear idea about His identity. Only those who have defined for themselves their personal experience of Him in a clear, intelligent conviction can proclaim it with boldness and enthusiasm.

## 4. The Apostles' Answer Given By Peter (16:16)

**16:16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.** Critics spend pages arguing which form of the "good confession" is the original wording, and which has been worked over according to the editorial theology of the "author": Matthew's, which is the fullest expression; or Mark's, which is the briefest; or Luke's? The most obvious explanation is that Matthew's account is the most complete, while that of Mark and Luke represent the abbreviated versions. Carver (*Self-interpretation of Jesus*, 107) wryly comments:

Sometimes the obvious explanation is the most intelligent. There is no more vicious principle in Biblical criticism than that, among various accounts of an incident or reports of a speech, the briefest is most likely to be accurate (i.e. perfectly verbatim, HEF). The briefest is always condensed, as indeed the fullest must be.

Others had confessed Jesus before this moment:

1. John the Baptist (Jn. 1:34) and Nathaniel (Jn. 1:49) called Him "Son of God."
2. Andrew, Peter's brother (Jn. 1:40f) exclaimed: "We have found the Messiah!"
3. Samaritans recognized Him as "Christ" and "Savior of the world." (Jn. 4:25, 28f, 41f)
4. All who had called Him "Son of David" thereby admitted His Messiahship. (Mt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:22)
5. Even the Apostles themselves had confessed Jesus before this hour. After Jesus walked on the water and calmed the storm (Mt. 14:33): "Truly, you are God's Son!"
6. After multitudes deserted Jesus to follow Him no more, Peter affirmed, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God." (Jn. 6:68f)

But this confession is far more critical than those preceding it, since it indicates to what extent the Twelve, at this point in their experience, have committed themselves to the foundation-belief of the Kingdom, that message they must proclaim throughout their ministry as His emissaries. Always and everywhere it must be "Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, God's Son and foundation of our faith." McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 411) notes another distinction between

this confession and other, earlier statements which . . .

. . . had been under the pressure of miraculous display and strong emotion. Hence they were rather exclamatory guesses at the truth, and differed from this now made by Peter which was the calm expression of a settled conviction produced by the character and miracles of Jesus.

**The Christ, the Son of the living God.** Peter affirms two distinct truths about Jesus, a fact indicated by the repeated use of the article. **Son of God** does not stand in apposition to **Christ**, as if explaining something about **Christ**. **Christ** refers to His office as the one whom God anointed (Greek = *christōs* = "anointed"), whereas **Son of God** refers to His divine nature. (Cf. Jn. 1:1, 14, 18; 5:17f; 10:36; Lk. 22:67-71) **Christ** declares the belief that He was anointed with the Holy Spirit to the messianic office (Cf. Ac. 10:37, 38), and underlines His humanness, since the Christ must be the human son of David. (See on 1:1-17; Lk. 1:31f) **Son of God** affirms Jesus' spatio-temporal generation by the Father in the womb of the Virgin. (Lk. 1:32, 35; Gal. 4:4) Even if Peter imperfectly comprehended the full significance of his own words, it is unfair to him for some to affirm that he could have understood absolutely nothing of the high concepts he was later inspired to reveal in his apostolic ministry. Nothing positive may be affirmed about how much Jesus had revealed about Himself to this inner group of disciples beyond the well-substantiated self-revelations made before this encounter. (See on 16:17.) That is, did He reveal to them the circumstances surrounding the Virgin Birth that we have learned from Mt. 1 and Lk. 1? Even if these revelations had not been given, Peter could have based his affirmation of Jesus' divine Sonship on the following evidences: Jn. 5:17f, 25; 10:36; Mt. 3:17 and par. Jn. 1:29-34; Mt. 8:29 and par. Account must also be taken of the disciples' own Jewish culture which would have predisposed them to entertain the notion that the Messiah might also be the Son of God.

1. There are the Messianic texts of Scripture that picture the great Servant of Javeh as the "eternal Father, mighty God," "whose origin is from of old, from ancient days," etc. (Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:2) Would devout hearers of the law and prophets, read to them every Sabbath, fail to attempt the harmonization of God's great promises to come personally to bless and heal His remnant, with those promises to send His Servant, the Son of man? (cf. Mal. 3:1f;

Zech. 9:9-16; Dan. 7:13f, etc.)

2. Despite the live possibility that some portions of the book of Enoch were actually post-Christian interpolations, if even some of the texts that speak of a supernatural Messiah be of pre-Christian authorship, hence undoubtedly Jewish thinking, then those few do demonstrate the conclusion that the divine Sonship of the Messiah formed a real part of the contemporary Messianic belief among the Jews.

The problem with citations from Enoch is the problematic dating of its "Son of God" sections. Is 2 Esdras 2:47 of Christian origin? In 2 Esdras 7:28f the voice of God speaks of "my Son the Messiah" (cfr. also 13:32, 37, 52; 14:9), R. H. Charles considers Enoch 105:2 to be of Chasidic or Pharisean authorship: "The Lord bade them to . . . testify: . . . I and My Son will be united with them . . ."

The hypothesis that contemporary Jewish messianism could think of the Christ as divine is perhaps also supported by the virulent reactions of the clergy when Jesus claimed to be "the Son (of God) in a unique sense (Jn. 5:17f; 10:24-39; 19:7), or even "Son of man" (Jn. 12:23-34).

Although Peter did not derive his understanding of Jesus' Messiahship from his own cultural milieu (16:17), still, the intellectual climate in Israel favored consideration of the Messiah as divine. The deliberateness with which this question of His identity is approached on this occasion argues for the conclusion that the high view of Jesus' identity expressed by Peter is his genuine conviction, because it stands out in contrast to the lower estimates made by public opinion. The only strategem remaining to discount Peter's understanding is to deny any historical validity to this entire account, a tactic actually used by some.

**You are the Christ,** said Peter, not "an anointed of God." The definiteness of his expression rightly encourages Gresham (*Christian Standard*, 1965, 108) to affirm:

For a Jew to say, "You are the Christ," means more than the average man can realize. The term "Christ" or "Messiah" means the anointed one, and in its Messianic use, it catches up into its ultimate significance all the typical offices God set in Israel, guaranteed by special anointing. Thus, Aaron and his sons were anointed and designated high priests (Leviticus 8). Prophets were anointed (1 Kings 19:16), signifying the approval of the Lord

concerning their message. Kings were anointed (1 Kings 19:15f; 1 Samuel 16:13) by the prophet of God, indicating whom God would have rule over His covenant people. In light of this background, the Jew believed that the Messiah would fulfill all these relations and offices perfectly, adequately and universally.

The great confession was, and is, a confession of content. If we would stand with Peter and express the conviction of our hearts as he, we must believe that Jesus of Nazareth fulfills the prophetic office of God, bringing that final Word from God in His own person and through His work (See Hebrews 1:1-3; John 1:18; 14:7-10; cf. Dt. 18:15-18; Lk. 24:19; Ac. 3:22; 7:37) If we would give adequate answer to our Lord's query, "Who do you say that I am?" we must affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is our only high priest, who in His own body made adequate sacrifice for iniquity and uncleanness, and who now continues His priestly work at the Father's right hand (See Hebrews 7-10; cf. Psa. 110:4; Ro. 8:34) If we would confess that Jesus is the Christ in the meaningfulness of its first context, we must submit to His kingly power and enthrone Him as Lord of our lives (Matthew 28:18; Philippians 2:6-11; cf. Psa. 2:6; Zech. 9:9; Mt. 21:5; Lk. 1:32f; Eph. 1:20-23; Rev. 11:15; 12:10; 17:14; 19:11-16)

The content of this confession must include these items: Jesus of Nazareth is God's truth-revealing prophet, sinful man's adequate high priest and sacrifice, and the world's ultimate monarch:

While it is true that Peter did not always do honor to his great confession made here (see on 16:22), his inconsistency does not change anything either of the sincerity with which he voiced or of the truth to which he gave assent. Any discussion of Peter's understanding must always weigh into the balance Jesus' satisfaction with Peter's affirmation and His identification of its source. (16:17)

To entitle Jesus as "the Christ of God" (Mk. 8:29; Lk. 9:20) is to admit that His representation of God's intentions for Israel's Messiah is the correct one, regardless of how drastically His humble life of service contradicted human preconceptions. By implication, we recognize that His attitudes and activities must guide and judge ours, since our commitment to Him as God's Anointed means that we bow before both His conceptual revelations as well as those acted out in His life-style as Servant of the Lord. (See on 16:24.)

Peter honors the Father of Jesus as **the living God**; because He stands in direct contrast to dead idols (cf. Jer. 10:6-10; Hos. 1:10;

Isa. 40) The God revealed by Jesus His Son is real, alive and active! (Cf. Jn. 6:57; Ro. 9:26)

### 5. Jesus' Joy and Promises to Peter (16:17-19)

**16:17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven.** The beatitude-formula means to represent the one described as particularly happy or well-off. (Cf. on Mt. 5:3-12) **Blessed art thou:** "You are happy indeed!" or "How favored you are!" **Blessed are you, Simon,** even though your understanding of the content of your grand affirmation is severely limited! **Blessed are you,** even though you can hardly imagine all that it means for me to be the Christ or Son of God, as God intends these terms. By comparison to all that you will later understand about these high concepts, what you have just said is but baby-talk expressing a child's understanding. But **blessed are you,** because your confession is true and sincere, and backed by all the authority of God.

**Blessed art thou** is but the echo of "Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear . . . Many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." (Mt. 13:16f) This is why Jesus' commendation of Peter is not totally unique, since the same blessedness is available to anyone open to receive the information God provides him through the life-character and prophetic credentials of Jesus the Nazarene. The Lord singles out Peter as a remarkably happy man because he has believed the testimony of all the evidences that God had worked through the miracles and prophecies of Jesus, hence was really a solid believer. If faith, then, is the trust of testimony to the reality of the facts about Jesus, then anyone today who believes the same facts on the testimony of the eyewitnesses who accurately report them to us, can share in this blessing by making the same declaration of faith.

**Simon Bar-Jonah:** why refer to him in this way? Is Jesus striking a contrast between what would have been Peter's personal views as a man and what had to be the result of his observing God's revelations given him?

1. Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 60), discussing this address, argues: Simon is called *Barjona*, an epithet which is probably equivalent

to "revolutionary," in the sense of one who is desirous of eliminating the Roman oppressors, a sympathizer with the Zealots and, hence, a Galilean longing for national liberty. Given this his nationalistic tendency, Peter could not have spontaneously imagined that Jesus, to whom such ideals were foreign, could have really been the expected Christ. That had to be the fruit of a particular divine revelation.

In support of his interpretation, he cites the Hebrew root *jnh* in the sense of "violent, oppressor" (Jer. 46:16; 50:16; Zeph. 3:1; Psa. 123:4; Ex. 22:21, etc.), seeing a correspondence between the modern Hebrew "birion" and "Barjona." Accordingly, he would see Peter as a "son of the violent" or a Zealot sympathizer if not actually one of them. Not only would this agree with his impetuous character, but it would throw into greater relief the complete dissimilarity between his human views and the high, spiritual Messianic concept he had just confessed.

2. On the other hand, Blass-Debrunner (*Grammar*, §53 (2)) explains *Ionā* as a hybrid Hellenized name which has been abbreviated from *Ioān(n)es* for the even longer Hebrew form *Iochanan*, and therefore equal to *Ioānnou* of Jn. 1:42; 21:15-17. Arndt-Gingrich agree (386). From this standpoint, Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 644) sees "Simon, son of John" as a

. . . reminder of what he was by nature, simply a human son of a human father. He was a man who of himself could not have contributed anything worthwhile, just one human being among many. This reminder is going to be followed shortly (v. 18) by an affirmation of that which by grace this same Simon Bar-Jonah had become, namely a worthy bearer of the name "Cephas" (Aramaic) or "Peter" (Greek).

**Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee. Flesh and blood =** human in contrast to divine. (See Gal. 1:16; 1 Co. 15:50; Eph. 6:12; cfr. Sirach 14:18; 17:31f) But, is the humanity involved here that of Jesus or of others?

1. Barnes (*Matthew-Mark*, 169) applies the expression to Jesus' own humanity. They had not comprehended His proper dignity by the lordly appearance of His human nature or worldly rank and stature, surrounded with external pomp and power as a man. These were not His insignias of Messiahship, so it was obvious that they had not recognized Him on the basis of His human

splendor. Rather, despite His lowly appearance and lack of resemblance to all that they had expected, they still had glimpsed His glory in His miracles, His matchless life, His teaching in harmony with the Old Testament and the prophecies that were coming true in Him.

2. The grand conclusion reached by Peter and the others who shared it had not been decided by taking samples of public opinion, although, as our text proves, it had not been made in isolation from it. The Twelve expressed what contemporary messianism thought of Jesus the true Messiah (16:13, 14), and, ironically, in the wake of the contemporary messianic understanding, themselves rebuke Jesus for talking in such a way as would overthrow their theories about His Messiahship (16:22f).

How was the glorious truth revealed exclusively **by my Father who is in heaven?** The expression, **flesh and blood has not revealed it**, in antithesis to **my Father**, must not be construed as excluding Jesus' ministry, as if His own humanness (flesh and blood) should be thought to eliminate His ministry from consideration as the source of the revelation. Rather, Jesus argued that all His words and works were derived directly from the Father (Jn. 5:17-36; 8:28; 10:25; 14:10f), and that what He revealed was adequate to lead them to believe. To suppose that His own incarnation in and of itself is inadequate to produce faith without unusual supernatural insight is to misunderstand the purpose of His coming. Had not Jesus toiled for over two years to produce this very conviction in His disciples? Why should His patient struggle with their ignorance and misunderstanding all be forcibly down-graded, forgotten or ignored in the flash of a special miraculous revelation to the mind of Peter? No, the only explaining the great confession is to admit that they were seeing what God in His Old Testament Word and in His Son, the living Word (Jn. 1:1, 14, 18), had been saying to **EVERYONE**. Carver's reconstruction (*Self-interpretation of Jesus*, 108) bears further consideration:

He has been very patient with these men while they were discovering Him. He did not begin by telling them He was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" and asking them to follow Him in that exalted capacity. . . . He waited for His personality (and His supernatural signs, HEF) to compel in them an exalted interpretation. They began following Him as teacher to find that He was "The Teacher." At first He was for them a prophet, to become "The Prophet," and in the end, the Maker of Prophets.

They began following "a friend of sinners" to find themselves heralds of the Redeemer from all sin. Jesus asks only that men will get acquainted with Him and then accept what they find Him to be.

A useful research project at this point would be to study the life of Peter or John as they are brought into contact with Jesus for the first time, with a view to study their individual growth in faith. Notice should be taken of Jesus' claims and deeds recorded up to this time. This method will reveal in precisely what ways God revealed the Messianic dignity of Jesus to Peter through His word and work. We should come to the same conclusions he did and by the same method. This means, further, that Peter's affirmation on Pentecost proves that ANY HEBREW witness of Jesus' ministry could have arrived at his own personal conviction of Jesus' Lordship by recognizing God's power operative in Jesus of Nazareth. (Ac. 2:22) This does not, however, base the final conclusion upon the sole reliability of human reason as distinguished from divine revelation, but rather upon the right use of human intelligence to conclude that a faithful God is actually revealing Himself through Jesus. Peter's own conclusion, then, is neither irrational nor absurd, being correctly arrived at by the proper use of his own intelligence. But it is not based upon human intellect alone. It admits the Lord God's revelations in the Old Testament concerning the nature of the Christ, and then goes on to identify the fulfilled reality in Jesus of Nazareth.

This revelation of the Father to Peter is not an instantaneous, personal inspiration unavailable to everyone else. See notes on 13:16, since the historical context of the great Sermon in Parables (Mt. 13) explains how this glorious truth could be revealed to disciples like Peter, while, at the same time, it lay hidden from so many of Jesus' contemporaries who said so far less about Him than was really true, however high their esteem for Him. So, if this revelation of Jesus' be unavailable to anyone, it is his own fault! (Cf. Mt. 11:25, 26 in context!) Further, as illustrated in 13:17, all the intimate disciples were seeing Jesus for what He really was, and received the same approval as Peter here. Although it is Peter who formulates the great confession, he is quite probably the spokesman of the belief held by the entire group. (Cf. Jn. 6:68f: "We have believed . . .")

Further, when Peter later acted in direct opposition to a correct application of his confession, his misunderstanding was not corrected by an immediate flash of supernatural inspiration, but by Jesus' stern

rebuke and patient teaching. (16:23-28)

**My Father:** notice that, far from correcting anything supposedly erroneous in Peter's answer, the Lord affirms His own deity by making His own that expression of unshared Sonship. (Cf. Jn. 5:17ff)

16:18 **But I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.** Before continuing our interpretation of this section, we must ask . . .

### IS THIS PASSAGE A HOMOGENEOUS PICTURE?

In their effort to interpret problematic language in this text, some commentators see Jesus' language as painting one, unified picture which consists in one homogeneous, extended rhetorical device in which each of the various elements mentioned combine to complete a scene to be explained more or less literally. They see the following elements:

1. Jesus is the builder.
2. He is about to build His Church (assumed by some to be a city-kingdom).
3. The foundation of His Church is a great rock to be identified.
4. Simon Peter is to be the gate-keeper to this Church (city-kingdom?) by using the keys.
5. The keys Peter uses are those which permit entrance into the Kingdom.
6. The gates (symbol of a city's power) of the city-kingdom of death will be unable to withstand the assaults of Christ's Church.

A bit of circumstantial evidence seeming to confirm the above rhetorical construction comes from the topography. Because this conversation occurred near Caesarea Philippi, a city enjoying a strategic location on the solid rock foundation of the foothills of the Lebanon mountain chain, its very configuration would have furnished Jesus with a powerful, visual illustration of His words. Thus, the Apostles would have comprehended instantly that the Church-image He intended was that of a city-kingdom founded upon a solid mountain base.

If this be the proper reconstruction of Jesus' language, then certain internal conclusions follow:

1. If Jesus is the Builder, He Himself cannot be regarded as the foundation rock of the Church.
2. If Peter is bearer of the keys, he would not be thought of as the foundation either.
3. Therefore, the foundation of the Church must be something other than these two persons whose position in the picture is clearly established.
4. All that is left in the picture to serve as the Church's foundation is Peter's confession, or perhaps something else.

Whatever may be claimed for the above-mentioned extended metaphor, all must admit that it is not without weaknesses, significant among which are the following:

1. Jesus nowhere affirms His intention to present a homogeneous picture similar to that constructed by the logic of its interpreters.
2. The Hebrew mentality back of this conversation (recorded in Greek) has importance for our decision about how to interpret the passage, because, if the presumed imagery of the unified picture is nothing but a series of independent Hebraisms, then the supposedly "unified picture" disintegrates. Each single Semitism, in that case, must be interpreted according to its own literary type, but not necessarily linked with the others, as the "unified picture" concept would require. That a genuinely Hebrew mentality lies back of this conversation is evident from the following expressions: "Bar-Jonah" (if thought of as an Aramaic variant of the Greek "son of John"), "flesh and blood," "kingdom of heaven" (instead of "kingdom of God"), "binding and loosing," and the typically Hebrew word-play based on a name (even in Greek!)

The presumption that a conversation in Aramaic stands back of the text of our Greek Matthew cannot be established merely by the presence of Hebraeo-Aramaisms translated into Greek, since no one at this late date can determine objectively who did the translating: Jesus Himself as He spoke, or Matthew as he wrote.

Consider also the Hebraisms involved in the following objections:

3. The rhetorical fiction of the two city-kingdoms takes little or no account of the play on Peter's name in connection with the rock foundation upon which the Church should be built.
4. Also, the Church, in the presumed imagery of this section, is never

- called a city-kingdom in this context. This must be assumed to complete the picture. The expression "gates of Hades" need not suggest "the gates of the kingdom of heaven." Nor need the "keys of the Kingdom" promised to Peter, imply that they are for use in opening the Kingdom's gates, but even if so, that would not depend upon this figure, but upon their own literary connection.
5. Again, no explanation is given of the switch from the image of the construction of a city-kingdom upon a mighty rock foundation to the image of a man binding and loosing certain objects. (16:19) A change of figure in the very verse that speaks of the consignment of the keys of the kingdom of Peter weakens the reconstructed rhetorical device supposedly intended by Jesus.
  6. Are the functions of "bearer of the keys" and "foundation-stone" mutually exclusive? Only if we superimpose an invented rhetorical device upon the text.

Further weaknesses appear in the way the data have been organized into what appeared to be an air-tight metaphorical picture. The error can be exposed by simply furnishing another image that utilizes the same language-data:

1. Christ is the Builder, or Founder, of His Congregation, or Assembly (*ekklesia*).
2. Peter the believer is a basis (= foundation stone) in that living congregation.
3. The gates of death (= the city of the dead) is powerless to imprison that congregation within its walls:
  - a. Both in the sense that Christ would burst those gates, rising from the dead to establish His congregation of believers.
  - b. And in the sense that the Church too would crash death's gates from within and come forth, victorious over death.

In this alternative picture, the Church is seen as having real existence only in Christ who must Himself enter the gates of the city of the dead, the grave. According to this construction, then, we must not think of the Church as a great city-kingdom on the outside of Hades and warring against the latter kingdom. In fact, Jesus said nothing about that in this text. Rather, we must understand the Church as "in Christ" (a thoroughly Pauline concept), having real existence only in relation to Him. This means that the Church was in Hades with Christ during the time of His death, just as really as Christ was within the "gates of Hades." If He intends also a future prophecy

regarding the Church in a time after His resurrection, then, He means that the Church would enjoy all the benefits of victory over death by resurrection.

Because of the above-mentioned weaknesses in the former rhetorical reconstruction, the method followed in this study will be the consideration of the idiomatic expressions used by Jesus, taken individually and not as part of a rhetorical whole, except as each expression by its nature demands.

In the history of the exegesis of this text, positions have been taken that, in some cases, have produced grievous consequences in the Body of Christ. In the case of most questions afflicted with extreme stances, the truth usually lies somewhere near the middle, roughly halfway between the extremes. The exegetical history of our text has seen its interpreters divided into about three major groups: those who see Peter the man as the Rock-foundation of the Church, those who see Peter's confession as the Rock, and those who affirm Christ to be the Rock. Is it not possible that, for good and sufficient reasons, the truth may well lie somewhere near the middle between these extremes? This is no plea for that indifferentism, that middle-of-the-road-ism, that refuses to choose between hard alternatives. In fact, the choice of a mediating position is often one requiring no little courage, because it is then exposed to the fiery objections from the contenders for the extreme positions. This, however, is not mediation for mediation's sake, but because—at least in our present case—the truth appears to lie between the above-mentioned positions. For sake of clarity, these positions will be dealt with in the following order:

1. Peter is not intended:
  - a. God the great Rock of Israel is meant.
  - b. Christ Himself is meant.
  - c. The faith that formed the content of Peter's confession is meant.
2. Peter is intended:
  - a. Peter the man is made earthly Head of the Church.
  - b. Peter the believer, symbol of all who confess this truth, is meant.

### I. PETER IS NOT INTENDED

"You are Peter, a man of rock, worthy of your name, because you have given expression to the revealed truth of my Messiahship and divine Sonship. Your name suggests a symbolic name for what shall

be the Rock upon which I establish my Church."

Those who reject Peter as the intended reference notice the distinction in gender between the words Jesus used. Jesus referred to Peter by his masculine name, *Petros*, but identified the Church's foundation by using a feminine noun, *pétra*, thereby distinguishing the two. Further, *Petros*, it is pointed out, refers to "a stone," in general contrast to *pétra*, "bedrock, a great rock cliff, etc." Thus, whatever is represented by the term *pétra* is certainly not *Petros*! Peter, accordingly, is but a small stone incapable of supporting the Church. The sure foundation must be sought elsewhere.

Because this view is based entirely upon the Greek record of Matthew, its opponents notice that it would be seriously weakened if it be admitted that Jesus were speaking Aramaic at the moment, and that our author rendered in Greek the sense of the Aramaic. The supposition is that the nice distinctions of the Greek are not respected in Aramaic which adopts the same word for Peter (*Cephas*) as for rock (*Cefa*). Proponents of the view then answer that the Holy Spirit guided Matthew's selection among the Greek synonyms, deciding upon that word in Greek which correctly represented the mind of the Lord. Thus, no appeal can be made to a supposed Aramaic original of the text in question, since the final Greek original of Matthew bears the divine stamp of that Apostle's inspiration and consequent authority.

It is further argued by those who reject the man Peter as intended by Jesus' word-play, that had Jesus intended to establish the Church on Peter, He would not have been so ambiguous. Instead, He would have affirmed: "and on you I will build my Church."

#### A. GOD, THE GREAT ROCK OF ISRAEL, IS INTENDED.

1. In favor of this view three points are noted:
  - a. The confession of Peter mentions the name of God. ("the living God")
  - b. Jesus also mentioned the "Father who is in heaven" as the source of Peter's confession.
  - c. In the Hebrew Biblical literature God is pictured as the great mass of rock that protects and blesses Israel. (Dt. 32; 2 Sam. 22:32 = Psa. 18:31)
2. Against this view, it must be noticed that, while God the Father is part of the larger literary and historical context, there are other

possibilities much closer to our text. The expression "upon THIS rock," unless compelling reasons demand otherwise, would be badly applied to words or phrases too far away.

### B. CHRIST HIMSELF IS THE INTENDED ROCK

1. In favor of this view the following evidences are cited:
  - a. Christ is pictured as the Rock or as a Foundation in other texts.  
(1 Co. 3:11; 10:4; Lk. 20:17, 18; Ac. 4:11; 1 Pt. 2:4-8)
  - b. Mention is also made of the difference in gender and meaning between *Péters* and *pétra*, a factor which facilitates a reference to someone other than Peter.
2. Against this view the following objections should be registered:
  - a. This view introduces confusion into the imagery presumed to be essential to Jesus' rhetoric. That is, if Jesus is the Architect of the Church, how can He properly be considered to be the stone foundation also in the same metaphor?
  - b. If, according to many, it be assumed that the Church be pictured in our text as a great city-kingdom founded upon a rock foundation, then none of the above-cited texts are of any use, because they all involve quite different rhetorical images. When Paul laid Jesus Christ as the Church's foundation at Corinth (1 Co. 3:11), another image is involved: that of an artificial foundation for a temple. (1 Co. 3:9-16) Paul "put" (*étheke*) the foundation that now "lay" (*keimenon*) there. Nothing is said about digging down to the rock, because the figure is another. Nor can 1 Co. 10:4 help the theory, since the "Rock that followed (*akolouthôses pétras*) them was the Christ," was a rock at various places in the desert from which Moses drew water, hence no symbol of a fixed, unmovable foundation for the Church. In the other texts He is no longer the foundation stone, as required by this view, but the "corner-stone."
  - c. *Pétra*, used in reference to Christ does not necessarily refer to a massive rock foundation, since Peter calls Jesus "the stone (*lithos*) of stumbling and the rock (*pétra*) of offence." (1 Pt. 2:8) In our rhetoric, do men normally stumble over massive mountains of rock, or, rather, against rocks of more modest proportions?
  - d. If the distinction in meaning between *Péters* and *pétra* be thought important, why not be consistent and notice also the

distinctions between Greek words in the above-cited texts where Jesus is called a "stone" (*lithos*), "foundation" (*themélion*), "rock" (*pétra*), "cornerstone" (*akrogoniáton*)? Do not these different words intend also to indicate distinct meanings? If so, then why unite them with *pétra* against *Pétros*? If not, then why pit *Pétros* against *pétra*?

- e. Even if it is true that the divine basis of the Church cannot be a man as such, but only the Christ (cfr. 1 Co. 3:11), we must ask the question: is Jesus presented in our text as the foundation of the Church *directly*, or only *indirectly* through the confession of Peter, just as is true for all the Apostles in Eph. 2:20?

### C. PETER'S CONFESSION IS THE ROCK

1. In favor of this view, the following points have been noted:
  - a. The difference in the Greek words is noted: *Pétros* = "a stone"; *pétra* = "a solid rock foundation." It is as if Jesus had said, "You are Peter, truly a man of stone, and upon what makes you that, i.e. the truth you have just confessed, I will found my Church. Though a man of rock yourself, you are but a small stone compared to the solid, massive, bed-rock foundation—i.e. my messianic dignity and my divine Sonship—upon which I establish my Church.
  - b. The validity of this view is further based contextually upon the imagery supposed to be in Jesus' mind. Thus, if Jesus is the Builder of the Church-Kingdom and for which Peter is but the keyholder, then the Rock must be something other than these two. Having identified all other parts of this (supposed) picture, one is driven to conclude that the confession of Peter is itself the Rock.
  - c. The appropriateness of the imagery used to represent the ideas communicated would be ruined, were it supposed that such a momentous institution as the Church should be pictured as established upon so human a foundation as the man Peter. Regardless of the preciousness and lofty conception of Peter's conviction, Peter the man is still human. Contrarily, the glorious proposition to which he gave voice stands above all that is human ("flesh and blood did not reveal this"). Rather, this mighty truth is of divine origin ("my Father in heaven").
  - d. Further, the resurrection faith preached by the Apostles centered

around their conviction of the Messiahship and Lordship of Christ, not around the shallow glory and secondary importance of the man Peter. Thus, only the truth confessed is an appropriate, stable basis for the Church.

2. Against this view the following objections should be noticed:
  - a. Jesus adopted the pronoun "THIS" (*taiute*), not "that" (*ekeine*), "upon THIS rock," a demonstrative that points, not to something further back in the context, such as the confession of Peter made a few minutes before, but to something more immediate. In that case it would have been more logical to say, "upon THAT rock." (*epi ekeine tē pétra*)
  - b. The validity of making such wide distinctions in the Greek words *Petros* and *pétra* will be discussed under II. "Peter Is Intended."
  - c. The question of "appropriateness of imagery" may turn out to be subjective taste, if it can be demonstrated that another different view arrives at the same goal of rendering the true meaning of this text by providing equally appropriate alternatives.
  - d. The faith preached by the Apostles after Jesus' resurrection was not merely intellectual assent to the right view of Jesus' Lordship and Messiahship. Rather, they labored to produce that fine balance so well expressed by Paul: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27) This is truth alive in human personality, a larger expression of the confession Peter voiced. So, the cold, naked confession, considered alone, is actually a weaker basis for human transformation than previously imagined, hence, less appropriate as the Church's basis, at least in this sense.

## II. PETER IS INTENDED

Before entering into a consideration of the applications to be made of the data pointing to Peter, let us first examine the data.

1. The contextual data; the near context is tightly focused upon Peter:
  - a. The blessing upon Peter by name for his confession. (v. 17)
  - b. The word-play made upon the name of Peter. (v. 18)
  - c. The particular mission of Peter. (v. 19)

Taken together, these factors recommend that we apply to Peter the intervening material whereinsofar this is possible.

## 2. The mechanical guideposts as signs of meaning:

- a. Jesus begins v. 18 by saying: "And I say to you (*kagò dé soi légo*)" as if happy to confess Peter for what he is, even as Peter had confessed Him according to His true identity. Peter had said, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." Now Jesus says, "You are Peter." Much earlier the Lord had said, "*You are* Simon son of John. *You shall be called Peter.*" (Jn. 1:42) Here, on the other hand, He affirms, "*You are Peter,*" even now what the name implies. So, the double confessions, i.e. that of Peter and this of Christ, leads the reader to notice Peter in some special way.
  - b. Another mechanical detail drawing attention to Peter is the word "THIS ROCK" (*taùte tē pétra*). Should Jesus have meant to refer to some object outside the immediate sentence, He would have said "THAT ROCK" (*ekeine tē pétra*). Unless some reference to Peter is intended, further clarification is needed in the sentence to turn the gaze of the reader away from Peter and toward some other unnamed object.
  - c. The Greek nouns *Pétrós* and *pétra* are not so mutually exclusive as usually defended by apologists. Everyone will agree that *pétrós*, taken as a common noun (not a name), may mean "a small stone" in contrast to *pétra*, "a great rock cliff."
- (1) Nevertheless, in its own linguistic history, *pétrós* has been used as a synonym of imperturbability or hardness (Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 334). Reference is even made in Euripides (*Medea*, 28) to "the rock-cliff of Thorikia" (*ho Thorikios pétrós*) according to Roccia, 1494. Therefore, at a significant point in their spheres of meaning, *pétrós* and *pétra* can have overlapping connotations, i.e. they can both mean "rock-cliff, ledge of rock."

(The same phenomenon occurs in Italian where "sasso" means "a pebble," but "Gran Sasso d'Italia" means "the Great Massif of Italy," a tract of the Appennine range that most looks like high mountains!)

- (2) Further, even *pétra* can sometimes indicate a rock of modest proportions. Both Paul (Ro. 9:33) and Peter (1 Pt. 2:8) cite the parallel use of *lithos* and *pétra*, appearing in Isa. 8:14. (See note at I, B; 2, c above)

See Salvoni's citations (*Da Pietro al papato*, 63, note 9) of Homer, *Odyssey*, 9,243; Hesiod, *Theogonia*, 675; *Wisdom of Solomon*, 17:19 LXX=17:17. The exchange

of these nouns is affirmed in the second century after Christ by the anatomist Claudius Galeno (XII, 194)

In English the same phenomenon occurs in the word "rock": just how big is a "rock"? It can refer to anything from "a rock to throw at rabbits," to the "Rock of Gibraltar." Only the context can determine the size of the rock in question.

So, if the Greeks used *pétros* and *pétra* with some of the same liberty, and sometimes interchangeably, then our interpretation of these words in our text must be determined from the context, and not so much from a mechanical use of wooden definitions.

- d. Regardless of the external measurements of the object to which each word *pétros* and *pétra* is supposed to refer, they are, after all, composed of the same material, a fact that cannot help but cause the mind to connect the two in some intimate way.
- e. Jesus had surnamed Simon "Cephas-Peter" at their first encounter. (Jn. 1:42) What motivated the Lord to do that? If He meant for this characterizing label to indicate some essential quality of the man, to what side of Peter's make-up and especially to what phase of his future work in the Church would He be referring by calling him a "little rock, pebble or stone"? And did He not, rather, by prophetic insight, name him *Cephas-Pétros* in view of his latent capacity for faith and the rock-like spiritual power he would personally contribute to the stability of the Church?

In fact, we are so accustomed to the Apostle's new name that we forget that, originally, it needed to be translated for the common readers of John's Gospel (Jn. 1:42). To sense the original flavor of that scene, we should render it in English: "You shall be called Cephas (which means Rock)." However, prior to Jesus' naming Simon *Céphas-Pétros*, how common was this expression as a normal masculine name? In fact, if *Cephas-Pétros* were NOT a common name in our literature and among the Jewish-Greek speakers of Palestine, then attention would be immediately called to the root significance of that common noun made into a proper name. In this case, only with time would it become commonly known as a proper name because of the fame of the Apostle and used in all the normal situations and combinations common to proper names, e.g. "Simon Peter."

However, Edersheim (*Life*, II, 82) cites, as proof that the name *Péters* is Jewish, the father of a certain rabbi (José bar Petros), without, however, identifying the date of his source, Pesiqta, ed. Buber, p. 158a, line 8 from bottom. Unless this source is undoubtedly pre-Christian, then the name could have entered Jewish culture from Christian sources rather than vice versa.

*Péters*, as a name, can scarcely be pre-Christian. (Arndt-Gingrich, 660) But the prior question, of course, is whether CEPHAS were known as a proper masculine name before the first century, since *Péters*, as it first appears in the NT at Jn. 1:42, only furnishes the Greek translation for Jesus' Aramaic choice. *Cephas*, etymologically linked with the masculine noun *ceph* (= "rock") which is used only twice (Job 30:6 and Jer. 4:29), does not appear in the OT as a name, but is clearly based upon it. (Gesenius, 410 and Scerbo, 139, both link it with NT *Cephas*.) Further, whereas it was formerly thought that *Cepha* were a feminine noun, Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 62, note 4) indicates that now, however, the critics, on the basis of the Palestinian Targums and Samaritan Targum, recognize it as a masculine noun and therefore applicable to a man. Now, whether or not our Greek text reflects an Aramaic conversation, it nevertheless mirrors the Aramaic word-play that Jesus Himself deliberately set up by naming Peter *Cephas*. Whether or not the conversation took place in Greek or Aramaic makes absolutely no difference, because the final result is the same:

- (1) If Jesus said only two Aramaic words in His Greek sentence (i.e. "You are *Cephas* and upon this *cepha* I will build my Church."), the very change from second person ("You are") to third person ("upon this") points to two concepts, not just one. The pun shows the intimate link, while the change of person shows the distinction.
- (2) If Jesus spoke the whole sentence in Greek exactly as recorded by Matthew, then, He renders Simon's name in Greek *Péters*, while using the feminine *pétria* to underline the characteristic in Peter upon which He would establish His congregation. Thus, in Greek we have not only the change of persons (from second to third), but also the change of gender to indicate the distinction. Nevertheless, the etymological affinity of the two words, brought out in the word-play,

establishes the intimate link between their concepts.

Foster (*Middle Period*, 235) distinguishes *Pétros* from *pétira* as also *Cephas* from *cepha*. On the latter pair he argues that coining a man's name from a feminine word *cepha* automatically makes it a different word with a different signification. But this emphasis fails to recognize that the very act of coining a proper name from a common noun instantly calls attention to the common noun, regardless of which language is used.

This is, of course, increasingly less true the farther the new name travels from its original source. Many common names have meanings that originally characterized the person so named. For example, *Harold* is an old Norse word meaning "Powerful Warrior, army leader." *Edward* is Anglosaxon for a trusted steward, a guardian of property. *Fowler* is English for a hunter of wild fowl. So far are we from the origins! The actual names of the current labor union leaders in Italy, rendered in English, are Mr. Crooked, Mr. Badly-made and Mr. Little (Sigg. Storti, Malfatti e Piccoli)!

So, "Rock" or "Rocky" calls attention to "rock," not vice versa. The net result of these considerations is that, when Jesus made His famous pun, His hearers' mind easily would run from *Pétros* to *pétira* and back in a close, natural identification in terms. But, if something about Peter is the object of Jesus' thought, what conclusions may be drawn therefrom?

#### A. PETER THE MAN IS MADE EARTHLY HEAD OF THE CHURCH, VICAR OF CHRIST.

1. In favor of this view, the following points are argued:

- Granted that all NT doctrine exalts the primacy of Christ in heaven and on earth, this primacy properly requires human expression on earth during the physical absence of Christ. This principle of representation of God by human officials is illustrated in OT religion, the typical preparation for the new, in its high priest, its prophets and its kings. Because Jesus is their typical fulfilment, but physically absent, and because the Holy Spirit is present only invisibly, human need for divine representation is met by Christ's human delegate, or vicar, who acts on His behalf. But any human delegate must have

proper credentials to identify him as such. Mt. 16:18f constitutes the necessary proof of the transmission of this authority and establishes Peter as Christ's Vicar. In this position, Peter and his successors upon whom episcopal hands have been laid, become the lineal self-projection of Christ Himself in the world. Because of certain historical circumstances, the bishop of Rome is the lineal successor to the Chair of Peter.

- b. The leading position of Peter in the apostolic group and in the life of the early Church is striking confirmation of the authority with which he is invested in this text.
- 2. Beyond what has already been written on "The Supremacy of Peter" (Vol. II, 274ff), the following objections to this expression of the Roman Catholic position are raised:
  - a. Jesus did not say, "You are Peter and upon you I will build my Church," but rather "upon this rock," a fact that, while admittedly linking Peter and the *pétra*, points away from Peter the man to some characteristic that he and the Church's foundation share in common.
  - b. John 20:21 furnishes the following precious elements of proof to the contrary:
    - (1) Jesus' self-projection in the world is not to be accomplished by a single vicar, but by a plurality of disciples: "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you (plural: *humās*)."  
Many NT texts explain that the mission of the total Church is but the extension of Jesus' activity in the world. (Cf. Jn. 12:26; 14:12-20; Mt. 28:20; Ro. 12:4-8; 1 Co. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:23; 4:4, 12-16; 5:30; Col. 1:27, 28; 1 Jn. 4:17)
    - (2) Jesus' commission was given on this occasion to both apostolic and non-apostolic disciples present. Peter was not alone, as other Apostles were present. (Jn. 20:19-21) If this is the same appearance recorded in Lk. 24:13 (cf. Jn. 20:19), two of the non-apostolic disciples are mentioned: Cleopas and his friend. (Lk. 24:18) It was while these latter were retelling Jesus' Emmaus-Road appearance to them that He Himself appeared to the Eleven. (Lk. 24:36)
    - (3) The gift of the Holy Spirit is breathed indiscriminately upon them, not just upon Peter. (Jn. 20:22)
    - (4) The solemn promise is made that men's sins would be forgiven or retained through THESE disciples. (Jn. 20:23)
  - c. Jesus established no hierarchy on earth and deliberately blocked any possibility of its later development by men claiming divine

- approval. (Mt. 20:25-28; cf. Lk. 22:24-30; Mt. 23:8-12) The very character of Christian liberty—i.e. the freedom to act responsibly without surrendering one's right to decide by turning it over to the despotism of hierarchical legalism or to a "Teaching Authority" (Magisterium)—eliminates the need for a continuous judicial or legislative hierarchy. (See Special Study after Mt. 15:20: "How to Avoid Being a Pharisee"; cfr. also Mt. 23:8-12 where Jesus outlawed glorification of any teaching authority.)
- d. None of the other Apostles interpreted any part of this verse as establishing Peter over them in any hierarchical sense. Their debates about their own relative importance prove that this point had not been settled by Jesus in this text and situation. (Cf. Mt. 18:1ff) The request of James and John for places of honor,—a request which, intentionally or involuntarily, would cut Peter out,—may also indicate that they did not interpret His words as placing Peter on such a throne as that of the "Holy See." (Mt. 20:20-28) The New Jerusalem has only twelve apostolic foundations, none of which is described as more important than the others. (Rev. 21:14, 19ff) There were fully 12 judgment thrones, not just one for Peter. (Mt. 19:28)
  - e. Peter himself, to whom any personal dictatorship was foreign, saw his position as that of a "fellow elder" charged with "not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." (1 Pt. 5:1-5) The Apostle, especially charged with the responsibility to "Feed my lambs," pictures His Lord as "the Shepherd and Guardian (Bishop) of your souls" (1 Pt. 2:25) and "the chief Shepherd." (1 Pt. 5:4)
  - f. Whatever may be affirmed for Peter in this text (16:18), in no sense is he either the real Founder ("I will build") nor the Owner ("my Church"). These fundamental roles are filled only by Christ Himself. (Eph. 1:22; 4:11-15; 5:23ff)
  - g. Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 80) points out that . . .

. . . the context refers to a particular point in the history of the Church, i.e. its establishment: "I will build my Church." It is therefore in that precise moment that Peter's activity must take place . . . a fact which excludes both the function of Head and the continuance of such a function for the entire history of the Church.

- h. Again, Salvoni (*ibid.*, 123-125, 146-150, 153) shows that the early Church did not recognize in this passage a hierarchical

superiority of office for Peter, because the church at Jerusalem was more prone, after Peter's departure from Jerusalem (cfr. Ac. 12:17; Gal. 2:11; 1 Pt. 5:13), to follow the leadership of James the Lord's brother. How could the Judaizing element of the Jerusalem Church justify their glorification of James, if everyone knew that Peter had been appointed Vicar by Christ? Also, those in the post-apostolic Church who tended to glorify John among the Apostles do not see Peter as Head of the universal Church or of the Apostolic college. If Peter's episcopal primacy was clear from the beginning, how is this phenomenon to be explained?

- i. The major misunderstanding represented by the papal view is its uncanny lack of fundamental sensitivity to the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom. What are "authorized representatives and vicars" worth, if they ignore the nature of Jesus' kingdom and the type of influence He desires to be expressed in the world, i.e., spiritual transformation by moral methods, as opposed to materialistic manifestations, mechanical rule or hierarchical authority? Of what use are living authorities, when men will obey or reject the authoritative voice of the Apostles and Prophets now dead, and when men may be judged on the basis of their response to these, just as well as by their response to living authorities?
- j. The attitude of Paul toward Peter is especially revealing:
  - (1) He stoutly denied that his apostleship depended upon any man, especially upon those who preceded him chronologically in the apostleship at Jerusalem. (Gal. 1:11-17)
  - (2) He rejected the popular estimate of the so-called "pillars," since God shows no such partiality, and affirmed that he received nothing essential from them. (Gal. 2:6-10) Note that Paul mentions the Three of Jerusalem as "*reputed* to be pillars," but does not affirm that they *are* pillars. Next he sets them in this order: James before Peter, then John. How could Paul have talked like this, had Peter really been proclaimed head by Christ and His Vicar?
  - (3) He shared a world mission at least as great as that of Peter (if not actually greater numerically!), the only real difference being that Peter's mission was to one nation (the Jews), whereas Paul was entrusted with that to all nations (the Gentiles). (Gal. 2:7-10)
  - (4) Paul had no fear to oppose Peter resolutely when he saw

- him move away from the Gospel truth. (Gal. 2:11)
- (5) When there arose at Corinth a division honoring Peter, Paul did not for once admit that it was essential to belong to Peter in order to belong to Christ, as if Peter should have been recognized as Christ's vicar. Rather, he thundered that one must belong only to Christ. (1 Co. 1:12ff) Later, Paul affirmed that the Apostles, Peter included, are but simple servants of the Christians. (1 Co. 3:4, 5, 21-23)
- k. The entire New Testament doctrine that sees Christ as now enjoying the primacy in heaven *and on earth* militates against any concept of Peter or anyone as the substitute of Christ. (Cfr. Ephesians, Colossians, and the "once-for-all quality" of Christ's sacrifice and the permanence of His high-priesthood in Hebrews.) The Roman Catholic position fails to understand that God has exalted Christ as Head of the Church, that "in **EVERYTHING** He might be pre-eminent." (Col. 1:18)

#### B. PETER IS PICTURED AS TYPICAL OF ALL WHO CONFESS THIS TRUTH.

It is as if Jesus had said, "In you, Peter, I have just hit solid rock, just the kind of rock—*this divine truth alive in human personality*,—upon which I will found my congregation of the new Israel." Thus, He makes Peter typical of all in whom this divine truth is found, and out of whom He could construct His Kingdom.

1. Beyond the arguments listed above under II. PETER IS INTENDED, consider the following arguments in favor of this interpretation of the symbolism inherent in the words *Petros* and *pétra*:
- a. Only this view explains adequately the word-play made upon the name of Peter.
    - (1) Only this view explains why Jesus did not say, "You are Peter, and upon you I will build my Church." The Church is not to be constructed upon Peter the man as its only foundation. Rather, Jesus affirmed: "You are Rock and upon this rock I will build . . ." i.e. upon that quality in you, as the first confessor, which makes a good base for the Church: truth alive in the human personality of Peter who recognized Jesus for what God knew Him to be.
    - (2) The rock upon which the Church is built, then, is not just

bare truth nor mere humans, but upon that fine combination of the two which we call Christians. Peter, by his bold confession of the conviction of his heart, proved himself to be the first disciple, the first Christian, deliberately tested and found solidly in harmony with all that God was revealing to men through Jesus.

(3) Only this view adequately explains the use of the masculine and feminine nouns, *Petros* and *pétra*. If it be true that *pétra* refers to the larger mass of rock and *pétros* to the smaller, the union of these two ideas in the same sentence draws attention to the fact that the one rock (*Petros* = Peter) standing before Jesus, is a splendid specimen of the sort of rock (*pétra*) upon which He could finally begin building His Church. The *Petros* comes from the *pétra*! They are of the same material, a fact that draws attention to what they have in common. Jesus did not say, "You are Peter, BUT upon this rock," but "You are Peter AND upon this rock," a fact that unites and coordinates the ideas. Peter is but a symbol of that upon which the Church is built: *divine truth alive and incarnated in human personality*.

- b. The rhetorical error of those who do not see Peter as the symbol of the rock, is their unproven assumption that Jesus intended to indicate a rock mountain, when it is conceivable that He really intended a rock for construction. After all, how big is a rock (*pétra*)? (See Greek citations on *pétra*, *pétros* under II) Only the superimposition of the subjective picture (illustrated earlier) sees the Church as a City-Kingdom situated on a mountain, whereas Jesus' mental picture might be that of a temple built upon a series of stones constituting a foundation which itself is laid upon solid rock. But since Jesus expressed no mental image other than that of a congregation (*ekklesia*) constructed upon a definite basis (*epi taûte tê pétra*), perhaps we would do well to dispense entirely with mental images projected back into Jesus' mind!
- c. In order properly to interpret the rock upon which the Church is to be built, we must ask a question usually assumed already to have been answered: what does it mean to "build upon"? (*oikodomeso epi . . .*) If it means "to establish something upon something else as its foundation or basis," then we must realize that there are as many bases for a concept as grand as the Church as there are standpoints from which it may be viewed.

- (1) The Church has a *theological* basis: justification by faith in the all-sufficient sacrifice of the divine-human Christ.
- (2) The Church has also a *functional* basis: the conversion of individuals by submission to Christ, and their empowering by gifts of the Holy Spirit (both ordinary and special) whereby the whole body effectively builds itself up toward maturity and does Christ's work in the world.
- (3) The Church has a *historical* basis: the mighty acts of God realized in time and space in the person of Jesus and the Apostles, as well as in the preparation made by the prophets and the Law.
- (4) The Church has a *spiritual* foundation also: its goals and methods, as well as its incentives, take their form from their Designer, God, Who is spirit, not carnal nor material.
- (5) The Church has an *economic* basis upon which it operates: its possessions are freely shared because viewed as God's property to be responsibly administered by individual stewards.
- (6) The Church has a *personal* basis: rather than function as a power block to achieve its goals, it begins with the creation of new men and women who, because of the truth incarnate in them and because of what this makes them become and do, are capable of being the body of Christ in the world.
- (7) The Church has a *social* basis: not limited to a vertical, individual relationship to God, the Church not only draws her members from the world, but converts them and returns them to function in the world to leaven society.

NOW, UPON WHICH OF THESE (or other) BASES DID JESUS BUILD HIS CHURCH? The total New Testament answer is, of course, ALL OF THEM. But to which did He refer *in our text*? Too long we have presumed that He meant to indicate only the theological or Christological foundation, when He may well have meant the PERSONAL basis or foundation. It is the conviction of this writer that the latter is the case.

- d. Should it shock anyone that God or Christ should found His Church upon men like Peter, let the following observations be made:
- (1) Other passages clearly reveal that it is NOT UPON MEN ALONE that Christ founds His Church.
    - (a) Everything depends upon the fulfilment of the plan of God.

- (b) Without *Christ*, nothing would be possible, because He carried out God's part on earth.
- (c) Further, it is precisely by means of the proclamation of the *truth* of the messianic dignity and divine Sonship of Jesus, that the Church was created, is edified and brought to maturity.
- (d) However, without the spontaneous participation of **MEN**, there could be no Church, because the Church (*ekklesia*) is, by definition, an assembly constituted of **MEN**, i.e. of believers in whom the confession of Peter is a living conviction.
- (2) It does not please God to see truth reduced to a fleshless abstraction, nor men living without truth. God's ideal is to incarnate truth in the heart of a man, so that by means of this perfect incarnation, God's intentions for creating man might be realized.
  - (a) When God set His plan in motion to redeem the human race, He incarnated His truth in a Man, Jesus Christ.
  - (b) Similarly, when Jesus Christ set in motion His plan to establish His Church, He sought some men in whom His truth had become a living reality. And He found it first in the person of Simon Peter. (And many others too: John 17)
- e. From this standpoint, the man Peter is no longer of any help to those who would establish an ecclesiastical hierarchy upon him. In fact, that which renders *Petros* like *pétra* is the same thing that makes all other believers into "living stones." (1 Pt. 2:4, 5) For *pétra* Edersheim (*Life*, II, 83) coins the useful English paraphrase: "that which was the Petrine in Peter." As a result, the only primacy ("firstness") left for Peter, therefore, is the chronological primacy expressed in the honor to make the first proclamation of the faith that he, as the first, had confessed. As a result, what was Petrine in Peter earned him the joy to be the first stone in the chronological order to be laid in place. Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 65) has it:

To the chronologically first confessor Jesus entrusts an important part in the building of the Church, in the sense that He leaves to him the announcement of the fundamental decisions regarding entrance into the Church, thus rendering the Apostle a sort of permanent base, in as much as all

believers who want to enter the family of God will have to own the profession of faith made by Peter and obey the norms that he will sanction once for all time: baptism without circumcision. . . . Peter's function is an activity or condition connected with the establishing of the Church, a fact which would happen only once in the history of the world. Once the Church had been founded, it would rest upon Peter only in the sense that Simon Barjona, by means of the inspired passage in Matthew's Gospel, continues to proclaim that his confession of faith is indispensable to enter into the Church. The fleshly human Simon will die; but the confessing Simon is eternally alive in the sense that the Holy Spirit wanted his confession of faith to be part of the eternal gospel message. To hear the name of Peter is equivalent to hearing once more the voice of Simon who confesses Jesus' messiahship and divine Sonship, an act that must be imitated by anyone who intends to enter into the great family of God, which is the Church.

For this reason, none of the arguments against Peter's assumption of earthly headship of the Church can be thought valid against his being considered symbolic of all genuine Christians. In fact, this latter view sees Peter as equal to those of whom he is but the symbol here. The man Peter is unimportant, because the assembly of Christ cannot be founded on the basis of a single individual alone. But *it is based upon him and all like him* insofar as this divine truth confessed make them what they are: the living stone out of which the new spiritual house is to be built. (1 Pt. 2:4) Should it surprise some that the Church should be founded upon men in whom the implications of this great confession are fully and freely displayed, then Jesus' words could be paraphrased in another way: "The basis of the Church I found, Peter, will be your type of people, i.e. believers who confess what you just said."

- f. This interpretation has the advantage of uniting all the best elements of the other interpretations:
- (1) Since God is the Rock of Israel, then Peter, by his acceptance of God's revelations, becomes intellectually one with God by sharing with Him, despite his own humanity, that truth which he now confessed.
  - (2) If Christ is the Rock-foundation of the Temple of God, then

Peter by his admission of Jesus' true identity and mission, becomes, by that act, the same kind of material out of which that Temple is to be built—from the laying of its foundation to the glorious completion of every part. (1 Co. 3:11; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pt. 2:4-8)

- (3) If the truth of Peter's confession is the Rock-foundation, then Peter, by virtue of his conviction, identifies himself with that truth, which, in the final analysis, Christ Jesus had taught him. Peter's union with the truth, or the truth in Peter, had made him the Rock he was. Because he had built upon the rock (cf. Mt. 7:24f), his construction partook of the same solid, durable character as the rock of Christ's word and work he had now confessed. *He had become the truth he believed.*
- g. Whether this is the only proper interpretation of the phrase in question or not, it is none the less true that Jesus Christ has no Church at all, except that group of believers in all centuries in whom this confession Peter made is real. This view sees no one as truly part of Christ's Church who is not thoroughly what Peter was that day, when, despite adverse public opinion about the Christ, he staunchly stood firm for his bold, good confession.
- h. While it is certain that the Church began on Pentecost, the Church nevertheless became a live possibility only when a human being recognized Jesus' real identity and committed himself to it personally and publicly. This is why Peter is the first foundation stone. Jesus could begin to build His Church or assembly (*ekklesia*) once one human being—in this case, Peter—had correctly analyzed and accepted His true identity. However immature and failing Peter's faith may have been, it was a definite beginning point from which Jesus could begin. You cannot build a pack of wolves until you have at least a pair of wolves, nor can you build a church ("assembly") until you have some believers to assemble either. But one is a beginning, the foundation of what follows. Carver (*Self-interpretation of Jesus*, 109f) says it well:

There is buoyant rapture in His reply that we can appreciate only if we think of this as marking the realization in Peter of what He has all these years been seeking to develop in men. What He missed so sadly in the soliloquy

(Mt. 11:20-30, i.e. "No one knows the Son except the Father" HEF) He finds now in this man. Here, at last, is one man in whose experience He has become the Christ, the Son of God. . . . What He has achieved in Simon, He can accomplish in any other man, in all men. . . . Jesus has come to remake humanity, in the individual. Now He has an example. He has succeeded. . . . God's revelation which has become Simon's conviction is His opportunity for starting afresh in His program. He has some material now that He can use . . .

- i. Collateral support for this interpretation comes from Jesus' own personal teaching style. He habitually began from a concrete situation to illustrate an abstract truth. (Cf. Lk. 13:1-5; Mt. 18:1-4) To exalt the truth of His teaching, He presented Himself as "the Way, the Truth and the Life." (Jn. 14:6) When He needed to reveal difficult truth, His imagination produced suggestive parables based upon concrete objects or events. (Mt. 13:1-53) The urgent need to repent in the light of limited opportunity and immanent doom is pictured by a sterile fig tree granted one more year of care. (Lk. 13:6-9) Similarly, it would be natural for Jesus, desiring to teach the necessity of confessing the faith by anyone who would enter God's Kingdom, to speak of its first confessor, Simon "Rock," as symbolic of the rock foundation of the Church.
- j. Within the larger cultural context of Jesus' contemporaries, His symbolism used here was not a novelty incomprehensible to His hearers. Isaiah (51:1f) had exalted Abraham and Sarah as "the rock from which you were hewn, the quarry from which you were digged." The prophet's argument is this: in the same sense in which a "rock" apparently sterile, can be rendered fertile by God's blessing, so Abraham and Sarah, ancestors of the people of Israel, are symbols of what God can do. So, it was not unheard of in Hebrew literature to refer even to men as "the rock," in harmony with the immediate intention of the Biblical writer himself. (We must not create false parallelisms here, however, between Abraham "the rock" and Simon "the Rock," which would miss the point of both Isaiah's and Jesus' words. All that is affirmed here is the existence, in Hebrew literature, of similar—although not identical—references to men as rock and symbolic of some truth to be taught.)

## 2. Weaknesses of the view taken here:

- a. If Peter is really symbol of every Christian, then the Church (in the sense of "the congregation of the Christians") is both the foundation and what is founded thereupon. We have, thus, a confusion in figures.

*Answer:* If the word "Church" be taken, not in its connotative sense ("The Christians taken together as a body"), but in its denotative sense ("assembly, convocation, congregation"), the problem disappears. Thus, according to this view, Jesus is saying, "Upon such Christians as you, Peter, I will base my assembly."

- b. Does not this view, which sees Peter as merely the first stone (*Péters*) of the same material as the rock construction (*pétرا*) for which there would be many "living stones" (*lithoi zôntes*), commit the same error rejected in the view that sees Christ as the *pétرا*? In fact, use is made here of texts (e.g. 1 Pt. 2:5) which mix distinct Greek words: *pétرا*, *lithoi*. If such use were wrong in the one hypothesis, is it not also in the other? *Answer:* No, in rejecting the Christ = *pétra* view, we rejected only variant Greek words as they were by that view applied to Christ to prove Him to be the foundation stone, because its proponents laid great stress on the *péters-pétرا* distinction, without, at the same time, recognizing similar distinctions in words thought to sustain their hypothesis.

What is to be gained if this latter hypothesis be accepted?

1. If Peter, in his capacity as a confessing believer, really represents the "rock," then we are better able to grasp the ideal Jesus sets before us: *divine truth must be incarnated in human personality*.
- a. In that glorious moment Peter had shown himself to be all that Christ had come to earth to create: a believer, a man who knew to whom he must go for leadership back to God and who sincerely trusted that Guide. Although he was but one Rock (*Péters*), he was of the right material (*pétرا*) to serve as a proper basis for the great congregation (*ekklesia*) to be established.
- b. Even though Peter did not always live consistently with his confession, however, because the truth was truly in him and he in the truth, he was able to become that useful servant of the Lord that we witness in the New Testament.
- c. The heart-searching question for the reader, then, is: "Are we

too 'Rock,' that is, persons in whom the truth God revealed in Jesus is truly incarnate? Or does it remain a dead letter on our lips?"

2. If Peter here (Mt. 16:18) and the other Apostles and Prophets elsewhere (Eph. 2:20f) can serve as foundation for the Church of living God, it should cease to shock anyone that God depends upon men for the carrying out of His plan for the foundation, growth and progress of His Church, His Kingdom in the world. (Cf. Psa. 8:2! Mt. 21:14-17; 11:25f; 1 Co. 1:18-31; 2 Co. 12:7-10)
  - a. What a glorious truth: the great God of heaven, absolutely independent of everything and everyone, sought a basis in human beings to accomplish His purpose to conquer evil and bless humanity!
  - b. And, although the Church is composed of men who are new creatures, redeemed, full of the Spirit, they are still **MEN IN WHOM THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS CHRIST IS A LIVING REALITY!**

**I will build my church.** What is meant by *church* in this very first mention in the Gospels, will be amplified in the Epistles. Nevertheless, several characteristics of this new creation lie on the surface:

1. Its futurity: **I will build.** The new community of believers in Jesus Christ was yet to be inaugurated. Although Jesus had already set in motion a grass-roots movement in His popular ministry, He was not beguiled by His own popularity. He knew that the crisis of the cross and the demands of discipleship would thin out the well-wishers and the hangers-on. The Church must be born at the cross: without that sacrifice there could be no forgiveness, no Gospel and no Church, so, until Jesus had conquered sin and death, He could not build His Church. Whereas the same terms of salvation apply to men of any continent or time-period, i.e. faith in and obedience to whatever God requires of each, nevertheless, the fruition of God's plans revealed in the new Israel through the proclamation of redemption in Christ Jesus was yet future.

Consequently, rather than search the Old Testament for the source of the Church's life, as this is to be expressed in what she confesses and by her formal structure, we must look to the (then yet future) birth of Jesus' Church on Pentecost (Ac. 2) and the expressions of its life and practice that follow that date.

2. Its ownership: **My Church.** This fact is notoriously forgotten in congregational squabbles and in many theological circles, where both the doctrine and practice that the Lord desires goes unexpressed and is bypassed in favor of decisions based upon "church

traditions; convenience; local acceptability, unacknowledged power structures, fears and perhaps also unhistorical exegesis of Scripture." (Scott Bartchy)

While His personal ownership of the Church-Kingdom would not necessarily exclude national Israel, the fact that Jesus sees that a distinctive congregation is essential, i.e. separate from, and even opposed to, the nominal descendants of Abraham, suggests that these latter will have rejected the God-given Messiah and His Kingdom. Its futurity and its distinctive ownership combine to affirm that the concept Jesus has in mind did not then exist in the form of national Israel, and that He is dissatisfied with that nation as such. For the thinking disciple who follows this idea to its logical conclusion, Jesus must mean that, if any in national Israel are to be part of His movement, they must do so upon His terms which, incidentally, had already begun to stir up the determined opposition of almost every religio-political power block in Judaism! Rather than rejuvenate the elements already available in standard Judaism, He intends to form a new people of God destined to take the place of those who rejected Him.

3. Its sense of community: **Church.** It is to be an *ekklesia*: an assembly, reunion or gathering, summoned together, away from the public at large, for the purposes of Christ.

Since Church (*ekklesia*) means "assembly or congregation" we may ask: does Jesus have in mind "the congregation of the Lord," as this expression connotes the "whole nation of Israel, especially when gathered together for religious purposes"? (Cf. the LXX version of Dt. 31:30; Jdg. 20:2; 1 Sam. 17:47; 1 Kg. 8:14; Dt. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; Acts 7:38) If so, He means *ekklesia* in the sense of "the New Israel of God." (cf. Gal. 6:16)

Such a convocation, by virtue of its purpose and character, intentionally condemns all divisive attitudes, however they are expressed: as full-grown schisms or by individual sulking.

For further notes on the relationship of the Church to the Kingdom of God, see the Special Study after Mt. 13:53: "The Kingdom of God." There it is argued that the Kingdom is the effective reign of God in all of its expressions. The Church, therefore, is to be distinguished only as that congregation of Christian believers who have willingly submitted to the King's good government. The Church, as a concrete movement, expresses the intention of God's

Kingdom, and is in the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is active in and through the Church. Nevertheless, the Church is not the only expression of God's Kingdom by which the universe is governed, even if, for Jesus' purpose in our text, it is the most significant, tangible manifestation of God's rule among men. This explains why Jesus can promise Peter "the keys of the kingdom" immediately following this announced determination to build His "Church," since Jesus knows that His Church, rightly understood, submits to God's Kingdom. The obedience to the terms of salvation preached by Peter instantly submits the believer to the rule of God (Kingdom) and makes him an integral part of the congregation (*ekklesia*), or Church of Christ.

**I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.** (. . . *kai pùlai hàdou ou katischùsousin autès*) To what does "it" refer? It (*autès*) is feminine, so refers directly to "church" (*ekklesia*), also feminine.

Hades is the realm of the dead, or death itself. In the Old Testament, as also in intertestamental Jewish literature, the expression **gates of Hades** is a common figure for the dwelling of the dead. (Cf. Isa. 38:10; Psa. 9:13 = LXX 9:14; 107:18 = LXX 106:18; Job 38:17; cf. Wisdom 16:13; 3 Macc. 5:51. See also Psa. 49:14f = LXX 48:15f; Hos. 13:14; Psa. 16:10 = LXX 15:10) The origin of the figure and its connotative flavor is explained variously.

The gates of oriental cities were the place where the judges held their deliberations, in which justice was done, and from which, naturally, the city's warriors poured to carry out the counsels of the city's elders. Sometimes plots were organized and conspiracies planned there. It was at the gate of Samaria that Ahab king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah decided their ill-fated raid upon Ramoth Gilead. (1 Kg. 22:10-12) The city gate also served as city court to resolve local questions, because the city's elders sat there. (Ruth 4:1-11; Psa. 127:5; Jer. 1:15; 14:2)

While these explanations are interesting, it is far more probable that Jesus intends *gates of Hades* in its idiomatic completeness, without reference to all the usual functions of city gates in the oriental world. The picture involved in *gates of Hades*,—if indeed Jesus intended any mental image, is that of a city called *Hades*, the place of disembodied spirits, within whose *gates* one is imprisoned by death. Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 70) suggests that "the plural 'gates' may perhaps be explained by the fact that originally it was thought

that many gates, one after the other (as in modern prisons), closed the entrance to Hades," through all of which one must pass to enter and from which there could be no return. If this plural, *gates*, intends only to reinforce the figure (cfr. Arndt-Gingrich, 16, on *Hades*), then it indicates the monstrous power of death within whose walls the Church of Christ would be locked, but could not be held, because those gates would be thrown ajar by the power of the Risen Christ. It is in this sense that **the gates of Hades shall not prevail against the Church**, a fact that has worked out historically in various ways:

1. The personal death of Jesus Christ in no way hindered His plan to establish His Church or come in His Kingdom as planned. (Cf. 16:18, 28) Rather, unless He submitted to death to bring them into being, there would have been no Church, no Kingdom of God on earth. His resurrection, predicted figuratively under the sign of Jonah (16:4) and literally (16:21), guaranteed that all that Death could do would not be strong enough (*ou katischūsousin*) to thwart the Church's being established. This truth is plainly echoed in Ac. 2:24, 31. (Cf. 2 Ti. 1:10)

This affirmation is definite preparation for the confrontation with the disciples on the question of the necessity of Jesus' going to Jerusalem. (16:21ff) Although they would imagine that His death would seal the doom of all hope of victory, He has already assured them here that death would have no power to hinder the glorious fulfillment of everything He planned for the Church's realization. He would come forth victorious from the tomb, thus guaranteeing the triumph of the cause of righteousness. Their fears were unfounded.

2. Despite the death of His followers, the loss of each single member to death would not mean the death of the Church. Even if Jesus be not speaking directly of our suffering death, but rather of His own death, yet the fact that He would crash the gates of death in a victorious break-through guarantees the perpetual victory of His people. This is the minor interpretation, because it depends for its accomplishment upon the personal victory of the Lord over death, therefore His struggle with death is the more directly appropriate interpretation.

In a very real sense, the Church was as much in Hades as was Christ Himself. In fact, had He not conquered death, there would have been no Church. Metaphorically, then, we may say that the Church was "born out of death," a fact surprisingly recalled in His later discourse: "the way to life is through death." (Mt. 16:24-28)

3. While this passage, as we have seen, does not explicitly reveal a war between two kingdoms, i.e. that of Jesus Christ against Satan's reign of death (Heb. 2:14), in which the Church would sweep in conquest, nevertheless the result is still the same! The kingdom of death cannot at any time hold out against the power of the Church to break its bonds and come forth.

Some see this mention of Hades (death, grave) as a metonymy for Satan's reign of death (cf. Heb. 2:14; Lk. 22:53; Jn. 8:44); hence, stands for all the conspiracies of the powers of evil combined: demons, Satan, and death. Accordingly, all these monstrous powers of wickedness and death would be brought to bear against the Church, without, however, succeeding in strangling or destroying it. (Ac. 4:24-31; Jn. 12:31; 16:33; Ro. 16:20; Rev. 2:10f; 1 Co. 15:54-57)

How could *the gates of Hades* withstand Jesus and the Church, when the resurrected Lord Himself has the keys to the gates?! (Rev. 1:17f) No, Jesus assures the disciples that His Church was not merely designed to last for awhile, like some school of thought or an ethical influence or a religious manifestation, but would continue beyond the grave and on into eternity!

**16:19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.** Before entering into a detailed discussion of the terms involved, it is well to remember our decision as to whether Jesus is carrying forward a supposed rhetorical figure or not. If so, then this verse must be interpreted in the light of that figure, but if not, then the terms used here will be interpreted in light of their usual sense and in context with the general subject under discussion. Because we failed to see the necessity to superimpose upon this text a rhetorical picture not explicitly stated in Jesus' words (see reasons at 16:18), we shall follow the latter course.

#### WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE AUTHORITY CONFERRED?

The expressions, **keys of the kingdom** and **binding and loosing**, taken together in so close a context, are probably to be understood in the rabbinical sense of "the right to teach authoritatively the truths of the Kingdom of God." It may have been by two steps that the rabbis appropriated for their ministry the glorious concept of

**the keys of the kingdom:**

1. It may refer to the office of royal steward. A key literally serves to open and lock doors. So the power of the keys consisted in providing (or excluding) access to and care of the royal chambers, and in the decision who was or was not to be received into the king's service. Keys, then, are a symbol of superintendence. Thus, authority and privilege are involved in the consignment of the keys, although not an authority or privilege independent of direct responsibility to the king himself. In fact, he who receives the power of the keys is not the king, but the trusted steward, or servant, of the king, since the keys continue to belong to the king to whom the steward is finally responsible. (Cf. Isa. 22:22; God is the real king of Israel; Rev. 3:7; 9:1; 20:1ff)
2. By a splendid metaphor the rabbis (scribes) could refer to the responsibility of opening the royal chambers of God's truth as possession of **the keys of the kingdom**. In this sense, as stewards of God's truth, they were to be responsible for permitting popular access into God's Kingdom, as proven by Jesus' attitude toward the theologians (scribes, rabbis) who misused their exalted position. (Lk. 11:52; Mt. 23:13 = *kleiete*, from *kleis*, a key))

That Jesus' disciples could become scribes is implicit in Mt. 13:52 and explicit in 23:34. That they would be stewards of the mysteries of God, is noted in Lk. 12:41ff. (Cf. 1 Cor. 4:1, 2) So, the power of **the keys** and **binding and loosing** may be but two forms of the same promise in the sense that *keys* would then be general teaching authority, while **binding and loosing** would be the specific sphere of its application. With Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 73ff) we should notice that the verbs . . .

. . . *binding and loosing* are two terms of rabbinic usage that assume opposite meanings according as they are applied to a "prohibition" or to an "obligation." In the case of the prohibition, one "binds" when he prohibits someone to do something . . . while he "looses" by lifting the prohibition, permitting what had heretofore been prohibited . . . In the case of the obligation, one "binds" by establishing something as an obligation, but one "looses" when he eliminates this obligation . . . The verb "to loose" can also acquire the sense of "to pardon," i.e. to "looose" the guilt from the individual.

Consequently, consigning the keys to Peter is paramount to assigning

him the responsibility for admission to, or exclusion from, the Kingdom-Church. **Bindind and loosing**, accordingly, refer to the task of expressing authoritatively those terms of salvation and damnation which would permit men to enter the Kingdom, or else be forever excluded therefrom.

### THE AGENT UPON WHOM THE RESPONSIBILITY IS CONFERRED

**I will give unto thee** means to Peter. No reading of the text can ignore the singular: "I will give to you (singular: *dōsō soi*) . . . whatever you bind (*hō eân déses*)."<sup>1</sup> The promise of *the keys* is not made to the Apostles, either by name or taken as a group *per se*.

**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.** Since it is assumed that there is a degree of officialness in this granting power to Peter, it must also be remembered that the nature of the "office" must be judged by its historical exemplification in the life of the man to whom it was intrusted. But the nature of Peter's "office," as this is recorded in Acts, mirrors that of a major prophet whereby God made His will known through this authorized, qualified spokesman. Then, having revealed God's message, he had to submit to it personally and urge others to communicate it. Since God raised up none to occupy his specific function to reveal new truth or determine Christian orthodoxy and conduct, then the only "office" left is that which now faithfully communicates "the faith once for all delivered to the saints," i.e. those who share the message in evangelizing and teaching.

Before rejecting the authority conferred upon Peter as referring to judicial, administrative and legislative powers, since it appears to make Peter rule the Church and establish the laws of pardon (cf. Foster, *Middle Period*, 237), it must be remembered that Christ never consigns responsibility to men without also providing the power necessary for its proper completion. So, if we admit that Christ knew that Peter would faithfully deliver the decrees of heaven as these were revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, then the Holy Spirit is the real administrator and legislator operating through Peter. Why fear such power when it is the Lord who not only decides to give it, who also decides to whom to promise it, but who also will govern its expression when He does confer it? Merely because we fear abuse of power, thanks to the myriads of illustrations available in Church history

alone; does this justify our hesitation to let Jesus confer it upon Peter, especially if the Lord Himself is going to be the One pulling the strings? Key-bearing authority is no different from normal prophetic authority, as fearful as that responsibility is! Has it suddenly become impossible to trust the Spirit of Jesus to be able to control the exercise of key-bearing authority wielded by the fisherman-Apostle? Even in the later history of Peter, when he once got out of line in his personal practice, the Holy Spirit at work in Paul was present to correct his temporary aberration. (Gal. 2) Modern fear to concede *the keys of the kingdom* to Peter is an over-reaction to Roman Catholic argument which misuses Peter. But since the Lord established no such hierarchy or series of successors as the Roman clergy demands, why prohibit the Lord Himself from recognizing the rock-like quality of His Apostle and conferring upon him this honor? And then judge Peter's ministry in retrospect: did he abuse what Christ here conferred upon him? Did he act the part of a pope? History has forever absolved him of that accusation! Had the Roman Church never abused this passage to exalt Peter to supreme authority over all other Christians, applying this text to what it was never intended to touch, no other meaning would have been sought for it. The fact that Jesus established Peter as a specially honored instrument for the first proclamation of the Gospel to the world, did not hinder Him from commissioning Paul. Perhaps we would worry less about the uniqueness of Peter's commission, if we remembered Paul's. (Study Ac. 9:15f; 14:27; 22:13ff; 26:15-18)

**Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.** Regardless of whether the tenses involved here be considered a future perfect passive ("What you bind on earth SHALL HAVE (already) BEEN BOUND in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth SHALL HAVE (already) BEEN LOOSED in heaven"), or as a simple periphrastic future passive (as rendered in the common text), it is implied that Peter is to have such a very close relationship with God that he would know what God required or permitted. The resultant pronouncements of Peter will be precisely what God intends that he say. This is no esoteric, mysterious promise completely unconnected with everything that lies right on the surface of Jesus' ministry and of the history of the early Church. In fact, during Jesus' ministry, Peter had already been receiving precise and clear revelations of God's will openly expressed in all that Jesus said. (Jn. 17:14) In fact, it was on the basis of these revelations that Peter made his confession (16:17). Later, Jesus would

promise His Spirit to empower the disciples to remember His entire message and to make revelations of future events (Jn. 14:26; 16:13), so that they could preach and set down in print for all future ages precisely that Gospel and doctrine that God *bound or loosed in heaven*.

So, if the power of *the keys*, understood as the right to teach authoritatively the truths of the Kingdom of God, be no less than the inspiration of the Spirit who would cause Peter to reveal precisely what God willed, then we would expect other passages to confirm this. Instead of confirming only Peter, other disciples are included in the same general work and empowered by the same supernatural provision. Peter's unique opportunity or privilege is left intact, but others are added.

1. The authority to *bind and loose* is further modified by its being conferred also upon the Church. Although Mt. 18:18 is correctly analyzed as spoken directly to the Apostles personally present, conceptually, however, the emphasis is upon Christian cooperation within the congregation to settle difficult problems between believers and to correct sinners. Moreover, the major subject of the chapter is personal, not official, relation among the Apostles. Still, it is the assembly (*ekklesia*) which *binds and loosens*.

Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 77) argues the illegitimacy of reference to Mt. 18:18 if used to weaken the fact that the keys were conferred upon Peter, since, contextually, the two texts (i.e. 16:18 and 18:18) refer to different situations. The former, rightly noticed by Salvoni, refers to Peter's unique mission to open the Kingdom of Heaven to men by indicating to them what was necessary to enter it. The latter refers, rather, to church discipline by teaching how to act in the case of a sinner within the group (*ekklesia*). He also argues correctly that the *binding and loosing* have different functions in the two texts: in 16:18 Peter is to indicate what is obligatory or not for the believers, whereas in 18:18 the text deals with sins of the individual sinner to *bind upon*, or *loose from* him. While these distinctions are essentially correct, Salvoni fails to see that both texts represent one total function, that of teacher and the decision about what is to be thought and done about a given problem, be it entrance into the Kingdom or that of an unrepentant sinner. To the Church is confirmed this authoritative function.

2. See comment on Jn. 20:21. (Objections to the papal position, at 16:18, II, A, 2) Other disciples were present to hear the precious promise: "Receive the Holy Spirit: if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (Cf. Lu. 24:33-49) From this it appears that, whereas Peter, because of his forthright confession, was privileged to be God's first spokesman to reveal God's great truth about salvation in Jesus Christ, others too were to participate in this general work.
3. Paul's treatment of prophetic gifts assumes that others than Peter or the Apostles were so gifted as to assume an authoritative teaching role in the Church. (1 Co. 14:3f, 24f; Eph. 2:20; 4:7, 11)
4. Neither Peter nor the other Apostles were called to be innovative theologians, creatively inventing new theologies to which God must set His stamp of approval. Rather, they are called to be witnesses of what God had revealed through Jesus the Christ. (Cf. Jn. 15:26f; 16:13-15 where 'not even the Holy Spirit was to be innovative.)

Thus, the inspiration needed to *bind and loose* was promised, not to Peter alone, but also to other disciples as well.

But, to this view it may be objected that Peter is left with no uniqueness worthy of Jesus' declarations that here clearly single him out for special responsibilities, if not also honors. In answer let it be affirmed that this promise, like any other prophecy of future realities, must be interpreted in the light of its undoubted fulfilment. Of this prediction we have the fullest historical illustration in the book of Acts and in the Epistles. This prophecy was fulfilled exclusively and completely when Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, carried out his unique function by being the first to express those terms whereby both Jews (Acts 2) and Gentiles (Acts 10) would be forever admitted or eternally excluded from God's Kingdom. In so doing, he announced God's Word on earth. Because of its normative character and finality, there is no further need for new Peters to arise to use these or other keys. The Kingdom, once opened to mankind by Peter's proclamation or forever left inaccessible to those that reject his message, needs no further opening or closing. This is why we must dissent from Plummer (*Matthew*, 231) who decides that we may not assume "that what Peter decides for the visible Church is binding on the Church invisible; or that what he decides for the visible Church of his day holds good for ever, however much the conditions may change . . ." No, it is because of Peter's inspiration that we MUST

assume the definitive authority of his words, especially when he is absolutely the first Christian Apostle to enunciate the perfect universality of Christianity, the first Apostle to announce Christ's Lordship, the first Apostle to tell both Jews and Gentiles how to be saved on God's terms. Why NOT listen to Peter? What possible change of conditions could justify ignoring Peter today? It is Peter who, after describing Christian maturity, assures us: "Be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall. So there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Pt. 1:5-12)

Since *binding and loosing* appear in a context concerning the use of the *keys to the Kingdom of heaven*, then, as Salvoni (*Da Pietro al papato*, 73ff) has it, these expressions . . .

. . . must refer to something that is necessary or is not necessary for someone who desires to enter it. In the book of Acts which serves as a commentary on Christ's prophecy, it turns out that it is Peter himself who once and for all rendered baptism obligatory for entrance into the Church ("bound"), while he dispensed with the obligation of circumcision ("loosed").

Peter's great mission during the early days of the Church, even before Paul's great contribution, was to establish the Church on a solid, international basis by liberating Christianity from the Jewish religion. (Ac. 15:7ff) By establishing the Christian plan of salvation ("binding") and never once requiring any Jewish rite ("loosing"), he carried out his mission prophesied here. Although Peter definitely occupied a leading position in the life of the early Church during the period of its almost exclusively Jewish character, he was instrumental in giving divine sanction to the evangelization of the Gentiles. Thus, he actually laid the groundwork for acceptance of Paul's brilliant ministry to the Gentiles. Although Paul's apostleship was truly independent of Peter's authority, his specific mission was prepared for by Peter. Salvoni (*ibid.*) notes:

In place of the "doctors of the law" (scribes) who with their doctrine hindered others from accepting Jesus as Son of God and from thus entering into the Kingdom of heaven, Jesus places the confessing Peter, so that, with his faith just demonstrated, he might open the Kingdom of heaven to anyone desiring to enter it. Not the Scribes, but the Apostles (here represented by Peter) will be the new heralds of the Word of God, the new prophets of Christianity.

The key-holding responsibility of Peter does not at all militate against his being considered symbolic of the foundation of the Church, as suggested in v. 18. Rather, to whom ELSE should Jesus more appropriately consign such an important responsibility as that of bearer of the keys, than to the first tested believer in whom the experience of Jesus as the Anointed Son of God is a real conviction? No amount of fear of falling into the Roman Catholic error can justify denying to Peter what Jesus really gives to him and recognizes in him! In fact, it is notorious how far the Roman Catholic Church, while formally glorifying Peter, so effectually ignores Peter's teaching, in favor of her own dogmas! This is why the modern Christian must not balk at owning Peter as the retainer of the keys. Rather, we must be more truly Petrine than any Catholic ever thought about! We must accept the terms he revealed for entrance into (or exclusion from) God's Kingdom, or miss it entirely! (Acts 2:36-40; 3:26; 4:12; 5:29-32; 10:42-48; 11:17f, etc.)

Should it be argued that any view that sees Peter as intended to be symbolic of the rock foundation of the Church, even as symbolic of every believer, proves too much, because, if that interpretation were carried forward into this verse (19), then, to every truly Petrine believer is consigned *the keys* and the authority of *binding and loosing*. To this it may be answered:

1. Sure, why not? After all, every believer in whom the conviction is real that made Peter the rock he was, really does use only the Petrine keys to open or close the Kingdom to anyone he contacts with the Gospel. And, since the "Petrine keys" are really those of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 10:20; Jn. 20:21-23; Lk. 24:46-49; Ac. 2:1-4, 14; 4:8; 5:3, 4, 9; 10:19), all of the Spirit-filled Christians of the first century joyfully proclaimed the Gospel which the Spirit inspired Peter, first of all, to proclaim to the Jews on Pentecost and to the Gentiles later. Only those Christians who faithfully adhere to and faithfully proclaim THIS Gospel may consider themselves to be such. In any case, we are "key-holders" only in a secondary sense. (Cf. Ac. 4:31)
2. On the other hand, no Christian, other than Peter, received that unique, first privilege of proclaiming the terms of pardon to representatives of the entire world. He had been first to confess Jesus on the basis of a matured conviction and when specifically tested. Why should he not also be the first to proclaim Jesus? In this view, the only proper primacy left to Peter is not ecclesiastical primacy, but merely chronological.

## HOW IS THIS AUTHORITY EXPRESSED?

Carver (*ISBE*, article "Power of the Keys," 1794f) well outlines the hierarchical mentality and structural concern apparently innate in human beings, that is apparent in Church history's various answers to this important question:

1. The power of the keys was conferred to Peter alone.
2. The power committed to Peter was also conferred upon the other apostles, including Paul, discharged by them, and descended to no others.
3. The power was conferred on Peter officially and on his official successors.
4. The power was conferred on Peter officially and the other apostles officially, and to such as hold their place in the church.
5. The power belongs to Peter as representative of the church, and so to the church also is committed the same power, to be exercised in the following manner:
  - a. By the officials of the church alone.
  - b. By the officials of the church and those to whom they commit it.
  - c. By all priests and persons allowed to represent the church *de facto*.
  - d. By the church in its councils, or other formal and official decisions.
  - e. By the church in a less formal way than through formal, counciliar decisions.
  - f. By all members of the church as representing it without specific commission.
6. The power belongs to the Christian as such, and so the power is imposed upon, or offered to, all Christians.

This penchant for structuring a "chain of command" is neither sinful nor merely human, because God has also organized the heavenly order (Col. 1:16; Rev. 4, 5; 1 Pt. 3:22; cf. Psa. 89:5-7) and structured human authority for man's benefit. (Ro. 13:1-7; Psa. 8) However, like most human mistakes, it is possible for man to take a good thing to an extreme, and want to establish precise limits where God established very few. We feel that we must be certain beyond the limits of reasonable certainty. For man, it is not sufficient that Christ should be Head over His Church, ruling it by His Word (1) authentically revealed once for all by a few authorized spokesmen, i.e. Apostles and

Prophets, and (2) faithfully taught by a multitude of evangelists and pastoring teachers, and (3) obediently observed by everyone until Christ comes. Nor is a simple, congregational government judged by some to be adequate with its local rulers, the superintendents (bishops = elders = pastors). Man must have an iron-clad chain of command, with authorized officials and specific commissions to speak only after conference in formal councils, that decide either on matters that God said nothing about, or is thought to be unclear in what He did teach. Nothing is to be left up to chance, if man must be mathematically certain that he is right. For these reasons, the above-listed plethora of possible applications of this our text is quite seriously offered by serious, sincere students of church polity! Unfortunately, most of these expressions sadly miss the primary emphasis of Jesus which is light-years' distance from establishing an official hierarchy so foreign to His fundamental approach to government. His emphasis is not upon uniqueness of power and privilege, but upon usefulness of duty and responsibility; not upon office, but upon function. It just does not seem to occur to us that power and privilege and office are of absolutely no use to the Lord, where the usefulness of duty, responsibility and function are absent. And for those theorists who hold that one can have both in equal measure and in equilibrium, let it be answered that nowhere in sacred Scripture is it recorded that Jesus conferred the papacy or its equivalent upon anyone. If there are no predecessors, there can be no successors! Besides, Jesus knows that He can expect usefulness, responsibility and function without instituting power structures and privileged offices to get them.

How is this authority expressed? Once Peter's function had been completed, the Kingdom was open to all men. Other Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers lead men into the Kingdom by the gate opened by Peter. All of them together, Peter included, then busy themselves in the maturing the Christians and the committing the Word, now revealed, to faithful men who shall be capable of teaching others also. (2 Ti. 2:2; Ro. 15:14)

If Peter is really symbolic of every Christian, then the exercise of this power belongs to the Christians as such. The Christian must be all that Peter was in the moment of his confession, the kind of rock of which all "living stones" built into the temple of God must be before God inserts them into His construction. Thus, the words addressed exclusively to Peter are to be thought of as addressed to him in his symbolic character as the first typical Christian. So, Peter has no special prerogative to hold the keys other than the chronological

priority to use them. Carver (*ISBE*, 1794f) concludes that

The words were spoken to him only as the first who gave expression to that conception and experience on the basis of which Jesus commits the keys of the kingdom to any believer in him as the Christ of God. . . . The holder of the keys is any man with that experience that called forth from Jesus the assurance that Peter should have the keys. Such a man will be in fellowship and co-operation with like men, in a church, and the Spirit of Jesus will be present in them, so that their decisions and their testimony will be His as well as theirs. There is a corporate, or church, agency, therefore, and the man who would ignore that lacks the experience or the Spirit needful for the use of the keys. Yet the church is never to overshadow or exclude the individual responsibility and authority.

In the early Church are revealing examples of the non-official, but true, communication of the divine truth on the part of common Christians who, despite their unofficial position and perhaps also lack of miraculous credentials or special mandates, went everywhere preaching the word" (Ac. 8:4), starting churches wherever they went, opening the kingdom of God even to other races. (Ac. 11:19-26) They accepted the priesthood of all believers (1 Pt. 2:4, 5, 9; Heb. 13:15f; Rev. 1:5b, 6), utilizing their individual gifts for the common good. (Eph. 4:7; 1 Pt. 4:10, 11; 1 Co. 12:6, 7; Ro. 12:3-8)

#### WHAT IS THE SCOPE OR RANGE OF THIS POWER?

1. This power confers no political authority over the kingdoms of the world. It is no mistaken antithesis that notices that Jesus said, not "keys of the kingdom of the world," but "keys of the kingdom of heaven." The reign of God is not "of this world," (Jn. 18:36), although very much IN the world.
2. The power of the *keys* and *binding and loosing* is spiritual power to be used for making men godly. It is therefore a redemptive, sanctifying influence. No corruption of this influence, either by its abuse or omission, can lay claim to Christ's support. Because it is also a liberating influence, all unauthorized binding of human opinions, conclusions and traditions upon the disciples is unjustified. Therefore, when any disciple, without divine authorization confirmed by prophetic credentials, attempts to invoke the

power of the keys by binding their conclusions upon others, he has usurped the Lord's authority and must be rebuked.

3. It follows that the power of the *keys* and *binding and loosing*, understood in the sense of teaching what God has revealed, is essential to liberate the Kingdom from evil men who try to take possession of it for their own purposes. Spiritual men must be equipped to exclude these usurpers.
4. The power of the *keys* and *binding and loosing* necessarily involves the teaching of the condition of entrance into the Kingdom and proper conduct in it. But this cannot mean the "authoritative" invention of "necessary" applications of divine principles where God has not revealed these. It must mean merely the appropriate and thorough proclamation of the revelations given once and for all by the Apostles and Prophets. The divine commission of the Church is always to "teach them to observe (1) all that (2) I have (3) commanded (4) you." (Mt. 28:20)

#### 6. Secrecy Required (16:20)

**16:20 Then charged he the disciples that they should tell no man that he was the Christ.** The reason for this extraordinary strict order (cf. Lk. 9:21) is woven into the fabric of the context in which it was given:

1. It was given at a time when the word "Christ" or "Messiah" would provide the spark to ignite the powder-keg, exploding in a bloody national uprising that would attempt to throw off Roman supremacy, end Roman occupation of Palestine, restore Jewish independence, attempt world dominion under a Jewish Messianic King, and bring in an era of unprecedented prosperity for Israel. This was the religio-political platform of the Galilean party of Zealots ready to revolt instantly, were they to discover a convincingly viable Messiah. All the genuine, spiritual aims of Jesus' Kingdom would be totally ignored in the insuing confusion. Six months earlier, tumultuous disciples had reacted to Jesus' miraculous feeding of the multitude by exclaiming, "This is indeed the Prophet to come into the world!" and He barely staved off their ambition to take Him by force to make Him their kind of king. (Jn. 6:14, 15) Another perhaps more impelling reason for this prohibition is that those very disciples themselves as yet so badly understood what they themselves had confessed in calling Him the Christ of God. Just

how badly they misunderstood is vividly portrayed in the successive conversation. (16:21ff) Very likely they still considered their confession to be perfectly compatible with bloody revolution, national glory, hierarchical attainment and material prosperity. Without direct inspiration to override their own prejudices,—which, because of this prohibition, we may assume He would not provide,—what could they say publicly to explain what it meant to believe Him to be the Christ? Total silence on this subject is the only solution.

Further, what could be sufficient to correct the mistaken impressions that would be left in people's minds by (presumably) off-key preaching by the as yet uninspired Apostles? Once a sack of feathers has been emptied into the wind, regathering them would be impossible. Jesus, therefore, is saving Himself and the Twelve the work of having to undo what wrong-headed zeal and bad timing would have caused.

3. Plummer (*Matthew*, 24) rightly sees that the popular, however misdirected, enthusiasm of the masses ready to crown Jesus and sweep Him into power, is a real temptation to Him. Satan's wilderness suggestion to avoid the cross and still enjoy world power without suffering, is by no means dead. In whatever form, by whomever proposed, the opportunity to be the kind of Christ men wanted is the same sordid seduction.
4. Another significant motive for silence combines the previous ones. If the as yet imperfectly understood confession of His Messiahship were caught up as a revolutionary motto, it is conceivable that, were Jesus to be cast in the role of a political revolutionary, even the cross could become a sociological impossibility. Why should a national hero be executed by the Jews? But, since He never intended to be this kind of Christ, if events should precipitate to such a level, He would then have to change His course radically. And, since His sacrificial death to complete the expiation of our sins lay at the center of His mission, He must ruthlessly eliminate anything that would threaten to block this determination. (Cf. on 16:22f; 17:9; Mk. 9:30f)

The Triumphal Entry enthusiasm is no objection here, because at that point there was no time left for the development of revolutionary fervor before His crucifixion. In fact, the hot-bloods from Galilee, present at Jerusalem during the national feast, were only a portion of the total assemblage. Also, Jesus' Apostles

held their silence, not proclaiming Him openly as the Christ. Jesus Himself, too, did everything possible to make Himself available to His enemies to permit them to carry out their determination to destroy Him.

5. Only the resurrection and glorification of Christ could place the true nature of His Christhood in its proper perspective.

What a commentary of men and events: God has taken 1500 years to teach Israel what He meant by this word "Christ" and yet the Jews had practically totally misunderstood the word! But before we proudly condemn, we must ask what He is trying to instruct us concerning the words "Church," "Kingdom," "cross-bearing," and "self-denial" and many other concepts!

## B. THE WAY OF THE CROSS (16:21-28)

### 1. The Revelation of Jesus' Approaching Death and Victory (16:21

16:21 This is no less a test of the Apostles' commitment to Jesus than was the question asked earlier, for this declaration is but the trial by fire through which their commitment to Him must pass. It is one thing to confess sincerely that Jesus is the Christ, Savior and Lord. It is quite another thing to accept everything He says though it collides with our own understanding. The Apostles had brilliantly passed the first test. Would they do as well when their confession (as they understood it) was clearly contradicted by Him who was the object of their trust?

The crucifixion part of Christianity is unique, because, in His self-revelation, Jesus had the unique choice to reveal Himself first as the glorious Messiah of God, or first as the suffering, crucified Messiah. If He revealed the former first, His disciples would not be prepared for His death, but if He revealed Himself as born to die, they would not believe in His glory because of their inherited prejudices. His reserve regarding His sufferings had been maintained out of regard for their weakness. He waited, therefore, until Peter's confession confirmed their relative readiness for this news. A critical reason for Jesus' beginning now with a frank elaboration of His destiny to suffer is the three-way tension between the escalation of the opposition's plotting against His life, the disciples' natural nervousness about it, and Jesus' determination not to defend Himself. Foster (*Middle*

*Period, 240) sees that*

To keep the apostles in ignorance of the fact that He did not intend to defend Himself would place the apostles at a great disadvantage. It would be harder to control them and to keep them from meeting violence with violence.

**From that time began Jesus to show his disciples, that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things.** . . . There had been ominous, distant thunder warnings before, that hinted of the approaching storm that would finally burst on Calvary. (Cf. Lk. 2:34f; Jn. 1:29 "the Lamb of God" to be slain? 2:19-22; 3:14; Mt. 9:15; 12:40; Jn. 6:51-57) Now, however, all allusion has been dropped, and the horrifying facts are bared in all their shocking realism: **He began to show** (*deiknuein* = "to show, indicate, make known, reveal, explain") "He said this plainly." (Mk. 8:32) Until this crucial moment Jesus had been steadily building the disciples' faith in Him, gradually divulging His heavenly mission so that they could sustain the shock which the cross must inevitably produce on their emotions. Now, however, they must learn the unexpected, unwelcome, even incomprehensible lesson that the concept of His death did not contradict the reality of His divinity and Lordship. *Jesus began* and He kept up the lessons (Mt. 17:22f and parallels; 20:17-19 and par.; Lk. 17:25), because they must learn to live with the Divine Will, however temporarily uncomfortable it might be. Bruce (*Training*, 169) underlines the somber significance of going to *Jerusalem*:

Yes! there the tragedy must be enacted: that was the fitting scene for the stupendous events that were about to take place. It was dramatically proper that the Son of Man die in that "holy," unholy city, which had earned a most inevitable notoriety as the murdereress of the prophets, the stoner of them whom God sent unto her. "It cannot be"—it were incongruous—"that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem." (Lk. 13:33) It was due also to the dignity of Jesus, and to the design of His death, that He should suffer there. Not in an obscure corner or in an obscure way must He die, but in the most public place, and in a formal, judicial manner. He must be lifted up in view of the whole Jewish nation, so that all might see Him whom they had pierced, and by whose stripes also they might yet be healed. The "Lamb of God" must be slain in the place where all the legal sacrifices were offered.

**He must go and suffer** (*deī apelthein kaī pollà pathein*) This

prediction is not simply the astute recognition of an unavoidable disaster, but the announcement of a personal purpose in harmony with the decree of God (*deῖ patheîn*). This is best felt by comparing 16:21 with Jn. 3:14f; Lk. 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5?; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44; Mt. 26:54; Ac. 3:21; 17:3; 1 Co. 15:25. His predicted suffering and death is entirely voluntary, for who, in his right mind and intending to live out his normal life, would deliberately walk into a trap set for him, out of which he knew there could be no exit except through the tomb? Foster (*Middle Period*, 240f) justly concludes that

Jesus was seeking to cause His disciples to recognize the divine compulsion and plan behind His perplexing refusal to defend Himself and behind His approaching death. The enemies of Christ could not destroy Him. They would not be able to bring about His death unless it was God's will that He go into their midst and suffer torture and death at their hands.

Although Jesus does not even name the cross directly here, it was clearly in His mind. In fact, His discourse which immediately follows shows how vividly the cross stood out in His thinking. Even if He must mention the reality of His death without indicating the method by which it would be accomplished, He has already given the disciples more in this first announcement than they can tolerate.

**Jesus began to show his disciples** that His enemies were already plotting the very course He now details for His men. (Cf. Jn. 5:18; Mt. 12:14 and par.) Whereas their plotting was yet somewhat nebulous in contrast with their final success in Jerusalem, Jesus' precision marks Him as a Prophet of the first order. In fact, whereas any astute political observer could predict that, given the collision course on which Jesus was heading, the Jewish clergy would very probably do Him in, no one but God could foresee Jesus' victory over them by His triumph over death.

**Elders, chief priests and scribes:** whether or not this expression is the normal technical designation for the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin, it practically includes its every member: the men of reputation, representative constituents from various cities of Israel, the priestly caste and the theologians. There is no cushioning of the shock in the discovery that the most famous, most influential, most highly respected men in Israel would unite to inflict this suffering on their Master! Now it becomes even clearer why He had ordered His men to "let them alone" (Mt. 15:14). He had no intention to

save face before that religious establishment, because it stood at cross purposes with God's plans. *Elders*: the Hebrew Flusser (*Jesus*, 159) is plainly mistaken to plead that the Jewish Sanhedrin was not responsible for Jesus' condemnation, since, according to his own apologetic purpose to exculpate the best men of Judaism, these *elders* must be only "the elders of the Temple," hence, merely Sadducees. Matthew, however, (26:3, 47) terms them "elders of the people," not merely "of the Temple." The whole Sanhedrin would be involved. (Mt. 26:59; Mk. 14:55; 15:1 *hólon tò sunédrion*; Lk. 22:66 "the assembly of the elders of the people" *tò presbutérion tō̄ laō*) While it is unnecessary to perpetuate and unChristian to perpetrate further hatred of Jewish people, it is also unjust to exonerate those actually responsible for this judicial murder. To accomplish this latter, Flusser must discount the historical references to the fulfilment of Jesus' prediction. To what state had so glorious a nation fallen when her wisest, holiest, most learned men should become the prime movers and responsible agents in the contemptuous execution of the One Hebrew whom God had chosen, qualified and sent to bless her in turning everyone away from his sins! (Ac. 3:26)

**He must be raised up the third day.** What sort of King is He who so confidently promises His own resurrection shortly after His yet future death? Although Jesus' students missed this victory note. Matthew's readers have the unexcelled advantage of being able to ponder this question, and they must decide about it. *The third day* (= "after three days," Mk. 8:31) This expression, coming shortly after the repeated sign of Jonah (16:4) and reminiscent of the more elaborate expression of that sign (12:39), is but its literal interpretation given by the Lord Himself. If Jesus intends to arise literally *on the third day*, then the figurative language of the earlier prediction which had seemed so precise, must be interpreted in light of His explanation. (See notes on 12:40.) If Jesus must remain in the tomb literally "three days and three nights" (= 72 hours), then His resurrection would occur on the fourth day, a hypothesis nowhere affirmed in Scripture. He said: *on the third day*, not "on the fourth day."

This prophecy is a perfect illustration of divine foreknowledge. In fact, every single person who was to play a role in this drama did so with full liberty and responsibility, yet their moves were foreseen in surprisingly accurate detail.

## 2. Peter rebukes Jesus (16:22)

**16:22 And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall never be unto thee.** Peter's words are stated here in about as good an English paraphrase as is possible for *hileós soi, kúrie*, literally: "(God) be merciful to you, Lord." This scene is so true to life, so human, so much like all of us! We are repelled by death, especially that of our closest friend. So Peter, too, could not understand how our glorious Lord must also crumble in the dust of death. The Twelve could admit that the common lot of mortals might include martyrdom, even on crosses. But "the difficulty of the twelve was probably not that the servant should be no better than the Master, but that the Master should be no better than the servant"! (Bruce, *Training*, 176) **Peter took him aside (*proslabómenos*, Mk. 8:32),** evidently intending to make the rebuke relatively private. But his shock reflected that of the others. (Mk. 8:33, "But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter," as if they too stood stunned by His incredible prophecy, agreed with Peter and so needed to hear the correction administered to Peter.) They must have reasoned: "Our Master no better than a common criminal? Unthinkable! But what of the Kingdom, if Jesus should die? What will happen to us, His closest followers? Of what sort of kingdom is He, then, a king, if He must die to establish it?" These burning questions form the backdrop of Jesus' answers and teaching that follows. (vv. 23-28)

The stunned Apostle probably hoped to head off that kind of talk as soon as possible, because Jesus' message came through with a clarity far too painful. (Mk. 8:32) It must have seemed to Peter that such negative talk would defeat the Messianic cause he had just confessed, and render impossible the realization of the Church to be established. But his psychological reaction is astonishingly similar to that of Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1ff). That Pharisee, after having honestly admitted that Jesus was "a teacher come from God, since no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him," turned immediately to arguing with the Lord whether the new birth from above could be a real possibility or not!

The abruptness of Peter's reaction indicates that this is the first time that any of the Twelve had really understood anything about Jesus' destined suffering. Allusions had preceded this, which the disciples had apparently cast into the limbo of incomprehension or had interpreted in some figurative sense, e.g. Jesus' influence would

suffer some sort of temporary eclipse only to shine forth in far more glorious strength thereafter. Now, however, His words are impossible to take in any way but literally.

Because they focused only upon the concept of the suffering Messiah, the men missed the promised hope of His resurrection. And despite the stern correction Jesus handed them on this occasion, a correction they could understand intellectually, they could still not bring themselves emotionally to accept its truth—even after the resurrection had occurred and its reality witnessed to them. (Mt. 28:17; Lk. 24:8-11, 41; Mk. 16:11, 13f; Jn. 20:9) Obviously, they had stopped listening as He told of the compelling necessity of His death. Emotionally, they may have never even heard the rest. Death was such a shock that resurrection lost all its glory for them. Yet, His prediction of a resurrection was not futile, even though it probably did not fully register in their mind, since, like the sign of Jonah given to the Pharisees (Mt. 12:39; 16:4), when the resurrection actually occurred, it became the means of strengthening their faith as they recognized, however tardy, that Jesus had actually described it many times before it took place. (Cf. Jn. 2:22)

Another psychologically true note is sounded by Peter's officiousness: could anyone really suppose that the true Son of God, God's Anointed, could do or say something that deserved rebuke? Could anyone who is really thinking admit that such a Leader needs leading? But Peter's impulsive, well-meant reproof arises in a mind that is perfectly normal in its not being able to see the real, moral contrariety between the rebuke and the confession. His own prejudice blocked out his ability to sense this contradiction. Because these disciples had no conception of the necessity of the Messiah's suffering, the more firmly they trusted Him to be the Messiah, the more confused they became when told He must be executed. Rather than trust His promise of resurrection, they could only hope that His extremely negative view of the situation would prove baseless. And so they sin by supposing themselves to have a clearer conception of Jesus' duty than He Himself does! They have no intention to tempt Him to prefer safety to righteousness, duty and truth; they merely suppose that He wrongly understands what they have decided must be true. Herein is written the danger of supposing that our love for the cause of Christ may permit our well-meaning concern to overstep the limits that our discipleship imposes upon us, and to tell our Lord what He can say or do. In this frame of mind, Peter is the forerunner of all Christians who assume that they know anything better than Jesus

and may safely presume to tell Him so. All of Peter's sincere love for Jesus and his devotion to His cause, all his joy flowing out of his past confession, all his happiness born of Jesus' commendation, are insufficient to justify this bold protest against the program of God revealed by His Son! Every believer must be open to correct his own understanding and be able to grow past the limitedness of his beginning conceptions, however rightly stated may have been the terminology in which it was originally expressed.

### 3. Jesus rebukes Peter (16:23)

**16:23 But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men.** What a crushing blow this must have been to the fisherman-Apostle who probably expected to be commended for his love and concerned loyalty, even as he had earlier been recognized for his faith and grasp of his Master's revelation! And yet, too much was riding with the outcome of this confrontation to permit Jesus to treat Peter in any other way. Jesus may not have expected the disciples instantly to fathom the absolutely essential nature of His death, but He did not intend for them to object either!

**Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art a stumbling-block unto me.** Peter is a Satanic trap to Him in a dual sense:

1. Peter's selfish concern for the supremacy of his views as to what the Kingdom of God must be and how it must be brought about is the same subjective self-interest that makes Satan the devil that he is. He had no concern to promote God's interests; only his own.
2. Because this is true, Peter's misdirected affection is nothing but Satan's subtle attempt to sway Jesus from His divinely appointed purpose. Bruce (*Training*, 174) is right on the mark to link with Satan's character this advice to sacrifice duty to self-interest:

That advice was substantially this: "Save thyself at any rate; sacrifice . . . the cause of God to personal convenience." An advice truly Satanic in principle and tendency! For the whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man. Satan's temptations aim at nothing worse than this. Satan is called the Prince of this world, because self-interest rules the world; he is called the accuser of the brethren, because he

does not believe that even the sons of God have any higher motive. He is a skeptic, and his skepticism consists in the determined, scornful unbelief in the reality of any chief end other than that of personal advantage.

Any counsel to prudence, any hope of by-passing the cross which stood at the focal center of God's foreordained plan, is nothing short of being the subtlest whisper of Satan who is making excellent use of perfectly natural, well-meant concern for Jesus' safety and earthly success. "None are more formidable instruments of temptation than well-meaning friends who care more for our comfort than for our character." (Bruce)

Jesus shows His true humanity at a critical point: He is temptable! Peter really has become *a stumbling-block* in Jesus' path. He needed no persuasion to avoid the cross that any true human being would instinctively dread. Rather, He needed to be encouraged to endure it! This is why He responds so drastically to the temptation: He refuses to temporize with sin. In so doing, He sternly exemplifies His own doctrine. (Mt. 5:29, 30)

**Thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men.** Disciples of all epochs must learn once and for all that no man may confess Jesus to be Messiah and Son of God and still permit himself the luxury of disagreeing with whatever in His message does not suit his taste, views or hopes. This very disagreement with the Lord of all earth and heaven is nothing less than *minding the things of men* at the expense of the will, purposes, plans and methods of God.

Whereas it was God who had revealed to Peter the great confession, it is this-worldly self-preservation that prompted his present protest. God planned the death of Christ for man's sins, but the popular concepts dreamed of a political, earthly Messiah ruling in kingly splendor. God intended a reign voluntarily embraced in humble, submissive faith, but men clamored for a triumphalistic, fascistic domination that forced compliance to the architects' brand of king and ruthlessly crushed all opposition. God desired to offer men mercy through the voluntary self-sacrifice of His Son; men's scheme had no place in it for mercy; only self-glorying, self-justifying, self-satisfied self-righteousness. And even if the Apostles who had already given up much for Jesus did not now intend to be selfish, they nevertheless suffered from the short-sightedness of their small view. They were grossly hampered because they preferred their human point of observation as final, rather than God's. Jesus, on the other hand,

could see the victory of God's counsels, as well as the self-defeating, self-destructive end of theirs.

#### 4. The Sermon on the Cost of Our Salvation (16:24-28)

16:24 **Then Jesus said unto his disciples**, but before launching this ultimatum, He "called to him the multitude with his disciples" to hear it. (Cf. Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23) The presence of the crowd argues that His desire for privacy was only partially realized during the trip north. The Evangelists' silence about the motive for the presence of the crowd does not permit us to determine whether Jesus was actively engaged in any public ministry, although this is doubtful, because of the nearness of the final crisis and the deep need of the disciples for further training. The crowds, however, had probably heard of His fame (cf. Mt. 4:23-25) and here too "He could not be hid." (cf. Mk. 7:24) However little or much they knew of Him, they too must hear this hard-hitting, down-to-earth challenge. In short, He was promising "blood, sweat and tears" for every one of His servants. No cost would be too great, no sacrifice too dear for His sake. Only realistic individuals who have taken a long, hard look at discipleship need apply for membership in God's Kingdom! The loyalty and devotion that He had required of His Apostles during their first evangelistic tour (Mt. 10:38f) is also required of everyone without exception. (Mk. 8:34; Lk. 14:27; 17:33) The extreme demands Jesus makes here are not for the heroic few who would live exceptional lives somehow untrammelled with the harrying problems of normal existence, or for spiritual giants capable of reaching this hallowed ground. They are for housewives, businessmen, coal miners, truck drivers, lawyers, sailors, students and pensioners, living and working in the commonest daily experiences. This is not the rare spiritual discipline for so-called "religious orders of super-Christians," but the only means of saving ANYONE!

**If any man would come after me** (*Ei tis thélei . . .*) The service of Christ is to be freely accepted as an autonomous choice of the will and because we want to. (*thélei*) There is no external constraint, just the impelling power of a new affection. It is easy to submit to the subtle pressure of family, friends, the congregation or the preacher. But one cannot become a Christian unless he *wants* to more than anything else. Not even God compromises our liberty to refuse. (See notes on 13:9.) But this does not mean that willingness to deny self and bear a cross are matters of indifference, because the terms of

discipleship He lays down next, by their very nature, are absolutely indispensable, not only to a right understanding of salvation, but to our participation in it. We cannot be disciples of Jesus on any other terms!

**Let him deny himself.** (See Special Study: "The Cost of Our Salvation" after 16:28.) Here all that is Satanic in each disciple meets its Waterloo. Self-interest, self-promotion, self-preservation and self-complacency must forever die. (See notes on 5:5, Vol. I, p. 213.) This death to self is only possible where men have a clear understanding of absolute righteousness and recognize their failure to meet that exacting standard. (See notes on 5:48.) How can anyone seriously present himself before a gloriously holy and righteous God, garbed in filthy rags, all the while pretending that such "finery" could satisfy the most scrupulous examination? (Cf. Isa. 64:6; Ro. 3:9-20; 6:4-11; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 4:22-24; Phil. 1:21; 2:1-8; 3:7-12; Col. 3:5-17; 2 Co. 5:14-19)

**Take up his cross.** Jesus' Galilean listeners well know what cross-bearing meant. In fact, Josephus (*Antiquities*, XVII, 10, 10; *Wars*, II, 5, 2) reports the crucifixion of 2000 insurgents by Varus shortly after the birth of Christ. They knew that His words could only mean the voluntary bearing up under any avoidable suffering, even martyrdom, that would come in the line of duty for anyone committed to Jesus. As he signs his own recruiting papers, each disciple must recognize that he is, at the same time, subscribing to his own death warrant. It is *his cross* he must bear for sake of Jesus. There is no merit or meaning in suffering for any other cause, nor for one's own wrong-doing. Rather, the fiery ordeal that tries each disciple's mettle must come only because he is a Christian and for doing right, conscious of God's will. (1 Pt. 2:19-25; 3:13-18; 4:12-19)

Even though each man must *take up his cross*, such a cross only has meaning as it admits the rightness of Jesus' having borne His. Why bear ours, if His were not part of God's plan? Therefore, the demand that we bear our cross is an implicit demand that we accept His. To the modern Christian, fully accustomed to glorying in the cross of Christ, this sounds backwards. But to those Hebrew disciples, unconvinced that Jesus' cross was an inevitable and integral element in God's planning, this demand is far from superfluous.

Conversely, however, to claim to follow Jesus without admitting His sacrificial death and proclaiming it as God's only plan to save humanity, is tantamount to refusal to bear one's own cross, the instrument by which we identify ourselves with Him and His. But who

would dare minimize His cross? ANYONE is certainly trying it who supposes that social revolution or social service without proclamation of the bloody sacrifice at the cross can still communicate the total message of Jesus or the love of God. No one who understands the social expression of a relevant Christianity could ever deny that the building of hospitals or the feeding of the world's starving populations is a natural fruit of Christ's spirit. But to substitute these for the demand that men not only acknowledge the cross of Christ as the only means of their salvation, but that they also immediately and willingly shoulder their own cross, is to deny the Lord who expects us to do both.

Bearing our cross identifies us with Jesus' understanding of God's program and plan. In effect, this means that, in our own personal experience, we identify with Him by generously giving ourselves in sacrificial service to others, however humiliating or painful this turns out to be for us. (Ro. 8:36; 12:1, 2; 1 Co. 15:31; Heb. 13:13-16; 1 Jn. 3:14-18) Even as He lived out the implications of the cross every day of His life, even before the actual, historical crucifixion, so we too must bear our cross DAILY (Lk. 9:23). What is this challenge but His invitation to every disciple to share in His mission, His method, His experience? Jesus not only assumes upon Himself the responsibility to be the suffering Savior of men, but He also calls into existence a group of self-sacrificing disciples willing to share His work, extending it throughout the world. In this sense, this body of followers will be but the extension of His thoughts, the continuance of His own mission—in short, His body. (Eph. 1:22; 4:12ff) The real test of our belonging to the Church, then, is not merely intellectual orthodoxy, or the ability to give the correct answers, but readiness to serve and follow Jesus whatever it costs. Bales (*Jesus the Ideal Teacher*, 54, italics his) describes the psychological soundness of this challenge:

It will cost to be a Christian. And yet, there is *the heroic in man* which responds to such a challenge. For a cause which he considers worthy, man is willing to sacrifice. . . . To some the Christian life has been presented as a sissified type of thing that demands nothing and brings little. Such is a perversion of Christ's teaching. Men need to understand that although the blessings of the Christian life far outweigh its costs, yet one is called to a life of service. The real tough guy is the guy who has the moral fiber to stand up and do right regardless of what others may think. Such conduct really takes strength of character, but any weakling can drift with the tide and do what the crowd does.

In this sense, then, what seems too rigorous and extreme a requirement, is real wisdom, for Jesus knows that it is the only way to produce His own character in us and actually equip us for the mission on which He sends us.

*And follow me.* (1 Pt. 2:21ff) Psychologically, this death to self is possible only if men make an intensely personal commitment to Jesus. People are far less ready to give themselves to an impersonal cause. Jesus knows that the psychological power to rise to the high sacrifice of self can come only as each person feels the compelling warmth of His own personal challenge. Notice His emphatically personal invitation to "come after ME . . . follow ME . . . lose life for MY sake . . . ashamed of ME (Mk. 8:38), the Son of man (= "I") shall be ashamed of him also . . . for the Son of man ("I") is to come . . . He will repay everyone for what he has done." (Study the implications of Jn. 12:26. Beyond the servant's sharing in Jesus' glory after the judgment, how does the servant share with his Lord now? Where is Jesus at work on this earth in our time? This is where we at His side must busy ourselves in thoughtful, useful service among those in our ken who have any need of our [His] service.) This challenge is but the working out of His own principle: "A servant is not above his Master." (Mt. 10:24f) We must understand that Phil. 2:5-10 was not written to inform theologians about the incarnation and atonement, but to teach all of us that we too must die to self and not have our own way! (Phil. 2:1-4)

This extraordinary invitation must not be misunderstood as a doctrine applicable only to a certain, critical era fortunately different from our own, or applicable only to those willing to live dangerously in prominent roles as unwelcome prophetic leaders who publicly denounce the world's sins, or, simply, as a doctrine too demanding for ordinary people. No, the cutting edge of Jesus' requirements must not be dulled, since their imperative character reflects the will of God for each of us. We must identify ourselves with them by obeying, because these very demands identify us with, and justify, His determination to cooperate with the purpose of God: "The Son of man must . . ." (16:21) Thus, our identification with His cross must identify us with God's purpose for our lives, and, as Morgan (*Matthew*, 219) expresses it: "whether it be laughter or crying, sorrowing or sighing, the secret of life is to follow Him on the pathway of loyalty to the Divine Will."

**16:25 For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.** Because the terms of service

in Jesus' discipleship are so exacting, Jesus mercifully submits three persuasive reasons to make acceptance easier, each of which argues that the disciple who obeys is actually acting in his own best interest.

1. Because only the loss of self in Christ's service leads to true life. (16:25)
2. Because he who loses himself in self-interested choices, loses everything. (16:26)
3. Because Jesus will reward everyone on the basis of his own free choices. (16:27)

The hub around which Jesus' paradoxical declarations turn is every man's decision about what constitutes *his life* (*tēn psuchēn autoū*). Implicit in His words is an understanding of life that includes both earthly, temporal life and eternal life hereafter. But, for those whose view of reality includes only the here and now, Jesus is talking absolute nonsense. This statement immediately tests everyone's view of reality: whose world is real, Jesus' or his own? The critical importance of this pronouncement lies in its ability to test our own view even of our own life: what is our *life* (*psuchē*)? Luke (9:25) furnishes a precious key to understand to what Jesus refers. Instead of Matthew's "gain the whole world but forfeits his life" (16:26a), Luke says: "gain the whole world and lose HIMSELF." Thus, Jesus is talking about man's own being, his soul, his ego, his person, which he possesses in this life and could lose or keep for eternity. (Cf. Jn. 12:25, not parallel) Paraphrased, this becomes: "Whoever decides to protect all that contributes to and constitutes his personal happiness, shall lose everything. Whoever surrenders all this for my sake, shall find that he has really preserved it best!" In context, Jesus will clearly illustrate this attempt to save oneself: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed when he comes . . . then he will repay every man for what he has done." (Mk. 8:38; Mt. 16:27b) Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 656ff) is right to teach that the great contrast in life choices here is between love and selfishness. In fact, the person who would save *his life* seeks to promote his own predominantly selfish interests. He relies upon what he has made himself. He must subordinate every choice, every relationship to the preservation of whatever good he sees in himself, because this latter is of absolute value and importance to him. His first concern is for his own well-being, popularity, position and possessions. Accordingly, the person who is anxious to save his own skin, will abandon truth and righteousness.

and Jesus. Cowardly withdrawing from the pressure and avoiding the hatred inevitably directed toward true disciples of the Lord, he retreats to a temporarily safe position. This instinctive selfishness, however, is self-defeating and will be inevitably frustrated. Despite his gaining a few years of ease and tranquility in this way, such a person will die after all, only to face the Christ he had so miserably denied in the name of prudence. All that he had hoped to save by his caution, prudence and evasions, is forever lost. So, "the prudent" are damned!

**Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.** This is the man who loves, whose whole existence is bound up in out-going sharing with others for Christ's sake. He understands how Christ loved him and, because of that love, he responds by loving Him and anyone Jesus wants him to love, whatever that costs. Love is what makes *life* all that it is meant to be, because self-giving love brings real usefulness to the world and personal satisfaction in successful help rendered others. (Cf. 1 Co. 13; 2 Co. 8:1-7; 9:6-15; Gal. 2:20) Real *life* is "to know that one is loved, and then to love in return, and in showing this love to recognize no boundaries among men beyond which love cannot go, that is life." (Hendriksen, *ibid.*) Ironically, the man who risks everything involved in Jesus' discipleship, and spurns the unreal "safe houses," those pseudo-refuges in this life, will actually protect his own best interests best. He places everything into the hands of a trustworthy guarantor, God. And even if he should temporarily lose family, possessions, economic security or even his own physical life, he joyfully suffers the sacking of his goods, because he sees Him who is the invisible Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. (Cf. Heb. 10:32-39; 11:6, 25-27, 35f)

Note the striking parallel: "If any man would . . ." and "Whosoever would . . ." (vv. 25, 26) Our discipleship and how we spend it, is left a matter of free choice. No man can shake his angry fist at God, blaming Him for his personal failure to find life. Further, the freedom to spend our life precisely as we wish (*thélei*), is unhampered by God. The crucial difference does not consist in whether anyone can really save his life or not, because the winners and the losers, after all, spend their whole lives, sacrificing all their powers and possibilities to arrive at what they consider their goals and for whatever they consider to be the right reasons. The crucial difference, rather, lies in the reason for which the life is spent. Only those who spend (*lose*) their life *for Jesus' sake* succeed in discovering life in all its fullest, best senses. (Cf. Mt. 19:29) To have sacrificed

everything—talents, power, opportunities, influence—all for the wrong reason, self, is really to lose everything that was real life. So, the conscious quest of happiness by taking the route of self-interest is the surest way of missing the happy life.

If there must be any concern for self, it must be our concern to be useful means to accomplish His purposes for us. Beyond this, however, the disciple, now absolutely unconcerned about personal glory or comfort; and practically careless about personal consequences, sees himself as having only relative value and only comparative importance, i.e. relative to the greater perspective from which he now views everything in which God and His will are biggest values in his whole scale and control everything else. This is why only an adequate concept of grace can prevent people from demanding their rights, even to life itself, if they need to surrender them for Jesus' sake. Here is where the settled conviction of one's own real damnation actually helps him. It saves him from defending the indefensible. Why would anyone attempt to *save his life*? Because he supposes himself to be worthy and justifiable JUST AS HE IS. But grace teaches that he cannot be justified AS HE IS, and must be forgiven FOR WHAT HE IS. (Romans 1:8; Tit. 2:11-14)

**Lose his life for my sake** “and the sake of the gospel” (Mk. 8:35) means to give up self for all that Jesus is and stands for and is trying to get done through His body, the Church. The Gospel is but the good news about Jesus, and the implications of this message, hence the entire program of Christ, the success of the Kingdom of God. (Cf. Lk. 18:29f) So, for the worldlings, unconvincing or unsure of Jesus’ credentials and true identity, Jesus’ promise of life to those who bet everything on Him sound like a risky long shot in a game where the stakes are astronomical. So, the whole question boils down to the decision whether we really think He knows what He’s talking about, or not. If He does, there is absolutely no risk! If He does not, we are wasting time with Him anyway. How can we be sure? Because God raised Him from the dead and named Him Judge of all and set the date for our trial. (Acts 17:30f)

**16:26 For what shall a man be profited, if he gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?** Consider Lk. 12:15-21 as commentary on this unanswered and unanswerable question. **Gain the whole world**, taken in the absolute sense, is the goal sought by only a few unrealistic dreamers. If they happen to be idealistic disciples of Jesus, then they probably see the Messianic Kingdom as the triumphal crushing the free choice of all

those who do not willingly submit to the Messiah. But this kind of world conquest leads only to the destruction of all the moral values Jesus came to establish. On the other hand, more modest goals constitute *the whole world* for the more realistic. The only distinction, however, lies in one's own definition of what, for him, constitutes *the world* to be conquered. But these are only relative differences without a real distinction, relative differences which make no real difference to Jesus. In fact, *forfeiture of one's life* is a price too high for the value received. The conquest of all that anyone wishes to consider his personal world to conquer, at the expense of the forfeiture of his own life, is worthless in the final balance. *Gaining the whole world*, therefore, is not merely a commercial transaction bargained for by a wealthy industrialist, or the battlefield conclusion of a victorious potentate. It is the arriving at one's goals by being "ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation"! (Mk. 8:38 = Lk. 9:26) This also expresses itself in being unconcerned about Jesus' words which would bless men by making them righteous, noble-spirited, holy people, giving them peace of conscience and joy in the Holy Spirit. Too often the highest practical goal of millions is to be "happy animals" oblivious to spiritual considerations. So, the proper investment of one's life is of absolute importance.

This rule applies as much to Jesus Himself as to the humblest disciple in His Kingdom. In fact, had Jesus acceded to Satan's offer to concede Him all the kingdoms of the world, in exchange for His homage, what could Jesus Himself yet offer to repurchase His own freedom from Satan's bondage? No, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." (Savor the whole context of Jn. 12:23-33!)

The cowardly disciple, the purpose of whose existence is to save his own neck at any price, will be bullied into denial of his discipleship by the powerful insistence of his own degenerate contemporaries. But because of this betrayal of all that is holy and precious to God, consistent with truth and justice, Jesus will be ashamed of him. (Mt. 10:32f; 2 Ti. 2:12)

Or, if the expression *forfeit his life* is synonymous with death, then, Jesus says: "What profit is there, if a man should arrive at his life's highest goals and gain all the greatest of earthly possessions, and then dies? His life has been spent. What could he possibly have of value to give in order to have his life back again?"

**What shall a man give in exchange for his life?** Does Jesus mean

this verse to contain two questions somewhat parallel, hence, synonymous, or, rather, two consecutive questions expressing a development in thought? If the latter, then: in whose hands does Jesus see the man as having forfeited his life and to whom he must now give something in exchange for it to have it again?

1. To Satan? Having pawned his life to Satan for whatever Satan had offered to provide, in order to repurchase his own soul, what could impoverished man give in exchange for something so precious? From this standpoint, the doctrine of grace receives extra support, because the answer to this rhetorical question ("What shall a man give . . . ?") must be that, without help from God who mercifully interposes the sacrifice of Christ as redemption of the pawned soul, man is absolutely penniless, hence unable to give anything of his own to buy back his forfeited soul.
2. To God? Having spent God's gift of life for himself, when man is called to face his Maker to commit his soul to God, what, of all the baubles collected and for which that life was misspent, what could he substitute for *his life*? What could have the same value as what God gave him, that he might return *in exchange for his life*?

This must have been an incredible concept, unimaginable by contemporary standards in Jesus' day, since it implies that all the materialistic goals and worldly gains, as these were envisioned for the Messianic Kingdom in standard Jewish thought, are grossly unsatisfactory and inadequate. Is it credible that the triumphalistic, materialistic golden age as they fancied it, should finally be so self-seeking in its aims as to cause everyone who had banked everything on its realization, *to forfeit his life*?

Bruce (*Training*, 180), on the other hand, sees Jesus' meaning differently:

The two questions set forth the incomparable value of the soul on both sides of a commercial transaction. The soul, or life, in the true sense of the word, is too dear a price to pay even for the whole world, not to say for that small portion of it which falls to the lot of any one individual . . . The whole world is too small, yea, an utterly inadequate price, to pay for the ransom of the soul once lost . . . Mic. 6:6f.

The whole point is that, apart from God's grace, the lost soul has no market price, although the damned would wish it so.

How poignantly was this very reality played out in Peter's later denial of his Master in order to save his own skin! What if Peter had truly escaped conviction for being a disciple of the Nazarene, only to live on for 50-60 more years, relatively undisturbed under the leaky umbrella of the powers that be on earth? What would he have gained? What would he have lost! And Peter had just now been ashamed of Jesus' revelation of His approaching suffering!

**16:27 For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then shall he render unto every man according to his deeds.** See the discussion of this coming of Jesus in the Special Study: "The Coming of the Son of Man," (Vol. II, pp. 430ff) That this coming of the Son of man is His personal second coming, is proven by the following factors:

1. His coming would be surrounded *with the glory of the Father*. Whether He means that His appearance would be enwrapped in that glory that is usually associated with the Father, or accompanied by a glorious manifestation of the Father Himself in person with Jesus, there is no denying the public character and magnitude of such an appearance. But for Him to be in a position to share *in the glory of His Father* must mean that He will have been fully vindicated and glorified, His death notwithstanding. Although He affirms His deity by speaking to "His Father" in the unshared sense of unique Son of God, He too would be punished for such presumption, unless this claim be vindicated too.
2. His appearance will be attended by his *holy angels*. (Cf. 2 Th. 1:7; Mt. 25:31)
3. His stated purpose is *to render unto every man according to his deeds*. He affirms His right to judge all nations. (Cf. Jn. 5:29; 2 Cor. 11:15; Rev. 2:23; 1 Cor. 3:13f; Psa. 62:12; Prov. 24:12)

These considerations may not be weakened by appeal to the Greek original, as if Jesus mistakenly believed that the date of His return were soon. While it is true that *mέλλει γάρ ho huiός tοῦ anθρόπου érchesthai* can be rendered: "The Son of man is about to come," nevertheless, the verb *mέλλει* may also be rendered in the following manners: a. "to be about to, to have in mind to, to plan to, to want to." b. "to be established that, to be in the circumstance to," thus, ordinarily: "I may or I must," as by the force of the will of others or by the events. This is even weakened sometimes to a mere possibility: "I can perhaps, I must perhaps." c. "To hesitate, to put off, to delay,

to defer to." 4. Sometimes *mellei* serves as a simple paraphrase for the future tense, substituting for future tense forms that were disappearing from common use. (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, § 338, 3; 350; 356; Arndt-Gingrich, 502; Rocci, 1203) This latter usage is the more likely and preferable, especially in light of the definiteness and certainty with which Jesus' second coming is taught elsewhere.

The reasons for His mentioning His coming in judgment upon the world are multiple:

1. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4, etc.) When men tremble in terror of men's threats, they must be shaken by the realization that they do not stand before human tribunals, but before the Judge of all the earth! (Mt. 10:28, 33) Only a proper fear of displeasing our Lord will be sufficient to hold us faithful against the provocations to protect ourselves at all costs. G. C. Morgan (*Matthew*, 220) said it well:

The Judge will be the Lord whose cross you will not share today. To whom will you appeal from His verdict? The last throne is His throne, and at the final assize He presides. If you save your life today, how will you buy it back, for the Man for Whom you will not suffer is the Man coming to reign in His glory.

In effect, Jesus warns: "You will see my glory and face my judgment. I will judge you on the basis of your loyalty to me!" Unless He can cause His disciples to be sensitive to His displeasure more than to their own self-protective instincts, He will have failed to convert them at their most fundamental psychological level.

2. Beyond fear to displease the Lord Jesus, Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 658) notes another excellent connection: "Do not seek to possess the whole world. That will mean loss. Leave the matter of receiving a reward to the Son of man. He at his coming will reward every man according to his deeds." (See Special Study "The Reasonableness of the Redeemer's Rewards for Righteousness," Vol. I, 198ff) Jesus' words here are two-edged: they promise and threaten at the same time, the difference in application being merely what each person intends to do about his own discipleship. Does our discipleship become less ethical, merely because we desire the crown of righteousness and fear eternal contempt? Some would

grade Jesus down for establishing such categorical alternatives that influence our present choices on the basis of the prospects of future destiny, as well as for encouraging right choices by hope of reward, rather than teaching virtue for its own sake. Bruce (*Training*, 181) answers such cavils correctly:

. . . an alternative is involved in any earnest doctrine of moral distinctions or of human freedom and responsibility. . . . Christians need not be afraid of degenerating into moral vulgarity in Christ's company. There is no vulgarity or impurity in the virtue that is sustained by the hope of eternal life.

Those who would object to Jesus' offering repayment or reward to His disciples make just one more example of people who enjoy informing God about His privileges and duty!

3. The fitting climax to Jesus' discourse on the necessity of entering into the glorious Messianic life through suffering and death to self, is the truth implied in Jesus' promise: "Although I must suffer, I will arrive at the glory that is rightly mine, because I will return in my Father's splendor, with His obvious approval and exalted glory." The confused disciples had seen nothing until now, but humiliation, affliction and execution. Now they must admit the truth of His promise of victory ("and rise again the third day" 16:21). He forces them to face the heavenly glory. Luke expresses this threefold glory far more emphatically: "he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and (the glory) of the holy angels" (Lk. 9:26). To disciples, heart-broken at the news of His humiliation, He says that the same *Son of man* who must suffer soon and who now calls men to shoulder their crosses, *shall come in glory!* It is only through the cross that men arrive at the crown, through the grave they arrive in glory, through death they arrive at dominion. (Cf. 2 Ti. 4:8; 1 Co. 15:42f; Rev. 2:10, 26f; 3:21; consider Mt. 16:27 as the affirmation of Daniel 7:9-18, 22, 27) Jesus, too, will be rewarded only after enduring the cross and despising the shame. (Heb. 12:2f) The disciple is not above the Master. Must the servant have his reward before, or even without, the shame and contempt?

What is the resplendent *glory* with which Jesus will be surrounded? Is it only the blazing brilliance of light? Yes, at least this, but such visible splendor is but one aspect of a spiritual God. The glory of Jesus is also His praiseworthiness for what He will then have accomplished on the spiritual plane too:

1. He will have brilliantly succeeded in removing the final scaffolding from a glorious Church, having fitted into place the final stone. Now He can reveal her in all her corporate beauty, notwithstanding the wide diversity of individual lives, gifts, personalities and ministries, He will have then succeeded in gathering into one glorious harmony all these varied personalities submitted to His direction. (Cf. Eph. 3:10, 21)
2. He will have accomplished to the full all the things of God upon which He had fixed His heart and mind all the time He was a Man! This is implicit in His encouragement aimed to bolster the sagging faith of disciples whose confidence in His ability to succeed has been shaken.

Only a cosmic, long-range view of His total mission and victory would suffice to provide the motivation for our willingness to bear reproach for Him. But because of His resurrection, we can be certain that He is able to carry out the remainder of His promises. The only question is whether we believe it or not.

**16:28 Verily I say unto you, There are some of them that stand here who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.** (Cf. the Spécial Study "The Coming of the Son of Man," Vol. II, pp. 430ff, esp. 437ff.) The coming of the Son of man, intended in this verse, is clearly distinct from that intended in the preceding verse, unless, with some modern scholars, we are ready to attribute a gross error to Jesus. They would hold that He Himself expected to return during the lifetime of His Twelve. While He confessed not to know the time of "that day and that hour" (Mt. 24:36), He affirmed nothing about not knowing perfectly every other detail thereabout. In 16:27, rather, He shows that He does know these details. As with other prophecies, so also this one must be interpreted in the light of its undoubted fulfilment. Jesus did not return personally in the lifetime of His Apostles. Therefore, He did not intend to promise that here. Rather, Jesus did establish His Kingdom during the lifetime of these disciples, therefore that is the coming He had in mind. (Study Acts 1 and 2 as the beginning of the fulfilment of this prophecy.)

Had Jesus meant to refer to His own second coming in this verse, then it would be assumed by the reader that, after some would have seen the coming of the Son of man in His kingdom, then they would experience death. But the very final defeat of death at the final judgment precludes this possibility. (Cf. 1 Co. 15:25, 26) Therefore,

when the Lord affirmed that **some would not die until** they should see **Him coming in His Kingdom**, He really leaves open the possibility that, after that event, they could really die. In light of the Church's beginning on Pentecost, an event witnessed by every Apostle (except the suicide, Judas, Mt. 27:3-5), we must affirm that this verse refers at least to that event, and maybe to much more in the life of the early Church. Today, however, the Apostles are all dead, and Jesus has not yet personally returned in His glory and royal dignity. What has occurred in verses 27, 28 has been correctly analyzed by Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 659). Jesus shows the Apostles His entire glorification as one unitary concept embracing all the events from His exaltation and vindication at Pentecost and the period following clear up to His second coming. Verse 27 outlines His final victory; verse 28 describes its beginning.

A careful harmonization of all that Jesus said reveals His full intention:

MATTHEW:

There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

MARK:

There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.

LUKE:

There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.

The differences in reporting Jesus' words may be resolved in the following manner: "You will live to see the beginning of my Kingdom surrounded with power. The arrival of the Kingdom of God is equal to and contemporaneous with the beginning of my reign as King." The fulfilment of this promise was only understood by faith, since Jesus did not personally appear in Jerusalem at Pentecost, nor even visibly above Jerusalem, exalted at the right hand of God. Not even then did Jesus perform stupendous personal signs, other than those actually recorded as performed by the Holy Spirit, to convince men of His reign. But what was done was evidence enough that He had indeed begun to rule the Kingdom of God with power. (Cf. Ac. 2:32, 33, 36) That the post-crucifixion, post-Pentecost events are evidence of Jesus' coming in His Kingdom is clear from the following observations:

1. The disciples saw Jesus ascend to the Father's right hand. (Ac. 1:6-11; Lk. 24:50-52)

2. They beheld the Spirit's coming to bring charismatic power, help and illumination. (Ac. 2:1ff)
3. They witnessed the birth of the Church among the Hebrew people despite the helpless rage of His enemies. (Ac. 4:24-33; 8:4; 21:20!) They thought of this as "the Kingdom." (Ac. 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; Ro. 14:17; 1 Co. 4:20; Col. 1:13; 1 Th. 2:12; Heb. 1:8; 12:28; Rev. 1:9)
4. They participated personally in the vigorous, rapid, world-wide expansion of the Church among the Gentiles. Ac. 10; 11:19-26; 13-28
5. They labored for and witnessed the maturing of the Church's love, boldness and oneness.
6. Some of the Apostles, notably John, witnessed the fall of national Judaism with its temple, priesthood and sacrifices, and the triumph of the Gospel proclaimed in every part of the Roman empire.

These all provide evidence of Christ's royal reign in and through the ministry of His people, the Christians. These momentous events, from the world's point of view, could be described as "filling all Jerusalem with your teaching" (Ac. 5:28) and as "turning the world upside down" (Ac. 17:6) But from the Christian point of view, however, it was evidence of Christ's glory and reign. (Col. 1:13)

And so ends Matthew's chapter 16, as orderly as a tax-collector's record, but as incisive as an Apostle's sermon. In effect, Matthew says to his reader: "The signs are conclusive that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son. Although many did not acknowledge Him, many did, and became part of His new, invincible, immortal assembly. Death would not stop Him, nor any who follow Him. However, He demands total loyalty and complete self-submission of His servants. A high price, but the world's best bargain, since everything else is even more expensive and not worth the price paid for it. Jesus will return to judge everyone on the basis of what they will have decided and done? Dear reader, what is your choice?"

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What incidents took place immediately preceding this journey Jesus took to Caesarea Philippi, and where did they occur?
2. Locate Caesarea Philippi on the map, describing its location in relation to Capernaum. Tell something of its history and importance.

3. Since the King James Version speaks of "the coasts of Caesarea," explain what is meant by "coasts." Where exactly were Jesus and the Twelve during the conversation recorded in this section?
4. Which Gospel writer notices that Jesus was praying at this time? What relation would there be between this prayer and what follows?
5. Why did Jesus ask two questions of His disciples, when possibly only the second one was what He really wanted to know?
6. At what stage in His ministry was Jesus when He quizzed His followers in this way?
7. How many times and on what occasions had the Apostles made similar confessions of the unique identity of Jesus? What is the specific importance, then, of this particular confession in the growth of faith and understanding of the Twelve? How does it differ from those other, however similar, confessions?
8. In what way is Jesus' question as to His identity important (a) to the disciples; (b) to the multitudes; (c) to us?
9. Cite all the passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke which, up to this point, show the deity of Jesus or indicate His unique relationship to the Father, and which, because of this, become reasons Peter and others could confess Jesus as Christ and Son of God.
10. Where did the multitudes get such misconceptions about Jesus as to think of Him as John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the ancient prophets?
11. What is the full significance of Peter's answer? What meaning would his words have to these Apostles conversant with the Old Testament? What is meant by "the Christ"? What is it to confess Him as "Son of God"?
12. What literal truth is meant by each of the following figures of speech?
 

a. "flesh and blood"	b. "gates of Hades"
c. "keys of the kingdom of heaven"	d. "binding" and "loosing"
e. "take up one's cross"	f. "upon this rock"
	g. "taste of death"
13. What does "Bar-Jonah" mean? Does this prove that Jesus was speaking Aramaic in this incident? If so, what would this prove about the contention of some that in Aramaic He would have said, "You are *Cephas* and upon this *cepha* I will build my church?" If not, what is this Aramaic expression doing in the middle of a Greek sentence?
14. Explain how God revealed to Peter the truth he had confessed.

Did Peter know this truth before he spoke, or did he speak by immediate inspiration? Is Jesus' own ministry the thing referred to by the expression, "flesh and blood"? Did not Jesus have a flesh-and-blood body in which He lived and worked? Did Jesus have anything to do with revealing His real identity to Peter? But, if so, how can He say that "my Father who is in heaven (has revealed this to you)"?

15. Explain Jesus' remark about building His Church. What is an *ekklesia*, and what is its significance in helping us to understand what a "church" is? In what sense, then, is it to be His Church?
16. Identify the "rock" on which Jesus built His Church and prove that your identification is the only one correct, showing the weaknesses of the other explanations offered for "this rock."
17. In what sense(s) is it true that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it"? What is it that they shall not prevail against? Why does the King James Version say "gates of Hell"?
18. When Jesus gave the Apostles and Peter (Mt. 16:19; 18:18) the power of binding and loosing, He said, "Whatever you bind (or loose) on earth, shall be bound (or loosed) in heaven." Now, did He mean that anything that the Apostles required or permitted during their earthly ministry would later be supported, or ratified, by God? If so, in what sense? Or did He intend to say that in the future they would require or permit nothing that God had not already required or permitted from eternity? How could you know this? In other words, which comes first in the historical sequence: (a) what the Apostles require or permit? or (b) what God requires or permits? What historical facts help us to answer this question?
19. Why did Peter begin to rebuke Jesus? Why did Jesus rebuke Peter? How was Peter a "Satan" and a "stumbling block" to Jesus?
20. Quote and explain what Jesus said and meant about the high cost of discipleship, i.e. the exacting requirements for following Him.
21. What effective threat did Jesus place before those who would be tempted to be cowards in the face of grave difficulties so frightening as to be ashamed of Him?
22. Affirm or deny: according to our text Jesus taught and sincerely believed that His second coming should have taken place during the lifetime of some of His disciples present on the day that this discussion took place. Explain your reasons for the position you take.

## APPLICATIONS

## "DAMNING CHRIST WITH FAINT PRAISE"

16:14-16

Today, as in first-century Palestine, men continue to underevaluate Jesus of Nazareth, and so "damn Him with faint praise," because their esteem or praise so badly mirrors the reality. They hold Him to be far less than what He really is:

1. Some admit Him to be *the best of men* that ever lived, but *not the Sovereign Lord* who wisely and perfectly administers His Kingdom.
  - a. As long as they can approve of Jesus' doctrine, judging it by the criteria of a generous humanism, so long will Jesus enjoy their esteem.
  - b. However, should Jesus, at some point, contradict their idea of God or their vision of man and what man needs to better his lot, then at this very point, they do not hesitate to dissent.
  - c. For such people, Jesus' methods are too slow. The emphasis He places upon the conversion of the individual is, for them, an unrealistic scheme, incapable of changing the course of humanity.
  - d. Ironically, Jesus cannot be even the best of men, or even considered good, if His "unprovable, unacceptable" claims to be divine are to be taken seriously and rejected as untrue. But, if He really is divine, then no amount of human dissent can detract one iota of the wisdom of His sovereign rule!

Others would consider Him to be *the perfect man*, but *not the God-man*.

- a. Great, popular theologians attempt to diminish the impact of the New Testament assertions of the divinity of Jesus. But these Biblical affirmations involve the validity of His most marvelous claims. They also demonstrate that all that He requires of all men is absolutely essential, because His words are the words of God.
- b. These scholars attempt to reduce the force of Jesus' claims, because, if what He says should prove true, then some principle of theirs is seen to be false, though they have always defended it and reasoned on the basis of it. Woe to anyone who would

disturb their well-established, sacrosanct presuppositions, because, according to them, they have been established on the basis of "the assured results of modern criticism with its scientific conclusions!" And yet these same scholars would hail Jesus as the Ideal Man.

- c. Ironically, Jesus cannot qualify to be the Perfect Man, if His moral and intellectual credentials are not in order, because He claims to be both divine and human, when, according to many unbelieving theories, He is not.
- 3. Or else men honor Him as a *Divine Savior*, but not a Savior qualified to be such *on the basis of His atoning sacrifice*.
  - a. Why should this concept offend men? Because, whereas men do feel the need of something or someone to deliver them from all their ills, yet it must *not* be done *at the expense of their pride*.
  - b. They want to arrive as far as possible in their own power, by their own intelligence, as autonomous men.
  - c. But the concept of a Jesus that offers Himself as a unique sacrifice eliminates all merit in human effort to justify oneself before God, and this is for them a grave offense. Jesus, by His all-sufficient sacrifice, says, "Without me, you can do nothing!" which means: "You cannot do it by yourself!" Thus, He condemns their self-sufficiency.
  - d. The doctrine of salvation by human submission and self-denial that denounces all self-justification before God, has always been offensive to many.
  - e. Ironically, however, it is impossible to have a Savior who saves from earth's pain, who does not also save from the sins that are its cause. Nor can such a Savior save from sins, unless He attack that malignant cancer that stands at the root of all other evil: *human pride!*
- 4. To the extent that men consider Jesus to be only a prophet, and not "the Christ, the Son of the living God," they can serenely search elsewhere for the realization of their messianic hopes:
  - a. If Jesus is no more than a John the Baptist, an Elijah, or Jeremiah, or just another undefinable prophet, then we may safely search elsewhere for our supreme Hero!
  - b. And people actually go looking for Him in science, philosophy, law, letters, music, social service, or elsewhere.
  - c. However, men of today who do not decide to follow Jesus as committed disciples of the supreme Prophet of God, automatically

align themselves with those who formally praise Him, but, in substance, they reject Him!

- d. This rejection, in the light of the sufficiency of the signs that validate all that He says of Himself, eliminates the claim to be an "honest doubter." There may remain many doubts, but they can no longer be called "honest."

**CONCLUSION:** Let us not praise Jesus superficially, pretending to say something important about Him, when we have no intention to go all the way with Him in sacrificial service. Let us praise Him, confessing Him for what He really is: the Christ, the Son of the living God, King of kings and Lord of lords!

But let us praise Him with a solid understanding of what we believe about Him! Our faith, if it is to be mature, must not be a sheltered house-plant, unaware of the options, untested by the winds of opposition from hostile opinions. We must be aware of these low views of Christ's essential identity and glory, we must test them and be prepared to be loyal to our convictions, despite the fact that we may remain a small minority in the world.

#### SPECIAL STUDY:

#### THE COST OF OUR SALVATION

During His ministry of approximately three years Jesus of Nazareth, with fiery words of eternal wisdom, set the skies ablaze over Judea and Galilee, announcing the most important news man was ever to hear! He raised no army, laid and collected no taxes, put on no robes of royalty. Yet, His sudden rise to the public eye was very little short of being as spectacular as that of any historic revolutionary. The common people heard Him gladly. At first, the leaders of Judaism listened with an interest which turned sour, first into disgust, then bitter hatred. Jesus stormed the capital of the Jews and wrought havoc right in the sacred precinct by raising embarrassing questions, exposing Pharisaic hypocrisy, and by claiming for Himself the nomenclature which was exclusively Messianic. Characteristically, He demonstrated His most magnificent claims by producing the most inescapable proof—"mighty works, wonders, and signs, which God did by Him in the midst" of those who most wanted to disclaim and destroy such proof. And yet, whether in the midst of the haranguing

in the Temple, or during the storm-tossed boating experiences on Lake Tiberias, or by intercepting the funeral procession at Nain, or in the midst of the popularity of the multitudes on many occasions, this Jesus proved Himself to be the Christ, the Son of God to those whose hearts made them willing. Later, Jesus was to die for all men of all times. In that death the punishment for sin was to be meted out upon the Son of God, although He had lived a pure life among sinners of every description!

At this mighty demonstration of God's living in human flesh we at first can only marvel. We are challenged by His words, awe-stricken by His works. Desiring to hear more of His lessons on the Kingdom of God, we join the crowds pressing around Him as He speaks to the great multitudes in Perea. Like everyone else in that vast audience, we listen breathlessly for some clue as to when He will accept our crown, march into Jerusalem, overthrow our oppressors, and establish God's Kingdom into which we can press. There have been reliable reports from Galilee, the Decapolis and northern Perea that Jesus fed more than 5,000 people on one occasion and upwards of 4,000 on another. At least some of the eyewitnesses of those events have suggested that the Nazarene could do this indefinitely, feeding our armies, reducing famines to a memory of the past, healing our sick and wounded,—even to the point of raising all our dead!

Quiet! He is seating Himself on that boulder to teach:

If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' (Lk. 14:26-30)

We stop listening, puzzled by His words as He goes on to speak of kings and salt. We listen as He gets through to us once more, "So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

Questions race through our minds: Do you mean to say, Master, that it costs something to be your disciple? Who pays this cost? What do you mean by "self-denial"? (I thought that you were going to provide what we did not have, and that we would get to keep what

is already ours!) How must we renounce all that we have? What is this "cross-bearing"? We heard John say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." What does repentance have to do with it?

Here are some answers to our questions:

### I. DISCIPLESHIP (and its end product, SALVATION) IS EXPENSIVE!

No expense has meaning except for those who must pay the cost. Therefore, to WHOM is the charge laid for the salvation of man?

A. It cost GOD THE FATHER AND CHRIST THE SON to purchase our salvation! The souls of men were up for sale on the world market and God in His love paid the highest price Heaven could afford to buy men back. Our redemption cost God many heartbreaks and bitter tears as He dealt patiently with a capricious nation, so He could raise up a family through which His Son could come. It cost Christ the humiliation of the death for sinners whom He had come to save. It cost God the best blood of earth—that of His prophets and apostles who laid down their lives in confirmation of their testimony to God's truth. It cost God countless billions of blessings to lead men by the goodness of His Providence. Yes, even before the world was formed, God counted the cost and cried out, "I will pay it!"

B. It cost the gracious HOLY SPIRIT Who strove with men before the flood, signified God's truth by means of the ancient prophets, and at the present works through the Word of God, which He Himself guaranteed. It costs Him to live in the often unclean temples of our bodies. But He too, agonizing with straying sheep, cried out, "I will pay it!"

C. It costs the WOULD-BE DISCIPLES also. Christ reads our hearts and foresees the future. He knows that we, the multitudes, will fall away from Him, and many would even cry out? "Crucify! Crucify! Away with Him!" And so He sifts the crowds by explaining in the boldest terms possible, that His salvation, His discipleship, His Kingdom, is going to cost the would-be disciple something too!

### II. THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP AND SALVATION STATED

What is the cost of salvation to us? Why does the Lord demand it? "I thought that salvation was to be a free gift!" someone would object. But is not the very nature of the grace of God its undeserved blessing at the cost only of the One who extends it? Paul emphasizes this, answering affirmatively:

But God's free gift is not at all to be compared with the offense. For if by one man's offence the whole race of men have died, to a much greater degree God's favor and His gift imparted by His favor through the one man Jesus Christ, has overflowed for the whole race of men. And the gift is not at all to be compared with the results of that one man's sin. For that sentence resulted from the offence of one man, and it meant condemnation; but the free gift resulted from the offenses of many, and it meant right standing. For if by one man's offense death reigned through that one, to a much greater degree will those who continue to receive the overflow of His unmerited favor and His gift of right standing with Himself, reign in real life through One, Jesus Christ.

(Romans 5:15-17, Williams' translation.)

God's gifts are described as free, truly enough. However, the main feature of God's free gift—a feature that is so often totally by-passed,—is that it is the free opportunity to extricate oneself by the power of Christ from the entangling alliances with sin. The opportunity is free, yet priceless! The laying hold of this opportunity is the expensive item to all concerned—this is the crux of the matter.

From what is this great salvation accomplished? SIN which finds its origin in the very person of man himself.

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. (James 1:13-15)

For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.

(Mark 7:21-23)

This harmonizes perfectly with Jesus' requirement: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself . . ." (Mt. 16:24; Lk. 9:23) Thus, Jesus is also placing before men a great paradox: a discipleship which leads to a priceless salvation to be received as a free, unearned gift, and, at the same time, He lays down the unmistakable terms at which that salvation may be had. The very consideration that our pure, righteous God would, and did, extend terms of surrender to a rebellious human-kind is the very summit definition

of grace!

What is this "self-denial" of which Jesus speaks: "If a man hate . . . not his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."? Let us first decide what "self-denial" is not, and so draw the circle to include only what Jesus meant.

1. Christ has not asked us to deny ourselves of this or that luxury, but to deny **OURSELVES**! Some early preacher described the deadly cancer of self as manifesting itself as:

- a. Self-will, the desire to be outside the law of obedience, i.e. above the responsibility to obey.
- b. Self-interest, the desire to be outside the law of sacrifice, i.e. free from the responsibility to sacrifice self for others.
- c. Self-sufficiency, the desire to be outside the law of fellowship, i.e. no sense of responsibility for others.

The whole scheme of redemption pictures the best love of man for himself as this is appropriately expressed in his willingness to save himself from the power, guilt and consequences of sin in himself. Man rightly cares for his own true, best life and wishes it to be developed and strengthened. (Eph. 5:28, 29; Mt. 22:39) Indeed, in the first gospel message, Peter urged the proper kind of self-preservation: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation!" (Ac. 2:40) This prevents us from misconstruing Jesus' words.

2. Similarly, Christ is not asking us to deny ourselves whatever is good and needful for strengthening of our spiritual or physical life. Jesus taught that fasting, for its own sake, was incompatible with the genius of the Kingdom of God, which "is not eating or drinking [or lack of it, HEF], but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17; also Mt. 9:14-17) All other forms of asceticism must bend to this same plan. (Col. 2:20-23) All real values are those which develop character and lead to eternal life. God let Solomon write from personal experience that all seeking after worldly ambitions, wealth, self-satisfactions of all kinds, including self-righteousness through severity to the body, is vanity. Life does not consist so much in what we live ON, as in the proper understanding of what we live FOR. Mere renunciation of the abundance of possessions, without renouncing the love of abundance, fails to understand the Lord. Denial of this love of possessions is the only proper preparation to use abundance appropriately as an administration assigned by the Lord.

3. Nor is it true "self-denial" what is done merely as self-denial.

True self-denial, like all other forms of Christ-likeness, is unconscious of self, "does not know that its face shines." We deny nothing when we give up certain foods on certain days, abstain from social dissipation during certain seasons, and many other useless and uncalled-for sacrifices. Can it be true self-denial for man to dictate to the Lord which sacrifices he shall make, merely because he supposes that some endeavor at renunciation is in order, whether or not the Lord has ordered it? Should the Master will that we join Him in the wedding joy of the new life, must we be anguished because pain and suffering are distant, and so invent self-inflicted abnegation, or "manufacture artificial crosses out of ascetic austerities"? (Bruce, *Training*, 179)

4. Nor is self-control—as the world understands it—equal to self-denial, for the former is the control of the lower elements of our being by the higher, whereas self-denial means that both higher and lower elements of our being are to be treated as elements of the former life to which we have died. It is here that Paul's paradox has significance:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

Having seen what it is not, we must now ask: what is self-denial?

1. Self-denial is self stepping down from life's throne, laying crown and scepter at the Master's feet and thenceforth submitting the whole of life to His control. It is living out our life, not to please ourselves, but to please our Lord, not to advance our own personal interests, but to do His work. It is the glad making of any sacrifice that loyalty to Him requires. Self gives way altogether as the motive of life.

2. "As Peter said when he denied Christ, 'I know not the man,' so say thou of thyself, and act accordingly." (Bengal) We are instructed by the grace of God which brings salvation that "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world. . ." (Titus 2:11f) "Worldly lusts" (*tās kosmikās epithumias* = "the earthly desires") need not be worse than the usual aspirations common to this earth, aspirations which become so all-important. It may be nothing worse than the animal instinct of self-preservation that thinks only of self-interest, but not of duty. There is no stronger normal human desire than to live, yet even this

too may be renounced in the line of duty, as Jesus so definitively proved. Jesus has not required abnegation of the self that loves God with the heart, soul, mind and strength, and serves its neighbor because of love "as yourself." Rather, what the Master demands is the total renunciation of that rebellion that brought sin into the world originally and still maintains it in all of its forms. Herein is the paradox true: "For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." (Mt. 16:25; Lk. 9:24)

3. Self-denial is also the yielding of our right to choose anything but the will of Christ. Having accepted Jesus as the Lord of our conscience and will, emotions and intellect, we obey one law. His slightest wish is our highest command! When we became His slaves, we surrendered our right to a choice, although not our power to choose. (Cf. 2 Cor. 5:15)

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Lk. 16:13; Mt. 6:24)

Whatever self-denial must mean to the disciple, Christ has already shown us in one lasting, concrete example. (Ro. 15:3) Listen to His claims:

"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name." (John 12:27f)

"Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, . . . 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,' " (Heb. 10:5-7)

"Jesus answered them, 'My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me.' " (Jn. 7:16)

"And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." (Jn. 8:29)

"I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do." (Jn. 17:4)

Peter shows how His self-denial is the model for ours:

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness . . ." (1 Pt. 2:21ff)

#### 4. Self-denial is all that is implicit in obedience. For . . .

"Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (Romans 6:16)

There is also implied the overcoming faith in the One to whom the obedience is yielded and for whose sake self is renounced. Jesus calls us to take up His yoke upon us and learn of Him. (Mt. 11:29) When we have decided to wear His yoke, the question becomes, not what we shall choose, but, what is it that He has chosen for us? His yoke is His will for us, His rule, His discipline.

5. Self-denial is the crucifixion of self, "the old life with its passions and desires." (Gal. 5:24; Ro. 6:6) It is not merely the putting self off for a later date, but the immediate and total sacrifice of anything that stands between the disciple and totally-surrendered, loving service to his Lord.

6. Self-denial is the power behind repentance just as godly sorrow for sin and the desire to start a new life is the motivation. Self-denial, like repentance, must be in the present tense. To make up one's mind that he will, in some undefined future time, deny himself, is not at all self-denial. What is this but a determination to continue in self-satisfaction still other days and years? Such a resolution is an indication of a deep-seated impenitence, since it agrees to the rectitude of Christ's demands, but refuses obedience. It has been said that the way to Hell is paved with good intentions. This cannot be true, because good resolutions do not lead away from God, and a resolution to repent, or deny self, at a more convenient season,—but not now,—is not a good intention! If God should consent to any postponement of self-denial, He would become accessory to a sinful life.

Self-denial, like repentance, involves an abhorrence of all sin, especially the soul's own personal sins. It involves a recognition of his personal guilt before God, and that he needs to repent! The soul acknowledges the justice of the divine law and its own condemnation

by it. It puts itself in the wrong and God in the right. It utters the prayer of the publican, "God be merciful to me—a SINNER!"

Self-denial, likewise, implies the renunciation of all sin. There can be no mental reservation, no "darling sins" not given up. It would be but an insult to God to make a catalogue of sins and say, "These I loath and renounce"; and compose another list and say, "These I cannot surrender; these, my dishonesty, my covetousness, my impurity, my wicked ambition, I love and will not forsake." To deny self with the purpose in mind to continue in sin, any sin, is impossible. To repent with the idea that it is only a formality in order to be forgiven, and so that a life of continued sin and continued repentance may finish in heaven, is but wicked self-deception. Such an intention is an abuse of the grace of repentance.

Self-denial involves the soul's seeing itself in the light of God's Word, seeing the nature of sin—the number, the heinousness, and the aggravation of HIS OWN sins. It involves seeing how his sin mars and pollutes his own soul, how it destroys and injures his fellow-man; how it defies God's authority, tramples on His love and compels the out-pouring of His wrath. This self-knowledge is exceedingly difficult to attain. It is unwelcome and painful. This knowledge tortures the soul, and we would rather be ignorant of it. Hence the memory comes reluctantly to its work and the past is imperfectly remembered. The law of God is obscured and misinterpreted, and the moral judgment is weakened and biased. Weak excuses are formed and the guilty soul seeks to hide itself behind a "refuge of lies." This is why denial of self must take place before intelligent approach to God is even possible.

It may even be unnecessary to differentiate between "repentance" and "self-denial." Further, Jesus spoke of "cross-bearing," a figure which seems to be but another facet of the diamond of total acceptance of Himself. What is "cross-bearing"? This is best answered by asking another question: what did it mean to Jesus? The occasions in Galilee when Jesus placed this challenge before His disciples were occasions on which Jesus had clearly predicted His own death. This expression must mean that the disciple must be as his Lord.

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.  
 (Phil. 2:5-8)

Study the expressions Paul used: "emptied himself," "humbled himself," "obedient unto death," "death of the cross."

1. To Jesus, cross-bearing symbolized one thing: providing the needed sacrifice to save the individual sinner by undergoing whatever was necessary to do that. It meant His facing the mocking unbelief, the cruel jeering and the lashing of the scourge, the spitting, the injustice, and the separation from His Heavenly Father. It meant willingness to bear the pain that others' faults bring. It meant not pleasing Himself, but serving others. (Ro. 15:1-3)

2. To the individual sinner who aspires to discipleship "cross-bearing" means the positive identification of himself with the sufferings of Christ on his behalf. It was the Apostle's one desire to grow to "know Him and the power of His resurrection, and share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." (Phil. 3:10f) Cross-bearing, to Paul, implied the dying daily to his own self-will: "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." (1 Co. 9:27)

3. Did Jesus ever speak of our heroically or sentimentally bearing His cross? No, because He bore OURS in order to furnish us with sufficient motive and opportunity to bear our own! We are not, therefore, to manufacture artificial crosses for ourselves, but accept the cross which Christ has called us to bear and die upon it.

4. Cross-bearing means the willing, cheerful suffering of the loss of all things for "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Phil. 3:8) If that means the loss of "father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters" who stand as stumbling blocks to our feet, we must crucify that this-worldly affection, in favor of our heavenly loyalty to Christ. Obviously, cross-bearing in practice must mean different things to different people. Bruce (*Training*, 177) teaches:

For one the cross may be the calumnies of lying lips, "which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous"; for another, failure to attain the much-worshipped idol success in life, so often reached by unholy means not available for a man who has a conscience; for a third, mere isolation and solitariness of spirit amid uncongenial, unsympathetic neighbors, not minded to live soberly, righteously and godly, and not loving those who do so live.

How are "self-denial" and "cross-bearing" related to each other?

They are, respectively the negative and positive aspects of our total commitment to Christ. They are carefully linked by Paul:

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires . . . But far be it from me to glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal. 5:24; 6:14)

### III. THE REASONS FOR PAYING THIS COST

Having considered who pays this cost and the definitions of the cost, let us ask ourselves: why pay the cost of our salvation? God freely gives sinful man the gracious opportunity to become a disciple of Jesus and be saved by meeting the terms of discipleship. These terms, negatively and positively stated, are "self-denial" and "cross-bearing," and all that these involve. Historically, there have been very few who, having counted the cost, were willing to pay it. Jesus described such a state of affairs like this:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Mt. 7:13f)

During His earthly ministry Jesus contacted one of the world's best prospects for discipleship. The young man was rich, ambitious, righteous by most standards, apparently humble and highly talented. The Master placed the cost of discipleship before him, but he turned it down! The question has probably already been asked: why, if so many who could mean so much to the Kingdom turn down Jesus' offer, does Jesus not make the cost lower, the "cross" lighter, the burden easier? Because, were the Lord to do so, He would be readmitting to His household, into His Kingdom, the very element that exalted Satan, cursed mankind and turned the world into a cemetary in the first place: SELF! To make the demands less stringent, God would have to open the gates to allow mankind with all its sinful trappings of self-centeredness to pour into His promised land, reserved only for those who are willing to deny self and exalt Christ. Self-complacency, being the very heart and core of all sin, would, in this reversed case, require God to refuse to condemn any sin. But in all this, what would have become of the pure, righteous Creator

of all, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? He would have become unjust Himself and not to be trusted to be right or the One to right the wrongs of earth. Vengeance would then belong to anybody who can take it! Law and order would no longer exist, save in those remnants of society still influenced by the ancient concepts of the justice and mercy of God.

But God is not a man that He should charge! And, since He has not, we are faced with the decision to count the cost and pay it and receive His proffered mercy, or face the consequences. Why pay the cost?

1. If we are unwilling to start the journey by the strait and narrow way, because of the call of our luxury or possessions, or because the desires of family, friends, social or business life must be satisfied before the Lord's desires, or for some other reason, we judge ourselves unworthy of His offered mercy. The ultimate end of such a course must be punishment. However high we may hold our heads, they shall at last be bowed before Jesus!

2. Why pay? Because, if one were to start the long, arduous journey of discipleship, but decide to give it up, he is just as lost as if he had never started. By the very nature of the case, this cost must be constantly and consistently paid. So subtle are the temptations to indulge self that every disciple must "watch and pray that they enter not into temptation." Consider these warnings:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not sit down and count the cost first, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, "This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace.

(Lk. 14:28-32)

And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

(Lk. 8:13-15)

. . . No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

(Lk. 9:62)

These are tragic words! There is no disaster so great as that of a life started out on its course heavenward, only to see it sink beneath the waves of doubt and selfishness miles and years from the blest harbor!

### 3. Consider the psychological future of selfishness vs. selflessness:

Those who are selfish and who do only that which pleases their fancy, and who will not exert themselves for some high principle, will find that their range of dislikes will increase and their range of likes will decrease. As time goes on, life becomes more and more filled with disagreeable things until the selfish life becomes the doomed life. He who does things for Christ's sake is responding to something higher than his personal inclinations. This leads to a steady increase of one's "range of interests, likes, and success" and the fuller life is the reward of the giving up of a selfish life. "No discovery of modern psychology is, in my opinion, so important as its scientific proof of the necessity of self-sacrifice or discipline to self-realization and happiness."

(James Bales, *Jesus the Ideal Teacher*, 40)

4. The biggest inducement to pay this expense is the realization that it leads to life eternal. But some who genuinely count the cost, studying the standards of the Kingdom, cry out, "It's too difficult! For fear of falling, I will not attempt to rise! I will not try!" But the tower MUST be built; the battle MUST be fought; the Kingdom of God MUST be sought at any price and above all. Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame," and we can too! Hear Him again as He challenges all men:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serve me, the Father will honor him. (Jn. 12:24ff)

. . . Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

(Mark 10:29f)

We are never better off than when we are completely ready to let God have the really great opportunity He wants. When we lay ourselves prostrate on our own cross, denying ourselves of all right to live, conscious of our total inability to save ourselves, then and only then are we in the best frame of mind to receive all that He has to offer. What a paradox: He takes away from us all things that He might truly give us all things!

#### IV. SELF-DENIAL AND CROSS-BEARING IN PRACTICE

Having seen something of the theory, we must ask ourselves how this works out in practice. Otherwise, what was intended for our daily growth in faith and likeness to Christ, will become a dead, useless concept, unconnected with our real way of thinking and acting.

In the general field of self-denial and cross-bearing there are actually two areas of application. On the one hand, there is death to self's desires that lead into sin in any and all of its forms. (Col. 3:5; Gal. 5:24) On the other, there is that renunciation of one's legitimate rights for love of another person. Since the reader is more likely to be familiar with the numerous examples of the former with which the New Testament is replete, let us examine a very few of the countless expressions of self-denial in the latter area.

##### A. JESUS IS OUR MODEL

He denied Himself by surrendering legitimate rights of His own free will for the sake of others. (Study Romans 15:3 in the context of Romans 14 and 15:1-7; Phil. 2:5-8 in the context of Phil. 2:1-4; Eph. 5:25 in the context of Eph. 5:21-33; cf. Heb. 3:1; 12:2, 3; note 1 Pt. 2:21ff in the context of 1 Pt. 2:18-20; 3:18 in the context of 3:13-22; 4:1-6; 4:13 in the context of 4:12-19) God, too, labored unsparingly for us! (Ro. 8:32)

##### B. APPROPRIATE CONCERN FOR OTHERS' NEEDS IS OUR STANDARD.

In order to take many NT exhortations seriously, we must deny ourselves some other use of our time and energies in other perfectly

proper, completely justifiable Christian activities. Thousands of thoroughly enjoyable human pleasures, such as reading, listening to music, flower arrangement, keeping one's home in perfect order, painting and all hobbies, while innocent themselves, can—and, on certain occasions, must be—set aside, in order to have time to express our concern for others. These activities are perfectly legitimate within themselves, and the Christian need not fear God's frown upon them as they engage in them, since He Himself has left him free to choose his activities. However, the question of priorities asks the Christian: "Which comes *first now*: your neighbor's needs or your own comforts and hobbies?"

As every serious, busy pastor knows, counseling with people takes time. Solutions must be examined. People's problems do not respect clocks or follow schedules. This means that a Christian who would really be of help to his fellows must be available. But availability means being "on call" at any time, and, as any doctor or ambulance driver knows, self-denial is the order of the day. Doctors cannot say, "I'm sorry that I cannot respond to your emergency, because I'm listening to Beethoven!" Rather, they deny their right to enjoy Beethoven and rush down to the emergency room. When Eutychus fell out of the third-story window, Paul did not insist on continuing his inspired speech, but rushed down with the others to do what he could for the lad. (Ac. 20:7-12)

### C. HOW TO GO ABOUT IT

1. Consider the following encouragements to deny ourselves in order to be available to meet others' needs; Ro. 12:3-21; 14—15:7; 1 Co. 6:12—10:33; 11:33; 12:7, 25; 13:1-7; 14:all; 16:16; 1 Pt. 4:10.

2. All encouragements to be generous in giving to others' needs are incitements to spend for others what we have a right to spend on ourselves. See 2 Co. 8, 9; Gal. 6:6, 10; Eph. 4:28; 5:15f; Col. 4:5f; 1 Ti. 5:4, 8, 16; 6:18f.

3. All exhortations to love and serve one another require self-denial to carry them out. See Gal. 5:13f; 6:1-5; Eph. 5:21—6:9, 18; Phil. 2:1-4; 4:3; Col. 3:18—4:1; 1 Th. 2:8; 5:14f; 2 Th. 3:6-13; 1 Ti. 6:1f; Tit. 3:8, 14; 1 Pt. 2:18ff; 3:1-8; 1 Jn. 3:16-18.

4. Consider these examples that show us how it is done. Paul would have been willing even to sacrifice his own salvation, if this would accomplish the salvation of his fellow Hebrews. (Ro. 9:3) Remember

the Apostles' self-denial for their churches (1 Co. 4:8-13; 6:12—10:33; 2 Co. 4:2, 7-15; 5:13; 6:1-13; 11:7-11, 23-29; 12:14ff; 13:9; Phil. 1:23-26; 1 Th. 2:9-12; 3:10; 2 Th. 3:7-9; 2 Ti. 2:10. Remember the Apostles' letter-writing ministry: that took time to edify their readers!

5. Others devoted themselves to serve other Christians with needed refreshment: 1 Co. 16:15f; 2 Co. 8:1-5; 2 Ti. 1:16-18; Heb. 6:10; 13:1-3; 3 Jn. 5:8, 10b.

6. The rules governing Christian liberty require that we deny ourselves. (See Special Study: "How To Avoid Becoming a Pharisee" after 15:1-20, which discusses some of these rules.) Perhaps some narrow-souled Christian demands to know where in the Bible it says he must do some particular act of kindness that he does not want to, or do without some pleasure for the sake of someone else. The New Testament was not written to cater to such legalism, but to stimulate us to want to rise above the demands of mere, legal rules, to live a life guided by the Spirit of Christ, inwardly motivated to seek out practical, helpful kindnesses by which we can bless our neighbor. However, the New Testament guarantees our liberty to do this and guides our decisions concerning it. But the very principles that set us free from casuistic legal restrictions require that through love we become servants of one another. (Cf. Gal. 5:13; Ro. 14—15:7; 1 Co. 6:12—10:33; Jas. 1:25-27; 2:8, 12; 1 Pt. 2:16; 3:8; 4:8-10; 5:5)

7. Christian exhortation and teaching takes time, energy and dedication! If time is money, then denying ourselves the use of our time as our own, in order to bring back a sinner from the error of his way, is the same sort of sacrifice Jesus made. It takes time to care enough to go teach someone what he must know in order to please God. (Cf. Heb. 3:13; 10:24f; Gal. 6:1f; Jas. 5:19f; 1 Th. 5:11, 14; 2:11; Jude 22f. It takes self-denial to be gentle and forbearing with one's opponents who are what they are because they need to repent and because they are certain they know the truth better than the Christian servant. (2 Ti. 2:24-26) It takes self-denial to care about truth and falsity in life and doctrine. (Cf. Ro. 16:17-20; Eph. 5:11; 4:25; 2 Th. 2:11-15; 2 Ti. 1:14; 1 Ti. 4:16; 6:12, 20; Rev. 2:2, 3) It takes self-denial to refuse to make use of what appeals to human pride, in order to proclaim the truth, and hold to the truth despite the powerful temptations to trust human wisdom to be more certain. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:18-31; 2:1-5; 3:18-23)

8. Tremendous self-discipline is required to be able to submit to

persecution of any sort, whether through public abuse or loss of possessions or family. But this willingness to suffer the loss of all things comes through the self-denial that admits that everything we are and have came from God, and, because of this recognition, turns it all over to God. This way, whatever happens to our possessions, our relationships, or to us, we are confident that everything is in good hands: His! Self-denial, thus, is the secret behind the ability to rejoice and give thanks in all circumstances. (Cf. Phil. 4:4-7, 10-13; 1 Th. 5:18) No matter what evil is done to us, self-denial keeps us from paying back evil for evil. (1 Th. 5:15; 1 Co. 6:7) Even our "vengeance belongs to the Lord" (Cf. Ro. 12:17-21).

9. Submission to our own Christian leaders requires self-denial. (Cf. 1 Pt. 5:5; Heb. 13:17; 1 Th. 5:12f; 2 Th. 2:15; 3:6, 14; 1 Co. 11:2) Submission to the decision of others requires no little self-denial. (Cf. 1 Co. 6:1-6)

10. The kind of praying that needs to be done for our world, our Church and ourselves requires discipline and the time that only self-denial can furnish. (Cf. 1 Ti. 2:1, 2, 8; 1 Th. 5:17f; Eph. 6:18, etc.)

11. Growth in godliness requires self-denial which furnishes time, energy, interest and activity that will make character growth possible. (Cf. Eph. 4:15f; Phil. 3:12-15; Heb. 5:11—6:12; 12:3-17; 1 Ti. 4:7b, 8; 2 Ti. 2:3-7, 15; 1 Pt. 1:13-17; 2 Pt. 1:3-11)

There are many, many more texts and illustrations in the Word that could be listed here. But a good rule of thumb might be this: if you see something to do that you should not, either for yourself or others, do not do it. That is self-denial. If you see something good to do for someone else, something that, to do it, takes time that you would have used otherwise for something you would rather have done for yourself, do it. That is self-denial. Self-denial and cross-bearing, seen from this practical standpoint, are indubitably the price we must pay to be saved from ourselves and our sins, and in order to be of any practical use to Jesus. The only law of Christianity, as anyone knows, is to love God with all we have and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Self-denial is but this love in action. (See Notes on 5:44, 48; 7:12, Vol. I, pp. 311ff, 318ff, 415ff)

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN OUTLINES

- Section 42. Transfigured on High Mountain, Jesus Shows His Glory to Peter, James and John. (17:1-13)
- Section 43. At Base of Mountain Jesus Heals and Frees Demonized Boy. (17:14-21)
- Section 44. Jesus Makes Third Passion Prediction. (17:22, 23)
- Section 45. Jesus Quizzes Peter About Temple Tax. (17:24-27)

### STUDY OUTLINE

- I. REVELATION OF DIVINE MAJESTY (17:1-13; Mk. 9:2-13; Lk. 9:28-36)
  - A. The passive participants (Mt. 17:1; Mk. 9:2; Lk. 9:28, 32)
  - B. The private pageant at the peak: a glimpse of glory (Mt. 17:2; Mk. 9:2b, 3; Lk. 9:29)
  - C. The part played by the prophetic pair from Paradise (Mt. 17:3; Mk. 9:4; Lk. 9:30f)
  - D. Peter's presumptuous perpetuation of a pernicious pantheon (Mt. 17:4; Mk. 9:5; Lk. 9:32f)
  - E. The Paternal pronouncement of the peerless pre-eminence of Christ (Mt. 17:5; Mk. 9:7; Lk. 9:34f)
  - F. The prostrate, perplexed Apostles persuaded to promote their present Prince. (Mt. 17:6-8; Mk. 9:8; Lk. 9:36a)
  - G. The prohibition of premature publication because of predominant preconceptions and prejudice (Mt. 17:9; Mk. 9:9f; Lk. 9:36)
  - H. The pondering of pivotal personality (Mt. 17:10-14; Mk. 9:11-13)
- II. REPROOF OF FAITHLESSNESS AND FAILURE (Mt. 17:14-21; Mk. 9:14-29; Lk. 9:37-43a)
  - A. The paralysis of power by preoccupations, pessimism and prayerlessness (Mt. 17:14; Mk. 9:14-16; Lk. 9:37)
  - B. The poignant plea of a pathetic predicament (Mt. 17:14b-17; Mk. 9:17-21; Lk. 9:38-42)
  - C. The pained but perceptive plea of the pressured parent (Mk. 9:21-24)
  - D. The piteous prisoner promptly purged of his perverse possessor

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(Mt. 17:18; Mk. 9:25-27; Lk. 9:42b, 43)

- E. The Apostles' puzzlement over their pitiful production (Mt. 17:19; Mk. 9:28)
1. The pollution of practical paganism (Mt. 17:20)
  - B. The purifying power of personal penitence and persistent prayer (Mt. 17:21; Mk. 9:29)

III. REPETITION OF THE PASSION PREDICTION (Mt. 17:22f; Mk. 9:30-32; Lk. 9:43-45)

- A. The perceptible pressure of popularity (Mt. 17:22a; Mk. 9:30; Lk. 9:43b)
- B. The painfully precise plan of His passion (Mt. 17:22b, 23a; Mk. 9:31; Lk. 9:44)
- C. Perception prevented by persistent prejudice (Mt. 17:23b; Mk. 9:32; Lk. 9:45)

IV. READINESS TO BE SUBMISSIVE BEYOND DUTY (17:24-27)

- A. The petty pestering for payment of the poll tax (17:24)
- B. The precipitate parry by Peter (17:25a)
- C. The privileged position of the Prince (17:25b)
  1. The proper prerogative of a potentate's posterity (17:26)
  2. The powers postponed by a practical pliability and a purpose to protect others (17:27a)
- D. The praiseworthy performance of this principle of precedence (17:27b)

## Section 42

### TRANSFIGURED ON HIGH MOUNTAIN JESUS SHOWS HIS GLORY TO PETER, JAMES AND JOHN

(Parallels: Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36)

TEXT: 17:1-13

1 And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart: 2 and he was transfigured before them; and his face did shine as the sun, and his garments became white as the light. 3 And behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him. 4 And

Peter answered, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, I will make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. 5 While he was yet speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold, a voice out of the cloud saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. 6 And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. 7 And Jesus came and touched them and said, Arise, and be not afraid. 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one, save Jesus only.

9 And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen from the dead. 10 And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come? 11 And he answered and said, Elijah indeed cometh, and shall restore all things: 12 but I say unto you, that Elijah is come already, and they knew him not, but did unto him whatsoever they would. Even so shall the Son of man also suffer of them. 13 Then understood the disciples that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why would Jesus single out just three Apostles to witness the Transfiguration? Did not the others need to behold Jesus' glory? If so, why leave them out?
- b. Even though a week intervened after Peter's confession and Jesus' first plain prediction of His death and the conversation and teaching occasioned by this prophecy, is there a psychological connection between these events and the glorious vision of the Transfiguration? If so, what is that connection? If not, why do you deny such a link?
- c. How do you think Jesus was transfigured? What other NT texts would bear on the question?
- d. Do you think that the total Transfiguration-event was intended in any way for Jesus' benefit? If so, how could it strengthen Him?
- e. Of what special benefit would this benefit be to those Apostles who witnessed it? What would it teach them about Jesus' nature and mission? (Cf. Lk. 9:31)
- f. What do you think was the motive for selecting only Moses and Elijah, of all the OT characters, to appear with Jesus here?
- g. What does the appearance of these two OT worthies have to say, if anything, on the subject of resurrection, or on life beyond this life.

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- h. Is their presence in this vision only part of the scenery, a phenomenon without any objective reality? How would you go about defending the factual, historic character of their appearance with Jesus during the Transfiguration? There are "scholars" who doubt it, you know.
- i. Do you think that the apostolic trio had fallen asleep and suddenly awoke to see the vision already in progress, or were merely oppressed by sleep while they were trying to stay awake? In other words, did they miss some of the vision by being asleep? What is important about this detail in relation to the general verification of the historical character of this narrative?
- j. What is so significant about the grim topic of conversation discussed with Jesus by Moses and Elijah? Was this important for Jesus alone, or the Apostles only, or both? Why?
- k. What was so wrong-headed about Peter's enthusiastic suggestion?
- l. Why did Peter propose to make three tents (booths or "tabernacles")? What purpose must he have had in mind for constructing these peculiar dwellings?
- m. Do you think God just made good use of the normal phenomenon that regularly appears on mountain peaks, when He spoke out of "a bright cloud"? If so, what?
- n. What is the significance of God's message from the bright cloud (1) for Jesus? (2) for Peter and the others? (3) for us?
- o. Why would Jesus tell the Apostles here to keep silent about the glorious vision and the heavenly Voice? Would it have helped anything to promote His mission had they proclaimed it abroad?
- p. Besides the fact that Jesus Himself had mentioned the resurrection as the terminus after which they could publicize the Transfiguration, why should the Apostles desire to dwell on the meaning of the "rising from the dead"? (Mk. 9:10)
- q. In answering their question about the proper interpretation of "the coming of Elijah," why should Jesus interweave the Old Testament's mention of the Messiah's sufferings? What good does that fact do toward helping them to understand about the promised "Elijah"? (Cf. Mk. 9:12f)
- r. From what clue could the Apostles arrive at the correct deduction that Jesus had been referring to John the Baptist?
- s. How did the Apostles recognize Moses and Elijah who had disappeared from the earth centuries before, probably leaving behind no reliable photographic likeness whereby these Apostles could have recognized them? What clues would have assured them that

- the two men were really Moses and Elijah?
- t. Was the revelation of the lordship of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration more exalted than the revelation of the lordship of Jesus as He died on the cross? Why do you answer as you do?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

About a week after Peter's confession and Jesus' first plain prediction of His death, Jesus selected Peter, James and his brother, John, to accompany Him up into a high mountain where they could be by themselves for prayer. While He was praying, His entire appearance was changed, right in their presence. The appearance of His face was so altered that it shone like the sun. His clothing turned a glistening, intensely dazzling white—white as the light—so white, in fact, that no earthly bleaching agent could possibly make it any whiter.

Suddenly, there appeared two men conversing with Jesus. These were Moses and Elijah, seen in heavenly splendor. They were discussing His Exodus, i.e. His liberation of the New Israel of God, which He was soon to bring about in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Peter and the other two had been fighting sleep. They managed to stay awake, so they saw Jesus' heavenly splendor as well as the two men who stood with Him. It was just as these latter were leaving Jesus that Peter blurted out, "Master, it's wonderful for us to be here! If you wish, let's put up three festival booths right here: one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah!" However he did not know how to react nor did he realize what he was suggesting. In fact, they were terrified.

While he was still saying this, a bright cloud overshadowed them, causing them to be gripped with fear as it enveloped them. A voice from the cloud declared, "This is my own dear Son, my Chosen One: I am well pleased with Him, so listen to HIM!" When the disciples heard this voice they fell on their faces in terror. Then Jesus walked over to them and touched them, saying as He did so, "Stand up and do not be afraid." All at once, when they raised their eyes and looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them, just Jesus Himself.

As they were descending from the mountain next day, Jesus ordered them, "Never mention to anyone the vision you have seen, until the Messiah be raised from the dead." So they kept quiet about it, and during that period told no one anything of what they had witnessed.

However, although they kept the matter to themselves, they began discussing with one another what this expression "rising from the dead" could mean.

Then the disciples put this question to Him: "Why, then, do the scholars claim that Elijah must appear on earth before the Messiah comes?"

This was His answer: "That's right, 'Elijah' is supposed to make his appearance first and bring about a spiritual restoration of men's hearts to God. And how does the Scripture describe the Messiah? It teaches that He is destined to endure great suffering and be treated with contempt. However, I can assure you that your 'Elijah' has already made his appearance and people failed to recognize him. They treated him just as they pleased, just like the Bible speaks of him. They will do the same thing to their Messiah too."

Then the disciples realized that He had been referring to John the Baptist.

## SUMMARY

Jesus took His "inner circle" of disciples with Him to give them a glimpse of His glory. As God identifies His Son as His final, authoritative Prophet, the Law and the Prophets fade into proper perspective. To preclude misconceptions, Jesus enjoins the men to keep the vision to themselves until after the resurrection. They question Jesus about popular theological views about the "Elijah." Jesus affirms that the famous "Elijah" was none other than John the Baptist, whose rejection was symbolic of His own fate.

## NOTES

### I. REVELATION OF DIVINE MAJESTY

#### A. THE PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS

**17:1 After six days.** Because Luke affirms that there were "eight days," some would charge him or the other two Evangelists with contradiction. However, Luke affirms that it was "about eight" and there really are six days between his eight, so there is no contradiction. He merely counted the first and last days, whereas Matthew and

Mark counted only the ones intervening.

This event occurred during the final year of Jesus' ministry. The last date mentioned before this was the Passover at which He fed the 5000. (Jn. 6:4) Although exact computation of the time elapsed since that date is impossible, an examination of Jesus' ministry at Capernaum, in Phoenicia and in the Decapolis (Mt. 15, 16) and the nearness of the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn. 7:2) would lead us to conclude that the Transfiguration occurred at the end of the summer or in the early fall.

To grasp the significance of the Transfiguration, we must remember what had preceded it. Luke draws a tight connection between this event and the Good Confession and the subsequent Sermon on the Nature of True Discipleship. (Cf. Lk. 9:28: "Now about eight days after these sayings . . ." recorded in Mt. 16:13-28; Mk. 8:31—9:1; Lk. 9:22-27) This means that Jesus gave the disciples about a week's time to ponder deeply the shocking prediction of His tragic rejection and death, and especially the unexpected lecture they received when Peter tried to redirect Him. That must have been a sleepless week of furious, secretive arguments among the Apostles, a week of disappointment and discouragement, confusion and turmoil, a week of soul-wrenching torment. Now He would remove their despondency by balancing His earthly humiliation with His heavenly glory.

**Jesus took with him Peter and James and John.** Why He chose only three Apostles, and only these three, becomes clearer only as the larger picture is seen. His reasons may have been some, or all, of the following:

1. To guarantee the necessary privacy, He chose three and no more. Any larger group would render silence more difficult to maintain. (17:9)
2. To guarantee that the Transfiguration would accomplish its purpose. Whereas it was desirable for all the Apostles to behold His glory, it was imperative that at least some have unquestionable proof of His triumphant glory. But such a vision could not be of value unless enough of them could testify to having seen it. Thus, the choice of three men is to provide witnesses sufficient in number to establish the reality of the fact in any court. (Cf. Dt. 19:15; Mt. 18:16; Jn. 8:17; Cf. Ac. 10:41)
3. To have men who could best interpret and make best use of the Transfiguration's impression on themselves. Jesus apparently

judged the rest of the group not to be qualified to witness it nor to hear of it afterwards. The three chosen were not necessarily elected because better loved by the Lord, but because qualified, in that they were more open, more ready to accept and obey Him.

4. These men, together with Andrew, Peter's brother, had been the earliest disciples of Jesus. (Cf. Jn. 1:35-51) Only they were allowed into the room with the parents to behold the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead. (Mk. 5:37; Lk. 8:51) Only they were invited to share the Lord's sufferings in Gethsemane, (Mt. 26:37; Mk. 14:33) They had been nearest longest and were most intimately linked to Jesus in heart and thought. In the Master's plan each was to become a pillar supporting the truth:
  - a. Peter was to swing wide the gates of the Kingdom of Christ to Jew (Ac. 2) and Gentile alike (Ac. 10) and record his eye-witness testimony to this pre-passion revelation of Jesus' glory before he too suffered martyrdom. (2 Pet. 1:16-18)
  - b. James would be the first Apostle to lay down his life rather than deny Jesus' resurrection. (Ac. 12:2)
  - c. John, also a pillar of the Jerusalem Church (Gal. 2:9), would probably be the last Apostle to die, having bridged the gap from the personal ministry of Christ on earth until the Church was well-established throughout the world. To him would be granted the privilege of relating the Messiah's triumphant glory seen in the visions of the Revelation. (Rev. 1:9)
5. Indirectly to bless the other Apostles who were not privileged to be present. The others would feel the changed attitude of these three, and because of their positive influence, the others would hold firmer to Jesus in their turmoil, even if they could not identify the source of what blessed them.

Whether these are the reasons Jesus chose them or not, is not clear. To choose these and no others was Jesus' right and was done in His wisdom.

For the Hebrew reader of Matthew's Gospel, the imagery of the event itself would far outweigh any problems connected with His choice. In fact, the imagery would lead the thoughtful Jewish reader to see allusions to events in Hebrew history, beginning with the ascent upon the high mountain, symbol of Sinai (Horeb) on which Moses and Elijah received revelations from God. (See on 17:3.)

**And led them to a high mountain apart.** The mountain intended must be *high* and within about a week's travel from the area of

Caesarea Philippi, scene of the confession of Peter. (Mt. 16:13-28) Since the next recorded event begins after a secret return through Galilee to Capernaum, the mountain cannot be located in that area. (Cf. Mk. 9:30, 33; Mt. 17:22, 24) None of the tall hills in Galilee or Gilead would qualify and none of the more populous areas of Galilee would permit Him the privacy. Mount Hermon, located just 25 km. (15 mi.) north of Caesarea Philippi and rising over 2814 m. (9232 ft.) and visible from much of Palestine, easily qualifies as the peak in question. Further, if we have rightly identified the time of the Transfiguration as sometime in late August or early September, the snow on Mt. Hermon would all be gone, making it possible for the Lord and His men to scale clear to the top. McGarvey enjoyed 22°C (71°F) weather at the peak, even with masses of unmelted snow in June. (*Lands of the Bible*, 548) W. Ewing (*ISBE*, 3006) opts for *Jebel Jermuk*, the loftiest mountain in Galilee, rising to 1208 m. (3834 ft.), reasoning as follows:

1. It is located in Palestine proper, whereas Mt. Hermon is located in heathen territory and the sacred associations with Hermon are pagan, not Jewish.
2. Jesus was met, upon His descent from the mountain, by a plainly Jewish crowd with "scribes" in evidence. (Mk. 9:14) Therefore, the mountain must have been in a district with a Jewish population.
3. Jebel Jermuk, located in Galilee, would be close enough to Caesarea Philippi to be reached within the week after Peter's confession. The distance is just 40 km. (25 mi.). Further, Matthew (17:22: "As they abode in Galilee") seems to imply that the healing of the demoniac boy at the foot of the mountain occurred in Galilee. Mark's "They went on from there and passed through Galilee," accordingly, need not mean that they were outside Galilee, but merely left the area of the mountain and traversed what remained of Galilee between them and their destination at Capernaum. (Mk. 9:30; Mt. 17:24)

But Ewing's arguments are not conclusive for the following reasons:

1. Nothing is affirmed about the particularly Jewish sacredness of the mountain in question. Peter just called it "the holy mountain" in connection with the Transfiguration. (2 Pt. 1:18)

Grollenberg (*Shorter Atlas*, 10) affirmed that majestic

Hermon's name is derived from *hrm*, a root meaning "sacred, unassailable," a fact noticed also by Davidson (*Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, 275). Gesenius-Tregelles (*Lexicon*, 306) agrees that the stem means "devoted, sacred." Davis (*Dictionary of the Bible*, 301) interprets the name as "mountain peak or sacred mountain."

Now, the Christian Apostle Peter, who would be less likely to sanctify certain places as peculiarly "holy," not even the mount of Transfiguration, nevertheless referred to this site as "the holy mountain." (2 Pt. 1:18) Could it be that the Apostle translated the Hebrew-Aramaic expression *Har-Hermon* into Greek as *tō hagio ὄrei* ("the holy mountain"), and thus precisely located the Transfiguration as having occurred on Mt. Hermon? This hypothesis would eliminate the one place in the NT where an Apostle seemed to regard the site of some Christian event as especially "holy," as opposed to the whole earth which is holy.

2. The presence of Jews around Jesus' disciples, even in heathen territory, is not strange, nor is His dwelling in a house in pagan country. (Cf. Mt. 15:21-29; esp. Mk. 7:24!) Besides, the identification of the "house" into which Jesus entered upon rejoining the main group of disciples after the Transfiguration, is impossible. (Mk. 9:28; see on 17:19) The feeding of the 4000 occurred in the Decapolis. (Mt. 15:29-39; Mk. 7:31—8:10) Excited people had followed Jesus into isolated areas before. (Cf. Mt. 5:1; Lk. 6:12, 17ff; Mk. 4:36; Mt. 14:13; 15:29; Mk. 8:34)
3. Matthew's affirmation is textually not "as they abode in Galilee," but "as they were gathering in Galilee." (17:22 on which see notes) This may not be parallel with Mark's expression (Mk. 9:30). Therefore, Mt. 17:22 has nothing to do with Jesus' movements, and Mark's expression may well mean that they entered Galilee from the area around Mt. Hermon.
4. As to the assertion that there is no hint that He had crossed the border of Palestine, is it absolutely certain that Mt. Hermon would have been considered OUTSIDE the borders of Israel, in the same way Tyre and Sidon are? (Cf. Dt. 3:8, 9; 4:48; Josh. 11:16f; 12:1, 5; 13:2-6, 11; 1 Chron. 5:23; Psa. 42:6)
5. The argument based on the presence of the "scribes" completely underestimates the dogged determination of those theologians to pounce on even the slightest appearance of weakness in Jesus'

message, manners, mission or men, even to the extent of tracking Him and His understudies to great lengths. (Cf. Lk. 5:17 in context and Mt. 15:1)

6. Retreat to a quiet, semi-Gentile area would be especially appropriate for the private teaching needed during this period of Jesus' self-revelation. (Cf. Mk. 9:30f) Thus, Mt. Hermon in the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi, while not absolutely certain, is most likely.

### B. THE PRIVATE PAGEANT AT THE PEAK

Jesus' stated purpose for ascending the mountain with His inner circle of trusting friends was "to pray." (Luke) The object of His prayers is not expressed, but, if we may judge from what occurred there, this would not be difficult to imagine:

1. He needed to be with the Father after the disciples' jarring rejection of His clear revelation of His death. It cost Him to tell them the unwelcome truth, but He must remain true to His mission, so He took refuge in the Father's presence. But what need had He to be transfigured for His own personal benefit? Jesus was not an angel, but a MAN! (Heb. 2:9, 14-18) He needed whatever encouragement the Father could give. (Cf. Jn. 12:27f in context.) He may have prayed that God would help Him to succeed in making His own glory more evident to His Apostles, and so defeat the discouragement He could not help but feel because of their obtuseness. The Transfiguration, whether desired or sought by Jesus or not, would serve to brace His courage to face the bitterness ahead in two ways:
  - a. The foretaste of the glory which would follow His suffering (Heb. 12:2) would be like being back home for just an instant, making His voluntary obedience even unto death (Phil. 2:5-11) to be seen, by comparison, as something to be despised.
  - b. The Father's loving voice, even speaking directly to the Apostles, would reaffirm His pleasure in His Son, warm His heart and encourage Him in His lonely mission among unsympathetic men. It is like the encouragement felt by an expert pilot flying through a storm-tossed night with no visible landmarks, when suddenly a voice comes over the radio, saying, "We've picked you up on radar, friend, and you're right on course!"

Peter testifies that "he received honor and glory from God the

Father." (2 Pt. 1:17)

2. His disciples needed further evidence of His true glory: could He not request the Father to grant them this, even in words similar to those in Jn. 17:1, 5? These men who believed the Good Confession which God had revealed to Peter (Mt. 16:17) did not accept the Messiah's mission to suffer (Mt. 16:22), although He had guaranteed them His vindication in glory (16:27). So they needed the direct teaching that a brief, but convincing, revelation of His divine majesty and a word from God would convey. The immediate and imperative significance of this Transfiguration before His status-seeking, materialistic Apostles is to give them a glimpse of a majesty they had never dreamed, a glory that would make all earthly grandeur and magnificence to fade away into insignificance. In perspective, the Transfiguration would confirm the program of Jesus in a moment when, according to every human prediction, He was headed for failure. (Cuminetti, *Matteo*, 233) Peter, interpreting this golden memory in his life, offered it as a supreme illustration and convincing proof of the deity of Christ, as well as the solid kind of evidence upon which we base our faith. (2 Pt. 1:16-19) The understanding of their discipleship depended upon their concept of His Lordship.

**17:2 He was transfigured before them.** The three Evangelists grasp for adequate terminology to communicate the grandeur of this transformation. They emphasize the splendor of the dazzling white light radiating from His entire being. Although His features retained their recognizably human form, everything else about Him took on a blinding light, blazing with sun-like glory. This is the incident which so marvelously encapsules what the Apostles meant when they said: "We have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn. 1:14), and "We were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Pt. 1:16ff). This is something of that majestic dignity for which Jesus longed: ". . . the glory which I had with thee before the world was made." (Jn. 17:5) It is that unbearable, blinding splendor which shone above the brightness of the noonday sun on the Damascus road that convicted Saul of Tarsus that he lay prostrate in the presence of "Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord of glory" (Ac. 9:3; 22:6, 9, 11; 26:13; 1 Co. 2:8) This is a foretaste of that radiant beauty recognized by the elder Apostle when Jesus dictated the Revelation to him. (Rev. 1:9-19)

**He was transfigured** means that when people saw Jesus, they normally saw nothing different from a normal Galilean, like a

thousand others they could name. But for this brief, splendid moment the three disciples beheld "the glory of God in the face of Jesus" (2 Co. 4:6) **He was transfigured** (*metemorfóthe*) means that the "form of God" (*morfē theoū*) shone through the "form of a servant," (*morfē doulou*) (See Phil. 2:6, 7; Edersheim, *Life*, II, 96.)

The effects on the reader would be at least two:

1. The common reader would see that here in the glory of Jesus is a suggestion of the awe-inspiring glory with which He would be surrounded as He began to reign at the right hand of the Father and in which He will return. (Mt. 16:27; Lk. 9:26) Is this a foretaste of the glory that one day we too shall share? (Cf. Phi. 3:20, 21; Col. 3:4; 1 Co. 15:35-58; 1 Jn. 3:2, 3)
2. If the Transfiguration reminded the Hebrew reader of the shining face of Moses after his conversations with God on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 34:29ff), it would be a comparison by contrast. The luminousness of Moses' face was relatively so feeble that a veil easily concealed it. (Ex. 34:33-35; 2 Co. 3:12-18) Contrarily, the brilliance of the person of our Lord was such that every part of His entire being was radiant. A greater than Moses is here.

### C. THE PART PLAYED BY THE PROPHETIC PAIR FROM PARADISE

**17:3 And behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him.** This is the second encouragement of Jesus. At last He is able to converse with men who really understand and share His aims. Just why, of all the illustrious giants of OT history, *Moses and Elijah* should have been distinguished for this appearance is not easily ascertained. Certain instructive factors stand out, however, to suggest a motive for their selection:

1. Their lives and ministry paralleled that of Jesus at precisely this point:
  - a. Moses was discouraged by the faithlessness and perversity of the people of God (Nu. 20:1-13).
  - a. Elijah was discouraged by the faithlessness and perversity of the people of God. (1 Kg. 19:1-10).
  - a. Jesus was discouraged by the faithlessness and perversity of the people of God. (Mt. 16:22ff; 17:17).

JESUS SHOWS HIS GLORY TO PETER, JAMES AND JOHN 17:2, 3

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| b. Moses talked with God on Mount Sinai<br>(Ex. 19:16-19).                            | b. Elijah talked with God on Mount Sinai<br>(Horeb) (1 Kg. 19:9-12).                   | b. Jesus talked with God on this mountain (Lk. 9:28; Mt. 17:5).                                                      |
| c. Moses was glorified.<br>(Ex. 34:29-35)                                             | c. Elijah was glorified.<br>(2 Kg. 2:11ff)                                             | c. Jesus was transfigured.<br>(Mt. 17:2; 2 Pt. 1:17)                                                                 |
| d. Moses led the Exodus from Egyptian bondage, mediated the Law and the Old Covenant. | d. Elijah turned Israel back to Javéh and restored true religion in Israel. (1 Kg. 18) | d. Jesus was to lead His Exodus from sin's bondage, mediate the New Covenant and God's new Law. (Lk. 9:31; Heb. 8:6) |

2. Their departure from the world contrasted with His.

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| a. The death of Moses was immediate and painless while he enjoyed undiminished vigor of health and God buried him. (Dt. 34:5-7) | b. Elijah was exempted from death by a triumphant departure in a chariot of fire directly to heaven. (2 Kg. 2:11) | c. Jesus would endure a painful, ignominious death. (Mt. 16:21; Mk. 9:12) Only by suffering a bitter death would He enter into His glory. (Heb. 2:9; 12:2) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

3. Both men who had seemed too great to die had been victorious over death, and so would He.

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| a. Moses had indeed died and was buried by God Himself, but now stood "in glory," evidence of his victory over death. (Lk. 9:31) | b. Elijah had not died, but thereby proved that death could be defeated by God's power. (Lk. 9:31) | c. Jesus, though He must truly suffer death, would defeat it by God's power. (Ac. 2: 32; 3:15; 4:10; etc.) |
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4. Another lesson from the appearance of the heavenly pair is that death, or removal from the earth, is not the final end of one's place in God's plan. Moses and Elijah, although separated in time by many centuries, are suddenly united and ushered into Jesus' presence for this specific mission. The dismayed disciples, horrified

at the thought of Jesus' abandoning them by voluntary death, are suddenly reminded that death does not bring man to an end, nor does it terminate his mission and service to God. Quite unexpectedly for these defeatist disciples, there appeared UNTO THEM Moses and Elijah and "in glory" too! (Lk. 9:31)

Does this latter expression mean that they too were transfigured, appearing in all their moral, heavenly glory that one day we too shall share, or does "in glory" refer to the sphere in which they were seen, i.e. they were surrounded with heavenly brightness? Luke seems to imply the latter: "they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him," i.e. Jesus was gloriously transfigured, but not necessarily those who "appeared in glory" with Him. (Lk. 9:32) The difference in terminology may be occasioned by the distinctions in glory: His was the essential glory of Deity, whereas theirs was that of righteous men made perfect. (Cf. Heb. 12:23) Their specific character or appearance should cause us no more difficulty than for that of angels.

As *Moses and Elijah* stood bodily before the Apostles in this vision, they were evidence that God can cause them to appear whenever and wherever needed, and that all who have departed this life really exist in God's presence and He can easily glorify them and again be served by them, even though they were once in the grave, especially His own Son.

**Talking with him.** They discussed His "departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." (Lk. 9:31) This is the entire point of this personal appearance of the chief representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Whereas the Apostles refused Jesus' predictions of His death as an idea contradictory to the basic concepts of the Old Testament, here *Moses and Elijah* unhesitatingly discuss His death as perfectly in harmony with all they taught. Were they talking about His victory from their own point of view? After all, they too would have been redeemed by His suffering, and now that their Redeemer was nearing his final goal, His accomplishment of their salvation would undoubtedly have been on their minds and cause for their gratitude.

The "departure" (*éxodos*) was no unavoidable accident, but something He Himself was shortly to "fulfil," i.e. carry out of His own free choice. (Remember "must" [*dei*] of Mt. 16:21) But what, exactly, is this "departure" or *éxodos*?

1. *Exodus* can be a military term, referring to an expedition, a march, a sally or a sortie, a sudden issuing of troops from a defensive position to attack the enemy. (Rocci, 670) Does Luke mean Jesus was conferring with Moses and Elijah about the "breakthrough" which He would accomplish at Jerusalem? The plan of God, while holding Satan's forces at bay for millennia, had moved steadily forward in a defensive posture. Even God's Son had preached positively, limiting Himself merely to skirmishes with Satan. But at the battle of Jerusalem, Jesus would launch an all-out attack that would permanently destroy Satan's capacity to win. (Gen. 3:15; Isa. 42:1-4) Since our Lord intended to win this battle in the only way it could be won, i.e. by giving His own innocent life for the life of the world, "the Just for the unjust that He might bring us to God," the breakthrough must necessarily take place at the cross and the open tomb. (See also on 17:22.) This meaning of *éxodos* comes out at the same place as the one following:

2. Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 176f, emphasis his) elaborates the picture thus:

*Exodus* is exactly the same word as the English word *exodus*. It is the word which is always used of the departure of the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, into the unknown way of the desert, which in the end was going to lead them to the Promised Land. The word *exodus* is the word which describes what we might well call the most adventurous journey in human history, a journey in which a whole people in utter trust in God went out into the unknown. *That is precisely what Jesus was going to do.* In utter trust in God He was going to set out on the tremendous adventure of that journey to Jerusalem, a journey beset with perils, a journey involving a cross, but a journey issuing in glory . . . It is as if the greatest figures of Israel's history came to Jesus, as He was setting out on the last and greatest adventure into the unknown, and told Him to go on . . . witnessed to Jesus that He was on the right way, and bade Him go out on His adventurous *exodus* to Jerusalem and to Calvary.

This way, Jesus stands at approximately the same place Moses stood on Mount Horeb reflecting upon his exodus which he would accomplish in Egypt. (Ex. 3, 4) The Son of God must go to His Egypt too, Jerusalem (Rev. 11:8). There He would become the new Deliverer to lead the new Israel of God (Gal. 6:16) out of their

bondage to sin. Thus, all that Jesus accomplished at Jerusalem, His death as the perfect Pascal Lamb of God, His burial, His resurrection and ascension to glory, was but the accomplishment of the actual departure. This is His praiseworthy victory, not over a defeated Pharaoh (Ex. 15:1-18), but over Satan himself. (Cf. Rev. 7:1-17; 14:1-5; 15:2-4) Then, the Mediator of a New Covenant would lead His people past Mount Zion, the new Sinai, where His new Law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Ro. 8:2) would be "once and for all delivered to the saints" (Heb. 13:18-24; Jude 3), and then on through the wilderness trek (Heb. 13:14), and right on into our Promised Land, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. The departure of Israel from Egypt was an exodus in triumph by the power of God, and so is "His exodus which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem!"

In short, the Apostles needed to return to their Bible and re-evaluate their own concepts, bringing them into harmony with what Moses in the Law and the prophets really believed and taught. What we have learned as a common characteristic of Matthew's Gospel, and not uncommon in the others, was a real revelation to these disciples: "EVERTHING written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms MUST BE FULFILLED" (Lk. 24:44; see also Mt. 26:54, 56) If the prophets are not shaken at the thought of a crucified Messiah, why should the disciples? In fact, Peter later admitted: "The prophets prophesied . . . predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory." (1 Pt. 1:10f)

#### D. PETER'S PRESUMPTUOUS PERPETUATION OF A PERNICIOUS PANTHEON

17:4 Until this moment the disciples had been passive participants in the pageant. Now, however, Moses and Elijah began to take their departure. (Lk. 9:33) Peter suddenly came alive to try to capture the rapture of that precious moment. The fisherman's ecstatic outburst is marred by the following facts:

1. It is paralyzing: **Lord, it is good for us to be here.** Peter, the man of action, suggests a move that would stop all action, without even realizing the contradiction. Never one to be still for long and much preferring to be busy doing something, he, ironically, desires to prolong this exquisite moment of closeness to God and glory,

forgetting that the action of God is to take place, not merely on this mountain of golden splendor, but down in the valley of daily ministry and on redemption's cross. Does Peter's "good to be HERE" have as its antithesis: "bad to be down THERE among unbelieving, conniving Pharisees and other miserable wretches, enduring sinners' hostility and battling the myriads of evils that plague the earth"? Even ONE booth would be too many, if it meant to stay forever on the mount and ignore world need. Does Peter, in his thrill to keep the Feast with Moses and Elijah, forget the other Apostles, the waiting crowd and needy humanity? How long did he hope to prolong it all? Surely he did not intend to desert the world's needs. However, from this viewpoint, if God's Feast of Tabernacles has come, there would not be any needy humanity to worry about, for all would be supplied, all the world's ills healed.

2. It is perplexed. While both Mark and Luke affirm that Peter "did not know what to say," nor did he really "know what he said," nevertheless he apparently felt he must say something, and blurted out the first instinctive suggestion that came to mind. The very departure of these heavenly visitors may have triggered him to act to try to detain them. But it was unnecessary for him to react, since the entire Transfiguration was even then taking place to correct his own mistaken Christology. He was talking when he should have been listening and learning! **And Peter answered,** does not mean he was answering something addressed to him, but rather that he was responding to the marvelous experience in general and probably to detain the great OT worthies.
3. It perpetuates what must of necessity be temporary.
  - a. It is presumptuous to suggest to the Lord of glory what is right and proper! True, he begins humbly: **If you wish.** Nevertheless, he did not realize the audacity and absurdity of his suggestion. The absurdity of his idea lies not so much in his providing material shelters from the mountain cold for the glorified Jesus and His heavenly guests, as in believing that God's great Feast of Tabernacles had come. (Cf. Lev. 23:33-36, 39-43; Zech. 14:16-19; Dt. 16:13-15; see also Edersheim, *Life*, II, 148-165 for descriptions of rabbinical views of this feast and its typical significance, as also of Jewish traditional observances.) If in the Messianic Kingdom the remnant of the nations would participate with Israel at the great Tabernacle Feast, symbol of God's bringing them out of this life's wanderings into the blessing of eternal peace, perhaps that moment has come! If so, Peter

would make **here three tabernacles**, forgetting that the Feast of Tabernacles lay in the near future (Jn. 7:2f, 10; Mt. 19:1; Mk. 10:1; Lk. 9:51), the proposal of Peter to construct the little huts of branches from trees or shrubs may have been prompted by the realization that they were even then approaching the season for it. The actual materials would have been near at hand on the mountain down at the timberline. Peter's natural, human desire to eternalize this breakthrough of glorious reality is understandable, but it reveals just one more time the fact that he did not comprehend the meaning of the event. This was not, as the Apostles were wishing, the beginning of the final and definitive, but merely a prophetic and fleeting anticipation of it. God's final day of rest had not yet arrived, nor could it until after His day of judgment. And there had been no day of mercy before the day of wrath! Peter presumptuously wanted to dispense with the cross of Christ and freeze history right at that moment, not dreaming that, were he to have his way, he would have been swept out of God's presence forever along with the rest of us!

- b. Not only does he desire to prolong the mountain-top experience, but in the very act of providing **THREE** temporary lodges and placing them at the same level with Jesus, he perpetuates the authority of spokesmen whose messages served their day well, but from this day forward must rightly fade into the background behind the more glorious final revelation of Jesus Christ. How can Peter, who had but recently confessed Jesus to be God's Son and Messiah, now consistently consider even such great and holy men as Moses and Elijah to be at the same level of importance with Him? Is Jesus, after all, really just "one of the prophets"?! (Cf. Mt. 16:14) What is this, but the creation of a pernicious pantheon of personages, in which the definitive revelation of Him who is the final word from the Father is relegated to the status of lesser prophets.

His thinking is still contaminated by his worldly Christology and by his lack of comprehension about how the Messianic mission must be carried out.

## E. THE PATERNAL PRONOUNCEMENT OF THE PEERLESS PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST

17:5 The correction of Peter's nonsense was instantaneous, even while he was yet speaking. A bright cloud overshadowed them, apparently enveloping them, because Luke mentions the disciples' fear "as they entered the cloud." (Lk. 9:34) Although sunny-bright clouds naturally form around a mountaintop like that of Hermon, the special characteristics of this one mark it as supernaturally produced: its brightness, the disciples' extraordinary fear, the Father's voice out of it, its sudden appearance and disappearance at the right moments, and, finally, its possible theological significance. This *cloud* radiated the characteristically celestial brilliance with which Jesus was invested. Like other symbols in this unworldly vision, this *cloud* was part of Israel's unique history. The radiant cloud was the classic symbol of God's presence among His people to lead and bless them. (Ex. 24:16f; 34:5; 40:34-38; Lev. 9:6, 23f; Dt. 5:22-24; 1 Kg. 8:10f; 2 Chron. 5:11-14; 7:1-3; cf. Isa. 2:10, 19, 21; 4:5, 6; Ezek. 3:12; 8:4; 10:4, 18f; 11:22f; 43:2ff) However, more significantly for our context, God appeared to Israel in the luminous cloud to vindicate the mission and authority of His servants. (Ex. 16:10; Nu. 12:5, 10; 16:19, 42; 20:6) In exactly this same way God had appeared to Israel before to say, "This is my trusted servant, Moses: listen to him!" If the Almighty could not tolerate for an instant the neglect of His servants the prophets, how much less can the Father overlook even the well-meaning abasement of His Son! God's Good Confession, although directed to the disciples, would prove a third encouragement to Jesus.

Three distinct, meaningful messages were given, which, Peter affirms, conferred honor and glory from God the Father when the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory: (2 Pt. 1:17)

1. THE FATHER HERE IDENTIFIES JESUS AS HIS OWN SON: **This is my beloved Son.** By contrast, Moses and Elijah, highest exponents of the prophetic office in the economy of God, are but "servants in His house." (Cf. Heb. 3:1-5) Jesus, too, stands last and highest in the long line of God's prophets (Cf. Heb. 1:1ff; Mt. 21:11, 46; Mk. 6:15a; Lk. 7:16, 39; 13:33; 24:19; Jn. 4:19; 6:14; 7:40, 52; 9:17). Nevertheless, He is not to be classified as merely "one of the prophets" (Mt. 16:14), however honorable and holy they had been. He is the very fulfilment of the Law and the prophets. (Mt. 5:17; Lk. 24:44f) He is not just "God's Prophet"; He is God's SON, a

word expressing a relationship so exalted and intimate that no mere prophet ever reached this pinnacle of greatness.

In effect, this word from God says that Jesus is right on course existentially. Just as there is a father at the foot of this mountain pleading for his only begotten son (Lk. 9:38), so here at the summit the Father intercedes on behalf of His only Son, also suffering, not from disease, but from ignorance and misunderstanding on the part of His followers! He affirms that Jesus is really what He claims to be. Peter had earlier confessed Jesus to be God's Son, on the basis of God's revelations made through the words and works of His Son (See notes on 16:17.) Now the Father Himself confirms that conclusion by revealing it directly from heaven.

2. THE FATHER HERE IDENTIFIES THE PURPOSES AND PROGRAM OF JESUS AS HIS OWN: **in whom I am well pleased.** This divine verdict announces that Jesus is right on course morally and tactically. The mission of Jesus, however unworldly, impractical and seemingly unreasonable, however contradictory of human plans and aims, is well-pleasing to God! Jesus' manifestly waning popularity, approaching suffering and shameful death are not objective indicators of the ultimate failure of His mission. "He will continue to refuse to be a political Messiah of the Jews, He will stride into certain death by the hand of wicked men, He will be rejected and despised by the people, but **I am well pleased** with Him!" At Jesus' baptism the Father had expressed His approval of the Son's determination "to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15, 17). Here, He repeats His expression of approval, now of the Son's determination to give Himself to death as humanity's Redeemer (Mt. 16:21-28)
3. NOW THE FATHER IDENTIFIES THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS AS HIS OWN: **Hear ye Him!** God announces that Jesus is right on course theologically. This makes Jesus' "prophetic word more sure" too (cf. 2 Pt. 1:19), because God has identified Him as "the Prophet like Moses" to whom men must listen or be damned. (Dt. 18:15ff LXX where the verb form is almost identical: future indicative for present imperative) This order to listen to Jesus intends to be a deliberate and solemn endorsement of all that Jesus had taught, especially concerning His own humiliation and obedience unto death as well as the glory thereafter, and concerning the follower's obligation to bear his own cross. (Mt. 16:21-28) God means that everything Jesus says on this and any other subject is totally true and in harmony with God's eternal purpose. This command

represents the whole point of the Transfiguration. To miss it is to fail to comprehend the entire scene.

How badly the disciples needed to hear this voice! Foster (*Standard Lesson Commentary* 1955, 420) describes these men:

They had been anxious to hear more of what Moses and Elijah had to say; they were commanded to concentrate their attention on Jesus and to yield implicit obedience to Him. The apostles must have been sore tempted in recent months to listen to the bewildering cross-currents of the conflicting desires and plans of the national leaders and the multitudes; they were now ordered to listen to Jesus and obey Him.

The exalted preeminence thus bestowed on Jesus and the transformation of His appearance to harmonize with dignity of His position, and the manner in which His divine majesty was displayed never before nor since witnessed on the earth,—all this would be needed as a steady influence against the rapidly mounting opposition and conflicts with the hierarchy and political heads of the nation.

It is as if God were saying for all the world to hear: "Listen to Jesus, not Moses and Elijah nor the Law and the prophets as final, not the suggestions of Peter, not the pretensions of popery, not the spiritualistic experiences of mystics nor the rationalistic propositions of skeptics, but the voice of Jesus of Nazareth!" He is the final voice of God, so the fundamental attitude of the disciples is not creative theology, but listening and obedience! Man must give up trying to be the measure of truth and become the disciple and obedient servant of Him who is the Truth. Although every disciple, as a human being, has a right to his own personal opinion and free choice, the "Listen to Him!" urges each to deny himself in order to let Jesus lead and decide. Jesus is our only THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGIAN.

#### F. THE PROSTRATE, PERPLEXED APOSTLES PERSUADED TO PROMOTE THEIR PRESENT PRINCE

17:6 Although the disciples had been exceedingly afraid before (Mk. 9:6), especially as the cloud enveloped them (Lk. 9:34), they had been more or less passive spectators listening to a discussion that did not require their direct participation. But Peter's wrong-headed reaction brought them immediately into the picture, so God reacted instantly by addressing them directly. **And when the disciples**

**heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.** The voice of the Almighty so overawed them that their instinctive reaction, typically oriental, is to hurl themselves on their knees with their forehead touching the ground. God dwells in unapproachable light (1 Ti. 6:16), so, when He approaches man, His presence is unbearably terrifying. (Cf. Israel's reaction to the voice of God at Sinai. Ex. 20:18-20; Dt. 5:22-27) Sinful mortals have reason to tremble in the presence of the unmitigated brightness of the glorious holiness of the living God and in that of His messengers. (Cf. Gn. 3:10; Ex. 3:6; Dt. 9:19 = Heb. 12:21; Isa. 6:5; Dan. 8:17; 10:9-11; Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 44:4; Rev. 1:17)

**17:7 And Jesus came and touched them and said, Arise and be not afraid.** The touch of Jesus brought them back, not to reality, but back to the events of time and earth. (They testify to the vividness of the reality of all they had witnessed.) They had just seen a glimpse of the world of eternity and Paradise, and the program is now over. They must return to the equally real world of time and tribulation, the world into which Jesus Himself had come. He loved them, so He walked over to them, stooped to their level and tenderly laid His hands on their shoulders to encourage them to rise and have no fear. (Cf. Dan. 10:2-19; Rev. 1:17)

**17:8 And lifting up their eyes** means that they had remained in the prostrate position from the moment God spoke from heaven. This is the first time they dare raise their heads. Because Jesus had gently encouraged them, they did so. **They saw no one**, because they actually started "looking around" (Mk. 9:8) to see what had happened to Moses and Elijah. The result of this fruitless search is the more impressive because they had desired that Moses and Elijah remain forever present, and because God had ordered: "Listen to Jesus!" Now, literally in this symbolic vision, and later in theological reality, Moses and the prophets faded away as the final arbiters of human destiny, leaving *Jesus only*. The brusqueness with which the vision of Moses and Elijah faded serves to underline the fact that God has given to the disciples (hence to the Church) no other, no higher final authority than **Jesus only**. This is the final reality that must guide the life of the believers. The NT itself reflects this truth. In fact, from one end of the NT to the other, it is always about Him who is the Author and Perfecter of our faith, the Prophet, Priest and King of the new era of God's grace. If men miss this, they miss everything, for this is the one point of this entire event, that is more important than anything else of significance.

### G. PROHIBITION OF PREMATURE PUBLICATION BECAUSE OF PREDOMINANT PRECONCEPTIONS AND PREJUDICE

17:9 **And as they were coming down from the mountain.** When they made their descent is not told, so we have no inkling about whether the Transfiguration occurred by day or night. Nor is it clear how soon after that event they started down. Not even Luke's note, "On the next day when they came down . . ." (Lk. 9:37), helps, because, before starting their descent, they may have camped on the mountain one more night after a daytime Transfiguration. The fatigue of the Apostles, evident during the event itself (Lk. 9:32), is no indication of night-time either, since they could have been worn out by the ascent up into the rarified air of the peak.

**Jesus commanded them.** This very order tests their readiness to "Hear ye Him!" Can they begin obeying instantly? How the other Apostles would have pumped them with questions, cajoling them to furnish information about that wonderful something which must have taken place on the mountain, which was visible in the changed attitude of the three Apostles upon their descent. The Three obeyed the Lord faithfully and "kept the saying to themselves." (Mk. 9:10; Lk. 9:36) By so doing, they proved their discipleship to be true, at least in this point. Others, ordered to silence, almost invariably disobeyed Jesus. (Mk. 1:44f) They probably justified themselves: "He just cannot really mean what He says!" These Apostles trusted Him to know best, and so obeyed. His order contains three elements:

1. The prohibitive limitation: **Tell . . . to no man.** While this is another case of Messianic reserve (cfr. 8:4; 12:16) whereby Jesus wisely restrained popular Messianic excitement by simply prohibiting its divulging, why should the inner circle of disciples not share information so essential to reinforce the faith in Him, for example, of a Judas Iscariot? Why *tell* absolutely *no man*? Luke's expression (9:36) implies that the Three understood Jesus to mean they were to maintain absolute silence. Jesus knew His men and He had granted the vision of His glory only to those three, among all His disciples, with whom He could trust the information. He well knew what the others would have done with this kind of information, so He simply withheld it by instructing the Three not to disclose it. In fact, the others proved only too clearly their unfitness by their faithlessness and failure at the mountain's base. (See on 17:14ff.) Further, as is likely, even the Three themselves

had not yet digested the full significance of this event and needed time to ponder it in the context of later teaching and events.

2. The content: *the vision*. With this convenient summarizing word Jesus intends to include every part of the disciples' mountaintop experience. But does this word tell us anything about the nature of the experience?

a. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 669) fears that to call a "vision" everything that the Apostles saw, would somehow render unhistorical the transfigured appearance of Jesus, except in the mind of the three Apostles. He urges that *tō hórama*, here rendered "the vision," be translated "what has been seen" or "what you have seen," finding confirmation in the verb forms of Mark (9:9) and Luke (9:36). He feels that the distinction between subjective and objective appearance would really make a significant difference for the history. We agree that the objectiveness of Jesus' personal transformation is a fact: "He was transfigured before them" (Mt. 17:2; Mk. 9:2), "the appearance of his countenance was altered" (Lk. 9:29a), His garments became a glistening white. (Mt. 17:2; Mk. 9:3; Lk. 9:29) If this is so, then, by what criteria may we distinguish one part of the narrative as a "vision" from another part, calling it objective reality?

b. But the distinction between the subjective and the objective nature of *the vision* would not make a difference for the HISTORY; it would only make a difference for some of the HISTORIANS. After all, the eyewitnesses of this event are sufficient in number and their other well-known qualifications as inspired Apostles are sufficient and convincing that they can render impartial testimony. The real problem is not "visions" versus "real and historical," but a problem of prejudice in the reader who would deny the reality and importance of WHATEVER occurred during this event. Must we conclude that the "visions" given to Ananias (Ac. 9:10) or to Saul (Ac. 9:12) or to Cornelius (10:3) or to Peter (Ac. 10:17, 19; 11:5) or to Paul (Ac. 16:9, 10; 18:9), or Peter's impression (Ac. 12:9) were any less historical, because they were subjective rather than objective? Just because God projects a "vision" on the subjective consciousness of the viewer does not mean that He is not objectively revealing what they really see in this subjective way. We are dealing with historical fact either way.

c. To say that a vision cannot be collective, i.e. given to more than one person at a time (because such would smack of mass

hallucination), or to say that it would be seen by only one person, misses the point. In fact, when God gives visions He can render them visible to one or a thousand as He deems it necessary. Besides, our experience with the world of the spirit and visions is so limited as to disarm any dogmatism about whether any true experience of that world is "subjectively" or "objectively" experienced.

d. "Vision" does not necessarily mean something unreal or artificially imagined and which became the subject of myth. The word *vision* here is a summary of what happened and is itself clarified by the narration of the event itself, and for this reason must not be used as a definition for that for which it is only a summary, especially where it is flexible enough to refer to "what they saw" (objective) as well as a subjective experience ("vision"). Peter, himself an eyewitness, forever distinguishes this event from even the slightest suspicion of fraud or invention: "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God . . . we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain." (2 Pt. 1:16-19)

3. The terminus: **until the Son of man be risen from the dead.** The basic reason for this particular time limitation lies in its appropriateness:

a. It would have accomplished no immediate good to have publicized the event:

(1) If people believed it true, it would only have ignited misguided zeal and unfounded hopes, hindering the progress of understanding the true, spiritual aims of the King and His Kingdom.

(2) If they disbelieved it, they would have to doubt the truthfulness of the fishermen who told it, and the time is not yet come for their powerful, unique, independent witnessing. Later, He would empower them with their own supernatural deeds to serve as credentials to convince men to believe their testimony.

b. To keep it a secret would have pushed the eyewitnesses to meditate on its meaning, i.e. what is there about such a glorious event which occurred at such a time that, while crying to be told, must be kept confidential? Time is required to unlearn what is so deeply ingrained, so they must be silent in order to learn.

- c. The death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus to glory would explain the meaning of the Transfiguration. These evidences of Jesus' divine Lordship would be completed by His sending the Holy Spirit. (Ac. 2:33) His crucifixion was required to dash their misguided hopes and His resurrection would unveil His true glory. Despite all His explanations given prior to the actual occurrence of these facts, they still did not make the proper connections, because even now they are "questioning what the rising from the dead meant!" (Mk. 9:10) They understood resurrection as such, but could not mentally connect it in any rational way with the Son of man. Again, understanding is far easier after some unexpected event has taken place and is explained, than with all the explanations given prior to its taking place. The disciples' misconceptions are psychologically understandable, however, on the basis of their emotional rejection of any concept of His death. Resurrection, as a solution to death, would not interest anyone so completely convinced that his Master shall not die. Even now, when the Master alluded to His resurrection, it was as if He had introduced an absolutely foreign subject. Surely this Master of superb figurative language must mean "resurrection" in the metaphorical sense!
- d. Silence would also tend to keep them from boasting about the privileged intimacy with glory to which they had been admitted, lest they be too elated by the abundance of revelations. (Cf. 2 Co. 12:7) A man finds difficulty in bragging about something he cannot even talk about! Pride would be as serious a problem for these disciples as for the others. (Cf. Mk. 9:34 and notes on 18:1 and 20:20-28)

#### H. THE PONDERING OVER A PIVOTAL PERSONALITY

17:10 Having just heard the living voice of Elijah in glory, the disciples think they see a connection between that and another concept popular in Israel: **And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?** To the unaware, this question would appear to be a gross non sequitur, especially the word "then" which logically links this question with His prohibition to proclaim the Transfiguration until after His resurrection. But the connection is there, so intimate and so obvious to a Jewish reader that Matthew did not even need to express it. The disciples' perplexity

is composed of the following elements:

1. "What the rising from the dead meant" in reference to the Son of man. (Mk. 9:10; Mt. 17:9)
2. "Elijah must first come," or chronological order in God's timing.
3. Whether Messianic prophecy is fulfilled in the brief appearance of Elijah or not.
4. The inexplicable injunction to silence, if Elijah has truly come.
5. They ignored an alternative sequence, an "Elijah" already come who fulfilled the prophecy without being Elijah the Tishbite.

So, if the implications of the disciples' question had been inked in, their meaning would read something like this: "You just affirmed that you, the Son of man and our true Messiah, must rise from the dead, implying that you must die. This implies a time when death is possible. But the scholars teach that Elijah must come BEFORE the Messiah, in order to reform the world with its evil and death. Since we know you are God's Messiah ALREADY come, and since we just saw Elijah appear with you in glory AFTER your own appearance on earth, (1) on what basis do the scribes affirm that Elijah must come FIRST? (2) Does what we saw have anything to do with the fulfilment of the prophecy of Elijah's coming? (3) If so, why did he not remain to do the work expected of him, instead of disappearing almost immediately? (4) But if he must yet morally reform the world, eliminating man's rebellion against God, would this not eliminate any need, yes, even the possibility for you to die? What possible purpose could the death of the Messiah serve in a restored society? If it is restored, a Messianic death would be meaningless, since all murderous opposition to Him would have already ceased. (5) Last, why not speak openly about Elijah's appearance? After all, our testimony to having seen him is evidence that he has come and that you are, therefore, the Christ!"

The Apostles are not unaware of the Malachian prophecy (Mal. 4:5, 6), so their question does not mean: "Where did the scribes get their idea?" (See on 17:11, 12)

Just how widespread the knowledge of the "Elijah-prophecy" really was is illustrated by the fact that even courtiers of Herod Antipas knew of it! (Mk. 6:15) Priests and Levites from Jerusalem had interrogated John the Baptist himself whether he were Elijah or not. (Jn. 1:21)

Rather, they mean, "With what propriety do the scribes take such a

position on Malachi's prophecy?" **Elijah must first come** may have been the scribes' rebuttal to the disciples as the former argued that Jesus could not be the Messiah since the promised Elijah had not yet appeared.

17:11 **Elijah indeed cometh, and shall restore all things.** Note the unsectarian fairness of Jesus: when the scribes represent truth correctly, as here, He is glad to recognize it. (Cf. Mt. 23:2, 3) He loves truth above party. (Cf. 1 Co. 13:6) They were correct in their analysis at these points:

1. The absolute certainty of Elijah's coming was based on God's ordering: **Elijah must come** (*Elīān dei eltheīn*).
2. The sequence of the comings was correct: first that of Elijah and then that of the Messiah.
3. The purpose of Elijah's coming was correctly seen as restoration.
4. Their only mistake was in literalizing the prophecy, by expecting Elijah the Tishbite personally (See the LXX!), and by exaggerating, or completely missing, the spiritual, individual, voluntary character of the results of his mission.

**Elijah is coming and shall restore.** How is this future tense to be reconciled with the Lord's next statement that "Elijah has already come"? He means that their free quotation from Malachi's book and time, then yet future, is correct. However, what was future for Malachi has already had its fulfilment in John the Baptist who has come "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Lk. 1:17), even if he was not Elijah in person. (Jn. 1:21, 25) See my notes on 11:14 where this prophecy is discussed more fully.

**And shall restore all things** is a free, but good interpretation of Elijah's mission. In fact, *restore* (*apokatastēsei*) is the word used by the LXX translators. In Malachi's thought the *all things* is clearly moral renovation.

#### MALACHI HIMSELF IN HEBREW:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.

(Mal. 4:5, 6)

#### MALACHI TRANSLATED BY LXX:

Behold I send you Elijah the Tishbite before the great and famous day of the Lord comes,

who will restore (a) heart of (a) father to (his) son and a man's heart to his neighbor,  
lest I come and smite the land completely.

(LXX = 3:22, 23)

#### GABRIEL'S INTERPRETATION:

He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah,

to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

(Lk. 1:17)

The "fathers" in Malachi are the godly ancestors of the corrupt contemporaries of Malachi, as well as those of later times, "the children." Neither shares the same attitude toward God as the other. A common love for God which should have united them is missing. The mission of the great "Elijah" is to correct this by putting the godly heart of the fathers in the place of the degenerate heart of their descendants, and by leading the children to be like-minded with their godly ancestors and by turning the ungodly heart of the descendants toward what made their god-fearing ancestors what they were, lovers of God. Thus, the "Elijah" would prepare the way of the Lord to His people, that at His coming He might not have to smite the land with a curse. (Keil, *Minor Prophets*, II, 472)

The scribes with their hoary traditions and exaggerated notions about this text had been listening for the first whispers of an automatic, universal, almost mechanical renovation of the present order, a restoration with only superficial overtones, accomplished through the personal ministry of Elijah the Tishbite himself. (Cf. Sirach 48:10; see also Edersheim, *Life*, II, Appendix VIII, 706ff; Append. IX, 737 on Eccl. 48:10, 11 and relative references.) This, however, was not the purpose of Malachi's great "Elijah" nor the business of John the Baptist. For a people far from God and righteousness, the restoring of the original, physical aspects of their land, or even the returning of Israel to its home, are not of first importance. **Restoring all things** begins with getting men and women to repent and turn to God! Helping men to believe in Jesus Christ is fundamental to any attempts at **restoring all things**, and, until this is done, unregenerate men admitted to a restored Paradise will turn it into a hell on earth in five minutes. Repentance is the only real restoration of the proper state of things; nothing else even comes close! The only alternative God offered was destruction because of a refusal to repent. The entire message of Malachi was aimed at bringing men to an awareness that only in this condition of soul would men be ready to receive the Messiah, and that only in this spirit would they be ready to see in Him the realization of all God's promises and the hopes of their fathers. Repentance was the only way to avert destruction, not provoked by a world of nature out of joint, but by men who paid no attention to their God! But the materialistic, worldly-minded rabbis could not fathom this nor recognize the true realization of this kind of thinking when it was put into practice and preached by someone who restored men to fellowship with God like no one else had done for centuries. (See Jesus' sermon on John, Mt. 11) Ironically,

Jesus Himself was mistaken for "the Elijah" by His contemporaries, probably on the grounds of the marvellous moral reformation He was preaching. (Cf. Lk. 9:8, 19)

17:12 **But I say to you**, as I have already told you before (Mt. 11:14), Elijah is come already.

At this point, according to Mark (9:12b), Jesus made an interesting appeal to the prophecies: "Elijah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man? That he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt." (Note Tischendorf's punctuation which suggests that Jesus asked a question about the Messianic prophecies and then answered it.) Note the intentional parallelism in Mark: (9:12, 13)

12 How is it written of the Son of man? that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt (as it is written of Him)

13 Elijah has come and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.

Was the persecution of the "Elijah" (John the Baptist) predicted in Scripture: "they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him"? Or does this phrase refer only generally to the coming "Elijah"? If this latter, then Jesus is only filling in the details of the fulfilment of the prophecy, while affirming that "Elijah has come . . . as it is written of him" (that he would). The fate of John is, then, a parenthetical remark, not specifically prophesied.

Some believe that what was written of the original Elijah, describing his rejection and suffering at the hands of Ahab and Jezebel, has had its historical repetition in the rejection and suffering of John at the hands of Herod and Herodias.

It is as if Jesus said, "Although the scribes do correctly tell you of the coming and restoration of Elijah, they do not tell you of the suffering of the Christ, but the **SCRIPTURES DO**. You have as much Scriptural reason to expect the despised and suffering Messiah as you do the coming Elijah, and should not lay so much emphasis on the one to the neglect of the other." While on the basis of Scripture the scribes were perfectly orthodox in insisting that **Elijah must first come**, they had totally missed its true, proper fulfilment in the person of John the Baptist. But these same theologians, so adamant in asserting that Jesus cannot be the Christ since Elijah had supposedly not

appeared to lay the necessary groundwork for the Messiah, need to re-examine other Bible prophecies concerning the humiliation and suffering of the Messiah, to see that their theological grasp of the Messiahship was faulty. A correct reading of the Messianic prophecies might lead to a truer understanding of the Elijah of Malachi, and vice versa.

**Elijah is come already, and they knew him not.** (Cf. Mt. 11:13f) **But they did to him whatever they pleased.** The ungodly in Israel laughed him off as a brassy-voiced revivalist or a religious crank. (Mt. 11:18; Lk. 7:30) Or they sent delegations to challenge his authority. (Jn. 1:19-25) Or else they cowardly surrendered his innocent head to the vengeful and immoral. (Mt. 14:1-12) **They knew him not!** If people could not recognize John the Baptist as the fulfilment of the great "Elijah" prophecy, what better results could be expected of them as they interpreted the great Messianic prophecies? And it was precisely such faulty interpretation as this that had misled the Apostles, and which had required that Jesus correct their false notions by being transfigured before them.

In answer to the Apostles' implied objection that Elijah's moral restoration would automatically obviate the monstrous death of the Messiah at the hands of the rulers of the elect people of God, Jesus responds, in effect, that not even the benefic ministry of the promised Elijah would eliminate or even compromise man's liberty. In fact, in the personal case of him who was "the Elijah," John the Baptist, **they did to him whatever they pleased.** Moral reformation does not mean universal destruction of human freedom to reject God's will or messengers. God has no intention of making people be good who do not want to, however much the theorizing scribes wished it. (See notes on 13:9; "Apologetic Value" after 13:43, esp. point 2. Also 13:10) In fact, even the prophecy of Malachi did not promise unqualified success: "Behold, I will send you Elijah . . . He will turn the hearts . . . lest I come and smite the land with a curse." (Mal. 4:5, 6) What if the hearts refuse to turn "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes"? Some would hearken; most would not, so all that would be left for God to do was to smite Israel with the ban of utter destruction.

**So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands,** because they would not recognize Him either! John the Apostle, later, had to comment that Jesus "was in the world . . . yet the world knew him not. He came to His own home and His own people received Him not!" (Jn. 1:10, 11) Had the princes of this world recognized the

wisdom of God, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Co. 2:8) The fate already befallen John also lay in store for Jesus, as already intimated in 11:11-19. (See also on 14:1-13 Introduction.)

And as the prophet Elijah predicted by Malachi appeared in John the Baptist, so did the Lord come to His temple in the appearing of Jesus Christ. . . . Israel rejected its Savior, and was smitten with the ban at the destruction of Jerusalem in the Roman war.

(Keil, *Minor Prophets*, II, 473f)

This second Passion Prediction mercilessly thrust the Apostles back into the fiery furnace of anxiety over Jesus' impending death, but the Transfiguration had now furnished them significant pieces in the puzzle whereby they could more readily grasp the paradoxical terms on which Jesus intended to be God's Messiah: the glorious Son of God and, at the same time, the suffering Servant of Javéh.

**17:13 Then understood the disciples that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.** Jesus had formally and publicly identified His forerunner as the coming "Elijah," but He did so with this premise: "If you are willing to receive it." (Mt. 11:14) Although they had probably heard Him say it, they obviously had not been open to receive it. The reticence to believe that John was really "the Elijah," while surprising in these ex-disciples of John (cf. Jn. 1:35-40 notes), is decidedly comprehensible. Since their vision of what the Elijah must restore had not matched the actual ministry of their former teacher, now that Jesus categorically declared the prophecy's fulfilment in John, they see that they had already missed the right interpretation as badly as did their scribes. Once more, in this humiliating way, they learn that the plan of God is different from their own schemes. Nevertheless, having beheld Jesus' glory, they now have strength to continue in His discipleship like never before. God Himself has convinced them that, everything else notwithstanding, they can trust Jesus to know what He is talking about and where He is leading them.

By pointing to its undoubted fulfilment Jesus has just authenticated Malachi 4:5, 6 as true prophecy and a trustworthy witness to God's will. Additional proof of the authority of that text is the proper, unshaken confidence of the Jewish scribes that divine necessity required that Malachi's words be fulfilled ("Elijah MUST first come"). This evidences Jewish acceptance of the prophecy and the book that contains it as backed by the authority of God.

The relative positions represented in this discussion may be

represented graphically as follows:

	MALACHI 4:5, 6	THE SCRIBES (and Apostles too)	JESUS
S E Q U E N C E	<p>1. Elijah, "my messenger" (Mal. 3:1; 4:5f)</p> <p>2. Messiah, "the Lord, the messenger of the covenant" (Mal. 3:1 -3)</p>	<p>1. Elijah comes first. Disciples imply: "Did Elijah come second, i.e. at Transfiguration?"</p> <p>2. Messiah comes second. Disciples imply: "Did you come first before Elijah?"</p>	<p>1. Elijah already came first = John the Baptist.</p> <p>2. Messiah = Jesus</p>
M E A N I N G	<p>1. Elijah will come.</p> <p>2. He will bring restoration of hearts.</p> <p>3. Lest I smite the land with a curse.</p>	<p>1. "He will come personally."</p> <p>2. "The restoration will be automatic, universal, mechanical and material."</p> <p>3. "The curse is improbable, being rendered unnecessary by Elijah's success."</p>	<p>1. "One like Elijah"</p> <p>2. "The restoration will be spiritual, hence voluntary, hence individual."</p> <p>3. Death and suffering of the Messiah and His forerunner are still possible.</p>

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. The Transfiguration occurred "six days after" what event? How harmonize this with the fact that Luke 9:28 says "eight days"?
2. On what other occasions did Jesus select Peter, James and John for some special privilege to be the intimate observers of what occurred?
3. What information in the text helps us to decide up into what mountain Jesus went?
4. Describe the transfiguration itself by listing the ways the Synoptic writers tell about it.
5. What is the significance of Moses and Elijah respectively, that explains the propriety of their appearance with Jesus here?
6. What, according to Luke, was the topic of their conversation with Jesus?
7. Why did Peter propose to make three tents, rather than one only, or perhaps six (one each for the three Apostles, Jesus, Moses and Elijah)? Does Peter mean to build little shelters or large

- tabernacles like the one Israel built in the desert?
8. Explain why the Apostles were so sleepy. (Lk. 9:32) It seems as if these three fall asleep at the worst moments, especially when Jesus is praying!
  9. How does Peter's suggestion to build three tents confirm and conform so well with what we know of his character elsewhere?
  10. What is the meaning of the sudden appearance of "a bright cloud"?
  11. Why should the Apostles have been afraid as they entered the cloud which overshadowed them? (Lk. 9:34; cf. Mk. 9:6)
  12. What is the meaning and consequent effect of what the voice said from the cloud?
  13. Why did the disciples fall on their faces when they heard what the voice said?
  14. On what other occasion(s) did God thus publicly and audibly recognize Jesus?
  15. What is implied in the words: "my *beloved Son*"? "my *Chosen*"? (Lk. 9:35)
  16. What happened to Moses and Elijah at the conclusion of the vision? Is this significant? If so, why? If not, why not?
  17. Why did the voice have to say, "Hear ye Him"? Did the Apostles sometimes not listen to Jesus, hence would have needed this command? What is implied in this command?
  18. What circumstances make it imperative that Jesus give such a prohibition to these disciples?
  19. How long were they to keep the matter to themselves?
  20. What, in this text, indicates that the disciples did not yet understand that Jesus must die for the world's sins?
  21. What two predictions were discussed as Jesus and the three disciples came down from the mountain?
  22. On what basis did the Jewish scholars affirm that, before the appearance of the Messiah, Elijah would first appear to set the stage?
  23. To whom did God refer when He promised the sending of Elijah? Where is this reference found?
  24. How is it possible to say that John the Baptist is "the Elijah" intended, although he himself denied being Elijah? (cf. Jn. 1:21)
  25. What does this undoubtedly fulfilment of OT prophecy teach us about the nature of prophecy? That is, how are we to understand it? God promised that Elijah would come, but He did not mean the ancient Tishbite at all. Rather, He referred to another

- man. By what sort of logic can Jesus, or anyone else, say that John the Baptist is the Elijah intended?
26. What is the central message of the Transfiguration? What do we learn about Jesus from it? What happened to Jesus that made the transfiguration take place? Why was the transfiguration only temporary in the person of Jesus? Where did He get that glorious light that shone out of, or through, His physical human nature? What other Bible passages would help to explain what we should see in this event?
27. When or where is Jesus permanently glorified?

### Section 43

#### JESUS HEALS AND FREES A DEMONIZED BOY

(Parallels: Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43a)

TEXT: 17:14-21

14 And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a man, kneeling to him, and saying, 15 Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is epileptic, and suffereth grievously; for oft-times he falleth into the fire, and oft-times into the water. 16 And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him. 17 And Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I bear with you? bring him hither to me. 18 And Jesus rebuked him; and the demon went out of him; and the boy was cured from that hour.

19 Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast it out? 20 And he saith unto them, Because of your little faith: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. (Many authorities, some ancient, insert ver. 21: "But this kind goeth not out save by prayer and fasting." See Mark 9:29)

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Where did the crowd of people come from? Why were they present here?

- b. How did the nine Apostles get embroiled in this embarrassing situation?
- c. Why were the scribes arguing with the Apostles? What do you suppose the argument was about? (Cf. Mk. 9:14, 16)
- d. What was there about Jesus' appearance that caused the crowd to be greatly "amazed" when they saw Him? (Cf. Mk. 9:15)
- e. Why did they all press forward hurriedly to greet Him? (Mk. 9:15)
- f. To whom do you think Jesus addressed His question: "What are you discussing with them?" The scribes? The disciples? The multitudes? (Mk. 9:16)
- g. What is Jesus' intent behind this question? (Mk. 9:16)
- h. In what way is the appeal of the father on behalf of his son the answer to Jesus' question? (cf. Mk. 9:17)
- i. Why do you think the father went into such great detail in his description of his son's case? Would it not have been sufficient to be brief, since anyone who knows Jesus understands that His compassion is aroused by a simple presentation of the problem. What did the father hope to gain by such a thorough recitation of all the symptoms found in the three Gospels?
- j. Does the boy have epilepsy, or is he demon-possessed? How can you distinguish between the two? Is it not evident here that the distraught father is confused by the severer attacks of the disease, to the extent that he sincerely, however mistakenly, ascribes the symptoms to an evil spirit in his boy's body? How do you decide this?
- k. With regard to whom does Jesus sigh: "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?"? How do you know? Do you think this question indicates Jesus was exasperated? Why?
- l. Why does Jesus take so long to cast out the demon and end the poor sufferer's torments? (See Mk. 9:19-25.) Why waste additional precious seconds merely to ask further details of an already clear case? What possible good could be accomplished by this?
- m. Explain what the father meant by, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24)
- n. Do you think Jesus is impatient in throwing the father's statement back at him ("... if you can do anything")? Or is He patiently pointing out the weakness of faith in the father? Why do you decide as you do? (Cf. Mk. 9:23, 24)
- o. Why should Jesus be so concerned about a "crowd running together" (Mk. 9:25), that He would hurry up the casting out of the

demon? Or was He deliberately waiting on their arrival in order to achieve maximum publicity?

- p. In what sense were the witnesses to this miracle "astonished at the majesty of God"? (Lk. 9:43)
- q. If the disciples had at least some faith, however little (Mt. 17:20), why was this insufficient to expel the demon? What kind of faith is "little faith" and why did it fail?
- r. Are there varying kinds of demons? When the disciples asked the Lord why they could not cast it out, His answer was that "this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." (Mk. 9:29) Are there other kinds that can be driven out without prayer? What did Jesus mean?
- s. Why should the Apostles' unbelief prevent their working a miracle? After all, was not the power to do it actually God's? Could He not do anything He desired, notwithstanding their weakness and lack of faith? What did their faith have to do with it anyway?
- t. Should we expect the same miraculous demonstration today of mountain moving? In what sense? Does this mean that we can "pick our mountain" and, "in faith," order it to move, expecting God to do it? If faith is taking the Lord at His word, and He has given us no specific instructions regarding a particular "mountain" in our life, do we have any basis for believing that He will move it, merely because we have determined within ourselves that it has to be moved and simply because we want to believe that He will?
- u. Would you say that modern man is *liberated* from the fear of demons and the devil, or *superstitious and bound* by his bold assumption that "of course, they don't exist!"?

#### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

The next day after the Transfiguration, Jesus, Peter, James and John descended from the mountain. They were approaching the other nine Apostles when they noticed a large crowd surrounding them and some theologians debating with them. Suddenly, when all the crowd saw Him, they were awestruck. Running forward to Him, they greeted Him. But He broke in, "What is this argument about? Why are you arguing with them?"

At this point a man pushed out of the crowd and fell to his knees before Jesus, imploring, "Teacher, I brought my son to you. I beg you to be merciful to him and take a look at him, because he is my only boy. He has a demon that makes him speechless. He is an

epileptic and is very ill. When this evil spirit attacks him, he screams unexpectedly. It convulses him, dashing him to the ground. He is always falling into the fire or into water. He foams at the mouth, grits his teeth and becomes rigid. The evil spirit is severely bruising him and is slow to leave him. I brought him to your disciples, begging them to drive out the demon; but they failed! They were not able to heal him."

"O you unbelieving, corrupted children of the times!" Jesus sighed impatiently, "How long must I be among you? How long must I put up with you? Bring your son here to me!"

Then they led the boy to Him. But before the lad could reach Jesus, the demon saw Him. He suddenly threw the child to the ground in a convulsion; and he lay there writhing and foaming at the mouth. Jesus interrogated his father, "How long has he been like this?"

"Ever since he was very small," the father responded. "It is always trying to end his life by casting him into fire or water! But if there is anything you can do, take pity on us and help us!"

But Jesus retorted, "What do you mean: 'If you CAN . . . !'? Everything is possible to the man who believes!"

Instantly the child's father exclaimed, "I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!"

Now when Jesus noticed that a crowd was rapidly forming, He spoke sternly to the foul spirit: "You deaf and dumb spirit, it is I who command you to come out of him and never go back again!"

The demon screamed and convulsed him terribly, but came out, leaving the lad like a corpse. This caused most of the people to gasp, "He is dead!"

But Jesus grasped the boy by the hand and lifted him up. He stood up, instantly cured. Then He handed him back to his father. Everybody stood awestruck at this demonstration of the majesty of God.

When He got home, Jesus' disciples came to Him privately, puzzled, "Why is it that we were unable to drive out that demon?"

"Because you believed so little," He replied. "I can assure you that even the tiniest amount of authentic faith is invincible against the most impossible obstacles! Nothing will prove impossible to you. Nothing is effective against this kind of evil spirit, unless you go to God asking Him to drive it out. Cases like this require prayer, not argument."

## SUMMARY

Following the Transfiguration, Jesus and His inner circle of Apostles returned to the waiting nine whom they found engaged in argument with some rabbis, at the center of attention of a large crowd. Surprised to see Him back, everyone hurried to welcome Jesus. He, however, went straight to the point, asking what was going on. The father of a demonized epileptic presented his son's case to Jesus, describing the Apostles' failure to expel the demon. The Lord summoned the lad, but the demon made one last effort to break the boy, causing a violent convulsion. When He saw the despairing doubt of the father, He demanded of him unhesitating confidence. To end the further suffering of the boy, Jesus ordered the immediate and permanent expulsion of the demon, and it obeyed, but not without a final struggle which left the child apparently dead. Jesus instantly raised him up perfectly healed, and gave him back to the father, to the reverent amazement of the entire crowd.

Later, the humiliated Apostles asked for a private explanation. The Lord underlined their lack of faith and prayer.

## NOTES

### II. REPROOF OF FAITHLESSNESS AND FAILURE

#### A. POWER PARALYZED BY PREOCCUPATION, PESSIMISM AND PRAYERLESSNESS

As will be seen by a summary comparison with the accounts of Mark and Luke, it is clear that Matthew boils this incident down to a few essential lines. He omits:

1. The greatness of the crowd gathered around the disciples. (Mk. 9:14)
2. The debate raging between the embarrassed disciples and the scribes. (Mk. 9:14, 16)
3. The amazement of the crowd when Jesus suddenly appeared. (Mk. 9:15)
4. Jesus' scolding challenge: "What were you discussing with them?" (Mk. 9:16)
5. The fact that the epileptic demoniac was only a child (Mk. 9:24)

- and that he was an only child (Lk. 9:38).
6. The epileptic symptoms: its seizures, foaming at the mouth and rigidity (Mk. 9:18) and its convulsions (Lk. 9:38).
  7. Whereas Mark and Luke immediately attribute the cause of the disease to a "dumb spirit" (Mk. 9:17) or a "spirit, a demon" (Lk. 9:39, 42), Matthew almost neglects to mention the demon until the actual cure takes place. (Mt. 17:18)
  8. The long conversation between Jesus and the father. (Mk. 9:20-24)
  9. The fact that Jesus was moved to rebuke the unclean spirit when he saw that a crowd was gathering. (Mk. 9:25)
  10. The final convulsions as the demon came out, and Jesus' raising him up (Mk. 9:26f)
  11. Jesus' returning the boy to his father, healed (Lk. 9:42b)
  12. The astonishment of the witnesses at the majesty of God (Lk. 9:43)

Matthew brushes aside these instructive details in order to get down more quickly to the chief features of this incident: the faithlessness and failure of the followers.

**17:14** **And when they were come to** the foot of the mountain the next day (Lk. 9:37), they immediately encounter *the multitude* (*tōn óchlon*). The definiteness of this expression makes the reader ask, "What multitude?" Since there was none mentioned as they went up the mountain, McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 152) disposes of the problem by deduction: "From the expression . . . we infer that Jesus and the three had left a multitude when they went into the mountain, and that they now return to the same." The point is, of course, that the presence of the article made such a deduction necessary. The last time a definite "crowd" was mentioned previously, was the multitude present with the disciples during Jesus' sermon on "The Cost of Our Salvation" (Mt. 16:24-28), but it was Mark who mentioned the crowd in that instance, not Matthew. (Mk. 8:34) Perhaps this crowd had remained with Jesus' party until now, lingering around the Lord for further teaching.

The solution may be that suggested by Thayer (*Lexicon*, 433, see his examples): "The article is used with names of things not yet spoken of, in order to show that definite things are referred to, to be distinguished from others of the same kind and easily to be

known from the context . . ." Arndt-Gingrich (552) agrees that "the individualizing article also stands before a common noun which, in a given situation, is given special attention as the only or obvious one of its kind . . ."

The linguistic result would be much like the common American idiom with which people often begin a story: "There was this man . . .," although we learn who the man was from what follows, not from what precedes, since this is the beginning of the story with a definite demonstrative pronoun!

So, Matthew may mean nothing more than "the (usual) crowd."

As with all crowds, these folks were eager to find Jesus for almost as many different reasons as there were people. They had become, however, unwilling eye-witnesses both of the disciples' humiliation and of the scholars' insinuating questions. The fact that Jesus' sudden return immediately brought them running to greet Him is evidence of where their sympathies lay during the heated discussion between the rabbis and His disciples. But the great amazement of the crowd caused by His sudden appearance so near them must not be attributed to any traces of the radiance of His transfiguration lingering about His face or body. Such a hypothesis is at variance with Jesus' forbidding all publicity connected with His Transfiguration. The better explanation of their amazement is that Jesus' sudden return at just the right moment took everyone by surprise. Those who sided with the rabbis would feel suddenly exposed as if they had been caught in the act. These loyal to Jesus would be happily surprised and relieved that He had arrived at just the right moment.

Upon His descent from the mount of Transfiguration He found disorder among His disciples, however not as crude as Moses found in the camp of Israel when he descended from Sinai. (Ex. 32) But the perversity and faithlessness were no less damning. Hurrying into the midst, Jesus challenged the scribes and His disciples alike with one blistering question: "What were you discussing with them?" (Mk. 9:16)

1. To the gloating scribes, this would mean: "Do you dare say to me what you just said to my disciples?"
2. To the disciples, this would mean: "What was so important that you had to discuss it with THEM, instead of getting on with the business of God?"

The scribes stand voiceless and impotent before His onslaught. Their

silence evidences a felt rebuke for the unjustified revelling over the failure of His disciples. The silence of the nine Apostles betrays their guilty conscience and they have not the courage publicly to admit their failure to their Lord and Master. Despite His fiery challenge, **there came to him a man, kneeling to him.** The desperation of a distraught father pushes him to leave the anonymity of the crowd and rush to his knees to state the pitiful plea in Jesus' presence. Although this is not the answer to Jesus' question, his case is the object around which the entire discussion had hinged.

### B. THE POIGNANT PLEA OF A PATHETIC PREDICAMENT

17:15 **Lord.** The other two Evangelists quote him as saying, "Teacher." (Mk. 9:17; Lk. 9:38) Without denying these other testimonies, Matthew seems to underline the proper lordship of Jesus by showing the man's respect for Him. However, since *lord* (*kyrie*) may also mean nothing more than "Sir," an address used in place of the proper name of the person addressed, we cannot assess the depth of the man's faith on the basis of the form of address alone. **Have mercy on my son.** Although the father will later show the inadequacy of his confidence in Jesus' power (Mk. 9:22b), his initial request appeals to Jesus' compassion, as if the Lord's ability to heal the boy were for him a foregone conclusion.

The child is an *epileptic*, but not just an epileptic, because this physical malady is merely the background upon which his demon possession is superimposed. Rather, the cause of the epilepsy and its accompanying symptoms was a demon. (v. 18) On demon possession, see notes on 8:28ff and Seth Wilson's "Notes on Demon Possession" (*Learning From Jesus*, 302ff). Although the NT does not teach that all, or even most, cases of epilepsy were produced by demonic power, this one was. Note that doctor Luke (Col. 4:14), who would have most scientific reason to doubt the demonic cause, is as descriptive as Mark in attributing the seizures to "an unclean spirit, a demon." (Mk. 9:17f, 20, 25; Lk. 9:39, 42f) Matthew himself knew how to distinguish cases that were strictly demonic from those which were normal, non-demonic epileptics, paralytics and other various diseases and pains. (Mt. 4:24) Beware of that undiscriminating pseudo-scholarly talk that affirms that "during this time it seems to have been common to attribute various types of physical difficulties to demon possession. It should be obvious because of this that the term

'demon' in the various Gospel narratives may mean a number of different things, mainly bound up with what were otherwise inexplicable human problems." (McMillan, *Mark*, 113)

**For he often falls into the fire and often into the water.** Are these phenomena to be attributed to the epileptic seizures or to the attacks of the demon who maliciously tried "to destroy him"? (Mk. 9:22) Certainly the father means that the unexpected effects of the (demonically induced) convulsions required that the boy be constantly watched lest such terrible accidents endanger his life. **Into the fire.** Even non-epileptic children, if not controlled, can be horribly burned by their accidentally falling into the open brazier of live coals used for heating their homes. **Into the water.** The danger of drowning is just as real for a non-swimmer whose body is out of control.

**17:16 And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.** What damning evidence of their failure! The man had originally come, bringing his son to Jesus. (Mk. 9:17) Finding Him temporarily absent, he cheerfully turned to the very men who were reputedly disciples of His, men who had shared His miraculous power, men who should have shared His mind and heart and turned instantly to God in prayer for power. Instead they stood POWERLESS, sputtering over their embarrassing incompetence.

Had this distraught father neglected to try every remedy known in his time? would such a father have left any stone unturned, any solution untried to save his boy? If not, do we not learn that there was nothing in that time equal to the task of liberating him? Was there nothing in all Hebrew culture or religion that could touch that boy? Was there nothing in the refinement and learning of Hellenism to free him? In the presence of the most refined philosophies of his age, that father personally experienced their absolute bankruptcy and helplessness to set his little lad free from the foul demon that enslaved him! Only spiritual power can deal with spiritual problems, and even Jesus' disciples did not possess this.

**Thy disciples** means the nine Apostles left at the base of the mountain while Jesus ascended with Peter, James and John for prayer. Barnes (*Matthew-Mark*, 179) suggests that the disciples here are not the Apostles, but other followers who attempted to work miracles, for others of His disciples also worked them who were not personal attendants on His ministry. (Mk. 9:38) However, this explanation presupposes that the father had never asked the Apostles to heal his son. But this is highly improbable, since the Nine were physically present in this scene. The father probably would not have asked others

of Jesus' disciples present in the crowd, instead of the Apostles who would presumably have had more faith and more experience and power than those unsuccessful "disciples." On the contrary, the word *disciples* calls us back to remember that the mighty Apostles of the Church of Christ were one day but learners, struggling with doubts and mistakes.

**They could not cure him.** This is the first time any failure on their part is mentioned in the sacred narrative. Their embarrassed question at the conclusion is further proof that this is the only failure in their ability to work miracles. (17:19; see also Lk. 10:17-20) And, since Jesus showed them the cause of this unsuccessfulness, it is evidence that they learned the lesson of faith. (17:20)

17:17 The pained outcry of our Lord is provoked primarily by the powerlessness of His nine Apostles to heal the boy. Mark 9:18b, 19 underlies this by saying: "I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered THEM . . . Matthew in v. 16 furnished the fullest statement of the disciples' discomfiture. So, his v. 17 most naturally expresses Jesus' chagrin at THEIR ineptness.

Some consider this exclamation as addressed to the unbelief of the relentless scribes who were present, the doubting father, the vacillating multitudes, the human miseries caused by sin and unbelief, as well as the weak faith of the baffled Apostles. Others would inexplicably exempt the Apostles from censure, and blame rather the perversity on the malicious influence of the rabbis at work in the crowd, and only indirectly on the Apostles, if at all. It is not wrong to ascribe perversity and faithlessness on the crowds and the scribes, who undoubtedly were all of this.

In fact, can the Lord be complacent in the face of the pernicious influence that threatens to undermine the faith of His disciples and destroy the precious nucleus He had labored so patiently to create? And should He not denounce it, even in general terms, so that ANYONE who shared these doubts would feel compelled to reaffirm his personal decision about Jesus to follow Him in single-minded faith?

Because they had begun to entertain some of the uncertainty about Jesus and His Messianic methodology and the same doubts that were characteristic of their cultural ambient, the Apostles had been brought back temporarily to the same level of unfaithfulness with their own unbelieving countrymen. This is why they must share in the common condemnation.

**O faithless and perverse generation.** Often when Jesus used the word *generation*, He considered the whole contemporary generation of Jews as a uniform mass confronting Him. (Cf. Mt. 11:16; 12:41f; 23:36; 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 7:31; 11:29-32, 50f; 17:25; 21:32) He described that *generation* as "evil" (Mt. 12:45; Lk. 11:29), "evil and adulterous" (Mt. 12:39; 16:4), "adulterous and sinful" (Mk. 8:38). Contemporaries of the Apostles appeared to them as a "crooked generation" (Ac. 2:40) and "crooked and perverse" (Phil. 2:15), like the kind that provoked God in the wilderness (Heb. 3:10). See Arndt-Gingrich on *geneá*, p. 153.

Here, however, He leveled the charge of perverseness and unbelief primarily at His own disciples. How can such an attitude of bitter disappointment be justified? This is an unmitigated outburst of divine judgment upon people to whom had been granted the most extraordinary opportunities to know and obey the truth. Therefore His words are to be taken in their harshest sense. (Cf. Dt. 32:5, 20, esp. in LXX!)

1. There is no necessity to soften the apparent severity of His words, because the disciples had done more than merely empty their reputation as miracle workers. In their self-seeking, they had nearly wrecked the father's faith. They would not have gone away grieved about the poor boy whom they had failed to heal; they would have slunk away, red-faced over their soiled reputation. Consequently, they had embittered the father, armed the scribes with handy arguments, and tarnished the name of the Lord whose discipleship they owned.
2. The Apostles had worked miracles in the name of Jesus before, especially the casting out of demons. (Mt. 10:1, 8; Mk. 6:13) Had they only now succumbed to the temptation to use this power for their own glory "just to show those scribes that they really could"? As a matter of fact, they were arguing with the theologians instead of striving in prayer to God. Apparently they merely began to try to cast out the demon. But the Lord had not told them to TRY to do anything: He told them to CAST THEM OUT through confidence in His authority. (Mt. 10:1, 8) He had provided the power, but they were to furnish the faith. They are now perversely faithless, and He furnished them no power.
3. The perversity of their faithlessness was further evident in, and actually caused by, their running mental debate with Jesus' views of the Messianic Kingdom. They refused to envision any hope of

success for a suffering, dying Messiah who worked so patiently with the most unpromising people and whose notorious lack of economic schemes, power structures and military policy was becoming intolerable. In other words, what they could not rationally accept, they tended to believe impossible. Believing that God in Jesus Christ could work out all the seemingly contradictory details was fundamentally foreign to large segments of their entire way of thinking. THIS IS UNBELIEF, PERVERSE AND WICKED UNFAITHFULNESS! They, too, needed to have Jesus repeat to them: "All things are possible to him who believes!" To the extent that the Apostles shared the feeling that Jesus' views and practice were uneconomical, impractical, unsound, unscholarly and bound to fail, they must suffer His condemnation upon their skeptic age.

**Perverse** (*diestramménē*, from *diastréfo*) means "twisted, contorted, distorted, disordered, inverted, changed, seduced, depraved." (Rocci, 466) If this sounds too strong for Jesus' Apostles, or even His disciples, Morgan (*Matthew*, 224) shows the connection:

Moreover, the age was not only "faithless"; it was "perverse"; which does not mean merely that it was rebellious; but that it was a generation twisted, and contorted; a generation in which things were out of the regular; a generation distorted in its thinking, in its feeling; in its action; a generation unable to think straightly, to feel thoroughly, to act with rectitude; a generation in which everything was wrong.

The use of the two words "faithless and perverse," indicates a sequence. A generation that loses its faith, becomes distorted, out of shape. A people who live exclusively upon the basis of the things seen, form untrue estimates; their thinking is distorted, their feeling is out of the straight, their activity is iniquity, which simply means crookedness.

There is no more tragic *unbelief* in all the world of any generation than the unbelief of **BELIEVERS**. There is no *perversity* more wicked than that which claims discipleship to Jesus and claims to be asking honest questions, while attempting to force its own opinions upon Him. It is *perverse* for disciples to refuse, however unconsciously, to let Him be the Teacher and Lord, debating His every word as if He were no more than a common rabbi from the country!

**How long shall I be with you** to rescue from the abortive attempts of your faithfulness and to teach you until you understand? How

long must I visit you until you take my medicine instead of yours? R. C. Foster (*Standard Lesson Commentary* 1959, 10) thinks that

This sweeping statement of Jesus seems to contrast earth and heaven. It was as if He looked up momentarily to all the glory and implicit obedience which had surrounded Him in heaven. It seems that a bit of nostalgic longing for all He had surrendered to come into this world suddenly swept over His soul. But it was not a word of self-pity, not to mention despair. It was a biting, challenging criticism and protest.

He had put up with this nonsense for almost three years now, and He longs for it all to be over. Not intolerable conditions, but intolerable UNBELIEF, wore Jesus out! In contrast to their wavering and wrongness, He trusted God and lived a life in harmony with His will, and the contrast caused Him pain. He had provided them enough reasons to trust Him implicitly, so He had a right to expect more intelligent faith. This anguished impatience is not evidence of His humanity, but of His deity! In fact, had He been but a mere man, He would have already given up! His impatience, disgust and weariness is just like God's! (Study Ex. 16:28; Nu. 14:11, 27; Isa. 1:14; 7:13; 43:24b; Jer. 4:14, 21; 15:6; Mal. 2:17) This longing for the finish of His earthly mission, even if that meant the cross and suffering in virtual preference to these continual disappointments, shows just how wearying to Jesus must have been the disciples' obtuseness and lack of confidence in Him. Yet, He loved them and continued patiently to minister to their needs until He could truly say, "It is finished!"

**Bring him here to me.** What imperative majesty there is in this summons! What confidence in the power of God at work in Himself! This prompt, decisive action is an indirect challenge to the scribes, because it focuses everyone's attention on Himself with whom "all things are possible," because HE believes that God will work through Him. It shames the Apostles for their time-wasting, faith-dissipating discussions.

The immediacy of Matthew's narrative omits the delay that occurred between Jesus' order (v. 17) and the expulsion of the demon (v. 18). In fact, Mark and Luke inform us that, while the boy was being brought, the demon, when he came in sight of Jesus, threw him to the ground in a convulsion. (See on 17:21.) At this point the following conversation took place:

C. THE PAINED BUT PERCEPTIVE PLEA OF  
THE PRESSURED PARENT (Mk. 9:21-24)

Mark 9:21 And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" The Lord's apparently clinical manner is not intended to furnish Himself information for a proper diagnosis, and certainly not to prolong the suffering of the victim and, consequently, of his father. He achieved two purposes by this question: (1) He showed the father His personal concern and steady nerve even though the demon was raging his wildest, and (2) at the same time, He impressed everyone present with the obstinacy and apparent hopelessness of the case, so that they might form some estimate of the supernatural power required to resolve it completely. When combined with the disciples' bafflement and the father's desperation and the scribes' overconfidence and the multitudes' indecision, these two factors are well calculated to throw Jesus' calm mastery of the situation into greater relief. **From childhood** (*paidióthen*) may not mean too long a time, since the victim was still a "child" (*paidlou*, Mk. 9:24).

Mark 9:22-24 Confident of the Lord's power, the leper had said, "If you will, you can . . ." (Mt. 8:2) The believing Martha showed some uncertainty about whether it would be Jesus' will to raise Lazarus, but she too had no doubt about His power. (Jn. 11:21-27) But this poor doubter, basing his plea only on Jesus' compassion, now cried: **If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.** Imagine the audacity of saying to Jesus Christ, "If you CAN . . .!" No wonder Jesus exploded, "What do you mean by saying to me, 'If you can . . .?' All the might of the living God is at the disposal of the person who trusts Him!" **Him who believes.** Where personal faith was impossible on the part of the victim, Jesus welcomed the faith expressed by those who brought them. (Cf. 9:2; 15:22, 28) The epileptic boy, victim of a malicious demon, could not be expected to believe, so Jesus requires faith of him who made the request and could believe. When HE breaks down under doubt, the Lord mercifully pricks his conscience to show him where his weakness lay. Note that the Lord expected him to believe in the face of the disciples' humiliating failure and the seemingly unanswerable attacks of the scribes and the deadening confusion of the crowds.

**All things are possible to him who believes.** Is this a general truth equally applicable to every believer, or to be understood only in this local frame of reference? The most natural explanation is to view Jesus as speaking directly to the need of a man who was clearly

doubting Jesus' ability. There is no suggestion here of Jesus' inability to heal an unbeliever. (See notes on 13:58.) Rather, He hints at the man's possible refusal, or failure, to believe that He could do anything needed. His word intends to stir the father to rid himself of the skepticism implied in his petition. It was the father's own wavering that was rendering the difficult healing even more so. Further, in the presence of the scornful scribes who had exulted over the failure of the nine disciples, Jesus would prove that *all things are possible to Him!* He Himself believed God and He would prove the truth of this doctrine by His miracle.

This passage is no justification for the assumption on the part of some who would take this as an unqualified promise for indiscriminate application, implying that God will automatically bend the universe to suit the fancies of the sincere. In His infinite wisdom, God may actually choose to bless the believer who prays that His will be done, in precisely the form in which the believer requests it. Yet, faith, to be faith, must be based upon objective evidence of God's will. (Ro. 10:17) But "faith" that is based on one's subjective wishes or dreams is not faith, but presumption. The backing of God is not promised for some screwy idea we cook up and attempt "on faith," because Jesus has not obligated God to deliver anything according to our whims.

The father instantly corrected his error, wringing out of his soul the most beautiful, most profound confession of trusting dependence upon God's mercy: "**I believe; help my unbelief!**" What a model for our every prayer in our struggle for righteousness! What profound understanding of the temptations to doubt despite our profession of faith! What humility to bare before the Lord our own unworthiness and lurking mistrust! What genuine confidence in Jesus to help us to greater faith and more real dependence upon His grace and power! What insight to call his little faith "unbelief!" This faith stood out in sharp contrast to the rabbis who had resisted the impact of the evidence and stubbornly insisted on not believing. Recognizing the inadequacy both of the content and of the sufficiency of one's faith, taken together with that intense, overwhelming longing to be all that it is possible for us to be, is the kind of faith that Jesus was longing to find.

What did the father believe? Jesus had been making tremendous, transparent claims to deity, leading men to accept Him as the only one who knew God (Mt. 11:25-30) and as the Forgiver of sins (Mt. 9:6) Despite its admitted weakness, this confession of faith made in

the presence of hostile witnesses admits that Jesus is possessor of divine power and divine truth. No small test this, it involved more than believing that the Nazarene could cure, since the very basis of this miracle was what Jesus claimed to be. Did the father believe this? His reaching out to grasp all the truth may have been caused by the ghastly realization that he only imperfectly saw Jesus as God's Revealer.

Meanwhile, the foaming, convulsing boy was half-carried, half-walked past the embittered critics and incompetent teachers of the age, past the fumbling, faltering followers, past the irresolute and inactive throng, into the presence of the Son of God.

#### D. THE PITEOUS PRISONER PROMPTLY PURGED OF HIS PERVERSE POSSESSOR

**17:18 And Jesus rebuked him and the demon went out of him,** thus ending years of suffering. (Mk. 9:21) That the Lord desired the clearest, most decisive conclusion to this event, is evidenced by the following considerations:

1. Before rebuking the unclean spirit Jesus waited until He "saw a crowd come running together." (Mk. 9:25)
  - a. A great crowd of people had been present from the outset. (Mk. 9:14) There is no evidence that these ever left. It is psychologically improbable that anyone would move a step until this great question was settled.
  - b. He had reason to await the arrival of newcomers. His purpose in waiting may have been to secure the largest possible number of eyewitnesses to His successful healing of the demoniac boy, since His own disciples had already muddied His reputation by their bungling.
2. When Jesus rebuked the demon, His wording is deliberate, precise and explicit (Mk. 9:25):
  - a. The specific demon causing the malady is singled out by description: "You dumb and deaf spirit . . ." i.e. the demon that caused the boy to be deaf and dumb. Note, Jesus did not address the disease, but the demon. Luke says it precisely: "Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy." (Lk. 9:42)
  - b. Jesus expressed His own personal authority: "I command you" (*egò epitássō soi*). He needed not, as the Apostles, to appeal to

any higher authority. (Cf. Ac. 16:18)

- c. A specific order was given: "Come out of him!"
- d. A warning admonished: "And never enter him again!" Men may have thought that the return of the convulsions had been associated with the return of the demon. Nevertheless, demons can return to former victims. (Cf. Mt. 12:43-45) However, we have no evidence that any Jesus expelled ever returned. McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 425) contrasts the particular "malicious effrontery and obstinacy" of this demon with the "cowed supplicating spirit shown by the Gadarene legion," (Mt. 8:28ff), suggesting that this demon might just try it, a possibility that would necessitate this precautionary warning.
- 3. Had He desired to avoid a valid use of theatrics, He could have shortened His conversation with the boy's father (Mk. 9:20-24) and gotten down to the business of casting out the demon much sooner, and done it instantly without any resistance by the demon. But the way Jesus led the father to deeper faith all the more clearly shows His deliberate intention to glorify God in the most spectacular way possible under the circumstances.
- 4. Finally, when He actually began the healing itself, He did not forestall the demon's violent, final convulsion which left the boy like a corpse and most of the witnesses convinced of his death. This tense moment furnished Jesus the privilege of lifting the boy up, perfectly and instantly cured. The first step (rebuking the demon) left the audience disappointed, so they were psychologically unready for His last move. The last step left the observers completely breathless and staring in wonder. So, His technique was made far more spectacular by a two-stage process than if He had simply hurried to banish the demon and heal the boy, all in one rapid gesture.

So, it is incorrect to affirm that Jesus' noting the gathering of a crowd caused Him to accelerate the healing, because this is not an example of His Messianic reserve, since there is no hint of an attempt to avoid the spectacular. If we have correctly located in semi-pagan country the mountain at the base of which this event occurred (see on 17:1), there would have been little or no need for silence to forestall unwanted publicity. It was only when He "went on from there and passed through Galilee" that "He would not have any one know it." (Mk. 9:30) Now, however, since His unbelieving, bungling disciples have forced Him to clear His name publicly, He has ample

reason to avoid secrecy on this occasion.

**And the demon came out of him**, not, however, without violent convulsions that left the lad so much like a corpse that bystanders pronounced the victim dead. Jesus ignored their judgment, took the boy by the hand, lifted him up and he arose, *cured instantly*. (Cf. Mk. 9:26f) The sensitive Luke notices that He "gave him back to his father." (Lk. 9:42) The instantaneous cure shows the decisiveness and completeness of Jesus' power, in contrast to others' time-wasting discussions and neglect of the suffering victim. It also leaves His hecklers suddenly facing the pressure of facts which they must accept (in which case they must repent) or reject (in which case they must invent plausible explanations in the presence of rejoicing crowds, astonished at the majesty of God and marvelling at everything Jesus did! Lk. 9:43). Whereas the disciples had drawn attention to themselves by their faithlessness and failure, the scribes had leveled unjustified criticism at the Lord's power, the demon had succeeded (apparently) in procuring the death of the afflicted lad, the crowds stood around with hands tied by human helplessness, the Lord, on the other hand, acted with compassion and total mastery. This vivid contrast left the crowd standing in awe of God! Lest our short-sighted love for Jesus cause us to be a bit jealous that "all were astonished at the majesty" not of Jesus, but "of God," let us rejoice at this compliment to Jesus whose every move draws men's eyes toward God. It is for this that we love and worship Him!

#### E. THE APOSTLES' PUZZLEMENT OVER THEIR PITIFUL PRODUCTION

17:19 **Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could we not cast it out?** The Nine had enough personal pride—or was it the timidity of bad conscience?—to reserve for private discussion the postmortem appraisal of their fiasco. In fact, Mark (9:28) notes that "when he had gone home" (*kai eiselthόntos autoū eis oīkon*), they approached the Lord.

NOTE: Who went home? Does this genitive absolute refer to the demoniac boy's departure for home, or the return home of Jesus? The last mentioned possible antecedent for pronoun *autoū*, subject to the participle, is the subject of the preceding verb, "he arose, (*anéste*), referring to the boy. If so, then Mark's

expression would mean simply that when the boy left, the crowds apparently dispersed, leaving Jesus alone with His followers who can now ask Him the cause of their vain attempt.

On the other hand, if the pronoun refers to Jesus, Mark may mean that the disciples reserved their question until Jesus had sought lodging in the area. Then, when He had gone indoors, they approached Him. But since *eis oikou* is idiomatic for "home," especially with *eisérchesthai* (See Arndt-Gingrich, 563), Mark may mean that they did not dare bring up the question until they were clear back to Jesus' "home" in Capernaum! (Cf. Mk. 2:1; 9:33) If so, this section is recorded here because of its direct connection with the story of the demonized boy, of which it is the proper theological and psychological conclusion. But, from this standpoint, it serves as more fuel for the fiery debate on "who is greater in the Kingdom of heaven?" (See on Mt. 18:1ff)

It is to their credit, however, that, sooner or later, they **came to Jesus** for the solution to their turmoil.

This question is not proof that the pained lament of Jesus (17:17) could not have been leveled at them, since the formula used by Jesus had been broad enough to include ANY disciples contaminated with the spirit of the age. In fact, the Apostles ask a question which applies only to themselves, for had the answer they expected involved the failure of other "disciples," the question would not have been asked in the first person plural, but "Why could THEY not cast it out?," and, in the absence of the other disciples who presumably would have needed it, the answer becomes only academic information and a general warning to the Twelve. This question is, rather, proof only that they missed the connection Jesus intended to make between their perverse faithlessness and their failure.

Ironically, their failure was absolutely essential to their usefulness to Jesus. It was failure after exhilarating successes had left them elated with an invincible self-confidence. This was a humiliating defeat, but one they needed to see the fallacy of self-confidence and to make these disciples more really trusting, these strong men stronger.

The question may also have been part of the motivation behind the struggle for status in the Kingdom. (See on 18:1.) The Nine admit they could not cast out the demon, while the Three remembered that they themselves had been with Jesus, basking in the light of transfiguration glory. Naturally, these Nine cannot know about the

glory, but if the Three nourished any hopes of promotion (cf. Mt. 20:20-28), this contrast in fortune could not have escaped their notice.

**We could not cast it out.** This sentence guarantees the authenticity of this account, because the Gospel writers do not hide the weaknesses and failure of characters even this important in their narration. This shame, both in the presence of the multitude that day, as well as in the eyes of the present readers, is evidence of that stern truthfulness that must tell the facts as they occurred without embellishment even to save the influential. Lastly, this question and Jesus' answer is proof positive that they had not failed to work miracles before this time. It was a totally new experience, since, presumably, He could have answered, "You could not cast it out for the same reason you failed before."

## 1. THE POLLUTING POTENCY OF PRACTICAL PAGANISM

17:20 **Because of your little faith.** The Apostles, not the crowd or the scribes, had possessed but *little faith*. Their failure was not a question of lack of courtesy or skill, courage or readiness, or enthusiasm, or any other excellent quality, but of spiritual power! It was not the obstinacy of this loathsome disease with its foaming convulsions and shrieks, that left them despairing of being able to cure him, because they had faced bad ones before. It was not even this kind of malicious demon that stumped them, because "this kind comes out by prayer." It was not because Jesus was away, because He had commissioned them to cast out demons before in His absence, and they reported no failures then. It was not the heckling opposition of the scribes. Their insinuating questions perhaps contributed to the failure, but could have been silenced by confidence in God, prayer and miraculous success. Rather, it was their lack of confidence in the supernatural power of their Lord, which left them paralyzed in the presence of agonizing human need.

Their confidence in Him had been deeply shaken by His insistence upon the path of shame and suffering and the cross as the only road to glory. Perhaps they had hoped their Rabbi would change the world by an educational process, but now He had demanded their personal participation in the blood and ignominy of His own inevitable martyrdom. Consequently, to the extent that they did not fully trust Him to know, they began to be afraid of Him, even unconsciously, afraid lest He be mistaken, afraid to hold tenaciously to

Him and let Him lead, come what may. However unconsciously and insidiously this distrust grew, it nevertheless left them morally quite some distance from Christ, the Source of their power. At that moment, when face to face with real, demonic power and armed with only a paralyzed dependence upon a Christ only half-trusted, they failed!

Some have supposed that the demonized boy's father's lack of faith might have been a factor in the Apostles' failure. But the man's demonstration of doubt came after Jesus' arrival on the scene and after the Apostles' failure. The man himself had brought his son to Jesus originally. (Mk. 9:17) This is faith. Finding Him away, he asked His disciples to cast it out. (Mk. 9:18) This is cheerful perseverance that welcomes a suitable alternative. The man's desperation and struggles with doubts were caused, not by some original, deeply rooted distrust of Jesus, but by the blundering of the disciples who were supposed to know what they were doing, but clumsily handled the case and consequently collapsed, taking the father down with them! Even if the man himself possessed some faith, his weakness could have been healed by the Apostles' positive dependence upon God, had they but cast themselves on their knees instead of launching a debate with the scribes.

Note that faith is demanded of both: the Apostles and the one who requests the miracle. The mere possession of miracle-working power in the past was no guarantee of their present possession of faith or righteousness or worthiness to be God's representatives. (Cf. Mt. 7:21-23)

1. Even Judas Iscariot had worked these miracles previously. At least, he is not singled out as a non-participant. (Mk. 6:13) But miracles per se did not guarantee his personal honesty. (Jn. 12:6)
2. Remember Samson who would "go out as at other times . . ." but "did not know that the Lord had left him." (Jdg. 16:20)
3. "The Spirit of the Lord departed from King Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." (1 Sa. 16:14) Nevertheless, stubborn in his unbelief, he went out to battle the Philistines, hoping against hope to be able to "beat his luck," the certain death predicted for him by God through Samuel. (1 Sa. 28:3-28; 31:1-13)
4. The sin of Achan compromised the sanctity of Israel, so that, their miraculous victory over Jericho notwithstanding, Israel's first attack on the city of Ai crumpled. God was not with them as

- before! (Josh. 6, 7)
5. Even the mighty Moses buckled under the pressure of constantly having to prove himself the God-sent leader of Israel, and just once took credit for a miracle. Although God could have humiliated Moses and Aaron by letting them fail to bring forth water from the rock, He chose to punish them differently. But He did punish them, "Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel . . ." (Nu. 20:12)
  6. Remember Peter's imperfect walk on the water. (Mt. 14:28ff and notes.)

So, Jesus' disciples' previously effective ministry became ineffective, because they had grown self-reliant, supposing that busyness and activity could substitute for humility, prayer and worship of God. They had begun to identify their results as their own accomplishments, and this self-trust undermined their confidence in God as the only true Source of their power.

**Because of your little faith** to depend on and receive God's power. Their faith was not expected to CREATE miracle-working power independent of God's might; it was only expected to COLLABORATE with God in whom their confidence should have rested. It was expected to trust God to do His part perfectly. (See notes on 14:31; also 6:30; 8:26; 16:8 for notes on *little faith*) Faith, as such, does not confer God's power: God does that. Rather, faith makes it appropriate that He exert His power in favor of the believer.

**If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move hence to yonder place," and it will move.** This mountain, even massive Hermon, then in plain sight, is a symbol of impossible tasks, just as a *grain of mustard seed* symbolizes beautifully the smallest quantity of real spiritual power to fulfill them. That this is figurative, not literal, language, is proven by the Apostles' understanding and practice of what Jesus meant here. They did not go around rearranging earth's geography, but, by the exercise of genuine faith, they certainly "turned the world upside down!" (Cf. Ac. 17:6; Phil. 4:13) They did the impossible.

Some, while admitting that the point of the comparison is the smallness of the mustard seed in contrast to the huge mountain, insist that more is meant. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 675) says: "A mustard seed (see 13:31) though at first very small, yet, because of its uninterrupted and vital contact with its nourishing environment, grows and grows until it becomes a tree so tall that the

birds of the air come and lodge in its branches. Accordingly, 'faith as a grain of mustard seed' is the kind of trust in God which does not immediately give up in despair when its efforts do not meet with immediate success. It maintains its uninterrupted and vital contact with God and therefore continues to pray fervently, knowing that God in His own time and in His own way will bestow the blessing." That is, does Jesus mean to indicate a faith that, however small initially, will rise to meet the task it faces, in the same way a mustard grain flourishes against its obstacles and becomes a tree at the right time? While this is true of living faith, it seems to be pushing the figure farther than Jesus actually intended it. Others, in a similar vein, suggest: "If you have any of this real faith at all, you possess what is certain to grow into more, and thus you have what will ultimately be competent to remove the most impossible obstacles."

But the Lord's point is not based upon the seeds' growing to be what it should become, but upon *mustard seed AS IT IS* as opposed to the *mountain AS IT IS*. On another occasion when Jesus taught something the disciples thought impossible to accomplish, they exclaimed: "Increase our faith!" His reaction is significantly similar to our present context. (Lk. 17:1-6) What was needed, was not larger faith to meet this "impossible task," but confidence that even the smallest amount of authentic trust in God can accomplish wonders.

But having *little faith* is not equal to having "a little faith" even so small as a grain of mustard seed, because, while the latter is indeed small by contrast to the mountain it must move, it is real. *Little faith* is not really faith, but doubt asserting itself as self-trust. Genuine faith is solid confidence in God, does not dictate to God any time schedules, does not waver, does not give up. (Jas. 1:6-8; Lk. 18:1-8) Faith means believing what Jesus says. Ironically, some later reader of Mark's text of this incident (Mk. 9:29) just could not believe that prayer was sufficient, so to the words of the Son of God he added: "and fasting!" Cannot He even be trusted to tell us what is necessary without our doubts reasserting themselves? Faith in Jesus means that He must fill all our vision, His will must be our only standard of judgment. When we permit Him to be measured by human considerations and place Him among other human beings and gauge Him as but one among many other great teachers. His power is not available to us. It is only when we let His Word be the standard by which all

else is judged, when He is Lord of all for us and our only hope, that we can be competent to accomplish the impossible in His service.

Jesus Himself BELIEVED that the Kingdom COULD be established "not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord," and all the mountains of traditional theology, all the mountains of ignorant zeal and deliberate opposition, were no match for Him! (Cf. Zech. 4:6, 7) As later events proved Him right point by point, His words, which now must have seemed so visionary, would have been the pragmatically successful power behind the unflinching courage of these same disciples. Belief did not come easy for them. They were even then totally incapable of grasping the most fundamental concept of God's Kingdom. (See on 17:22f.)

**Nothing shall be impossible to you.** Although addressed to His ancient disciples, is this promise applicable to modern ones?

1. Hurte (*Restoration NT Commentary*, 37) answers,

No, it can only apply to those who had the gift of power. Christians can appropriate any promise made to them as God's children, but the working of miracles was a special gift bestowed only upon a few. It was true to the apostles in relation to their work, but not to others.

2. However, it is God who decides what specific powers He will confer on any one disciple in any given age. Faith lets God decide this. Faith does not desire nor attempt anything but what He desires, a fact that automatically eliminates capricious rearrangements of terrestrial topography and any other supernatural fireworks not within His will. But the question of the hour is not: "Does anyone today have the miraculous power to do the impossible?" but: "Does anyone have faith enough to do all that IS POSSIBLE for him?" The fault of our failure to attain to all that is good, true and noble lies in our shallow, inconstant faith. (Jas. 1:5-8; 4:2, 3; 5:8-11, 13-18)

## 2. THE PURIFYING POWER OF PERSONAL PENITENCE AND PERSISTENT PRAYER

(17:21 is omitted in the better manuscripts: **But this kind cometh not out except by prayer and fasting.** See Mk. 9:29) Comment is made on this verse, not because Matthew wrote it, since he probably did not, but because Mark says that Jesus said it, and because of its

appropriateness as a comment on Matthew. (This is probably why someone originally copied it from Mark into their copy of Matthew, and a later scribe mistook the marginal note for a textual correction.)

**This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.** (Mk. 9:29) *This kind* of demon suggests the natural antithesis: "other kinds." Trench (*Notes on Miracles*, 232) believes that

. . . *this kind* marks that there are orders of evil spirits, that as there is a hierarchy of heaven, so is there an inverted hierarchy of hell. The same is intimated in the mention of the unclean spirit going and taking "seven other spirits more wicked than himself." (Mt. 12:45)

On these hierarchies, remember also Eph. 2:2; 6:12; 1:21.

Are we to infer that "other kinds" of demons were more cowardly, hence more easily cast out? Jewish exorcists apparently attained considerably professional notoriety and success through the use of incantations and magic by which they were able to bring temporary remission for demoniacs. (See on Mt. 12:27; cf. Ac. 19:11-17; see also Josephus, *Antiquities*, VIII, 2, 5) In this case, it would be thought that some demons might be cast out without prayer and dependence upon God. And, if they obtained control over demons by obtaining, through magic, power of Satan or by compromises with him, they could temporarily appear to succeed. But their results were tainted with evil, unlike those of Jesus who caused all to be "astonished at the majesty of God." (ISBE, 1068)

*This kind*, then, speaks of the audacious wickedness and peculiarly determined viciousness of the demon Jesus had just cast out. The demon's maliciousness not only drove him to keep a strangle-hold on the lad despite the disciples' attempts, but appeared obstinately determined to defy the power of Jesus too! (Cf. Mk. 9:20; Lk. 9:42) Further, he took hellish delight in inflicting pain. (Mt. 17:15; Mk. 9:22) Confidence in God gives moral power that commands respect for the man of God determined to expel a demon. But without this fundamental confidence in God's backing, or faith, even the most experienced miracle-worker must back down and admit defeat in the presence of tenacious, malignant spirits of *this kind*.

Besides the disciples' prayerlessness, their floundering is attributable also to their alternative: they were arguing with the rabbis. (Mk. 9:14, 16) It is quite likely that they had been busy defending themselves against the heckling of these skeptics, when they should have

been praying and getting on with the business of glorifying God by healing the demonized epileptic. (Mk. 9:29) Prayer is the only suitable preparation of one's faith to address oneself to the task of doing the impossible. Prayer itself would not have given them the power needed, but it would have intensified their sense of dependence upon God, and so enabled them to be His instruments in utilizing the power He had granted them.

### APPLICATION

What a striking parable of the modern Church! How important the lesson for the modern disciple during the Lord's absence, when he too is facing the daily cry of needy humanity in the valley of humiliation, the positive opposition of the agnostics, the frustration of confrontations and the need to succeed! The desperate world, finding Jesus temporarily away from the earth, turns to those who should know Him best and share the secrets of His power, crying for assistance to cure the ills of human existence. Far too often the faithlessness of the prayerless Church, busy with her ecclesiastical machinery and worldly concerns, is not only the main ingredient of her own failure, but, more tragically, the principle cause of the world's unbelief and doubting even the mighty power of Christ Himself. Embarrassed by lack of real spiritual power, the Church is too ready to try to save man by social programs of self-improvement, by theological debate, by religious programs, by psychological gimmicks or by the power of positive thinking. She depends upon these as a source of power, rather than fulfill a mission blessed by the power of God. Then, the now nearly hopeless world, bypassing the fumbling Church, with one last rattling gasp, whispers to our Lord, "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us!"

Under such circumstances, brethren, we deserve the sternest denunciation our Lord can pronounce! To the extent that we personally share the doubts and consequent helplessness of our age, our perversity and unbelief cannot escape His holy judgment!

Brethren, when we are pressured by circumstances to doubt our direction, our abilities and our Lord's care and concern for us, let us pray. Let us admit our lack of great faith, confess our dependence upon God, consecrate ourselves more completely to Him, and rise to do the work of God as the men of God in our time until our Lord returns! Since men are not going to be saved and made fit for God

except by our faith and prayer, let us by prayer nourish a faith so mighty that it will not be put to shame as we deal with the impossible difficulties of our time! (1 Jn. 5:4)

### DEMON POSSESSION — DO WE BELIEVE IT?

With his usual keen insight, Foster (*Standard Lesson Commentary*, 1959, 13) asks this incisive question and applies its significance to our section, in a note that well deserves repetition:

It is remarkable that in a lesson which concentrates upon our lack of faith, our need of faith, and the fact that Jesus calls forth faith, we find ourselves considering the type of record which today causes many people to doubt the truth and accuracy of the Gospel accounts.

Many people are caused to stumble at the fact that demon possession existed in the time of Jesus, that Jesus talked with the demons, that they responded intelligently and with evidence of superhuman knowledge, that He cast them out. As Jesus called for faith in the heart of this father, so He demands faith of us as we study these records.

Who are we to attempt to dispute the record of demon possession? What do we know about the spirit world? We cannot comprehend, except in a superficial manner, even the physical world approached by the five senses. If a person is moved to doubt that there are actually in existence the devil and his angels who serve him and seek to bring man to destruction, then will he also doubt the existence of angels in heaven? Thus the Sadducees went forward in their logical deductions that denied the existence of angels and of any life after death. That this compelled them to deny the truth of the Old Testament and robbed them of all hope did not bring them to a halt in their folly. But if there be no angels and no life after death, how can there be any God?

Jesus calls forth faith in the heart of every humble Christian today to accept without question the New Testament record as a true and faithful account of what actually happened.

The fact that vast mysteries lie imbedded in the records should not overwhelm us with doubt. What else can we expect? Are we not mere finite beings with puny outreach of both intellect and physical power? We cannot encompass God. We must believe.

We must depend upon God when our understanding and our strength fail.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Where had Jesus and some of His disciples been when they encounter the remaining Apostles and a crowd of people? When and where did this take place? At what chronological point in Jesus' ministry did it occur?
2. In what activity were people engaged just before Jesus appeared on the scene? Where would they have likely come from? What was their interest in this situation?
3. What special goal would the scribes have hoped to reach in their debate with the disciples of Jesus? Who are the scribes: what section of national life in Judaism of Jesus' day did they represent?
4. What was the central point of focus of the entire situation that caused the excitement before Jesus' arrival?
5. What reasons did the disciples have for believing that they could have cast out the demon? Had they ever done so before?
6. List the physical symptoms described by the epileptic's father.
7. Did the father distinguish between epilepsy and demon possession? Are all epileptics demon-possessed?
8. What information in the text indicates that Jesus clearly distinguished between the disease and demon possession?
9. There are only four possible views with reference to the Gospel accounts of demon-possession and the casting them out, but only one of them is tenable. List them, showing why each of the three is illogical or historically improbable while the other is practically unassailable.
10. From the Biblical information available to us, is it possible to say whether demons always caused maladies or defects? Are there other symptoms of demon possession not seen in the case reported in this section (17:14-21)? If so, what are they?
11. To whom did Jesus address the words: "O faithless and perverse generation"? Prove your answer. What is the meaning of Jesus' question: "How long shall I be with you?"? What does He mean when He says: "How long shall I bear with you?"?
12. What caused the father to say to Jesus, "If you can do anything . . ."? (Mk. 9:22)
13. What is the point of Jesus' reply? (Mk. 9:23)

14. Explain the seemingly contradictory answer of the father: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24)
15. How did Jesus cast the demon out?
16. What was the effect of the miracle on the eyewitnesses? (Lk. 9:43)
17. Why did the disciples fail to cast out the demon? State both of Jesus' answers. (Mt. 17:20; Mk. 9:29) Explain what He meant by each one.
18. List any Biblical passages which would tend to qualify our understanding of the phrase: "All things are possible to him that believes."
19. List other Biblical examples of demon expulsion that would aid our understanding of demons and demonic possession. Are demons merely bad habits? Must those who are demon-possessed be exceptionally wicked? What other young children have been mentioned as demon-possessed during Jesus' ministry?
20. What is learned about demons from the command Jesus gave to the demon: "Enter no more into him"? Can demons return?
21. What does the phrase "unclean spirit" indicate about the nature or the effect of demon-possession on the one possessed?
22. What is the significance of the reaction of the multitude to Jesus' signal victory over the demon? (Lk. 9:43)

### Section 44

#### JESUS MAKES THIRD PASSION PREDICTION (Parallels: Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:43-45)

TEXT: 17:22, 23

22 And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be delivered up into the hands of men; 23 and they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised up. And they were exceeding sorry.

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why were people "gathering in Galilee"? (See comment on the textual variation from "abode in Galilee.") Is there a suggestion

- here of a mass rallying of the Galileans for a popular march on Jerusalem?
- b. Why does Jesus need privacy to teach His disciples? (Cf. Mk. 9:30) Cannot He do anything He wants to, even teach His followers in the presence of great crowds? What kind of hindrance would the great audiences present to the training of the Twelve?
  - c. Is there any connection between this prediction of death and the marvelling of the disciples? (Cf. Lk. 9:43)
  - d. Why does Jesus preface this third passion prediction with the words "Let these words sink into your ears"? (Lk. 9:44)
  - e. Why were the disciples afraid to ask him about this saying that so deeply distressed them? (Mk. 9:32)
  - f. In what sense was it painfully true that the disciples at that moment in their experience did NOT believe the gospel? What, to you, is gospel?
  - g. Why should such an embarrassing account be included in the story of the life of Christ? After all, the Apostles are put in a bad light by this sort of thing. Would it not have been better simply to edit the narrative, omitting the spiritual obtuseness of the very men who later were to become the pillars of the Church? What could possibly be gained by this unabashed mention of their shameful fears and misconceptions?
  - h. How was "this saying concealed from them"? (Lk. 9:45) Did God hide it from them? Did Satan? Did they do it themselves? If so, how? If not, who did?
  - i. Why did the prediction produce a different effect in the disciples this time, as compared to the previous one?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus and the Twelve traveled on from the district around the mount of Transfiguration, passing through Galilee. It was a time when people were gathering in Galilee, full of admiration and awe over everything He was doing. It was for this reason that He wished this journey to be kept secret, because He was trying to teach His disciples. He would say to them, "You all get this through your head: the Messiah is destined to be betrayed into the power of evil men. They will execute Him. Nevertheless, though He be killed, three days later He will rise from the dead."

Yet they did not understand. Preconceptions concealed its meaning,

making it impossible to understand and accept. Even though they were crushed with grief by it, they were afraid to ask Him about it.

### SUMMARY

The realism of Jesus demands that, in the midst of great popular enthusiasm, He continue hammering on the major, however unacceptable, theme of His ministry: His death, burial and resurrection. Though He often repeated this prophecy of ultimate victory over apparent defeat, the Twelve saw in it nothing but incomprehensible pessimism. The deep dread that what He predicted might possibly be true so numbed them that they could not bring themselves even to request further information that might have alleviated their pain, for fear that they would receive only additional confirmation of their worst unspoken fears.

### NOTES

#### III. REPETITION OF THE PASSION PREDICTION

##### A. THE PERCEPTIBLE PRESSURE OF POPULARITY

17:22 **While they abode in Galilee.** The American Standard Version revisers decided that the better reading here is "abode" (*anastrefoménon*). However, in the calculation of probabilities of scribal correction, Metzger's evaluation (*Textual Commentary*, 44) is the more sound:

It is probable that the reading *sustrefoménon* (taken to mean "were gathering together") would strike copyists as strange, and therefore would be changed into what seemed more appropriate (*anastrefoménon*, "abode"). The verb *sustréfein*, which occurs only twice in the New Testament, apparently means here "while they were crowding (around Jesus)."

The attentive reader will object (as probably did the one who made the original change in Matthew's copy) that, if the original reading were "they were gathering" instead of "abode," it would make Matthew's affirmation of the presence of crowds ("gathering" or "crowding") contradict Mark's secret journey ("And he would not

have any one know it"). To this it may be countered that even Luke (9:43) seems to contradict Mark by implying the presence of crowds at least in the general area when Jesus made the Passion Prediction. Doubtless this is but faulty harmonization. A better solution is to see that the Lord repeated this prediction several times during this same period. Resultantly, the three Gospels were never strictly parallel because they refer to different aspects of this period. The basis for this solution is as follows:

1. Mark's verbs in the imperfect tense (*éthelen*, *edidasken*, *élegen*) affirm that Jesus repeated His Passion Prediction many times during this period, so exact harmonization of the three Gospels is not necessary, even if the wording of the prophecy is comparatively similar each time. Thus, Matthew's "gathering in Galilee" is not even parallel, much less contradictory, to Mark's secret journey.
2. Luke's version is to be closely linked with the epileptic demoniac episode, hence the first of the series of Passion Predictions implied in Mark's imperfect-tense verbs.
3. Matthew's "gathering in Galilee," then, occurred near the close of this journey from the mount of Transfiguration, perhaps as Jesus and His disciples neared, or arrived at, Capernaum.
4. Another solution is the lexical significance of *sustrefoménon* given by Rocci (1784) who interprets this word in Mt. 17:22 as "to roam about together." Accordingly, he would see no crowds whatever, since the last personal reference in the context is only to Jesus and the disciples talking privately. (17:19ff) If this interpretation be adopted, Matthew and Mark would be seen as more closely parallel.

Certainly there is no ground here for accusing the Evangelists of self-contradiction and no basis for emending the text. In fact, there is even another suggestive solution which would see Matthew and Mark as parallel.

Although Rocci personally interpreted *sustrefoménon* in our text as "to roam about together," he points out that *sustréfo* is also a military term meaning "to regroup, to close ranks," i.e. pulling one's forces into a compact unit ready for action. What a picture, if this be thought of as Matthew's intention! With a materialistic coup d'état in mind, the Galileans would be closing rank around Jesus to march on Jerusalem. The Apostles and more spiritually-minded disciples would expect Him to proclaim His Messianic Kingdom there. Jesus

Himself is going to battle in Jerusalem too, but in the only way this war can be won—by dying for sinful man. So, in this Galilean staging area for “the long march” on Jerusalem, Jesus called aside His aides for a private briefing. (Mk. 9:30) Not only “would he not have any one know” about their travel through Galilee toward Capernaum (Mk. 9:30, 33), but He must repeat His incredible message only in the hearing of His disciples. (Lk. 9:43b, 44; Mk. 9:31; Mt. 17:22b, 23) Although He will make several quick trips to Jerusalem before the fated Passover (cf. Jn. 7:10; 10:22f; 11:17f), the final assault actually begins from Galilee. (Cf. Ac. 10:37-39; Lk. 9:51) But before leaving Galilee, the Apostles must understand the true purpose of this final approach to Jerusalem. So He now lays before His men for the nth time the ultimate targets to be reached, but they are not the kind of objectives that anyone else had in mind.

Although Matthew mentions nothing of great crowds, except this possible oblique reference (“while they were crowding” around Jesus), Luke (9:43) connected the first of these Passion Predictions with the liberation of the demonized epileptic boy and the consequent astonishment of the people at the majesty of God, causing them to marvel at everything He did. Therefore, enthusiastic praise and popular excitement are definitely part of the background situation to which the Lord addressed this prophecy of His death. The excitement caused by the healing of the demonized boy in the area of the mount of Transfiguration (Lk. 9:43) may have had only local repercussions. Nevertheless, if the Feast of Tabernacles was not far off (cf. Jn. 7:2), it is not impossible that crowds should begin to form for the trek to the capital. Although the Lord desired privacy (Mk. 9:30), His deliberate return into Galilee and Capernaum in particular brings to an end the “withdrawals” He had begun when He took His disciples to Phoenicia. (Mt. 14:1, 13; 15:21; 16:4f, 13) So, as they return to Galilee and potential popularity, with the hallelujahs of His recent victory ringing in their ears, they must be brought back down to reality.

Incidental proof of Jesus’ long absence from Galilee during the preceding period is furnished by John, who, although he does not recount Jesus’ withdrawals from Jewish population centers, nevertheless, records the challenge of Jesus’ unbelieving brothers, “Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.”

(Jn. 7:3ff) Ironically, this too tempts Jesus to ignore the reality of the cross and keep the popular, enthusiastic approval coming.

Accordingly, Jesus' Passion Prediction, given in these circumstances, means, "Gentlemen, do not let yourselves be taken in by the false hopes of the people nor fall for their mistaken opinions, by forgetting or doubting my declarations. In fact, it is into the hands of ignorant, mistaken men that I am to be delivered, men to whom I am related by blood, men from whom I should expect understanding and faith, loyalty and submission, gratitude and honor!"

Ironically, the basis of the astonishment at the majesty of God evident in everything He did should have furnished the Apostles reasons to accept anything Jesus said, however unreasonable or improbable it might seem. For these are proof that He is "a Teacher come from God, for no man can do these signs unless God be with Him." (Jn. 3:2) But, like Nicodemus who must argue the new birth with Jesus rather than let Him reveal it, the Apostles, too, are left distressed by His teaching. So, rather than strengthen their faith in Him, the miracles psychologically widened the breach between their belief that He is the Christ, on the one hand, and their total incomprehension of His death-predictions, on the other, because of the strident incongruity between these two ideas. The more miracles He did the more He seemed like the Messiah and God's Son, and the less likely seemed His predicted murder!

#### B. THE PAINFULLY PRECISE PLAN OF HIS PASSION

**The Son of man shall be delivered up into the hands of men, and they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised up.** All generals ask men to die for the cause they represent, but Jesus talked about voluntarily dying for His enemies. Now, those disciples who expected a triumphant militaristic Kingdom in which men would be delivered into the hands of the Messianic King, must now learn that **the Son of man is about to be delivered (*méléi paradidosthai*) into the hands of men.** Who delivered Jesus over to His enemies? Judas Iscariot thought HE did, but it was God the Father who handed His own Son over to men. (Ac. 2:23) In Gethsemane Jesus actually handed Himself over! (Study Jn. 18:4-11; Mt. 26:51-54; Jn. 10:18!) While the God-fearing disciples wept bitterly around the cross, they would deem the Passion of Jesus a betrayal by a God who had let

them down at this critical moment by not intervening to rescue Him from such a fate. But the Father had not betrayed them. He handed over His only Son, yes, but not to have done so would have been a betrayal of the entire human race. This is what it means to believe that "God so loved the world that He GAVE His only Son!"

### C. THEIR PERCEPTION PREVENTED BY PERSISTENT PREJUDICE

As we evaluate His planning from our vantage point, we appreciate the precision of His time-schedule. His divine foreknowledge, like all prophecies, is more impressive after the fulfillment. But His disciples were not unimpressed: they were appalled!

1. **They were exceedingly sorry (*elupéthesan sfódra*), deeply grieved.** Although they found no place in their mental framework for the literal interpretation of His words, His persisting in repeating them (Mk. 9:31) hurt them deeply. Whereas they had been shocked before, and indignant that anyone should think of plotting His death (Mt. 16:21ff), now they are crushed with disappointment. Not even the promise of His resurrection can transform this grief into hope. This sorrow proves how unsympathetic they yet were with Jesus' intentions, and proves that they too were yet unbelieving. (Study 11:6 and notes.)
2. "They did not understand this saying and it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it." (Mk. 9:32a; Lk. 9:45a) Since its obvious, literal sense was totally unacceptable to them, and since they could not decipher any other meaning, they were as unable to understand it as if someone were trying to hide its meaning from them. How could the Messiah they believed Him to be, actually permit His enemies to slay Him when He possessed the supernatural power to annihilate them, assert His God-given right and so prevent such an injustice?
3. "And they were afraid to ask him about this saying," (Mk. 9:32b; Lk. 9:45b) Two motives:
  - a. Fear to be reproved by Jesus for their reluctance to accept it at face value, as Peter had been rebuked. (16:22f)
  - b. Fear to face the horrible truth, hoping that ignoring it would make it go away. This is based on the horrifying possibility that He really intended to go through with every appalling

bit of it.

So they preferred to remain ignorant. And His solitude became complete. (Cf. note on Mt. 11:27)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. By what route did Jesus return from the preceding incident to Capernaum? (Cf. Mk. 9:20) Where had He been? How do we know Capernaum was His immediate destination?
2. List several reasons why Jesus would have desired anonymity at this time.
3. Who was "gathering in Galilee," according to the better manuscript evidence for Mt. 17:22?
4. Why does Jesus refer to Himself as "the Son of man"? What does this title mean?
5. On what other occasions had Jesus predicted His own untimely death and bodily resurrection?
6. Indicate several motives for His repeating these predictions here.
7. List several factors which collaborated in causing the disciples to fail to understand His remarks about His death. (Cf. Mk. 9:32; Lk. 9:45)
8. Explain their great distress. Explain how "they were exceeding sorry."
9. What reason would explain why they were afraid to ask Him for further explanation? (Cf. Mk. 9:32; Lk. 9:45)

### Section 45

#### JESUS QUIZZES PETER ABOUT TEMPLE TAXES

TEXT: 17:24-27

24 And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received the half-shekel came to Peter, and said, Doth not your teacher pay the half-shekel? 25 He saith, Yea. And when he came into the house, Jesus spake first to him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? the kings of the earth, from whom do they receive toll or tribute? from their sons, or from strangers? 26 And when he said, From strangers,

Jesus said unto him, Therefore the sons are free. 27 But, lest we cause them to stumble, go thou to the sea, and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a shekel: take that, and give unto them for me and thee.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why ask Peter? What do you suppose was the motivation behind this question posed by the collectors of the temple tax? Did they just happen to meet Peter during their normal collection rounds and decide to take advantage of Jesus' presence to close out their books? Or do you think that there was something sinister in this query? Why not come to Jesus directly?
- b. Why did Peter answer as he did?
- c. On what basis could Jesus claim exemption from a tax that was required by God from every Israelite? Was not Jesus a true Israelite? Should He not have to pay like everyone else? Why this tax dodge?
- d. Maybe you can justify Jesus for not having to pay the tax, but why did Jesus pay the tax also for Peter? Did he enjoy the same exemption? After all, did not Jesus say: ". . . lest WE cause them to stumble"? Did not this imply that Peter too would not have had to pay, technically, were it not for the fact that his not paying would have caused this scandal? Or, is that what Jesus meant?
- e. Be honest now: on a plain reading of this text, do you see anything miraculous in the way Jesus had Peter procure the tax money? If so, where? If not, why not?
- f. Do you not think that this "miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth" violates the principle that "miracles are not necessary to be done where ordinary means are available"? There were plenty of other places where Jesus could have obtained the tax payment without resorting to the use of His miraculous power. What possible good could come from a miracle that only one person, i.e. Peter, knew about? Or would others know about it too?
- g. Does it not seem to you that this concentration of the mighty power of God to find one little fish with a coin in its mouth is a misrepresentation of what we usually see in Biblical miracles? Do you not think it a grotesque distortion of the dignified, sober presentation of divine power, to think that God concerns Himself with so tiny a sum as this? God has more important business to

take care of than causing the right fish with the right coin to come up at the right time when Peter first throws his hook in! What is your opinion?

- h. This miracle, if you still think of it as such, brought no relief to suffering humanity. Therefore, it is unworthy of God and Jesus, so it probably did not really happen. Affirm or deny this and tell why.
- i. In the temptation scene in the wilderness Jesus refused to use His miraculous power to supply His own personal needs, even as desperate as His need for food. Here, however, we see a narrative which totally reverses this unselfishness, because Jesus Himself shared in the benefit of this "miracle," a deed contrary to what we see of His spirit elsewhere. How can you possibly justify the inclusion of this story in the Gospel? How can you possibly justify Jesus for doing it?
- j. Show how Jesus' decision to pay a tax He did not owe marvellously illustrates one of the most fundamental principles of Christian ethics, described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12—11:1; Romans 14:1—15:7.
- k. How many people do you think heard this conversation between Jesus and Peter, and, consequently, knew about the conclusion Jesus drew from His own premises? In other words, how many would probably have actually benefited from His good example given here of paying a tax He did not really owe, in order to keep others from stumbling? Why did not He pay for the other disciples too, as well as for Peter? Would not this have been a greater example? Or were the others not involved?

#### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Upon the arrival of Jesus and the Twelve to Capernaum, those who collected the special poll tax for the upkeep of the temple approached Peter with the question, "Your teacher does pay the tax, does he not?"

"Why, yes, of course, He does!" he said.

However, when Peter got home, Jesus spoke to him first, "What's your opinion, Simon? Who is really subject to pay customs or tribute to earthly monarchs? Their own sons, or strangers outside the royal family?"

"The strangers," was Peter's reply.

"That means, then, that their own sons are exempt," Jesus reminded him. "On the other hand, since we do not want this refusal to pay to become a hindrance to these people so that they would be influenced to think or do something wrong, you go down to the lake and throw in your hook. Haul in the first fish that bites. When you open its mouth, you will discover a silver coin in it. Take that and pay them the tax for you and for me."

### SUMMARY

Jesus and the Apostolic company had no sooner arrived back in Capernaum when Peter was cornered by the poll tax collectors about Jesus' payment of the tax for the upkeep of the temple. Without hesitation Peter covered Jesus. But upon his arrival back home, Jesus clarified His own right to exemption from this payment as Son of the King. However, rather than horrify the moral sense of the Jews by His seeming refusal to obey God, He chose to pay the tax. By providing the necessary money in an unusual way, He paid for Himself and for Peter.

### NOTES

#### IV. READINESS TO BE SUBMISSIVE BEYOND DUTY

##### A. THE PETTY PESTERING FOR PAYMENT OF THE POLL TAX

17:24 **And when they were come to Capernaum,** they had just returned from a long journey north to Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:13) and possibly to Mt. Hermon nearby. (See on 17:1.) This culminates a series of wide-ranging journeys outside Palestine. (See on 17:22.) The discussion of the temple tax is the first of two events that occurred upon Jesus' return to *Capernaum*, before He left Galilee for elsewhere, and there is an amazingly close connection between them. Bruce (*Training*, 224) is absolutely right to observe that,

. . . though the scene (of the temple tax question) occurred before the sermon (on relative greatness in the Kingdom) was delivered, it happened *after* the dispute which supplied the

preacher with a text. The disciples fell to disputing on the way home from the Mount of Transfiguration, while the visit of the taxgatherers took place on their arrival in Capernaum. . . . Is it too much to assume that His knowledge of what had been going on by the way influenced His conduct in the affair of the tribute money, and led Him to make it the occasion for teaching by action the same lesson which He meant to take an early opportunity of inculcating by words?

In the discussion of the temple tax, Jesus, the Son of God the King, magnanimously pays a tax that He does not owe, thus making Himself the servant of others in order not to place before anyone a temptation to sin. By forgiving Peter's presumptuousness, He illustrates His own rule to forgive indefinitely. Rather than take offense at Peter's compromising answer, He mercifully led him and the others back to that faith in Him they sorely lacked, especially in the preceding moment of failure at the mountain's base. Jesus Himself avoided harsh treatment by the kindness He showed in dealing tenderly with Peter's lack of understanding. The lesson of the first event is that stumbling-blocks can be avoided by gentle consideration of others, while that of the second is that stumbling-blocks occur by neglecting this consideration, and must be correctly removed. (Mt. 18)

The half-shekel (*dídrachma*) means the yearly atonement money to be collected from every Hebrew over 20 years of age, as an offering, originally for the service of the tent of meeting, and then of the temple. (Cf. Ex. 30:11-16; 38:25f; 2 Kg. 12:4; 2 Chron. 24:5, 6, 9; also Josephus, *Antiquities* III, 8, 2; XVIII, 9, 1; *Wars* VII, 6, 6) The one-third of a shekel of Neh. 10:32 may represent a temporary reduction due to the poverty of the people. Though it was called an "offering," it was nevertheless compulsory, not only because commanded, but also to serve as a ransom for the payer during the census-taking: "that there be no plague among them when you number them." (Ex. 30:11-16) The plague during the census of David may be an example of this. (See 2 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 21: 27:23f.) The monetary value of the Hebrew half-shekel was two Greek drachmas (the *dídrachma*) or two Roman denarii, hence the equivalent of two days' work of a common laborer. **They that received the half-shekel** were Jewish (*Wars*, VI, 6, 2), but not publicans, because no such outcast would have been permitted to handle what was destined for temple service.

Because *the half-shekel* is the temple tax, it is evidence for the early redaction of this Gospel. For, if the *Gemeindetheologie* school is correct to assert that "the unknown editors of our present Gospels dealt only with problems alive in their own given congregations (*Gemeinden*), then on the hypothesis of a later date for the writing of Matthew, how are we to explain this incident where Jesus is pictured as paying the temple tax, when the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.? For congregations after that date this problem would no longer exist.

But if this temple tax payment were a pressing problem for early Christians living in Judea, problem to which the Evangelist gives a positive answer, then, we have positive evidence for the early dating of the final redaction of this Gospel. Before the fall of Jerusalem's temple, when the Christians had separated themselves from Judaism but continued to live in Jewish territory and under Jewish religio-civil legislation, the question of the legitimacy of the payment of tribute to the temple would have become quite urgent. And, if the final edition of this Gospel comes from so early a date, there is no necessary reason why the Apostle Matthew himself could not have written it!

That this episode was never intended to deal with civil taxes in general is admitted by an exponent of the *Gemeindetheologie*, Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 237). He frankly notes that, if Matthew included this episode to illustrate not merely the temple tax question, but taxes in general, then Jesus' desire not to "scandalize them" (the tax-collectors) is nonsense. After all, for disciples to refuse to pay taxes in general on the ungrounded pretense to being sons of the King, would be to violate Christian orders to pay taxes. (Cf. Mt. 22:21; Ro. 13:6, 7) In this case there could be no scandal based upon a misuse of one's personal liberty not to pay, but only disobedience to a positive divine command to pay. The intention of the Lord not to scandalize the tax-collectors is comprehensible only if it is a question of the Jewish temple tax. In fact, "the force of the argument depends on the assumption that Jesus was a son of the king for whom the tribute was collected." (McGarvey, *Matthew-Mark*, 155) And He was not the son of any Roman Caesar!

The same should be said of Barclay's attempt (*Matthew*, II, 188) to date Matthew around 80 or 90 A.D., hence after 70 and the destruction of the temple. Vespasian, accordingly, enacted that the half-shekel temple tax be diverted from the now non-existent Jewish temple and paid to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. (Josephus, *Wars*, VII, 6, 6) Accordingly, says Barclay, Matthew

included this story to calm the nerves of Jewish Christians so they would be good citizens and pay their Roman taxes. Unfortunately for this explanation, the Vespasian order is not a Jewish law which had now been superceded, but a Roman one to which the Christians must render obedience. Problem: how could the Christians then justify their support of a pagan without compromise of their conscience toward God? How would this differ from incense to Caesar? A simple but adequate answer would be that Matthew was not addressing himself to the situation in Vespasian's time, because he was really writing long before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed.

If this tax was not a Roman tax payable to publicans at the local tax office in Capernaum (cf. Mt. 9:9), and if the half-shekel for the temple was payable at Jerusalem to Jewish officials, then how explain the approach of these collectors? The answer lies both in their system and in their motives:

1. Concerning the system of collection, the Jewish fiscal organization should be noticed. On the first of Adar (February-March in our calendar) it was proclaimed in the Palestinian provincial cities and towns that the temple tax time had arrived. On the fifteenth of the month authorized money-changers set up booths in each provincial town and village. At these money-stalls, after the local money was exchanged for the sacred coin, the tax was paid to these money changers. Ten days later on the twenty-fifth of Adar, these pay booths were transferred to Jerusalem and set up in the temple precinct. If the tax had not been paid by the twenty-fifth, therefore, the payer could only pay it directly at the temple in Jerusalem. (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, II, 111; also I, 367f)

Although Peter paid his and the Lord's tax at this time, there is no necessary indication in this fact that the time of year was near Passover, since the collectors may have accosted Peter merely because Jesus had just returned to Capernaum, and not because they were open for regular pre-Passover business.

2. Concerning their motives for approaching Peter on the Capernaum street, we may notice:
  - a. Jesus' official residence for the major part of His life had been at Nazareth, so the Capernaum collectors would not have been concerned with records of His payments for the ten years He would have been obligated to pay at age twenty until He began His ministry around thirty (cf. Lk. 3:23), because those years were the concern of the Nazareth census bureau and money-

changing tax-collectors.

- b. However, He had changed residence from Nazareth to Capernaum at about age thirty. (Cf. Jn. 2:12; Lk. 3:23; Mt. 4:13 notes) This put Him under the jurisdiction of the Capernaum office. But since His rapid-paced, itinerate ministry kept Him on the move from place to place, it took them nearly three years to catch up with Him, or at least with someone who could furnish correct information about His payment for this year. Further, He had been out of the country a lot recently. (See on Mt. 15:21; 16:5, 13; 17:1, 22.) During the six months from Passover (Jn. 6:4) until this return to Capernaum, He had been in town once only briefly. (Jn. 6:59)
- c. Their question does not necessarily betray any hostility, since it is framed in Greek in such a way as to permit Peter to answer "yes": "Your teacher does pay the two-drachma tax, does He not?" (. . . *ou telei d'drachma*; See Blass-Debrunner, *Grammar*, §427 (2); 440; Arndt-Gingrich, 594) This may or may not be another move to entangle Jesus in such a way as to furnish a basis for saying that He was not keeping the Law or supporting the temple.
- d. Their approaching Peter, rather than Jesus, may evidence their timidity to approach the great Rabbi on such a mundane subject. They may have considered Peter a particularly important disciple, another factor possibly contributing to the jealousy behind the subsequent discussion of relative greatness. (Mt. 18)
- e. However, being conversant with Jesus' claims to superiority to many points of Jewish law and His disdain for "authoritative" traditions (cfr. Mt. 12:1-14; 15:1-20), they may be questioning whether He considers Himself exempt from paying this tax too. Since the Pharisees and Sadducees had fiercely debated whether this tax were obligatory or not (See Edersheim, *Life*, II, 112), they may be testing Jesus' views thereabout. This would be their preliminary investigation before attacking Him directly for ignoring what was obligatory obedience to God.

#### B. THE PRECIPITATE PARRY BY PETER

17:25 **He saith, Yea.** On the basis of Christ's previous practice, Peter responds correctly that He does pay. Without even pausing to wonder whether Jesus NEEDED to present any of the offerings

commanded in the law, Peter leaps to the defensive and presumes to give a positive answer. Since, in the fisherman's estimate his Lord is a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and since the tax is obligatory for every self-respecting, Law-abiding Hebrew, Peter reasoned, his Master obviously HAD to pay the tax every year. Although Jesus had apparently paid the tax on former occasions, He had taken a position in the meantime, a position that Peter himself had accepted, i.e. that of being the Christ, God's Son. (Mt. 16:13-20) Now, in contrast to all previous years, were Jesus to pay the tax without explaining His motives for so doing, He would have caused very serious misunderstandings for His followers, especially those spiritually-minded souls who could sense the incongruity of the King's Son paying taxes to His own Father. But Peter, in his concern to place his Teacher in a favorable light with the tax people, had overlooked the relationship of Jesus' divine Sonship to their question. He had not thought through his own confession to see its practical ramifications for the earthly life of Jesus.

**And when he came into the house, Jesus spake first to him.** Returning home from some errand in downtown Capernaum where he had been accosted by the census people, he was met, not by a scolding for his impetuous inference, but by a puzzle. **Jesus spake first to him.** Had Peter intended to mention his conversation in town? Edersheim (*Life*, II, 111) thinks that he would have had no intention of telling Jesus about the conversation, since his defense of the Master was but another way of eliminating opposition to Jesus in its every form. He had answered without previous permission, so he probably sensed that the Lord would not have approved his decision. Whether he intended to bring it up or not, the Lord anticipated it and furnished His disciple not only the essentials for arriving at a correct solution to his question, but gave him additional proof of His omniscience. He showed Peter that He knew about the discussion while that disciple was away from Him. Feel the psychological soundness of His approach to a question about which Peter stood on the wrong side: *What do you think, Simon?* Rather than browbeat him for his wrongness, Jesus invites him to ponder a phase of normal, royal administration and give his opinion. *Simon:* is this a kindly, familiar use of Peter's real name (cf. Lk. 24:34; Ac. 16:14), or, when addressed to him who should have been "Peter" and what this implies, does it imply that Jesus addressed His friend as the man who yet needed to learn much? (Cf. Mk. 14:37; Lk. 22:31; Jn. 21:15-17)

## C. THE PRIVILEGED POSITION OF THE PRINCE

**The kings of the earth.** Is there an antithesis implied here: "the King of heaven"? (Cf. Dan. 4:37; 5:21-23; Mal. 1:14) **From whom do they take toll or tribute? From their sons, or from others?**

NOTE: *toll* (*télos*) is just any kind of tax, customs, duties, the collector of which is called a *telónes*, like Matthew. *Tribute* (*kῆنسος* = Latin: *census*) is a census tax, or poll tax, payable every year. This latter word, while a common Roman word referring to the census tax (cfr. 22:19), shows Peter that the Lord knows about the Jewish census tax discussion downtown.

The question is easy because of the absurdity it involves: *Toll or tribute* is tax money for the support of the kings themselves and *their sons* as well. To tax their sons is tantamount to taxing themselves, like one hand paying the other. No, kings collect taxes, not from their own sons, but from those outside the royal family, i.e. from *strangers*.

### 1. THE PROPER PREROGATIVE OF A POTENTATE'S POSTERITY

17:26 **And when he said, From strangers,** he had answered correctly, but Jesus must make His real point, using the half of the answer that Peter omitted: **Therefore the sons are free.** Two reasons prohibit our seeing in the plural *sons* any application of His principle to the disciples, or even properly to Peter:

1. The essence of the argument does not depend upon whether the royal family is represented by one son or by several, since the contrast is between those who are members of the royal family, hence exempt, and those who are not, hence obligated to pay. (Plummer, *Matthew*, 245)
2. The question raised by the collectors is not whether Peter, or the Twelve, pay, but whether Jesus Himself does. It is nowhere doubted that the disciples are liable. In fact, all God-fearing Hebrews were "sons of God" in this secondary sense (cf. Hos. 1:10; Isa. 43:6), but the very law in question rendered none so bound to pay this tax as they.

So the plural *sons* does not consider Peter and Jesus together as "sons of God's Kingdom," Jesus as God's true Son; Peter, His

disciple, a true "son of the Kingdom." In fact, what was Jesus implying in His conclusion about the exemption?

1. The tax money in question was designated for the service of the temple, the house of the true King of Israel, God Himself. Josephus (*Antiquities XVIII*, 9, 1) affirms that Jesus' contemporaries considered this tax as offered to God.
2. Both God and Peter had confessed Jesus to be "the Son of the living God." (16:16; 17:5)
3. If He is the Son of God, the King and Owner of the temple, then the tax destined for its service does not apply to Him. Should He contribute tax money to His own Father's house? (Cf. Jn. 2:16) Why should He weaken His title as "Son of God," or appear to disown it by acting in a manner out of character with its dignity?

If this is all Jesus said about His own exemption, then we may admire His kindness in not exulting over Peter's wrong thinking, by saying: "So, you see, Simon, how **WRONG** you were to commit me to pay taxes I do not even owe?" He just gently draws out the implication and lets Peter think it over and see the obvious conclusions. This is the face value of His little puzzle, but consider the unstated, but nonetheless indisputable, magnitude of these implications:

1. In His attitude, God's Son towers above the Temple of Javéh and the Mosaic legislation that collected half-shekels for its service. Indeed, "something greater than the temple is here!" (Mt. 12:6) He challenges His obligation to pay this tax only for Himself, because all those who were not sons in the unique, unshared sense of His Sonship, were still liable.
2. Without any preamble or a word of explanation from Peter, Jesus led him around a veritable labyrinth of theological speculation about whether the Messiah, as typical Hebrew, should offer sacrifices, and, by means of a simple illustration, pointed out the right solution. Only One with the certainty of Heaven could keep it that simple, that true and that conclusive. If He were not the Son of God in the highest sense of that word, even His conclusion, so rich in implications, is blasphemy, and He would have no choice but to pay the tax like everyone else.
3. Another reason for not submitting to the tax, which could have laid before the disciples, is based on one of the purposes of the tax. It served as a ransom for the souls of the individuals being counted

in the census. (Ex. 30:11-16) How could He who is the God-appointed ransom for all men somehow be thought to need a ransom for His own life? To admit obligation at this point would cast doubt on His true relation to God and to all other human beings.

## 2. POWERS POSTPONED BY A PRACTICAL PLIABILITY AND A PURPOSE TO PROTECT PEOPLE

17:27 **But, lest we cause them to stumble . . .** We means both Peter and Jesus, because the former had rashly taken a position that committed the other to pay. So both would be involved in any scandal caused by Jesus' refusal to pay it now. The collectors of the half-shekel would not have understood Jesus' divine right not to pay. Unless convinced of His deity, they would have interpreted His proper refusal to pay as claiming a liberty He did not truly possess and as evidence of a lack of reverence for God, the temple and the Law, and they would have been unnecessarily horrified, whereas there was no Hebrew in all the history of Israel that ever had a higher, more intelligent regard for God and His will.

### THE ASTOUNDING QUESTION ARISING OUT OF THIS SITUATION IS: "HOW MANY OTHER INDIGNITIES AND INCONGRUITIES DID JESUS HAVE TO ENDURE AS A HUMAN BEING?"

Does this section furnish an answer to the question whether Jesus attended the feasts, offered the sacrifices, and generally respected every other requisite of God's Law given through Moses? May we conclude, on the basis of what He reveals about Himself and His policy in this incident, that it was His normal practice to do everything that it was right for a Hebrew to do? (Mt. 3:15)

1. He had been born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Gal. 4:4, 5) There was no intrinsic need for Him to be circumcized (Lk. 2:21) or purified (Lk. 2:22f), except "to perform everything according to the law of the Lord" (Lk. 2:39). Is the temple tax question but a tip of the iceberg of legal obligations which Jesus made it His standard policy to respect?

2. The changes in OT legislation, that Jesus taught would go into effect after His death had set aside the old covenant. (Heb. 9:15-17; Col. 2:13, 14; Eph. 2:14f) Examples:
  - a. The distinction between clean and unclean meats (Mt. 15:11; Mk. 7:19)
  - b. The centralized place of worship (Jn. 4:21-24)
  - c. To what extent did He participate in Passovers without offering sacrifices and sharing in the meals? (Jn. 2:13-23; Lk. 22:15; cf. 1 Co. 10:18)

The Bible does not positively say whether Jesus did or did not offer animal sacrifices—even as thank-offerings to God for His goodness. Nevertheless, simple silence on this question is not a positive argument. Rather, His refusal to offer sacrifices without accompanying His refusal with appropriate explanations to His contemporaries would have caused far more scandal than His refusal to pay the temple tax! For Him to have offered such sacrifices in the temple when not obligated to do so and when fully aware of the temporary character of the Mosaic system would not have contravened His deity, any more than paying the ransom involved in the temple tax would have disproven His right to be the Redeemer, any more than submission to John's baptism would have proven Him sinful merely because one of the primary purposes of that rite was "the forgiveness of sins." (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3)

3. There is no warrant for affirming that Jesus and the Apostles had never paid the temple tax during the three preceding years of His ministry, as if Peter hurried anxiously to get a ruling from Jesus on the matter. Such anxiety would have been psychologically impossible, if a precedent had already been established. But there is no textual indication that Peter was anxious for a ruling or that he even wanted to talk about it. Jesus' anticipation of Peter's mentioning the tax conversation can be interpreted differently, not as anxiety on Peter's part, but as urgency on the Lord's part. The Lord desired to furnish Peter additional proof of His Sonship to God. It is better to assume that Peter well knew that the Lord paid every year, for the simple reason that, had He not done so, Peter could not have truthfully answered "Yes" regarding a yearly tax. Also, would not the Apostles have already questioned Jesus about His non-payment and already received the information just now revealed to them in our text?

If we rightly object that Jesus did not have to subject Himself to the

indignities of offering animal sacrifices required of other Hebrews, we still have not positively affirmed that He did not actually offer them. In an exquisite passage rich in insight, Bruce (*Training*, 217ff) observes:

Surely, in a life containing so many indignities and incongruities,—which was, in fact, one grand indignity from beginning to end,—it was a small matter to be obliged to pay annually, for the benefit of the temple, the paltry sum of fifteenpence! He who with marvellous patience went through all the rest, could not possibly mean to stumble and scruple at so trifling a matter . . . He wished them to understand . . . that it was not a thing of course that He should pay, any more than it was a thing of course that He should become a man, and, so to speak, leave His royal state behind and assume the rank of a peasant: that was an act of voluntary humiliation, forming one item in the course of humiliation, to which He voluntarily submitted, beginning with His birth, and ending with His death and burial.

For our magnanimous Lord, the dilemma was easy to resolve: to refuse to pay, merely to prove a point for some, would cause others to stumble and cost the salvation of some precious souls, but to pay when under no obligation to do so, costs exactly one *drachma* and He could teach His disciples deference! So He paid, and in so doing He did not violate either His own freedom or the conscience of others. Rather, by submitting, He demonstrated his majesty. **Lest we cause them to stumble**, expresses Jesus' concern for the weak and ignorant. (See on 18:12, 13.) By His example He instructs all disciples not to abuse their freedom and to be sensitive to unbelievers, refraining from unnecessarily offending those who could be positively influenced to accept the Gospel. Although we cannot permit or refuse compliance to a thing on any other grounds, we cannot refuse on this one. The requirement wholly uncalled for in Jesus' case He found absolutely irresistible on the ground of others' weakness. Although He was exempt from the tax because of Who He was, His interest was not in exercising His proper prerogatives, but in helping to protect others from stumbling. Jesus' justification for waiving His privileges may well have been identical to that of Paul. (1 Co. 9:1-23) To relinquish one's own undeniable, inalienable personal rights for the good of others is true self-denial and the story of Jesus' life. (On self-denial, see "The Cost of Our Salvation" after 16:28.) Behold

how "though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor!" He did not possess one half-shekkel to His name, and yet His honesty would not divert community funds for private need.

### 3. THE PRAISEWORTHY PERFORMANCE OF THIS PRINCIPLE OF PRECEDENCE

He paid by procuring the money in such a way as to furnish surprising evidence that He really was the King's Son and exempt as He had said. **Go thou to the sea** (of Galilee just outside Capernaum) **and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a shekel: take that, and give unto them for me and thee.** How would this particular choice of miracles have impressed His fisherman-Apostle? This alone justifies the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth against all His detractors. Anyone who can either create a fish with the right coin in its mouth and bring it to Peter's hook as the first one to bite, or else knew that such a fish would so come, and tell the fisherman to go catch it, qualifies for temple tax exemption, because only Deity can do that! Jesus is not the mere son of an earthly potentate, but the Son of the Owner of the cattle on a thousand hills, and if He cannot make use of one small fish to bring Him a coin to fill the need, what kind of Son is He?! The moral purpose and spiritual instruction in his miracle were aimed squarely at Peter, and indirectly and secondarily at us. The coin itself was not *a shekel*, as translated in our text, but a *statér*, a silver coin equivalent to the Jewish shekel, hence enough to pay two half-shekkel taxes.

**Take that, and give unto them for me and thee.** Why pay for Peter too? He was not a Son of God, hence not exempt in the way Jesus was. However, his constant association with Jesus in His whirlwind ministry may not have permitted him leisure to pay his just dues as a true Hebrew. Therefore, when Peter took Jesus' payment to the collectors, they might well have questioned Peter about his own tax payment, and were they to find him delinquent, there would be another cause of stumbling. So Jesus paid for them both to eliminate any possible cause for scandal. The money the Lord furnished, however, was not "for us," as if both were sons of God in the same sense, but *for me and for yourself*, the Son who is exempt and the citizen who is not. The payments are identical, but the reason for which each of them is paid is different.

## OBJECTIONS TO THIS "FISH STORY"

1. **There is no real miracle here.** Some would suggest that Jesus' reference to the fish be understood metaphorically: "In the fish that you will catch you will find what will pay for us." Accordingly, this might mean that the fish would sell for the right amount. And since we are not told that Peter actually did find a coin in the mouth of a fish, the confirmation of the prediction's exact terms is missing.

*ANSWER:* Matthew did not need to elaborate on Peter's obedience to Jesus' orders, the latter not being essential to the account of Jesus' teaching about the temple tax. The fact that the miracle is not described means that the emphasis of this story is not on the miracle, Matthew's purpose being to teach Jewish Christians their duty not to abuse their freedom. However, the natural impression on the reader is that the order was obeyed and that the miracle really occurred. This impression is confirmed by the skeptics' own attacks based on this impression. But to demythologize the miracle by reducing His statement to "You will find our tax money (in the sale of) the very first catch," excludes divine foreknowledge and, in its place, substitutes simple, human probability prediction.

2. **It was not beyond human power to earn such a trifling sum.** "A day or two of fishing by the Apostles would have brought in enough money to pay the tax for themselves and Jesus too. Therefore this miracle violates the usual principle that supernatural means are not used where natural means suffice. Poor as Jesus and His disciples were, the putting together a sum equivalent to the salary for four working days is not so serious a matter as to require a miracle to raise such a trifling sum."

*ANSWER:* Natural means would never have sufficed in this situation to prove what Jesus proved by this sign of His true Sonship, nor demonstrated that Jesus needed not to submit to the humiliation of paying a tax for the support of the royal house. Divine power is required to testify that all nature serves HIM, and that, as His father's Son, He possessed all things. Admittedly, the intrinsic value of the sum is trifling, but this can never be thought the basis for considering the miracle as having been worked for a very trifling purpose! Is it a trifling purpose to show His disciples how profound was His voluntary submission to a servile obligation, despite His full consciousness of His own identity? And is it a trifling purpose to establish that identity by choosing a

manner of payment which would contemporaneously illustrate Himself "as the Lord of nature, to whom all creatures in land or sea were subject, and all their movements familiar, while yet so humbled as to need the services of the meanest of them"? (Bruce, *Training*, 219) Even so, Jesus sent Peter to go fishing. He did not will the fish to come to Him at the edge of the lake and drop the coin within His reach. He made use of ordinary human means to complete the miracle.

3. **It served the personal need and was done for the personal benefit of the one who worked the miracle.** "If this story be taken in its crude literalism, it would show Jesus using His divine power to satisfy His own personal needs. But He had decided never to use His miraculous power selfishly to satisfy His own hunger or to enhance His prestige as a worker of wonders. (Mt. 4:1-11) Thus, taken literally, this story violates Jesus' own character and wilderness decision."

*ANSWER:* Instead of seeming to compromise the completeness of His humiliation, this miracle only makes it that much more glaringly conspicuous, as if the miracle story proclaimed: "Notice who it is that must pay this tax and is so painfully poor that He must stoop to such a level in order to pay it! It is He who has 'dominion over the works of your hands . . . the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea!'" Psa. 8:6-8; 50:11) So, rather than profit in such a way as to alleviate His human life of hardship by the use of His divine power, He is still teaching others the reality of His humiliation. If this seems an exception to His normal rule of doing nothing miraculous for His own benefit, "the exception, however, had the same reason as the rule, and therefore proved the rule." (Bruce, *Training*, 220)

3. **The story is immoral in that it encourages man to suppose that by a stroke of good luck he can solve his problems, meet his obligations without exertion on his part.**

*ANSWER:* Those who accuse the Lord of solving His problems without exertion should consider how much it cost Jesus to place Himself in the incongruous position of becoming a man at all. Let them decide whether He would have considered it a "stroke of good fortune" or "meeting one's obligations in a lazy, effortless way," when His entire life was one grand indignity, one continuous and voluntary servanthood, from start to finish. No, the miracle story, by its very nature and the lessons it teaches, distinguish Jesus the miracle-worker from any common mortal who would

excuse himself for effortless laziness and refusal to pay the normal price of work for all things.

4. **The miracle is grotesque and unworthy of God:** "The very idea of using a fish to deliver tax payments, indeed!"

**ANSWER:** Consider God's use of animals to do His bidding: Nu. 21:6; 22:21-33; 1 Kg. 13:24; 17:4-6; 2 Kg. 17:25f; Ezek. 14:15, and especially God's use of the great fish to deliver Jonah! Jon. 1:17; 2:1-10. Why shouldn't He have had to take the coin from the FISH's mouth when HE could have taken it from an ANGEL's hand! On the other hand, Jesus did some other scandalous things (Mt. 11:6) like going to a cross. (1 Co. 1:18-23) More grotesque than that . . .!

#### EVIDENCES OF JESUS' DIVINE DIGNITY REVEALED IN THIS SECTION

1. Omnipotence is revealed by His anticipating Peter's recounting the temple tax discussion. (17:25)
2. His consciousness of His true Sonship. (17:25)
3. His considerate deference to others' weakness shown in His unwillingness to take offence at nor scandalize those who would not understand His reasons. (17:27)
4. His omnipotence was again manifest in drawing the right fish (the one that had precisely the right coin) to Peter's hook first. (17:27) Or else, by divine omniscience He knew that the coin was there and that the fish would come to Peter's hook. He knew and foretold that God would pay His tax in this way.
5. His generosity with Peter: not only did He not scold him for his unsatisfactory answer, but He shared His own bounty to pay Peter's tax along with His own. (17:27) God does things like this.

Barclay's note (*Matthew*, II, 183f) beautifully concludes Jesus' lesson to us from this chapter:

We see here the constant demands which were made upon Jesus. Straight from the glory of the mountain top, He came to be met by the demands of human need and human suffering. Straight from hearing the voice of God, He came to hear the clamant demand of human need. The most precious and most Christ-like person in the world is the person who never finds his fellowmen a nuisance. It is easy to feel Christian in the moment

of prayer and meditation; it is easy to feel close to God when the world is shut out, and when heaven is very near. But that is not religion—that is escapism. Real religion is to rise from our knees before God to meet men and the problems of the human situation. Real religion involves both meeting God in the secret place and men in the market place. Real religion means taking our needs to God, not that we may have peace and quiet and undisturbed comfort, but that we may be enabled graciously, effectively and powerfully to meet the needs of others.

As noted before, the second half of this lesson will be concluded with Jesus' sermon in chapter 18.

#### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Where had Jesus and the Apostles been when they arrived in Capernaum?
2. What is this "half-shekel" tax that the collectors ask about? What was its purpose? What Scriptures speak about this tax?
3. Why do the collectors ask this particular question? Did they expect Peter to answer yes or no?
4. Where was Peter when accosted by the collectors?
5. Who were "they who receive the half-shekel"? Were they the same as "publicans"? How do you know?
6. In this section Jesus demonstrated His deity and divine dignity in various ways. What are they?
7. What does this section indicate about Jesus relation to the Mosaic Law and its institutions?
8. Why did Jesus anticipate Peter when he came home? How did He do this?
9. What is the principle behind Jesus' question and the point of His own conclusion?
10. Why did Jesus pay the tax? Of what grand principle in Christianity is this an excellent illustration?
11. Explain the mechanism in this situation whereby Jesus and Peter would cause these tax collectors to stumble, were they not to pay the tax these thought was due.
12. Explain how Jesus paid the taxes.
13. Prove that there is (or is not) a miracle involved in the peculiar way Jesus secured the tax money. Indicate the purpose(s) involved

in His getting the money this way.

14. Show how this incident is excellent psychological preparation for the teaching the disciples must have and will receive in the incident that immediately follows in Matthew 18:1-35.

### INTRODUCTION: THE UNITY OF CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

No chapter is better connected nor better reveals the mind of the Lord back of every paragraph, uniting its every concept from beginning to end, than chapter 18. The most remarkable characteristic of this section is not merely its wholeness, but the amazing number of threads per verse that connect and interweave ideas throughout the entire chapter.

Perhaps the best way to experience this unity at first hand is to pick out an idea as if it were a thread of one color, and then trace it through the chapter to see its various applications. Then, pass to another colored thread of thought and follow it through the Lord's message. The ever-pleasing result will be a growing appreciation for our Lord's ability to deal with His disciples' initial dispute and the deeper spiritual problem that caused it, as well as a sense of amazement at the long-term, final answers Jesus gave to our most complex modern problems.

Here are some of the themes you might wish to trace throughout this chapter:

1. Right and wrong ambition in the Kingdom of God.
2. Relative rank: one's relationships to those who are his inferiors and superiors.
  - a. Definition and illustrations of "inferiors";
  - b. Redefinition of "superiors."
3. Responsibility for others' spiritual growth, needs and failures.
4. Responsibility for one's own spiritual interests and needs.
5. Standards of judgment and a concept of mercy.
6. Greatness in the Kingdom, or, relative importance to God and the Kingdom.
7. The perils of pride, despising others and unmercifulness.
8. The various faces of humility.
9. Jesus' love for the least, the last and the lost.
10. Christian discipline as this reveals itself in personal self-discipline

and in congregational discipline.

11. The picture of the Church that Jesus paints: the Kingdom of God is not a community of plaster saints typical of an ideal purity impossible to realize. Rather, it is a congregation of people who continue to make mistakes, to sin, to cause occasions of stumbling and refuse to forgive, and who always need forgiving. And it is an assembly that lives in the awareness that God loves and cares for each single member without exception and is conscious that Christ is in its midst, and so acts with full authority and confidence.
12. True and false concepts of structures of authority.

Additional proof of the chapter's unity is the fact that each of these themes is so important to the texture of the final result that one outline of the chapter will just not exhaust its meaning, since to outline means to summarize, but to summarize means to omit some of the chapter's thematic developments. The outline we will be following is an attempt to represent as many of these themes as possible.

This chapter is an interesting study of human motivation to action. It shows how holy and unholy ambition are related, yet contrary. As you go through the chapter, ask yourself, what are the various sound psychological devices used by the Lord to help disciples to aspire to true greatness as He defines it?

The more one works with each paragraph in this study, the more he becomes convinced that one can take almost any motif anywhere in the chapter and see its connections with almost any other which precedes or follows it! Even the scholar who begins with the pre-supposition that some unknown editor arranged these otherwise unconnected materials into one discourse, if he permits himself to entertain the not improbable possibility that that unknown editor was a gifted, intelligent Christian, hence knew exactly what he was about, must be smitten with the surprising cohesion with which every single idea in this chapter is intertwined with every other. Judged merely from a literary standpoint, this speech is an unexcelled masterpiece on human relations. Its lucidity and incisiveness, its simplicity and far-reaching applications, its tenderness and its terrible power to strike terror in the conscientious, all present us with a wisdom so high as to be worthy only of Him who identified Himself as the Son of God. Only eternity can bring to light the brilliance of character produced in His disciples and all the lasting good done in the world and all the problems resolved in the Church by this single lesson by our Lord!

**CHAPTER EIGHTEEN OUTLINE AND SUMMARY****Section 46. Jesus Trains the Twelve in Personal Relations (18:1-35)**

**SITUATION: DISCIPLES DREAMING OF DISTINCTIONS:** Argument among the disciples about relative status in the Messianic Kingdom (18:1; Mk. 9:33f; Lk. 9:46f)

**RESPONSE: JESUS' SERMON ON THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS**

**TEXT:** "The secret of true greatness is humble service to others." (Mk. 9:35)

**OPENING ILLUSTRATION:** The little child in the midst. (Mt. 18:2; Mk. 9:36; Lk. 9:47)

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMILITY THEME:**

I. Your position in, and relative importance to the Kingdom of God is measured by your humility. (Mt. 18:3f)

A. Entering the Kingdom depends on humility: "only the humble need apply!" (Mt. 18:3)

B. Relative rank in the Kingdom depends on humility: "The humblest is the greatest: the most important is he who admits his deep spiritual need!" (Mt. 18:4)

II. Your humility is measured by your openness and sensitivity to so-called "inferiors" in the Kingdom: "There are NO UNIMPORTANT PEOPLE in the Kingdom!" (18:5; Mk. 9:36b, 37; Lk. 9:48-50)

A. Receiving the least important means receiving the King! (Mt. 18:5; Mk. 9:37; Lk. 9:48)

B. John's question about the unaffiliated miracle worker the rebuke of whom implied a sectarian rejection of all but themselves. (Mk. 9:38; Lk. 9:49)

C. Jesus' answer: a lesson on exclusiveness and bigotry versus tolerance (Mk. 9:39-41; Lk. 9:50)

1. "Do not forbid him: I am in control here."

2. "Whoever helps me will not soon turn against me."

3. "Whoever is not actively opposed to you, permits you to work."

4. "Whoever helps you in the smallest way will be rewarded."

III. Your humility is measured by your concern about your own sins

and liability to sin and what this does to others. (Mt. 18:6-9; Mk. 9:42-50)

- A. "The one who causes stumbling is better off dead!" (Mt. 18:6; Mk. 9:42)
- B. "The world is bad enough off without YOUR contribution to its stock of stumbling blocks!" (Mt. 18:7)
- C. "Your own most important and justifiable bodily members can cause you to stumble, so are better dispensed with than permit them to cause the loss of your soul! No sacrifice is too great! (Mt. 18:8, 9; Mk. 9:43-48)
- D. "How do you want it: saved by the fire or saved for the fire?" (Mk. 9:49, 50)

IV. Your humility and sensitivity to the weak is measured against Heaven's concern for them. (Mt. 18:10-14) The problems of "inferiors" immediately and actively involve the sympathetic concern of Heaven.

- A. Ministering angels have God's immediate audience. (Mt. 18:10)
- B. The Good Shepherd came to seek the lost little ones. (Mt. 18:11-13)
- C. God Himself has no desire to lose any we might designate "inferiors." (Mt. 18:14)

V. Your humility and sensitivity to others is measured by your concern about others' sins. (Mt. 18:15-20) Does it really matter to you about the gain or loss to the Kingdom of a brother? "If your brother sins . . .

- A. Make a personal effort to regain him. (Mt. 18:15)
- B. Get other helpers as witnesses. (Mt. 18:16)
- C. Enlist the strength of the congregation (Mt. 18:17-20)
  - 1. The special weight of the common judgment of common believers: God will recognize Church decisions rightly taken! (Mt. 18:18)
  - 2. The special power of the common prayer of common believers: God will answer their prayers! (Mt. 18:19)
  - 3. The special honor of the common meeting of common believers: Jesus Himself is present and personally interested!

VI. Your humility and sensitivity to others is judged by your readiness to forgive or show mercy. (Mt. 18:21-35)

- A. Peter's question: "How many times forgive?" (Mt. 18:21)
- B. Jesus answers: "No limit: mercifulness is the rule in God's Kingdom!" (18:22-35)
  - 1. Consider the greatness of God's mercy to you. (18:23-27)
  - 2. Consider the smallness of your brother's sins against you. (18:28-30)
  - 3. Consider the consequences of indulging an unforgiving spirit. (18:31-34)

CONCLUSION: You endanger your own position in the Kingdom by unmercifulness and reckless superiority! (Mt. 18:35)

## Section 46

### JESUS TRAINS THE TWELVE IN PERSONAL RELATIONS (Parallels: Mark 9:33-50; Luke 9:46-50)

TEXT: 18:1-35

#### A. Humility and True Greatness

1 In that hour came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? 2 And he called to him a little child, and set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

#### B. Responsibility

5 And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me; 6 but whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea.

### C. Self-renunciation

7 Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh! 8 And if thy hand or thy foot causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter into life maimed or halt, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the eternal fire. 9 And if thine eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into the hell of fire.

### D. Individual Concern

10 See that ye despise not one of these little ones: for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven. (Many authorities, some ancient, insert ver. 11: "for the Son of man came to save that which was lost." See Luke 19:10) 12 How think ye? If any man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and go unto the mountains, and seek that which goeth astray? 13 And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth over it more than over the ninety and nine which have not gone astray. 14 Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

### E. Discipline in the Fellowship of Christ

15 And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. 17 And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican. 18 Verily I say unto you, What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my

Father who is in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

#### F. Forgiveness

21 Then came Peter and said to him, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times? 22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven. 23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, who would make a reckoning with his servants. 24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, that owed him ten thousand talents. 25 But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. 27 And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. 28 But that servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, who owed him a hundred shillings: and he laid hold on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay what thou owest. 29 So his fellow-servant fell down and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee. 30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay that which was due. 31 So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were exceeding sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. 32 Then his lord called him unto him, and saith to him, Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me: 33 shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on thee? 34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due. 35 So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.

(19:1 And it came to pass when Jesus had finished these words, he departed from Galilee and came into the borders of Judea beyond the Jordan.)

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- Matthew (18:1) says the disciples came to Jesus asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" whereas Mark (9:34) says that

when they were asked directly about this very discussion, "they were silent." How can both statements be true? Explain this apparent contradiction by showing the proper order in which these took place.

- b. What is the spirit of the Apostles' argument? What would their mental concept of the Kingdom have been that caused them to discuss the question of relative greatness?
- c. What is the point of Jesus' object lesson: what is there about children that makes them a good illustration of what the disciples must become?
- d. What does it matter what attitude one has who would seek to enter the Kingdom?
- e. How does humility so radically affect a man's life as to produce the desired change Jesus indicates as absolutely essential for entrance into God's Kingdom? Explain how it is that the most humble are the greatest in the Kingdom.
- f. How do the principles of Jesus conflict with those of the world as to what constitutes true greatness? Who are the truly great in God's sight?
- g. What are some dangers to avoid in trying to be truly humble?
- h. Does Jesus actually say that it is wrong to want to be great? Did He imply it?
- i. What does "receiving little children" have to do with humility? Do "the great" of this world not receive them?
- j. Does Jesus mean that those who operate orphanages serve God perfectly?
- k. Why were the Apostles mistaken to hinder the unaffiliated worker of miracles?
- l. Why do you suppose Jesus permitted the unaffiliated worker to do his work in His name? So that the disciples would have to encounter him and have to decide about him?
- m. How does building a religious denomination with its great agencies, its shows of strength, its big conventions, its fences of separation, its grand institutions, defy the spirit and will of Jesus? Or does it? If not, why not?
- n. What does judging by harsh condemnation do to this spirit of Jesus?
- o. How does the incident involving the unaffiliated worker of miracles relate to His teaching concerning false teachers? Does this passage instruct us to receive all religious teachers regardless of their teaching, simply on the strength of the fact that "they follow

- not with us"?
- p. How can you harmonize "he that is not against us is for us" (Mk. 9:40) with Mt. 12:30: "He who is not with me is against me"?
  - q. Does Jesus specify what reward may be expected by any who help the disciples? What do you think it is?  
If you say that "these little ones who believe in me" are young Christians, why then does Jesus call them "little"? What is so "little" about them?
  - s. How or why would death by drowning be "better" or "profitable" for the one who causes others to stumble?
  - t. Why "must" occasions of stumbling come? How do they come?
  - u. If a Christian, despite his pure life in Christ, unknowingly causes others to sin, is he thereby placed under the condemnation of Jesus? What is a stumbling block anyway? Is it best to look for them in our lives, or to ignore them and let others point them out? Are any of your present habits or attitudes likely to become stumbling blocks? What are you doing about them?
  - v. What is the relationship between Jesus' dire warnings about one's own hands, eyes or feet, and what precedes as well as what follows them? In other words, what principle is seen in self-discipline and self-mastery that affects the disciples' attitude toward others?
  - w. What protection against damning selfishness does Jesus afford His disciples in the very words of our text? (Mt. 18:1-35)
  - x. How many weak, sinful, stubborn, abusive, hardheaded church-members are included in the command: "See that you despise not one of these little ones"? How do you know?
  - y. How does the illustration about the finding of the lost sheep hold an undisguised threat to status-seeking disciples ambitious to be the greatest in the Kingdom? How does this parable serve as an extremely important context for the teaching on church discipline given later in this same text? (Mt. 18:15-18)
  - z. Who is meant by "thy brother (who) sins"? Should we bring "against thee" into the discussion? Is our action toward a sinning brother dependent upon whether he has sinned against us or not?
  - aa. Even if we admit "against thee" as having been written in the text by Matthew, does this change anything about the nature and seriousness of the brother's sin? What "sin" is referred to in this command the Lord obviously intended for us: it is *anything* listed in the NT lists of sins? What is the law whereby we know when a person sins? How are we going to apply Jesus' will as He states it here?

- bb. Must this "sin" be a public disgrace before we do anything about it? What if it is a failure in one's Christian faith which needs to be strengthened by privately showing him the lack? Are there sins concerning which one should not make a public issue where it is better to forgive than to publish them by initiating disciplinary action? On what basis should this decision be made?
- cc. Since not everyone is gifted with tact and wisdom sufficient to approach the sinning brother in order delicately to remove the cause of his stumbling, would it not be just sufficient merely to be kind and forgiving toward him without going to him about it? Must we go? Why not just pray for him and stay home? Besides, if we lack the necessary abilities to handle the case right, would we not do more harm than good? What does the Lord say?
- dd. Why go to the sinning brother privately at first? Show the wisdom of this course.
- ee. Why, in the case of failure, should one or two others go too? What is their exact function?
- ff. Why "tell the matter to the church"?
- gg. Who or what exactly is the "church" here? How could Jesus speak of the church before it even existed?
- hh. Do you think that God has nothing better to do than cooperate with the Church on earth by ratifying in heaven decisions made by the Church? Who is governing this world anyway: God or the Church? How are we to understand the "binding and loosing on earth and in heaven"?
- ii. Do you think Jesus should require anyone, much less His Church, to call people names like "pagan" or "publican"? Why or why not?
- jj. Just because two people agree to ask God for something, does this mean that God is obligated to honor the promise made by Jesus in our text? (18:19) Or are there other considerations? If so, what are they?
- kk. In what sense is it true that Jesus is present wherever two disciples meet in His name?
- ll. Do you think an erroneous decision made by the Church, or perhaps one which contravened God's law, would be binding on anyone? What do you think should be done, if the Church does err in a particular disciplinary case?
- mm. When Peter asked the Lord how often "my brother shall sin against me," who does he mean by "my brother"? only Andrew? What had been said in Jesus' previous discussion that would cause

- Peter to ask this question?
- nn. Do you think Peter was being generous or Pharisaic to try to ascertain the precise limit to which one should go in forgiving a brother? Why?
  - oo. Should we forgive an offender who does not seek forgiveness from us? On what basis do you answer as you do?
  - pp. Why should Jesus have to tack onto His demand that we forgive the additional expression "from the heart"? Is there any other kind of forgiveness?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Returning to Galilee from the tour of Phoenicia, Syria, Decapolis, and, most recently, the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus and the Twelve arrived in Capernaum. Now an argument had arisen among the disciples as to which of them was the most important. But Jesus knew what they were thinking. So when He was indoors, He faced them with the question, "What were you discussing on the way home?"

But they would not answer, because on the road they had been disputing with one another about who was the greatest. At that moment some of the disciples came forward to Jesus, blurting out the question, "Who then is really the most important in the coming Kingdom of Heaven?"

Jesus sat down and, calling the Twelve together, told them, "If any one wants to be first, he must put himself last of all and be the servant of everybody!"

At this point He called a child to His side and stood him in the center of the group, commenting, "Truly I can assure you, unless you change your entire outlook and become like children, you will certainly never get into God's Kingdom! The most important man in the coming Kingdom is the one who humbles himself till he is like this child."

Then, putting His arms around the child, He continued, "Whoever takes care of one little child like this for my sake, is, in effect, welcoming and caring for me. And whoever welcomes and cares for me, is not receiving me only, but also God who sent me. You see, he who seems to be the least important among you all, is really the one who is the most important!"

John broke in to say, "Master, we encountered somebody invoking

your name to drive out demons, so we tried to stop him, because he does not follow you along with us."

But Jesus' answer was, "You must not hinder him, because no one who uses my name to do a miracle, will immediately thereafter be able to insult or revile me. In fact, anyone who is not actively against us is on our side. I can assure you that, whoever gives you a mere cup of water to drink on the basis of the fact that you belong to Christ,—there is no way he can miss his reward."

"On the other hand, if someone becomes the means whereby one of these seemingly less important disciples is caused to stumble into sin, it would be better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and be plunged into the sea and drowned. How terrible for the world that there are things that cause people to stumble into sin! In fact, it is inevitable that such things happen, but woe to the person through whose influence the temptation comes! So, if it is YOUR hand or YOUR foot that proves a snare to YOU, hack it off and fling it away from YOU. By comparison, it is better for YOU to live forever maimed or lame than be thrown with both hands or both feet into the eternal, unquenchable fire of hell! It is the same way with YOUR eye, if this is the cause of YOUR undoing, tear it out and hurl it away from YOU. Entering life half-blind in the Kingdom of God, is better for YOU, than with two good eyes to be thrown into a fiery hell, where the maggots never die and the fire is never put out. The salt with which everyone will be salted is fire. But the "salt" is a good thing only if it has not lost its strength. Otherwise, how will you season it? You must have in yourselves the "salt" I mean, and keep on living at peace with one another."

"Be especially careful not to underesteem—much less despise—one of these seemingly insignificant followers! I assure you that in heaven their angels have uninterrupted access to my heavenly Father. What is your opinion? Suppose a man had a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray. Would not he leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one that is straying? Moreover if he manages to find it, it goes without saying that he is happier over it than over the ninety-nine that have not gone astray. So, it is not the will of my heavenly Father that even one of these seemingly insignificant disciples should be lost.

"So, if your brother sins against you, go and convince him of his fault privately, just between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed

by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, present your case to the congregation. And if he refuses to listen even to the community of believers, then consider him like you would a pagan or an outcast. I assure you that whatever action you take on earth will conform to the divine pattern and God will back you up. I intend to underline the fact that, if even two of you agree on earth about anything they pray for, they will receive it from my heavenly Father. This is because, where two or three come together as disciples to meet in my name, I am right there with them."

Then Peter came up with the problem: "Lord, how often shall my brother keep on sinning against me and I have to forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Jesus disagreed, "No, I would not say, seven times, but seventy times seven! This is why God's Kingdom may be compared to a king who decided to settle accounts with his agents. He had no sooner begun than one man was brought in who owed him an astronomical figure. Since he could not pay it, his Lord ordered him to be sold as a slave—his wife, his children and all his possessions—and payment to be made. At this the agent fell to his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, give me time, and I will repay you every cent of it!' Out of mercy for him, this lord not only released him, but also forgave him the debt. But this same fellow, as he went out, happened to meet one of his co-workers who owed him a paltry sum. Grabbing him by the throat, he began choking him and demanding, 'Pay me what you owe!' At this, his companion prostrated himself, pleading, 'Just be patient with me, and I will pay you back!' But the other refused. Instead, he hauled him off to prison till the debt should be paid. Since other co-workers had witnessed the spectacle, all very upset they went to their master and reported the entire incident. Then the king summoned that agent and addressed him: 'You wicked ingrate! I cancelled your entire debt because you asked me to. Should you not have been as merciful to your fellow worker, as I was to you?' His indignant master then turned him over to the prison torturers, until he should pay the entire amount. This is precisely how my heavenly Father will treat every last one of you, unless you sincerely forgive your brother!"

Then, when Jesus had finished this message, He left Galilee and went beyond the Jordan River to Perea which borders on Judea.

## NOTES

## SITUATION: DISCIPLES DREAMING OF DISTINCTIONS

**18:1 In that hour came the disciples of Jesus, saying, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** The opening words link this section with Jesus' discussion with Peter about the temple tax, therefore in the house where He regularly stayed during His now less frequent returns to Capernaum. These two events probably occurred the same day, as there is a definite logical connection between them. (See on 17:24.) This discourse may have occurred upon Peter's return from paying the temple tax (17:27), although its basis lay in an earlier quarrel. Depending on the emphasis placed on the various details, there are three possible harmonizations of the Gospels' approach to this question:

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Argument on the road home (Mk. 9:33; Lk. 9:46)</li> <li>2. Jesus perceived their thoughts (Lk. 9:47)</li> <li>3. Jesus challenged them to admit it (Mk. 9:33)</li> <li>4. Ashamed, disciples remain silent (Mk. 9:34)</li> <li>5. Jesus' statement: "First is last and servant." (Mk. 9:35)</li> <li>6. Disciples insist: "Who, then is greatest?" (Mt. 18:1)</li> <li>7. Jesus' object lesson: "Be like children" (Mt. 18:2; Mk.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Argument on the road home (Mk. 9:33; Lk. 9:46)</li> <li>2. Jesus perceived their thoughts (Lk. 9:47)</li> <li>3. Jesus challenged them to admit it (Mk. 9:33)</li> <li>4. Ashamed, disciples remain silent (Mk. 9:34)</li> <li>5. Disciples, unmasked, ask, "Who, then, is greatest?" (Mt. 18:1)</li> <li>6. Jesus' statement, "First is last and servant." (Mk. 9:35)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Argument on the road home (Mk. 9:33; Lk. 9:46)</li> <li>2. Disciples ask "innocent" general question (Mt. 18:1)</li> <li>3. Jesus perceives their real meaning (Lk. 9:47)</li> <li>4. Jesus challenged them to admit meaning (Mk. 9:33)</li> <li>5. Disciples remain silent, ashamed. (Mk. 9:34)</li> <li>6. Jesus' statement: "First is last and servant." (Mk. 9:35)</li> </ol>
<p>This assumes they either did not understand His statement (5) as the true answer, or in light of its ethical implications, stupidly push Him to indicate His prospective hierarchy anyway.</p>	<p>This assumes that, faced with His obvious insight into their squabble, they shamelessly request that He settle their dispute, indicating their relative status.</p>	<p>This assumes they hide their ambition under an innocent, general, hypothetical query, but Jesus reads their thoughts and unmasks their real motive to learn their future status.</p>

Drawn out in these bleak terms, their selfish ambition may seem shocking to the reader who has learned to love and regard these very men highly for their work's sake (1 Th. 5:13). In fact, the psychological likelihood of this dispute against a backdrop of Passion Predictions may seem slight, but upon closer investigation, is regrettably harmonious. The argument on the road home from Caesarea Philippi (16:13) and the Mount of Transfiguration (17:1) very likely finds its genesis in certain important details involved in the events that took place there:

1. The promise of special powers to Peter (Mt. 16:17-19). Did this make him greatest?
2. The special privileges of Peter, James and John—was there any self-exaltation among them because of this?
  - a. To witness the resurrection of Jairus' daughter. (Mk. 5:37)
  - b. To pray with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration. (Mt. 17:1; Lk. 9:28)
3. The contrasting failure of faith and miracle-working power of the Nine. (Mt. 17:19f) Did this put them in a bad light with the other three?
4. Perhaps the fact that the temple tax collectors singled out Peter seemed to increase his prestige as spokesman for the group and especially for Jesus. (Mt. 17:24-27) We are not told how many other Apostles knew about the collectors' question, however.
5. From the standpoint of James and John, Peter's impulsiveness and constant rebukes by the Lord might have marked him, not for the highest office, but for some lesser post, a fact that would leave the nicest political plums still on the tree. (Cf. Mt. 16:22f; 17:4, 24f; 14:28-31; 15:15f) Notwithstanding Jesus' lesson delivered here, they return later with their own false ambition. (20:20-28)
6. It is not unlikely that Jesus already perceived the harsh spirit of John and the others (cf. Mk. 9:38ff) and the self-righteous bargaining of Peter (Mt. 18:15, 21).

So, Jesus' question, "What were you discussing on the way?" (Mk. 9:33) was not based upon His ignorance, but upon theirs, because He was very much aware, just as He was aware of Peter's answer given to the collectors of the temple tax. (Cf. Mt. 17:25) How gently He deals with these children! His question which leads their conscience to accuse them is more effective than a direct rebuke and leaves them psychologically readier to study the question with Him. There are root causes that made it a psychologically easy matter

to begin scrapping over the brightest honors in the Kingdom:

1. Heart-broken over Jesus' insistence that He must die (see on 17:23), they cling for hope to the Kingdom-idea, but it was THEIR Kingdom-concept that led them astray. As Edersheim (*Life*, II, 115f) reminds us,

It was the common Jewish view, that there would be distinctions of rank in the Kingdom of Heaven. It can scarcely be necessary to prove this by Rabbinic quotations, since the whole system of Rabbinism and Pharisaism, with its separation from the vulgar and ignorant, rests upon it. But even within the charmed circle of Rabbinism, there would be distinctions, due to learning, merit, and even to favouritism. . . . On the other hand, many passages could be quoted bearing on the duty of humility and self-abasement. But the stress laid on the merit attaching to this shows too clearly, that it was the pride that apes humility.

If they connected the general resurrection with that of Jesus (cfr. Mk. 9:10), then they may have imagined the apocalyptic last judgment as following hard on the heels of the general resurrection, and the proclamation of the Messianic Kingdom immediately thereafter.

2. They presumed without proof that Jesus' Kingdom would OF COURSE be hierarchical and that someone among them would very likely occupy the highest posts, dignities and honors. They presumed that greatness and position were political prizes dispensed by the King to His favorites, rather than qualities to be developed through ministry and usefulness to others. Further, they were well aware that Jesus intended to create a community of which they themselves were the founding elements. (Mt. 16:18f; Jn. 6:68-70; Mt. 10; 13:10-17)
3. Since their total concern was who among themselves was greater than the rest of them (see Lk. 9:46 = *meίzon autōn*), they evidently could not conceive of anyone outside their group as being trusted with such greatness nor even with miracle-working powers which Jesus entrusted exclusively (so they thought) to them. (Cf. Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49f)
4. From this theorizing and castle-building in which they would all benefit, it was an easy step to begin hypothesizing about who would merit the lion's share, because pride and envy are not far apart.

Their formal question is, "Who then is greatest in the Kingdom?" but the question of their heart is: "Lord, is it I?" They were dividing the spoils before beginning the battle. Scarcely anyone is willing to accept inferiority to others as normal, and considering everyone else as fully one's equal is just as difficult to admit for many, but the vast majority can dream of nothing but unrivaled superiority.

In this confusion of motivations, half based on Jewish expectations and half grounded in their brash expectation of honors and positions as rewards for following Jesus, as Farrar (*Life*, 389) says,

The one thing which they *did* seem to realize was that some strange and memorable issue of Christ's life, accompanied by some great development of the Messianic kingdom was at hand; and this unhappily produced the only effect in them which it should *not* have produced. Instead of stimulating their self-denial, it awoke their ambition; instead of confirming their love and humility, it stirred them to jealousy and pride.

While some assert that Matthew plays down the disciples' failures and ignorance, this chapter eloquently corrects that view, since it was written in the perspective of the cross and in the hindsight of several years of Church history. For him to report that any one of Jesus' disciples posed this shameful question is to paint the humiliating truth about them in its true colors. In fact, this detail guarantees its authenticity, for there are few more embarrassing spectacles of the Apostles' unworthy ambitions than that which underlies every syllable of this chapter. If this is not a true, reliable documentation, then to the extent it is self-descriptive, its author must be judged masochistic at worst and possessed of a warped taste at best. In fact, his use of "disciples" instead of "apostles" here is not meant to shield the Twelve, but to underline for the reader that these giants of the faith were one day students in Jesus' classes and in desperate need of the same instruction the Lord lay before them and requires of all His followers. His goal is not demythologizing the Apostleship, but upgrading the discipleship. He does this by warning every disciple not to be surprised at his own ignorance and failure, as though something strange were happening to him, since even the great Apostles have also walked this lowly path of discipleship too.

The point of their question is its obvious demand for an authoritative, definitive pronouncement on primacy and status in the Kingdom, but especially in the Apostolic group itself. These men want to know

precisely what the Catholic Church and all like her have settled for themselves, but it is heresy of the first order to invent human answers and ignore the sort of hierarchy which the Lord actually established by His definite and final answer given in this chapter! It is one of the ironies of Church history that men should so often have deliberately filled in the outline the Twelve had in mind, realizing their ideal of greatness with its high office, its pomp and pageantry, its rod of empire and its submissive subjects, and, in the same motion, robbing Jesus of HIS ideal. Had the Lord ever intended to establish the primacy of Peter or anyone else, this is the time, and this is the chapter. In fact, He could have simply answered their question, settling it for all time and eternity, by saying unequivocally: "First, Peter has the keys of the Kingdom: second, James and John shall share equally as prime ministers, then the other nine will form the Apostolic College under the former." Then, having settled the issue, Jesus could then have preached them a message suited to their particular needs while functioning in their newly announced official ranks. But the very fact that He established NO OFFICIAL RANK when formally requested to do so is satisfactory proof that He had no intention of so doing. This conclusion is rendered almost, if not absolutely, certain by the impact and implications of the message He gave. Jesus knew what structured power would do to men. He also knew that He could establish His Kingdom in the world without the organizational power-structure men believe so indispensable to the accomplishment of such a task. He clearly foresaw just how damaging to the spiritual aims of the Kingdom would have been the establishment of an Establishment. Although at this time the Apostles are ignorant and so ask their question, we have the benefit of historical perspective and cannot claim their ignorance, because we are certain that Christ's Kingdom is not of this world, and the man or church is in trouble who acts as though it were! How amply and how sadly church history has vindicated His wisdom!

The question itself, although confidently addressed to Jesus as King of the Kingdom and, hence, qualified to furnish a definitive answer, is reprehensible, as the embarrassed silence of the Apostles betrays when He quizzed them about their quarrel. (Mk. 9:34) In fact, as will be obvious from His answer, Jesus saw far more at stake than a simple request for His prospective line-up for preferential treatment in the Kingdom. Because He correctly sensed that much more was involved, He went right to the real heart of their problem, leading the Twelve in quite another direction than they expected

when they worded their question. In fact, the very haggling over their own relative importance had not unlikely led to bitterness among them and, consequently, demanded that Jesus answer their question in such a way as to indicate the cure and motivate them to take it. Out of this will come the exhortation to humble efforts to seek reconciliation with a brother and the parable of the unforgiving servant. (18:15-35)

What Jesus *did* at this occasion revealed not only his thorough understanding of the nature of the kingdom and of the way of entering it, but also his tenderness toward the little ones. What he *said* deserved all the praise that has ever been ascribed to it, and far more than that. But was not the amazing glory of the Mediator's soul revealed also in his restraint, that is, in what he did not do and did not say? He did not even scold his disciples for their callousness, their insensibility with respect to this approaching agony, the non-lasting character of their grief, their quickness in turning the mind away from him to themselves, their selfishness. All this he passed by, and addressed himself directly to their question. (Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 687)

It does, indeed come upon us as a most painful surprise, and as sadly incongruous this constant self-obtrusion, self-assertion, and low, carnal self-seeking; this Judaistic trifling in face of the utter self-abnegation and self-sacrifice of the Son of Man. Surely, the contrast between Christ and His disciples seems at times almost as great as between Him and the other Jews. If we would measure His stature, or comprehend the infinite distance between His aims and teaching and those of His contemporaries, let it be by comparison with even the best of His disciples. It must have been part of His humiliation and self-exinanition (=self-emptying, cfr. Phil. 2:7) to bear with them. And is it not, in a sense, still so as regards us all? (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 116)

The task to which He now addressed Himself was at once the most formidable and the most needful He had as yet undertaken in connection with the training of the twelve. Most formidable, for nothing is harder than to train the human will into loyal subjection to universal principles, to bring men to recognize the claims of the law of love in their mutual relations, to expel pride, ambition, vainglory, and jealousy and envy from the hearts even of the good. Men may have made great progress in the art of

prayer, in religious liberty, in Christian activity, may have shown themselves faithful in times of temptation, and apt scholars in Christian doctrine, and yet prove signally defective in temper. . . . No wonder then that Jesus from this time forth devoted Himself with peculiar earnestness to the work of casting out from His disciples the devil of self-will, and imparting to them as salt His own spirit of meekness, humility and charity. He knew how much depended on the success in this effort . . . and the whole tone and substance of the discourse before us reveals the depth of His anxiety. (Bruce, *Training*, 193f)

#### RESPONSE: JESUS' SERMON ON THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS

In answer to their question either spoken (18:1) or unspoken (Lk. 9:46f; Mk. 9:33f) Jesus made certain every single Apostle was present in class before beginning the all-important lesson. (Mk. 9:35) Then, in one pithy, paradoxical proverb He stated His text: **If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.** (Mk. 9:35) Everything else He will say will amplify this fundamental idea. Notice how Jesus overthrows earth-bound value judgments by arguing that "the last will be first, and the first last, a theme He will take up again in the Parable of the Eleventh Hour Laborers. (Mt. 19:30—20:16)

Who is **last of all and servant of all?** The wood-choppers and water-haulers of earth! (Josh. 9:27) In short, the lowly burden-bearers in the service of others. Those, therefore, who voluntarily put themselves on this level of ministry to others are the most likely to fulfil the law of the King. (Gal. 6:2) The secret of true greatness is humble, impartial service kindly offered, not on the basis of the worthiness of the recipient or any qualifications other than that of need. This means not merely to serve one's own relatives or friends or social class or religious group, but *all*, like Christ did. (Mt. 20:25-28; 23:11f; Lk. 22:24-27; 14:11; 18:14; cf. 2 Co. 4:5; contrast Jude 9f)

True nobility, in Jesus' view, is not decided by one's notoriety nor his grip on other men to manipulate them at will. The primary reason for this is that, among men, the power to rule over others does not necessarily imply **THE ABILITY TO RULE ONESELF.** But the man who can successfully serve others by being happy to make others great is a man who has his own spirit under control also. He rules over the citadel of his own soul. (Prov. 16:32; 25:28) Only he who governs himself well is fit to suggest to others how to manage their affairs

for the greatest common good.

Greatness, in Jesus' view, is open only to the free. This is true, because the man who worships greatness, becomes a slave to it, whereas the man who despises this slavery to greatness is above it, hence truly free. But such freedom means the death of personal ambition, personal prestige, personal fame and personal advantage as motivations. But the man who freely chooses to become the servant of others and last in line is truly the greatest, because it requires so much bigness of character to do this.

Greatness is psychologically open only to the modest and unassuming anyway. The way into men's hearts is not opened by a bludgeon. In fact, our acquaintances whom we look up to and gladly acknowledge as better persons than ourselves, are usually the people who pour out their lives for others. Since men tend to resist naked power and willingly bow to loving service, we may say that, from a purely tactical standpoint, Jesus is planning the takeover of the world in the only way that it can successfully be done, by creating battalions of the most loving, unselfish, generous servants of mankind the world has ever seen! By equipping them with these character qualities, He readies them to sweep in conquest. What cities would not open their gates readily to winsome, friendly people who are bent on nothing but good for all its citizens?

Greatness depends upon being *last of all*, i.e. ridding ourselves of our proud pretenses. In fact, the man who makes no pretenses falls heir to that which the pretenders claim and by their pretenses cannot obtain! Only God can make us great after all, and it is only to the degree that we bring to Him an empty vessel, empty of pride, selfish ambition, self-importance and demands, that He is able to fill us more fully with eternal greatness, wealth and positions of importance.

Jesus does not deny that there may be those who are *first*. Rather, He simply rectifies every concept of greatness or importance, so that everyone in the new Christian community understands that the *first* duty and *first* place is that of the humble servant. This means that every gift we possess that distinguishes us from each other, whether mental endowments, leisure time, strategic position, possessions, or whatever, is entrusted to us for use in loving service of others. Love, that most fundamental rule of God's Kingdom, abolishes the vulgar distinctions that characterize Satan's realm, dividing it into the status-seekers and the down-trodden, the victors and the victims. Jesus' proverbial rule here calls for a total unconsciousness of rank,

the spontaneous choice of inferiority and the dropping of all claims to consideration and respect, which can be attained only by self-denial. So, He has maintained His hard-line position on the cost of our salvation. (See on 16:24ff.) Whereas the Apostles' question concerned what PERSON would be declared greatest, Jesus' answer defines what CHARACTER ANY PERSON MUST DEVELOP to be considered greatest.

**OPENING ILLUSTRATION:  
THE LITTLE CHILD IN THE MIDST**

**18:2 And he called to him a little child, and set him in the midst of them.** Jesus' visual demonstration consisted of two separate gestures, each symbolizing a distinct lesson:

1. He first called the child and **set him in the midst of the disciples.** In this vivid way He centered everyone's attention on the child standing there at His side in the place of honor. If Jesus and the disciples are seated around the room, when the child comes in to stand by Jesus (*étesen autò par'heatô*, Lk. 9:47), it would be standing "in the midst of them" (Matthew and Mark). At this point the child becomes the ideal or standard by which the disciples must judge themselves, a symbol of the disciple honored as great. (Mt. 18:3f)
2. Next, He took the child in His arms. (Mk. 9:36b) This gesture symbolized the truth that "When you embrace a child, you embrace me too." (See on 18:5 = Mk. 9:37ff = Lk. 9:48f)

This *little child* stood in marked antithesis to the dignitaries the self-important Apostles had dreamed of becoming. Jesus is proceeding just as God did when He began the world's redemption, as Thomas (*PHC*, XXII, 429) eloquently said it:

By the incarnation there was "set in the midst" of the prophets, philosophers, armies, governments of the world, "a little child." The sign that God has come to redeem the world was not in blare of trumpets, volleys of artillery, edicts of emperors, but in the swaddling-clothes that swathed a Babe in a manger.

Surrounded by His self-seeking disciples, He who Himself is the greatest in the Kingdom turns their eyes to the *little child* and begins His lesson.

ONE OF THESE LITTLE ONES: LITTLE CHILDREN  
OR WEAK CHRISTIANS?

That there is a progression in Jesus' thought none would care to dispute. The Lord starts with a little child in the midst and then takes it in His arms. This literal example becomes the basis of His entire message. From "this child" (Mt. 18:4) He will move to discuss "one such child" (Mt. 18:5), and from there He will progress to "one of these little ones who believe in me." (18:6) Later, when He argues that though they go astray like sheep (cf. Isa. 53:6; 1 Pt. 2:25), they are nonetheless precious to Him, it is clear that He is intentionally referring to both concepts indiscriminately under the same expression.

Interesting evidence that this is Jesus' meaning is to be found in the neuter number "one" (*hén*) in 18:14, even though other, later manuscripts miscorrect this to the masculine *heis*. The Lord is probably not referring to the neuter noun "sheep" (*próbaton* = "one [sheep] of these little ones"), but the neuter noun "child" (*páidion* = "one [child] of these little ones").

Then, without the slightest indication of a subject change, His argument fades smoothly into the discussion of what to do when "your brother sins against you" (18:15), a note on which He will end the message. (18:35) But even in the latter section (18:15-35), He keeps developing the "little child" theme of weakness and apparent insignificance, so characteristic of the first half (18:1-14). He does this by underlining the power and importance of just "two or three" united in Christ's name to conduct the business of the Kingdom of God. (18:16, 19f) Again, the "brother" who, because he sinned, proved himself to be "a little one" in need of personal, tender care, turns out to be a fellow Christian whom others and even the Church must help when brought in on the question. (18:15-17)

Therefore, because Jesus does not always distinguish His intended reference to *little ones* when molding our attitude toward them, we are obliged to show the same humility and self-sacrificing helpfulness to both, the little children and the weak Christians, and certainly not neglecting "all that a child represents—the weak, the insignificant, the helpless." (Bruce, *Training*, 196)

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMILITY THEME

**I. YOUR POSITION IN, AND RELATIVE IMPORTANCE TO,  
THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS MEASURED BY YOUR HUMILITY.**  
(Mt. 18:3, 4)

**A. ENTRANCE INTO THE KINGDOM DEPENDS  
UPON HUMILITY. (18:3)**

**18:3 Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.** "Only the humble need apply for entrance!" In one breath-taking motion He swept these ambitious aspirants out of the throne-room and clear back to the gates of the Kingdom! Their question had been framed as if they were quite certain to be a part of that Kingdom, but He must warn them that, unless they reverse their position completely, they would be entirely excluded from it. Entrance into God's Messianic Kingdom is absolutely blocked to everyone who refuses to submit to His requirements. Jesus' double negative in Greek makes this absolutely certain. Citizenship in the Kingdom means loyal deference to the King, not the insubordination of arrogant self-exaltation, selfish contention, power-grabbing, enjoyment of personal prestige. We must feel the shock and scandal caused by anyone who would dare suppose that he can take his pride, lust and rebellion into God's Kingdom or refuse to bow before His gracious will. (Cf. 18:8, 9; esp. Mk. 9:47) This is why Jesus so emphatically insisted that His discipleship clearly involves denial of self, since this "self" is an idol of the most blasphemous character. He smashes all our hopes of keeping our treasured idol and worshipping the true, living God at the same time. There can be no double-minded servants in God's Kingdom. (Mt. 6:24)

This explains why the only exception admitted for entrance into God's Kingdom is the requirement of repentance (*Except ye turn*) and humility (*become as little children*). If one's aim is individualistic self-fulfilment at the expense of others, he is aiming for the precise opposite of all that the Kingdom stands for. So long as he regards his ego-fulfilment as this world's most precious prize, he has his back to the Kingdom, and only complete conversion (*turn*) can save him. But, unless he willingly acknowledges the sentence of God upon all that in his self-exalting he holds dear, unless he surrenders to God's revealed will and trustingly depends on God to make him what he must become, he has no hope at all of participating in God's Kingdom. But to refuse Jesus' conditions for entrance into the Kingdom is to take the consequences. Refusal to repent and place oneself at the subordinate level and gladly eliminate anything objectionable

in his life leaves only one alternative: an "eternal Gehenna of fire!" (18:8, 9)

In a sense, the *turning* and the *becoming as little children* are the same thing (*hendiadys*), because together they refer to what is elsewhere called "conversion," the "new birth" and "repentance." (Jn. 3:1-10; Ac. 11:18; Tit. 3:5) Unless rebirth takes place, a person will not even comprehend God's Kingdom, much less get into it! To the Twelve here, as to Nicodemus earlier, Jesus must demand that they start all over. What is this but the admission that all their "righteousness" and "worthiness" and merit to be at the top, key posts of the Kingdom is in reality filth, and their sin is so great that they cannot possibly hope to pay their debt to God and society. However, with a fresh start, thanks to the forgiveness and mercy from God, they can begin again. (See on 18:23-35.)

**Become as little children:** what the child is by nature the Lord demands that we freely and deliberately choose to be. But what is Jesus' specific point of comparison as He indicates *children* per se as the standard of excellence?

Since no specific character qualities of *little children* can be pointed to with certainty (like teachability, docility, trust, devotion, desire to serve, etc.), we must interpret Jesus as meaning *little children* as such in their natural inferiority to everyone else. While it is true that this subordinate position may involve other qualities such as those mentioned above, what is uppermost in Jesus' mind and most in harmony with His context is the littleness of the child, his inferiority, his relative unimportance in contrast to adults in making decisions, his dependence upon others, and his subservience as one who must come to terms with adults more often than vice versa. The problem with *little children* is that their very size and lack of experience makes almost anyone bigger and better than they are. The vulnerable situation of childhood with its frustrations with being civilized leads the little person to feel inferior to all the (apparently) successful bigger people around him. He is considered least in importance in a society where respect increases with age. Worse yet, the *little child* is totally dependent. His survival depends on others, because he is not self-sufficient. His nourishment, clothing and care come from his parents.

In fact, one might argue that *little children* IN RELATION TO OTHER LITTLE CHILDREN are not especially more humble, teachable, docile, trusting, devoted or willing to serve, than are adults with their peers. (Prov. 22:15; 29:15, 17; Heb. 12:7-11) Just give one toy to two children

and you have problems! Whereinsofar each *little child* is an adult in miniature, i.e. developing as an individual, he demonstrates many of the same foibles seen in older people. So, Jesus' point of comparison is not children's character qualities, but what it means to be a little child in contrast to being a grown-up.

This is sheer genius to establish the child as the model, instead of, for example, a brutalized slave or an ideal disciple or an oppressed citizen or something else, because, although some people have been or would be some of these at one time or another, hence would know something of these experiences, ALL of them, without exception, know perfectly well what it means to be a child in terms of subordination, imperfection, submission to others and lack of experience in almost every field. (This does not mean that Jesus cannot use slaves, disciples or citizens as models, for He does that too. Mt. 10:24f; 18:23-34; Mk. 9:35)

The Apostles had failed to remember that any concept of hierarchy, rank or status necessarily involves RELATIVE position in the pyramid for everyone but the one at the top to whom EVERYONE IS SUBORDINATE. There are absolutely no citizens superior to the King in God's Kingdom. But this means that even the highest possible ranks just beneath the King are still subordinate positions, even if relatively superior to everyone below them. But, if subordinates, then servants; if servants, they must learn humility! This means that, unless the highest, most honored subordinates of the King possessed the heart of a true subordinate who really knows how to serve, they were unfit for such honors and must with shame begin to take the lower positions. (Cf. Lk. 14:7-11; Prov. 25:6f) This explains why beginning again as a little child is actually the fastest route to greatness!

Paul communicated literally what Jesus is saying symbolically here: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." Then he furnished the supreme example of what he meant, by pointing to the self-emptying of Jesus who submitted Himself to the death of a human servant on a cross! (Phil. 2:3, 5-8)

#### B. RELATIVE STANDING IN THE KINGDOM DEPENDS ON HUMILITY. (18:4)

18:4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. "The humblest is

the greatest; the most important is he who admits his deep spiritual need, real inferiority and subordination."

**Whoever humbles himself** must do so in relationship to others. Self-humiliation, as God intends it, cannot take place in a vacuum, i.e. by solitary ascetics. All true humility expresses itself by putting one's own ambitions in the background in order to serve others. This is but the repetition of the teaching of the Beatitudes: the great are not the powerful, the rich, the self-seeking the self-important who, because they are too proud to serve, demand for themselves service from others.

**As this little child** is often assumed to mean: "Whoever shall humble himself as this little child is humble." It is more probable that Jesus means: "Whoever shall lower himself to the level on which this child stands in relation to everyone else, is greatest." That is, whoever freely and willingly places himself on the level of natural subordination occupied by the child in reference to everyone else is **the greatest in the kingdom**. Why should this be true?

1. Because he who makes himself the willing servant of others, helping them to live a joyous, holy life useful to God and their fellows, is, in effect, honoring that gentleman or lady in them which, by his efforts, they can be helped to become. What a startling realization: which is greater? an earthly king or the kingmaker? If the kingmaker can unmake a king as well as make him, then the kingmaker is the greater. If, therefore, a disciple busies himself serving others, laboring unselfishly to help them realize their highest, noblest goals in God's service, helping them, in short, to reign, **HE IS A KING-MAKER and the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**. This, of course, does not mean that he is superior to God the heavenly King who really does not need any of our service to make it possible for Him to rule over the universe. However, since Jesus the Messianic King has chosen to use our service to extend His government on this earth among its people, then by His grace and through our service we make Him our King and bring others under His sway.

To state this concept another way, who is **the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**: the person who tramples down others to fight his way through the higher echelons to sit with folded hands at the top of the human pyramid and press down from the top, or he who is supporting the weight of the entire pyramid on his shoulders, pushes up from the bottom, lifting everyone above him ever higher toward God who rules at the undisputed peak?

2. Because it is only in and because of this genuine self-abnegation, true humility and service to others that one will develop the kind of character qualities Jesus desires in all of His servants. Gibson (*PHC*, XXII, 430) pictures what it meant to the Twelve:

They did not indeed, get over their selfishness all at once; but how grandly were they cured of it when their training was finished! If there is one thing more characteristic of the Apostles in their after life than any other, it is their self-forgetfulness—their self-effacement, we may say. Where does Matthew ever say a word about the sayings or doings of Matthew? Even John, who was nearest of all to the heart of the Saviour, and with Him in all His most trying hours, can write a whole Gospel without mentioning his own name; and when he has occasion to speak of John the Baptist does it as if there were no other John in existence. So was it with them all.

Some have noticed that no worse distortion of our Lord's principle could be imagined than for someone to put himself deliberately in last place or go through the motions of serving others as a means of climbing the ladder of social success to the top. Lenski (*Matthew*, 683) cites "Pope Gregory the Great (who) called himself *servus servorum* ("servant of servants"). He did it in order to be the greatest, did it in a mechanical fashion, by a shrewd kind of calculation, putting on humbleness in order to secure greatness." This description, however, raises the legitimate question whether one can really get to true greatness this way. One of two things would happen first: either one's selfish ambition would soon tire of this game, rip off its mask and hurry to make up lost time in the unabashed scramble to the top of the pile, showing itself for the pride it really is, or else the person would be transformed in the attempt. Since our motives undermine or validate all our actions, cannot those who sought greatness for selfish reasons, change course when faced with the realization that true greatness is only possible to the pure in heart? Can they learn obedience by the things they suffer by emptying themselves, taking the attitude of a servant and becoming obedient even to death (Heb. 5:7-9; Phil. 2:7-9), even with the specific goal of arriving at the crown (Heb. 12:1-3; Gal. 6:9f)? Conversion is possible, but it will not take place until false humility is crucified. Bruce (*Training*, 195) teaches that

The higher we rise in the kingdom the more we shall be like

Jesus in this humbling of Himself. Childlikeness such as He exhibited is an invariable characteristic of spiritual advancement, even as its absence is the mark of moral littleness. The little man, even when well-intentioned, is ever consequential (= self-important) and scheming: ever thinking of himself, his honour, dignity, reputation, even when professedly doing good. He always studies to glorify God in a way that shall at the time glorify himself. Frequently above the love of gain, he is never above the feeling of self-importance. The great ones in the kingdom, on the other hand, throw themselves with such unreservedness into the work to which they are called, that they have neither time nor inclination to inquire what place they shall obtain in this world or the next . . . if only He be glorified.

Humility expresses itself in the following characteristic ways:

- a. An unwillingness to assert oneself at the expense of others, or absence of ambitious pride and self-aggrandizement.
- b. A willingness to forget injuries suffered, no room in one's soul for bitterness, unwillingness to judge harshly.
- c. No shame to admit ignorance, totally unassuming modesty regarding one's own opinions, no falsely assumed intellectual self-sufficiency, an acute awareness of one's own limitations and conditioning.
- d. The presence of a vivid, free imagination, because one does not assume he already knows it all, hence not stubbornly dedicated to limited cliches and stereotypes.
- e. No confidence in one's own merits as a basis for distinctions in rank.
- f. No insistence on one's own rights, no proud demands, unpretentiousness.
- g. Willingness to yield to the Lord's leadership.
- h. Contentment, no sense of loss when others are honored and the recognition that everything one has is given to him, (1 Co. 4:7)

Humility realizes that to God and others goes most, if not all, of the credit for one's attainments in life. In short, to evaluate ourselves as God does is humility. It cannot be degrading to face this reality. Far from being want of proper self-esteem, it is the only proper view of ourselves precisely as we are. It is a willingness to be evaluated as we really are, whether by God or others. This

recognition of our absolute dependence on God and others that admits that our security and future are in the hands of others deflates any desire to compare our talents and accomplishments with those of our peers to their disadvantage. (1 Co. 4:6, 7)

3. Because only an attitude of teachable humility, that admits one's own deep need, can be blessed by the Lord. Remember the examples of deep humility that impressed Jesus:

- a. The self-confessed unworthiness of the Roman centurion (8:5-13)
- b. The Canaanite woman who accepted herself as a "doggy under the table" (15:21-28)
- c. The sinful woman who washed His feet (Lk. 7:36-50)
- d. The reaction of Zacchaeus to His visit (Lk. 19:1-10)
- e. The anointing by Mary of Bethany (Mk. 14:3-9)

The kind of humility Jesus insists on is but a proper consciousness of our creaturely condition and a proper fear of God. To ignore this is to make oneself a little tin god, and only as we regain our healthy respect for the true God can we fathom the folly of social-climbing and the wisdom of that self-denial that bows its head to kneel beneath the load of everyone else's burdens to lift.

*Greatest* suggests "great and greater." In fact, since each disciple possesses these character qualities in varying degrees, they would be relatively great according to their relative humility and usefulness to others. So, Jesus leaves intact the concept of relative difference in rank in the Kingdom, a fact that leaves room for consecrated competition and godly ambition and holy aggressiveness. Then, having shown that the name of the game and its highest goal is to be the humblest, most useful servant, He turns our redirected ambition loose to determine to be that servant. It is an entirely different ball game, but there is room for holy aggressiveness and competitive spirit. (See Ro. 12:10: "Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor!") Jesus did not return their question unanswered, noting, "You ask a meaningless question (18:1), because, in the Kingdom, the distinctions of great, greater and greatest do not exist." Our Lord is no communist who would level everyone to a gray equality that ignores personal differences and stifles initiative. Rather, infinite growth toward maturity is possible in the Kingdom, and its relative realization will unavoidably produce degrees and distinctions in maturity. But while such levels of status do exist in the Kingdom of God just as in earthly kingdoms, the all-important difference between them lies in the basis upon which

these promotions are based. On earth, the prizes go to the self-seeking; in God's Kingdom the truly great are the self-forgetful. This is why Bruce (*Training*, 195) recognizes that

In this sense, the greatest one in the kingdom, the King Himself, was the humblest of men. Of humility in the form of self-depreciation or self-humiliation on account of sin Jesus could know nothing, for there was no defect or fault in His character. But of the humility which consists in self-forgetfulness He was the perfect pattern. We cannot say that He thought *little* of Himself, but we may say that He thought not of Himself at all: He thought only of the Father's glory and of man's good.

II. YOUR HUMILITY IS MEASURED BY YOUR  
OPENNESS AND SENSITIVITY TO THE SO-CALLED  
"INFERIORS" IN THE KINGDOM: "THERE ARE NO UN-  
IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN THE KINGDOM!"

(Mt. 18:5; Mk. 9:36b, 37; Lk. 9:48-50)

A. RECEIVING THE LEAST IMPORTANT MEANS  
RECEIVING THE KING (18:5)

At this point Jesus took the little child into His arms for the second phase of His visual lesson: "To get to me, you must get to the child too—love me, love my little one!" Jesus' thought naturally flows from becoming what a child is, to welcoming what in older people the child's weakness stands for, because there is but little distance between conflicts over greatness and contemptuous harshness toward one's inferiors. Cruelty and aggression are congenital defects of selfish ambition. Where there is this aspiration, this will to power, wanton trampling on others cannot help but follow as a matter of course. Therefore, the Lord must furnish a motive adequate to stop the mad climbing to the top of the pile that pushes everyone else out of the way. Jesus knows how tempting it is in our highly competitive world to admire the self-confident, aggressive, ruthless people who, in the worldly sense, succeed in life.

18:5 **Whoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.** *Whoever* means that the inimitable privilege of being host to the King is open to anyone who takes seriously the condition Jesus lays down. The condition is *receiving one such little child in my name*.

1. *Receiving* the child and *receiving* Jesus must be the same kind of reception, for the word is identical for the one as for the other: *déxetai* (= "take, receive, accept, treat as a guest, grant access to someone, show oneself open to, receive favorably, welcome, embrace"; cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 176; Thayer, 130; Rocci, 430). To treat Jesus and/or the child as a guest properly means to be sensitive to what he considers his needs. It is to dispense with stereotyped categories and notions about what he has to be or like, and to take him seriously as a person, to listen to him as if no one else mattered. To be able to do this sincerely requires putting oneself on his level and seeing things through his eyes.
2. **One such little child** means that Jesus intends to be understood literally, at least primarily, because there was *one such little child* right there in His arms. (Mk. 9:36) Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 196) helps us to see Christ in the child:

To teach unruly, disobedient, restless little children can be a wearing job. To satisfy the physical needs of a child, to wash his clothes and bind his cuts and soothe his bruises and cook his meals may often seem a very unromantic task; the cooker and the sink and the workbasket have not much glamour; but there is no one in all this world who helps Jesus Christ more than the mother in the home. All such will find a glory in the grey, if in the child they sometimes glimpse none other than Jesus Himself.

Ironically, these very disciples shortly after this lesson started hustling little children away from Jesus, not improbably frowning upon them as insignificant and unimportant to Him, just getting in the way of the more important aspects of His ministry! But the child is a practical beginning point for the disciples' practice, a. Because a *little child* lacks experience and, because of his weakness and dependence, can more easily be appreciated despite his mistakes. We tend to show tender compassion to the naturally weaker.

Jesus could say this to disciples trained in revealed religion, because it is by no means a matter of course for humans to treat children as little human beings and worthy of respect. Brutality to children, whether in child sacrifice or social contempt, is in stark contrast to the practice of peoples governed by God's revelations of the importance of others, especially the weak.

- b. It is at this point that Jesus implies the kind of character one must have in order to arrive at the ideal He symbolizes in the stature of a child. Since to the little child every one else is literally physically, morally and spiritually greater than he, the disciple must develop in himself those characteristics which will enable him to appreciate the greatness and importance to God that is there in every human being. This is the genuine humility of the old gentleman who tipped his hat to young boys, and when asked about this unusual gesture, he responded, "It is not to the boys as such that I tip my hat, but to that gentleman that each of them will become." What a majestic concept of the preciousness and potential greatness of everyone else, Jesus would have us hold!
- c. Then, having learned to consider *a little child* important in his own right and treat him with the same cordiality and respect one would show the Lord Himself, one can see more clearly how to apply the same principles when dealing with grown-ups whose similar weaknesses and imperfections would formerly have bored or disgusted him. What ramifications is this principle going to have in husband-wife relationships, especially where the wife is no longer the beautiful, sweet young thing he married, or her weaknesses no longer seem to offer him scope to protect her, but rather merely bore him? See Jesus' approach to this practical problem. (19:1-12) In the process of transferring our knowledge gained in working with children to working with older people, we learn that we are all ignorant merely on different subjects. We all lack certain experiences, we are all dependent and need help, that we are all just older children struggling toward maturity. Contrarily, the person who "has arrived" is damned to stagnation, self-righteousness and the ulcer he developed fighting to get to and stay at the top.
- d. Luke (9:48) confirms this conclusion: "For he who is least among you all is the one who is great." This paradoxical statement may mean:
- (1) He who willingly makes himself the least and servant of all is by that act truly the greatest. This harmonizes with Mk. 9:35.
  - (2) He who by nature is the least among you is the most important. Because of his greater needs, his natural weakness, his moral or spiritual fragility, he is the most in need of the attention of the strong. (Ro. 15:1; Gal. 6:1) This harmonizes with Mt. 18:10-14.

3. **In my name** limits the reception of the King (*receiveth me*) to those who, because Jesus tells them to, open their heart and life to little children. Jesus is not automatically blessing all orphanages and adoptive parents merely because they take in children to raise and educate. Non-Christians who do this in the name of philanthropy or human parent love will receive a human parent's reward or a philanthropist's satisfaction, but no more, since they did not do it "on the basis of Jesus' authority and instruction." (*epi tō onómati mou*, see Arndt-Gingrich, 575; Rocci, 1339; Thayer, 447) Not fondness for children is the question, but welcoming and caring for them because they represent Christ. (See on 10:40-42; 7:22; 12:21; 18:20; 21:9; 23:39; 24:5; 28:19; Mk. 9:38f)
4. **Receives me.** No one is qualified to receive Jesus as the Guest of his life and serve Him in whatever capacity at whatever level of status in the Kingdom (18:1) who has not learned to consider people important and treat even the least with respect. Even if Jesus had never affirmed His intense concern for and personal identification with weak, straying sheep (18:10-14), we could understand how dear they are to Him, because, here, He identifies Himself with them in a manner so close that whatever is done for or against them is done for or against the Lord Himself. (Mt. 25:40, 45; Ac. 26:9-15) In fact, the moment was coming for these disciples when neither they nor anyone else could serve Jesus, except by the useful service they rendered to the sick, hungry, naked and imprisoned—the little ones.

There is another sense in which the servant of children *receives me*. Every generous self-forgetful act opens his life to understand his Lord more fully, to assimilate His spirit more completely and to live in closer communion with Him. This is why this kind of ministry is the path to genuine greatness in God's Kingdom, which is contingent upon how much of His character has been developed in our life.

With this simple declaration Jesus drives us all back to the wonderful children's land of make-believe! He says simply: "Try to imagine now every person whom you are tempted to consider as your inferior. Now, let's play like that person were I, your King. Now, offer him the consideration and respect you would have shown *me*." What an act of faith this would require, what imaginativeness, what creativity! Most of us will have to drop all of our stereotyped categories and nice little labeled boxes into which we have stuffed others. But since to all superficial observers we are serving not the King of the universe, but just our little neighbors, no one can praise us but He,

because only He knows better! And in our child's play, we have arrived at a greatness to which the selfish of the world are all blind. We are the only ones who can see it now, because we dare to make believe. Is it any wonder Jesus takes this approach? By so doing, He intends to develop our likeness to our Creator by making us seek creative ways to serve. But to be creative we need a vivid imagination like that of a child who sees everything and everyone with fresh eyes. If it seems irreverent to conceive of Jesus' development of a fertile imagination which reorganizes everyone's mental filing cabinets, reclassifying everyone else as a personal embodiment of Jesus Christ, then reconsider His use of creative fancy in the Golden Rule of which our text is but an illustration. (See notes on Mt. 7:12.)

Had not Jesus Himself already seen possibilities in His followers that even they dared not dream were there? Had He not received them in humility despite their outward rudeness? Had He not known, for example, that there was an Apostle under the rough exterior of that fisherman, Peter? Could He not see through the marble exterior of a hard-nosed publican and make out the facial features of a Christian teacher who could organize the very Gospel we are reading together? And did He not call these rough-hewn stones and lovingly sculpture them by His own company, patient instruction and endless repetition, until He found them ready for the final polish by the Holy Spirit? And the rest of the mixed bag of followers around Jesus seemed unreliable material out of which to make anything, much less the Kingdom of God! But He welcomed them, He served them, He built them, He made them great! Is there any doubt that, because of this, HE is the greatest in God's Kingdom? And it is to this, His ministry and method that He calls us.

What a shock it must have been to these Apostles who, in their day-dreaming, had seen themselves as pompous officials, now hear themselves reduced to baby-sitters for children and other feeble, fumbling folk! But, as events proved, they were to learn that the social contract of the Kingdom of God requires that the "strong," the mature Christians and the "weak in the faith," the overscrupulous Christians, must accept each other's existence and take a specific stance of mutual concern for each other. The weak must not condemn the strong, nor the strong despise the weak, but receive one another as Christ has welcomed them to the glory of God. (Ro. 14:1—15:7) Even before Jesus terminated His discourse, the implication for the Apostles is immediately obvious: rather than despise other disciples as potential rivals jockeying for position, they must see them

as marked by Jesus Christ for potential greatness and usefulness to God. And, as He will say in 18:6, 10, they dare not trample that greatness nor hinder its development by their own blind rush to realize their own unworthy ambitions!

As did the Apostles, so every Christian congregation must learn that not only the weak need the strong, but the strong cannot do without the weak. The weak offer us so many excellent opportunities to learn the spirit of Christ by our helping them, strengthening them, lifting them, encouraging them. The strong are capable, efficient, self-confident, polished, needing nothing but the experience that can only come by plunging into the service of the little ones. Is it possible for anyone to be more important to the growth of the strong, than the weak and insignificant who lay the privilege of serving them within the grasp of the strong? Who on earth could be greater than those who, because of this fact, are the veritable ambassadorial representatives of Jesus Christ Himself?

Right here begins the ministry of mutual edification as each disciple seeks to develop that unique likeness of Jesus Christ latent in each of his brethren. (Ro. 12:5; 15:14; Eph. 4:16; Heb. 3:12, 13; 10:24, 25) Because true greatness lies in serving others to help them be what, by God's grace, they may become, our Lord has practically turned every one of His disciples into amateur artists to use the painter's palette and brushes or the sculptor's tools to bring out by creative artistry all of the best and the beautiful and the God-like in his fellows. Now this concept of the to-be-completed master-piece will develop in us that tolerance that honors each human being as a unique representation of God's and one's own handiwork in varying stages of development!

James (2:1-13) has painted the best satire on the kind of partiality Jesus is attacking here. Whereas men customarily welcome certain persons of importance on the basis of their wealth, talents or power, or because they belong to the same clubs (cf. Mt. 5:46f), Christian disciples are to be equally concerned about the usually unimportant, commonly unnoticed members of the Christian community, as well as the children, because THESE are the true VICARS OF CHRIST on earth. How ironic that in the only context where Jesus was asked to announce His projected hierarchy, He bypassed Peter and all the rest and enthroned the child! Later, when He announces the special authority and honor of ordinary believers (18:17-19), He establishes the common local congregation as His visible, earthly expression, and men will despise this too in favor of something more impressive,

like an episcopal college or synod, and dethrone the ones whom Jesus promised to bless with His presence and concern.

And yet the graciousness of Jesus' promise seems almost unbelievable, for what an honor would we esteem it to be permitted to welcome Christ into our home for even an hour! Is there anything more splendid than the true greatness of ministering vicariously to the King by our reception of and ministry to His choicest representatives?

B. THE UNAFFILIATED WORKER OF MIRACLES: A LESSON ON EXCLUSIVENESS AND BIGOTRY VERSUS TOLERANCE  
(Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49, 50)

**WHY INCLUDE THIS SECTION IN MATTHEW?**

The question of the unaffiliated worker of miracles is a lucid illustration of what it means to **receive a little one in the name of Christ** (18:5) and to **cause one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble**. (18:6) John and the others had blocked the path of this isolated disciple on his way to serve God. They choked off his enthusiasm for Jesus' discipleship. Stunned, he could have wondered, "If these are special disciples of Jesus and they treat me like this, I wonder whether the scribes and Pharisees would have given me any worse treatment!" So the disciples would have been responsible for a disappointment so deadening that he might never have recovered. Also, we include this section here because it so adequately illustrates the difference between the real inferiority of littleness and the greatness of magnanimity. The great ones have no fear that God could fail even when His work is done by imperfect and otherwise irregular means; the small-souled nervously challenge and check everything and everyone, blocking everything they cannot totally approve, no matter how glorifying to Christ it might be. (Study Nu. 11:24-30 and Phil. 1:15-18.)

Mark 9:38 **John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name; and we forbade him, because he was not following us."** Luke (9:49) says: ". . . because he does not follow with us." The Apostles may have encountered him during their own evangelistic tour months before, but only bring it up now. (Mt. 10—11:1) What was the connection in John's mind that spurred him to interrupt the flow of Jesus' thought by this question?

1. Jesus had spoken earlier of humility as the absolutely essential condition for entrance into the Kingdom (18:3, 4). Had they acted with arrogance in interfering with the miraculous ministry of the other?
2. Jesus had just spoken of the greatness and blessing of receiving the lowliest child, whatever his weakness, imperfection or need. This stirred John's memory and pricked his conscience, leaving him half wondering, half fearing whether their actions were justifiable. So sure before, he is now plagued with misgivings, because, rather than "receiving" him and encouraging him in the good work he was accomplishing in Jesus' name, they had ordered him to stop altogether. Could it be that this very disciple they had intercepted was not an opponent to be stifled, but "one such little child" after all, to be warmly reassured and taken to their hearts? Perhaps he had deserved more sympathetic treatment.
3. Plummer (*Luke*, 259) sees John as possibly seeking to qualify Jesus' previous, apparently universalistic statement: "Whoever accepts a child embraces God."

His words are those of one who defends his conduct, or at least excuses it and might be paraphrased, "But the principle just laid down must have limits, and would not apply to the case which I mention. . . . One who remains outside our body is not really a follower of Thee, and therefore ought not to receive a welcome."

The only justification John can muster in defense of their procedure is **because he was not following (with) us**. They were probably actuated by a mixture of motives:

1. They were jealous of their official prerogatives.
  - a. THEY had been established as Apostles, not he. (Mt. 10:1-4; Lk. 6:12-16) What right had others not of the Apostolic company to furnish divine credentials for a ministry which, as far as they knew, had not been authorized by the Lord?

They remind us of the zeal for Moses' prerogatives shown by Joshua, when Eldad and Medad received God's Spirit and prophesied in the camp, although they were not personally present among the group of seventy elders who "officially" received the Spirit and prophesied at the Tabernacle. The response of the great-hearted Moses is remarkably similar to that of his Lord here. (See Nu. 11:16-30.)

JESUS TRAINS THE TWELVE IN PERSONAL RELATIONS Mk. 9:38

- b. They probably deceived themselves by mingling their own interests with those of Christ, so that their concern for the honor of His name was only a veil for their personal pride.
- c. The less important fact that the isolated miracle-worker did not follow them, completely blinded them to the far more important fact that he honored their Lord.
- d. They were sincerely jealous for the good name of their Master in whose service they labored and whose authority gave their ministry power. They may have argued, "How can anyone be sincerely devoted to Jesus and actually enjoy being isolated from His disciples?"
- e. Bruce (*Training*, 224) thinks that

In so far as the disciples acted under the influence of jealousy, their conduct towards the exorcist was morally of a piece with their recent dispute who should be the greatest. The same spirit of pride revealed itself on the two occasions under different phases. The silencing of the exorcist was a display or arrogance analogous to that of those who advance for their church the claim to be exclusively the church of Christ . . . In the one case the twelve said in effect to the man whom they found casting out devils: We are the sole commissioned, authorized agents of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the other they said to each other: We are all members of the kingdom and servants of the King; but I deserve to have a higher place than thou, even to be a prelate sitting on a throne.

- 2. They ignored the live possibility that Jesus had authorized the man without informing them. The very fact that he was succeeding in Jesus' name should have been presumptive evidence of a commission from Jesus. Was the man's power from God or from Beelzebul? (Study Mt. 12:22-36; 1 Co. 12:3; 15:10; Phil. 2:12f.) Where was their moral sense? Were they ready to declare that power to work a miracle came from any other source than God? If not, is not he who has the God-given ability to cast out demons in the name of Christ, therefore, a true supporter of Christ? In absence of proof to the contrary, his God-given miracle-working power should be thought evidence that he was not among the enemies of Jesus, and could not be an antagonist of the Apostles.
- 3. His only fault was his lack of affiliation with "the officially authorized true believers," and THEY claimed a monopoly on the Messiah!

It never seemed to occur to them to invite him to join them in following their common Master, or give him the right hand of fellowship. They apparently did not inquire about his allegiance to Jesus or his character. Their superficiality was satisfied by the fact that he was outside their charmed circle, as if all inside it, even Judas Iscariot, could do no wrong, and anyone having the misfortune to be caught outside it were a lesser breed of follower, if not downright damned. They are motivated by sectarian pride.

The importance for our understanding of Matthew 18 lies in the fact that John and his associates, in cruelly silencing the man, had acted in perfect sincerity. As Bruce (*Training*, 224) taught,

In so far as the intolerance of the twelve was due to honest scrupulousness, it is deserving of more respectful consideration . . . That the scrupulosity of the twelve was of the honest kind, we believe for this reason, that they were willing to be instructed. They told their Master what they had done, that they might learn from Him whether it was right or wrong. This is not the way of men whose plea of conscience is a pretext.

But it is for this reason the more dangerous, because the very devotion of mind and the tender, intense attachment to Jesus and the scrupulous conscientiousness in their actions when void of the humility and mercifulness Jesus inculcates here, made them bigoted and intolerant. Their suppressing this nonconformist was of a piece psychologically with their persecuting spirit that was ready to call fire from heaven to consume the Lord's enemies. (Cf. Lk. 9:51-56)

### C. JESUS' ANSWERS

#### 1. Mark 9:39 Do not forbid him.

- a. This means that Jesus is Lord and giver of commissions and He can empower whomever He will. They are not at the helm; He is Chief of Operations and if He desires to empower a thousand such miracle-workers not belonging to the apostolic group, without ever informing them, what was that to them? (Cf. Jn. 21:21f)
- b. This command is an implied rebuke of their past attitude and an order for the future. The over-protective spirit toward Jesus shown by John and others in the case of the isolated disciple is

identical to that which provoked Jesus to rebuke them later in the case of the little children: "Forbid them not!" (Mt. 19:14 = the verb is the same: *mè kolúete autón, autà*) Hindering the weak, unknown, unimportant disciples in any way when they are feebly struggling to please Jesus is dangerous business! The Lord forbids this kind of forbidding. They must forbid, if at all, only those who maliciously slander Christ. To every other, even if he has not arrived at a perfect understanding of truth, they are to offer kind leadership and patient understanding. However imperfectly each has begun to stammer Jesus' name, he is to be loved and instructed for that flicker of discipleship he confesses.

**2. No one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me.**

- a. Since the man was succeeding, whereas the nine Apostles had just miserably failed because of their little faith and prayerlessness (Mt. 17:17, 19f; Mk. 9:29), it should have been obvious that he really believed in the efficacy of the name of Jesus and was, by their own admission, making use of it for good. (Cf. Mt. 12:22-28) Such great faith is proof against quick apostacy. Further, a man who would abandon the religio-magic enchantments of the Jewish exorcists and stand up for Jesus of Nazareth in the teeth of a Jewish society growing more disenchanted with Him could not be too far from the Kingdom.
- b. While later apostacy is always possible even for miracle-workers (Mt. 7:22f), it would probably not occur contemporaneously with their miracles, otherwise God would seem to be furnishing divine credentials to confirm their apostacy. (However, see Dt. 13:1-5 and "How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee" after 15:1-20.) Jesus' main thrust here is that a person is not likely to be a traitor and a devoted follower simultaneously.

For this reason it is unlikely that the question discussed in this section has anything to do with the problem of objective criteria for distinguishing true from false prophets. Jesus' counsel of tolerance has nothing to do with prophets who are not expressly or implicitly disciples of Jesus, hence members of the Church. (Cf. Gonzalez-Ruiz, *Marco*, 171)

This warns the disciples to pause before judging, hastily and on so little evidence, that any man could be chargeable with unfaithfulness to God. Until valid reasons for changing their minds appeared, He would have them consider the fruit of the others'

lives as proof of the sincerity of their faith and belonging to Him.  
(Cf. Mt. 7:15-20)

- c. The tragedy of it all was that, if we may decide on what little grounds we have, the Twelve had silenced a sincere, honest man, "whose heart had been impressed by the ministry of Jesus and His disciples, and who desired to imitate their zeal in doing good"! (Bruce, *Training*, 224)
- 3. **Mark 9:40 For he who is not against us is for us.**
  - a. "Whoever is not actively opposed to you, permits you to work!" Everyone who is not hindering you is giving you every opportunity you need to do my work. They may not be an immediate, positive assistance to you, but if they give you no trouble, rejoice and do my work! But the man, however imperfect may have been his discipleship, was not neutral. Jesus argues that unless a person is openly hostile, he should be considered an ally. In a time when intensified opposition makes discipleship difficult, any assistance should be welcomed by disciples who would need every friend they could find. "Learn who your friends are!"
  - b. The barely noticeable difference between Mark's "against us . . . for us" and Luke's "against you . . . for you" is to be explained by thinking that Luke is emphasizing the Apostles' ministry, whereas Mark quotes Jesus as speaking of "us" in a general way, probably referring specifically to the Apostles, because they (He and the Twelve) labored in the same cause.
  - c. There is no contradiction between this saying and that recorded in Mt. 12:30 ("Whoever is not for me is against me."), because Jesus is not discussing here the problem of feigned neutrality or aggressive refusal of His ministry, but the question of methodology among those obviously committed to Him. Mt. 12:30 refers to inward unity with Christ; Mk. 9:40 and Lk. 9:50 discuss external conformity to a group of His people. Inward unity with Christ may exist independently of outward conformity with other groups. It is this inward unity that unites real Christians, whatever their affiliations and external distinctions. The difference in the texts is the question of methodology versus allegiance: in the one case it was a question of not being with Christ; in the other a question of being not against the disciples in their work. (See note on 12:30.)
  - d. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 118) has it: "Not that it is unimportant to follow with the disciples, but that it is not ours to forbid any work done, however imperfectly, in His Name, and that only one

question is really vital—whether or not a man is decidedly with Christ."

4. Mark 9:41 **Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.** "Whoever helps you in the smallest way will be rewarded." Appreciation for Jesus' disciples even in the common, mundane things of life, convenient to whatever circumstances they are in, is appreciated by the Lord who accepts this as helpfulness shown directly to Him. (See note on 10:42; 18:5; cf. Heb. 6:10) **Whoever**, while certainly including the humblest, poorest in His Kingdom who show their love for Jesus by doing good even with the feeblest assistance, is not limited by our Lord. Our sectarian reaction is to limit Jesus' promise to bonafied members in good standing of the church of Christ, but Jesus rejoices in righteousness and generosity wherever He finds it. (Cf. 1 Co. 13:6) Acts of love done by any man who helps Christians, because they are Christians, though often curtly turned out of the Kingdom by the orthodox, will not be forgotten by the Lord. His reward is not stated, but since our attitude toward him is to be tempered by Jesus' magnanimity and openness to him and interest in him, we will long to bring such a generous contact all the way to the Lord whose name he honored in us.

It is worthy of note that here it is the disciples themselves who are on the receiving end of the generosity of others. Jesus is not at this point instructing them to share generously with the little ones. Rather, they themselves belong to that group, and, ironically, they will need the sympathetic assistance from these very outsiders whose ministry they had so arrogantly decided to impede!

Merely because Matthew omitted the incident of the isolated miracle worker, many assume that Jesus' answers to John's question given in Mark and Luke ended with those texts. However, the disciples present would have heard the complete discourse without break. This means that the successive material might well have been considered by the Twelve as further amplification on the general question of John. If so, then, in addition to the above, Jesus' answers continue:

5. Do not despise little ones who believe in Jesus (18:6-14)
6. If your brother is wrong, go to him and seek his salvation (18:15-17)
7. The power of fellowship and unity must not be underestimated. (18:18-20)

A man who loves good for its own sake and God for His, will

joyfully welcome and approve all the good that is accomplished by others and rejoice that the Kingdom of Christ is advanced. Although this entire context demands that we do everything in our power to edify the weak, instruct the ignorant and be patient with everyone's failings and infirmities, our Master lets us rejoice in every good thing done in His name, no matter how imperfectly or irregularly it might be done. (Cf. Phil. 1:15-18!) Regardless of our fears that some will not be resolute in their goodness and efforts for Jesus, we may permit them to continue, when they seem to be at all useful and desirous to please Him. God Himself authorizes these workers and it is He who performs the good they do. (Study Mt. 12:22-36; see also Phil. 2:12; 1 Co. 12:3; 15:10.) The first century Jewish readers of the Gospels desperately needed the instruction of this incident and the Lord's reaction to it. They would certainly have seen practical applications of its teachings as they reacted to the liberating, limit-bursting universal Christianity of Paul.

It is right that we should identify ourselves emotionally WITH the Lord's work in some area to get work done. It is wrong when we identify ourselves AS the Lord's work, i.e., the exclusive expression of it in that place. True greatness does not depend upon "following us and our brotherhood," but upon faithful service to Jesus, and, whether we like it or not, those two things CAN BE exclusive! A man MUST know Christ, but he does not have to know or follow along with us to be Jesus' servant. We must keep in mind that others may read the Bible and obey the Word without following our traditions. (We even have the tradition of saying that we have no traditions!) With these Apostles, we assume too readily that "affiliation equals fellowship," but this is the "loyal church" fallacy (= "We are the one true, authorized church of Christ!") Too often we do not care how badly mistaught a man may be, or how dead his zeal, or how polluted his morals, just so he is in "our company," hence has a ticket out of hell. But men do not have to be approved by us to be our brethren! We are to invite men to Christ: it is He that they must obey to be pleasing to God and in the Kingdom. Has anyone a monopoly on Christ and Christian service? We must beware of jumping to conclusions about a man's spiritual condition based on merely superficial shibboleths and titles, without being concerned about his zealous allegiance to God and the Bible. We have the duty to recognize and willingly encourage all who truly love Christ and avail themselves of His help in combatting evil within and around them.

So, while Jesus did not teach a universalistic indifferentism toward

those who do not belong specifically and openly to the Church which would eliminate any need for evangelism or correction, yet He did emphasize the openness which the Christian community must show those who show an attitude of benevolent sympathy toward it. And in showing Himself a model of excellence in His gentle treatment of John's wrongness and sectarianism, He shows us how to be of service to all men, especially the denominationalists. Our business is to minister to the needs of people and extend the reign of God (not the rule of our sect) in men's hearts.

### III. YOUR HUMILITY IS MEASURED BY YOUR CONCERN ABOUT YOUR OWN SINS AND LIABILITY TO SIN AND WHAT THIS DOES TO OTHERS (18:6-9)

#### A. THE ONE WHO CAUSES STUMBLING IS BETTER OFF DEAD. (18:6)

18:6 **But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea.** This is the antithesis of 18:5, since to harm or hinder **one of these little ones** is to attack Jesus! (Cf. Ac. 9:4; 5:39) The reason Jesus brings this up is that the Twelve must see that their vying with each other must necessarily tend to produce bitterness, provoke anger and offend one another.

By saying **one of these little ones that believe on me**, Jesus enlarges the range of His principle. Without excluding little children, He now includes weak Christians for our thoughtful service. Tolbert (*Good News From Matthew*, 155) asserts that "the little one is by definition weak and vulnerable. He looks to others for leadership. To be a leader involves a special responsibility, for his actions may damage those who come under his influence." (Cf. Jas. 3:1ff) New Christians especially need proper direction and careful reorientation. O my soul, am I such a guide: would it really benefit the progress of a weak Christian to move in beside me, or block it? Would I merely, however unconsciously, drag him down to my own miserable plane? Faithfulness to God is measured not only by the welcome given His messengers (see on 10:40-42), but also in the conduct we show toward the weakest and most lacking, the most incompetent and those without resources, the slow students, the unaware and the unprepared,

in short, the "bruised reeds and the smoldering wicks." (Mt. 12:18-21) Whoever takes up the work of unifying humanity in the Kingdom of God, but forgets those who suffer because of the divisions among men or are what they are as a result of these barriers, is on the wrong road. The greatness and utility of our programs and projects must be judged by the prominence they give to the weakest and most undefended, those who are of no use to the powerful nor even to those who struggle to dethrone them to grab their place. Jesus Himself took this latter road, beginning with the nobodies, the **little ones who believed in Him**, mere babes. (Cf. Mt. 11:25ff) Unfortunately, the disciples are always in danger of forgetting that their position and strength has been given them by Jesus. (2 Pt. 1:9; Eph. 2:3-10; Tit. 3:1-7; 1 Co. 6:9-11; Col. 1:12) Constant reminder is necessary for those who are themselves in danger, to keep them helping others in similar peril, since zeal to rescue others is an excellent antidote to complacency. (1 Ti. 4:16; Heb. 12:12f) From this standpoint, there is a lot of "little one" in every one of us! (See on 18:8, 9.)

**Cause to stumble** (*skandalizein*) means to be the bait in the trap which allures the unsuspecting into the trap and ensnares them. (See on 18:7.) In our context it means to have no regard for others' weakness by refusing to adapt ourselves to their intellectual and ethical ignorance and inconsistencies. It is to make a life that is holy and useful to God more difficult for them to live. It is to destroy their innocence by being their encouragement to do the wrong thing, hence push them along the road to forbidden things. To teach another to sin must be the worst sin of all. A stumbling-block is anything in my conduct that causes another to be so shocked, so shaken in conscience that he yields to the temptation to act in some way inconsistent with his principles, and, therefore, sin, and, in so doing, miss the right way to life. It may be some act of mine that violates his conscientious scruples. Whether or not he be over-scrupulous is not the primary question. Rather, the issue is whether or not his conscience has been horrified or shaken from its foundation by what I do. For example, **one of these little ones that believe in me**, because he knows nothing of our liberty to do what we do, may suppose, without conviction of his right, that he too has that liberty, and in following our example, he sins, because he did not follow his conscience (upon which he will be judged), but our example (on which he will not be judged). For a full discussion of this principle, study Romans 14:1—15:7 and 1 Corinthians 6:12—11:1. In these extended texts Paul's amplified argumentation covers both neutral conduct about which

some could be scandalized as well as that openly sinful conduct which is wrong for everyone. In Jesus' sermon here (18:6) it is clear that He sees as potentially scandalous also for others the disciples' selfish ambition to be the most important figure at the expense of others beneath them. The Lord's own example in paying the temple tax "lest we cause them to stumble" shows that situation to have contained a risk He chose not to run. So, Christ-like deference means limiting our freedom so as not to shock the conscience of those little ones to whom Christ has called us to minister. Any habit or action of mine could become a stumbling-block to anyone, with or without my knowledge. It is when I become aware of it that I can and must eliminate the occasion of stumbling. (See on 18:8f.)

**It is profitable for him** has been understood in two different ways:

1. His deserved punishment. Bruce (*Training*, 198) explains this view:

It were better for him—or, it suits him, it is what he deserves and it is implied, though not expressed, that it is what he gets when divine vengeance at length overtakes him. The mill-stone is no idle figure of speech, but an appropriate emblem of the ultimate doom of the proud. He who will mount to the highest place, regardless of the injuries he may inflict on little ones, shall be cast down, not to earth merely, but to the very lowest depths of the ocean, to the very abyss of hell, with a heavy weight of curses suspended on his neck to sink him down, and keep him down, so that he shall rise no more.

2. Comparative value to the offender. **It is profitable for him** in comparison with the severity of the punishment he would receive for causing the loss of those whom he considers inferior to himself. There is "a fate worse than death" to which even the most gruesome execution would be preferable before being able to carry out the scandalous deed. (See on 18:8f.) The particular execution pictured here is that of a convicted man around whose neck a donkey-drawn millstone has been hung, who is then taken by boat to a lonely, particularly deep expanse of sea and there pushed overboard to drown. (Cf. Revelation's use of a similar figure: Rev. 18:21) That drowning was not a Jewish punishment does not mean that it was never utilized by Jews nor by others! (Cf. *Antiquities*, XIV, 15, 10; XV, 3, 3) For the man who looks kindly toward anything in himself which proves the ruin of his brother, the millstone would be a profitable investment! Better a millstone than

a stumbling-block!

Have you ever heard Jesus use stronger language than this? The great crimes against humanity and social sins are not denounced in sterner language. The heinousness of putting a temptation to sin in the path of weak disciples surpasses the outrageousness of murder or suicide, in that, in the same act of wounding the conscience of the little one, the person dooms the soul of the other and actually defaces all that is Christlike in his own nature. Jesus must speak frankly, because most would tend to consider it a minor thing to **cause one of these little ones to stumble**, because of the relative unimportance of the person against whom the offence is committed. ("What I did won't matter much, because the other person is only a . . .") Jesus' purpose in pronouncing the death sentence preferable is to bring the careless up short face to face with God's justice: if the smallest kindness shown the least disciple will not go unrewarded (Mk. 9:41; cf. Mt. 10:42), then the apparently most insignificant scandal ruining the least disciple will not go unpunished either. We must feel the outrageous barbarity and heinousness of ruining a person's character by being the reason they do what they know is evil. What a horrible reality to which to awaken! The question is not, what if only one lowly person should be damned because of my bad influence, but, how many have already gone down the drain because of my warped representation of Jesus Christ? How much do I already owe my Lord? (See on 18:24.) But there is hope of mercy: that such a fate can be avoided is evident from what follows.

That Jesus has not left the theme of true greatness in the Kingdom is evident from the consideration that, although **these little ones** are to be cherished for Christ's sake, yet to be in any sense the enemy of even one of them is to be judged worthy of the most horrible death, and none on earth are to be more highly respected than they! Can anyone reasonably aspire to an importance or greatness superior to this?

#### B. THE WORLD IS BAD ENOUGH WITHOUT YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO ITS DEATH-TRAPS (18:7)

**18:7 Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling!** for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh! In what sense does Jesus pronounce the first **woe unto the world?** His anguish over the sorry state of the world

is caused by the fact that the world as such is both cause of its state and victim. And worse yet, it has no hope—there is no way out but His. The cause of the world's plight is the **occasions of stumbling** (*tā skándala*). This word pictures a trap whereby animals are snared. The *skándalon* is the bait-stick that holds up the dead-fall cage, so that when the animal goes for the bait, it knocks the stick out, causing the trap to fall around it, capturing it inside. The allusion, then, is to anything whereby the unsuspecting are led unconsciously into sin and entrapped.

But the world's plight has its cause in the very nature of the case: **for it must needs be that the occasions come.** There is no avoiding it, since this necessity is bound up in the very nature of the creaturely human condition. (Cf. 1 Co. 10:13) In fact, when just two personalities meet each other on a collision course, with their contrasting wills, contradictory desires, varied consciences, diverse recall, differing value systems and unequal tastes, can there be anything but hurt, distress, grief and offense in the resulting clash? And the world is made up of billions of people all different, colliding everyday! Should it be any surprise even to the casual observer that Jesus should have said this? The greater surprise would be to learn that there is any possible way of avoiding the inevitable!

Two important conclusions arise out of Jesus' observation that *it is necessary that temptations come:*

1. This very sentence is proof that Jesus was no child of His age. He believed in no earthly Messianic utopia where people could look forward to the day when there would be no necessity for strength against temptations and stumbling-blocks. Rather, He realistically fortified His disciples to face and eliminate them, because His theology of the Messianic Kingdom involves the presence of evil in the world right down to the judgment. (See notes on 13:36-43.)
2. The very existence of personality differences is precisely His reason for leading His people toward like-mindedness and unity of spirit. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:10; 12:24-26; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 1:27; 2:1-5; Col. 2:2; 3:14) He knows that if He can create in us the same tender consideration for one another, the same forgiving spirit, the same earnestness of mutual love, the same patient forbearance, He can neutralize all the negative aspects of our creaturely condition and make us blameless, i.e. having no cause of stumbling in us, irreprehensible. (Cf. Col. 1:21-23; 1 Ti. 3:2, 10; Tit. 1:6f; Phil. 2:14f; Jude 24; Rev. 14:5) This not only lessens the tensions created

by scandals, but goes a long way to eliminate them altogether. (Ro. 14:13)

From this it should be obvious that **the necessity for occasions of stumbling** is there, not because God desires it, but because selfishness, carelessness and ambition make men susceptible to the shock of others' selfishness, carelessness and ambition. It is this fragility that makes it inevitable that **temptations to sin come**.

Rather than attack society en masse for its disorders that contribute to the ills of its members, since He knows that "what is everybody's business is nobody's business," and therefore cannot count on society as such to do anything significant toward renewal, He begins grass-root reform by making His disciples aware of their own constant personal responsibility for the total impact of their lives on others: **But woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!** The inevitable can be avoided only if one is aware of the horrible fate of those responsible for being the cause of others' loss. Jesus has already warned that a terrifying drowning is preferable to the fate of such callous individuals. (18:6) The man who is insensitive to the vulnerability of the weak is a man who is dangerous to everyone! If he can trample the children with lighthearted unconcern, how can he be consistently and authentically gentle with the undeniable and inevitable fragility of everyone else around him? That some men are deadly traps for the world's people is certainly a monstrous injustice, but is it not even more unthinkably outrageous that the men themselves should do their dirty work of their own free will and with pleasure? The irony is that Jesus is not discussing Nazi war criminals, but reasonably good, decent folk who are members in good standing of His Church! (18:8f; Ro. 14:13ff; 1 Co. 8:10-12; 10:32)

Is it best to look for stumbling blocks in our lives, or to let others point them out? Jesus will answer this by saying, "Both!" In 18:8, 9 He will insist on the most rigorous introspection to eliminate all that we can see for ourselves as hindering to our godliness and service. In 18:15, if we ourselves are the offending brother who is approached by him against whom we have sinned, then it is implied that we listen to him and eliminate the cause of the problem.

It is almost as if Jesus were responding to those who would evade their personal responsibility for the effects of their lives on others: "Your objection, that the world contains temptations so numerous, human nature is so weak and fatal stumbling blocks so certain that your own conduct cannot be significant enough to make a sickness out of worrying about its effect on others, has no basis." Rather,

black terror awaits the individual who blocks the realization of the moral possibilities latent in every creature of God. How little we understand the human atrocity of stunting and stifling the development of the character of Jesus Christ in every *little one!* What monstrous wickedness it is to be the inducement that twists the dynamic possibilities of others into a power for evil unleashed on the earth!

Can the Lord stand impassively by while people with warped minds use tricks, menaces, persecution, persuasive arguments and other seductions to induce His people to abandon Him? Can He have no judgment of those who in every age and in every community derive twisted pleasure from the employment of their riches and culture, their achievements and professional influence to approach and seduce the unsuspecting into infidelity, sin and consequent ruin? No, His woe has in it the distant rumble of certain judgment and no one on earth has a more terrible responsibility to answer to God for it than they!

### C. NO SACRIFICE IS TOO GREAT (18:8, 9)

18:8, 9. At first glance, it would seem that Jesus has suddenly introduced irrelevant material, since He was discussing the danger of trapping others, not the disciple's own peril. But this is precisely the point: to sin against even **one of these little ones who believe in Jesus** is to sin against one's own soul. To cause another to stumble is to stumble into sin, taking one's own weaker brother down too. So, Christ must make men sensitive to that **IN THEMSELVES** which proves to be a seduction to **THEMSELVES** and to others. Another reason for His inserting this paragraph is the fact that to recognize the weaknesses and mortal dangers in one's own personal character is devastating to his exaggerated sense of self-worth, or pride. The status-climbing disciples must face the horrid truth: their own weaknesses and liability to sin dogs their steps even to the top of the pile and mars their supposed worthiness and nobility of character! Worse, without forgiveness and mercy from God and others, they must instantly and forever surrender all claim to such greatness and honors.

In two pithy sentences the Lord's focus zooms in on each disciple's personal responsibility for his own degree of temptability, and therefore for his own stumbling into sin. Nine times (count them!) He hammers on the personal pronouns "YOU and YOURS." He had

pronounced fearful woes on the world in general for its multitudinous threats to one's soul security, and to particular tempters through whom those seductions come, but now He rips aside the veil to unmask that hotbed of temptations in the heart of each disciple. This time it is YOUR hand, YOUR foot, YOUR eye. Is Jesus discussing only our liability to temptation from the point of view of our fleshly members named? (See notes on 5:29, 30.)

1. He definitely includes whatever in our fleshly desires would render a holy life useful to God difficult for ourselves and others. Our selfishness and its passionate desires must be crucified. (Ro. 6; Col. 3:5ff; Gal. 5:24) But these temptations to sin are probably already thought of as forbidden under other precepts. Nevertheless, should anyone forget his own liability to lust, Jesus leaves nothing to guesswork on that point. What would not be so obvious would be actions that would be otherwise perfectly justifiable, which, because of the weakness of others, would become for them temptations to sin. **Hand, foot and eye** are gifts of God, therefore good and not intended simply to be disposed of. Rather, they are fit instruments of service to man and God, and the source of unsullied joy to their possessor. But their use can be subverted into abuse, in which case they must be sacrificed. This means that God has placed some things within our reach which, in most circumstances, are positive blessings, while in other situations, deadly instruments for seductions to evil. (Study Paul's argumentation about our members, in Ro. 6:12-14.) Man dare not let himself be deceived by his most useful, justifiable elements of his person or personality. (Cf. Jas. 1:13-15) To be true to himself and his Lord he has only one live option: dispense with such things completely.
2. But since the illustrations He uses are of perfectly legitimate, justifiable members that, when normally and rightly used, are blessings to the well-rounded, happy life, the Savior may be pointing to what is symbolized by the **hand, foot or eye**: one's practice, pursuits or research. (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 121) Thus, He is also pointing to what we have a normally legitimate right to use, which, for the sake of our own salvation and the weak conscience of others, may be dispensed with. He means anything that compromises a person's virtue, Christlikeness, leaves him less humble, less determined to live with God.

An illuminating case in point is that of the rich young ruler.  
(Study Jesus' comments on his case: Mt. 19:16-30.)

It could be personal taste, emotional attachments, partnerships, any kind of employment, occupation or hobby, the pursuit of some physical or intellectual culture or art. If these lawful things, however perfectly innocent in themselves and quite permissible for others who are not hurt by them, cannot be pursued without self-injury to our likeness to God, then, out of regard for our best self, that self for which Christ died, they must be stringently sacrificed. They may be perfectly innocent pleasures which we are unable to keep within their proper limits, pleasures that sap the strength out of our concern for the Lord's work. However dear they may be to us, to enjoy the things that cause us to sin here on earth and be lost can never match the sheer delight of eternal life.

The all-important word here is **IF**. Such self-severity is recommended **IF** our soul is endangered, but if not? Here is a fundamental principle of Christian liberty. The decision about such matters must rest in our hands and be limited to our own case. This is the point of the repeated use of the second person **SINGULAR** pronoun. Other people may be able to keep their members, even if we cannot. They are responsible for their own decision, but their experience cannot be our guide. Nor may they decide for us, or we for them. The restrictions we find obligatory for ourselves are not to serve as a basis for condemning them for not adopting them, nor can we impose them on them. For fuller information on Christian liberty, study Romans 14:1—15:7; 1 Co. 6:12—11:1; Gal. 5:1-6, 13-15; Phil. 4:8f; Col. 2:8—3:4; Jas. 1:25; 2:8-12; 1 Pt. 2:16.

**Entrance into life** is only possible for those who are willing to do without what they may most easily justify, but for whom the use of which would hinder their living a holy life useful to God and men. The direct consequence of this drastic severity is the salvation of two souls: the one who would have stumbled by abuse of his own liberty and the other, "the little one who believes in me" who would have been caused to stumble by the abuse of the first. Unconditional eternal security is just not available to earth-bound believers. Our possibilities for eternity are rigorously conditioned by the decisions we make as to whether we will make these sacrifices or not. (Heb. 3:6-14; 4:1, 11; 6:4-8; 10:19-39; 12:14-17, 25; 1 Jn. 1:7-10; 2:1f, 9f, 15-17; 4:20; 5:16f, 21) The phase of **the kingdom of God** into which we enter by such self-sacrifice (Mk. 9:47) is equal to the **life** (Mt. 18:9)

and is co-extensive with it. Thus, the Lord refers to **life in the kingdom of God**, here and hereafter. Evidently Jesus is not troubled here to distinguish this life from that, because death is not going to make all that much difference. In fact, just as **the kingdom of God** is in existence now and continues on out into eternity (Col. 1:13; 2 Pt. 1:11), so eternal life has already begun and we know that we enjoy it because we love the brethren enough to make these essential sacrifices for ourselves and them. (1 Jn. 2:25; 3:14-16; 5:11ff; 2:15-17; Jn. 5:24)

These two verses taken together prove that **the eternal fire** and **the hell ("Gehenna") of fire** are identical and what is affirmed of one in Scripture is true of the other also. They stand together across the abyss from what it means to be **in the kingdom of God** (18:3, 4; Mk. 9:47) and **eternal life**. (Cf. Mt. 25:46) On *Gehenna*, see on 5:22, esp. 10:28 notes. Jesus is not just frightening folks with imaginary fears and medieval scarecrows! If JESUS informs us that there is a hell, then it really exists. Should not the garbage-heap of the universe be the proper dumping ground for those pompous individuals who, because of their self-assured insensitiveness to their own temptability, offend a child and sow the world solid with stumbling blocks? When talking about other people, even the most hardened have no difficulty with this doctrine. ("There would have to be a hell just for Hitler!") Their hedging and objections begin when Christ begins insisting that even they could end up there too.

This painfully severe self-examination is the only spirit in which to begin to correct another. (Mt. 18:15-17; 7:1-5) In our liberty to select objects for prayer, have we sinned in ceasing to pray for our brother? (Cf. 1 Sa. 12:23) Have we been a misleading example to him? (Ro. 12:1-5) While restoring such a one in the spirit of meekness, we must consider ourselves because of our own vulnerability to temptations. (Gal. 6:1-5) If our own bad attitudes, offenses or neglect are factors contributing to our brother's offense, then we cannot proceed to settle the problem according to 18:15-17, but according to 5:23f.

#### D. HOW DO YOU WANT IT: SAVED BY THE FIRE OR SAVED FOR THE FIRE?

At this point in the Synoptics' narrative Mark (9:48-50) inserts the following: **48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not**

**quenched. 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.**

The allusion is simply to the process of salting meat to preserve it. Jesus says that **EVERYONE** indiscriminately will be salted to preserve them. However, rather than with literal salt, **everyone will be salted with fire.** (Mk. 9:49) **The fire** itself, thus, is the preserving agent for everyone.

1. The previously mentioned unquenchable fire of punishment (Mk. 9:48), intended for everyone who, contrary to the demands of severe self-discipline just given, refuses to present himself as a sacrifice to God, rather than just burn him up, will actually keep him perpetually in a state of severest suffering, or "eternal punishment." (*kólasin aiónion* of Mt. 25:46) It is an **eternal fire** (Mt. 18:8) and **unquenchable fire** (Mk. 9:43).
2. The Christian, on the other hand, who willingly submits to being a spiritual sacrifice to God, cost him whatever it may, by his embracing this very fire, will be preserved for eternal life. (Ro. 12:1, 2; 1 Pt. 1:6-9; 2:11; 4:12ff; 5:9f)

The Lord concludes with a caution and an exhortation: (Mk. 9:50)

1. **CAUTION:** The preserving power of this chastening fire for the Christians only operates where men permit it to work by making every sacrifice necessary. **Salt is good.** Otherwise, it would be like saltless salt, useless in their individual lives. The very same chastening, disciplinary fires come to the ungodly too, but it does them no good, because they do not respond to it with the same spirit of self-sacrifice as the godly. The self-same fire to them is like **salt that has lost its savor**, and the corruption continues.
2. **EXHORTATION:** **Have salt in yourselves**, i.e. let the aforementioned fire which preserves you do its work. Welcome the purifying, preserving principle of self-denial, enduring trials, removing stumbling-blocks, pride, ambition and contention. Welcome the severity of self-discipline, self-judgment and self-sacrifice. This cannot but restore peace and fellowship among you.

Another way of arriving at this same conclusion by another route is the following:

**ANATHEMA = DOOMED AS A SACRIFICE = DAMNED**

The point of this text may lie in the concept of sacrifice which God

has taught us in the Bible. The philosophy behind any sacrificing is the unworthiness of man. He has no right to live, because the image of God in him has been marred by sins and character defects. Unfit to live, he should be destroyed. Mercy, however, offers man the privilege of sacrificing, the life of an animal for the life of the man, an object of value for the value of the giver.

Now, because of the preservative power of salt to stop corruption, the orientals used salt as a symbol of perpetuity and permanence. (Cfr. Nu. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5; Ezek. 16:4 = immortality?) So, in the symbolism of sacrifice it seems that the Lord chose salt as an absolutely essential preparation for every offering, in order to impart, among other things, this meaning to the sacrifice. (Ex. 30:35; Lev. 2:13; Ez. 43:24) This sacrifice is hereby given permanent, eternal value, even though the thing offered is itself dead.

So, every human being, because he is a sinner is destined for the fire as a sacrifice, a victim of his own sins. From the fire there is no escape and no exception. But precisely at this point a merciful choice is given to humanity: (1) the opportunity to be a personal, willing, living sacrifice to the honor of God's grace, or (2) the fiery punishment in hell, serving as fuel to the honor of God's justice. Man, damned by his sins, is already doomed, hence *anathema*. But mercy gives him the choice of accepting his own damnation as God's righteous judgment and freely sacrificing himself as an offering to God. Thus, he becomes *anathema* in the sense of an offering.

*Anathema* (from the verb *anatithemi* "to place upon (the altar), to put upon (the walls of a temple as a votive offering)" means "what is offered up to God." (Arndt-Gingrich, 53f; Rocci, 112, 133; Thayer, 37) This is the common LXX translation of the Hebrew concept of *cherem*, "a thing devoted" to God without hope of redemption. It can be either consecrated or accursed, depending on the point of view required. (Gesenius, 305)

Unrepentant sinners who refuse to come to repentance and soul preservation by accepting the punishment for their sins in this life, must face eternal preservation in the midst of an eternal, fiery hell. The eternal fire is that which would burn them as sacrifices. Since the wicked accepted no substitute, rather than suffer as a living sacrifice in honor to God on earth, they burn as the victims of their own corruption in hell.

Christians, because they accepted the perfect Christ as their substitute sacrifice, do not themselves have to die the second death in the

destruction by fire, because they will have already sacrificed themselves willingly on the altar of Christ's service in this life. (Ro. 12:1, 2; Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:3, 5; Ro. 6:1-11) They have accepted their damnation as God's righteous judgment and have been permitted to die spiritually to their sins. Thereafter, their life is to be considered as one continuous living sacrifice. Though it might seem a hell on earth, its fire not only purifies their dross, but preserves them eternally. (Cf. Heb. 12:4-12)

The fire of the Christians which preserves ("salts") them, then, is all the discipline that comes to them in the normal course of their living the Christian life, all that purges them of their impurities (1 Pt. 1:6f; 4:12f) and makes them like Christ (1 Pt. 2:18-25; 4:1f; Ro. 5:3, 4; Jas. 1:2-4, 12) The man who has no fear of the blazing wrath of God is the man who has had all that is combustible in himself burnt away, who has already submitted to the fire, the purification that God directs. (Cf. Isa. 33:14f) Living according to the will of God, he lives in the love of God, so he has no need to be alarmed at the judgment of God upon sinners.

Christians are preserved from destruction in hell by their willing submission to suffering for Christ in this life, by humble contrition and removal of stumbling blocks in their lives and by maintaining peace with others by a loving, forgiving spirit.

What is the *good salt*? (Mk. 9:50) It is the spirit of humble self-sacrifice for God and others which keeps Jesus' followers united together in a common covenant whereby they can live in peace with one another. Should this "salt" lose its power to work its transformation, the individuals involved would not be sacrifices truly acceptable to God. The ensuing corruption would doom them to the other fire. The wicked treat their "salt" as worthless and so must suffer the consequences of their own corruption.

Thus, everything Christians give up for Christ's sake is considered as offered up in sacrifice to God (*anathema*) because damned (*anathema*), if sinful, and consecrated (*anathema*), if a fit object for offering to God. No wonder a Christian lives forever! His self-denials, subduing his desire, his enduring trials and removing offenses for Christ's sake is just another way of saying "getting rid of all that is objectionable to God," so why should God destroy him?

**IV. YOUR HUMILITY AND SENSITIVITY TO THE WEAK  
IS MEASURED AGAINST HEAVEN'S CONCERN FOR THEM.  
(18:10-14)**

18:10 **See that ye despise not one of these little ones.** Despise (*kataphronésete*) means "look down on, despise, scorn, treat with contempt; think lightly of or have the wrong ideas about; care nothing for, disregard, be unafraid of." (Arndt-Gingrich, 420) In their striving for position, the Twelve HAD to *despise* others of their number as *little ones*: it was the only way to get ahead in this world, but not in that of Jesus. Ironically, any disciple who had never indulged in the kind of status-seeking power-play that motivated the Apostles here would be tempted to sneer at others' lack of maturity and murmur like a true Pharisee: "Thank God I never made their mistake!" Temptations to despise those who live below their own standard of righteousness or level of maturity are the peculiar scourge of "the righteous," precisely because they have lived highly moral lives. This explains why Jesus shows that **one of these little ones** is but a straying sheep (12-14) and a sinning brother (15). **These little ones** now has a larger meaning since verse 6 where the least believer is indicated, so that, although Jesus is not excluding little children, He now includes weak disciples, the slow learners. To *despise* them is to consider them not worth our attention enough to take the time and trouble to turn aside our important business to assist them, patiently supporting them as they stumble forward toward perfection in Christ. To *despise* them is to think them beneath our notice, but to do so is sinful folly! (Prov. 11:12; 14:21) There are two reasons for this: first, there are so many of them that they are actually the world majority! Jesus presents the other: the problems of "inferiors" immediately involve the active, sympathetic concern of Heaven. He supports this with three arguments. Some see a crescendo of greatness in Jesus' ordered argumentation:

1. Angels, the servants of God, are concerned about little ones.
2. Jesus, the Good Shepherd and Servant of Javéh, is dedicated to their rescue.
3. God Himself, the eternal Judge of all, is unwilling that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

A. THE "INFERIORS" MINISTERING ANGELS  
HAVE GOD'S IMMEDIATE AUDIENCE. (18:10)

**For I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.** Several details lie right on the surface of Jesus' statement:

1. Jesus Christ affirms the existence of the *angels*. His argument stands or falls on the truth (or untruth) of their existence, since He argues: "Do not despise little ones, because their angels have immediate access to God." If His reason were not true, then any fear of negative consequences for despising them would be groundless.
  - a. If He were honestly in error because of His human limitations, then every other revelation of His would be undermined by the same argument, because there are no objective criteria by which one may separate revelations of truth from God and ignorant trash.
  - b. If He were merely adjusting His teaching to popular Jewish beliefs, although He knew that what He affirmed was not true, then we must impute deliberate falsehood to Him who is "the Truth." (Jn. 14:6)
  - c. The only other viable alternative is to see in Jesus' word a guarantee that angels exist, and for those who trust Him the question is settled.
2. Jesus affirms that *little ones* have *their angels*.
  - a. The **little ones** are not merely children, but also struggling Christians (v. 6; see note on 18:2: "One of these little ones: little children or weak Christians?") The one does not exclude the other. Since this expression collectively takes in both categories, there is no internal necessity to assume that the latter expression, "**their angels**," be distributive either. In fact, thus far we have angels equally for little children and weak Christians.
  - b. **Their angels** does not affirm or deny anything about "others' angels," as if only children or only new converts were the object of special "guardian service." In fact, other Scriptures inform us that angels are considered as God's ministering spirits to help the people of God. (See Heb. 1:13, 14; 2:2; Psa. 91:11; cf. Mt. 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19; 4:11; 24:31; 26:53; 28:2; Lk. 1:11, 13, 18f, 26, 28, 30, 34f, 38; 2:9f, 13, 15, 21; 12:8f; 15:10; 16:22; 22:43; 24:23; Ac. 5:19; 7:30, 35, 38, 53; 8:26; 10:3, 7, 22;

11:13; 12:7-11, 15?, 23; 27:23; 1 Co. 11:10?; Gal. 3:19; 1 Pt. 1:12; Rev. 1:1; 22:6, 16; perhaps also 1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 5, 7, 14 and many more.) These texts speak of the keen interest God's messengers, the angels, have in the salvation and conduct of His people. Even their participation at the judgment implies their interest and function as God's servants. (Mt. 13:39, 41, 49; 16:27; 25:31; 2 Th. 1:7) Also, from the point of view of our personal weaknesses and imperfection, each of us is in need of all the help he can get. Rather than leave us to face a bleak, empty universe alone, Jesus Christ has given us the heavenly vision of ministering angels ascending and descending upon every son of man, caring, ministering, protecting, until we lay down our weary clay to be carried by the angels to our Father's house. (Cf. Gen. 28:10ff; Jn. 1:51; Lk. 16:22) Who would dare despise the friendly assistance of these supernatural helpers who watch with sympathetic eyes the fortunes of Apostle (1 Co. 4:9) and repentant sinner alike (Lk. 15:10)? So, if God sends angels to help the whole people of God, then Jesus' affirmation includes a portion of the larger body of angels. Without denying that anyone else has angels assigned to him, Jesus merely reminds the Apostles that the very **little ones** whom they in their own bid for greatness had been tempted to **despise** are the special concern of **their angels**.

3. Jesus affirms that **their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.**

- a. There are angels who stand in the presence of God. (Gabriel: Lk. 1:19, 26; cf. Dan. 8:16; 9:21-23; Michael: Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7; 8:2; Isa. 63:9) Are these the ones **who do always behold the face of my Father?** But do not all angels, in a certain sense, stand in God's presence? (Cf. 1 Kg. 22:19; Rev. 5:11; 7:11)

It is no small temptation to follow Edersheim (*Life*, II, 122) who sees in Jesus' words a contrast to the standard Jewish angelology: "We seem to see Jesus still holding this child, and, with evident reference to the Jewish contempt for that which is small, point to him and apply, in quite other manner than they had ever heard, the Rabbinic teaching about Angels. In the Jewish view, only the chiefest of the Angels were before the Face of God within the curtained Veil . . . while the others, ranged in different classes

stood outside and waited His behest. The distinction which the former enjoyed was always to behold His face, and to hear and know directly the Divine counsels and commands. This distinction was, therefore, one of knowledge; Christ taught that it was one of love." (See also his Appendix XIII, 748ff, where he concedes this view as based on Talmudic references, not necessarily held by Jews of Jesus' day, although the roots of such views may well have been.)

- b. In what sense is it true that these dwellers of the heavenly world **always** (*dià pantòs*) **behold the Father's face**, even during their missions on behalf of His people? Does it not mean that while they execute their service they have instant audience with the Father, so that, even while ministering on earth to the little ones, they are in simultaneous communication with the Throne? They are never out of "radio contact" with God.

The main thrust of Jesus' argument, then, is that God's highest, most glorious messengers (*ángeloi* as opposed to *profētai*) and who have immediate access to the great God of heaven, are commissioned with the humble service to the weakest disciple or little child! And if these dwellers of heaven, great in might and power, intercede for the lowliest before the Most High, who is the man who would dare despise them? Bruce (*Training*, 199) thinks that Jesus is utilizing an argument similar to that of Peter (2 Pt. 2:10f; cf. Jude 9):

The inhabitants of heaven . . . are loving and humble; ye are selfish and proud. What hope can ye cherish of admission into a kingdom, the spirit of which is so utterly diverse from that by which ye are animated? Nay, are ye not ashamed of yourselves when ye witness this glaring contrast between the lowliness of the celestials and the pride and pretensions of puny men?

Whereas Jesus speaks here of angels, He implies how precious every single little one is to God who grants ready access to **their angels**. So, even here, it is God who values them so highly that no man may safely treat any of them as if they did not count. Is this not true greatness? If He is aware of all that happens to His little weak ones on earth, He certainly sees what we do with them, and whether we treat them with tender care or neglect.

**B. THE GOOD SHEPHERD CAME TO SEEK  
THE LOST LITTLE ONES. (18:11-13)**

18:11 is omitted in the better manuscripts, because Matthew probably did not write it. The owner of a manuscript copy rightly saw in Lk. 19:10 an edifying parallel thought: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost," and so wrote it onto the margin of his copy of Matthew. Then, it was undoubtedly inserted into the text by mistake by some scribe who mistook the excellent marginal note for a textual correction. But to purify Matthew's text by removing it once more does not rob us of its beauty and connection, as its words may best be summarized in verses 12, 13 anyway.

18:12, 13 This is the second reason we should never "despise one of these little ones." (v. 10) Compare Jesus' use of this same story in another context where Pharisees and scribes sneered at the "sinners" Jesus associated with. (Lk. 15:1-7) His sub-parable of the proud elder brother is devastating. (Lk. 15:25ff) Some blame Matthew for inserting this parable here without regard for its "original context," and then when they get to Luke they blame him too. But if Jesus can repeat 5:29f in 18:8f, cannot He repeat the lost sheep story in different situations with equal appropriateness? After all, the proud, self-seeking Apostles were in serious danger of the same insensitivity and arrogance toward inferiors as were the Pharisean theologians in the other context.

**How think ye?** With this attention-getting question, Jesus hooks into the moral judgment of His listeners and turns on their emotions as they become absorbed in this story which is really a low-key rebuke of their callous disregard for the weak and straying. The basic mechanism is to push them to commit themselves to a value-judgment: how would a shepherd feel about the loss and recovery of just one of his lambs that had strayed?

**If any man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray.** So often, when "our brother sins against us," we are tempted to think of him as a ferocious beast ready to rip and tear us. This is why Jesus must give us another perspective, His, to be ready to envision our erring brother, not as a wolf, bear or lion, but as a lost, wandering *sheep* that belongs to God. From the point of view of the shepherd and from that of the potential damage a given lost sheep can do to the flock, he is relatively innocuous, so that we may see that any real damage we have suffered by our brother's offense is so very slight, compared to the sheep's loss to the Shepherd, hence his value to

the Lord. (= 18:23-35!) Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 191) notes

Sheep are proverbially foolish creatures. The sheep had no one but itself to blame for the danger it had got itself into. Men are apt to have so little patience with the foolish ones. When they get into trouble, we are apt to say, "It's their own fault; they brought it on themselves; don't waste sympathy on a fool." . . . Men may be fools, but God in His love loves even the foolish man who has no one to blame but himself for his sin and his sorrow.

Sometimes sheep go astray by following false shepherds. (Jer. 50:6; Mt. 15:14; 2 Pt. 2:1f) But their choice of shepherds and pastures is free and for which they are responsible. (Jas. 1:13ff; 2 Ti. 4:3f) Nevertheless, the little ones may be unimportant to the selfish who cannot use them, since they have no influence, power nor wealth. They are only an embarrassment to the pious, because they are unable to keep up. They represent only 1% of the flock anyway, so why bother? Jesus answers eloquently: "Because they are precious to God, that's all!"

**Doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and go unto the mountains and seek . . .**

The Greek of both Matthew and Luke (on 15:4) states that the 99 were left "upon the mountains" or "in the wilderness" (Lk. 15:4). These prepositional phrases modify the preceding verbals, not the following verb preceded by *kai*. Obviously, the ASV translators of our text felt that the shepherd would not have abandoned the large flock in the hills to the greater danger of scattering during his absence in search of the one lost sheep, so they render the verse so as to have the shepherd go into the mountains. (But even ASV in Lk. 15:4 has: "doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost . . .") The translators failed to see the other shepherds with whom our shepherd left the 99 while he went searching. And, if we are not at liberty to invent fellow shepherds, must we add equally unmentioned dangers like wolves, thieves and robbers, or scattering? Let us give Jesus credit for not creating a ridiculous parable, which, if pushed to its logical extreme would picture the Good Shepherd as abandoning His people to their fate while He goes traipsing around in search of strays! In fact, since the setting of the story is the hilly country of Palestine, unless the shepherd took the 99 clear back to town before beginning his search, he would have had to leave them right there where they

were grazing *on the mountains*, since the major portion of Palestine devoted to pasture land is hilly.

**Does he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one?** (RSV) "Of course, he does," is the answer Jesus expects. (*ouchì afései* . . .;) Although there are sheepfolds out *on the hills* in Palestine, Jesus does not seem to refer to them here. Rather, the picture is that of the anxious shepherd who no sooner than the sheep is missed, leaves the remainder of the flock in good hands right where they are and begins the search at once.

Maclaren (*PHC*, XXII, 435) avoids the problem of the shepherd's leaving the 99 out on the mountain, by imagining the flock of 100 sheep as the totality of God's creations of which man is only one, however, the one that went astray: "Not because man was so great; not because man was so valuable in comparison with the rest of creation—he was but one among ninety and nine unfallen and unsinful—but because he was so wretched . . . so small, . . . so far from God, therefore the seeking love came after him, and would draw him to itself." But Jesus is picturing only the crisis of this one sheep now, but tomorrow the lost sheep might be another one. He is not discussing lost man as against unfallen nature, but one lost man as opposed to others who, at the moment of the story, did not need seeking.

The 99-1 emphasis is obviously on the *one that went astray*. This means that the Lord would have us understand how much He cares about each one personally. For the shepherd the one lost stray was not lost in the crowd: he missed it because it mattered to him. (Cf. 1 Pt. 5:7) Nobody is unimportant to Jesus. (See on 18:5.) Everyone is significant to Him. He thinks in terms of persons, not humanity en masse, and by making individual concern for individuals the center of this story, He furnishes us motive and power to evangelize.

There is in this parable a tacit comparison between the attitude of the Good Shepherd and that of everyone else toward the straying. To the extent that this comparison sours into a contrast, to that degree the single disciple does not share the mind and heart of his Lord. The disciple is often tempted to harbor resentment and revenge at the misbehavior of his brother. In fact, he may calculate how much trouble and anxiety it costs him to be bothered by the other's conduct that forces him to have to seek him. The Lord, on the other hand, reacts quite differently to the same situation, being moved to

compassion to help the fumbling, stumbling, faltering man. (Cf. Mt. 9:36)

**Doth he not leave . . . go . . . and seek?** Jesus Himself is the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11ff) who does everything divinely and humanly possible to rescue those left to the prey of wolves and hirelings, thieves and robbers. His mission was to seek and save the lost. (Lk. 19:10) This is why He stopped at Zacchaeus' house. This is why He chose Matthew! (Mt. 9:12f) He longed to save the wayward Jerusalem. (Mt. 23:37) And He found profound, genuine joy every time He succeeded. Bruce (*Training*, 200) sees that His love shows that

. . . there was not only no pride of greatness in the Son of God, but also no pride of *holiness*. He could not only condescend to men of humble estate, but could even become the brother of the vile . . . the charity of the Son of Man, in the eyes of all true disciples, surrounds with a halo of sacredness the meanest and vilest in the human race.

A Pharisee can never understand this. (Cf. Lk. 7:36-50)

**And if so be that he find it.** There is always the realistic possibility that even the Good Shepherd could fail to bring the lost sheep back, since the will of the human sheep is left free. (Heb. 6:4-6; Mt. 23:37) If the wandering one refuses to be found, he will not be compelled against his will, because the Kingdom of God is entered freely, not by constraint. (See on 13:9, 10; also "Apologetic Value" after 13:43, esp. point 2.) Judas wandered away from the flock never to return, and he was not alone. (Jn. 6:66-71) Some are recovered. The formerly incestuous man was reclaimed for the Kingdom and the whole Corinthian congregation was held together around Jesus. (1 Co. 5; 2 Co. 2:1-11; 7:1-16)

**He rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.** The ninety-nine just had not gone astray yet! This did not mean that one, two or ten of them could not do so the very next day. But the Shepherd's gladness is unmarred because they have given Him no particular difficulty. In fact, this paradox is Jesus' point: the one sheep that gave him the most trouble brought him the most happiness! The Shepherd lavishes special attention upon the lost one, not because he is worthy, or because he loves him more, or due to a supposedly greater intrinsic worth of the lost one. His greater rejoicing and special care is lavished on the one, just because he so desperately needs it.

In chapter 20 Matthew will illustrate what He means by picturing this Shepherd who hears the lost sheep's cry, as hearing the appeal for help by two stumbling blind men over on the edge of a pushy, arrogant crowd that was trying to hush them up. (20:29-34) But Jesus stopped everything and mercifully healed them, enabling them to join the flock on its way to Jerusalem.

**He rejoices:** without recriminations, grudge-holding, lecturing or superior contempt, He rejoices to have His child back safe again. (Cf. the Father's attitude in Lk. 15:20, 22-24) Lenski says it beautifully (*Matthew*, 695): "Jesus is simply stating what we constantly experience: a sheep, a jewel, a child, any treasure takes on greater dearness when they are lost and then found or when they are endangered and then brought to safety."

This parable hits hard at the problem of grabbing for greatness in the Kingdom. Since the Son of man came to save what was lost, this which had been His clearest self-humiliation is also His most glorious exaltation. He who had laid aside His celestial splendor to don the slave's garb and undertake the world's greatest man-hunt must be the greatest of the race! And if He care that much for the morally degraded and wicked, how much must He care for little weak ones? It is far harder to love the self-righteous, the calloused and cold-hearted ungodly than it is to interest oneself in relatively good people. (Ro. 5:6-8) But can He who did the more difficult fail to do the simpler?

Can the power-hungry disciples see themselves yet as like "sheep gone astray and turned every one to his own way"? (Isa. 53:6; 1 Pt. 2:25) The major question is one of identification with Jesus' story: what if I had been the lost sheep and those who held my attitude toward the little ones had despised me and left me out there to die?

As in the case of the angels' care for the little ones, God's watch-care looked over all, so also here God's great Shepherd-heart goes seeking the lost. (Ezek. 34:12-15) We must admit that Jesus did not identify the Good Shepherd. He is probably Ezekiel's "David," the Servant of Javéh, the prince and shepherd for Israel. (Ezek. 34:23f) We are right to think of Jesus in this capacity, because He proved it over and over again. (Jn. 10) Nevertheless God had already written an angry chapter on self-interested, self-serving shepherds whom He accused in words that sting the complacent of every age: "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought

back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them." (Ezek. 34, esp. v. 4) With compassion Javéh lovingly sought them wherever they strayed and brought them to safe pasture. (Ezek. 34:11-31; cfr. Isa. 40:10f) Jesus must be God come in the flesh therefore.

### C. GOD HIMSELF HAS NO DESIRE TO LOSE ANY WE MIGHT DESIGNATE AS "INFERIORS!" (18:14)

18:14 Even so, in the same way angels have the interests and needs of these **little ones** on their hearts, in the same way Jesus the Good Shepherd came to seek and save the least wayward one, so also **your Father who is in heaven** cares about each single one: And the man who can be arrogantly indifferent to them sets himself against Almighty God! When the Father spends so much effort to rescue a lost stray, how monstrous it must be to be the cause of his loss, the stone over which he stumbles! (18:6-9) Does this not indicate how great, how important and how exceedingly precious **one of these little ones** must be?

**It is not the will of your Father . . . that one of these . . . should perish.** This affirmation sheathes a threat. While it is **your Father who is in heaven** who cares for you with a tenderness unequalled anywhere in the universe, it is, however, His will that not one of these, who are the special objects of His concern and care, be lost through neglect or deliberate mistreatment by those who deem themselves their "superiors." Anyone who would dare despise their "inferiors" and block their salvation and so imperil their soul, will find themselves in the extremely dangerous position of endangering their own! (Cf. Psa. 10:1-18, esp. v. 14; 68:5f; 94; 146:5-9) God is the special defender of the weak and feeble. (Psa. 82) He who knows the number of hairs on our head, could He fail to be personally interested in each single one of us? (Cf. Mt. 10:30) He personally rejoices when even **one of these** perishing ones is redeemed. (Lk. 15:7, 20-24) He longs for His people's return. (Dt. 5:29; Psa. 81:13; Isa. 45:22; 48:18f; Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; 2 Pt. 3:9)

But, because **one of these little ones** is a sinning disciple, God has far more right and reason to despise him than do we who so closely resemble him. Nevertheless, He against whom our brother has sinned does not hold him in contempt, but gladly sacrifices Himself to redeem him. Because **these little ones** are dear to God's heart, each

disciple must test his own spirit by God's personal attitude and relation to them. With these lines Jesus just wipes out the cocksure, proud person who is always comparing his talents and accomplishments with those of his peers to their disadvantage, because, according to Jesus, every single proof he can adduce of their limitations and imperfections is reason for him to build them up, care for them, endeavor to develop in them all that is high, holy and godly!

**Perish.** Then, is anyone correct to teach that God wills the salvation of babes, and, therefore, they ought to be baptized? No, because while Jesus is adamant that the little children must be tenderly cared for and no death-traps set for them by unthinking disciples, lest they **perish**, He intends that they be cared for according to the means He has actually established for them, rather than misapply what was not intended for them. The false assumption of inheritable sin pushes desperate people to "save" what was not lost. Jesus came to seek and save what was really lost. This chapter is itself illustration, for it was not until the unforgiving servant was apprised of his debt to the king that he really needed to seek mercy, although his debt had been piling up long before that moment. (18:23-35; also notes on 19:13-15)

Right here is our basis of security and contentment: are there any other honors equal to belonging to Jesus Christ? And, if this dream be ours, how could such earthly distinctions enrich us? But, if we were not the special objects of God's concern, to what extent would earthly glories fill up our loss? What would our real loss amount to, if God be ours, if we were only partially to reach earth's highest prizes? Is it then thinkable that all their bright allurement and noblest excellences would even be missed, if God's concern and care for us is guaranteed? (1 Co: 3:21-23)

To this point Jesus has been dealing mainly with the question of not seeking one's own greatness, not being haughty or conceited, but Christ-like or God-like, so as to be able to live in harmony with one another, give oneself to humble tasks and associate with the lowly. (Cf. Ro. 12:16) Now, He must clinch it with that other Kingdom principle of self-forgetfulness which looks not only to its own interests, but also to those of others by seeking the good of an offending brother. (Phil. 2:3f)

V. YOUR HUMILITY AND SENSITIVITY TO OTHERS  
IS MEASURED BY YOUR CONCERN ABOUT OTHERS' SINS:  
DOES IT REALLY MATTER TO YOU IF A BROTHER  
IS LOST TO THE KINGDOM? (18:15-20)

A. MAKE A PERSONAL EFFORT TO GAIN HIM. (18:15)

Although some believe that Matthew is collecting together in this chapter paragraphs out of other incidents, the following considerations show that Jesus is presenting one very tightly connected discourse:

1. From His discussion of an unforgiving mercilessness toward whatever in ourselves is the cause of others' stumbling (18:6-9), He moves to discuss the merciful seeking of a little one who wanders away (18:10-14), and now He pauses to discuss a forgiving mercifulness toward a sinning brother whose stumbling must always excite our patient attempts to bring this little one back. (18:15ff) Now, He must instruct His disciples on how to act when they are not the cause, but the victim, or even the witnesses, of wrongs.
2. Jesus knows that recovering the lost and straying and maintaining the unity of the Church is the most difficult, most demanding job in the Kingdom, so He judges His disciples' greatness (18:1), not by their ability to expose the inferiority of others, but by their demonstrated ability to restore and edify them! So, He is still discussing the criteria of true greatness.
3. What follows is the practical application of the Good Shepherd Parable. There is a natural tendency, **if thy brother sin against thee**, to consider him as less worthy of our attention and care. But his offense is but proof that he is the one sheep that has gone astray, the very alarm that sends one who has a shepherd's heart out to find him. His sin causes him to be looked down upon ("despised," v. 10) as an inferior ("one of these little ones" vv. 6, 10, 14) by the brother against whom he has sinned. Nevertheless, Jesus intends that even our temptations to despise someone should become the signal to recognize him as "one of these little ones" for whom Heaven shows the tenderest concern. Then, guided by our heavenly Father's example, encouraged by the angels' humble ministry and stimulated by Jesus' loving concern, and sharing His shepherd's heart, we hurry off in search of our **brother**.
4. The original dispute out of which this discourse arises was one

which could not help but be marked by a loss of fellowship among the Apostles, by sharp words and angry looks. Irritated, each Apostle no doubt felt that, in varying degrees, the others had sinned against him. They all need instruction on how to deal with offences that touch them personally. To this point they could all see how the Lord's stern warnings against offending others would apply to the others, since others had offended them, but now they must learn how to heal the broken fellowship by removing the offense in the other.

5. The disciples must also learn how to forgive. They cannot even begin rightly to gain their brother unless they are moved by a generous spirit of forgiveness. Without the ability to forgive, no one can ever hope to be great, because greatness and forgiveness are intimately connected. Look at God's magnanimity to pardon our sins. (18:23-35) It is the glory of the truly great to forgive. (Prov. 19:11) But man's ambitions to be great leave him usually too busy with self-interested pursuits to care much about the deepest needs of those who sin.
6. If the disciples have sensed the depth of God's wrath against those who cause others to stumble, they must now see that no hatred on their part can be harbored against those who have severely hurt them. Rather, love must send them to seek and save their lost brothers.

So, Jesus is not introducing new material, but developing ideas already expressed.

**18:15 And if thy brother sin against thee.** If he is **your brother**, then he is bound to you by the closest ties of love and loyalty. (1 Jn. 3:16; Gal. 6:10) **Your brother**, contextually, means "your fellow Christian" (18:17), but must never be thought to exclude from your love and desire for reconciliation your fleshly kin. (Ro. 12:18) In fact, how far would a merciful, reconciling spirit on our part help toward bringing our unconverted neighbors and kinfolk to long for the secret power that moves us, and desire to surrender themselves to our Lord too? (Cf. 5:44-48)

**And if thy brother sin . . .** Significant ancient manuscripts do not include the words "against thee," but their loss to the text does not seriously affect Jesus' meaning. Morgan (*Matthew*, 232) rightly sees that "Our responsibility (for) our sinning brother is not created by the fact that he has wronged us, but by the fact that he has sinned and harmed himself," and, let us add, wronged God. The presence

or absence of this phrase in Greek manuscripts makes no real difference, since a disciple's every sin dishonors his Lord and makes it difficult for his fellow Christians to live a constantly holy life. (Cf. 2 Sam. 12:14: "You have given the enemies of the Lord occasion to blaspheme . . ."; Ro. 12:15; 1 Co. 12:26) Nor does **against thee** have to be in the text to enforce our personal, individual duty to be responsible for every other Christian. (See Eph. 4:25; Heb. 3:13; 10:24f; 12:14f; Ro. 14:19) The Lord is concerned about our attitude toward sin as such, since, too often where someone else's sins do not wound us personally, we can live so easily, so loosely with them. This criminal tolerance of his sins that stands by in silence while he goes down for the third time, disclaiming all the while to be a "self-appointed fault-finder," cannot be a true representation of the spirit of Jesus! (Cf. Eph. 5:11; Gal. 6:1-3) There is no psychological virtue or social grace in refusing to find fault, since many cannot see their own faults. (Cf. Psa. 19:12; Jer. 17:9) Jesus wants to develop in us a love for taking care of others, a love that is superior to the sterile orthodoxy that is only concerned to save itself. (1 Th. 5:11; Phil. 2:4)

**If thy brother sin . . . go.** The great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20; 1 Pt. 5:4) commissions every single disciple to act at once. Whereas the Twelve had been motivated by wrong ambitions, Jesus redirects their ambition, lifting them up to the level of His own ministry to save the lost, and makes them truly great! (See notes on 9:36—10:6; Jn. 4:35) How liberating is this order! When we are burdened down with the problem of frustration caused by sins, both our own and those of others, wondering what to do, Jesus shouts: "Take the initiative!"

1. Earlier He had said, "If your brother has something against you, take the initiative to restore fellowship with him." (Mt. 5:23ff)
2. Now He says, "Although you are innocent, take the initiative anyway. The responsibility to correct the situation does not rest only on him but also on you. You, my peace-making disciple (Mt. 5:9) are in the business to bring about reconciliation, and no logic is good enough to shift onto him your responsibility for getting results."

In other words, when in doubt, attack! (Ro. 12:21) Jesus releases us from the frustrating doubts of stalemates by furnishing practical steps to eliminate the barriers that separate one Christian from another and reunite them in a congregation that loves and cares for each of its members. The Master knew that many of us would be

fearful and double-minded, wavering between "mountains and molehills," real sins and imagined offenses, fearful that we blunder and fail to produce the desired result. His "go" puts holy boldness into us by giving us the confidence that what we do or say will bring lasting good to everyone concerned. His "go" gives us that decisiveness that moves out despite these difficult choices, because He has already decided for us what our course shall be.

If he is *your brother*, then you are a brother to him. Your brotherly spirit involves:

1. Making it plain to him that you have no desire to make him suffer unnecessarily for his offense. (2 Co. 1:23—2:4)
2. Showing your willingness to keep his fault private will do much to persuade him to confess and abandon it, making it as easy as possible to admit his fault and request reconciliation and forgiveness. (Prov. 17:9)
3. Your desire to know accurately the facts and the ground for his attack on you shows him your sense of fairness and that loyalty which seizes adversity as an opportunity to prove your moral obligation to him. (Prov. 17:17)
4. Humility (cf. 1 Ti. 5:1f especially in private relations.)

At this point many are tempted to withdraw into their shell and hope to stop any quarrel by refusing to talk about it, especially with the offending party. Among worldlings that procedure might be the only way to handle wrongs, but what a miserable shortage of brotherly love it would be for Christians to take this route with their brethren! Overlooking affronts is indeed better than harboring resentments, but Jesus intends to "show us a still more excellent way" (1 Co. 12:31—13:13) He desires to unveil a method that will bypass this stoic indifference and eliminate grudging resentment, by inspiring us to intelligent, active concern for the offender's welfare.

**If thy brother sin, go, show him his fault.** There is in the commentaries a carefulness to note that only real sin is referred to here, i.e. only what can convincingly be shown to be such. It must be something that would endanger Christian fellowship, hence not merely some weakness or fault, not mere, trivial irritations, some personal slight or embarrassment, which would be better off simply ignored, swept aside, excused and forgotten. In fact, other Scriptures seem to suggest that there is a class of petty grievances which would be better resolved outside of the disciplinary measures stated in our text.

- Prov. 10:12: "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offences."
- Prov. 12:16: "The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent man ignores an insult."
- Prov. 17:9: "He who forgives (covers) an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter alienates a friend."
- Prov. 19:11: "Good sense makes a man slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."
- 1 Co. 13:5 (TEV) "Love does not keep a record of wrongs." 1 Co. 13:7 affirms that love bears and endures them.

The very notion of Christian forbearance and tolerance implies the existence of minor irritations that strain good fellowship.

It should be pointed out, however, that ignoring an insult, forbearance and tolerance, in Scripture, are not antithetical to action as such. They are the contrary of violence and vengeance, not synonyms of inaction. Loving tolerance and patient forbearance do not ignore petty irritations in every sense, but rather choose wise courses of action to deal with them. The virtue of tolerance is not inaction, but refusal to strike back, harming the offender with self-defensive anger. Wisdom and self-mastery, backed up by these positive qualities, is able calmly to choose the intelligent approach, rather than let the situation degenerate through instinctive brute reactions. This is why Jesus, in wisdom, indicates the one right way to meet the difficulty.

Lives there a Christian or a local congregation that has not faced the dilemma of deciding whether they were being over-sensitive about a triviality or indifferent to a major problem? How trivial must a thing be to justify our calling it an excusable weakness, or how injurious must it get before we think of it as sin? And, the question cannot be decided simplistically by saying, "Let the Bible define *sin*: whatever it calls *sin* is worth being concerned about. Everything else is a matter of opinion." Such over-simplifying merely ignores the fact that, while the Bible is final, definitive and authoritative, it covers far more complicated factors than are intended in the quoted suggestion above. The Bible is clear in furnishing long lists of sins. (Mt. 15:19; Mk. 7:21-23; Ro. 1:28-32; 13:13; 1 Co. 5:10f; 6:9, 10; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:31; 5:3-5; Col. 3:5-9; 1 Ti. 1:9f; 6:4f; 2 Ti. 3:2-9; Tit. 3:3; 1 Pt. 4:3; Rev. 21:8; 22:15 AND many more besides.) Sin is transgression of the law (1 Jn. 3:4), true, but the Christian law is not merely a new code, but a question of attitudes, a government of the Spirit by the law of love. (Gal. 5:5f) Any failure

to love perfectly is sin. (See notes on 5:44-48.) So, the sins of commission are not the only cause for concern, but every instance where love has been omitted is sin. Again, would anyone dare fail to admit that the more subtle sins of the spirit are no less serious than overt acts of the flesh? What about self-satisfied cocksureness that is confident it has nothing more to learn? What about the imperturbable cool certainty of one's superiority over his fellows? Is blindness to one's own faults not culpable? Should we be irritated at others' loving the limelight and delighting in the deference shown them as if it were their natural right? Is moral blindness which stresses ritual over ethics, the letter more than the spirit, the traditional custom over truth, somehow less blameworthy than stealing chickens or a sex scandal? The point is that some things appear on the surface to be but irritations, but in reality there may be root causes far more deadly and serious. It may be criminal negligence to overlook some things that seem trifles, because the wounds we feel which are caused by someone else's offense may be our only way of recognizing that they need help. Cannot their irritating ways be God's way of drawing our attention to the stress they are under, the pain they bear, the frustrations, the hopelessness, in order that we might mercifully minister to them in the way He will indicate? Thus, the Lord would have us show even greater concern for our offending brother AFTER he hurts us than before!

By what criteria do we decide to do something about what appears to us as sin? Jesus answers: **Show him his fault.** (*élenxon autòn*) If the problem is as serious as you think, prove it.

*Eléncho* is a vigorous word with a wide range of classical meanings:

"1. To shame someone, to despise; to reject, to nullify. 2. To convict someone of his crime, mistake or error; to unmask; reprove, criticize or accuse; confute, refute; make ridiculous; furnish proofs, demonstrate, prove; to beat or conquer; to inquire, investigate; put to the test; bring a charge against; decide a question." (Rocci, 598)

Even though many of these definitions flatly contradict the spirit of Christ, there is a core of meaning that is comprehended in them all, and is essential to do successfully what the verb denotes: "to demand an explanation from someone for his actions by proving satisfactorily that he has actually done that of which he is accused." (See Arndt-Gingrich 248f and Thayer, 202f) If it is not the sort of thing that can be demonstrated to be *sin* either to the offender himself or to

objective observers (18:16), then, no matter how much pain his action has caused you, he cannot repent of that about which he has no conviction. (He could certainly regret the pain and seek to heal your hurt, but he has no basis for repentance if he has not objectively sinned.) **Show him his fault**, thus, requires objective proof of fault presented in the spirit of tender love. This may include a rebuke that has real character (Lk. 17:3f), because tenderness in treating him does not mean weakness and uncertainty. Readiness to forgive must always be present, but actual forgiveness cannot occur until the sinner arrives at the point of wanting to be forgiven. Nor can he actually wish to be forgiven until he admits his guilt and repudiates his action, for without repentance, forgiveness is impossible, and, if granted, absurd and immoral.

1. Some of the worst outrages have occurred because of what someone has said, unaware of the meaning their words had for others. Therefore, if we give him the opportunity to learn what effect his expressions produced on us, not only would he be assisted in enlarging upon his original statements but would also see the need to be more careful and precise as he talks to others. To assume without proof from the person himself that he intended to produce the negative effect on our mind that he did, and then tear into him on this basis, is unjust.
2. Sometimes the wrongness of a brother does not involve wicked acts, but impure or incorrect ideas. (Cf. Ro. 16:17f; 2 Ti. 3:5ff; Rev. 2:14-16, 20) Again, private, painstaking presentation of the proper proof is perfect for promoting perception. It is not necessary to confute publicly mistaken concepts that were aired publicly, until every effort has been made privately to correct those who made them. (Cf. Ac. 18:24-28; 19:1-7) After this, of course, we must evaluate publicly doctrines proclaimed publicly. (1 Ti. 4:6, 11; 5:20; 6:2b-5; 2 Ti. 2:14; Tit. 1:9, 13; 2:15) Confutation of those who contradict sound doctrine is proper. (Tit. 1:9; 2 Ti. 2:25)
3. Division or separation from a brother for anything less than disobedience to Christ is itself sinful. (Ro. 16:17f) Therefore, personality clashes and disagreeableness ("agreeing to disagree") which violates Christian tolerance and unity of spirit are themselves sins, hence no excuse for disregarding the Lord's order to **go show him his fault**. Not even prayer can replace obedience to do this.

4. **Showing him his fault**, when done properly, is proof of your love and loyalty to him; failure to do so, of hate. (Lev. 19:17; Prov. 24:23b-26; 25:12; 28:23)
5. Putting our accusation before him saves us from poisoning our lives by silent suffering and brooding. Stating it openly, courageously to the accused may reveal our complaint to be insignificant and trivial. We may not be able to prove it: it may be nothing after all but a case of over-sensitiveness on our part. At this point, since we have no case, because our brother is able to convince us, we may rejoice that he had not sinned after all. Our goal was not the barren triumph of winning a cause or getting satisfaction. Our own personal sense of injury or embarrassment was secondary. What really counted was losing the joy of fellowship with our brother.

So, Jesus' premise, **If thy brother sin**, includes everything that erodes fellowship and may include what would seem to be petty grievances and trivial irritations as well as graver matters. In fact, lack of consideration for the offended can be evidence of deeper insensitivity elsewhere. This is not to make a mountain out of a molehill, but to begin treating a small problem in a manner consonant with its relative gravity. A small shovel is a proper tool for removing a molehill, while only dynamite can blast away a mountain. Drastic action is unnecessary to remove petty problems, but decidedly friendly reproof is in order to nip the problem in the bud. (Lk. 17:3; Lev. 19:17) The other's carelessness may be the tip of the iceberg. True discernment helps us to realize that our brother's visible actions are decided by causes further down inside him and it is these problems which may be the real sins we need to be dealing with.

**Between you and him alone.** God has warned that to share damaging information about another with those who are neither part of the problem nor of the solution creates more problems. (Study Lev. 19:15-18!)

1. To narrate it to others at this point is to involve people who would perhaps never have needed to know about his sin. (Study Eph. 5:3f, 11f.) To expose the offender before granting him the privilege of personally explaining his actions or of confession and repentance, is to convince others that he is not genuinely loved and is, rather, just a thing to be hated and exposed, rather than a brother to be gained. (Prov. 10:12; 1 Pt. 4:8)
2. To relate his sin publicly would perhaps incite the hearers to feel

menaced by him too. There is also the danger of undermining a long-standing friendship between him and those who hear about his sin. (Prov. 16:28)

NOTE: Paul's rebuke of Peter at Antioch was never a private question but a public landslide involving a number of Christians. (Gal. 2:11-14)

3. It unnecessarily exposes you to being thought of as a slanderer and a betrayer of secrets of everyone involved, especially by the one who offended you. (Prov. 11:12f; 25:8-10) Our plainest, most objective tale of his offense, told to a third person, becomes, in that person's mind, an automatic exaggeration of the reality, merely because we are telling primarily the offense and he may be unaware of the other's virtues and certainly his motives. Then, when the truth later comes out, all who passed on the supposedly "objective facts" will be exposed as guilty of slanderous gossip.
4. To fail to discuss the offense privately with the interested party means to rush into court with partial information and superficial, one-sided views, whereas the supposedly offending brother may be in the right and present valid objections and irrefutable arguments we never thought of. (Prov. 25:8-10; 18:13) So, to ask him in private for explanations is to do ourselves the favor of rightly understanding the situation before going off half-cocked, causing untold damage to ourselves, our brother and possibly others. It is true justice to look at a question from the point of view of everyone involved; any other approach is partial.
5. The only possible justification Jesus gives for informing others about the situation is when asking them to join us as witnesses of our second effort to redeem our brother. (18:16)

If he hear you, several results are yours:

1. **You have gained your brother.** This is the fundamental purpose. Surprisingly, the motivation Jesus now places before His listeners is not merely or only the salvation of a man for his own sake, as noble a goal as this is. Rather, He pleads with His disciples to imagine the value to themselves involved in restoring a brother to righteousness. Morgan (*Matthew*, 232) feels this keenly:

When presently we have done with the shadows and mists of the little while, we shall understand in the light of the undying ages that if we have gained one man we shall be richer than

if we have piled up all the wealth of the world and never won a human soul. What a blessed thing to gain a man, to possess him for oneself, for the fellowship of friends, for the enterprises of the Church, for the programme of high heaven.

2. **If he hear you,** it will mean you used true words fitly spoken. (Prov. 25:11f, 15) Your success in bringing this dangerous situation to a happy solution means you are growing toward that greatness Jesus longs to see mature in you! Your persuasiveness helped guide vital truth around any mental roadblocks he might have had.
3. Your problem is settled, no one else has been hurt by it, and you are at peace.
4. **If he hear you,** he will prove his conviction of sin by admitting it and sorrowfully begging your pardon. His repentance will be apparent as he seeks to make amends as far as possible (Lk. 19:1-10) as well as in the fruits of a penitent life lived thereafter. (Lk. 3:7-14) Unless he accepts repentance and restitution as the conditions of forgiveness, forgiveness is a morally spineless farce. However, Jesus offers no blanket guarantee he will not sin against you again. (See further notes at 18:21; cf. Lk. 17:3, 4)

Therefore ALL PROBLEMS based on a personal offense involving only two people are to be solved at the person-to-person level.

1. If you are successful in recovering the brother at this level, the problem is solved.
2. Only if you are not successful at this level are you then justified in involving other helpers.

It may well be that the definition of what is petty and what is major is only relative to this success or failure at the personal level. Any failure of love is serious, but may not be serious enough to justify bringing in others until the single disciple is no longer able to cope with it alone, i.e. he cannot get the offender to recognize, regret and repudiate his sin.

#### B. GET OTHER HELPERS AS WITNESSES (18:16)

18:16 **But if he hear thee not.** If God Himself cannot make people hear Him against their will, how much more problematic is it when a disciple attempts to recover his sinning brother? If his will is left free, he can continue to refuse to be convinced. No compulsion can force

him. However, the war is not lost merely because of an unfavorable first skirmish. **Take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established.** Curiously, Jesus did not specify the duties of these witnesses, perhaps intending to leave His statement general enough to permit flexibility according to the circumstances:

1. Since Jesus' reason is practically a verbal quotation of Dt. 19:15 (LXX), it would seem that these witnesses must have seen the sin committed which requires this effort. The Mosaic Law required a plurality of witnesses against anyone incriminated. (Dt. 17:6; Nu. 35:30; cf. 2 Co. 13:1; 1 Ti. 5:19) Paul's reprimand of the Corinthians was based on such a plurality of witnesses. (1 Co. 1:10f; 5:1; 7:1; 11:18; 16:17f) The problem arises whether Jesus intends His words to refer to proof before the offending brother that others know about and can substantiate his guilt, or whether He means that the offending brother would be more readily convinced, since he knows that these two or three others will, by their presence here, become witnesses to stand before the Church to give their testimony there of what takes place here. The latter is the better choice, since Jesus did not specify that they be witnesses of the sin, but rather implied that their ability to confirm every word would grow out of their being present here.
2. Just as two or three gathered together form a small fellowship (18:19, 20); so here, the opportunity to talk things over in the presence of a few thoughtful, tactful acquaintances creates a new atmosphere in which the problem can be aired with a greater amount of fair-minded objectivity. The others' own impartiality is to assure the sinning brother of fair treatment. By their presence they become witnesses to the wronged man's efforts to recover the other, and attest that the one has sincerely made every effort to convince the other, and whether the sinner responded positively to his attempt. They can certify whether the attempts were made in a harsh, vengeful, demanding manner, or whether they represent an honestly Christian effort to restore fellowship. It may even happen that they realize that the accused is actually innocent while the accuser is clearly in the wrong. Therefore, they can confirm or deny that a real sin is involved, not merely a question of opinions or relative judgment. If the sin was something said, they can verify what he actually intended to say. They can convince the complainer that he has no real basis for taking offense, especially where he

has inflated an imagined hurt all out of proportion.

While the obvious purpose of other witnesses is their testimony to what transpires during the encounter, the spirit and approach of these brethren must be the same as when the first brother went it alone: to gain the brother by showing him his fault in order to bring him to repentance, but done in the same brotherly comradeship shown by the first. From the following verse we learn that the offender must "hear them." Thus, they, too, may add their voice to appeal to him to abandon his sin. The collective warmth of their love is intended to melt his heart in contrite tears and thanksgiving that people cared enough about him to come looking for him, even when he did not know or care that he was lost.

### C. ENLIST THE STRENGTH OF THE CONGREGATION (18:17-20)

18:17 **And if he refuse to hear them,** he has already failed a test that determines just how sincerely determined he is to remain with Christ and His people. He has not shown that humility and concern for his brethren that is absolutely essential to remain in the Kingdom. (18:3-5) Regardless of how valid he considered his self-justifications, the appeals of his brethren should have outweighed them all, and now he needs to repent more than ever! Jesus assumes now that the offended brother (18:15) and the witnesses (18:16) are dealing with what any objective Christian observer would unquestionably call "sin." Even if, earlier, the quarrel between the two had been a question of over-sensitiveness and trifles, the fact that one of them refused to bend to the loving efforts at reconciliation of his fellow Christians is evidence of deadly sin. (Jas. 3:17; He is not "open to reason"; Tit. 1:7: he is "self-willed, arrogant" = 2 Pt. 2:10) The root cause of the previous irritation has now been uncovered and what might have appeared on the surface to be a harmless fault has turned out to have roots deep in self-complacency and pride that cares more about itself than fellowship, reconciliation, the Church and Christ. From this standpoint, the procedure Jesus prescribes does deal with a problem of first importance, since the life of the individual sinner and the strength of the Church is at stake. If that brotherly love that holds one's Christian brethren dearer than one's own self is missing, there is an open wound that no amount of brotherly patience and forbearance can heal! Can this be left to fester untreated?

**Tell it to the church.** Here, for the second time in his book (cf. 16:18), Matthew uses the word *church*, which, because the Gospel containing this reference appeared after the establishment of Christ's new fellowship, must refer to that and no other. Plummer's objection (*Matthew*, 253) is plainly mistaken when he insists:

Evidently "the Church" here cannot mean the Christian Church which Christ intends to build (16:18). It means the Jewish assembly, and probably the local assembly, the elders and a congregation of the synagogue in the place where the parties live . . . The directions here given are applicable to the Christian community, but, at the time, they must have been spoken of a community of Jews.

This forgets that the establishment of the Church of Christ was but a short half-year away. (See on 16:13, 18.) This fact, in the context of the hurried, busy ministry of the following six months, would have left little leisure for the settled kind of life in a Jewish community such an interpretation of these steps would require. Then, after the founding of the Church, there could be little or no application of this procedure to a community of Jews. If the Lord meant "synagogue," why did He avoid using the word instead of *church* (*ekklesia*)? No, He speaks proleptically, by anticipation, i.e. representing the future fellowship as if it were even then a present reality. However, it would be mistaken to believe that Jesus' words could have no immediate meaning for the Twelve or for other disciples, since they were thus given concrete practical direction for solving their quarrels even then as they grew in the immediate fellowship of Christian discipleship. Further, these words anticipatory to the establishment of Christ's Church presumed its imminent realization, hence offered valid grounds for beginning to think and act in the manner prescribed.

1. **Tell it to the church**, then, means that the fellowship of believers must hear the accusation, the evidence for it and the progressive attempts to rectify it. To enlarge the circle of those who know about the problem, even to the peripheral limits of the believing community, is not done with the intention of making an exposé, but has the purpose of involving the full, persuasive power of the whole family of God. For the person who can be recovered, the fact that an increasing number of decent, godly friends are finding out about his sins, people whose good opinion he cherishes, now

leaves him at the most critical moment of his entire spiritual life: can he fight the dearest, best friends he has, people who care enough about him to plead with him to abandon his self-justifications, and who obviously love him even though they all know all about his problem? This, admittedly, is powerful, public pressure, but absolutely essential, given the present state of the case. Shame is an appropriate motivation. (2 Th. 3:14f) But the fear of loss of fellowship can only be real and meaningful where he has felt the power and reality of good fellowship! If you have not been having fellowship with a brother, you cannot make him feel the loss of it through disfellowshipping!

2. **Tell it to the church** implies that our personal problems are not to be dragged before the courts of the unbelievers. Legalistic, Christless argument cannot really solve the issues at stake, because pagans have nothing on their lawbooks or in their procedures that can give the kind of sentence or settle the problems the way Jesus intends. (Study Paul's arguments in 1 Co. 6:1-8!) It is only when we examine our problems in the light of Christian love, earnest prayer and heart-gripping appeal in the name of Christ, that there is any real hope of Christian solutions.
3. The Church must act as a united group. (1 Co. 5:4)
  - a. The congregation must agree that the specific transgression in question is really wrong. There can be no division among the members if the leaders have taught God's standards. No congregational agreement can ever be expected over matters of opinion. Unanimity is only possible among Christians where God has spoken and they know what He says and respect Him for it. (1 Co. 5:11, 13; Ro. 16:17-20; 2 Th. 3:6-15; Tit. 3:8-11; Cf. 1 Ti. 6:3-5; 5:19f)
  - b. Should objections arise to this disciplinary action because of the existence of other undisciplined folk in the congregation, then unity must be achieved by dealing honestly and Scripturally with those problems as well. They must never be left as protective cover for any sinners. (1 Ti. 5:19-22)
  - c. **Hear the church** means that the Church must speak, giving him directions for correcting himself and removing the scandal. This means that the Church will speak through its recognized leaders who act as spokesmen for the entire group, but the sinner must feel the entire weight of the congregation, for only "the punishment by the majority is enough". (2 Co. 2:6; cf. 1 Co. 5:4; "When you are assembled.")

4. **The Church** can continue to labor for his restoration even after excommunication.
  - a. An excluded member is not to be considered an enemy but admonished as a brother. (2 Th. 3:14f) Total abandonment is out of the question for the Church that accepts the challenge to break his heart with a love that refuses to give up. At least, face the facts and hope for the best.
  - b. There remains the corporate responsibility to reaffirm the Church's love which the believers have never withdrawn even though their fellowship is denied him as punishment. (Cf. 2 Co. 2:6-8, 11) We are never ordered to hate "pagans" and "outcasts" among which he has taken up active membership by his attitude.
5. The final court of appeal for the Christian is the congregation, **the Church**, whose immediate, personal contact with the erring member is felt most keenly, not because of its authority to enforce boycotts, but because of the immediacy and power of its persuasive personal love. Lenski (*Matthew*, 703) argues:

Those who would place above (the congregation) a still higher authority: the pope, a bishop, some church board, a house of bishops, or a synod composed of clerics, or those combined with lay delegates, go beyond the word of Christ and the teachings of the apostles . . . False greatness and authority have often been arrogated to themselves by high officials in the church who have robbed the congregations of their divine authority; and congregations have been remiss in exercising the Lord's will; but that will stands as it is.

**And if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican.** If he willfully and perversely refuses to comply with what every one of his brethren considers right and reasonable, how can he be considered as belonging to this congregation? His obstinate attitude is divisive, separatist, dismembering, because he resists every try at dealing with the mini-schism separating him from one brother! Why should this virtual pagan contaminate the rest by his obstinate impenitence? (1 Co. 5:6; Gal. 5:8, 9) How can he be embraced further, when his whole demeanor is that of a heathen (*Gentile*) and an excommunicate (*the publican*)? From this standpoint, any action taken by the Church is but the formal recognition of the stand that he has taken by his blatantly willful refusals. This separation of the sinner from the congregation is the last resort

of hearts broken over their failure to restore him. After all, doctors do not make their rounds of housecalls planning amputations! They, and so must we, desire to heal the whole body.

**Let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican.** This sad sentence is the Lord's verdict whereby the Church must exercise her authority to maintain herself divinely pure and demonstrate to everyone that she does not tolerate sin. (1 Ti. 5:20ff) He must be thought of and treated as having the identical relation of fellowship to the Church that those renegades and pagans had to the Jewish community, i.e. none! If *Gentiles* were not considered the people of God, and if *publicans* are not the sort of people one hobnobbed with, *let him be so to you*.

If this decree sounds merciless, let the impenitent brother's mercilessness be seen for the injustice it is. He tenaciously clutches his yellowed reasons for not giving in, justifying himself to the bitter end. Why should the Lord's Church show him an unjust pity, when the Lord Himself has here condemned him? Further, He will condemn him even more severely for his mercilessness. (18:23-35) Lastly, when he flagrantly disobeys Jesus' order to "go and be reconciled with (his) brother" who has something against him, how can he escape the punishment of paying the last penny? (Mt. 5:23-26) When people continue sinning by repeated ingratitude, constant deceit and flagrant dishonesty, they make the kind of fellowship and affection that Jesus has in mind not only impossible, but unjustifiable. Could Jesus maintain arm-in-arm fellowship with the scribes and Pharisees who blocked the Kingdom of God to others and refused to enter themselves? Could He be the affectionate companion to the wily Herod or the greedy Caiaphas? Even so, this severe sentence has as its goal the salvation of the person excommunicated. (1 Co. 5:5; 1 Ti. 1:20; 1 Pt. 4:6) In fact, the moment he is outside the shadow and shelter of the Church fellowship, he becomes a person to bring to the Lord with whom alone he can find unbelievable grace and total forgiveness. The hope is slight (Heb. 6:4-6), but it is there. Consider these classic words by Bruce (*Training*, 204f):

The words . . . also plainly show that Christ desired His church on earth, as nearly as possible, to resemble the church in heaven: to be holy in her membership, and not an indiscriminate congregation of righteous men and unrighteous men, of believers and infidels, of Christians and reprobates . . . Such rigour, pitiless in appearance, is really merciful to all parties. It is merciful to the

faithful members of the church, because it removes from their midst a mortifying limb, whose presence imperils the life of the whole body. Scandalous open sin cannot be tolerated in any society without general demoralization ensuing; least of all in the church, which is a society whose very *raison d'être* ("justification for existence") is the culture of Christian virtue. But the apparently pitiless rigour is mercy even towards the unfaithful who are the subjects thereof. For to keep scandalous offenders inside the communion of the church is to do your best to damn their souls, and to exclude them ultimately from heaven. On the other hand, to deliver them to Satan may be, and it is to be hoped will be, but giving them a foretaste of hell that they may be saved from hell-fire for ever . . . It is this hope which comforts those on whom the disagreeable task of enforcing church censures falls in the discharge of their painful duty. They can cast forth evildoers from the communion of the saints with less hesitation, when they know that as "publicans and sinners" the excommunicated are nearer the kingdom of God than they were as church members, and when they consider that they are still permitted to seek the good of the ungodly, as Christ sought the good of all the outcasts of His day; that it is still in their power to pray for them, and to preach to them . . . though they may not put into their unholy hands the symbols of the Saviour's body and blood.

Since Christ's intention behind every part of this discourse is to anticipate and guarantee Himself a fellowship of believers that would be worthy of His name because of their holiness, love and unity, He rightly demands that we never tolerate any circumstance in which a break-down in personal relationships exists in the Christian community. This is why the aforementioned procedure is the only way to deal with our fellow disciples. Can there be any other right way to treat them, when the Prince of Peace Himself reveals this one as perfectly suited to encourage peace and unity in His body?

#### 1. THE SPECIAL WEIGHT OF THE COMMON JUDGMENT OF COMMON BELIEVERS (18:18)

18:18 **What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.** (See fuller notes at 16:19.) This majestic declaration

affirms simply that God Himself will recognize Church decisions rightly taken! Why this should be true for the lowly congregation becomes apparent when its action to expel the impenitent member is seen as an act of faith. Since God has indicated His will in His Word, faith is discerning what God plans to do about a particular situation on the basis of what He said, and then playing one's own part in conformity with it. This avoids presumption, because the Church on earth lets God tell her what He intends to do in a given situation. Thus, Jesus gives the Church the go-ahead to act with confidence, aware that God will be faithful to the commitment expressed in His Word. We may be sure that this is the proper meaning for the following reasons:

1. **Ye shall bind:** mark that plural, for all the Apostles are in it. (Mk. 9:35) Here Jesus repeats, but this time addressing it to all, what He had already affirmed to Peter. (16:19) But, let it be said, He takes nothing away from that Apostle to give it here to all, since, as we noticed at that text, what was said to Peter was addressed to him as typical Christian. Consequently, what is here guaranteed for all the Apostles is but the normal, expected out-working of what had been affirmed of that model believer. There (in 16:19) He was working with the first model Church member; here (in 18:18) He deals with twelve of them.
2. **Ye,** while indisputably referring to the Twelve present, listening to Jesus' discourse, means all the body of His disciples. (Mt. 18:1 says that "his disciples" raised the problem which evoked this discourse. Moreover, Matthew's purpose seems to be to underline the typical discipleship of the Apostles by avoiding the word "apostle" except in 10:2. So this "ye" is addressed to disciples.) In fact, the Twelve and a few hundred hardy souls were all the "Church" He then possessed. Pentecost would begin to correct this, but until that time came He spoke to the only people He had. The point is that He is not conferring on the Apostles powers so exclusive that the whole Church can in no sense participate in them.
3. **Binding and loosing,** as noted in the fuller notes at 16:19, refers to the Church's teaching responsibility to decide authoritatively on what is to be thought or done about a given case. This is true because THE APOSTLES BELONG TO THE CHURCH. Along with other helpers, Christ has given them to her for her complete outfitting. (Eph. 4:7-16) Through them AS PART OF THE CHURCH He revealed

God's will to the rest of the Church. (Jn. 14:26; 15:26f; 16:13-15) So, only whereinsofar as she is guided by the Word of God given through the Apostles, the Church is really authorized to do or say ANYTHING. No one has any authority to speak for God on earth but what Christ has granted through His Holy Spirit. But since these very Apostolic directives are perfectly in accord with God's will, their application by the Church is approved by Him and binding. It cannot be repeated too often or too vigorously: NO CHURCH CAN RIGHTLY CALL ITSELF APOSTOLIC THAT DOES NOT HUMBLY SUBMIT TO THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE AS THIS IS DOCUMENTED IN THEIR WRITINGS. BUT TO THE DEGREE THAT IT DOES, IT CAN! (See Notes on 10:19, 20, 40.)

So there is a sense in which only Christ's authorized, inspired spokesmen *bind* and *loose*. But these established once for all the guidelines whereby every single congregation of Christ can, without recourse to any other authority, *bind* and *loose* by specific application of the inspired doctrine to particular cases; and, Jesus says, God will back it up. It is in this sense that Morgan (*Matthew*, 234) is right to say:

That is the Church's ethical authority in the world. The Church teaches the standard of morality, and what the Church says is binding, is binding; and what the Church says is not, is not. But that is only true when we link it with what follows—the Church gathering in the name of Christ.

Such authority, thus, is locally and congregationally expressed. (See on 18:19, 20.)

From the foregoing it should be clear that it is not a question of the unanimous vote of the church determining God's actions, but a following of Christ's divine guidance in the midst of His Church that humbly seeks to discover what her Lord desires and then seeks God's help to do what He asks. (18:19, 20) The actions of the body of believers then conform to God's will only if they follow the pattern He has expressed authoritatively through His Apostles and prophets, and He is glad to recognize their decisions made on this basis. And why should He not? The Church is obeying Him!

Jesus obviously put this declaration here as a serious warning to that defiant sinner who refuses to bow to the Church's exhortations and as comfort to anyone who abandons his sinful conduct. Nobody may have any further doubt that when they are dealing

with a local body of Christians, they face final authority. They cannot hope to go over their heads and be tried by some higher or other court. The grave weight of an impartial decision of the local Christians is not something a genuine disciple would nonchalantly ignore or arrogantly disobey. In fact, this promise endows the act of excommunication with special solemnity for the believing fellowship and with ominous rumblings of eternal judgment for the offender. There is eternal consequence in the censure righteously administered by those responsible for the ejection of the impenitent. But, bless God, there is here a solid guarantee of divine mercy to those who bow to exhortations of the smallest congregation of Christ's people.

The extension of such powers to all the Church is the more impressive in this context where Jesus is deliberately discussing greatness and rank in the Kingdom. This fact implies, therefore, that Peter the man had no ecclesiastical supremacy or exclusive right to govern the Church any more than they all.

## 2. THE SPECIAL POWER OF THE COMMON PRAYER OF COMMON BELIEVERS (18:19)

18:19 **If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven.** Why *two of you*? Because two is the least possible number of people required to create a fellowship of any sort.

What will be the special application of this declaration to the problem of marriage where two people are to agree on earth? (See on 19:3-12.)

Christians are people in fellowship together, and seek to agree on God's will together. Autonomy, independence and individualism are the ultimate heresies. (Ro. 14:17; 2 Co. 5:15; 1 Th. 5:11; 1 Co. 12:21; 2 Co. 3:4, 5) The *two of you* could be those two brethren who earlier (18:15) were at odds with each other, but now, restored to fellowship and agreement, unite in prayer to God. They have the assurance of being heard about whatever else they request because they have honestly sought to obey God in what for them might have been the hardest question of their life, i.e. repentance and restitution, forgiveness and restored harmony with a brother. (Mt. 6:12, 14f; cf. 1 Pt. 3:7, "that your prayers be not hindered . . .") And if the smallest possible congregation is sure of God's audience, certainly

the united prayers of a larger congregation are certain to be heard. This is critical, because the more authority Christ gives to His community (18:18), the more imperative it is that the brethren seek His guidance and depend upon His instructions and act responsibly as in the presence of Christ. (18:20; 2 Co. 2:17; 12:19; 2 Ti. 4:1) This stands in counterpoint to the faithlessness and failure evident earlier due to prayerlessness. (17:17, 19-21; Mk. 9:29)

**If two of you shall agree.** Jesus is addressing disciples caught in the tawdry parade of self-importance that disparaged others' importance and usefulness to God. In this connection, then, He is flailing their jealous disputing: "So long as you agree to disagree, you will be powerless. God cannot take your prayers seriously, because to answer your prayers, He must frustrate others, while to give ear to someone else would leave you disappointed. For the prayers of one to succeed, God must necessarily work the downfall of another of His children. No, you must wipe out your own selfish individualism, come to agreement among yourselves before praying. An egotistic focusing on your own personal ambitions and necessities pretends that the world be arranged for you personally. Prayer, to be effective, must be with a sense of belonging to a fellowship, as members of a community and for the Church as a whole. So, if you agree in heart and mind, God's power will be yours!" Remember how Jesus' prayer for the unity of His disciples (Jn. 17) contrasted with the Twelve's feud about precedence (Lk. 22:24-27) and called for the lesson on humility (footwashing, Jn. 13:1-17) The agreement intended cannot refer to perfect unanimity on matters of opinion, otherwise we would never pray successfully. Christians, rather, must consent on the goals they pray for and be united in altruistic dedication to reach them. (1 Co. 1:10) **Two . . . on earth** stands in contrast to **Father . . . in heaven**. The omnipotence of the Almighty stands ready to meet the many needs of His people. **On earth** jogs our memory to recall that we are dependent in this earthly condition and that we need each other for mutual help, as much as we need Him and His heavenly power.

**Anything that they shall ask, it shall be done.** In this apparently blank-check promise, it is understood that what these agree to pray for together will be what God desires according to His expressions of His will in His Word. (Cf. 1 Jn. 5:14f; Mt. 26:39, 42) In fact, unless these two permit themselves to be guided by God's Spirit, even close agreement on spiritual matters would be impossible anyway. Naturally, their request must harmonize with other conditions

of acceptable prayer. (Jas. 1:5-8; 4:3; 5:16-18) Since Christians' agreement in prayer grows out of their meeting together in His name (18:20), it is clear that they pray "in His name," consequently depending upon His intercession on their behalf.

### 3. THE SPECIAL HONOR OF THE COMMON MEETING OF COMMON BELIEVERS (18:20)

**18:20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.** *For* introduces the explanation why harmonious praying is so effective: Jesus Himself will be present and personally interested! It also explains why what the believing fellowship binds or looses on earth shall also be recognized by God: Jesus Himself acts with His people as they obey His directives, seeking the blessing of His presence and help. **Gathered together in my name** means "gathered and thinking of me, i.e. so that I am the reason for their assembling." (Arndt-Gingrich, 575)

**Two or three**—think of that! Greatness in the Kingdom is not measured by the strength of numbers. The Lord has always taken particular delight in using a mere handful of dedicated, usually insignificant people to accomplish an incredible amount of good. (Jer. 9:23f; Psa. 8:2)

1. Moses, that herdsman from the backside of the desert, with a shepherd's rod routed the might of Egypt and freed a nation of slaves. (Ex. 1-15)
2. Israel, with the blowing of rams' horns made fortified enemy cities collapse. (Jos. 6) Thus, one nation began the conquest of many nations mightier than they. (Dt. 4:37ff)
3. Gideon, with but 300 men armed with torches and jars, defeated unbelievable hordes of enemies in one battle. (Jdg. 7, 8)
4. Samson with an ass's jawbone slew a thousand men. (Jdg. 15)
5. The stripling David, with sling and stone, felled the proud Goliath. (1 Sa. 17, esp. vv. 46, 47)
6. The intrepid Jonathan and his armor-bearer pushed to the attack and started a rout that ended in victory for Israel. (Contrast 1 Sa. 14:6 with 13:7, 16, 22!)
7. Elijah alone, by prayer, brought on an economic crisis; humbled the king, then challenged 850 prophet-priests that had led God's people into apostacy and won when fire fell from heaven. (1 Kgs. 17, 18)

8. Hezekiah, despite crippling psychological warfare and certain defeat threatening, defended Jerusalem with prayer! (Isa. 36, 37)
9. The 120 praying disciples (Ac. 1:12-14) and the 3,000 (Ac. 2) were but a handful facing Jewish bigotry and all the powers of paganism, but the events of all later centuries have justified their faith.

However, as in these classic cases in the history of Israel, so in the Church, the greatness is not in the minimal number per se, as if God has some partiality for meagerness. Rather, the minimum is His choice to show that "the battle is the Lord's," and that "the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Co. 4:7) **Two or three** united with the Lord are already a majority! It may have been to teach them this, that Jesus sent out His disciples "two by two." (Lk. 10:1; Mk. 6:7) What victories they had too!

The *two or three gathered together* must be in agreement. (18:19) The spiritual strength of *two or three* united in purpose is greater than twelve or many thousands sundered by infighting and jealousies. It is the unity around Christ that assures us of His presence and direction. The actual number of believers met together is of no consequence, since Jesus' purpose here is to underline in the most emphatic way possible the significance of brotherly love, understanding and unity, for if the *two or three*, united around Jesus, be mighty, then of what would legions of Christians be capable? Jesus is not interested in small numbers due to lack of love and a breakdown in understanding, but in humble harmony and mutual love living in the highest number possible.

Grandeur in the Kingdom does not depend upon the mass assembly of all of God's people in one place for a show of power. The electrifying psychological effect that can be generated in mass rallies is not essential for Jesus' disciples to experience the power of Christ at work among them. No more pilgrimages to Jerusalem to be able to savor the presence of God. Here is His grand concept of the new temple of God. As Morgan (*Matthew*, 233) portrays it,

How spacious and gracious and wonderful it is! First of all it breaks down all idea of localized meeting place with God. We have gained a temple everywhere by the loss of the temple in a locality. Mark the significance of it. It is not the temple that makes the place of worship, but the gathering "in my name."

Gone are the yearly feasts when obligatory worship gathered half-hearted millions at an earthly worship-center. Without being opposed to mass assemblies, Jesus upgrades even the smallest of them. Unlike those who put forth their finest only on certain "grand occasions," Jesus esteems even the minimum number of followers met in His honor to be a festal assembly, and He pours all the fulness and grandeur of Himself into it!

Nor is importance and usefulness to God based on being among "the chosen few in the upper echelons" or the elite at the top of the pile, because where just a handful of disciples, however humble and unknown, meet in Jesus' name, the Lord Himself considers them important enough to concern Himself personally with THEM! The insignificance of the tiniest group is no objection to Him. Here is the "little ones" theme again. (18:3-6, 10, 14) So far from despising or ignoring them, He honors every assembly, enriching it with His gracious power to bestow authority and effectiveness upon all they undertake for His sake. (Rev. 1:13; Eph. 1:23) He is still serving the least and the weakest to make them mighty! In fact, concentrated in them is now something more than their collective human strength. There is all the concentrated might of God in Christ who dwells in their hearts by faith. (Eph. 1:19; 3:16-21; 6:10ff) But notice that the incisive influence and invincible authority of Christ invested in His Church is not entrusted to a hierarchy, nor to a tightly organized and neatly structured body. Rather, all the power of the living Christ is in every single cluster of believers wherever in the world they are met together to worship and serve Him.

Notice how positively Jesus ends this section on corrective discipline: the goal to be sought is every member united with each other and with Christ in the midst. But the unity with Christ is the supreme issue, not the formation of a mutual admiration society without Him. Any ecumenicity satisfied with a false emphasis on great numbers of partially converted people is here rebuked by the Lord who can be found in the smallest assembly of two or three genuinely dedicated to Him!

The disciples who originally heard this statement must have been puzzled over the physical contradiction this promise entails: "How can Jesus be physically present in so many scattered groups, however small, united for prayer in His name?" If logically followed through, such a presence would imply physical absence in all but one of the places on earth where He would be physically present with His disciples. Otherwise, His presence, if really taken seriously, must

JESUS TRAINS THE TWELVE IN PERSONAL RELATIONS 18:20, 21

be spiritual. Their minds would be jarred to learn of His physical absence before they understood the meaning, purpose and wisdom of the ascension. However, during the Last Supper discourses, He would explain how He intended to be *in the midst of them* for that period in which He would be physically absent from the world. (Study John 14-17.) After the coming of the Holy Spirit, therefore, the Apostles must have drawn great comfort from these words which, in retrospect, sounded so much like the great Scriptural assurances of Javéh in the midst of His people to bless, console, direct and protect them. (See Gen. 28:15; Dt. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; Judg. 6:15f; 7:7; Psa. 20:7; 46:5; Isa. 1:9; 7:14; 8:10; 12:6; Jer. 14:9; Hos. 11:9; Zeph. 3:5, 12, 15, 17; Zech. 2:10) Despite the smallness or weakness of God's people, despite their being despised as insignificant by the world, God had promised to be really, however spiritually, present in their midst. (See also Mt. 18:10; Lk. 12:32.) The disciples would therefore experience what it means to believe Jesus to be "Emmanuel—God with us!" (Mt. 1:23; Isa. 7:14) Barnes (*Matthew-Mark*, 188) senses the global implications of this:

Nothing could more clearly prove that Jesus must be omnipresent, and, of course, be God. Every day, perhaps every hour, two or three, or many more, may be assembled in every city or village . . . in almost every part of the world—and in the midst of them all is Jesus the Saviour. Millions thus at the same time, in every quarter of the globe, worship in His name, and experience the truth of the promise that He is present with them. It is impossible that He should be in all these places and not be God.

VI. YOUR HUMILITY AND SENSITIVITY TO OTHERS  
IS JUDGED BY YOUR READINESS TO FORGIVE  
OR SHOW MERCY. (18:21-35)

A. PETER'S QUESTION: "HOW MANY TIMES FORGIVE?"  
(18:21)

18:21 **Then came Peter, and said unto him.** With the same freedom that John earlier broke into this discourse to ask his question about the isolated miracle-worker (Mk. 9:38-41), Peter may have arisen from his seat to confront the Master with what he may have thought was a limitation on something said earlier. There is no need

to assume that Matthew glued the following section onto the sermon because of its supposed appropriateness. (See also on 18:35; 19:1.) **Then came Peter** may be nothing but a glimpse into the freedom permitted in Jesus' class sessions.

**Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times?** This question is based on Jesus' statement in verse 15. Beyond what Jesus had said there (v. 15), was there a deeper problem getting to Peter? Had he been personally abused by comments from the sidelines by some of the others, jealous of his apparent promotions and prominence? At Caesarea Philippi Jesus had indeed promised him a key role in the establishing of the Kingdom. Were others, bitter at him because his presumed importance blocked their own hope of glory, casting aspersions on his worthiness? It is not impossible that some personal uncertainty made unlimited forgiveness seem extreme to Peter. There are two sides to his question: mentality and mechanics.

1. **MENTALITY.** Since the wronged person who attempts to recover his sinning brother must approach him in the spirit of forgiveness and without any intention to be vindicated, Peter may be wondering whether there should not be some limit to this open-ended long-suffering and forgiveness. The basic fallacy of Peter's question is that it assumes that forgiveness robs us of the right to cease forgiving and start demanding justice at least in certain cases. This is why Jesus' supporting story (18:23-34) must illustrate how God's demand that we forgive does not ask us to surrender a proper right to vengeance. Rather, His demand is based on the fact that, due to our own sin and need for mercy, we never possessed that right in the first place. The very act of asking that justice be waived and mercy granted in our own case is an implicit justification of mercy in all similar circumstances, like the case of our offending brother. There is just no time when we may claim a right to be vindictive. (Ro. 12:19) To cease forgiving and start demanding justice for others is tantamount to asking that justice be demanded in our own case too. But to beg mercy for ourself and justice for others is a hypocrisy that a holy God cannot overlook.
2. **MECHANICS.** Since, according to Jesus' formula, *if your brother hear you* brings the controversy to an end, Peter, seeing the possibility that some brother might repeat his sin, asks, "At what time should I simply stop forgiving my brother and bring the grievance before other witnesses, before taking the question before the

assembly?" Jesus' answer will imply that if this be the case, where the offender repents, there need be no second or third step in the reconciliation (cf. Lk. 17:3f) since all procedure would be blocked at the first step in an indefinite cycle of sinning and forgiveness involving only the two original brothers. (Mt. 18:15, 22) The only exception to Jesus' formula of forgiveness is, "If he does not listen."

In fact, delight in repeating sins may be the real sin of which the others are but superficial symptoms and, until this is eradicated by confession and forgiveness, the first step toward true reconciliation has not yet been really made. Jesus is not covering the diabolical desire to repeat the other sins "just to see how much that fool brother can take or forgive." No one is asked to be taken for a fool by another Christian under the guise of easy forgiveness, for just as soon as it becomes apparent to the offended brother that the other is stepping on his toes, not merely by excusable accident, but for love of tormenting, then this root problem is the sin with which the offended must deal. If he does not listen at this level, then the question should be aired before witnesses. (18:16) The secret to Jesus' meaning is to get at the right sin the first time.

**Until seven times?** In later Judaism the Talmudic rule only admitted forgiving one's offender three times, basing its argument on Amos 1:3 and Job 33:29, as if God Himself only forgave so far and no more: "Should a mere mortal be more amenable to forgive than the Almighty?!" It is not impossible that this same bad exegesis and grudging spirit had roots in thinking and practice in Peter's time too. If so, he had doubled the cautious, calculating scribal scrimping of love and even added one more time of forgiveness for good measure—was this not enough? But what went wrong?

1. Peter was moving in the true spirit of legalistic formalism, since he sought ANY numerical, outside limit at which mercy and forgiveness must stop. Rather than manifest a godly spirit, this is really a vindictive temper that wants to know how much longer it has to forbear before letting the offender feel the full brunt of its vendetta.
2. It had not occurred to him that, in the very process of counting wrongs, he had crushed the very spirit of forgiveness. To tally forgiveness can have only two justifications: to pamper one's pride in great magnanimity or to arrive soon to the outside limit when all mercy is withdrawn and vengeance can finally take over! The

spirit of mercy recognizes that we only forgive our brother ONCE. Then, however many times he offends us thereafter, each time he repents, we forgive PERIOD, not "once more," because we are not counting.

Whatever else may be criticized about Peter's steel-cold question, there is a heart-warming touch of reality in it: this is a real man wrestling with his desire to enter honestly into the spirit of his Master's teaching by offering generously the seven pardons, his desire that the offender learn to stop giving him trouble, and his desire for balance that does not make a mockery of either justice or mercy. Peter does not come to us on the sacred page as a fully perfected Apostle who makes no theological blunders, but as a man who is growing.

#### B. JESUS ANSWERS: "NO LIMIT: MERCIFULNESS IS THE RULE IN GOD'S KINGDOM!" (18:22-35)

**18:22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven.** On another occasion Jesus actually did say, "If your brother sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Lk. 17:3, 4) There is no contradiction between the two texts, since there the forgiveness is proportioned to the number of sins and repentance, so that the "seven times a day" means "as many as necessary, infinitely." (Cf. Psa. 119:164 where the same expression means "availing oneself of every available impulse and opportunity.") Jesus' memorable requirement of reasonableness and mercy stands in contrast to the unreasonable mercilessness of a Lamech who demands vengeance "seventy and seven" for what he personally suffered from others! (Gen. 4:23f) Although Jesus' quantitative expression harmonized with Peter's question about quantitative mercifulness, it unquestionably left in wreckage the basic assumption that love, mercy and forgiveness could be measured in numbers. With numbers He eliminated the meaning of numbers! The state of one's heart, his readiness to forgive, his longing for the restoration of his brother, his hoping for renewed fellowship—these are not things to tally. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 704) puts it succinctly: "One might as well ask, 'How often must I love my wife, my husband, my children?' as to ask, 'How often shall I forgive?'" Jesus' answer,

in the light of the following parable, might be paraphrased: "How many times should you forgive? As many times as it will be necessary for God to forgive you—not one time more!" (18:35) God Himself is not keeping score of the times He shows us mercy, because if He did, who could stand? (Psa. 103:8-14; 130:3f; Ezra 9:13; Lam. 3:22) Dare a sinful mortal be more severe in justice than the Almighty? Rather, nothing could bring us more into harmony with the character of our God than to do good to those who have ignored, injured or despised us. (See on 5:44-48 and notice esp. Luke's variations, Lk. 6:27-36.)

There are several connections between this section on mercifulness and what has gone before:

1. Jesus is still dealing with selfish ambition (18:1), in the sense that vindictiveness, the attitude condemned here, is but a side effect of ambition. The person who tramples others in his rush to the top makes himself the target of his victims' offenses. It is an unavoidable part of his psychological armament to react quickly to the offense and be slow about forgetting an injury. Longanimity is just not his style. He is far more at home grabbing his debtor by the throat and demanding instant retribution.
2. Since in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant Jesus pictures that servant as refusing to dispense with his undeniable legal right to throw his debtor into debtors' prison, a fact which scandalized his fellow servants, He may have intended the parable to respond also to that harshness that can despise weaker disciples and be oblivious to one's own obligation to do without what is perfectly justifiable if it hinders one's own access to life in the Kingdom or cause the loss of others. (18:6-9)
3. Jesus needs also to say that true greatness in the Kingdom (18:1) embodies a forgiving spirit.

#### 1. CONSIDER THE MAGNITUDE OF GOD'S MERCY TO YOU (18:23-27)

18:23 **Therefore** means: "What I have just said about the need to forgive indefinitely is the reason the Kingdom is like the following story." **Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king who would make a reckoning with his servants.** The moral procedure of this king and the justice of God as He rules His Kingdom

are similar. The way God will treat His people is illustrated by the king. (18:35) The picture of **the kingdom of heaven** drawn in this parable is that which includes the life decisions of a given sinner who has been forgiven by God, but refuses to show similar mercy to a fellow. Arraigned before God once more, presumably at judgment, he is actually cast to his final fate. Therefore, the point of view from which the Kingdom is here viewed is the rule of God over all men anywhere at any time clear down until final judgment. (For notes on the Kingdom, see comments after 13:53.)

**Who would make a reckoning with his servants.** In the parable this reckoning could well have been normal administrative procedure, but it only became critical for the story's protagonist due to his gross indebtedness. The fact that this oriental king's debtors are called *servants* should not surprise, for, though they might be powerful executives in their own right, nevertheless, because they are under the absolute authority of their potentate, in his eyes they would be considered his slaves.

In the reality, God operates His Kingdom with a strict accounting in righteousness. The basic ethical principle of His rule is uprightness. The *reckoning* in the parable does not stand for the final accounting, which actually comes later when the servant is rearraigned before the king. (18:32ff) This audit, based upon a strict account between God and man, intends to bring each of God's servants to the painful awareness of what he had previously ignored, the depth of his failure to meet the rigid standard of absolute truth and righteousness. No gospel of mercy and forgiveness can make any sense until the solemn sense of God's perfect law probing our inmost being awakens in us a horrified consciousness of our imperfection, unrighteousness and sin. (See "Jesus' Purpose For Preaching This Sermon," Vol. I, 188ff, also notes on 5:48.) There can be no desire to put ourselves in a position to receive God's generous forgiveness until we hear our sentence read and are conscience-driven to admit the justice of His decision. God mercifully brings us up short, ending our careless security, by making us face our sins. Sometimes this occurs when we hit our point of despair, up to our neck in adversity. He would rather we see ourselves in the light of His law. This is why it is a perversion of both the Gospel and compassion to offer salvation in Christ as something that eliminates a severe arraignment before God to give an account. It is this very reckoning of strict justice that makes us see that our standing before God can never be a question of strict legal merit or contracts, but a gift of grace. (Cf. how Jesus

upsets the usual, worldly value judgments in His later parable of the Eleventh-Hour Servants. 20:1-16)

18:24 **And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought to him, that owed him ten thousand talents.** One was brought to him, perhaps because the guilt of his negligence or embezzling his king made him reluctant to come willingly face-to-face with his victim, the king whom he had been damaging. It is not unlikely that, had this reckoning not interfered, the self-assured sinner would have gone on doubling and tripling the indebtedness for which he must at last give account. (Cf. Ro. 2:5)

**Ten thousand talents.** The value of money mentioned in the Bible is difficult to establish in precise dollar equivalents, because of the fluctuating purchasing power of our own money. Therefore, all the estimates given in the Bible encyclopedias have to be continually updated, because the sums given there represent world economic conditions in the times of the editors. However, to form some idea of his debt, the following calculation can be made: (See on Mt. 20:2.)

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{1 day's salary} = 1 \text{ denarius} \quad 100 \text{ denarii} = 1 \text{ mina} \\ \qquad\qquad\qquad 60 \text{ minas} = 1 \text{ talent} \end{array}$$

If this servant were a common day laborer, he would have to work at least 100 days to earn one mina, 6,000 days to earn one talent. Since he **owed him ten thousand talents**, he must work 60,000,000 days or just a little over 164,384 years. On the other hand, supposing him to have been more likely a royal minister who could have earned a 1000 times the pay of a day laborer, he would still have to labor 164 years with no overtime and no weekends off! This is merely the time required to earn that amount, not the time required to save that much, since, if he supported himself and his family while trying to earn the required amount, he would have to work that much longer.

To put it into dollars, if the common laborer could earn as much as \$2 an hour for an eight-hour day, his denarius would be worth \$16. In a 100 days (= 1 mina) he could earn \$1600. In 6000 days (= 60 minas or 1 talent) he could earn \$96,000, but since he must pay 10,000 talents, he must earn \$960,000,000 over the 164,834 years. In other words, our appreciation of the value of the talent is dependent on the average sum the laborer receives as pay per day. (= denarius)

To illustrate the magnitude of his debt another way, this 10,000 talent figure represented the amount Haman hoped to be able to

pour into the royal treasury upon confiscating the Jewish properties after exterminating their race in every part of the empire! (Est. 3:9, 13) When the Romans under Pompey took Jerusalem in 63 B.C., tribute was imposed on the Jews amounting to about 10,000 talents. (*Antiquities*, XIV, 4, 4 and 5) Or, back in 220 B.C. the sum of the taxes together for Coelesyria and Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria, came to 8,000 talents. (*Ant.* XII, 4, 4) So, the man's debt was larger than the national budget for four different provinces! How he got himself so hopelessly in debt is not important for the point of the parable, although it is not impossible, if he be thought of as a financial agent through whom royal funds flowed from which he could siphon off a private reserve of considerable proportions to squander over a number of years. This debt could have been incurred as a loan. (18:27)

Bruce (*Training*, 211) argues that the particular type of service involved here is another contextual connection with the basic theme of Jesus' entire discourse:

That it was some such unscrupulous minister of state, guilty of the crime of embezzlement, whom Jesus had in His eye, appears all but certain when we recollect what gave rise to the discourse of which this parable forms the conclusion. The disciples had disputed among themselves who should be greatest in the kingdom, each one being ambitious to obtain the place of distinction for himself. Here, accordingly, their Master holds up to their view the conduct of a great one, concerned not about the faithful discharge of his duty, but about his own aggrandizement. "Behold," He says to them in effect, "what men who wish to be great ones do! They rob their king of his revenue, and abuse the opportunities afforded by their position to enrich themselves; and while scandalously negligent of their own obligations, they are characteristically exacting towards any little one who may happen in the most innocent way, not by fraud, but by misfortune, to have become their debtor." Thus understood, the parable faithfully represents the guilt and criminality of those at least who are animated by the spirit of pride, and deliberately make self-advancement their chief end. . . . It is impossible to overestimate the magnitude of their guilt.

18:25 **But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.** The royal minister evidently had

JESUS TRAINS THE TWELVE IN PERSONAL RELATIONS 18:24, 25

nothing salted away with which to repay such an astronomical debt, so the king sentenced this agent to be sold into slavery along with his family possessions to meet the obligation. Who can affirm that such a sale would have totally liquidated the debt? Was the king salvaging what little he could by confiscation and sale of his property?

Jesus' mention of this sale of people into slavery gives us pause. Some commentators brush it off as mere scenery needed to complete the story, but not typical of God, "for He would never approve of slavery, especially of innocent people like **his wife and children.**" Accordingly, Jesus only pictures the classic procedure among oriental potentates with whatever rigor they judged proper, however unjust their decisions might be judged to be on the Christian balance. But it is only the commentators who assert that the man's wife and children were innocent, whereas the king knew better and acted accordingly. Their collusion must not be excused. In fact, the OT Law ordered the sale of the insolvent thief or thieves. (Ex. 22:3)

Not one other OT text justifies the sale of debtors into slavery.

1. Lev. 25:39, 40 admits the possibility of voluntary indenture in extreme poverty, but this lasted only until the year of jubilee and the servant was to be considered as a hired servant temporarily sojourning. Strict humanitarianism governed the treatment of such "slaves" (Lev. 25:39-55).
2. 2 Kgs. 4:1 reports without approval the case of two children taken as slaves by their deceased father's creditor.
3. Neh. 5:1-13 reports the desperation of people mortgaged over their heads who must force their own children to serve as slaves, after many of these same people had been repurchased from pagan slave-owners. Nehemiah condemned this slavery for debts on the basis of the Levitical law. (Lev. 25:42)
4. Isa. 50:1 in figurative language argues that God had not been forced to sell Israel to creditors for any supposed insolvency on His part. Their present condition was that of someone who had been sold into slavery because of their own indebtedness.
5. Amos 2:6 and 8:6 condemns the harsh, heartless sale of the righteous poor into slavery, whereas the Law had only permitted the sale of the unrighteous thief, but permitted voluntary indentured service for a limited time and under humane conditions. (Lev. 25:39-55)

The case before us in Jesus' story is that of an entire family that conspired together to use the influential, lucrative position of the man

of the house to use for their own purposes what really belonged to their king. Theirs is culpable insolvency and theft, and the proper verdict is: "Sell them!" (Ex. 22:3)

In the reality of which the selling into slavery was but the symbol God in perfect justice has every right now in this life to punish His debtors and all that is dear to them by turning them over to those who would make them feel the full force of their iniquity. In fact, the implication of Isa. 50:1 is that God would indeed sell His people into slavery for their iniquities. He did it historically in the captivities of sinful Israel, and should the Church not learn therefrom? (Ro. 3:23; 6:23; Jn. 8:34; Ro. 6:16; 2 Pt. 2:19; Ro. 1:24, 26, 28) He can abandon man, destroy him, sell him, torture him or anything else, because the enormity of man's sins require that divine justice be satisfied, and no sinner has even the slightest chance of repaying what he has already squandered, nor any right to complain about the severity of the sentence!

The creeping tragedy of this royal minister's sin is that it enveloped his whole family, because he could not limit the ramifications of his dishonesty to himself. Even those who might have been innocent at first were drawn slowly, inexorably into the web of his self-seeking and, therefore, must share the consequences of what at first may have been only his sin. A sinner's contaminated character casts its evil influence upon all around him and, imperceptibly, draws others into his guilt.

**18:26 The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.** The royal verdict had been pronounced, but before its sentence was carried out, the now terrified ex-official acts:

1. He cannot deny the reality of the debt: the incriminating evidence is too clear.
2. He offers no excuses or rationalizations for his responsibility in this outrageous imbroglio.
3. He has nothing with which even to make even a down-payment or even a token payment of the debt. He is bankrupt!
4. In typically oriental style, he threw himself on his knees, touching his forehead to the ground in front of his lord in abject obeisance and made his incredibly impossible request:
  - a. **Have patience with me** (*makrothúmeson ep' emoi* = "Be long-suffering with me.") Obviously this wretch has not really calculated the debt in terms of CENTURIES required to repay it

(as we did at 18:24), because he needs this much long-suffering from his lord and no less. He cannot imagine that he would actually erase the debt, and so trembles to think he must repay it.

- b. **I will pay thee all.** How absolutely impossible it was to fulfil such a promise! (See on 18:24.) His promise of mountains of gold is the wild desperation of the absolutely hopeless. It would have been ridiculous to have taken him seriously.

However, are any of us actually cognizant of the gravity, the multitude and the heinousness of his sins to the extent God is? Is not this man's promise the very wording of the hypocrite's prayer, "I promise to be good enough to resolve every claim you have against me, God!"? To make such a promise is proof that we hope that any amount of future goodness could somehow compensate for past iniquity. Such a sinner would gladly amass any number of good works to pay for his sins. A righteousness outside himself but imputed to him by faith is, to him, an incredible doctrine. (Romans!)

**18:27 And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.** Impressed with the servant's total impossibility to repay such an incredible amount, totally unimpressed by his promises and confident he would never be repaid, perhaps touched by the servant's evidence of a right purpose and determination to meet his obligations, and moved to pity by the man's abject despair, the generous lord acted. He consented to far more than the servant dared dream: not only did he *release him* from sale into slavery, but he completely erased all indebtedness.

**The debt** (*dáneion*) means "money given or taken on loan with interest; a loan," Rocci, 413; Thayer, 125; Arndt-Gingrich, 169) Apparently, the king had loaned the man money for an ill-fated enterprise which had not paid off but left him totally bankrupt, hence he is now exposed as a thief, having misappropriated his lord's loan for his own ill-fated projects which could not pay off the handsome profits promised, but rather left him penniless and broken, a debtor to his king. As in other parables, the idea of *debt* reminds us that what we think of as our own is actually but a loan from God who expects repayment. (Cf. Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 16:1-9; 19:11-27)

In the reality of God's Kingdom the severe demand that the standard be absolutely respected is followed by the mercy necessary to help those who fail. In fact, God mercifully cancels sin the instant it is morally possible to do so. God is not reluctant to forgive, but He

must first make the sinner realize how much he is being forgiven, and where there is the sincere request for grace, He is glad to respond immediately and generously with forgiveness. Like the forgiven servant, we start out anew, born again as a little child with a clean slate and imputed righteousness. (Jn. 3:3-5; Mt. 18:3, 4; Ro. 5:1f; Phil. 3:9) Our moral debt is reduced to zero and although we owe a debt of gratitude to our Lord, we can begin again. (See on 18:3, 4.) Lenski (*Matthew*, 716) rightly sees that

The king's word of release and remission is forensic: God on his throne declares the sinner free from guilt, as free as though he had never incurred that guilt. This is Biblical justification, the central doctrine of the Christian faith.

There is another sense in which this principle applies to God's dealings with every man on earth, Christian or not. Because this is not the final reckoning, but rather the crisis of conscience that comes when man, as man, becomes aware of the gravity of his sin against the Almighty, the very sense of relief that comes even to the most unbelieving when we realize that God exacts of us less than our guilt deserves (cf. Job 11:6) and even suspends the sentence temporarily to afford us time to accept His mercy and live (Cf. Lk. 13:1-9; Ro. 2:4), is personal, subjective evidence to every sinner that he is only on probation. So, whether we be Jew, facing the demands of Moses' Law (Ro. 2:12f), or pagan, feeling the accusations of conscience (Ro. 2:14f), or Christian trained in the doctrine of Christ, the rule applies to us all. From this standpoint, we all stand halfway between mercy received and mercy yet needed. (Cf. Trench, *Parables*, 59)

## 2. CONSIDER THE SMALLNESS OF YOUR BROTHER'S SINS AGAINST YOU (18:28-30)

18:28 The cutting satire of Jesus' story becomes even more incisive as He throws the forgiven servant's conduct into a series of contrasts with that of his lord.

1. The forgiven official as creditor stands in relation to his fellow servant as debtor where his king stood not long before in his own case. He is now lord of the situation with powers to exact justice or show mercy.
2. The king had considerably summoned him to assist at the grand

audit. Here the functionary curtly and completely excludes any honest reckoning and all further opportunity to pay. There is no opportunity for a calm, reasoned accounting, verification and admission. **Pay what thou owest** (*apόdos ei ti opheileis* = literally: "If you owe me something, pay it!") There is no doubt here that his fellow owed something, although he may have been in doubt about the exact amount. The main point is: Pay up whatever you owe me. (Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 219)

3. The king freely cancelled his enormous debt, but this unbelievable chance of a lifetime which rescued him and all that was dear to him from certain disaster left no sense of obligation nor even the slightest trace of gratefulness and brotherly love on his soul. No sooner had he left the warm, sunny love of his king than his heart froze over solid! The man who had owed his sovereign billions was let off, but now he has his brother, his peer, by the throat for a contemptibly insignificant sum! Jesus' main contrast is here: the astronomical debt forgiven and the paltry figure demanded here. **Hundred shillings** attempts to translate 100 denarii = 1 mina = 1/60th of 1 talent = 1/600,000 of the 10,000 talents remitted the avaricious creditor. Admittedly the debt amounted to just over three months' work for a common laborer, but for a big-time operator like this creditor, it was small change.
4. The king had shown polished, regal dignity in his composure despite his enormous loss due to the maladministration of his subordinate. Crassly ignoring his own high nobility, this functionary stoops to a rudeness and brutality unworthy even in serfs. Grabbing his fellow by the throat, perhaps even without greeting him properly, he began to choke him, demanding moralistically, "Pay your debts promptly; follow the rules!" His refusal to do for his fellow servant as he had desired be done for himself evidences his hatred. (See on 7:12 and 5:44.) He refused mercy to a subordinate and would not receive a little one in the name of the king's mercy! (Mt. 18:5, 10)

Precisely similar to Nathan's treatment of David (2 Sam. 12:1-5), Jesus deliberately provokes our sense of outrage at the abusiveness and consummate arrogance of this ruthless, close-fisted legalist. ("Grace for me, Lord, but the letter of the law for my neighbor!") In no sense must He be understood to affirm that others' sins against us are somehow unreal, because the indebtedness of 100 denarii is fully as real as the debit of 10,000 talents.

18:29. Note the similarity between the two cases: both debtors

1. Humble themselves before their creditors
2. Beseech their creditors for mercy
3. Request additional time to gather money
4. Promise to pay what is owed.

This similarity of circumstances should have awakened pity for his peer and gratitude for the privilege of being so soon able to treat someone else with the same kindness he himself had been shown.

In the reality, Jesus' demand that we forgive indefinitely is conditioned by the willingness of our debtors to request forgiveness, just as this debtor sought to be shown mercy by his creditor. (See Lk. 17:3: "If he repents")

18:30 Rather than sell him into slavery, as he himself had been sentenced (18:25), **he went and cast him into prison**, probably because of the small amount of the debt, **until he should pay that which was due**. This latter phrase does not reveal whether a jailed prisoner had any possibility by forced labor to work out payment or not. It is more likely that discovery of his imprisonment would force relatives and friends to scrape together enough money to pay his debt and secure his release. If so, the punishment inflicted was in proportion to the debt incurred. The severity of the merciless creditor is not in his choice of penalty.

The Lord's point is another, far more significant one. The severity of the pitiless servant is manifest in the fact that **HE DID EVERYTHING ACCORDING TO THE BOOK**. Note that he did not necessarily go beyond the letter of the law in force in his country. He was well within his legal rights and could plead absolute strictness as his right to exact his due from his debtor. But this very appeal to strict justice must be his condemnation in the eyes of his lord, who, waiving absolute justice for him, had magnanimously forgiven him completely. It was, in fact, his holding to the letter of the law that would damn him! (18:33f) In fact, the concept of a divine rigor determined by human mercy toward equals is not at all new for Jesus. (See on 5:7; 6:12, 14f.) Sure, the servant had roughed up his customer a bit, but his great sin was his score-keeping, his holding him to the book, his legalism. Since only the absolutely perfect can rightly demand every personal right, for a sinful humanity the only just course left is humble humaneness. Compassion, sympathy and sincere consideration for other human beings is the only justice left open to us. We must never suppose that no one could be so cruel as to exact the last penny from

a petty debtor. Anyone who thinks so is just not a good student of mankind nor of church history.

### 3. CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES OF INDULGING AN UNFORGIVING SPIRIT (18:31-34)

18:31 **So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were exceedingly sorry.** Did these fellow servants know about the unmerciful servant's having been forgiven? Are they incensed by his gross insult to the royal great-heartedness shown him by the king whose example he had refused to imitate? They are definitely shocked at the unreasonableness and brutality shown their fellow by this ingrate so pitiless in his adamant refusal to understand. Nothing is necessarily implied about the personal righteousness of the fellow servants, because, as McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 161) wrote, "No matter how much we are inclined to deal harshly with men ourselves, we are always indignant, when, as disinterested witnesses, we behold such conduct in others."

**They came and told unto their lord all that was done.** Rather than take the law in their own hands, they denounced the incident to their lord. Foster (*Middle Period*, 292) considers the detail of the fellow servants simply part of the scenery, not intended to represent some spiritual reality, because God does not need to be informed by men. On the other hand, assuming that these *fellow servants* are men, two other views are possible:

1. Could they not represent the common conscience of mankind that approves the sentence of God and appeals to Him for vengeance for the tyranny which they are powerless to do anything about? (Cf. Rev. 6:9-11; Gen. 4:10 and McGarvey's comment above.)
2. Although an omniscient God needs no human explanations of earthly events, it is true that He lets men reach the end of their human resources and turn to Him in their helplessness and need. (Mt. 6:8 does not preclude 6:9-13 or 7:7-11.) Legally powerless to stop their fellow servant's brutality, in their sorrow these take the matter to him alone who can bring justice. Jesus Christ is now Lord of the Church and as He rules we may appeal to Him to resolve the difficulties that perplex us.

What if these *fellow servants* are angels? (Cf. 13:27, 28 notes) Jesus warned that these fellow servants of God (Rev. 22:9; 19:10) have

His immediate audience with respect to little ones who are ill-treated. (18:10) If so, we see one more subtle tie with all that precedes in Jesus' discourse.

18:32 **Then his lord called him unto him.** In the parable it is not clear how much time elapsed between the appeal of the fellow servants and the summons of the unmerciful servant, but any apparent brevity between the events is typical of the extreme brevity of our earthly life, so that what happens at once in the parable, in the life of the sinner may have taken place over a span of years. The certainty of the divine summons, not its immediacy, is the point. So we have here a picture of man haled before his final judgment from which there can be no appeal and for which there can be no repentance and restitution. This is not another confrontation with God during the life of the servant somewhat on the same plane as the first confrontation (cf. 18:24ff) merely for the purpose of making him conscious of the monstrous wickedness of which he is now guilty. This is the final accounting, because the servant is sent away to his fate at the hands of the torturers.

In Greek the lord's accusation flashes with fire: "**You evil slave!** **All that debt I forgave you since you begged me to!**" Note the state's evidence sustaining the verdict of "Wicked!":

1. *I* (your king) underscores the high, royal authority by which he had benefited.
2. *forgave you* emphasizes the mercy received; he did not have to pay it all back even in time-payments.
3. *all that debt* reminds him of its enormity and impossibility of payment.
4. *because you besought me* indicates the simplicity and ease by which he obtained so magnificent a forgiveness.

His wickedness, so far as his king is concerned, consists in thinking so little of the mercy his lord had granted him and in demonstrating himself so unmistakably undeserving of such grace. (Ro. 2:1-11)

18:33 **Shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow servant, even as I had mercy on thee?** Does my example mean nothing to you? His question expects an unqualified "yes" answer. The king's mercy should have been the servant's ideal for his own imitation, but the despicable handling of his fellow servant reflected this standard only by its violent contrast to it and its negation of it. Note that the lord does not scold the unmerciful steward for wanting to get back his 100 denarii or for calling his own fellow servant to account. His only

accusation is leveled against the legalistic unmercifulness of his treatment.

In the reality, this question is the whole point of Jesus' illustration. (See notes on 5:45; cf. Lk. 6:32-36; Eph. 4:31f; Col. 3:12f.) God's mercy extended to us is intended to make us His sons and like Him in character. (Ro. 2:4; Lk. 6:35f) God promises to forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more. (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12; 10:17) This exposes the hypocrisy of the person who voices forgiveness but does not really cancel the offense. But the man who honestly faces his own weakness, presumption and ignorance with the realization that God will forgive him even these sins, cannot but be moved to imitate his Father by caring for his fellows no matter how or how much they stumble. But this is not just an emotional reaction. It should be the demand of an informed conscience. (1 Pt. 1:13-17; Col. 4:1; Eph. 5:1)

According to God's rules, man's inhumanity demonstrates the futility of showing him any mercy, because the only way man can even come close to repaying God for His kindness is by merciful helpfulness to His creatures. But the man who will not do even this much just proves how useless it is for God to grant him further leniency. To show him further mercy would only contribute to his delinquency. As Brown (*PHC*, XXII, 441f) said it:

The most serious block to your salvation may emerge after your forgiveness rather than before it. After you have received forgiveness you enter on a new probation. What are you going to do with it? When you know Christ has died for you, and that God forgives you, what influence are these facts going to have upon your life?—that is the question on which your ultimate salvation hangs.

18:34 **And his lord was wroth, and delivered him only**, since his family had apparently not been party to his unmercifulness as they had been to his wasting his master's goods. The clemency unquestionably enjoyed but never merited nor understood by this short-sighted ingrate is now revoked. From the moment of his earlier forgiveness until this, he was a free man, forgiven of his great debt. Now, however, the dreaded punishment ordered earlier is carried out as if nothing had ever happened in the meantime. He who had so gloriously tasted the great-souled magnanimity of his lord, must now taste the lash of his indignation and wrath. He is turned over to the court-appointed torturers (*basanistai*, inquisitors, executioners whose task

is to elicit the truth by torture) to exact everything possible from him. Till he should pay all that was due = never! Could he hope to live long enough to earn and save enough to pay his debt while he was free? (18:24) What hope has he of so doing, now that he is stripped of his liberty and earning power? The expression, till he should pay all, offers no hope of freedom thereafter. Lenski (*Matthew*, 723) perceives that

The "until" clause thus really becomes the strongest proof against the idea of purgatory and for the eternal duration of punishment. Saying "until an impossible thing takes place," simply says "never."

But for what is he being punished: his most recent unmercifulness toward his fellow alone, or the original, unthinkable great indebtedness or both? Trench (*Parables*, 58) sees this problem:

It is strange that the king finally delivers up the offender, not for cruelty, but for the very debt which would appear to have been entirely remitted to him. The question is here involved, Do sins once forgiven, return on the sinner through his after offenses?

The answer lies in the fact that his own appeal to law and strict justice in his treatment of his fellow, in effect, condemned his lord's recourse to mercy and waiving strict justice in his own case earlier. By condemning his king's decision to forgive him, he himself literally reopened his own case for rejudgment! Now the king simply obliged him by reversing the former decision of mercy and letting the man's own sense of justice be the measure whereby he himself would be judged, even if this meant that the full force of the king's justice must now be meted out upon him. Further, if he would refuse mercy for so miserable a debt, then, in proportion as 10,000 talents exceed the 100 denarii, continued mercy must, in justice, be denied him for his own vast debt.

In the reality, God simply lets every man choose by what standard he would be judged. This is no new doctrine. (See notes on 5:7; 6:12; 7:2; 9:13; 12:7) In fact, if a man rejects grace, mercy and forgiveness as a way of dealing with offenders, then God one last time lets that blind sinner have his way by permitting him to be judged by his own standard and face the consequences. So, in the long run, God has absolutely nothing to lose in terms of strict absolute justice by being patient, long-suffering, merciful, kind and generous with

even the worst of sinners. He can show them new mercies every morning. (Mt. 5:44-48; Lk. 6:27-36! Ro. 2:4; 9:22; 2 Pt. 3:9, 15) But if by inhumanity men reject the standard by which they themselves are blessed and forgiven far more times than they can count, He can still treat them in absolutely perfect righteousness and let them face the consequences and go to hell.

Some, determined not to believe that a child of God, once saved, can ever be lost thereafter, when faced with the eternal punishment of some Bible character, simply affirm, as, for example is this case, that this servant was a fraud, hence does not represent a genuine, believing Christian after all. But such an interpretation misrepresents the purpose behind Jesus' telling this story. Would any deny that Jesus' conclusion (v. 35) included the Apostles to whom it was specifically addressed? Would any affirm that these same Apostles were not genuine, believing Christians? No, there is no doubt that the unmerciful servant had actually enjoyed a period of grace before being brought to judgment for post-forgiveness sinfulness.

*Tormenters* is not a reference to a hell full of hideous devils whose unique mission it is to rack or afflict the condemned. They themselves are going to be too busy suffering, and probably will not have Saturdays off to torture others! (Cf. Mt. 25:41; 8:29; Lk. 8:31; Rev. 16:13f; 19:20; 20:10) It probably refers, rather, to all the suffering Jesus refers to in other contexts as "eternal fire," "Gehenna (of fire)" "eternal punishment," "torment," etc. (Cfr. 18:8, 9; 25:41, 46; Lk. 16:23ff) Since the guilt involved a sin against grace and mercy, a sin which by its own dictates demanded that there be no mercy, but only harsh, pitiless application of the letter of the law, then there could be no end to it. (Heb. 10:26-31) And since sin ammasses a *debt* that can never be paid, the suffering that is its punishment would logically have no end either. (Mt. 25:46)

### C. CONCLUSION: YOU ENDANGER YOUR OWN POSITION IN THE KINGDOM BY UNMERCIFULNESS AND RECKLESS SUPERIORITY! (18:35)

18:35 So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts. So concludes the comparison begun in 18:23 which has continued to this point. Jesus means that God's dealings with men will proceed exactly as pictured in every part of the story now ended. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*,

162) wrote that

The comparison has reference only to the last act of the king, that of delivering the unforgiving servant to the tormentors . . . We are not to infer, from the fact that the king retracted the forgiveness first granted, that God will do so with us. Our sins, once forgiven, are remembered no more. (Heb. 8:12)

But our forgiveness is conditional, as also God's willingness to forgive and forget. (Heb. 10:18, 26; see on Mt. 18:34) Implied in Jesus' threat are the following points:

1. We are all debtors to God. (18:23; Ro. 3:22, 23; Mt. 6:12) What an argument for humility! (18:4)
2. Our debt is so enormous that none can possibly pay it alone. (18:24, 25a) What irony: our only indisputable claim to greatness is our great indebtedness! (Cf. 18:1)
3. Justice requires that it be paid. (18:25b; Ro. 6:23; Ez. 18:4)
4. When each asks for mercy, God is happy to concede it, fully and completely, because it is His nature. (18:26, 27; Ez. 18:30-32; Psa. 103; Ro. 5:8)
5. Our hearts must feel how easy it is to forgive our fellow's small debts when what God has forgiven us is so infinitely greater. (18:28ff)
6. The mercy of God in forgiving us is the standard for treatment of our fellows (18:33; Eph. 4:32)
7. Fear of severity when we are judged will push us to be merciful when we judge others. (18:34)

In short, God will punish with eternal punishment everyone who refuses to be genuinely merciful to his fellow. God just cannot forgive an unforgiving heart! "Judgment is without mercy to him that has shown no mercy!" (Jas. 2:13) This parable illustrates the logical antithesis of the fifth Beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Cursed are the unmerciful and unforgiving, for they shall be treated with unmerciful severity." (Study also Psa. 18:25f; Jas. 5:9; cf. Sirach 28:1-12) Any disagreement with Jesus on this point, any qualification of His severity undermines our discipleship, yet people are not in the habit of acting as if keeping careful books on others' wrongs against them were a far more serious sin than anything registered on their books. It is far more common to think of "dirty sins" as sex scandals, and "heinous sins" as murder, high treason or something else. Barker (*As Matthew Saw the Master*,

94) comments:

We call the unforgiving man "strong-willed," "a person who sticks by what he thinks," perhaps on rare occasions "stubborn," "Sinner"? Never! The unforgiving man is excused on the grounds that "a man has to keep his self-respect."

**So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you.** This careful wording crushes out every hope that the announced severity might possibly be mitigated for some. Bruce (*Training*, 213) said it best:

This very doom Jesus, in the closing sentences of His discourse, solemnly assured His disciples awaited all who cherish an unforgiving temper, even if they themselves should be the guilty party . . . Stern words these, which lay down a rule of universal application, not relaxable in the case of favoured parties. Were partiality admissible at all, such as the twelve would surely get the benefit of it; but as if to intimate that in this matter there is no respect of persons, the law is enunciated with direct, emphatic reference to them. And harsh as the law might seem, Jesus is careful to indicate His cordial approval of its being enforced with . . . (strict) rigour. For that purpose He calls God the Judge by the endearing name "My heavenly Father"; as if to say: "The great God and King does not seem to Me unduly stern in decreeing such penalties against the unforgiving. I, the merciful, tender-hearted Son of Man, thoroughly sympathize with such judicial severity. I should solemnly say Amen to that doom pronounced even against you if you behaved so as to deserve it. Think not that because ye are My chosen companions, therefore violations of the law of love by you will be winked at. On the contrary, just because ye are great ones in the kingdom, so far as privilege goes, will compliance with its fundamental laws be especially expected of you, and non-compliance most severely punished.

**If you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.** The plurals (*afête* and *tōn kardiōn humōn*) are individualized: **every one his brother.** Whereas in the parable the relationship between the two servants was one of equality ("your fellow servant" v. 33) despite their creditor-debtor relation, in the conclusion Jesus underscores their common human bond: **every one his BROTHER.** This is the "brother who sinned against you" (18:15), and about whom Peter asked, "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive

him?" (18:21). Jesus answers, "You who have received the mercy of God in ocean-sized quantities, dare you dispense it to others with an eye-dropper, carefully measuring and calculating each precious drop? Does your love keep books? Is there a mad mathematics to forgiveness? Nothing that men can do to you or that you must forgive can begin to compare even faintly or remotely with what you have done to God or that He must forgive you!"

**From your hearts.** Jesus began this discourse in answer to a question from His disciples, whom Mark identified as "the Twelve" (Mt. 18:1; Mk. 9:35); and now He concludes it with a most piercing conclusion aimed right at their *hearts*, the very source of their selfish ambition, their status-seeking, their jealousy of official prerogatives, their stumbling blocks, their callousness toward others' weaker conscience and their limitations on forgiveness. Forgiveness cannot be limited to using the right words nor to going through the correct formal steps. It must be rightly motivated. In fact, unless our spirit is first freed of bitterness and unfriendly feelings, our facial expressions and "body English" will betray the aching for vengeance seething under our skin. This merciful spirit will seek in every way to restore the former, friendly relations. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 297) asks:

How often is our forgiveness in the heart, as well as from the heart narrowed by limitations and burdened with conditions; and is it not of the very essence of sectarianism to condemn without mercy him who does not come up to our demands—ay, and until he shall have come up to them to the uttermost farthing?

Is there someone whose outrageous conduct you cannot forget or for whom you cannot thank God?

And so ends the Lord's most remarkable discourse on the value of every single person. Although it echoes truth already taught in the Sermon on the Mount, it differs in emphasis. Whereas the other message emphasized the personal character and problems of the citizen of the Kingdom of God, this discourse highlights his relation to others, especially those whom he would see as his debtors, his inferiors. In Jesus Christ has the value of every single human being come to its greatest importance. He knows that this view of human personality will profoundly affect our evangelism, our institutions, our personal relations, our congregational life, our sense of values, in short, all else. But in all these areas He furnished us the key that opens up to us the secret of true greatness: self-giving service to

others, mutual edification, conscientiousness about one's own faults, mercifulness, self-discipline, and tender, considerate love.

**19:1 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.** Chapter 18 should end here, because Matthew indicates hereby that he has terminated the record of one connected discourse and the arguments given before for this conclusion are also valid here. (See on 11:1; 13:53 and notes on the "Unity of Chapter 18.") Chapters 19 and 20 will furnish a series of living illustrations of applications of the truth of this discourse in chapter 18: look for them!

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Outline or summarize all that Jesus taught when the Apostles disputed about which was the greatest among them. What does Jesus teach about men's ambitions to be great? Which verses would you choose from Mt. 18 which contain the kernel of the teaching of the entire chapter?
2. Where and when in the ministry of Jesus did this discussion about relative greatness in the Kingdom occur? List all the events and topics of Jesus' teaching from the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi up to this time and show their connections.
3. What various factors seen in the previous events might have formed the motivation back of this discussion? That is, what might have tended to elevate certain Apostles above their fellows?
4. How was the question brought before the group: did the Apostles ask about it first, or did Jesus bring it up? Harmonize Mt. 18:1 with Mk. 9:33, 34 and Lk. 9:46, 47.)
5. Where had the argument about greatness among the disciples taken place?
6. What is the meaning of "unless you be converted" or "unless you turn"? "Converted" or "turn" to what? Why bring that up here?
7. What is the principle characteristic of children that Jesus intends to serve as a model for disciples? How do you know?
8. How long did this argument about greatness in the Kingdom continue among the Twelve?
9. What other passages of Scripture bear on the question as to how we should "receive one such little one in my name"?
10. List the various situations in Jesus' life that illustrate how He

- steadfastly showed the kind of humility He teaches here.
11. What is the connection between Jesus' discussion of humbly receiving lesser disciples in His name, and John's question about the unaffiliated worker of miracles? (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49, 50)
  12. What other incidents or statements of Jesus show that one is blessed (or acceptable to God) on the basis of his own faith and deeds, and not necessarily on the basis of his affiliation or close association with "the right people" or "the one true church"?
  13. What other Biblical incidents prove that God does not have to work with or through a chosen few, and at the same time show that the greatness of the power is of God and not of the chosen few?
  14. List Jesus' answers to John's question about the unaffiliated miracle worker. Explain how this information should apply to us and our relations with other religious workers not affiliated with us.
  15. What is a stumbling block? Is it best to look for them, or ignore them and let others point them out?
  16. Who are "these little ones that believe in me"? Little children? New Christians without maturity in the faith? Could it be both?
  17. What is a "great millstone"? How big is it? For what is it normally used? Why would it be so effective when used as Jesus suggests here?
  18. In the expression "Woe to the world because of occasions of stumbling!" is the "world" the victim or the cause of these things that cause people to sin?
  19. What is the lesson involved in the illustrations about the removal of hands, feet or eyes?
  20. What does the word "despise" mean? What attitude is meant by "despise one of these little ones"? How or why do we tend to despise them?
  21. If the reference to one's own hands, feet or eyes is only an illustration of something else in our lives, what does Jesus mean? What Scriptures indicate what Jesus means, i.e. that He does not intend for us to practice bodily amputation?
  22. What other Scriptures help us to understand Jesus' comments about "salt" and "fire"? (Mk. 9:48-50) What is the meaning, then, of "every one shall be salted with fire"? How could the disciples "have salt within" themselves and "live at peace with one another"?
  23. What does Jesus imply by His warning, "their angels always behold the face of my Father"? What may we learn about the

ministry of angels from this text? What other texts corroborate it or elaborate upon the angelic ministry? Why does Jesus say "their angels"?

24. What is the main point of the story about the lost sheep?
25. After discussing true greatness, self-renunciation and individual concern, Jesus seems to change the subject to church discipline. Show how He has never left the fundamental problem posed at the very beginning of the discussion, by indicating the logical connections.
26. Outline the basic steps given by the Lord for settling problems among believers, explaining the wisdom of each step. What other Scriptures provide additional information on each of these steps and their purpose?
27. What is the meaning of the phrase: "you have gained your brother"?
28. Explain: "let him be to you as the heathen (or Gentile) and the publican."
29. Explain the sentence: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Tell where it is found and to whom it was addressed. Explain the terms "bind" and "loose," and their particular application in this sentence by showing from other Scriptures exactly what is to be bound or loosed. Indicate any parallel passages that help to interpret its meaning. And, finally, demonstrate whether what God binds or looses in heaven has already been bound or loosed by the disciples, or vice versa.
30. What did Jesus promise about the agreement of two disciples in prayer? What other Scriptures describe the secrets of successful praying?
31. What is involved in the disciples' gathering "in (Jesus') name"? What does it mean to meet "in His name"?
32. What is the main point of the story of the two debtors as it is seen as Jesus' answer to Peter's question: "How often should I forgive my brother?"? Are there any secondary issues or points brought up in this same parable? If so, what are they?
33. Describe the psychological mechanism of forgiveness: how do we forgive someone?
34. Why must we forgive seventy times seven? After the 490th time, what do we do then?

## DO YOU HAVE THE WORD IN YOUR HEART?

## Matthew 16-18

Who said the following? What is the context? Are there parallel passages? Give the variant manuscript readings, translations, and other possible interpretations (if any). What do you think is the true meaning?

1. "There shall no sign be given . . . but the sign of Jonah."
2. "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."
3. ". . . upon this rock I will build my church."
4. "There are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."
5. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him."
6. "Elijah is come already, and they knew him not, but did unto him whatsoever they would."
7. ". . . nothing shall be impossible unto you."
8. ". . . the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."
9. "for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!"
10. "See that ye despise not one of these little ones."
11. "Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall never be unto thee."
12. "Therefore the sons are free."
13. "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
14. "So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts."
15. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
16. "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" "Who say ye that I am?"
17. "Thou art a stumbling block unto me."
18. "Whosoever would save his life shall lose it."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN OUTLINES

- Section 47. In Perea Jesus Teaches on Marriage, Divorce and Celibacy (19:1-12)
- Section 48: Jesus Blesses Little Children (19:13-15)
- Section 49. Jesus Tests Rich Young Ruler and Encourages Apostles (19:16-30)

### STUDY OUTLINE

#### CHAPTER THEME:

"THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS"

- I. MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS (Marriage, Divorce, the Single Life: 19:1-12; Mk. 10:1-12)
- A. GENERAL SITUATION: Great popularity of Jesus in Herod's territory, Perea. (19:1, 2)
  - B. IMMEDIATE SITUATION: Pharisees endeavor to embroil Jesus in controversy that would destroy His credibility and bring Him into conflict with the adulterer-divorcees, Herod and Herodias. (19:3) "For what reasons may we get rid of our wife?"
  - C. JESUS' RESPONSE: (19:4-12) "Start looking for reasons to keep your wife!"
    1. "Adopt God's original intention which was marriage, not divorce." (19:4-6) God, not man, is the Lord of marriage.
    2. "Mosaic legislation on divorce was permissive because of the inhumanity of unregenerate men, but does not reflect God's original design for the family." (19:7-8)
    3. "Any divorce for any reason other than unchastity encourages adultery through marriage of divorced persons." (19:9)
  - D. THE DISCIPLES' STUNNED OBJECTION: "Beter never to marry!" (19:10)
  - E. JESUS' REACTION: "Only those who have the gift to live the single life are able to accept your conclusion; otherwise, no. Celibacy should be a personal choice based upon one's gifts and how one can serve God in the Kingdom." (19:11, 12)
- II. ADULT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS (19:13-15; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17)

- A. SITUATION: Parents bring children to Jesus for blessing.
- B. DISCIPLES' REACTION: They hinder the parents, rebuking them for the nuisance. "Children do not count, are not important to progress of the Kingdom!"
- C. JESUS' ANGRY REACTION: "Children are so important to the Kingdom that they are the only sort of folks of which the Kingdom is made!"
  - 1. "God's Kingdom belongs to such humble, trusting, teachable people, and to NO ONE ELSE!"
  - 2. "Permit the children to come to me" and He took them into His arms and blessed them.

### III. RICH-POOR RELATIONSHIPS (19:16-30; Mk. 10:17-31; Lk. 18:18-30)

- A. SITUATION: Rich young ruler questions Jesus on the one, all-essential good deed to inherit eternal life. (19:16)
- B. JESUS' RESPONSE (19:17-19)
  - 1. He challenged the young man's understanding of Jesus' position and his own comprehension of what is really good: "On what basis do you call me what is true absolutely only of God, and desire to know from me what only God can know?"
  - 2. He furnished the commandments God had already revealed.
- C. THE YOUNG MAN INSISTS ON PERFECTION (19:20)
- D. JESUS OFFERED PERFECTION THROUGH ABSOLUTE CONSECRATION (19:21)
- E. THE YOUNG MAN, HOWEVER, BALKED (19:22)
- F. JESUS' COMMENT ON THE INCIDENT AND TEACHING ON WEALTH (19:23-30)
  - 1. "Entrance into God's Kingdom is difficult for those who have wealth." (19:23)
  - 2. Apostles are staggered, but Jesus repeats Himself even more emphatically (19:24)
  - 3. Dumbfounded (Mk. 10:24), the disciples ask, "If a rich man cannot be saved, who can?!" (19:25)
  - 4. Jesus answered: "God is Lord of all possibilities."
- G. PETER'S WRONG-HEADED QUESTION ANSWERED (19:27-30)
  - 1. "We have done what the rich young ruler would not, i.e. we have left everything: what shall be ours?"
  - 2. Jesus' answers:
    - a. PROMISE: "In the new world, you will reign with me,

judging all Israel." (19:28)

- b. ENCOURAGEMENT: "All who have sacrificed for my sake now will receive in this time a hundred times what they give up, and eternal life in the time to come." (19:29)
- c. WARNING: "Watch for a reversal of earth's value systems: positions of relative importance will be reversed. Many big names will become nobodies, whereas the nobodies will then be important." (19:30)

### CHAPTER NINETEEN AND TWENTY: ILLUSTRATIONS OF CHAPTER EIGHTEEN?

In Matthew 18 Jesus presented a marvelous discourse on human relationships among disciples in the Messianic Community, the Church of Christ. While treating the Twelve's question about relative greatness in the Kingdom, He touched themes such as mercifulness, humility, self-sacrifice, self-discipline, concern about the weak, the children, and stumbling-blocks. It would appear that this discourse was, for Matthew, as significant in the revelation of Jesus as the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, much as he did for the Sermon on the Mount in the chapters that follow it (Mt. 8 and 9), Matthew seems to spend the two chapters following the Sermon on Human Relationships (Mt. 19, 20) to illustrate this sermon's great themes, by selecting out of Jesus' encounters in Perea those events which illuminate them. Consider the following illustrations:

1. Male-female relationships, or the divorce versus marriage question. Do we not have here the larger question of male superiority versus tender concern for one's mate? What about reconciliation after offences? (18:15-20)
2. Adult-child relationships: how should children be treated? Jesus answers: "Blessed!" Apostles had treated them as if they did not count. (Cf. 18:5)
3. Rich-poor relationships: the rich young ruler, an "ideal disciple" who refused to sacrifice his own stumbling block for the Kingdom's sake, and so was lost. (18:6-9) Disciples, aghast that rich men hardly enter the Kingdom, ask, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answers that salvation is by grace. (Cf. 18:23-35) Peter responds, "We sacrificed everything: what will that get us?" Jesus answers, "Much, however, all the present values and proud pretensions will

- be overturned." (Cf. notes on 18:1-14)
4. Grace-merit relationships: the eleventh-hour servants equal to all-day workers by a gift of grace. Our standing before God is not a question of strict, legal accounting but the gift of undeserved favor. (Cf. 18:23-35)
  5. Passion Prediction: the Messiah will serve others even to the point of death at the hands of highest authorities in the land. (See note on Mk. 9:35 after Mt. 18:1.)
  6. Refusal to establish a power structure: greatness is measured by service (20:20-28; cf. 18:1-5)
  7. Jesus is not too busy to heal two blind men who desperately appeal to Him for help (20:29ff; cf. 18:10-14)

### Section 47

#### JESUS TEACHES IN PEREA ON MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND CELIBACY (Parallel: Mark 10:1-12)

TEXT: 19:1-12

1 And it came to pass when Jesus had finished these words, he departed from Galilee, and came into the borders of Judaea beyond the Jordan; 2 and great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there.

3 And there came unto him Pharisees, trying him, and saying, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? 4 And he answered and said, Have ye not read, that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh? 6 So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. 7 They say unto him, Why then did Moses command to give a bill of divorce, and to put her away? 8 He saith unto them, Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it hath not been so. 9 And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery. 10 The disciples say unto him, If the case of the man is so

with his wife, it is not expedient to marry. 11 But he said unto them, Not all men can receive this saying, but they to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs, that were so born from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs, that were made eunuchs by men: and there are eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why is Jesus operating now "beyond the Jordan" during this period of His ministry? What brings Him here, or, perhaps, drives Him here?
- b. Why would the Pharisees raise the particular question they did? Whereas they could possibly have asked so many others, why would this question be so important?
- c. Before dealing directly with the Pharisees' question about His own position, Jesus cited the Old Testament Law (according to Matthew) and asked His hecklers "What did Moses command you?" (according to Mark). Why did He bring out the Old Testament Law first?
- d. What does Jesus mean when He explains that the Mosaic divorce law was given "because of your hardness of heart" and therefore not in contradiction with His stated principle based upon God's original intentions for marriage?
- e. How, or in what sense, can "the two become one flesh"? What did God mean by this phrase in Genesis?
- f. In what sense does God join the two together?
- g. Jesus quotes from Genesis 2:24, but attributes these words to God: ". . . He . . . made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father . . .' " A close reading of Genesis 2 will not show that God actually said these words, yet Jesus affirms that the words quoted are of God. In what sense does He mean this?
- h. On the basis of what you answered in the previous question you should be able to tell what His affirmation has to say on the question of the authority and inspiration of the first two chapters of Genesis. Is Jesus merely condescending to the "mistaken view, commonly held by His people," or is He revealing the true paternity of that text?
- i. Why did Jesus make the exception to the general no-divorce rule,

- i.e. what is there about fornication that makes divorce a conceivable option for Jesus' disciple whose mate commits it?
- j. Mark reports that Jesus' repetition of His rule applies it to the wife who divorces her husband. Why would the Lord have repeated His rule for His hearers: did women have such rights in those days? Do women need to hear His rule? If so, why?
  - k. Why do you think the Apostles objected to Jesus' solemn declaration on marriage, divorce and adultery? What is the basis of their objection? Is it a valid one? How are modern objections to Jesus' teaching on this subject based on the principle the disciples implied in their objection?
  - l. Why do you suppose Jesus brought up "eunuchs" as a proverbial basis for His answer to the objection that "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry"?
  - m. To what does Jesus refer when He says, "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it"? "Receive this" what? Then, what must one possess or be to "be able to receive this"?
  - n. Can you name some "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"? There are some very famous ones in the New Testament.
  - o. How does this selection contribute to the larger question of male-female relationships? What principles in Jesus' doctrine have wider application than to the questions of marriage, divorce, adultery and the single life, as these are discussed by the Lord in our text?
  - p. Of what principles in Jesus' Sermon on Personal Relationships (Matthew 18) is this section an illustration?
  - q. Explain Matthew 19:3-12, Jesus' teaching on divorce and marriage, as well as you can to indicate what is positively and what is probably His will for us today.

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

At the conclusion of His message on personal relations, Jesus arose to leave the area where He was. In fact, since the days were approaching for His death and ascension, He resolutely set His face to go up to Jerusalem. So He left Galilee and went beyond the Jordan River to Perea which borders on Judea. There too large crowds followed Him, thronging around Him. And again, as usual, He taught them and healed them there.

Presently, some Pharisees came up to Him with a test question:

JESUS TEACHES ON MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND CELIBACY 19:1-12

"Has a man the right to divorce his wife for just any and every reason?"

He parried their question with another: "What did Moses command you?"

"Moses allowed a man," they began, "to provide her a written statement of separation, and so divorce her."

"But," Jesus countered, "it was because of your gross inhumanity that Moses wrote that precept for you. Have you never read in Genesis where the God who created man from the beginning, from the time of creation, made them a male and a female? This same God said, 'This is why a man must leave the home of his father and mother and become united to his wife: the two must become one family.' It follows that the man and woman are no longer two individuals, but one indivisible unit. Consequently, what God, in His original project for man, has united, let no man separate."

"But why, then," they objected, "did Moses lay down the law that one must give a notice of separation and so divorce his wife?"

Jesus lodged a counter objection: "Moses PERMITTED (not ordered) you to divorce your wives, because you were so unwilling to do what God wanted. This, however, has never been God's original plan!"

Later, when they were indoors, the disciples again brought up the subject to ask Him about it. His response to them was: "I can assure you that whoever divorces his wife on any ground other than her unfaithfulness, and marries another women, becomes an adulterer in relation to his former wife. Similarly, if a woman divorces her husband to marry another man, she too commits adultery."

His disciples took issue with this, "Well, if that is how things are between husband and wife, then it is better not to get married!"

But Jesus qualified their statement, "It is not everyone who can accept your conclusion that remaining unmarried is better. Only those to whom God concedes the ability can remain happily single. For there are some people incapable of consummating marriage, who were born that way, the congenitally deformed. Then, again, there are others made incapable of marriage they were emasculated by others. And then there are those individuals who abstain from marriage voluntarily in order to promote the interests of the Kingdom of God. Let anyone accept celibacy who is able to."

## SUMMARY

During Jesus' Pereaean ministry some Pharisees sounded Jesus out on the rigor or leniency with which He regarded the divorce question. He drove them back to God's original plan for man based on the indissolubility of marriage. Any post-creation, Mosaic precept was not an eternal principle but a provisional, temporary concession to alleviate the worst features of a sinful situation. Divorce by either party on any excuse, other than sexual immorality, is itself legalized adultery. The disciples, unready for the thorough-going rigidity of Jesus' position, rapidly surmised that celibacy would be better than the risks of marriage. Jesus, however, stuck to His guns on the original plan of God which included marriage between the sexes, while admitting celibacy as a proper exception in the case of those gifted with the proper temperament to make proper use of the single life for the sake of God's Kingdom.

## NOTES

I. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN  
MALE-FEMALE REALTIONSHPIS (19:1-12)A. GENERAL SITUATION: GREAT POPULARITY OF JESUS  
IN HEROD'S TERRITORY, PEREA (19:1, 2)

**19:1 And it came to pass when Jesus had finished these words, he departed from Galilee.** This formal conclusion to the Sermon on Personal Relationship (chap. 18) is no mere literary device. Events had kept Jesus and His group in a state of tension ever since Peter's confession. Note these connections:

1. Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, then Jesus prophesied His death and resurrection to occur at Jerusalem. Peter rebuked Jesus for this defeatism and had to be sternly corrected, since the cross lay at the center of all of God's plans. (Mt. 16:13-28)
2. As further corrective to their mistaken notions of earthly glory and materialistic messianism, Jesus showed Peter, James and John His heavenly glory. (Mt. 17:1-13)
3. Contemporaneous with the Transfiguration, the failure of the nine Apostles to cast out a demon required private teaching, but Jesus' signal success produced popular enthusiasm again. (Mt.

17:14-22) THIS IS THE STAGING AREA IN GALILEE FROM WHICH JESUS WILL MARCH ON JERUSALEM TO DIE. Amidst popular acclaim and precisely because of it, Jesus repeated His prediction of sufferings, thus stating His battle plan and purpose of the successive campaign. (Mt. 17:22f)

4. Upon their return to Capernaum, the disciples are involved in two events that require His special instruction:
  - a. Peter's presumptuous answer to the temple tax-collectors that Jesus pays the tax. (Mt. 17:24-27)
  - b. The disciples' private debate about relative status in the Kingdom. (Mt. 18:1-35)

These events are all reasonably closely connected, not only by chronological connections, but especially by logical necessity. Thus, when Jesus began to regroup His men in Galilee for the final "long march" to Jerusalem (17:22), chapter 19:1 was already a certainty that, to set it in motion, required only the completion of the intervening teaching.

**He departed from Galilee** never to return until after His resurrection. (Cf. 26:32 and parallel; 28:7, 10, 16ff and par.; Jn. 21:1ff) **He came into the borders of Judaea beyond the Jordan.** Is Matthew speaking here of a precise period and geographic location or only summarizing a general period and speaking loosely?

1. If he is speaking precisely with regard to the geography, we have a problem, since *Perea* ("the land beyond the Jordan," the Greek equivalent of Transjordania) is not politically "Judea." Further, Mark's language, "region of Judea AND beyond the Jordan" (Mk. 10:1) seems to separate the two areas.
  - a. But what if Matthew is ignoring boundaries established by Roman political divisions and is regarding Perea as really part of Judea? That is, by the expression *Judea* does he mean all of Palestine in the wider sense of "the land of the Jews," rather than a precise provincial designation? This would mean that Matthew included Perea as *Judea*, or Jewish territory. Then, if Matthew and Mark are strictly parallel, Mark's "and" in the expression "region of Judea AND beyond the Jordan" should be thought of as explicative "even, namely" and rendered "the region of Judea, namely beyond the Jordan."
  - b. It may be that Matthew means nothing more than that Jesus operated in that part of Perea along the border of Judea, i.e. mainly in the Jordan Valley and not farther east, deeper into

Perea. This would facilitate the quick trips into Judea implied by John and Luke.

2. If Matthew is speaking only generally, the problem fades even more. It is easier to think of both Matthew and Mark as summarizing the later Judean Ministry which is narrated by John (Jn. 7:1—10:39). Perhaps the events that Luke collects together in his chapters 10:1—13:21 are to be thought of as occurring during this period. Then John (10:40-42) indicates the actual passage of Jesus into Perea, which Matthew and Mark point to here by their expression, **beyond the Jordan**. If we should then follow Luke's chronology (13:22—18:14) from that point forward, with the single insertion of John's account of Jesus' quick trip to Jerusalem-Bethany for the raising of Lazarus (Jn. 11:1-54), located perhaps between Lk. 17:10 and 17:11, then Matthew and Mark's material begin to parallel that of Luke after Lk. 18:14. The net result of all this is the conclusion that Matthew 19:1f merely summarizes the events from the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn. 7:2ff) until just shortly before the last journey to Jerusalem for the last Passover. The specific events are recorded in Lk. 10—18:14 and Jn. 7:2—11:54.
3. Another, simpler solution might be that Matthew and Mark refer to the end of Jesus' concluding ministry, hence He is actually passing between Samaria and Galilee after His retreat from Bethany to Ephraim (Jn. 11:54; Lk. 17:11), hence is beginning the last trip to Jerusalem. This would mean that Jesus came into Perea bordering on Judea and there encountered the multitudes of pilgrims en route to the Passover. These people begin to attach themselves to His group, so He teaches and heals them.

**19:2 Great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there.** Mark (10:1b) notes that "crowds gathered to him again." Why "again"? The possibilities are two:

1. If the Lord is thought of as just entering Perea from Galilee, then "again" means that, although Jesus' popularity had collapsed in Galilee (Jn. 6:66), these fresh crowds swell His sagging popular following once more as He now enters a virgin territory where He had not evangelized extensively before.
2. On the other hand, if this is the last trip, these crowds are bound for the Passover. So, "again" would signal the end of the preceding, relative isolation that characterized His withdrawals from public attention. Rather than indicate the beginning of a popular ministry,

these are people who will travel with Jesus to Jerusalem for His last Passover.

In addition to His healing ministry, "as his custom was, he taught them there." (Mk. 10:1b) Why Matthew focuses on Jesus' healing, whereas Mark underlines His teaching is not clear. However Matthew implies the latter too, by recording two full chapters of situations in which Jesus is constantly teaching, especially in small situations.

B. IMMEDIATE SITUATION: INSIDIOUS PHARISEAN  
ATTEMPT TO EMBROIL JESUS IN CONTROVERSY  
OVER DIVORCE. (19:3)

19:3 **And there came unto him Pharisees, trying him.** Because He is travelling through Perea, a territory under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, some see this Pharisean trap as doubly treacherous:

1. Since John the Baptist had been beheaded for open condemnation of the adulterous union between Herod Antipas and Herodias (see notes on 14:3-12), these Pharisees hope to get Jesus to commit Himself openly on the divorce question and thus expose Himself to the wrath of that consciousless king and his cruel consort. Having crossed into Herod's jurisdiction, Jesus could more easily be arrested, if He made any self-incriminating declarations that might be employed to incite those authorities against Him.
2. If Jesus answered wrongly to the test question, He would lose credibility with whatever group He antagonized, even before beginning any serious ministry in Perea. Perhaps He had taught hard line on divorce many times in other areas (cf. Mt. 5:27-32), especially in contexts where it appeared that He intended to rise above the authority of the Mosaic Law. Thus, these Pharisees may hope to hook Him on the horns of a dilemma connected with His own well-known doctrine. If He repeated His hardline position on divorce, they would show that He rejected Mosaic authority. But if He upheld Mosaic Law which permits divorce, then they could expose Him as contradicting His earlier stand, and therefore as a teacher too inconsistent to be taken seriously.

**Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?** Had the Pharisees stopped with this much of a question, Jesus could have answered a qualified yes, as He does in verse 9, and there would have been no contest. The controversy turns, however, on their final words: **for every cause.**

- Because Hillel's school interpreted Dt. 24:1 ("some indecency") in the widest and most lax manner possible, the Pharisees' expression, **for every cause**, adequately states the position of Hillel and asks Jesus to verify or deny Hillel's decision and take the consequences.

See how Josephus, also a Pharisee, states his interpretation in *Antiquities IV*, 8, 23. Josephus himself divorced twice and married a third wife: the first because she was a captive and he a priest ordered by the emperor to marry her; the second, because he was "not pleased with her behavior." (*Life of Flavius Josephus*, §75)

Did the Pharisees hope Jesus' disciples shared the liberal view too? (Cf. 19:10) Compare also the brutal language of Sirach 25:26 which reflects this liberal thinking.

- The contrary opinion, expressed by the rabbi Shammai, interpreted Dt. 24:1 as referring to something indecent, libidinous or lascivious in the wife's conduct, as cause for divorcing her, a position morally closer to that of Christ. (See on v. 9.)

So, if Jesus opposed Hillel, He would lose disciples who sympathized with that great rabbi on this issue. But if He took Hillel's view, the stricter conscience of others would condemn His laxity. From the Pharisees' standpoint, He lost either way.

Notice the emphasis: **is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for any cause?** These are the Pharisean terms of the debate, based on the unconfessed premise of male supremacy and the woman's inferiority. Her rights or feelings or needs are not problems that seriously disturb the debators, a fact that reduced her to the level of a thing to kick around at the caprice of her Lord and master, the husband. The general tenor of Mosaic legislation tended to protect the weaker members of the Hebrew society against the abusive treatment of the strong. But, as usual, men sought the loopholes in order to elude their obligation to a spouse for whom they no longer felt any affection. The inhumanity of these scholars is evident in the fact that **THESE** are the terms of their debate. They did not interest themselves in solving the profound menace to society created by broken homes, children cast adrift and former wives left to shift for themselves. They assumed that **THEIR** rights and personal feelings were of first importance and their own masculine superiority remained unquestioned and unquestionable. So this test question which sees

woman as naturally inferior to man becomes an instant illustration of how to apply Jesus' teaching on attitudes towards "little ones." (See on 18:1-14.)

Rather than permit Himself to be embroiled in the Jewish controversy to become the target for whichever side He opposed, while talking directly with the Pharisees, He aimed straight at the heart of the problem, the heartlessness of men who refused to understand God's original intention for marriage. Later, when talking privately with the disciples (Mk. 10:10), He could give the kind of answer the Pharisees expected, but did not need. (Mt. 19:9) However, since the disciples had heard the former, they could also learn the latter.

According to Mark (10:3, 4) Jesus rebounded the Pharisees' loaded question by putting them to the test. It is significant that Mark writes: "He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'" For Jews, this is the proper approach: it is an answer in itself, because it draws immediate attention to the Word of God relevant to the subject. The Pharisees had approached Jesus with the intention of drawing Him into partisan debate on a hotly contested issue based on popular opinions. But, before presenting what will be His own definitive, divine revelation on the subject, our Lord took them straight to the Word of God which would be authoritative and final in the solution of the question at hand.

It is interesting to observe that they did not cite the law specifically, for to have done so would have required that they mention the bone of contention, the phrase, "if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her." He could then have pointed instantly to adultery or fornication as the proper exception. Their indefinite quotation leaves the responsibility for any decision squarely upon Him. They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away." (Mk. 10:4) This is a practical summary of Dt. 24:1ff. "Moses allowed," they say, thus underlining his prophetic permission. However, these Jews have side-stepped Jesus' question, because He is calling for the divine standard, not the concession they cite here. It is not unlikely that they sense that His demand for a citation of Moses' Law is anticipating a hard-line approach. In order to forestall an unyielding position against divorce, they trundle out a Scriptural exception which they suppose will automatically compromise any rigid interpretation He could make.

He waved their obstructionism aside, "For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment." (Mk. 10:5) The word "commandment"

here does not stand in antithesis to "allowed" in the preceding verse, as if Jesus had called for a commandment (Mk. 10:3), then they cite Him a concession (10:4) and He now admits it to be a "commandment" (10:5). He only calls the concession a "commandment" in the sense that divorce per se is the concession, but the method whereby divorce is regulated is by "commandment." The word "commandment" here stands in antithesis, rather, to "no commandment," i.e. no regulation of divorce whatever. Rather than leave Israel to govern its divorce practice by individual caprice, leading to worse consequences, God gave commandments to regulate what must be considered at best as only a concession in a bad situation which did not at all reflect God's original design for marriage.

Therefore, since they failed to cite the divine standard of Moses, He now cites it for them. (Mt. 19:4f)

### C. JESUS' RESPONSE: "START LOOKING FOR REASONS TO KEEP YOUR WIFE!" (19:4-12)

1. Adopt God's original intention which was marriage, not divorce.  
(19:4-6)

a. God's ideal is one man for one woman. (19:4)

19:4. Avoiding their superficial cavils and human interpreters, Jesus drove them directly to the highest possible Mosaic principle of marriage: God's foundational principle behind marriage. God, not man, is the Lord of marriage. **Have you not read?** (*ouk anégnote*) The answer expected is: "Yes, we have." They had indeed read, but never understood, the impact of the familiar words. As we have seen, Jesus countered their original question with: "What did Moses command you?" (Mk. 10:3) But since these opponents failed to quote the most significant texts of Moses on the issue, He now appeals to the principle texts, Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. THESE represent the genuinely prophetic, Mosaic thinking on the question of marriage, not Dt. 24:1ff. It should be instantly obvious to the impartial reader that these quoted texts, which are the hotly contested battleground between belief and unbelief today, are, for Jesus the revealer of the mind of God, products of the pen of Moses. Jesus' words represent a verbatim quotation of the LXX translation of Gen. 1:27 and a practically verbatim citation of Gen. 2:24. (See on 19:5.)

**He who made them** follows many ancient manuscripts, but another series of ancient textual witnesses has "the Creator" or "He who created them from the beginning" (*ho ktisias*, rather than *ho poiésas*). That this latter is the better reading is argued by Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 47) as follows:

It is easier to suppose that copyists changed the word *ktisias* (which is supported by several excellent witnesses) to *poiésas*, thus harmonizing it with the Septuagint text of Gn. 1:27 (which is quoted in the immediate context), than to suppose that *poiésas* was altered to suit the Hebrew word used in Gn. 1:27 (*bara'* which means "created").

Arndt-Gingrich (456) render *ho ktisias* "the Creator" in our text, because, although it is an aorist participle, with the definite article it becomes a substantive. These data lead to an important observation: in these simple words Jesus deals a mortal blow to any developmental theory of human evolution. He does this in several ways:

1. He implies that the record of their creation is a trustworthy, authentic record. **Have you not read?** Otherwise, why bother? The fundamental point of Jesus' argument against the Jewish looseness of marriage relationships through divorce and multiple marriages, is that, in the text cited, God indicated His original design for man. If this text represents nothing better than "the solidification of an ancient mythology," His argument falls, because it is neither Mosaic (as His argument implies) nor of God (as His argument demands).
2. By saying **from the beginning**, He assumes as proved that Adam and Eve are connected with the true beginning of human history, and that what He will affirm about them in the following verses is to be considered true and binding for the entire human race descended from them.
3. Jesus implies that the moral responsibility implicit in the relation of a heterosexual pair, i.e. **male and female**, proves that God did not create them as amoral animals by a process of successive genetic changes from other species, who could mate according to sub-human, non-moral instinctive urges. Rather, He created the species **MAN** in two heterosexual types, first the *male* and then the *female*. (Gen. 5:2)

This means that Jesus, in considering Adam and Eve the true progenitors of the human family, so that what is affirmed of them is

valid for their children, therefore sees Adam and Eve, not as animal-like protohumans, but fully possessing every essential characteristic shared by their children, and in whose steps the latter must walk especially in the marriage relationship. In the same vein, just as Adam and Eve are not the invented names of sub-human prototypes of our race, neither are they the mythical designations of legendary figures invented by ancient philosophers and poets to explain the misty beginning of man. Otherwise, how could he appeal to this **male and female** as the standard by which God would judge all men, if in fact there really existed no original **male and female** created by the hand of God?

On the contrary, this human pair, standing side by side at the beginning of the world, represents God's original project, a fundamental element in the ordering of all future society. How many times had every Hebrew male heard those lovely words from Genesis 2:18-24 that picture woman, in contrast to all animals, as "a helping being, in which, as soon as he sees it, he may recognize himself"? (Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, I, 86) Although the order of creation established male priority and leadership and female dependence (1 Ti. 2:13; 1 Co. 11:8f), a fact made painfully clear after the fall (Gen. 3:16), man's position could never be thought of as one of absolute independence. (1 Co. 11:11f) He was created **male** in view of his **female** whom God would create later. With the woman, man is completed. She is not merely his property, but an absolutely essential ingredient in his full humanness. According to God's original design, as **male and female**, they each contribute to the enrichment of the other and to the fullness of them both. It would be sacrilege for men to interpose a counterproposal of separation and divorce. By saying **and female**, Christ has restored woman to her true position and glory, not in the sense of conferring upon her a new, modern role, but rather by re-establishing her in that ancient glory appointed for her at the creation.

In effect, Jesus is saying that **male and female**, as an expression of God's will, does not mean male and females, either by outright polygamy or by that virtual polygamy produced by successive marriages interrupted by easy divorces. Although it was not His topic, Jesus' logic touches other areas. By saying **He made them male and female**, He eliminated homosexuality and other abuses.

1. God eliminated lesbianism, female and female.
2. God condemned sodomy, male and male.
3. By creating two free, unrelated individuals, He laid the groundwork for legislation against marriage with next of kin and incest.

(However, this principle did not seem to be important during the early years of the race when the early descendants of Adam and Eve necessarily married their sisters.)

It is the **male and female** view of human union that God pronounced "very good" along with everything else that He had made. (Gen. 1:31, 27f; 1 Ti. 4:4, 3) Any other judgment is arrogant, open rebellion against the will and judgment of the King.

- b. The parent-child relationship is subordinate to the marriage relation. (19:5)

19:5 **And said.** The most interesting question to ask about this verse is: WHO said what Jesus quotes? It is practically a verbatim rendering of the LXX version of Gen. 2:24. As a perusal of the Genesis text will reveal, the quoted words cannot be the words of Adam (2:23), because, without revelation, he knows nothing of mother or father, but must be the inspired comment of Moses, the author of Genesis. And yet, in Jesus' sentence, the only possible subject of the verb "(he) said" is that mentioned in the previous phrase, "the Creator, He who created." The sentence structure, simply, is this: "He who created . . . made them . . . and said." So it is God who is thought of as saying what is recorded in Gen. 2:24, "For this cause a man shall leave . . ." The only rational explanation that justifies Jesus' attributing to God Moses' words is the assumption that Jesus considered Genesis to be the inspired Word of God. For Jesus, God is real author back of Moses!

Now, if this be true, those who attack the inspiration or authority of Genesis 1 and 2, attack not men or traditions, but Jesus Christ who convincingly sets His own stamp of approval upon the Genesis text. This is further evident from Jesus' argument with the Pharisees. He will conclude that this verse means that God has hereby joined two people of opposite sex into an indissoluble union. (19:6) However, if His proof-text is faulty, i.e. not really God's Word on the subject, so is His conclusion. Monogamous marriage (Jesus' conclusion), if it is to be substantiated at all, must be justified on some other basis, because Jesus' citation of a text that does not really substantiate His argument not only weakens His own argument, but also undermines our confidence in any other conclusion He offers on the basis of OT Scriptures. His word in that case would have only relative, fallible, human authority. The only tenable basis upon which we may have our Christ now is to let Him tell us what we should believe about the OT texts, because, since we are unable to arrive at mathematical certainty about them on any other basis, His

authoritative word becomes the revelation that must guide all our thinking about this subject.

**For this cause**, in Gen. 2:24, refers to man's reaction to his wife: "This at last (in contrast to the animals he had observed) is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." God says that it is **for this reason**, i.e. because the one woman is so ideally suited to the one man, that **a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh**. In creating woman, God had taken her out of man. In marrying her, man cooperates with God in making her part of himself again. Thus, a union in which the two lives are joined into one is more solid than that of blood ties. To break such a union should be as unthinkable as hacking off the members of one's own physical body. (And yet, men thought it! Sir. 25:26) This is what it means to believe in the indissoluble and monogamous character of marriage.

**A man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.** This is the truly definitive law published by Moses: "**A man shall . . . cleave to his wife!**" Note the future tense: is God merely saying that marriage is the usual expectation when a boy leaves home? What reader of Genesis did not already know that? God is saying something far more significant. Since the Hebrew future is often used for commands (witness the Ten Commandments almost all stated in the future indicative.), is He not, rather, establishing an ordinance?

*Jerusalem Bible* boldly renders Mt. 19:5 and Mk. 10:7 as follows: "This is why a man must leave father and mother, and cling to his wife, and the two become one body," although they do not consistently render Gen. 2:24 this way.

From this standpoint, then, Jesus sees in the Hebrew future verb-forms of Gen. 2:24 the command of Moses that He sought. (Mk. 10:3, "What did Moses command you?") This permanent uniting of two lives into one is the real Mosaic command, the divine Law, as if God had said to man, "Leave your parents, and become as united to your wife as Adam's rib was physically and permanently part of his own body before Eve was created." Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 715) urges the conclusion that Jesus sees the divine command in this text, because

- a. Otherwise his argument would lose its force; b. the audience

hardly needed to be told that it is customary for men to get married; and c. this is in line with the words immediately following (v. 6).

Therefore, if the parental relation, which is itself a fleshly relationship, is subordinate to this marriage relationship, then to believe Jesus means that neither spouse in a battle between them may "run home to mother," because their tie to each other must be considered a stronger bond, hence they must settle their row and live unitedly in peace.

c. Jesus' conclusion: God's plans must not be destroyed by divorce.  
(19:6)

**19:6 So that they are no more two, but one flesh.** From the foregoing premises Jesus concludes that marriage leave man and woman no longer independent, autonomous individuals. They may no longer act as if they had separate interests and goals. They are to move as if they had one common soul. If God formed the original woman with something taken from the first man, He planned that the male and female, now two distinct persons, must be united in marriage as indivisibly as the original man had been when he was alone. From this standpoint, divorce amounts to amputation! (Study the diabolical combination of this concept with divorce in the brutal language of Sirach 25:26 LXX: "If she does not live according to your leadership, cut her off from your flesh!") And if death is the only means whereby a man can be separated from his own body (a unity created by God), the only means whereby the marriage unity (another union established by God) can be dissolved is by death. Or, to put it differently, marriage is **what God hath joined together.** If God is the Lord of marriage, they who enter into it may not act as if **THEY** were its lord either singly or together, in contradiction of His design for the institution He has established. **What God hath joined together**, as an expression, leads us to conclude that, whereas people usually think of themselves as consummating marriage in the sexual union, it is really God who **joins together**. Any married couple, therefore, is making use of an institution that belongs to God and must do so in the full awareness of His ethical principles that govern their proper stewardship of what belongs to Him. Otherwise, their mishandling of marriage becomes just another sin of misappropriation and abuse of His property.

**Let no man put asunder.** Jesus concludes that no single individual,

no human ordinance and no group of men has the right to effect a divorce without the consent of Him Who is the Lord of marriage, God. No man may excuse his illegitimate divorce by appeal to the law of the land, because neither the legislature nor the courts of any country have the right to contradict Jesus! Were all the legal systems of the entire world to permit murder or theft, these crimes would never become legal before God on such a basis. Despite all human lawbooks to the contrary, God would still hold the guilty responsible for murder or theft. Any country may pass laws that permit divorce "for every reason," but no one who cares about what Jesus thinks will avail himself of any of these legal means, except in the case of unchastity. (19:9)

Lest modern disciples bent on divorce for the shallow selfishness of "incompatibility" discount the Lord's sublime statement on the high sanctity of marriage as "anachronistic and impractical, because it fails to take into account the personality dissimilarities to which moderns are sensitive," they must be quietly reminded that Jesus pronounced this sentence in the full light of no less than 4000 years of bad examples! He is no mere social commentator with fallible judgment, but the Word of God revealing the mind of God on this as much as on any other subject about which He speaks. (Jn. 1:1-18) He does not need to be told by "enlightened moderns" what is in man, since He knows man inside and out. (Jn. 2:25) His words are spoken in the full light of the judgment whereby the fate of every single and married person will be weighed on the Last Day.

It is interesting to note that Paul's argument in 1 Co. 6:12-20—also based on Gen. 2:24—is founded on the intimate relationship of the believer to the body of Christ. (Cf. Eph. 5:28-31) That is, in the same way that sexual union creates a real, physical-spiritual relationship, so also the Christian's union with the Lord creates a spiritual union. (Cf. 1 Co. 6:17) However, sexual immorality, by establishing with a prostitute a union parallel to that pre-existing between the believer and Christ, desecrates the latter unity. This too argues the theological reality and unquestioned permanence of marriage created by such a union.

2. "Mosaic divorce legislation reflects inhumanity, not God's original family design." (19:7, 8)

**19:7 They say unto him, Why then did Moses command to give a bill of divorcement and to put her away? Notice the emphasis of**

this rabbinic objection: **Why did Moses COMMAND . . .?** Jesus had countered their first question by asking, "What did Moses command you?" (Mk. 10:3) They answered by citing a concession (Mk. 10:4). Jesus waved it aside as a situational permission that did not really represent God's purpose for marriage and was intended as but a regulation to eliminate the worst features of masculine inhumanity. (Mk. 10:5) Perhaps because He referred to this regulation as a commandment (*entolēn*) and certainly because He has solidly established His anti-divorce position on unquestionable Scriptural premises, they attempt once more to seize the advantage by reminding Him that Dt. 24:1ff is, after all, divine legislation, an insinuation that He has made Moses contradict himself by giving commands which contradict the original commandment concerning marriage in Gen. 2:24. Notice the shift in their argument: earlier they had argued against Jesus' intended hard-line stand by asserting that Moses PERMITTED. Here, against His citation of the original family design of God, they argue that Moses COMMANDED.

Study this Pharisean reaction carefully: even the Lord's correct exposition of Genesis cannot break their deeply ingrained habit of ignoring God's original design for marriage during their conventional debates on divorce. Their corrupt heart is exposed by their over-attention to a concession justifiable only to eliminate grosser inhumanity. They are not moved by any deep-running concern to seek to know the principle institution in the mind of God and obey Him.

Note that these Jews reveal their settled conviction that Dt. 24:1ff as well as Gen. 2:24 and 1:27 are of Mosaic authorship. Even if they ignore the weight and proper understanding of these texts, they do not debate the authorship with Him.

**19:8 Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives.** Since they had mistaken a situation concession for the original, divine standard, He must correct them by reminding them that they had rightly termed it a concession earlier. (Mk. 10:4) They had made the exegetical mistake of assuming that Moses' legislation commanded divorce. Moses did not order divorce as a right solution to anything. He ordered only one thing in Dt. 24:1ff: that in case a divorce had already taken place, reunion with the divorced wife is forbidden if she had married another man in the meantime. The portion cited by the Pharisees regarding the divorce certificate (Mt. 19:7) is not a law at all. (To appreciate this it is necessary to notice carefully all the "ifs" and "whens" in Dt. 24:1-4. They all

serve to describe the kind of situation in which the prohibition in verse 4 is valid. The only real precept in that entire text is found in verse 4.) Dt. 24:1-3 is but the description of a situation assumed as customary and founded upon a tradition which left it completely in the hands of the husband to initiate a divorce. In such a situation Moses could not entirely abolish the tradition without requiring by law the kind of regeneration in husbands that such new marriage laws would actually require. But even so, a correct exegesis of Dt. 24:1-4 would show that Moses actually discouraged an easy divorce, because he clearly points out the negative implications involved. Jesus' peculiar wording rumbles with judgment: **For YOUR hardness of heart Moses permitted YOU to put away YOUR wives.** Not only does He recognize that His questioners are Jews and so under the Mosaic system, but He intentionally underlines their spiritual kinship to the hard-hearted, unconverted, inhumane men back in Moses' time who retained their selfish grip on the total disposition of a marriage, claiming the right to dispose of wives who were no longer pleasing. So saying, He declared, in effect, Hillel to be exegetically right and Shammai wrong, because, whatever might be the interpretation of "some indecency," Moses never tolerated unlimited divorce.

How could God, or Moses, tolerate such **hardness of heart?** On the basis of genuine compassion for the women, the true victims of that bad situation. An entire nation cannot instantly be raised from moral vileness to Christian standards merely by enacting better laws. In fact, without deep conversion of the men that would put a new spirit in them to treat their wives with respect, the permanent, monogamic marriage ideal seen at creation, if welded into iron-fisted legislation, would have tempted men to choose sexual promiscuity or other illegitimate means to avoid the bondage of permanent marriage under a rigid legal system. Or, forced by law to keep an unloved, unwanted wife, the brutal husband could abuse her with beatings, starvation, humiliations and overwork. Thus, even permitting her to be sent away with the formal protection of the divorce certificate would have been a real kindness to her. God had faced the choice of two evils with no real, immediately available third alternative except repentance and conversion, but He was already working on that too.

**But from the beginning it hath not been so. From the beginning** monogamy was the rule. **The beginning** was a paradise when everything functioned harmoniously according to God's original plan, where the Kingdom of God was, absolute. Now, Jesus' disciples have

voluntarily surrendered to God's rule. This is why the only rule for them must be the plan God indicated in the creation of men before sin marred the picture. Since divorce expresses the discord, rebellion and failure that come from rejecting God's Lordship over marriage, there can be no place for divorce in the Kingdom of God. In fact, it was a Cainite who began to pollute the race with the multiple marriages that divorce seems to legitimize. (Cf. Gen. 4:19)

If the validity and importance of a tradition is judged by its antiquity and origin, then Jesus has just beat the Pharisees hands down at their own game. If it be admitted that when treating divorce Moses only acceded to custom, then the Jews could claim only a tradition incorporated in the Mosaic Law, but had no authority whereby they could document this custom as much older or authoritative than that, and they certainly could not produce any divine authority for it. But Jesus, on the other hand, could not only cite a view of the human family that was as old as creation, but could point to one that enjoyed the authority of God Himself! This latter argument apparently silenced the Pharisees, because not only do they fade away, but Mark specifically affirms (Mk. 10:10) that the remainder of this conversion occurred in the house where His disciples quizzed Him further on the question. Matthew did not consider this break in the conversation important for his purpose, so omitted it.

3. "Any divorce for any reason other than unchastity encourages adultery through marriage of divorced persons." (19:9)

**19:9 And I say unto you.** This teaching is directed, not to the Pharisees who have apparently retreated in frustration, but to the disciples who, "in the house . . . asked him again about this matter." (Mk. 10:10) **I say unto you.** The time has arrived for the Son of God, with His power to convert hard hearts, to bring an end to the nefarious tradition upon which the imperfect concession in the Mosaic system was based. Jesus can create the situation where God's original ideal for marriage is a working reality. Whereinsofar men continue to insist on divorcing for any other reason than that indicated by the Lord of marriage, they usurp His divine prerogatives. Only the Gospel, not ideal divorce legislation, can bring about the ideal God had in mind at the creation.

**Whosoever shall put away his wife . . . and shall marry another, committeth adultery.** See notes on 5:27-32. Although Jesus' words deal specifically with the case of the man who divorces with the purpose of remarrying, the spirit of His thinking condemns also that

heartless individual who divorces his wife with no intention whatever of remarrying. He is condemned because of what the divorce does to the wife. (Cf. Mal. 2:13-16)

**Except for fornication** is the only concession Jesus admits to His hard line on divorce. So saying, Jesus showed Shammāi to have been morally closer to the truth and Hillel morally mistaken. But what reason validates this exception? By nature, **fornication**, or adultery, destroys the monogamic family life in the sense that, by that act, the guilty person separates what God has joined and takes another mate into the family relation. This is why marital unfaithfulness constitutes an assault upon the monogamic marital union: it is *de facto* polygamy. Were there absolutely no divorce permitted, the innocent married partner would thus be forced to live in a polygamous situation.

But the man who divorces a faithful wife, however imperfect she may be on other counts, and compounds his guilt by remarriage, thus slamming the door to reconciliation, is an adulterer. This is because marriage creates a unity divisible only by death. (Ro. 7:2, 3; 1 Co. 7:39) Thus, any divorce before death would not be recognized by God, and remarriage under these circumstances must be judged adultery, because this *de facto* bigamy violates God's monogamic ideal in Gen. 1:27 and 2:24. (Heb. 13:4) Under these circumstances even rabbinic law would have condemned such a union. (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 335) Marriage to another's divorced mate is adultery, because they are still married, notwithstanding the "divorce" granted by the laws of their society. Therefore, the society that legalizes divorce for any other reason than the only one that severs the monogamic union, is merely becoming accomplice to consecutive, if not contemporaneous, polygamy. On what grounds, then, can it be asserted that "divorce *can* be the sign of repentance of two human beings who recognize their guilt of having failed to make use of the gift of God to live according to His will, and *can* in this case free them for another manifestation of divine mercy"? (Edward Schweizer quoted with approval by González-Ruiz, *Marco*, 177) But the gift of God is not the supposed freedom to think otherwise than Jesus, but REPENTANCE of all that made that marriage fail! The guilt of marital failure is never absolved by superimposing upon it the additional guilt of a sinful divorce!

However, should the sin of *fornication* be the cause of a given divorce, then Jesus' rule would read: "Whoever divorces his wife due to her unfaithfulness and shall marry another, does not commit

adultery." This is because, when the only exception that Jesus admits, is the case, then the condemnation attached to divorce for all other excuses, is absent. The guilty party destroyed the marriage unity by fornication. No longer married, the divorced innocent party is therefore a proper candidate to marry another unmarried person. Although God recognizes divorce in no other case, for Him divorce is real in this one. And if divorce is real at this point, there is no marriage between the couple involved, hence the innocent husband or wife would be free to remarry without committing adultery by so doing.

#### D. THE DISCIPLES' STUNNED OBJECTION: "BETTER NEVER TO MARRY THEN!" (19:10)

19:10 The disciples say unto him, If the case of the man is so with his wife, it is not expedient to marry. They reason that if marriage is indissoluble, then a life-long marriage failure would be an intolerable prison sentence and therefore ought not to be begun in the first place. Two negative observations grow out of this:

1. Some commentators believe that Jesus could not have pronounced the unchastity exception to His no-divorce rule, since Mark does not record it, hence the reader of Mark would never know about such an exception, and thus the disciples' reaction here is far more understandable if Matthew be blamed for having invented it. To this it must be replied:
  - a. Neither Mark nor Luke needed to record the exception, since Jesus' well-known teaching with the exception included (as documented by Matthew) was already sufficiently well-known. (Mt. 5:32: how often had Jesus repeated this in popular preaching?)
  - b. Further, for the disciples, the problem is not whether there could be any unchastity exception or not, because the logic of Jesus had already established one single, life-long, monogamous marriage as the standard, which, if taken to its proper conclusion, must recognize that adultery is in itself destructive of that relation. Thus, even without Matthew's record, they could have arrived at the exception made due to unfaithfulness. And, if we may judge from the mood evident in every position represented in both Judaism and especially in the NT, every Jew

would have so readily admitted fornication as a suitable ground for divorce that it needed not to have been stated by any of the Synoptics. However, Jesus deemed it essential, so He said, and Matthew documented it.

- c. What shocks the disciples is not the presence or absence of any exceptions as serious as fornication. Rather, their reaction here registers their shock that absolutely all other motives for divorce, some of which they would have personally accepted as justifiable, are deliberately swept aside by Christ.
- 2. Others cannot believe that the disciples, so long in Jesus' fellowship, could be capable of such moral laxness: "They would not hold that what even the Jews of the stricter school of Shammai maintained respecting the marriage-tie was an intolerable obligation." (Plummer, *Matthew*, 260) From this conclusion it is argued that Jesus could not have given the "adultery exception" (19:9), since the disciples' reaction is explicable only on the assumption that He forbade all divorce, even in the case of the wife's unfaithfulness. This distortion of the picture is corrected by the following considerations:
  - a. It is based on the false assumption that the disciples COULD NOT have held so low a view of marriage after so long a discipleship under Jesus. This assumption is groundless, because they proved again and again that they did not share the Lord's mentality on many subjects, and frankly told Him so, even though they had listened personally to His instruction:
    - (1) They signally failed to understand Mt. 18:1-14 by hindering others' bringing little children to Jesus. (19:13-15)
    - (2) They shamefully failed to grasp Mt. 18:1-14 by continuing to ask for positions of personal prestige in Jesus' hierarchy. (20:20-28)
    - (3) They miserably failed to understand Mt. 18:6-9 by being shocked that anyone would miss the Kingdom of God simply by refusing to eliminate his own stumbling blocks. (19:25)
    - (4) They were in danger of misunderstanding that one's standing before God is not a question of religious status or strict legal accounting, but a gift of undeserved favor. (18:23-35; 19:29—20:16)
  - b. The disciples' exclamation is perfectly understandable on quite other grounds. They could imagine the life-long human tragedies that mar the joy of marriages, that moderns put forward as excuses for divorces on terms unadmitted by the Lord. It seemed

to them that Jesus was taking no account of clashing temperaments, in-law troubles, conflicting habits and religious differences. They saw clearly the suffering on both sides of such a union that must last until death. What they did not see, of course, was that repentance and reconciliation and regeneration, not divorce and division, are the answer to this suffering.

In other words, the disciples were floating on this theologicoo-sociological sea somewhere between Hillel and Shammai. So, the attacking Pharisees had correctly predicted the trouble they could cause for Jesus when luring Him into debate on this subject, because even His closer understudies leap to this extreme conclusion: **It is not expedient to marry.**

So saying, the disciples gave voice to that same obtuse, moral mentality that unhappily illustrated the hardness of heart and vindicated the rightness of the Mosaic legislation. And if THEY think this way, how much more so would anyone else do so who is less willing to seek God's ideal?! Their deduction, however, is but a calculating, selfish view of marriage. It seeks only what profit will accrue to the individual, not what this splendid opportunity affords us to bless our husband or wife, our future family, our society and the Church. The disciples were voicing the typically diabolical demand: "What am I going to get out of marriage?," not the Christian problem: "What can I bring to marriage that would make it a paradise on earth for my mate?" They just do not yet see that the self-giving Kingdom ethic, which motivated Jesus (20:28) and must motivate every citizen of the Kingdom (18:1-14), has ample ramifications that reach into every aspect of life. Marriage is affected by it too. (Cf. Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pt. 3:1-7) On the spur of the moment they can not envision a life-long, imperfect marriage being made perfect with the passage of the years. This leads us to see, with Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 227f), that Jesus' teaching about marriage means that

. . . only the Christian can accept the Christian ethic. Only the man who has the continual help of Jesus Christ and the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit can build up the personal relationship which the ideal marriage demands . . . The Christian ideal of marriage involves the prerequisite that the partners of marriage are Christian . . . So we have to face the fact that Christian marriage is only possible for Christians.

The Apostles' Jewish reaction, **it is not expedient to marry**, is based

on Jesus' statement of the case of the man . . . with his wife, and so differs radically in orientation from the Corinthians' position: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Co. 7:1). It is nevertheless interesting to notice that the conclusion of both the Jewish disciples and of the Greek Corinthians, that normal physical marriage is or would be wrong or at best problematic, is itself wrong-headed. This is because it ignores our proper human nature and our "temptations to immorality" (1 Co. 7:2). It fails to see that any no-marriage rule takes no account of normal people, and is valid only for physical eunuchs and those with God's gift of the single life. (Mt. 19:11f; 1 Co. 7:7, 8) While attempting to avoid possible failure or spiritual undoing in marriage, this ignoring one's own humanness forgets that the option of celibacy is not trouble-free either.

#### E. JESUS' REACTION: "THE SINGLE LIFE IS AN EXCEPTIONAL GIFT, NOT THE RULE." (19:11, 12)

19:11 But he said unto them, Not all men can receive this saying, but they to whom it is given. What is this saying (*tὸν λόγον [τοῦτον]*): the deduction made by the disciples (19:10) or the preceding exposition of Jesus (19:4-9)?

1. It refers to Jesus' own doctrine.

a. No significant weight can be placed on the demonstrative pronoun, "This saying" (*tὸν λόγον [τοῦτον]*) as pointing to the nearer context, because it is not absolutely certain that Matthew wrote it, as Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 48f) notes:

On the one hand, since the general tendency of scribes is to make the text more explicit, e.g. by adding the demonstrative pronoun, the shorter reading supported by B, f1 and several early versions, has a certain presumption in its favor. On the other hand, however, the ambiguity of the reference of *τοῦτον* in the context . . . may have prompted some scribes to delete the word. In order to reflect the balance of possibilities, the Committee decided to retain the word, enclosed within square brackets . . .

b. It is as if Jesus were saying, "Not everyone has the godly concern for their mate that is required to receive (accept, comprehend) my doctrine of permanent marriage and rigidly limited

divorce. Only those who accept me as revealer of God can understand it, because such a revelation is comprehensible only to those who have their eyes open to the will of God anyway. (Cf. Mt. 11:25f; 13:11) To my disciples **it is given** to understand, but to those uninterested in doing things God's way, it is not given. Accordingly, Jesus' concluding exhortation (19:12d) would mean, "Let him who by his discipleship is able to comprehend my doctrine, do so!"

2. It refers to the saying of the disciples: "It is not good to marry."
  - a. If a choice must be made, this is the better interpretation, because Jesus' logic is tightly connected with the proof He adduces for His present affirmation. (See on 19:12.) To ignore this connection leaves one at sea to interpret it.
  - b. Jesus is not necessarily scolding the disciples for their extreme position. Rather, He shows them those to whom their statement rightly applies. (19:12) They are not totally mistaken, for there really are some who should rightly decide: "It is not good to marry." In fact, **Not all can** implies "Some can." Jesus warns that only disaster can result from making such a universal rule as the disciples propose, because men cannot be bound by rules never intended for them, any more than they can or will be governed by laws that require them to be what they cannot. The result would be only the destruction of the very principle the rule-makers hoped to express in their rule.
  - c. Celibacy for everyone means increased temptation for all those who are not gifted with the ability to abstain from a fully sexual relationship. (1 Co. 7:2, 5; 1 Ti. 5:11)

The key to the Lord's meaning is the expression **they to whom it is given**. The Giver is God who gives men the ability to marry or live the single life acceptably. (1 Co. 7:7; 1 Ti. 4:3-5; Gen. 1:27-31; 2:24)

1. Hence, the Apostles' reaction that, whatever the reason, marriage is unacceptable, is itself unacceptable, because God gives the grace to be blessed in marriage to many people. In fact, marriage is the norm, not the exception. (Gen. 2:18) The disciples' expedient (19:10) would only be valid for those exceptional individuals to whom God gives the grace to live well the single life. (1 Co. 7:7f) However, He apparently does not give this grace to many. (Cf. 1 Ti. 5:11-14; 1 Co. 7:36-38)
2. In the following verse (19:12) Jesus will indicate only three classes for whom the disciples' exceptional expedient of not marrying

would actually make sense. For the rest, however, His rule on marriage is the standard, because properly directed sexual expression is the norm and that on which the continuation of the race is based. (Gen. 1:27f; 1 Co. 7:2-5, 9; Heb. 13:4)

3. God gives the grace for a permanent, happy marriage by helping people to be firmly resolute about fulfilling their marriage promises, by helping them to be graciously unselfish, to be generously ready to make sacrifices out of love for their mate, to discover true happiness in sharing one's self, and by giving them the experience of a unity of mind that, because based on a valid principle, really affects their everyday life.

Although some doubt this evaluation of 1 Co. 7:7 on the thinking that Paul sees only celibacy as a definite charisma from God, it should be remembered that the last phrase of that text (*ho mēn hoūtos, ho dē hoūtos*) leaves the door open for marriage as a possible charisma from God: "Each has his own special gift (*chárisma*) from God, one of one kind and one of another."

For Jesus, there can be no condemnation for those who cannot accept the disciples' condemnation of marriage, because, according to the Lord's standard, these would be in the majority. (19:4-6) For Him, there is absolutely no opposition between the single life and marriage, because the ability to marry well or live the single life well, is a gift from God, hence there can be no suspicion that celibacy should be thought of as a choice superior to matrimony, because the Lord the Giver does not so propose it. Rather, if there is any preference shown, His citation on Gen. 1:27 and 2:24 would rate marriage as the norm to which the single life forms the exception. (See also Gen. 2:18.)

**Not all men can receive this saying, but they to whom it is given.** If we think of Paul's handling of the celibacy question in 1 Co. 7 as normative for our understanding of Jesus' words here, then it is important to understand what Paul indicated as clues whereby people may decide whether they have the charisma of celibacy or not. Note his observations:

If they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. (1 Co. 7:9) . . . If any one thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. But whoever is firmly

established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. (1 Co. 7:36, 37)

From these expressions it could be concluded that the possession of the gift of the single life is closely related to, if not strictly to be identified with, the power and demands of one's own sexuality. That is, if sexual self-control and the celibacy determination is relatively easy, one has the gift. But if not, one does not possess it. In no case is there any blame attached to not possessing it any more than there is any special merit attached to possessing it. Paul argues in 1 Co. 7 that sexual asceticism must be based on good theology and practical considerations, and that anything that ignored either must be corrected, and that a fully sexual marriage was recommended for anyone that had not received from God the charisma of celibacy. (1 Co. 7:2, 5, 8, 36)

It is also imperative that Paul's reasons for the advantage of celibacy be rightly understood. He never argues that celibacy is a state theologically superior to matrimony. His arguments for his preference for the single life proceed along pragmatic lines, but it is never ordered for anyone. (1 Co. 7:7f, 25, 32, 40)

1. Sexual asceticism within marriage attempts to exalt a sexual contradiction, since it ignores one's own proper sexuality. (1 Co. 7:2-6) Mutual concern and proper self-knowledge demand limitations to any sexual abstinence within marriage. But this mutual concern does not permit undivided devotion to the Lord. (1 Co. 7:32-35)
2. Celibacy has the advantage over marriage "in view of the impending distress" (1 Co. 7:26) when conditions for Christians would become so bad that, even for married people, practical or virtual celibacy could well become the condition or state in which they must live. (1 Co. 7:29)
3. Celibacy permits "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Co. 7:35) which married life tends to compromise. (1 Co. 7:32-34)
4. The single life is not a question of spiritual or theological superiority, but of pragmatic advantage over marriage. (1 Co. 7:38) There is no sin in marriage where it is especially appropriate. (1 Co. 7:36, 38a) There is no question that marriage is good; rather, under the stated circumstances, the single life is better.
5. Although quite "free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord," the Christian widow would, in Paul's judgment, be

- "happier" in her unmarried state. (1 Co. 7:39, 40) "Happier" does not mean more highly spiritual.
6. It should also be noticed in this connection that Paul claimed his right "to be accompanied by a Christian wife (*adelfēn gunaika*) as the other Apostles and brothers of the Lord and Cephas." (1 Co. 9:5) Genuine Christianity does not find its validation in sexual asceticism exemplified in Paul, because he himself cited other equally authoritative examples to undermine such a conclusion.

To remain unmarried for the sake of freedom to work in the service of God and humanity, unencumbered by family cares and responsibilities, is one thing, while to refuse marriage out of suspicion that there is something contaminating or impure about marriage is quite another. (Marshal, *Challenge of New Testament Ethics*, 176)

19:12 **For:** what follows is intended to furnish a rationale for Jesus' previous statement that not everyone can accept the Apostles' extreme deduction that marriage is unprofitable. The single life to which the Apostles' conclusion points, says Jesus, is like that of the eunuch, of which He notes three types:

1. **eunuchs that were so born from their mother's womb**, i.e. those born with defective genitals and would not be capable of consummating a fully sexual marriage.
2. **eunuchs that were made eunuchs by men**, i.e. those who are castrated face the same problem. (Cf. 2 Kg. 20:18 = Isa. 39:7; Isa. 56:3-5; the two Ethiopian eunuchs; Jer. 38:7ff; Ac. 8:27ff)
3. **and there are eunuchs, that made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake.** These are those normal people who, while sexually perfectly capable of consummating marriage, have the gift to live the single life happily in special service to God, and choose to do so. Paul had the gift and used it for more effective service in the Kingdom by leaving himself free to carry on a wide-ranging evangelistic ministry. (See 1 Co. 7:7f, 32-35; 9:5) This principle describes and justifies the celibacy of John the Baptist and of Jesus Himself. Others, because of severe hardship and persecutions, might voluntarily decide not to marry. (1 Co. 7:25-35, 37f)

There are really only two options whereby people **make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven:**

1. Literal self-emasculation, while actually performed by a few misguided souls (cf. Origen, according to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical*

- History*, Bk. VI, chap. 8), violates the principles laid down by Paul against the uselessness of such rigor. (Col. 2:20-23; see notes on 5:29, 30) For the Christian, then, this is not a live option.
2. Those who are unmarried may choose not to marry, in order to be more effective in their service for the Kingdom. However, the motivation and one's moral capacity is important: Jesus is not interested in a mere abstinence from marriage or a superficial continence. He is rather discussing the person whose intellect and desires are so actively engrossed in the advancement of the Kingdom that he has no desire or impelling reason for marrying. This is non-ascetic celibacy for the sake of one's work. Again, any consideration of the single life for its own sake is also to be rejected, because the only question important to the Lord is whether His disciples are living lives that reflect their dedication to God, i.e. **for the kingdom of heaven**. If their celibacy does not actually promote this, He is not interested.
  3. Those who are married, but whose unbelieving partner refuses to live with a Christian, when forced to let the unbeliever depart, find themselves, for the sake of Christ, in the situation of a virtual **eunuch for the kingdom of heaven**. They are not obligated ("bound") to maintain a marriage for sake of the marriage to the detriment and disadvantage of their confession of Christ and their belonging to Him. (1 Co. 7:12-16) So, in principle, Jesus' expression, **eunuchs for the Kingdom**, does leave the door open for separation from an unbelieving spouse, but, even so, it is not a divorce initiated by the Christian in order to remarry (as in 19:9 or Mk. 10:11f), but a bowing to the choice of the unbelieving spouse, in order to follow God's call to peace in the Kingdom. (1 Co. 7:15c; Ro. 14:17) It is the choice to remain unmarried for Christ's sake, hence **a eunuch for the Kingdom's sake**. In a sense, this forced dissolution of a marriage is forced upon the believer. It is a condition over which he has no control, much like becoming a physical eunuch is beyond the decision of the person involved.

There are two senses in which every Christian must consider himself a **eunuch for the Kingdom**, even if he does not possess that gift of celibacy that expresses itself in a personal choice not to marry:

1. The Lord has declared that we, His disciples, must be willing, should the situation arise that requires it, to surrender everything we possess, even life itself, for His sake. (Mt. 10:37-39; 16:24-27; 18:6-9; 19:29; Lk. 14:26-33) This may include one's wife. (Lk. 18:29)

Even though Matthew does not include "or wife" in 19:19, as Luke does in Lk. 18:29, it is mistaken to believe that he saw some contradiction between Jesus' strong, hard-line stand on the permanence of marriage (19:3-12) and the loss of one's wife for Jesus' sake (19:29), and that for ascetic considerations, deliberately sidestepped the issue by omitting it.

So the call to great sacrifice of every relationship for Christ's sake, even marriage if need be, may reduce one to the level of a virtual eunuch, even though already married. (See above at 19:11.)

Was this kind of sacrifice temporarily required of Moses? He started out from Midian to begin his mission in Egypt, taking his Midianite wife and sons with him. But after the crisis over the son's circumcision at which time Moses' life was endangered and his wife reacted negatively (?), rather than take her and the boys with him to Egypt, Moses sent them back to Jethro, while he pressed on toward his great mission. Did Zipporah's attitude have anything to do with his decision? At least, it was not until his return to Sinai with the freed people people that he was able to embrace them once again. (Cf. Ex. 4:18-29; 18:1-6)

2. There is another sense in which every Christian must consider himself **a eunuch for the Kingdom of God**. Every Christian must, for Christ's sake, treat everyone of the opposite sex, who is not his or her mate, as if he or she could not consummate physical sexual relations with them because of a physical defect. The real hindrance is of course not physical but moral. (See notes on 5:27-30)

These are important, however secondary, senses and do not nullify the truth that some have the gift to live the single life in God's Kingdom and for His service.

**He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.** (*ho dunámenos chorein, choreíto*) The main problem of interpretation here is the decision whether Jesus is giving a command or making a concession, since the Greek imperative may be understood either way. Blass-Debrunner (§§387, 384) note:

The imperative in the NT keeps for the most part within the same limits as in classical usage. As in the latter it is by no means confined to commands, but also expresses a request or a concession

. . . In the latter case the imperative can simply be the equivalent of a concessive clause . . . There is, however, a strong tendency to use the imperative instead of the optative, not only in requests, for which the imperative has a place in classical too, but also in imprecations which in classical take the optative.

Also, as in our case with the third person imperative (*choreito*), the imperative can be equivalent to the hortatory subjunctive, i.e. as an exhortation. (Cf. Robertson-Davis, *Grammar*, 164, §308; 312, §407) There is practically no way of rendering the third person imperative in English, except as an exhortation: "Let him accept it!" On the basis of the foregoing, then, Jesus' exhortation is no ground for a church law that legally demands celibacy of an entire class of people (i.e. clergymen or any other group). Forced celibacy does not share Jesus' viewpoint and certainly is not commanded. Considered as an exhortation, this expression reflects the proper use of Christian liberty to marry or not as one's individual situation, gifts, opportunities, etc., permit. There can be no unanimity of application among Christians, since these factors all differ from person to person and from century to century as well as from country to country. Since the disciples had categorically excluded marriage, Jesus urges them to reconsider their rash proposal. Let them take individual differences into considerations. Four classes of people have been discussed: three classes for whom the single life is quite properly indicated, and one class—by far the largest—for whom only marriage is the solution. Now Jesus exhorts them: "Let each person decide what is best for himself."

See Special Study: "Money and Marriage: Manacles of the Mundane?" after 19:30.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. In what part of Palestine was Jesus operating when He was questioned about His position on divorce? Is it possible to pinpoint this place with precision?
2. Had Jesus ministered in this section before?
3. How does Matthew's account harmonize with that of Luke and John regarding any extended ministry of Jesus in this area? Is the period represented in chapters 19 and 20 another of Matthew's collections of events together (as he does in chapters 8 and 9),

- or is there objective evidence that the events narrated occurred in the order indicated by Matthew?
4. Explain the significance of the peculiar question placed before Jesus by the Pharisees. What was there about the divorce issue that served the critic's purpose to trap Him?
  5. List the points Jesus made in His reply.
  6. What Bible texts did Jesus quote to the Pharisees in support of His argument? Explain how Jesus could affirm that these texts represent the words of God.
  7. What did "hardness of heart" have to do with divorce? How would "hardness of heart" require a bad law on divorce?
  8. What exception did Jesus make to His universal prohibition of divorce? In what does this exception consist? Explain why only this exception is justifiable.
  9. How much of Jesus' discourse on marriage, divorce and the single life was publicly presented to the Pharisees and how much was stated privately to His disciples? How do you know?
  10. What was the disciples' objection and what provoked it? That is, what were they objecting to, AND what in them caused them to do so?
  11. What is a "eunuch" and why could Jesus use such a person as an illustrative basis for His discussion?
  12. Who or what is a person who has "made himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"?
  13. What is the major lesson on marriage and the single life that Jesus taught at the conclusion of this section?
  14. List the texts in Matthew 18 that find practical application in this section and show their connection.

## Section 48

### JESUS BLESSES THE LITTLE CHILDREN (Parallels: Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17)

TEXT: 19:13-15

13 Then were there brought to him little children, that he should lay his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them.  
14 But Jesus said, Suffer the little children, and forbid them not,

to come unto me: for to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven.  
15 And he laid his hands on them and departed hence.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Do you think that Jesus had ever blessed little children before? If so, why do the disciples object only here? If not, is there anything indicated here about the nature of the people in Perea who would desire this for their children, something that people elsewhere did not feel?
- b. Why would these parents have brought their children to Jesus to be blessed? What, do you suppose, was in their minds as they did so? That is, what positive good did they imagine such a blessing would bring their children?
- c. In what sense is it true that the Kingdom of God belongs to such? If the Kingdom really belongs to God, how is it also true that it can belong to such as those who are like children? Explain the meaning of "belong" in each case.
- d. Jesus said, "Let the children come to me," and yet it was their parents who brought them, i.e. they did not necessarily COME on their own without their parents. So, what does the Lord expect us to understand about HOW the children are to come?
- e. Mark and Luke add here the warning: "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein." What is there in common between "receiving" and "being like a child"?
- f. List several possible reasons why the disciples rebuked the parents for bringing their children to Jesus.
- g. Of what principles in Jesus' Sermon on Personal Relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Now there were some people who were bringing their children—yes, even babies—to Jesus, so He could lay His hands on their heads and pray. But when His disciples saw their intentions, they criticized and scolded the parents who brought them. Jesus was furious when He saw what was going on, and called them all back to Him. "Let the children come to me! Do not stop them from doing it, because the Kingdom of God belongs to people like this! I can guarantee you

that unless a person has the humility of a child enough to let God give him the Kingdom, he will not enter the Kingdom at all!"

Thereupon He put His arms around the little tots and, laying His hands on each one, gave them His blessing. Then He resumed His journey.

### SUMMARY

Parents, anxious for their children to have the blessing of the young rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, brought them to Him. His disciples, however, concerned about this interruption of Jesus' precious time, rebuffed them brusquely. But the Lord, deeply angry at this misunderstanding of His concerns and mission, called them all to Him, arguing that children have their proper place in God's plans. He further threatened that entrance into the Kingdom would be refused to any who do not do so with that humble submission characteristic of a child. Not only did Jesus formally lay His hands upon the children and pray for them, but took them up to hug them. He had time even for little kids!

### NOTES

#### II. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN CHILD-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS (19:13-15)

##### A. SITUATION: PARENTS BRING CHILDREN TO JESUS FOR BLESSING. (19:13a)

19:13 **Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should lay his hands on them and pray.** Although Matthew and Mark consistently call them *little children* (*paidía*), Luke (18:15) says "infants." Luke's expression recalls Jesus' healing ministry which was continuing during this period. (Mt. 19:1, 2) This, because not only were many sick people brought to Him for healing, but, as Luke has it, "even infants, that he might touch them." That these were not merely larger children in whom one might suspect the presence of a seed-germ of faith, is shown by the usual translation of Luke's word *bréfós*, "babe."

See Lk. 1:41, 44; 2:12, 16; note 2:27 *paidion* 40 days old; Ac. 7:19; 1 Pt. 2:2. 2 Ti. 3:15 "from childhood" is not necessarily counterevidence, since it may mean "You have known the Scriptures all your life!" Timothy's faith in God's Word could hyperbolically be said to have begun almost before he was born, because of the faith of his devout grandmother Lois and his godly mother Eunice.

There was likely a mixed group of children and babies brought to Jesus. Some think that the Jews customarily brought their children to the synagogue on their first birthday for a blessing from the rabbi. The special interest in Jesus shown by the folks who brought these children to Him certainly underlines their appreciation of His goodness. It is not unlikely that the parents, having observed Him lay His hands on the people He healed, blessing them with complete healing, would naturally consider it a special privilege for their children to be blessed by this great Rabbi.

#### B. THE DISCIPLES' REACTION: THEY REBUKED THE PARENTS WHO BROUGHT THEM.

The disciples' behavior recorded here is another indication of the Gospel writers' straightforwardness and impartiality. Although they must report what is embarrassing to the disciples themselves, this candor confirms our confidence in the reliability of their narration.

**The disciples rebuked them.** Note that these men scolded the adults, not the infants. Their reaction is not totally blameworthy, inasmuch as Jesus had established no Sunday Schools, no Daily Vacation Bible Schools or Christian Service Camps. Without being against such methods, He dealt with the decision-makers at the head of the house. The Apostles could cite no example where Christ worked first with children. And yet, here they are mistaken! What went wrong?

1. If, as suggested above, Jesus' time for teaching them was constantly invaded by demands for healing people of their sicknesses, in this case, however, parents had brought to Him their little ones who were quite healthy, begging to let Him touch them. The Apostles deemed this unreasonable request intolerable.
2. It may well be that some of them were thinking, "Children do not count in the adult business of the Kingdom. They are not important to its progress." So they begin hindering the parents,

rebuking them for the nuisance. Theologically, this reaction is inexcusable and shocking, since these disciples had personally heard Jesus' teaching on the little people's importance for the Kingdom. (Mt. 18:1-14) But it is psychologically understandable on the basis of the disciples' other inconsistencies and inability to connect Jesus' concepts with practical situations they faced. Nevertheless, these disciples represent stumbling blocks for these parents on the road to God, just as they had been a hindrance to the isolated worker of miracles. (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49f; see on Mt. 18:5, 6)

3. A corollary of their devaluation of the children was their misplaced emphasis on the importance of adults. According to them, the Kingdom of God is the prize and possession of qualified, worthy people who have merited it by doing the right deeds. Once more His followers show their inability to understand Jesus and the nature of the Kingdom.
4. Theirs might be the common human reaction to an embarrassing situation where, when people do not know how to handle it, they try to make it go away. On another occasion they had planned to send the people away without needed help. (Mt. 14:15f)
5. Were the disciples, in their rebuke of the parents who brought the children, partly moved by a misconstruction of His words concerning celibacy for the Kingdom? Did they suppose that an Essene-like celibacy was to become the Kingdom ideal? Did they suppose that in the renewed universe (= in the Messianic Kingdom) people would be as the angels, neither marrying nor being given in marriage, hence would have no children? What place would children have in such a scheme? From this standpoint, it was providential that the mothers brought their little ones to Jesus for His blessing not long after He had spoken words which might have been misinterpreted as a criticism of sex and family relations. Certainly, the Son of God intended no ascetic view of sexuality by His lesson on "eunuchs for the Kingdom." Because children are the living reminder that a fully sexual marriage is real, because they are its natural product, the blessing of the children furnished Jesus the providential opportunity to protest strenuously against any such misreading of His words.

C. JESUS' ANGRY REACTION: "CHILDREN ARE SO IMPORTANT TO THE KINGDOM THAT THEY ARE THE ONLY SORT OF PEOPLE OF WHICH THE KINGDOM IS MADE!"  
 (19:14f)

**19:14 But Jesus said, Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven.** Far from being soft, mushy sentiment, these words snap with Jesus' anger. (Mk. 10:14) Why should he NOT burn at the injustice shown these God-fearing caring parents who bring their dearest possessions, their children, seeking His blessing? How could anyone, much less His own disciples, who had heard the mighty Sermon on Personal Relations and the importance of little ones (Mt. 18), slam the gates of the Kingdom of God in the face of the very persons most qualified for entrance into it? To suppose Him, the Messianic King, to be unwilling to welcome a child is to misunderstand and misrepresent Him to the world—and should He not be angry?

**Suffer the little children** (*áfete tὰ paidía*) Permit them: do not hinder them! **Forbid them not.** See note on Mk. 9:39 after Mt. 18:5. People who desire to come to Jesus to labor in His service and receive His blessing must not be hindered but encouraged to do so, regardless of what we think about their qualifications, importance to us or their merits. **For to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven.** According to Mark (10:15) and Luke (18:17), Jesus repeated here a line out of His Sermon on Personal Relations (Mt. 18:13): "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all." The Kingdom of God is not something that can be bought or earned by self-complacent people certain of their own importance and worth to God. It must be received as a gift from God as the result of His divine initiative. (Cf. Lk. 12:32) This is a gift of grace, not founded upon the supposed greatness and worthiness of its recipients. The only worthy attitude in which to receive the Kingdom, therefore, must be that of the children who cannot earn it and to whom it must be given, if they are to have it. Like these children brought to Jesus, those who enter God's Kingdom do not march in and take over. They are carried in by the grace of Christ. Their only sufficiency is of God. (2 Co. 3:5)

On the question of infant baptism it is worthy of notice that Jesus did not regard children as "little pagans," but as people to whom the Kingdom rightly belongs. It is a false dichotomy that emphasizes "of such" (*toioúton*) against "of these" (*toúton*), as if Jesus meant,

"Not these particular children, nor all children, but those who are childlike in character, are possessors of the Kingdom." (Plummer, *Matthew*, 262) This distinction is manifestly false

1. because of its bad logic: how could these very children be thought unqualified for the blessings intended for those of whom they themselves are the standard??
2. and because Jesus had already clarified it that *children* per se enter the Kingdom. (Mt. 18:2ff)

Their real innocence of any personal sin is a proper condition for their entrance. Only sin excludes. If the Kingdom rightly belongs to them, His reason is that He does not believe the doctrine of inheritable sin, but rather its antithesis, the natural innocence of children. The purpose for which these parents brought their children to Jesus was for His blessing, not for soul salvation or circumcision or any other purpose. It is a distortion of this event to see in it a justification of infant sprinkling or "baptism" which the child-baptizers think took the place of circumcision.

Children have an unconditional right to be admitted into the Kingdom of God because of their innocence. No baby baptism is necessary to remove non-existent "inherited sin." They would not be thought of, however, as members of the Church of the redeemed, because they are not even qualified to be redeemed, since they have no sin from which to be saved. Until the child sins, he is like Jesus, mortal but sinless. However, they are positively members of God's Kingdom and may live with Him and His people forever, should they die in their infantile innocence, because they have never sinned. They cannot partake of Christ's atonement for sinners any more than He Himself needed atonement. The tragedy Jesus sees ahead for children is a diabolically inevitable future bristling with temptations to sin. (Mt. 18:6f)

Here we may notice that sinlessness in children is part of the standard they represent for the adult disciple. This is because the self-humiliation and repentance, the tender consideration of others, the long-suffering and forgiveness, the spirit of unity in seeking God's will, the altruistic service Jesus required in Mt. 18:1-35, must inevitably eliminate sin. And yet this is the spirit of the child, dependent upon others, in need of guidance and help. By inculcating receptiveness, humility and childlikeness, Jesus eliminates the selfishness and pride that lies at the root of sin. This is the practical side of love that makes a man perfect. (See notes on 5:7, 43-48; 7:12.) In a positive way He requires here what sounded so negative in self-denial and

cross-bearing. (Mt. 16:24ff) The result, however, is the same.

So, as long as children are children, their innocence or sinlessness is the standard and goal for every disciple. The perfect absence of rebellion against God (= sin) is, on the negative side, what the Kingdom is all about. Sadly, when they grow to the age of awareness and become conscious of the appeal of temptations, wittingly or not, they join the ranks of those who rebel against God and turn against His beneficent rule and leave their natural place in God's Kingdom. *Then they too must become like children to recover what they have lost.*

Although on this occasion the parents brought the children to Jesus, hence His words must mean that the disciples are to let the parents of the children bring them to Him, nevertheless **Let the children come to me and do not hinder them** may well look forward to a time when the children, on the basis of their personal love for Jesus and desire to be with Him, would want to come to Him on their own. They must therefore not be hindered but encouraged. Do we not see here His exhortation to the entire adult community of disciples to encourage the personal decision and individual responsibility of children who are maturing decisions about Jesus? Thus, the accusation of some that we baptize more babes, even though they are seven or eight years old, is false. These children who grew up in Christian families with proper teaching and so have had excellent opportunities to know the Lord, must not be hindered from obeying Him. But, it is objected, if these understand their need of a Savior from their personal sins, they would not therefore be "such" as those to whom the "Kingdom of God belongs," because they would not be innocent, as argued earlier. This would overturn the decision that they were really innocent of inherited sin, hence proper candidates for the Kingdom. But this is false, because, whereas before their arrival at awareness they were innocents, hence candidates for the Kingdom and the sinless standard for everyone else, now, even as they are becoming more and more aware of their present imperfection, they are still humble, trusting, teachable people, the very kind of people Jesus can work with most easily. Hence, even here, they are the standard for adults, and Jesus can still say, **Of such is the kingdom of heaven.** Let them come, then, while their heart is tender, their mind impressionable, their will pliable and their conscience sensitive to Jesus! God's Kingdom rightly belongs to such people, and to NO ONE ELSE!

Some commentators note that the Evangelists locate this event

logically right after the major discussion on marriage because of the appropriateness of discussing the importance of and concern for children. Here, then, is another corrective for the mistaken notion that a permanent marriage union is undesirable and inconvenient: what of the children?

19:15 **And he laid his hands on them.** Mark underlines the Lord's tenderness with these little ones, both in the Sermon on Personal Relations (Mk. 9:36) and here, however with the added significance of this occasion, "He took the children in His arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them." (Mk. 10:16) What a contrast there is between His welcoming, embracing and blessing the weak, needy children, and the bumptiousness of the officious disciples who presume to form an isolating cordon around the Master to intercept these "troublesome interruptions of His important work!" Jesus would have them learn that to be kind and considerate to sincere, needy people and seek God's blessing upon them, especially where they are trying to do their best, is His work and theirs too!

Very likely He placed His hands on the head of each child and called down the blessing of God upon each. (Mk. 10:16, *kateulógei*: "to praise highly, bless," Rocci, 1017; "to call down blessings upon," Thayer, 339) Thus, He prayed for the children as the parents had requested. (19:13) Remember how Jacob took Joseph's sons in his arms, kissed them and blessed them (Gen. 48:8-16), or how the old Simeon took the Baby Jesus in his arms and prayed, then blessed His parents (Lk. 2:25-35)

The Church of Jesus Christ today can measure her faithfulness to her Lord by the degree to which her program deals with the needs and growth of the children. How deep, then, must be the concern of all parents, that their children be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and that from a child they have the blessed opportunity to know the sacred writings which are able to instruct them for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. If the Lord of glory turned aside from what others thought was the main thrust of His busy ministry, to defend these defenceless children and bless them, dare any man or woman who shares His attitude turn their care and development over to others less able or less concerned to give them such blessings as God has commissioned us as parents to give them?

**FACT QUESTIONS**

1. Explain what the parents desired for their children when they brought them to Jesus. That is, what does it mean to them for Him to 'lay His hands on them and pray'?
2. What was the attitude of the Apostles toward the children and those who brought them?
3. What was the attitude of Jesus toward the children and those who brought them?
4. Explain: "To such belongs the Kingdom of God."
  - a. What phase, or expression, of the Kingdom of God belongs to them?
  - b. In what sense does it "belong to such"?
  - c. Who are the people intended by the expression "to such"?
5. What additional teaching do Mark and Luke include that further clarifies Jesus' meaning? Where in Matthew have we already encountered this?
6. What is the total impact of this vignette in the life of our Lord? There may be several points to notice.
7. List the texts in Matthew 18 that find practical application in this section.

**Section 49****JESUS TESTS RICH YOUNG RULER  
AND ENCOURAGES DISCIPLES**

(Parallels: Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30)

TEXT: 19:16-30

**A. The Demands of Discipleship**

16 And behold, one came to him and said, Teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? 17 And he said unto him, Why askest thou me concerning that which is good? One there is who is good: but if thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments. 18 He saith unto Him, Which? And Jesus said, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honor thy father and thy

mother; and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. 20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I observed: what lack I yet? 21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. 22 But when the young man heard the saying, he went away sorrowful; for he was one that had great possessions.

### B. The Dangers of Possessions

23 And Jesus said unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, It is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. 24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. 25 And when the disciples heard it, they were astonished exceedingly, saying, Who then can be saved? 26 And Jesus looking upon *them* said to them, With men this is impossible: but with God all things are possible.

### C. The Dividends of Faithfulness

27 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Lo, we have left all, and followed thee; what shall we have? 28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, that ye have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life. 30 But many shall be last **that are** first; and first **that are** last.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What do you think is the motive(s) behind the rich young ruler's request?
- b. Why did this Jew make this particular request, i.e. what point of view is back of the wording of his question?
- c. Why did Jesus hold him off at arm's length at first, quibbling over the word "good," or would you consider this a quibble? If

- not, what is the point of Jesus' shifting the emphasis from the "deed" to do, to the "good" that would qualify such a deed to inherit eternal life?
- d. Do you think Jesus meant to deny His own essential goodness by asking: "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good," i.e. God?
  - e. Since Mark and Luke both report Jesus as saying: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone," do you think Jesus meant to deny or affirm anything about His own essential deity and goodness? What would be the point of making these remarks before getting down to the young man's initial question?
  - f. If selling all that the young man possessed was the one thing he lacked to inherit eternal life, as Jesus later shows, what could have prompted Jesus to cite the commandments first? Was this a mere diversion, or an essential part of the total answer? If you think it was essential, explain why you think so.
  - g. Do you think the young man was sincere when he affirmed: "All these I have observed from my youth"? What makes you think this?
  - h. How would the sale of his possessions, alms and discipleship to Jesus make the young man perfect? What does this teach us about our own road to perfection?
  - i. Jesus said, "If you would be perfect . . ." in answer to the young man's assertion, "All these (commandments) I have observed; what do I still lack?" Do you feel a touch of irony in His words? Why?
  - j. As the price of our eternal life must we sell all we possess in order to have treasure in heaven? Is there no lesson or principle in this incident for us? If so, what? If not, why not?
  - k. The young man "went away sorrowful," but not angry. Why?
  - l. What kind of discipleship do you think Jesus was offering him? Was it eventual apostleship or some other function? On what basis would you decide this?
  - m. While the Scripture says he went away sorrowful "for he had great possessions," is it not also correct to say that he went away sorrowful "for great possessions had him"? Of what fundamental sin is he guilty?
  - n. Why do you suppose it is so difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom? To what phase or expression of the Kingdom is Jesus referring here? How does one's understanding of the Kingdom help to see why wealth makes entrance hard?
  - o. What picturesque figure of speech did Jesus use to illustrate the

- rich man's difficulty of entering the Kingdom? Did Jesus mean "difficulty" or "impossibility"? How do you know?
- p. Why were the disciples so stunned to hear Jesus' pronouncements about the hindrances blocking the entrance of wealthy people into the Kingdom? Name some wealthy AND godly people whom the disciples could have cited as certainly in the Kingdom. What is the point of view behind their astonishment?
- q. What motivation prompted Peter's reaction to Jesus' surprising pronouncements on wealth, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" Is it selfish calculation? Genuine curiosity motivated by interest in spiritual rewards? Are there any clues in the text that would help you decide whether his is a wrong-headed question or else perfectly proper?
- r. Some teachers of ethics and moral philosophers insist that good deeds based upon hope of reward are thereby vitiated. To what extent does Jesus' answer prove that rewards for Christian service are not ethically wrong?
- s. How could the future, glorious, messianic age be referred to as "the regeneration"? Do you think Jesus means the Christian age on earth, or the post-judgment new world of eternity? On what basis do you decide this?
- t. Does not Jesus' promise of "a hundredfold" actually promote the kind of materialistic calculation for selfish ends, that He had so obviously denounced in affirming the impossibility of rich men to enter the Kingdom? In what sense, then, does He promise "a hundredfold" what had been surrendered for His sake?
- u. Why did Jesus sound the warning that "many that are first will be last, and the last first"? Why is this aphorism appropriate at precisely this point?
- v. How does the section on the rich young ruler speak to the larger human problem of the relations between rich and poor, or does it? If so, what is the message?
- w. What else did Jesus teach about money, the desire for it and the use of it? What did He say about *how* to have treasure in heaven, and about *why* we should have it there?
- x. Have you noticed the connections between the latter part of this section (vv. 27-30) and the parable which immediately follows in chapter 20:1-16? What are the points of connection which illuminate Jesus' thinking even in our present section? How would this present section tend to mold our conclusions as we proceed to interpret the next?

- y. Of what principles in Jesus' Sermon on Personal Relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus was resuming His journey when something remarkable happened: a certain ruler came running up to Him and, kneeling before Him, requested: "Good Teacher, what good deed should I do to guarantee myself eternal life?"

Jesus pulled him up short, "Do you realize what you are saying when you refer to me as 'good'? Why ask me about what is absolutely good? After all, nobody is perfectly good, but God alone . . . You already know the commandments, so if you really desire to enter life, keep them!"

"Which?" he asked, "What kind of commandments do you mean?"

"These:" Jesus replied, "You must not kill. You must not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not cheat, Honor your parents, and, You must love your neighbor as you would yourself."

The young man objected, "But, Teacher, I have kept all these rules ever since I was a boy! What do I still need?"

As Jesus looked at him, He loved him. Hearing his reaction, He told him, "There is just one thing you still need. If you really want to go all the way to perfection, go sell everything you own and distribute the proceeds among the needy, thus transforming your earthly wealth into spiritual riches. Then come back and follow me."

But when the young man heard that, he was appalled. Visibly shaken, he went away grieved, because he was very wealthy, since he owned a great deal of property. When the Lord saw the man's reaction, He looked around at His disciples, and commented, "Believe me, it will be extremely difficult for men of wealth to enter God's Kingdom!"

The disciples were amazed to hear this. Nevertheless Jesus insisted: "Boys, how tough it is for ANYONE to get into the Kingdom of God! I repeat: a camel could more easily squeeze through a needle's eye than a monied man make it into God's Kingdom!"

When the disciples heard this, they were even more dumbfounded, and exclaimed to each other, "In that case, who can possibly be saved, if a wealthy man cannot?"

But Jesus looked them in the face when He declared, "Men just

cannot save themselves, but God can save them. This is because anything is a possibility for God."

Relieved, Peter began to say in reply to this, "Look, Lord, we, in contrast to the rich, have left everything we could call our own, to follow you . . . Uh, what are we going to get out of it?"

Jesus answered them, "Truthfully I can guarantee you that in the Kingdom of God when all is made new, during the glorious reign of the Messiah, you Twelve Apostles who have been my followers will also rule with me over the true Israel of God. Further, ANYONE who has given up house, or wife, or brothers or sisters or parents, children or farms on my account, for the gospel and the Kingdom of God will be repaid a hundred times whatever he gave up. He will receive it even now in this present time: houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and lands,—though not without persecutions—and in the coming age, eternal life will be his inheritance too! Many people who are so important here and now will be put in last place. Others who count for nothing here and now will be considered great then and there.

### SUMMARY

A ruler requested of Jesus the one magic deed that would guarantee him eternal life. Jesus turned him toward God and His Word, but the young man considered that all a past accomplishment and demanded more. Jesus demanded that he dismantle his central idol, wealth, distribute his wealth and disciple his heart, but he balked and left in disappointment.

The Lord commented that earthly wealth makes salvation difficult. The disciples, aware of everyone's desire for possessions, wonder who can be saved. Self-earned salvation is impossible for men, but God makes things possible.

Peter asked what the disciples' sacrifices for Christ deserved in payment. Jesus announced high, glorious rewards for everyone, especially the Twelve, but earthly value systems will be overturned.

## NOTES

## III. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN RICH-POOR RELATIONSHIPS (19:16-30)

## A. SITUATION: RICH MAN ASKS ABOUT THE ONE GOOD DEED ALL-ESSENTIAL TO BUY ETERNAL LIFE. (19:16)

Note the theological connections that link the instruction about children (19:13-15) with the teaching regarding wealth (19:16—20:16):

1. Each supplements the other. Like the tax collector confessing his sins to God (Lk. 18:13f), the children were closer to the Kingdom than each could have dared dream himself to be. But the rich young ruler, like the Pharisees congratulating God on His good fortune to have such a worthy citizen as he, was miles farther from entering it than he imagined. When Jesus preferred the children, He honored those who could not be ruined by such glory. When he humbled the rich man, He abased one who should have been helped by his humiliation.
2. Each contrasts with the other. Jesus had insisted that God's Kingdom must be received humbly as an unpurchased, unearned gift of God. (Mt. 10:15 = Lk. 18:17) The Kingdom belongs to children only on this basis. But the rich man showed by his question how little he understood the essential basis on which eternal life in the Kingdom is to be enjoyed, since he thought the blessings of grace could be bought and sold for one nobly heroic deed unthinkable for little children.
3. Whatever the rich young ruler thought he wanted, his question carries forward another theme seen in Jesus' comments on the children's possession of the Kingdom of God: *eternal life*. The Kingdom and eternal life are coextensive. (Cf. Mt.18:8, 9 with Mk. 9:42, 47, as well as the basic presupposition underlying the Mt. 18 discourse.) In fact, Jesus' final answer on inheriting eternal life or being perfect requires total surrender to the will of God, and this is the Kingdom. (19:16, 21) And when the young ruler turned it down, he turned down the Kingdom. (19:23)

19:16 **And behold one came to him.** Mark (10:17) and Luke (18:18) fill in graphic details of his approach:

1. "As He was setting out on his journey"—is this the departure for Jerusalem? (See on 20:17.) Not too many more events are going to occur before Jesus arrives in Jericho for the final ascent to the bittersweet Last Week. (Mt. 19, 20; Mk. 10; Lk. 18, 19)
2. The man, whom Luke identifies as a ruler, ran up and respectfully knelt before the Lord. These are not merely signs of youthful vigor (Mt. 19:20), but especially of earnestness: did he sense that with Jesus' departure he was about to lose the invaluable opportunity to learn the secret of life? No Nicodemus this man, heedless of others' bad opinion of him, he publicly appealed to Jesus for answers in the daylight.
3. His wealth, surprisingly mentioned last by all three Evangelists even though it is really the turning point of the story, may well explain his position as ruler at his unusually early age. (See on 19:20.)

**Teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?** On the form of his question, see 19:17. What, exactly, is this person really seeking?

1. Is he offering himself for discipleship? By seeking this kind of information from Him whom he designates "Teacher," it would certainly lead to virtual discipleship, if he accepted even the answer he expected. If so, what kind of discipleship would he have expected? (Study Jesus' treatment of another, a rabbi. Mt. 8:19f notes.) Is this his way of offering himself and his power and influence to enhance the public image of Jesus' cause? Does he suppose that the intrinsic worth of Jesus' program surpasses the superficial impression one might get of it by estimating it on the basis of His ragged, rough-hewn followers? Does he conclude that the cause needs more substantial "window-dressing" such as he has to offer? If so, he may be hoping to keep his wealth and power and have the Kingdom too.
2. This rich man, who had grown accustomed to use his wealth to secure and guarantee himself everything, perhaps very sincerely believed that even the inheritance of eternal life could be assured only by means of the scrupulous fulfilment of certain special rules or the mathematical result of doing certain, unusually pious deeds, in short, paying the price. At any rate, the outcome was always in his own hands, something he could control, something over which he would always be master, never servant, never dependent, never needy. But the Kingdom belongs to God who is a King who

royally dispenses His gracious favors, not a merchant haggling over prices with those who think they can buy His priceless wares!

3. Did he recognize that the standard righteousness of rabbinism (19:20) and his own unusual wealth were inadequate to satisfy life's deepest longings? Had this person who enjoyed the energy and enthusiasm of youth, a lovable personality, wealth and social status and an exemplary life, felt dissatisfaction in it all? Had he been superficially satisfied with life in general until he came into contact with the personality and teaching of the Master? Did that message give him self-knowledge that spurred him to higher things—yes, even the enthusiasm to attempt something really worthwhile, even heroic, for God? If so, his insight into the insufficiency of those mainstays of Jewish society should warn Jesus' disciples against any ideological dependence upon earthly power (wealth or any other) or upon any human, self-authenticating aristocracy (religious or philosophical or other).
4. Does his question request some special, meritorious deed that would guarantee him what he presumptuously supposes cannot be had in normal obedience to God in all that He requires? If so, his supercilious attitude toward common faith and obedience to the revelations of God applicable to his life MUST be called to his attention. (19:17) It is important to notice, however, that Jesus assigns him something to do which, of course, will help him to BE what he must BECOME. (Cf. Jesus' approach in Lk. 10:25, 28, 37) This is not merely a Jewish approach to his goal that equates righteousness with deeds rather than character, since what Jesus requires would be no merely mechanical, esoteric, meritorious deed whereby he could earn the Kingdom, but a practical act of faith that left the outcome entirely in God's hands. (See on 19:21.)

#### B. JESUS' RESPONSE (19:17-19)

1. Jesus challenges his understanding of Jesus' position and his own comprehension of what is really good: "On what basis do you call me what is absolutely true only of God, and desire to know from me what only God can know?"

19:17 Why askest thou me concerning that which is good? As reproduced in the Paraphrase and Harmony, the rich man's question

may have actually used "good" twice, once to distinguish Jesus as "Good Master" (according to Mark and Luke), and once to ask what "good deed" must be done (according to Matthew). Then, in Jesus' reaction there were two rapid questions, not just one: "Why do you call me good? Why do you ask me about what is good?" This is the simplest, least problematic harmonization of the seemingly contradictory, even confusing, wording which scribes and scholars of Matthew's Gospel have attempted to eliminate by assimilating Matthew's original text to that of Mark and Luke. The scholars who see the Synoptics' reporting as bristling with difficulties need to see that Jesus' two questions are both valid and important.

1. "Why do you call me good?" (Mk. 10:17, 18; Lk. 18:19)

- a. That the title "good teacher" was utterly unknown to the Jews, as some affirm because it does not occur even once in the Talmud, proves nothing about what this young man could have thought, because the so-called "un-Jewishness" of such a title is but a generalization about what Jews generally think and do, not an inflexible, intellectual straitjacket that invariably governed their every thought. In fact, Jesus' answer does not condemn the un-Jewishness of his flattering title, but the thoughtlessness of it.
- b. Some take the skeptical view of these words that Jesus, embarrassed by the ruler's overcomplimentary title which appropriately referred only to God, intended to deny any pretense of absolute goodness. This view is so far out of harmony with Jesus' own self-understanding (Jn. 8:46) and other Scriptural declarations (e.g. 1 Jn. 3:5; 1 Pt. 1:19; 2:22f; 3:18; 2 Co. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26-28; 9:14), that it cannot be taken seriously. Although it is true that Jesus is not affirming anything about His own character or identity and is merely reproving the ruler's flattery that could not seriously intend what is implied by his terms, the following syllogisms illustrate how Jesus could not be rejecting His own goodness:

EITHER: There is none absolutely good but what shares in deity.

Jesus Christ is absolutely good.

Therefore, Jesus Christ shares in deity.

OR: There is none absolutely good but God.

Jesus Christ is not divine.

Therefore, Jesus Christ is not absolutely good.

But can we so lightly reject the absolute sinlessness of our Lord, without, at the same time, jeopardizing our own salvation that depends upon what, in such a case, would be His no longer perfect sacrifice?

- c. Jesus' challenge has been expressed syllogistically like this:
- |                            |     |                                       |
|----------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|
| EITHER: God alone is good. | OR: | God alone is good.                    |
| You do not believe me      |     | You call me good.                     |
| to be God                  |     | So, call me God, and be               |
| So, do not call me good.   |     | prepared to take the<br>consequences. |
- d. Jesus' method of dealing with the young man is immediately to draw his attention to his own superficial use of words: "On what basis do you call me what upon reflection you would admit is true absolutely only of God. You throw that word 'good' around so loosely, that you need to examine your idea of goodness. Do you really care about goodness? If there is none good but God, to apply that term to me with this understanding is to affirm that I am God—but do you believe this?" The objection of some that the ruler could not have understood this kind of reasoning fails to nullify Jesus' right to argue this way and lead the man to think along lines he had never before considered. It is not unlikely that the self-righteous ruler considered Jesus to have arrived at His goodness in the same way he had merited HIS. Thus, he is complimenting himself in conceiving of the Son of God as a man very much like himself, even if possessed of a far higher degree of the same kind of goodness. Jesus could no more tolerate the title "good" in this sense, than He could permit others to call Him "Christ," when intended in a mistaken sense. He refused to be accepted on the level of a merely "good teacher." In fact, since He was not just a "good teacher," but the Word of God incarnate, for anyone to refer to Him as an especially holy sage and then to seek from such a man only God could be trusted to know for certain, is all a terrible error. In this sense, the rich young ruler is turning aside from the true, divine foundation of Moses and the prophets to what he supposes, without any reasoned basis, is but an admirable, quite human rabbi renowned for his unusual wisdom. AND NO MAN, ANCIENT OR MODERN, CAN HAVE JESUS OF NAZARETH ON THESE TERMS! So, while Jesus' instant rebuttal points the rich man to God alone who is good, this is His deliberate thrust to prod this ruler's conscience to reflect upon what basis he

addresses Him with a title that unquestionably belongs to God. He is scolding His careless use of titles.

**2. Why do you ask me about what is good? (Mt. 19:17)**

- a. Since the ruler thinks of Jesus as only a man, he is asking Jesus to play God for him. This, because his inconsiderate question demands that Jesus be wiser than God by proposing a step the merit of which would surpass all preceding divine revelations. Now, whatever else may be said about the specific wording of the Evangelists' reports, if Jesus goes along with the game and furnishes ANY answer in harmony with this kind of request, He automatically exposes Himself to the accusation of having given information on a problem that only God could be competent to decide. But this is precisely what He did! (See on 19:21.) Thus, even if Jesus' deity and goodness are not clearly expressed, but rather seemed to be denied in His opening words, they are definitely not absent from the ultimatum He handed the young man, since He acts like God by requiring of him what only God could require.
- b. The point is: would the man really depend upon God to furnish him the true answer to his question? If so, why come to Jesus? By coming to Him, does he hope to circumvent the undoubted revelations of God or obviate obedience to them? If so, the only possible answer of a prophet faithful to God is: Go back to what God has already said in the commandments. (Cf. Isa. 8:20 ASV)

Thus, on the ruler's assumption that Jesus is a mere human, Jesus **MUST** refuse both to be called "good teacher" and hand out private nostrums supposedly leading to eternal life. The only right answer to Jesus' question is: "I call you 'Good Teacher' and ask you about the good, because I know you are a teacher come from God, since no man can do these miracles you do, unless God be with him." But the ruler gave no such answer at this point in our text. The dull silence of the young man serves to underline his shallowness. Jesus had proven that his complimentary title "good teacher" was mere flattery and his interest in "the good" an attempted side-stepping of God's will.

Whether you are asking for the source of human goodness or for the one good thing essential to have eternal life, **One there is who is good.** Will you trust him to tell you? Observe how carefully, almost meticulously Jesus worked with him. He is in no hurry to make a glib

convert who can repeat all the correct phrases but with no real understanding of what is involved in his statements. Although this meditation is the slower route, nevertheless to arrive at correct concepts of what is involved in goodness, eternal life, God and commandments is the essential task of true discipleship.

**But if you would enter life, keep the commandments.** To the modern Christian accustomed to the NT doctrine of the inadequacy and imperfections of the Mosaic Law with its inability to give life or make anyone perfect, this command of Jesus must sound little short of unbelievable. In fact, how can ANYONE enter into life by keeping the commandments He means? (Gal. 3:21; 5:4; Heb. 7:18f; 10:1) Yet, when the young man asked for illustrations, Jesus cited some typical, Mosaic legislation. Good stuff, of course, but why that?!

1. Because this demand is the all-essential first step to the conversion of anyone. Everyone must come face to face with the divine standard to see his sinfulness and be led by this realization to confess his need of divine grace. **Keep the commandments** demands perfection, not just relative goodness, because any admission of failure is enough to damn the person who depends upon perfect performance of law for salvation. (Ro. 2:13; Jas. 1:22-25; 2:8-11) **Keep the commandments** means: "Do not just listen to them or play at observing them!" This should drive the man to his knees before God in the painful awareness of his own sins, in desperate need of a Savior. In fact, had the young man been more severely honest with himself, he need not have gone any further than this answer, because it was God's answer for him. Sincerity would have compelled him to cry out with Peter, concerning Moses' law, "Neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear it." (Ac. 15:10) His answer should have been, "NONE of these things have I kept from my youth up: God, be merciful to me a sinner!" The critical importance of this part of Jesus' strategy will be vindicated later. Since the ruler so easily breezed past the Law with its stern demand of perfection, his failure to admit his need for a Redeemer may well explain his failure to accept Christ's invitation. Not having really faced the Law, he was not really ready for the Gospel.
2. Another reason why Jesus referred him to the commandments might be that these commands find their origin in a divine initiative. They are no merely human codification. Jesus turns his attention to the **One there is who is good** who is, at the same time, Author of the commandments, hence Author of that which "by

doing a man shall live" (Lev. 18:5). Since the young man had asked for something based on deeds that would lead to life, Jesus is perfectly in order to point him to God and His Law. (Cf. Gal. 3:11, 12) But even this points him to Him who alone is Judge and Standard and who alone can enable him to live by such a standard. But to admit this turns one's attention beyond mere deeds of law to see Him who alone can make him good enough to inherit eternal life. In fact, by saying that **only God is good**, He warns that no man can observe the Law absolutely perfectly, because to be good one must be perfect. If the young man were really thinking now, he must see that his own imperfection damns him and he must cry out for grace. If he is to have this kind of goodness, he must receive it from God as a gift of grace.

3. Another reason Jesus can safely point this Jew to **the commandments** is that the overconfident young man might manage to claim perfect observance of some of the Decalogue, but would eventually hang himself on "Thou shalt not covet!" And, worse, he would prove that he really knew nothing about the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me!"

So this is the only route, **if you would enter life**. Nor is this somehow a different route than that which leads to perfection, indicated later. (See 19:21.) On the assumption that *life* and *perfection* represent the same thing in Jesus' mind, we may safely conclude that *the commandments* (v. 17) and the demand of absolute consecration (v. 21) are closely related too. Otherwise, we would have the false dichotomy that common, ordinary people can squeeze into *life* by keeping ordinary commandments, whereas special **perfection** is only available for informed insiders who can make extravagant sacrifices in response to personally tailored asceticism. Jesus' preliminary answer, then, means that the way to eternal life is not based on the extraordinary or something not already widely known, but rather on the obedience to well-established commands of God.

Whereas Jesus is dealing with one man's personal problem, He nevertheless furnishes him the proper sort of credentials proper for a true prophet. He urges obedience to other well-authenticated revelations, **the commandments**. This very step is essential for Jesus as much as for the man himself. (Study "How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee" after 15:20, where prophetic credentials are discussed more fully.) From this standpoint, Jesus' appeal to the Law as a true beginning point was but one more evidence to the ruler why He

should be believed. The Nazarene had not laid another foundation, had not pointed him to other gods or other laws, but significantly directed him to the undoubted Word of God.

2. Jesus furnished him commandments God had already revealed.  
(19:18, 19)

**19:18 He saith unto him, Which?** Because the man asked, "**What kind of (*pōias*) commandments?**," it may be that he anticipated some mysterious precept with such an esoteric excellence that it differed radically in kind from the usual sort of thing ordinary people could learn in the Law. **And Jesus said, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honor thy father and thy mother; and Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.** The Evangelists' listings furnish no secure basis for critical conclusions about liturgical order of the commandments in the early Church. The order of the commandments here is probably unimportant to Jesus, since He is only furnishing the rich young ruler a handful of typical commandments of God's, extraneous to the Ten Commandments. Attempts to see special significance in the choice of the commandments cited note the following points:

1. Placing the Fifth Commandment to **honor thy father and thy mother** after VI-IX does call some attention to it, especially where the Jewish mind would have expected Him to cite the Tenth. Was there some shortcoming in the young man's life with respect to his parents that Jesus could see? Had he dedicated his goods to the temple by the diabolical "Corban" formula? (See on 15:3-6.)
2. **Do not defraud** (Mk. 10:19) This is found in Lev. 19:13, although the Greek wording is not that of the LXX for this Hebrew text, but of two manuscripts of the LXX of Dt. 24:14, followed by Sirach 4:1: *mē apostérēses*. Defrauding would be the standard businessman's temptation to shrewdness in his transactions, hence quite appropriate to cite for the rich young ruler. However, some see this commandment as a summary reminiscence of Ex. 20:17, the Tenth Commandment, since defrauding presupposes a covetous desire that would do anything to gain what belongs to another.
3. **You shall love your neighbor as yourself.** (Lev. 19:18) Plummer

(*Matthew*, 266) decides that Jesus could not have cited Lev. 19:18 on this occasion, because, had He done so, the rich man could not so easily have affirmed, "All these have I observed." But this fails to grasp just how shallow the human heart can be, especially if its attention is fixed on some supremely excellent deed and the person's mind is already impatient with familiar precepts like Lev. 19:18! In fact, it is easy to affirm that we have always done this from childhood, until we crash head-on into some unpleasant, uncomfortable or unwanted duty, as this young ruler so abruptly discovered. In fact, it was precisely this commandment that Jesus later chose to test the sincerity of his affirmed desire to be perfect. (19:21) Despite all the poverty and suffering all around him, he could still justify piling up wealth. He apparently loved his poor neighbor in the abstract, but not in the concrete, because, when faced with the practical opportunity to meet the immediate needs of some poor people and enlist himself in the service of Christ, which often involves going out of one's way to be of service to others, he balked.

Just because Jesus did not refer here to any particular command related to his relationship to God, we may not assume that Jesus considered the man to have properly ordered his religious life. In fact, by emphasizing his duty in the field of human relations where only truth in the heart can satisfy the conscience, He would show that he was not really in harmony with God either, because failure in human relations deeply affects one's relation to God. (1 Jn. 3:14-18; 4:20f) The Lord did not cite anything from the law of worship or ceremonies, because He knew how relatively easy it is to absolve oneself on the basis of perfect performance of rituals, justifying oneself by saying, "If God be appeased by the religious ritual, it does not matter greatly about my personal relationships. After all, my fellows are not going to be my final judge." Rather, with Lenski (*Matthew*, 750), we may think that Jesus cited these commandments, because they would be the ones of which the rich man might feel surest of his own perfect compliance. Ironically for this way of thinking, God judges us not so much on how orthodox is our ritual ("The right mode of baptism is immersion, the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day, and nothing but Welch's grape juice and Mandelbaum's matzos on the communion table, please!"), as on how truly seriously we take our relationship to other people. This is the old problem of "not just right ritual, but right relations too!" (See notes on 9:13 and 12:7.) Unconfused

by his assertions of his own goodness, Jesus will place before him a simple order that will unmask the legalism of all his previous care for others. And because he will turn down that requirement, this orthodox Jew will prove once more just how difficult it is for Jesus to do anything with "the righteous." In fact, Jesus came to call sinners to repentance, not the self-satisfied, self-justifying "righteous."

### C. THE YOUNG MAN INSISTS ON PERFECTION (19:20)

19:20 **The young man** (*neanískos*) was not necessarily a mere boy, since a person was considered a youth from about the 24th to the 40th year. (Arndt-Gingrich, 536; cf. *neanílou* of Ac. 7:58) **All these things have I observed.** Attitudes of commentators tend to range themselves into two positions regarding this young businessman's assertions: charity and realism.

1. With charity we might say that he had observed the Mosaic Law to the extent that he understood its meaning and to the extent he had fathomed himself. As Staton (*Servant's Call*, 9f) points out, so many religious homes are without real love for God and one's fellows, where its members live by regulations and judge their happiness by their ability to follow certain rules, without ever bothering to wonder to what purpose the rules were given in the first place. So they tell themselves and others that they have performed God's will merely because they have punctiliously kept a set of memorized rules.

The tragic reality represented by this young man is his unfeigned sincerity in affirming his faithful observance of the Law. His is a position actually possible for the person who accepts the pre-supposition upon which his statement is based, i.e. eternal life and righteousness can actually be attained by perfect observance of divine law. (Study Paul's own position as a Pharisee: "as to righteousness under the law—blameless!" Phil. 3:6) It just never occurred to such people that the revelation of God to Moses at Sinai depended entirely upon the gracious discretion and enterprise of God, not upon man. And if the Law itself did not depend upon human legislation, neither did the life it offered to those subject to it. Everything depended upon God from start to finish. (Isa. 26:12; 1 Chron. 29:10-16) And it is still that way. (Heb. 13:21; Phil. 2:13; 1:6; 1 Th. 2:13; Jn. 15:4f; Ro. 7:18; 2 Pt. 1:3-11)

- Charitably, we may see his declaration, not so much conceited as disappointed that Jesus had nothing more stimulating to tell him than what he had heard all his life. He had expected to be shown something heroic and inspiring and is reminded of mundane responsibilities on which he had been busy since he was a boy.
2. More realistically we may note that he had punctiliously performed all those commandments in harmony with the way they had been understood in Pharisean circles. His answer smacks of Little Jack Horner's attitude: "What a good boy am I!" How could anyone, who knows the holy God of heaven, have the gall to assert, as this man does in all seriousness, "I have put into practice everything that Moses required, and am now ready to move on to bigger things!"?! This young chap actually took the "Love your neighbor as yourself" in stride! His is the pride of accomplishment; the certainty that absolutely everything in his past is pleasing to God: there have been no mistakes, no slipups, no blunders, no bungling of any human relation.

Whichever view is taken of his first statement, by his own self-evaluation he should not have made the second one. That is, if God's will had been faithfully and perfectly observed, as he affirmed, how could such a good man say: **What lack I yet?**

1. Did this young fellow really desire an answer to his question? Does not his question sound like the game played by the thousands? These wring their hands in false despair, precisely because they are perfectly sure that they have lived up to the standard, they have always paid their bills, and yet, despite all their rule-keeping, their conscience does not let them rest. Nervously they ask, "What's wrong with me? What have I not done?" They expect no real answer from the person asked. They expect rather the soothing confirmation of their own goodness. Should the other person fail to play the game, and, instead of saying, "What more do you want? You are already the finest person we know!", he tells them the unwelcome news that they are imperfect in a deliberately ignored area, they are shattered. His statement about his faithful observance of the law exhibits great ignorance of its duties and of himself, but it is sincere. However, is his question as equally sincere?
2. He is really one step better than the Pharisee praying in the temple (Lk. 18:9-12) who is absolutely certain he had no need for improvement, whereas this young man at least admits the possibility that

he lacks something. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 726) solves it best:

Here superficial smugness is struggling with deep discontent. This young man tries to make himself believe that all is well; yet on the inside he is pathetically perturbed . . . though he tried hard to believe in his own virtue and respectability, he was actually feeling ill at ease.

Mark (10:21) registers here one beautifully tender reaction of the Master: "And Jesus looking upon him loved him." Why? Because He could look beyond his shallow self-complacency to see that this promising young person had been victimized by the formalism and legalism so characteristic of a religion of superficial observance of law. He could love him for the lost sheep that he was. (18:11-13; 9:36)

#### D. JESUS OFFERS PERFECTION THROUGH ABSOLUTE CONSECRATION (19:21)

19:21 **If you would be perfect** means "One thing you still lack." (Mk. 10:21; Lk. 18:22) It is not unlikely that, by divine insight, the Lord could have furnished him a rather substantial list of his shortcomings. Such humiliating perhaps would not have accomplished as much as the generous condescension He actually showed. With His usual tenderness He answered the ruler's question exactly as asked, "You ask, 'What do I still lack?' Just one thing, which, if you desire to be perfect, will make all the difference in the world." (1 Jn. 2:15-17; see notes on 13:7, 22.) It is the step whereby he would really come to know the true God and eternal life. (Jn. 17:3; 1 Jn. 5:20f) This would be no mere perfection in keeping the commandments as such, but perfection in arriving at the heart of ethical conduct and a right understanding of his relation to God and to the neighbor he had claimed to love as himself, which is the basis of all commandments. (See notes on 5:48.)

**If you would be perfect** has a touch of irony in it for the man who had just claimed to have kept the commandments, especially the "love your neighbor as yourself," a command that perfectly summarizes all that is really involved in moral perfection. But the young man hardly understood all this. There is special irony in Jesus' sending him back to this very commandment he had so flippantly claimed to have already kept as much as necessary. Despite the irony, Jesus'

demand is seriously meant, because He is really testing him on these main points: love and trust in God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength; love and service to his neighbor as himself; and his willingness to follow Jesus' leadership. (Mt. 22:36-40 = Mk. 12:28-34; Mt. 16:24ff)

**I. LOVE FOR GOD ABOVE ALL: Sell all you have . . . and you will have treasure in heaven.**

- A. Furnishing this formula to the ruler, Jesus is not thereby subscribing to a doctrine of good works, as if giving away so much wealth could guarantee him so much eternal life. Rather He exacts of him an act of faith in the grace of God and a self-surrender so complete that, without faith, he could never make the leap. So far from depending upon works and leaving out faith, there is almost **NOTHING BUT FAITH** here. (Col. 3:1-5) In fact, the promise of **treasure in heaven** guaranteed by God as a result of this major sacrifice is realistic only for the person who believes Him. (Heb. 13:5f; see notes on Mt. 6:19-34) So far from being a superhuman, esoteric act which would merit eternal life, Jesus' command was the simplest, most practical, most immediately verifiable way for him to take hold of God's grace by faith. But, as proven by the outcome, he did not believe, did not obey Jesus and so could not be saved. Thus, Jesus actually explores his real reverence for God, and so pushes him back to the First, Great Commandment of the Law, summary of the first table of the Decalogue. (Mt. 22:37f; Ex. 20:1-8; Dt. 6:5; cf. Prov. 19:17; 14:31; 28:27; Dt. 15:7-11) The Lord aims at breaking his dependence upon his wealth, so he could learn that he could not do without God. So long as he was well supplied with this world's goods, he could buy his way out of trouble without God's help, and even arrive at the point where he had eliminated all need for the constant, daily provision of the Heavenly Father.
- B. **Sell all you have and give it away** is an incredibly radical demand for the person who believes wealth to be essential to expansion and influence of the Messianic Kingdom. Jesus therefore asking him completely to disavow an essential article in his credo: no wonder he stumbles at it! But how many thousands of relatively rich Christians over the centuries have hallowed that article in their practice and thinking?

With half-hearted confidence in spiritual power, they substitute a show of wealth in great, barn-like edifices "to the glory of God and so that the world will sit up and take notice!" They form denominations and interdenominational power structures to ram "needed" legislation through Congress and lobby at the U.N. and smuggle military weapons to people's movements struggling for their share in the control of the world. Power in this world is based on wealth, but Jesus shocks everyone by saying to His most promising contact in the wealthy community, "Get rid of it!" Unbelievable doctrine, but solidly based on God's usual way of doing things. (Cf. Jer. 9:23, 24; 1 Co. 1:26 in its context of 1:18—2:18) Everyone needs to understand that God does not need our wealth and influence, our importance and social position to make His Kingdom function or succeed!

- C. The rich young ruler's biographical by-line, "he had great possessions," means that he had exceptional means at his disposal, and, whether he was a wise investor or the heir of a billionaire, his millions were locked safely away from the disturbing problems of needy people, as if the care and maintaining of possessions were the destined end-all of God's intended blessing. As it was, he was but the slave of as many masters as he had possessions, furnishing janitorial service to polish sources of pleasure he rarely if ever used or enjoyed. This is because the more things one possesses, the more he is obligated to protect, maintain and increase them, leaving him less and less time for the simple enjoyment of any one of them. Worse, because he must realize a wealth-oriented dream in his mind, the mammon-worshipper must turn down what comes to him unmanipulated in life. If God brings him something in life that does not fit his own preordered plans, he must ruthlessly thrust it aside, if his own scheme is to be realized. And yet, this young man had asked Jesus for something that did not fit preordered schemes! From this standpoint, his original question was destined to bring him to choose whether he would leave his own wealth-oriented dreams in order to accept the unforeseen in God's will that risked his wealth, or hold tenaciously to his dreams and risk losing God too. So, he cannot really enjoy reality as it is, even if God Himself made it that way. Instead, he tries to force reality to conform to his limited preconceptions and

dreams born of what money can buy. Thus, he misses all the interesting, richly exciting, genuinely satisfying experiences of adjusting himself to new, spiritual realities that could bless his life beyond his happiest imagining.

## II. LOVE AND SERVICE FOR HIS NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF:

**Give it to the poor.** How could he so carelessly pretend to love his neighbor as himself (19:19b), when he hoarded, despite the poor all around him? (19:22; cf. Jas. 1:27; 2:14-16; 5:1-6; 1 Jn. 3:15-18) Wealth tends to develop in the possessor the impulse to cling to possessions in order to retain them. Thus, selfishness develops, growing out of the struggle to hold what is in constant danger of slipping away through one's own neglect or through the greed of others. So Jesus strikes at the heart of his problem—selfishness, not merely the abundant possessions he had. Note that not even here do we find asceticism or self-privation ordered as an end in itself. This is not poverty for poverty's sake, but the ideal of brotherhood and sharing. It is rather the intelligent distribution of his goods made available to the poor, his brethren. (Cf. Luke's word, *dίddos*, "distribute," Lk. 18:22. See also Ac. 2:44f; 4:34f.) Genuine love must be the motive. (1 Co. 13:3)

## III. WILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW JESUS' LEADERSHIP: and come, follow me.

- A. The severity of Jesus' demand is softened into a sincere, affectionate invitation. Jesus actually wanted him in His service, because He could envision what this young man could become under his tutelage.
- B. The remedy for addiction to possessions does not lie in the communistic equalization of wealth or in divorcing our day-to-day existence from dependence upon some form of economic system. God knows that no man can live in a utopia where the necessities of life should not have to be paid for, because man is a sinner who has already destroyed the one utopia for which he was created, and he will not have another until he faces squarely the problem of His own sinfulness. (Study Gen. 3:16-19; 2 Th. 3:6-13; 1 Th. 2:9; 4:11f; Eph. 4:28.) Rather, the cure for wealth addiction (= covetousness = idolatry, Col. 3:5) is to be found in discipleship to Jesus. Only He can restore us to sanity by helping us to see the true value

of what He calls **treasure in heaven** and by devaluating all our temporal value systems, all our earthly treasures. Because our treasure takes our heart with it (Mt. 6:21), earthly riches tend to shackle our hearts, our interests, efforts and hopes to this earth, causing us to lose sight of, and finally interest in, the things of God and eternity. This is worldliness. (1 Jn. 2:15ff) His discipleship, then, is not an extra without which we could get along quite satisfactorily, because if we did not take His word for the reality of our true **treasures in heaven**, we would not take the steps He indicates to make it ours! Unless we follow Him, finding our true security in our trust in His leadership, our dependence upon His evaluations and His advice for our investments, we are at the mercy of every other temptation floating through our consciousness.

- C. If we interpret Jesus' demands as terms on which the ruler could have become an intimate follower at the level of the others, then Jesus' strict impartiality becomes evident, since He subjects him to the same sacrifices the other more intimate followers had made in order to enter His service. (See on 19:27.)

The young man had supposed that he could keep his wealth and inherit eternal life too by means of some magic formula he hoped to learn from Jesus. But Jesus, acting like God, demanded that he do something that did not fit an already established moral scheme. He suddenly overturned the calculating reasoning of the man and handed him what appears to be the special, tailor-made formula he had requested. And yet it was not a formula that he had expected, because it required no monumental use of his wealth, nor did it depend upon his past deeds or goodness. Rather, it stripped him of his usual supports and economic strength, leaving him practically naked before God and the world, and enrolled by faith in the discipleship of an itinerate rabbi whose future was not yet all that clear. The ironic thing about this whole situation is that he had asked for some nearly superhuman deed whereby he could inherit eternal life, and when, in form, Jesus furnished him precisely what he had requested—although the substance totally overturned his own concept of it—he turned it down. He had practically asked Jesus to play God for him by furnishing an arbitrary task that did not fit the usual scheme of things (such as the commandments in the law), and Jesus gave it to Him. Yet, in essence, He demanded that the ruler simply

*repent* of his addiction to wealth which is nothing more than the idolatry of covetousness. The specific form his repentance was to take must not obscure the fact that he was ordered to repent.

But is there nothing for the modern Christian in this special demand? Certainly, the surprising thing about Jesus' stringent demand made of the rich young ruler is that it is not just a tailor-made ultimatum specially designed for that man's special situation and personal need. It is the kind of dictate that Jesus could hand ANYONE! (See notes on 13:44-46; cf. esp. 19:29. Cf. Lk. 12:33 in its total context of Jesus' message on trusting God completely, Lk. 12.) The concept of heavenly wealth, as opposed to earthly riches, is not new for Jesus. (See notes on 6:20 in its context of 6:19-34!) In fact, Jesus' demand of the rich young ruler was nothing less than the rule that governed and explains His own matchless life in the fruitful service of God. In order to reign, He too sold all that He had and gave it to the poor! (2 Co. 8:9; Ro. 5:6ff) He too had to conquer by dying to all that was dear to Him. This is the pathway to eternal life for every disciple. (See Special Study: "The Cost of Our Salvation" after 16:28.)

In fact, the difference between Jesus' requirement of the rich young ruler and what He demands of everyone is only a question of details: what specifically must we do with our possessions? The ruler must sell everything and distribute it and we must turn over to Christ all claimed right to our possessions and then utilize them as His administrators, i.e. considering them a stewardship for His use. On 1 Co. 7:29-31, Bartsch (*First-Century Slavery*, 152) is correct to notice that Paul's insistence "that whereas the various earthly activities and relationships in which Christians were involved were not rejected, their definitive character for Christian existence had been negated," was founded not merely upon the passing of the present world scheme or upon the shortness of the time, but upon the call of God. (1 Co. 7:15c, 17-24) It is not "buying" as such that is called in question but rather "the keeping, the seizing, the possessing . . . Also, Paul did not criticize in principle either crying or rejoicing. (See Ro. 12:15.)" That is, we are to fix our attention on what God wants to do in our lives where we are with what little or much we have, rather than concern ourselves over much with the superficial, often accidental, circumstances that characterize our existence on earth, e.g. marriage, slavery, wealth, commercial activities, former religious status, etc. Accordingly, the determining attitude for Jesus' disciple is a refusal to set one's heart on earth and its transient treasures,

"for the *schema* of this world is on the way out!" (1 Co. 7:31b) Can you imagine the revolution in rich-poor relations that such insights must bring to people who accept them?

With insight Tolbert (*Good News From Matthew*, 165f) notes how Jesus' statement to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," has been turned into a cliché to repeat to everyone who wants to become a Christian. What would be the result in our twentieth century affluent world, were we to hammer out the demand Jesus laid before the rich young ruler? How many so-called Christians on the rolls today would have ever become a Christian, if they had been required to repent of their covetousness before being baptized? How many are unquestionably rich rulers with more real concern for their possessions than for God? Since when has this idolatry become fashionably "Christian"? Rather than be owned by their possessions, people must be free to be able for Christ's sake to utilize or dispose of them as the situation demands. The man that allows possessions to govern his thinking and activity cannot allow God to do so. (Mt. 6:24)

#### E. BUT THE YOUNG MAN BALKED (19:22)

19:22 **But when the young man heard the saying, he went away sorrowful; for he was one that had great possessions.** The rich young ruler is not like the happy farmer or the pearl merchant (see notes on 13:44-46), because, although he was faced with the supreme cost and value of the Kingdom ("eternal life" or "perfection"), he would not buy. He turned it all down and walked away, and Jesus let him go! Of what use to the Kingdom of God were his talents, his youth, his management ability, his uprightness, etc., if his claim to love his neighbor as himself (19:19) is false? Loving one's God enough to make this kind of sacrifice for the Kingdom is what the Kingdom is all about! However, everyone's will to accept must be left free to refuse, so Jesus did not detain him. If he did not really love God or his neighbor more than his gold, what kind of a disciple would he really have made? Although Jesus loved him (Mk. 10:21), He did not compromise His principle a hair's breadth to attain an influential addition to His cause. Staton (*Servant's Call*, 10) wisely counsels:

Jesus was not just concerned about the quantity of His disciples but also about their quality. When we go about making disciples,

we must not overlook the kinds of people Jesus discipled and the kinds He allowed to walk away.

Why was he **sorrowful**?

1. Is he shocked, hurt and grieved that for the strength of His Kingdom the Master can so easily do without the success symbols, means, power and influence that he, as a wealthy person has to offer? He had undoubtedly envisioned a situation where he could keep his wealth, respectability, power and influence, and have his eternal life too. And, if he resembles the other disciples, he was probably convinced that the Kingdom of God was going to need his very gifts and possessions to make its influence felt in the world, for are not these the indicators of success in our world? This would have let him nourish his addiction to wealth and guarantee him a slice of eternal life too!
2. Is it merely because he loved his possessions too much to part with them? If so, although Matthew says, "he had great possessions," it is also true to say, "Great possessions had him!" He was accustomed to the sway over others that wealth can buy. He had heard his money talk and enjoyed its commanding voice. But what would be left of him, if he lost his voice?
3. Or is it because he could see that Jesus had just unmasked him for the moral pauper he really was, and that, stripped of his pseudo-respectability, he could perceive that there was nothing left inside? Could he see that, unless he made the demanded sacrifice of total consecration, he would have wasted all his other efforts at goodness? Was he shaken to see that the pain of withdrawal from his addiction only underlined that much more clearly how thoroughly he depended on wealth to provide him his sources of happiness and security? Because he dreaded to take the risk and make the plunge Jesus indicated, he was not unlikely aghast at his own cowardice, at how needy he was and how very insecure without that crutch that gave him identity and apparent importance. His sorrowfulness is a plain symptom of his addiction, because a person who is not addicted is able to do with less, or at times even without, painlessly. He probably had thought himself equal to anything the Master could demand of him, only to find himself dangling helplessly from his own moneystree.
4. He was **sorrowful**, because he felt deeply the rightness and reasonableness of Jesus' answer. Otherwise, he would likely have scorned it as extravagant or insulting. His grief is the product of his struggle

to choose between giving up his purpose to have eternal life and giving up his possessions.

**He had great possessions.** Why mention this so late in the incident? Up to this point his major failing seemed to have been his self-righteousness, but here he chokes on the demand to liquidate everything and make practical use of it as gifts to the poor and take up personal discipleship to Jesus. Very possibly his addiction to wealth is mentioned last, after his standard Jewish morality is made abundantly clear, so that the reader may be psychologically satisfied that his wealth is not necessarily ill-gotten gain, and perhaps actually led to the (typically Jewish) conclusion that his wealth is but the normal pay-off for his orthodox goodness. (See on 19:25.) This, then, would be for the purpose of showing that even the undoubted blessing of wealth from God can become the most exacting slavery and the most unquestionable idolatry, and although justifiable within limits, must be unmercifully sacrificed when it becomes the cause of one's own spiritual loss. (Study Mt. 18:6-9.)

#### F. JESUS' COMMENT ON THE INCIDENT AND TEACHING ON WEALTH (19:23-30)

1. "Entrance into God's Kingdom is difficult for the wealthy."  
(19:23)

19:23 **Verily I say unto you, It is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.** The young man went away sorrowful, but he left Jesus sorrowing too. The Lord's quiet observation is the reaction of One who fully understands the demand He has just made and is grieved that such a fine, potential disciple could not break himself free from the one slavery, the one idolatry, that held him bound.

But why should it be so tough **for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God?** Two reasons suggest themselves:

1. Simply because his unwillingness to admit that, despite all the tangible evidences to the contrary, he has not really arrived in the Kingdom. He must begin all over, as a little child. (See notes on 18:3, 4; Jn. 3:3-5.) The trauma for so many self-made men would be so great that the necessary self-humiliation would always

elude them. In fact, to admit as final the value system of the Kingdom of God means that they must reject the finality and the this-worldly goals of the often unethical economic systems upon which so much of their wealth is founded. But the habits of mind and practice developed to gain, maintain and increase their wealth will have become so ingrained that to admit that they are totally mistaken means literally that anyone whose whole life has been immersed in that way of life must completely start over. Nicodemus' question (Jn. 3:4) is really pathetic, really pained, because it hurts deeply to admit that most, if not everything one is or has, at best, is wrongly oriented, and, at worst, is a deliberate exploitation and an abuse of others. (Jas. 2:6, 7; 4:1-6, 13—5:6) The deep chagrin felt by every driver who learns that he has gone miles out of his way and yet is nowhere near his destination and must lose further time and spend extra money and effort to arrive at the proper end of his journey only faintly illustrates that inner self-accusation and humiliating disappointment burning in the soul of the man who suddenly discovers that almost everything he represented in the past was foolish and wicked in the balance of eternity. (Lk. 12:13-21; see fuller notes on Mt. 6:19-34.) "Poor rich man!" is no idle comment!

2. Although God had said, "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day." (Dt. 8:18), this precept is easily forgotten in the temptation to bow to economic power as a supreme being in itself. Very few people are capable of keeping their head all the time in the fast-moving rush to hold and increase one's wealth. (Study 1 Ti. 6:9f, 17-19, notes on Mt. 13:7, 22; as also Wilson, *Learning From Jesus*, 273-296.)

In short, the reason wealth blocks its possessor's access to the Kingdom lies, not so much in the possession itself, as if wealth per se contaminated like nuclear radiation, as in the attitude of the possessor toward what he thinks wealth is and what wealth can do. The difficulty, therefore, lies primarily in what wealth does to the possessor. (See full notes on 6:19-34.) In fact, this may explain the low-profile discipleship of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. (Cf. Jn. 19:38f; Mt. 27:57; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:50) Vested interests make even good men cowardly lest they lose their grip on their investments in position, wealth, power, etc.

**Enter the kingdom of heaven**, in this context, means "be saved" (19:25) or "be perfect" (19:21) or "inherit eternal life" (19:16). **The Kingdom**, here, means that life lived under the rule of God which begins in this life with one's salvation from sin and proceeds through his perfection in the character of Christ and culminates in life lived with God for eternity. (See notes on "the Kingdom" after 13:53.) **It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven** means that the man addicted to wealth is an idolater who has too much at stake in his possessions to let God be the Ruler of his life, because this rule is the Kingdom.

Mark (10:24) reports that "the disciples were amazed at his words," a foretaste of their mounting astonishment that breaks out in Mt. 19:25 with their "Who then can be saved?" This close quizzing of the Lord by the disciples that we see taking place in this subsection (19:23-26) is precisely what Jesus intended should happen on other occasions, when, as in the Sermon on the Mount for example, He overturned everyone's expectations about the position and importance that wealth and power structures represented for the Kingdom of God. (Study note on 5:3ff; cf. Lk. 6:20, 24.) Disciples are driven to decide once again whether they think Jesus' view is the only tenable position, or whether their own is real. Is it really true that the blessing of the Kingdom is the possession of the poor in spirit?

2. Apostles are staggered (Mk. 10:24), but Jesus repeats His dictum even more emphatically. (Mt. 19:24)

19:24 **Again I say to you** means that Jesus is coming at His previous statement from another angle, because the **hard** (19:23) is not illustrated by the **camel going through the needle's eye**. In Mark (10:24), Jesus actually repeated His former exclamation: "How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God!" Although even in Mark Jesus stays on the subject of the perils of wealth as an obstacle to entrance into the Kingdom, it would seem that Jesus means: "You are astonished that I say that it is difficult for men of means to get into the Kingdom? Let me remind you that it is difficult for ANYONE to enter the Kingdom!"

On Mk. 10:24 it should be noticed that the better manuscripts do not have the expression, "for those who trust in riches," "a rich man," nor "those who have possessions." As Metzger

(*Textual Commentary*, 106) points out, "The rigor of Jesus' saying was softened by the insertion of one or another qualification that limited its generality and brought it into close connection with the context."

But Jesus meant to leave it general, because He must also deal specifically with this generality later. (Mt. 19:26) Thus, in Mark He means: "No ONE can claim prior right to entrance into the Kingdom on the basis of accidental distinctions such as race, wealth and social position, or cultural acquisitions such as the external performance of a legal code."

**It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.** We need not waste pages deciding whether the camel was really a camel and the needle's eye really a needle's eye. These expressions need no further comment than Jesus' word: "impossible!" (19:26) If it be urged that Jesus did not say that it is impossible for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, then it must be answered that the term "rich man" is ambiguous. Does "rich man" mean owner, or rather steward of great wealth that really belongs to God? The monied man who answers, "That wealth is MINE," cannot enter the Kingdom. The even wealthier magnate who exclaims, "Why, it is only God's: I am just His responsible administrator with no proprietary rights over these vast holdings!" understands Jesus and can enter the Kingdom. The first thinks HE is a rich man; the latter knows he owns nothing and that God is the wealthy One.

The disciples' reaction (19:25) is understandable only if we see them reacting to a paradoxical declaration that pictures a proverbial impossibility. It is a useless exercise to point to any of these words as special "Biblical Greek" capable of special renderings, when every one of these words (*kámelon*, *trématos*, *rhaſídos*, *trumaliās*, *belónes*) is known to classical Greek. (Rocci, 384, 963, 1638, 1853, 1862) The explanation that "camel (*kámelon*) should be cable (*kámilon*)."<sup>1</sup> is but a feeble human attempt to attenuate the rigor of Jesus' hard saying. It does not represent the correct textual rendering of Matthew, Mark or Luke (See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 50, 106, 169.), and should be forgotten by serious NT scholarship, except as a lesson on what not to do with NT words.

3. Dumbfounded, the disciples ask: "If a rich man cannot be saved, who can?" (19:25)

19:25 **And when the disciples heard it, they were astonishingly exceedingly, saying, Who then can be saved?** What does their question mean?

1. Is this the anguished outcry of a pilfering Judas? (Remember Jn. 12:4-6.) Some believe Jesus' unrelenting rejection of a rich man as a proper candidate for the Kingdom was not only to correct the disciples' understanding about the rich young ruler, but also, even primarily, to bring Judas back to reality. In the same way other Apostles were dreaming of thrones and honors, was Judas imagining the wealth that would be his? But Matthew's words is *disciples* (plural), because there were more than Judas who were stunned by Jesus' incomprehensible rejection of the wealthy.
2. It is not unlikely that the disciples' underlying presupposition was a typically Hebrew argument: "Does not God furnish man the power to get wealth? (Dt. 8:18) But would He have blessed the wicked in his greedy grasping? (Psa. 1; Prov. 3:9f, 16; 10:22; 11:24f; 15:6; 22:4; 24:3f) Therefore, whatever other faults the rich may have, they must have some hidden merits which the all-seeing God chooses to reward. Is not wealth, then, evidence of one's righteousness? But if a rich man cannot be saved, who can!?" Such an argument assumes, of course, that any amount of goodness, merits or future obedience can make up for past sins and failures. Had they been considering the licentious rich who cruelly grind the poor under their heel (cf. Jas. 2:6f; 5:1-6), they could have more readily agreed with Jesus. But Jesus was discussing a wealthy person who was but one step away from perfection! "If those whom we deem particularly qualified for the Kingdom cannot enter, then who can?"
3. The disciples' question, "**Who then can be saved?**," means: "Then, no one can be saved!" They rightly sense that Jesus refers to a situation possible for anyone. Their question has its proper answer: "Zacchaeus can be saved in identically the same way Jesus' indicates here." (Lk. 19:9f) But this they do not see. They only guess that all people are attracted to wealth and are driven by it, whether rich or poor. Therefore, since all have the virus, all must be damned.

Does their question mean that they too are secret addicts of wealth, shocked that Jesus had just wiped out their covertly admired heroes? To admire or indulge the practices and philosophy of the wealthy because of the quantity of comforts their wealth can provide them is not merely to acknowledge the addict in us, but also to become their accomplice by tacit or even unwitting secret agreement with them. Idolizing the money-grabber is already a latent commitment to the same paralyzing idolatry that will manifest itself when the first opportunity presents itself. Are the disciples dupes of the propaganda circulated by monied people to ease their own conscience about their own enslaving habit? Unfortunately, those accustomed to wealth often have society's communications media working full-time not only to perpetuate the concept that life is linked with wealth's purchases (contrast Lk. 12:15), but also to make this the official ideology of the world. Those who are relatively poor or really so, then, when confronted with this philosophy, have the choice of rejecting the popular dogma by accepting or rationalizing their poverty and being thought fools, or of becoming Mammon-worshippers too. After all, wealth is relative: one can be as dependent upon wealth with little as with much. Trusting in riches is a question of attitude toward it, not how much one actually possesses of it. There is, of course, Jesus' third alternative: that of relativizing wealth by re-assigned to the means of material wealth its true economic function, by subordinating it to the things of the spirit, which, in His view, is the true treasure. As we saw taught in Mt. 18 and as this section illustrates, the present age of the world is structured in such a way as to draw exaggerated attention to the powerful and the wealthy, who are, from Jesus' standpoint, the less secure, the more infantile, less scrupulous and more bulldozing members of the race.

Nevertheless, Jesus will answer the Twelve's pessimistic question by showing that not everyone will be so selfish. Rather, everyone who is motivated to make the sacrifice will be saved, and at the same time, will be amply repaid all that this cost him, even in this life. (19:29)

In this particular case, the disciples ask, "If a rich man cannot be saved, who can?" But other disciples with other orientations would just as easily ask: "If an ecstatic charismatic cannot be saved, who can?" or "If an ascetic holy man cannot, who can?" Or it might be a philosopher as opposed to the man on the street, or just any man as opposed to a woman, or a free man as opposed to a slave, a Jew as opposed to a Gentile, a powerful king as opposed to a lowly

commoner—and the list is endless. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:26-31; 2:6; 3:18-23; 4:8-18; 1 Co, 7; Gal. 3:28) The reason for this is that, according to each one's orientation, these various groups, due to their inherent merits, are thought to have automatically attained or earned the goal coveted by all. Nevertheless, a Christian's salvation and self-identity does not depend upon his earthly status, but upon what God makes possible for him to become in Christ and in accepting the challenge to be a Christian right where he is with what he has. Christ's invitation to discipleship is not based on the disciple's earthly situation, race, sex or social condition, but upon His own graciousness. Paul had learned this, and so could almost turn eloquent prose into poetry describing "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"! (Phil. 3:8-11)

4. Jesus answers: "God is lord of all possibilities." (19:26)

19:26 **With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.** Whatever else the details of this wonderful declaration may mean, Jesus proclaims in dramatic terms the absolute Lordship of God: God is in absolute control of everything: **with God all things are possible.** This declaration has soul-stirring significance for the original hearers and readers of this Gospel, especially because they faced earth-shaking sociological, economic, philosophical and theological upheavals that threatened to leave them adrift on a chartless sea. But to know that God is at the helm of the universe is security. But this fact also had immediate, personal ramifications for those disciples who were not a little perplexed when their Master took a hard line on divorce. (Mt. 19:10) And just now He has all but damned society's greatest, most influential citizens. (Mt. 19:23-25) Their emotions and readiness to believe are being strained to the limit, as if everything they had nailed down was coming loose. With these words Jesus anchors their souls to something solid that counts, something that is eternal, unaffected by time and change, to a God with whom **all things are possible.** (Cf. Lk. 1:37; Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17, 27; Zech. 8:6)

But the very proposition, **with God all things are possible,** may very well mean that, for the disciples as for anyone else, God may well have to take some unpredictable steps, unforeseeable by limited human conceptions. While God may be counted upon to be perfectly wise, holy and loving, He may talk and act in ways that no one on

earth could have foreseen or predicted with certainty. This is because God cannot be shut in by human categories or definitions. In fact, Jesus' parable of the Eleventh-Hour Laborers (20:1-16) explicitly teaches the unexpected truth that, in contrast to the usual, human notion that recompense should be measured on the basis of work quotas met, everything depends upon the free will and mercy of God.

What is it that **with men is impossible**, but easily falls within the province of **God with whom all things are possible?** Two answers are possible, depending on what is meant by **this** or on what is meant by **with men, with God.**

1. **This** refers to the disciples' question, "Who then can be saved?"  
 a. Basically, their question meant, "Who can be saved from the addiction of wealth so as to be admitted to the Kingdom?" They implied that none could be saved, because all normal people are involved, in one way or another, in the preoccupation with the gaining and maintaining of possessions.  
 b. Further, if those who seem to be gifted, particularly qualified personalities cannot be saved, who can?"  
 Jesus answers either standpoint.
2. **With men, with God** means "in the judgment of men or God about what each can do."  
 a. It is a mistake to understand the preposition *with* in either phrase as referring to accompaniment. *With* (*para* with the dative in both cases) does not mean to indicate the person with whom one cooperates, i.e. God or men, as determining the possibilities of the case, as if Jesus had said, "If being saved depended upon other men, men cannot be saved. When men take God's hand, they can do the impossible and be saved." Jesus did not say this.  
 b. Rather, *para* with the dative points to the judgment seat before whom one stands figuratively: "in the sight, or judgment, of someone." This meaning passes over into the simpler "with" and becomes almost equivalent to the dative, "possible or impossible for someone." (Arndt-Gingrich, 615) He means, therefore, that what in human judgment is impossible, God judges perfectly possible. Since we cannot live with wealth and we cannot live without some possessions, we must judge salvation, perfection and eternal life to be unobtainable. But God alone can work the necessary transformation of our vision of wealth,

so that we no longer depend upon it, but upon Him.

Men just cannot merit salvation, no matter how rich or righteous they are, because no amount of human qualifications can remove sin. (Heb. 9:22; Eph. 1:7) Only a perfect sacrifice can effect that. (Jn. 1:29; 1 Pt. 1:18-21; Ro. 3:21-26; 5:6-11; Heb. 7:26-28; 9:11-14, 23-26; 10:10, 26) And only God can furnish a sacrifice like that, for with God all things are possible, and, as Jesus will say later, He Himself is that sacrifice, a ransom for many. (20:28) Salvation is in the hands, not of self-congratulating men, but of a God who, seeing the human mediocrity and incapacity to be perfect, can do precisely what Jesus did with the rich young ruler, i.e. provide an arbitrary path to eternal life. This "arbitrariness," however, is apparent only to people who have carefully amassed their fortune in moral merit badges and brownie points with a view to cashing them in on eternal life at the end. But because they are sinners, they must not suppose that any quantity of merit can pay for one sin. This must be atoned for on quite another basis, because any goodness they may have expressed was totally their duty. (Lk. 17:7-10) The "arbitrariness of God" consists in His choice to save, not those who have carefully "earned" their salvation, but those who never earned it at all, but rather trusted Him to be generous and did what He asked. (See notes on 20:1-16; cf. Ro. 4:4, 5.) This is but the Pauline doctrine of justification by the obedience of faith. (Cf. Ro. 1:5; 16:26; 3:25; 4:24; 5:1; 6:17f, etc.)

The reason wealth and religious merit may be connected in this context is that "wealth" is but coined life, i.e. time and energy used to produce a certain result, hence that for which a man spends his lifetime must be considered his wealth, because he considered it worth his effort to produce or pursue it. This is why excessive well-being, too many worries, any earth-bound work carried on unlimitedly, all hinder the individual from possessing the Kingdom, because these leave no space, no time, no energy, no spiritual freedom to dedicate himself to the things of God in the common things of life. Anything that occupies our whole life and leaves no time for the Kingdom of God, anything that leaves us insensitive to Christian concerns or does not permit us to feel the need of God's salvation, is dangerous wealth. This includes that wealth that consists in religious practices punctually observed and carefully registered which salve the conscience that one's duty is done, but at the price of true love for God. (Cf. Maggioni, *Luca*, 237) So, even if a man spends a

lifetime hoarding up a treasure of merit wherewith he may buy his soul out of hell and pay for his right to enter God's eternal rest, his pursuit of this wealth is a striving after wind and vanity too.

The rich young ruler was a man who, by almost anyone's standards, deserved to be ushered into the Kingdom on a red carpet, but, staggered by the unexpectedly high price of the Kingdom, judged it impossible for him to pay, and walked away. In glorious contrast to him; however, there is Zacchaeus, the filthy rich chief tax collector. There hardly lived a man more "camelly" to go through the needle's eye of the Kingdom than he! And yet, during a visit with Jesus Christ, by the grace of God IN HE WENT! (Lk. 19:9) Not because rich, but because repentant.

If the Apostles' question means, "Who can break the spell that wealth holds over its possessors?", Jesus' later answer to Peter (19:29) will show that God had already begun to succeed in liberating the Twelve (with the possible exception of Judas) and many others from the fascination of possessions.

#### G. PETER'S WRONG-HEADED QUESTION ANSWERED (19:27-30)

1. "We have sacrificed what the rich young ruler would not: what is our reward?"

19:27 **Lo, we have left all.** Objectively, they had sacrificed little more than a few boats and nets and the simple fisherfolk that made up their families, hardly a treasure to compare with the ruler's millions. But it was their entire life: their livelihood, their loved ones. So when they turned away from these things to follow Jesus, they demonstrated as truly their dedication to Jesus as if they had renounced all the finest gold in the world or forsaken the treasured company of kings. **What then shall we have?** Is Peter's reaction to the foregoing statements of Jesus positive or negative?

1. Positive. Peter sees that the Twelve disciples had actually made great sacrifices to be in His personal service. They had willingly done what the rich young ruler had not, although the objective quantity was not near as great. If, then, the road of the wealthy is a dead-end street, what lies ahead on the road of sacrifice? Because the Lord does not seem to scold Peter's abrupt question,

it may be that He interprets Peter as asking, "Lord, since we have sacrificed for the Kingdom, does this mean that we are among the recipients of God's grace for whom He facilitates entrance into the Kingdom? What has God made possible for us?" Since Jesus had pointed out the impossibility to be saved ("With men this is impossible"), Peter may be uncertain about whether they, in their sacrificing, were laying up "heavenly treasure." But the fact that Jesus is not openly scolding in His answer is not decisive, because even His slightest warning (19:30; 20:16) may be thought to contain a criticism of Peter's question.

2. Negative. The rich young ruler had just been turned away because of the hold earthly possessions had on him, and now poor, grasping Peter commits the same basic error! **What shall we have?** means that what the Apostles even then possessed in the Person of Jesus Christ was to be judged meager in comparison with what they considered missing, and undoubtedly less than what they expected to come.
  - a. Peter and anyone who agreed with him was still addicted to wealth, because he just cannot quite stop thinking about what has been surrendered to be in Jesus' service. Worse, he values too lowly the beauty and preciousness of all the compensations with which he was even then surrounded. (Cf. Mt. 13:16f; Lk. 10:23f; Heb. 11:13; 1 Pt. 1:10-12)
  - b. Further, Peter's observation has the flavor of self-righteousness, because **we have left all** reminds the Lord of the greatness of their self-denial. So his question is colored by covetousness. Perhaps he thought, "Our rare success in doing what the most amply qualified citizens find impossible to do must be a very meritorious accomplishment indeed." **What shall we have?**, then, hints for V.I.P. positions and preferential treatment.
  - c. In the larger context, it may be that Jesus' remarks on the dangerous temptations of riches had a discouraging effect on Peter, leaving him uneasy about prospects of immediate reward on earth in the Kingdom of a King who inexplicably refused to be crowned (Jn. 6:15) and steadily predicted His own judicial murder (Mt. 16:21; 17:22f).

Though charity requires that we not condemn Peter without solid proof of his guilt, the latter interpretation seems more correctly to explain his motivation, since the warning Jesus gives in 19:30 and more especially the point of the Parable of the Eleventh Hour Laborers

(20:1-16) grows directly out of this question. Over-concern about contracts with God and the "What is there in it for me?" spirit endangers those who react and reason this way, because of its legalistic calculation, its putting self-interest first in priorities, and its expecting preferential treatment!

2. Jesus' answers: "You will be rewarded, but not on the basis you think." (19:28—20:16)

a. PROMISE: "In the new world, you will reign with me, judging all Israel."

19:28 Although His further remarks will leave the merit-counting self-seekers scratching their heads and frustrated, the interesting thing about Jesus' answer here is the gentleness of His reproof of Peter's self-interested question. Instead of criticizing his question, He answered it! There is a striking similarity between this reaction and His promises given in Lk. 22:28-30, despite the self-seeking dispute among the Twelve about relative rank and importance at the Last Supper (Lk. 22:24-27). A closer look at the answer in each context, however, may convince us that His promise of their future greatness intends to destroy any hope of personal gain or superiority over others. He disappoints every aspiration of personal distinction in a graduated hierarchical scale by seating them on twelve equal thrones. No one is worthy to be seated higher than another. This implies that no merit is accumulated even on the basis of the relatively differing sacrifices made by each one. (See on 20:1-16.)

**You who have followed me** means "you who have continued with me in my trials." (Cf. Lk. 22:28) The disciples deserved high positions in the Kingdom, not because they had sacrificed so much (Mt. 19:27), but because they had been willing to be His disciples despite all the common-sense rationalizations that told them to drop Him. They would be rewarded on the basis of their well-tested but victorious faith. They had seen in Him absolutely nothing that would concretely sustain any real hope of earthly security or power. Their faith is not perfect: they would misunderstand Him and they would yet express some ambitious hopes. (20:20-28) But these failings, in His view, were but ripples on an otherwise calm sea of deep trust in Him. He did not despise the generosity of their self-denial, however often it might misunderstand Him. Their general humility and willingness to be led was worth everything to Him: why should He fail to reward

them? Only an uninformed, greedy jealousy could raise an eyebrow at the idea of rewarding them for following Him, because, as He has intimated time without number, the rewards of the Kingdom are not the sort of thing that would attract the greedy or arouse the materialistic anyway. (See "The Reasonableness of the Redeemer's Rewarding Righteousness," Vol. I, 198-201; cf. notes on 10:41f and 20:20-28.) And, because eleven-twelfths of their number would finally learn the critical route to true greatness (18:1-4), He now replies to their original question in language more nearly resembling what they hoped He would use. But even then, the nearness of terminology must not be mistaken for nearness in thought!

**In the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.** As suggested above, regardless of what attraction the Apostles thought they saw in these words as they heard them the first time, they did not receive what they anticipated. And yet the Lord did not deceive them, because it was something similar, but something which their later, maturer Christian judgment would decide far superior and far more gratifying than all their earlier, paltry dreams. But to what does Jesus refer here? Note the two possible time elements and their relative applications:

- |                                   |                                                          |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. The regeneration:</b>       | <b>2. The Apostles' judging the 12 tribes of Israel:</b> |
| a. The Christian age              | a. By means of their teaching                            |
| b. The renovation of the universe | b. By decisions at the great judgment                    |

It may well be that such neat outlining is far more precise than the Lord Himself, especially if we must make either/or choices between what in the Lord's thinking may have been one continuous process that would include all of the above elements as progressive phases in the process. The details of that process, examined individually, then in harmony with each other, illustrate this.

1. Because Jesus says **in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne**, the time element is contemporaneous with the glorious reigning of the Messiah. Elsewhere, instead of saying "**in the regeneration**," Jesus said "in my Kingdom." (Lk. 22:30) His reign was announced as an accomplished fact the first Pentecost after His ascension. (Ac. 2:33-36) His Kingdom is a present reality. (Col. 1:13; 1 Co. 15:24f; Heb. 1:8; Eph. 5:5; 2 Ti.

- 4:1; Rev. 1:9)
2. **Regeneration** (*palingenesia*), as the Greek word suggests, refers simply to that long-awaited era when everything would begin to be made new. This would begin with the rebirth of men on the present earth. (2 Co. 5:17; Jn. 3:3-5; Tit. 3:5; Ro. 6:4; 8:10; 12:2) But the process would not be completed until this transformation of the present scheme of things affected every part of the total universe itself. (Ro. 8:18-25; 2 Pt. 3:7-13; Rev. 21:1, 5)
  3. It is to be a time when the Twelve would **sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel**. Note the kind of action represented by that present participle, **judging** (*kρινοντες*): it is durative, representing an action as in progress and continuing during the time when the Twelve would be seated on their thrones with Jesus. If we may presume that, following the great, final judgment, **the twelve tribes of Israel** would have already been finally judged and their fate no longer in question, then with that act also the Apostles' function as judges would come to an end. Thus, their *judging* must have been something in progress prior to the final judgment. Two problems should be noticed:
    - a. The thrones are *twelve*, because Judas would be replaced by Matthias (Ac. 1:15-26) and, for the time being, Jesus is not taking Paul and the Gentiles into consideration, so He does not mention "thirteen" thrones. But if there are at least twelve, there is not to be just one throne in the Vatican, the cathedra of Peter. We see here something far more wonderful: the college of Apostles gathered around Jesus Christ, ruling God's people.
    - b. Should we think of the *judging* in modern terms—only as a strictly judicial function? Plummer (*Matthew*, 270; see also Barnes, *Matthew-Mark*, 201) raises the interesting question whether the Apostles' specific function should be thought of as reminiscent of the position and activity of the Judges in ancient Israel, who not only gave sentence in legal cases, but positively governed the nation. (Cf. Jdg. 3:10; 10:2f; 12:8f, 11, 13f; etc. See Keil and Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 241.) Contrary to the Jewish expectation that the tribes of Israel would be ruled by the Twelve Patriarchs, the sons of Jacob (Cf. *Testament of Judah* 25:1), Jesus the Messiah elevates His own Apostles to that office.
  4. **The twelve tribes of Israel**, considered as an expression in the ears of a Jewish disciple, could have meant nothing but the ideal people of God. Certainly it may have been badly interpreted as referring

only to fleshly descendants of Abraham, thus eliminating the Gentiles, as it often was. But this abuse does not deny the propriety of Jesus' using it in a perfectly Jewish context. (Cf. Ac. 26:6, 7) It meant the ideal Israel. (Cf. Rev. 21:12) But the true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) includes believers of every sex, race and condition (Gal. 3:28). Thus, Jesus' expression is symbolic for the people of God redeemed by the Messiah. (Cf. Jas. 1:1; 2:1 shows that these are Christian.) But is there no sense in which the Apostles ever dealt with the literal tribes of Israel? Certainly, but hear their preaching as they go to "the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Ac. 13:46; 18:6; 26:6, 7; 28:20, 28; Ro. 1:16) The sentencing of the Jews will depend on whether they accepted the inspired preaching of the Apostles or not. But reference to fleshly Israel must not outweigh His reference to the true Israel of God. (Cf. Ro. 9:6-8) It is mistaken to believe that the reference is not intended in any sense to include Pentecost and the Church's establishment, a conclusion undoubtedly founded on the unwarranted identification of the **twelve tribes of Israel** with unbelieving Jews only, and on the too strict identification of the Church and the Kingdom. It should be noted that Jesus did not say "Church" in our text, but alluded to *thrones* suggesting regal judgment and, in the later comment of Lk. 22:28-30, said "Kingdom." His reference is not exclusively to the Apostles' judgment of the Messianic Community, but rather to the total rule of the King, beginning from His accession to the throne and continuing until the end of time. Thus, the Apostles could actually begin their *judging* of the believing and unbelieving Israel even at Pentecost, and not merely with the beginning of eternity at judgment day.

These data, taken together, lead to the conclusion that Jesus' words contain no mysterious, eschatological pronouncement, but simply declare what even the youngest Christian already knows by heart:

1. By their personal example of willing obedience to Him in whom they saw the works of God and from whose lips they heard the voice of God, these Twelve, more than any other disciple, rightly judge all Israel. They did the homework assigned to the entire nation, thus proving that it could and should have been done. (Cf. the example of Noah, Heb. 11:7b) Their example of successful discipleship should stand for all ages as a living monument and worthy of imitation, because even without their saying one further word of condemnation, their faithfulness to Jesus in His

lowest humiliation will damn "the wise and understanding" who thought they knew too much to believe the "impossible, unreasonable claims of that eccentric Nazarene!"

2. The Apostles' inspired doctrine is the official standard by which not only the new "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; 3:7-9, 26-29) is to be judged, but the proclamation of a Gospel by which the "Jew first" would be justified or condemned. (Ro. 1:16) Today, in the Kingdom of God it is "the Apostles' doctrine" (Ac. 2:42) that is the standard by which everyone is to be judged faithful to God and members of the Church of the Messiah. (See notes on 16:19; 18:18 and all notes on Mt. 10.) This prophecy was already being fulfilled in the Apostolic era. In fact, Matthew's book itself judges us!

In short, what Jesus promised in Mt. 16:18f and 18:18, that the Apostles' legislative and judicial voice would be considered as final, is going to be realized in all questions of faith and practice in the earthly expression of the Kingdom of God. As McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 548) said it:

During their personal ministry, they judged in person; and since then they judge through their writings. True, we have written communications from only a part of them, but judgments pronounced by one of a bench of judges with the known approval of all, are the judgments of the entire bench.

In the imagery, Jesus pictures the Twelve as ruling **when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne**. Some might object that Jesus' presence in the scene would preclude as superfluous any legislative jurisdiction on the part of the Twelve. However, neither Jesus thought so, nor did they themselves. Undoubtedly every Apostle, during his earthly ministry, could say with Paul: "It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved." (2 Co. 12:19b; cf. 2:17; 4:2; 5:11; 1 Ti. 6:13) Like the Thessalonians, believers embrace the Apostles' words as God's word. (1 Th. 2:13) Bruce (*Training*, 258f) exclaims:

Surely here is power and authority nothing short of regal! The reality of sovereignty is here, though the trappings of royalty, which strike the vulgar eye, are wanting. The apostles of Jesus were princes indeed, though they wore no princely robes; and they were destined to exercise a more extensive sway than ever fell to the lot of any monarch in Israel, not to speak of governors of single tribes.

b. ENCOURAGEMENT: "Sacrifice for the Kingdom is a profitable investment."

19:29 **Every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life.** Not only are the Apostles in line for exalted blessings as they follow Christ, but EVERYONE who has sacrificed for Jesus' sake will be rewarded even in this life with hundreds of times more than what they give up, and eternal life "in the age to come." (Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30) Giving away, letting go, liberating oneself of possessions is the only way of keeping and multiplying them! This is incredible doctrine, if not Utopian nonsense, to our hard-nosed, business-is-business, "practical-minded" world, but no more so for ours than for that of Jesus' original hearers. And yet, the Lord knows that this is the only way to free us from the nearly uncontrollable slavery to things and security-building relationships that distract men from the innumerable possibilities in life that do not involve possessions at all.

Everyone who has made the sacrifice, taken the risk, let go of his earthly securities, kicked the habit of addiction to possessions, says Jesus, **will receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life!** Mark and Luke emphasize the this-worldly character of Jesus' promise: ". . . now in this time, houses, and brothers, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." In terms of sheer reward, faith in Jesus pays far more than it requires of us, compensating for anything surrendered with 100-fold returns! (Cf. 1 Co. 3:21-23; 2 Co. 6:10)

**Inherit eternal life** is the language used by the rich young ruler (Mk. 10:17 = Mt. 19:16). What the Lord required of that potential disciple was not hopeless, profitless sacrifice, but an investment paying off handsome dividends!

If **inherit eternal life** sounds like a merited payoff for people whose sacrifices earn their reward, Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 731) shows how these who are saved by grace may truly inherit such blessings: "a. They are freely given to them, not earned by them; b. the gift is based upon justice: they were earned *for* them and are therefore theirs by right; and c. they are theirs forever."

Why should the Lord be so lavish? Why should He NOT bless the man who loves the Kingdom so much that to gain it he would sell everything he has, and then, deciding such sacrifices inadequate, give

himself? Should the Lord not give the man what he gave himself for? However, the sacrifice Jesus rewards is not the calculating self-concern of the ascetic, but the willing surrender of one who loves Jesus. We must not forget that Jesus is answering the disciples' question: "Who then can be saved? To this Jesus answers, in effect, "EVERYONE—everyone who sacrifices whatever hinders his loyalty to me." **For my name's sake** means "for my sake and for the gospel" (Mk. 10:29) and "for the sake of the kingdom of God" (Lk. 18:29). For other notes on suffering for Christ, see on 5:10-12; 10:16-39.

Jesus Christ puts such a high premium on sacrificing everything for Him, because He knows what earth-bound value systems do to people. He knows that riches have a shrivelling effect on our spirit because they supercharge the ego with a false sense of power. This is because, when we have unlimited resources to mold our own fate, we limit our future to the low goals which we can consciously conceive, rather than take life as it comes, a day at a time, with its unforeseeables, its risks. Here is where faith is made real for the believer. But because of these risks, doubts can constrict our souls by tempting us to struggle to make life "safe" for ourselves, so we can continue to enjoy our wealth unendingly. But in this very safety there is psychological stagnation, and faith in God dies, because it is in the unknowns, the risks, that real life takes on the excitement and zest that makes it worthwhile. Thus, security symbols—even the security of safe family patterns (**houses, brothers, sisters, parents, children, real estate**)—may have to be risked in order to be able to grow into the kind of life Jesus offers. Who would have thought that, in our old security systems whereby we guaranteed ourselves a constant supply of whatever houses, lands and kinfolk gave us, were already planted the seeds of our own stagnation and spiritual poverty?

Ironically, but truly, the chief symptom that we are addicted to our possessions (all that we think is ours and is of value to us) is the sensation that we are unable to meet our world without the reassurance that they are there. Our security symbol may be a well-padded bank account, a martini, a shot of a narcotic, modish clothes, business as usual, kinfolks all in their places, eating well, pleasant family surroundings, whatever. A person is hooked if he has the uneasy sensation that, IF HE SURRENDER ANYTHING HE POSSESSES TODAY, HE WILL BE INADEQUATE OR NAKED WITHOUT IT, for fear that it might not come back tomorrow. Notice, then, how Jesus even condescends to our all-too-human uncertainty by assuring us, on His

honor as a Gentleman and a Teacher come from God, that not only will we have a constant supply of what we really need for our real security and happiness, but it will be supplied in greatly multiplied abundance. Nor will it be merely "pie in the sky by-and-by," but in this time.

There is also the soul-shrinking reality that, in inverse proportion as our wealth grows and our interest grows in those pleasures wealth can assure us, our interest decreases in those innumerable options in the realm of the spirit that have nothing to do with wealth or possessions. In fact, it may well be that Jesus' **hundredfold** here has only partial reference to expanded material riches or multiplied physical kinfolk. (Otherwise, He would be stimulating the very greed He has just been condemning.) Rather, He guarantees the gain of what would be valued at a hundred times the price of what was given up: the multiplied fellowship of brotherhood in Christ, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, and much more besides that would far exceed the mundane values abandoned for Christ's sake. (See Wilson, *Learning From Jesus*, "Treasures of the Kingdom", 228ff.) Ponder Bruce's further explanation (*Training*, 262):

Still it must be confessed that, taken strictly and literally, the promise of Christ does not hold good in every instance. Multitudes of God's servants have had what the world would account a miserable lot. Does the promise, then, simply and absolutely fail in their case? No, for . . . there are more ways than one in which it can be fulfilled. Blessings, for example, may be multiplied a hundred-fold without their external bulk being altered, simply by the act of renouncing them. Whatever is sacrificed for truth, whatever we are willing to part with for Christ's sake, becomes from that moment immeasurably increased in value.

Jesus is convinced that He is ordering us what seems like poverty, which, in reality, is itself wealth. It is a measure that is not intended to limit man's maturing, but the condition that will make maturity authentic and actually possible. This is because the man who, out of love for Jesus and the Kingdom, reverses the whole mechanism of covetousness in his life, finds that he has time for God and people like never before. Although he is money-poorer, he is rich in freedom from the cares brought by the economic struggle for "just a little bit more." (Prov. 15:16; 16:8; 1 Ti. 6:9) He is rich in serenity, because he has learned in whatever state he finds himself to be content with it, because his mind is fixed on God (Isa. 26:3; 2 Co. 6:10;

Phil. 4:4-7, 11-13; Heb. 13:5f; 1 Th. 5:18; 1 Ti. 6:6-8) And, because he is now deeply involved in helping others arrive at the only authentic humanity there is—that which is available only in Christ,—he is rich in brotherhood. (Cf. Ro. 1:6-13; Mt. 12:48-50)

**Hundredfold:** where is all this going to come from? Is God going to rain down manna from heaven on His beleaguered saints? More likely He is counting on that marvelous hospitality whereby His people take care of each other. (Study Ac. 2:44f; 4:34f; Heb. 13:1-3; 1 Pt. 4:9; 3 Jn. 5-8; Ro. 12:8, 13; Eph. 4:28; Phil. 4:14; 1 Ti. 3:2; 5:10; Tit. 1:8; 3:14) More would come from a new work ethic that would create financial independence. (Eph. 4:28; 1 Th. 4:11f; 2 Th. 3:6-13; Tit. 3:14) Above and beyond these human endeavors and resources there is the vast treasury of heaven at our disposal! (Mt. 6:33; Phil. 4:19; Col. 2:2f; 2 Co. 9:8-11; Eph. 3:20)

That no easy life is indicated here is clear from Mark's addition: "hundredfold . . . with persecutions." (Mk. 10:30; cf. Ac. 14:22) That persecution is not merely an accompanying phenomena of the Christian life or even a hindrance, but really part of our profit, is illustrated by Bruce (*Training*, 263):

We see further why "persecutions" are thrown into the account, as if they were not drawbacks, but part of the gain. The truth is, the hundredfold, is realized, not in spite of persecutions, but to a great extent because of them. Persecutions are the salt with which things sacrificed are salted, the condiment that enhances their relish. Or, to put the matter arithmetically, persecutions are the factor by which earthly blessings given up to God are multiplied an hundred-fold, if not in quantity, at least in virtue.

The fact that it is for Jesus' sake that we are persecuted, is a blessing in itself, because it furnishes additional proof that we are really faithful to Him, hence assures us of our belonging to Him and eventual redemption by Him. (1 Pt. 1:6-9; 2:12, 15, 19-25; 3:13-18; 4:1f, 12-19; 5:9) This is no idle promise, either for the early Christians who, in order to share in the Gospel and be in the Kingdom of God for Jesus' sake, actually abandoned family, field and fireside, or for the modern saint who is called upon to sacrifice the companionship of those nearest and dearest to him, because they refuse him for his commitment to Jesus. How many have experienced the literal truth of the Lord's word, in the actual multiplication of dear ones closer than one's own ungodly kin who cast them out?

How many have found in the warmth of the Christian congregation strength to accept the inevitable persecutions (Mk. 10:30; 2 Ti. 3:12), and the incredible joy that comes from accepting the plundering of their property, knowing they have a better, permanent possession that enemies cannot touch? (Heb. 10:34; 1 Ti. 6:17-19; Mt. 6:19-21)

The fact that Matthew and Mark omit "wife" in the list of things abandoned for Christ's sake must not be interpreted as an anti-ascetic reaction on their part, any more than its inclusion by Luke (18:29) indicates the contrary tendency on Luke's part. It may only indicate that the former Evangelists dealt with the problem of man-woman relationships in the context of Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce and celibacy (Mt. 19:3-12 = Mk. 10:2-12) hence omit "wife" here to eliminate any suspicion of contradiction, whereas Luke, who will treat the divorce problem alone and in a quite different context (Lk. 16:18), could include "wife." In fact, as illustrated at 19:12, Matthew, in principle, does leave the door open for separation from an unbelieving spouse.

The current *Gemeindetheologie* school that believes that the Gospel writers wrote primarily for their own congregations (*Gemeinden*) and so reflected live needs and problems in their own special areas, do not hesitate to date Matthew's Gospel in the 80's and 90's, long after the fall of Jerusalem. However, the heavy insistence that the rich young ruler be immediately ready to sacrifice every item of value for the sake of Christian discipleship and the promise made to any disciple of a hundred times what would be sacrificed, quite easily point to an earlier period. We must not think that such problems arose exclusively at a later age of the Church. In fact, much earlier, people already had begun to experience the suffering of loss of all things for Christ. (Phil. 3:8; 1 Th. 2:14-16; 3:3f; 2 Th. 1:4ff) Rather, if Matthew's pastoral concern is to prepare his congregation for what it must face—and on the basis of what theory of pastoral theology can such a concern be denied?—then the early testimonies to joyful acceptance of the plundering of Christians' property because of their confidence in a better, abiding one (Heb. 10:32-36), tend to indicate a date prior to the Jewish war when the unbelievers of Judaism persecuted the Christian disciples, i.e. a date when Judaism, not yet preoccupied with war with Rome, could turn its persecuting attention upon the upstart sect of the Nazarenes.

## THE REWARDS OF SELF-SACRIFICE

Meditate these lovely lines by Bruce (*Training*, 255ff):

The first thing which strikes one in reference to these rewards, is the utter disproportion between them and the sacrifices made. The twelve had forsaken fishing-boats and nets, and they were to be rewarded with thrones; and every one that forsakes anything for the kingdom, no matter what it may be, is promised an hundred-fold in return, in this present life, of the very thing he has renounced, and in the world to come life everlasting.

These promises strikingly illustrate the generosity of the Master whom Christians serve . . . He rather loved to make Himself a debtor to His servants, by generously exaggerating the value of their good deeds, and promising to them, as their *fit* recompense, rewards immeasurably exceeding their claims. So He acted in the present instance. Though the "all" of the disciples was a very little one, He still remembered that it was their all; and with impassioned earnestness, with a "verily" full of tender grateful feeling, He promised them thrones as if they had been fairly earned!

These great and precious promises, if believed, would make sacrifices easy. Who would not part with a fishing-boat for a throne? and what merchant would stick at an investment which would bring a return, not of five percent, or even of a hundred percent, but of a hundred to one?

The promises made by Jesus have one other excellent effect when duly considered. They tend to humble. Their very magnitude has a sobering effect on the mind. Not even the vainest can pretend that their good deeds deserve to be rewarded with thrones, and their sacrifices to be compensated an hundred-fold. At this rate, all must be content to be debtors of God's grace, and all talk of merit is out of the question. That is one reason why the rewards of the kingdom of heaven are so great. God bestows His gifts so as at once to glorify the Giver and to humble the receiver.

c. WARNING: "Watch for a reversal of earth's value systems."  
(19:30)

19:30 **But many shall be last that are first; and first that are last.** This paradox is true, because the logic of the Kingdom overturns the whole merit-counting methodology of those people believed to be *first*. Earthly estimates and evaluations, based upon mistaken premises, however popular and widely believed, cannot but be reversed by God who judges everything according to reality. To worldlings, this must appear to contradict all sense of appropriateness and right, simply because the presuppositions, on which this sense is based, are themselves false. Imagine the world's surprise as all the most glorious prizes go to those to whom everyone would have assigned last place, the "also-rans," the "etceteras." But the big eye-opener will come when those judged "most likely to succeed" finish last! (See notes on 13:25, 30, 43.)

The Apostles had just witnessed a man, who by all counts, should have been *first* in the Kingdom, walk away from it to a destiny of *last* importance. Jesus' betrayer, too, was in line for greatness among the *first*, but Judas would be substituted by a disciple whose name never appears among the first disciples in the Gospels, but who would move straight to the top at the beginning of the Church. (Ac. 1:15-26) To reject the rich young ruler and Judas as not involved in Jesus' thought is to fail to look at Jesus' point from the disciples' standpoint, since they would certainly have considered Judas among the elite, and, as their own reactions showed, they had been staggered at the idea that an almost perfect rich man could not enter the Kingdom. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 732) agrees:

There will be surprises however. Not only will many of those who are not regarded as the very pillars of the church be last, but also many who never made the headlines—think of the poor widow who contributed "two mites" (Mark 12:42), and Mary of Bethany whose act of loving lavishness was roundly criticized by the disciples (Matt. 26:8)—shall be first on the day of judgment (Mk. 12:43f; Mt. 26:10-13). The disciples who were constantly quarreling about rank (18:1; 20:20; Lk. 22:24) better take note!

There is presumption in Peter's self assurance that takes it for granted that sacrifices should be rewarded and that the only

problem is WHICH reward. He must understand that there is no sense in calculating rewards in a Kingdom in which no one deserves even to serve! Because this maxim connects the Parable of the Eleventh-Hour Laborers with Peter's question (19:27), it very likely rebukes that self-complacency and pride that haggles with God over what He can or should give us. There could be a real situation in which those who considered themselves first because of their own self-sacrifice, would find it all vitiated by pride, and actually be surpassed by those who in genuine humility had equalled them in devoted, self-giving service to the Lord, even if not as fortunate to "get in on the ground floor" as the early disciples. Further, if Jesus' talk about handsome rewards for service might tempt some to serve merely for the prizes and not because they love the King, the Lord deflates such hopes by this prophetic epigram and the parable which follows as its illustration.

Note Jesus' terminology: **MANY shall be last that are first, and first that are last.** This means that not everyone who labors long, faithfully and efficiently in God's Kingdom will be contaminated with the mercenary, self-righteous spirit that congratulates itself on what it calculates as a reward for its arduous labor. God has ever had humble, unassuming, self-forgetful, generously trusting workers in His service. **Many** does not mean that all will be calculating and selfish. And, as Bruce (*Training*, 268f) astutely sees,

If there be some first who shall not be last, there are doubtless also some last who shall not be first. If it were otherwise,—if to be last in length of service, in zeal and devotion, gave a man an advantage,—it would be ruinous to the interest of the kingdom of God. It would, in fact, be in effect putting a premium on indolence.

For further notes, study the following parable which illustrates this point: 20:1-16.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Describe the man who came to Jesus. What was his character and position in society? What do his questions and answers reveal about him? What does his manner of approach to Jesus reveal about him?
2. What question did he place before Jesus? How does the wording

of Matthew differ from that of Mark and Luke? Interpret and harmonize these differences.

3. What concept of how to obtain eternal life did he have?
4. What preliminary response did Jesus make to the man's request? How does the wording of Matthew differ from that of Mark and Luke? Harmonize and interpret these differences.
5. List and locate by chapter and verse the commandments Jesus cited to the man.
6. What was the man's reaction to this repetition of the commandments?
7. What addition does Mark make that could aid in our interpretation of this text?
8. What did the man lack to be perfect?
9. Explain what was really required of him, i.e. show how total liquidation of his assets, giving alms and discipleship under Jesus would have led the man to perfection. What principle(s) behind these requirements apply to everyone?
10. Did Jesus say that rich men per se cannot enter the Kingdom, i.e. because they have the misfortune to have riches, or did He imply that those who trust in riches cannot enter? What is the evidence for the former conclusion? What is the evidence for the latter?
11. What is meant by the figure of the camel and the needle's eye?
12. How did the disciples react to Jesus' closing the Kingdom to wealthy people?
13. How did Jesus react to their reaction?
14. How did the disciples react to Jesus' further reaction?
15. What does Jesus mean when He says, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"?
16. What question did Peter ask as a general reaction to Jesus' firm stand on wealth and its relation to the Kingdom? What did the Apostle mean by his query?
17. What did Jesus refer to in His promise of twelve thrones for the Apostles? When and/or how would they "judge the twelve tribes of Israel"?
18. According to Jesus, what are the rewards of Christian service?
19. With what pithy principle did Jesus punctuate His remarks? What did He mean by it?
20. List the texts in Matthew 18 which find practical application in this section.

SPECIAL STUDY

MONEY AND MARRIAGE: MANACLES OF THE MUNDANE?

Modern apostles of the single life and semi-bohemian pushers of poverty even in the Church of Jesus Christ are making their voices heard to justify their less conventional life-styles. While each one must decide how best to react to the station in life in which he has been called by God, the disciples of Jesus Christ must see the options clearly, not being misled by popular talk that at times sounds like something straight out of the Gospels.

In our present sections we have examined Jesus' reference to those who would be natural and proper exceptions to marriage: "the eunuchs for the Kingdom of God," those who remain virgins in order to pursue specific goals for the advancement of God's rule. Further, we heard Jesus urge the rich young ruler to distribute his wealth among the poor to be "perfect." Now, if celibacy is to be received by those rare souls to whom it is given, and if voluntary poverty is required to be perfect, then a life-style that reflects these characteristics most nearly would have an intrinsic superiority over the married person who possesses property, would it not? And would not the freedom from these manacles permit a higher spirituality?

It is to Bruce (*Training*, 245-254) that we are indebted for the following salient points that analyze this problem:

ASCETICISM, AS A THEORY OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE,  
IS FALSE FOR THESE REASONS:

I. IT IS BASED ON A FALSE ASSUMPTION.

- A. Asceticism assumes that abstinence from lawful things is intrinsically a virtue superior to moderation in using them.
- B. This assumption is false:
  1. Because abstinence is actually the virtue of the weak, because it is the safer way for anyone given to an uncontrollable love of a thing. Abstinence gains this safety at the expense of that disciple that develops character and strength. A self-controlled moderation is the virtue of the strong. (Cf. Ro. 14:1—15:7)

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2. Because abstinence is inferior to moderation for its psychological sanity.
  - a. Asceticism tends to exaggerate the evil of the things avoided, developing a morbidness about contamination and a deliberate distortion of reality to justify its abstinences.
  - b. Abstinence, while necessary in special circumstances, is really unnatural and inhuman, a forced withdrawal from what God created to be received with thanksgiving. (1 Ti. 4:3-5)
3. Asceticism is surprisingly inferior to moderation even in the element that constitutes its character: self-denial.
  - a. To eliminate at the outset everything that could ever be a source of human joy so that it could never be a temptation sounds very impressive.
  - b. But to live with and fully use everything that could always be a temptation, while, at the same time, maintaining one's own spiritual freedom untrammeled is real spiritual power and character. This self-sacrifice is actually the greater, because it is ready to move, not from the sterile wilderness of empty asceticism, but from the midst of life's dearest enjoyments, and not merely once for all, but many times and at any time. These, not the ascetics, are the greater heroes.

## II. THE ASCETIC THEORY IS BASED ON ERRONEOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRIST'S WORDS

- A. Jesus does not state or even suggest that the single life and total self-privation of goods are essentially superior to marriage and proprietorship rightly understood and used.
- B. He teaches, rather, that, under special circumstances, the unmarried or the penniless condition offered certain advantages which facilitate a single-minded pursuing the interest of the Kingdom.
  1. Danger and hard times underline this advantage most clearly.
  2. But this forced unnaturalness is a real hindrance in the absence of such crises. (See notes on Paul's view of celibacy at Mt. 19:11.)
- C. The Christian ideal is consuming devotion to the Kingdom, regardless of what it costs or when it costs, so that everything

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- else is placed subordinate to it.
- 1. It is this sense in which all of Jesus' demands of self-sacrifice must be interpreted.
- 2. Any "overtime duty" is not asceticism for its own sake, but "extraordinary demands in usual emergencies" to get a job done.
- D. The reader is referred to the notes on 19:3-12 and 19:16—20:16.

### III. OPTIONAL ASCETICISM AS AN IDEAL OF VIRTUE IS A LOGICAL CONTRADICTION:

- A. If asceticism or abstinence be a virtue essentially and unavoidably superior to moderation and self-control in the use of lawful things, then with what logic can asceticism be thought of as optional?
  - 1. If godliness and perfection are inexorably linked only to poverty or celibacy, then to arrive at perfect godliness there can be no thought of free options.
    - a. Are we really free to choose whether we will be a "perfect" Christian as opposed to a more common "good" Christian?
    - b. May we be excused from developing a given character quality merely because it is too demanding, if it be really true that that very virtue is essential to a supposedly superior Christianity?
    - c. In short, if it is a virtue, it is required: if it is optional, it is not a virtue!
  - B. Were asceticism a virtue, then Jesus made a mistake not to command literal poverty and enforced celibacy for everyone. But that He did not, in fact, do so is everywhere evident in Scripture where Apostles continue to hold out perfection for everyone regardless of the condition he was in when he was called to be a Christian.
  - C. Ascetic poverty necessitates, for its continued existence, that the "superior ascetics" depend upon those "inferior Christians" who still possess enough capital to support the mendicant ascetics also, or worse, it must depend upon charity from non-Christians, or else, by personal industry, compromise its absolute poverty enough to possess the tools necessary for gaining its own living.

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IV. ASCETICISM, AS A THEORY OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE, IS ABSURD, BECAUSE IT ENTAILS THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITY.

- A. Even if family and possessions are not everything, man's earthly life is profoundly concerned with both.
1. Enforced celibacy leads to disintegration of the Christian ideal.
    - a. Because celibates who remain faithful to Christ and their ascetic ideal are themselves but one generation from extinction or must resort to adoption of others' children to keep the community going. (Cf. the Essenes' approach to this problem.)
    - b. Because celibates who abandon their virginity but remain celibates, leave also their virtue and sink into a degeneracy and corruption through sensuality that destroys everything for which they had become ascetics in the first place.
  2. Enforced poverty lasts until the end of the groceries in the larder, then it falls into the logical contradiction of depending upon those of "inferior" virtue to sustain it either by charity or commerce.
- B. Service to God and human life lived to the full are not mutually exclusive. Rather, it is in the crucible of true humanness that God's original design for man is to be perfected, where every relationship, every natural ability, every desire, every earthly possession is to be turned to usefulness in Christ's service and made to contribute to our maturity in the character of Christ. We must live in the earthly condition in which God has called us, resisting its temptations and overcoming by His grace. We must mingle in the world's crowd, expose ourselves to its temptations, venture within the magic circle of its attractions, but show by the power of Christ at work in us that we are men of another world, hence superior to this world's allurements. We must dispassionately compare this world's pleasures and prizes with those God offers, and prefer these latter out of genuine conviction of their surpassing worth. (Cf. *P.H.C.*, XXIII, 366)

CONCLUSION: Christ's stern words on marriage and possessions, poverty and celibacy anyone with family responsibilities or preoccupied

with wealth. Then, shaken by his own vulnerability, he can turn to God for power to do the difficult, not impossible, task of concerning himself single-mindedly with the things of the Lord, as if he were unmarried, although he is married, and although responsible for many possessions, he may be free from the love of money, rich in heavenly treasures, humble-minded and generously devoted to Christ's service.

## CHAPTER TWENTY OUTLINES

- Section 50. Jesus Tells Parable of Eleventh Hour Laborers (20:1-16)
- Section 51. Jesus Predicts His Passion a Fourth Time (20:17-19)
- Section 52. Jesus Refuses to Establish a Hierarchy (20:20-28)
- Section 53. Jesus Heals Two Blind Men at Jericho (20:29-34)

## STUDY OUTLINES

(Theme continued from Chapter 19: "THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS")

### IV. GOD-MAN RELATIONSHIPS Illustrated by the Parable of the Eleventh-Hour Laborers (20:1-16)

- A. Parable of householder hiring workmen to work in his vineyard:
  - 1. Having been hired at various hours of the day, they expect varying wages.
  - 2. He orders them all paid the same amount, beginning with the last laborers hired.
  - 3. Those who worked all day complain that the last were made equal to them in pay.
  - 4. Householder answers:
    - a. "I am doing you no wrong, because you received all the pay you bargained for."
    - b. "I can do what I want to with my own possessions. What is that to you?"
    - c. "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (Everything depends upon the free will and mercifulness of God.)

- B. General principle taught: "Human expectations are likely to be overturned by God's free, generous decision."
- I. FOURTH PASSION PREDICTION (20:17-19; Mk. 10:32-34; Lk. 18:31-34)
- A. SITUATION: Jesus and disciples on last trip to Jerusalem
  - B. JESUS' REACTION: Passion prediction
- II. THE QUESTION OF POWER-STRUCTURE IN THE KINGDOM: JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH A HIERARCHY (20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-45)
- A. JESUS' AUNT SALOME AMBITIOUSLY SEEKS ARBITRARY FAVORITISM FOR HER SONS (20:20, 21)
  - B. JESUS PARRIES THEIR REQUEST (20:22, 23)
    1. Rebuke: "You do not know what you are asking."
    2. Question: "Are you able to suffer with me?" They answer, "Yes."
    3. Prophecy: "You will suffer with me."
    4. Refusal: "Places of honor are only for those for whom my Father intends them." (Everything depends on God.)
  - C. THE OTHER APOSTLES ARE JEALOUS AT JAMES AND JOHN (20:24; Mk. 10:41)
  - D. JESUS REPEATS HIS LESSON ON TRUE GREATNESS (20:25-28; Mk. 10:42-45)
    1. "Worldly greatness apparently consists in the number of people over whom one exercises authority."
    2. "True greatness in the Kingdom is measured by the number of people to whom you are able to do service."
    3. "My own life of service and death for others is the standard!"
- III. PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION OF JESUS' TRUE MESSIAHSHIP OF SERVICE (20:29-34; Mk. 10:46-52; Lk. 18:35-43)
- A. SITUATION: On Jesus' journey to Jerusalem after He taught the Twelve about the sinfulness of selfish ambitions, He is met by two blind men at Jericho requesting help from Him as "the Son of David" (= Messiah).
  - B. RESPONSE: After permitting the blind men to address Him repeatedly in public as "Son of David" (= Messiah), Jesus stopped everything to heal them, proving not only He was truly the Messiah, but also that His royal majesty is seen in the service of others.

## Section 50

JESUS TELLS THE STORY OF  
THE ELEVENTH HOUR LABORERS

TEXT: 20:1-16

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that was a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. 2 And when he had agreed with the laborers for a shilling a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing in the marketplace idle; 4 and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 6 And about the eleventh *hour* he went out, and found others standing; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? 7 They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. 8 And when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto the first. 9 And when they came that were *hired* about the eleventh hour, they received every man a shilling. 10 And when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received every man a shilling. 11 And when they received it, they murmured against the householder, 12 saying, These last have spent but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. 13 But he answered and said to one of them, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a shilling? 14 Take up that which is thine and go thy way; it is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? or is thine eye evil, because I am good? 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Since Matthew was not encumbered with chapter divisions or verse separations (all things of later date), it may be that this section is but the continuation of the teaching given in the incident recorded in 19:27-30. In fact, the present section ends with the same words. (v. 16) If so, what are the points of connection that

illuminate the meaning of our present text? That is, what is there in Peter's (wrong-headed) question that finds further answer in this parable?

- b. Above and beyond particular details involved in the application of this parable, what is its obvious, majestic theme permeating this story? Some think that the sovereignty of God in dispensing His mercies is the main theme of the parable. If you agree with this evaluation, how do you account for the fact that at least some of the workers in the story actually earned the pay for which they had contracted at the beginning of the workday? That would not be grace, but merit! (Cf. Ro. 4:4) How do you explain this?
- c. Who are "the first" and "the last"?
  - (1) Jews and Gentiles? i.e. the Jews called first to God's service, the Gentiles called last?
  - (2) Rich and poor? i.e. first in the wealth, position and fame; last because poor?
  - (3) Early personal disciples of Jesus, as opposed to later generations of Christians?
  - (4) Church members in positions of greatness, as opposed to humbler servants?
  - (5) Life-long church members, as opposed to death-bed repenters? On what basis do you answer as you do? How much of this parable is to be considered essential to the point stated in the last verse (16)?
- d. Does this parable, with each laborer's being paid the same wage, speak to the question of rewards in heaven? If so, how? If not, why not?
- e. If we have no business discussing rewards in a heaven to which we do not deserve to go, why does the Lord, in other contexts, promise rewards for Christian service? Are there rewards, or not?
- f. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

### PARAPHRASE

Because many human expectations concerning their own merits may well be overturned (19:30), God's Kingdom may be illustrated by the landlord who went out at daybreak to engage grape-pickers for this vineyard. He made a contractual arrangement with the workmen for the regular wage of a denarius a day and sent them to work

in his fields. About nine o'clock he went out and found other men standing around in the marketplace, unemployed. He invited these too: "You men go work in my vineyard and I will treat you right at the end of the day." So off they went. About noon and again about three o'clock in the afternoon, he went out and did the same thing as before. Then around five o'clock he went to town and found other men waiting for work. To these he said, "Why have you been standing here all day, doing nothing?" Their answer was, "Because nobody has employed us." He answered them, "You go work in my fields too."

At day's end, the master of the vineyard ordered his foreman, "Call the workmen in and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first ones hired." So, when those who began to work at five, just an hour before quitting time, stepped up to be paid, each man received a denarius apiece. Then when the first ones hired came, they assumed that they would receive a bonus. But they were paid a denarius each like those before them. As they took their pay, they protested to the landlord, saying, "These latecomers worked only one hour, and you gave them pay equal to those of us who have done the heavy work and sweated in the blazing sun!" But he replied to their spokesman, "My friend, I am not being unfair to you. You contracted with me for a denarius, did you not? So, take the money you earned and go home. I choose to pay this last man what I pay you. Surely I am allowed to do what I please with what belongs to me. Must you show a calculating selfishness because I am generous with them?" So you see, many human expectations about rewards for their work for God will be overturned.

### SUMMARY

Continuing His discussion of Peter's question, "What shall we have?" and the others' troubled query, "Who in the world then can be saved?", Jesus illustrated His pithy maxim about the reversal of positions of relative importance, assuring His people: "That you will be paid for your service in the Kingdom is assured, but it will be on a basis different from what you expect."

## NOTES

IV. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HIS JUSTICE AND MERCY  
(20:1-16)

20:1 For indisputably links the following parable with the foregoing section on the rich young ruler and Jesus' discussion of the peril of wealth (19:16-30) of which this is an illustrative story. In fact, the punch line of this illustration (20:16) is roughly the same as that which concludes the preceding chapter (19:30). Indeed, were we not hampered with late-date, human chapter divisions, we would have assumed that 19:30 were the real beginning of our story which concludes by reiterating the point. (20:16) If so, this fact will be an invaluable key to understanding the story. The kingdom of heaven in this illustration is seen from generally the same perspective as that in the Paradise of the Unmerciful Servant. (18:23-35) Note the identical pleonastic use of *anthrópo basileî* (18:23) and *anthrópo oikodespóte* (20:1) with which each story begins. While there are differences of emphasis, the similarity of the two parables lies in Jesus' use of both to picture how God's grace and justice function in His dealings with His servants. This is the Kingdom, or Rule of God.

**A man that was a householder . . . went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard.** Householder (*oikodespótes* = "master of the house," Arndt-Gingrich, 560; "landlord, head of the house" Rocci, 1312; Thayer, 439, adds "householder," Mt. 10:25; 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 21:33; cf. v. 40; 24:43; Mk. 14:14; Lk. 14:21; 12:39; 13:25) The fact that what is being illustrated is God's Kingdom leads to the conclusion that Jesus intends to underline God's ownership of everything by calling the principle figure in the story "the landlord, the lord of the vineyard." (20:8) This point will be especially heightened in the climax (20:13, 14) **Early in the morning:** in the busy season every farmer's workday is from "can see" until "can't see." Jesus pictures here a twelve-hour workday from about 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. This rich farmer must have begun his grape-harvest just as soon as the sun was coming up, because no sooner had he organized the first wave of pickers at their work than he went back to town at 9:00 for more hands. **To hire laborers into his vineyard,** as verse 3 shows, he went to the place where just such day-laborers could be found, the town square. It is quite probable that the vineyard labor intended by Jesus is the main vintage

when the largest quantity of grapes are fully ripe and must be rapidly harvested. While it is true that grapes can begin ripening in the Jordan Valley as early as June and on the coast later in the summer, the main grape-harvest in the hills occurs in autumn as in Italy. (*I.S.B.E.*, 3086f) During the early, smaller gatherings, the individual vinedressers can, with the help of a few extra hands, keep the ripening grapes picked back and moving to market as table grapes. But when the big grape-harvest arrives, the entire ripened crop is harvested carried in baskets to the wine-presses. The families of the vineyard keepers camp out in the vineyard during this time in order to be able to labor as long as possible, uninterrupted by having to return back to town at night. (See also Thomson, *Land and Book*, II, 411) This special busyness connected with the vintage, that is not particularly connected with any other phase of vinedressing, points to the last, big harvest of grapes before the fall rains come and ruin the quality of the vintage.

Depending, of course, on what route Jesus took through Perea on His way to the ford of the Jordan at Jericho, He would have passed close to an area even yet today rich in vineyards. (*Rand-McNally, Bible Atlas*, 161)

On the western slopes of the mountains of Gilead there is Abel-keramim ("meadow of vineyards," Jdg. 11:33) just about six and a half English miles southwest of Amman, Jordan. (Cf. Grollenberg, *Shorter Atlas*, Maps 3 and 5; *I.S.B.E.*, 5) McGarvey (*Lands of the Bible*, 366) noted that Es Salt, about 20 km (14 miles) northwest of Amman had quite extensive vineyards in his day. These would be 16 km (10 mi.) off to Jesus' left if the usual Jordan Valley road were their route. But if they were travelling as far east as Jerash, Aijlon and Salt, they would pass right through this district, although not at harvest time.

If so, these vineyards would furnish a handy illustration of what Jesus intends to teach in the parable and would be further proof that He had not yet crossed the Jordan.

If we notice that the working day for all the laborers ended with the payoff at sunset, a symbol of the end of everyone's possibility to work and his subsequent retribution, then the entire working day pictured before us represents the sum total of man's labor in God's service. **Early in the morning**, accordingly, from the point of view of the Apostles, would indicate those privileged to enter Kingdom service from its very inception, an observation that points ominously

to the Apostles themselves.

20:2 **And when he had agreed with the laborers for a shilling a day, he sent them into his vineyard.** A shilling a day is the English Revision's attempt to translate *a denarius a day*, which was the standard working-man's wage for a day's work. (Arndt-Gingrich, 178) It is the buying power of this coin that furnishes us some basis for establishing the value of other coins which may be figured as multiples of the denarius. The main question is always what could a common laborer buy with his daily pay.

Tacitus (*Annals*, 1, 17) notes that two-thirds of a Roman denarius was the daily pay of the Roman soldier. Polybius (2, 15) mentions the price of a day's hospitality in the inns of Cisalpine Gaul as only one-half as, equal to one-twentieth of a denarius. (*P.H.C.*, XXII, 463) A drachma (= 1 denarius) a day was also a day's wage for a trusted guide. (*Tobit* 5:15 LXX) 2 denarii would pay a hostelry bill until "the good Samaritan" returned. (Lk. 10:35)

Whether the denarius be judged high or low for a day's pay, it must be remembered that, in an agricultural society, the farm day-laborers must make what they can in their high season, from spring to fall, moving from one harvest to another, and from crop to crop, before the bad weather comes and they cannot earn anything but what they can make indoors. Theirs is a precarious existence that depends upon their being hired on during the good seasons so they can make it through the lean ones. This fact will exculpate the men hired later in the day in Jesus' parable. (See on 20:3-7 on "idle.")

Since the landowner had gone out to hire (*misthosasthai* from *misthos*, pay, wages), and he employed them after agreement for the perfectly normal, going wage for this category of labor, the relationship between them is strictly contractual. There is nothing unusual about the *denarius a day*, except that the fundamental point of the story will revolve around this contractual agreement. After any one of these day-laborers will have put in his day, he will have earned no more or less than his denarius. It might be instructive to ask about the agreement: does Jesus mean to imply that there had been some haggling over the price before the final agreement was reached for *a denarius a day*? If so, this bargaining spirit of the first workers hired stands in contrast to all those who were hired later, who came for "whatever is right" (v. 4) or even for no promise but the trustworthiness of the Lord (v. 7). From the point of view of unemployment and the loss of a day's work, those hired first would

consider themselves the most fortunate, a fact reflected in the reality by those who enjoy great opportunities of service in the Kingdom of God, especially by those fortunate disciples who got in on the ground floor at its beginning. This opinion would be adjusted at the final payoff, the judgment. These laborers could well represent any, like Peter, who carefully negotiate their work contract with God: "We have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" (19:27) In fact, the spirit of bargaining for a contract separates these hired first from all those hired later, so we must consider only two groups: those who had a carefully stipulated contract, but grumbled; and those that came trusting in the lord's fairness and were happy with his graciousness.

**20:3 And he went out about the third hour.** If, as is likely, Jesus is counting time by the Jewish system which begins at six o'clock in the morning, **the third hour** is nine o'clock. **He went out . . . and saw others standing in the market-place idle;** **4 and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard.** This system of securing workers is still in use even in modern countries like Italy, where day workers, available to harvest grapes, olives and other truck farm products, gather early in the public piazza of the town as their point of contact with hiring farmers who need workers for that day. There are, of course, variations in the system such as use of professional mediators who seek out the farm owners for the laborers and who seek out the laborers for the farm owners—all for a fee. There is usually considerable hubbub involved in the hassle over wages and rights before the agreement is reached and the workers finally depart for the fields, a fact that gives the early morning market-place the air of a county fair. In some country towns the after-sunset hours turn the public square into what seems like a town meeting with a considerable portion of the male population roaming the square, discussing the day's events, seeking employers or employees for the following day, etc. **Standing in the market-place idle**, therefore, means that these day-laborers were where they should have been to find work. They were not loafers unconcerned about work.

**What is right, I will give you.** There must have been considerable trust generated by this generous householder, since he could start workers moving toward his fields to work for **whatever is right**, "no questions asked." These workers accepted his work offer, probably expecting a fraction of the denarius that would normally fall to them for a portion of a day's work. But the point is that they trust him enough to work for him, even without strict contracts to protect their

supposed "workers' rights."

20:5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. Again! The vineyard not only must have been large and the crop bountiful, but there must have been some urgency that more and more workers he engaged to bring in the loads of grapes before sunset. So the householder made trips back to the market-place at noon and at three in the afternoon. The workers he found do not haggle, but gladly hurry off to the vineyard, relieved to be able to work for even part of a day.

20:6 And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? The eleventh hour, or 5:00 p.m., is almost quitting time. Although grapes begin ripening as early as June in the Jordan Valley (*I.S.B.E.*, 3086), the big grape-harvest occurs in autumn in Palestine, so the sun would not go down until about seven with a long twilight. This would give these last hired a couple of easy hours in the cool of the late afternoon to work. (cf. 19:12) However, according to the protesters, these last just got in one good hour before quitting time. If quitting time at 6:00 p.m. seems too early for later summer or early fall, since there would still be considerable daylight to see to work by, it should be remembered that the remainder of the time would probably be used to walk back into town or to their homes, and most of these workers had been at work since morning.

Why stand ye here all the day idle? Had the householder noticed them earlier in the day during his earlier efforts at rounding up workers? It is doubtful that he had talked with these men before this instant, as their answer implies.

20:7 They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. No dead-beats these, their unemployment is not culpable, since they had lost a whole day's work merely because no one had engaged them for the day. Their readiness to go to work without even so much as a promise of payment, confident in the master's goodness, is evidence not only that their unemployment was not caused by unwillingness or refusal on their part, but also that they had been actively seeking work all day. There is no promise here for willful laziness or refusal to work for God when the first opportunity presents itself. This parable cannot be thought to hold out any hope for last-minute repentance for inconsiderate people who reject the call of God all their life, but decide at the last to take advantage of the Lord and accept His gracious invitation with a view to receiving the same reward as any other saint who labored faithfully all his life. McGarvey

(*Fourfold Gospel*, 553) wrote an interesting counter-parable that more correctly pictures the futility of such calculating shrewdness. The eleventh-hour laborers in Jesus' parable, on the other hand, had apparently never been approached by anyone and eagerly grasped at the first opportunity offered them.

This verse gives a preview of the graciousness of the lord of the vineyard, for he is not merely concerned about the progress of work on his estate, but also about these men who had desperately and patiently hung on to hope of work even past the time when any hope of being hired for that day was gone. Who ever heard of engaging workers almost at quitting time for just one hour's work? In fact, who would have thought that so provident a landlord as this man—who, in the reality, represents God—would not have hired enough men at the beginning of the day?

If those hired first represent the Apostles who ask, "What shall we receive?", and whose harvesting of souls and royal ministry of judging the Israel of God over the centuries by means of their writings in the NT, then they must learn that the Lord may well call other workers after their own ministry had long begun, and that these latter laborers would be paid according to the gracious free will of God, not on the basis of merits, and not even an Apostle could complain if these last received pay equal to that of an Apostle. If so, the call of God comes to other workers centuries later in the present world age. So, God could not have engaged these latter Christians to enter His fields until later. This text, then, can furnish no criticism of His providence or foresight. Rather, its total impact confirms both.

But this man continues hiring workers all day long! The point is clear: he is fully as interested in the needs of the people who need employment as he is in getting his own work done. God accepts every man who is willing to serve Him, even those who begin quite late with respect to others.

There is no price-haggling here: the men are only too glad to work, even if for a short while. Note that the later the workers are hired, the less claim they have toward their employer and the more they have to rely upon his goodness.

**20:8 And when even was come**, i.e. around 6:00 p.m. (Cf. 20:6, 12), came the time for the payoff of the day-workers, as required by the Law. (Lev. 19:13; Dt. 24:14f; cf. Jas. 5:4). **The lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward.** **The steward** (*epítropos*) is anyone

to whom the administration of something is entrusted (*epitrépo*), hence "manager, foreman, steward" (Arndt-Gingrich, 303), "superintendent, administrator, agent, curator, governor, protector, prefect, procurator" (Rocci, 745). In this case he is an employee in the master's household and estate who manages the keeping of financial accounts and pays the harvest crew. Some see Jesus as the *steward* of God, **the Lord of the vineyard**, since He acts as Mediator between God and man, and will be the One who will repay every man according to his deeds. (16:27) If so, the striking fact that, in the story, it is the owner himself, not his steward who calls the workers into the vineyard, leads to the remarkable observation that God Himself earnestly and generously calls men into His service no matter how late it is in terms of time left to serve.

**Call the laborers, and pay them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.** It really made no difference who got paid first, just so everyone was treated justly. However, this order of payment is deliberately calculated to raise the right questions about which Jesus intends to make comment. (19:30; 20:16) The fact that those who should have received proportionately less pay are not only paid first, although hired last, but paid an amount equal to that of those who thought they merited more, could not but evoke comment, and this is precisely what Jesus is counting on. Jesus' tone here is specifically polemical and directly aimed at correcting the calculating legalism that wants God's pay scale to be prorated on the basis of personal merits, seniority, strictly counted hours and earnings, etc.

**20:9 And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a shilling.** To their delight, the last ones hired, who had worked only one hour (20:12), unexpectedly received a denarius, the equivalent of a full day's pay... Because they had not earned more than one hour's pay, the full denarius represents pure grace on the part of the lord of the vineyard. There may be several motives why the landlord should decide to pay every man a full day's wage irrespective of the time put in:

1. The lord of the vineyard alone knew what the labor of each man was worth to him. If it was urgent that this vintage he finished rapidly, then time was of the essence, and, as the hours rushed by, the rested vigor of unfatigued hands would prove particularly precious to the lord of the vineyard.
2. Each man hired had been true to the only opportunity to work offered him, regardless of when he had been hired, a fact true

- even of those hired first. From this standpoint also every worker was actually equal. Each is paid, not on length or supposed importance of his labors, but upon fidelity to opportunity.
3. Those hired later had shown a magnanimous trust in their employer. Why should he not reward them magnanimously for coming when he needed them without losing precious time haggling over contracts, hours, wages and extra fringe benefits?

At any rate, he remains master of his own choices, except in the case of those laborers who had a specific contract, and this will be the main point of the parable.

Even though nothing further is indicated about the other workers who had put in only part of a day, having been hired at 9:00, 12:00 and 3:00, it would suit the tone of the parable to surmise that they too received a full denarius apiece. However, if the payoff proceeded consecutively "from the last unto the first" (20:8), then, because of the relatively more hours worked by those engaged relatively earlier, the anticipating of those last in line would be proportionately decreased, because the ratio of hours worked to pay received would increase. This may explain why Jesus omitted them from this part of the story. Or, it may be that the steward had only begun to go down the line of workmen paying them the full denarius when those hired first, impatiently asserting their seniority, cut in after those hired last, so as to be able to be paid second, thus leaving the payoff of those hired later in the day completely out of the picture.

The comments among the onlooking workmen waiting to be paid must have sounded something like this: "Wow, a full day's pay for just one hour's work! I wonder if the rest of us will be paid like that . . . Think of it: a denarius an hour, and I've turned in almost 12 hours today!"

20:10 **And when the first came**, they had already faced the annoyance of having to wait in line for their pay, even though they undoubtedly expected precedence over everyone hired after them. Another humiliation awaits them: no bonus! **They supposed that they would receive more** precisely because they had worked more hours and put up with more wearing toil out in the heat. (20:12) Nevertheless, their expectation of preferential treatment is groundless, because they had bargained with the vineyard's owner for a denarius, and a denarius is all they really earned. If pay must be based on a rule of earning or merit, this is all they legally or morally deserved, so **they likewise received every man a denarius.**

Not unlike Peter (19:27), these are disciples who drive a bargain with God. Their theology is a typically human one that expects God to reward seniority and show preferences on the basis of lifelong faithfulness, as if He owed something special to those who work long and hard doing their duty. They tend to rankle when God gladly welcomes with equal generosity even those who could not possibly have served so long as they. Naturally, they resent the idea that sinners and other unworthy, unqualified people should be welcomed by God on an equal footing with them who spend a lifetime of hard struggle against temptation. To them, this is unfair: it completely reverses their theology of righteousness. To them, Jesus can hobnob with sinners if He likes, but He has no right to treat them as if they had earned what it has taken the "righteous" many years of hard striving to attain!

20:11, 12 **And when they received it, they murmured against the householder.** They protest as if they were being handled with irresponsibility and injustice. Their complaint about the generosity of their employer completely forgets their contract bargaining of the morning.

1. **These last have spent but one hour**, i.e. they had worked from 5:00 p.m. until 6:00. On this basis, since pay must be regulated by the amount of work done, they do not deserve what they receive, yet they are paid a full day's work.

2. **(We) have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.** These men have undoubtedly put in a hard day working in summer-time temperatures around  $30^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $86^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) to as high as  $45^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $113^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) in some zones. (Cf. references to Palestinean heat and its effects: Gen. 18:1; 1 Sa. 11:11; 2 Sa. 4:5ff; Isa. 25:4f; 49:10; Psa. 91:1; 121:5f; Rev. 7:16; Jas. 1:11; Lk. 12:55) Much depends, as usual, on seasonal variables and geographical location, altitude and humidity.

Rand-McNally (*Bible Atlas*, 36) measures the average temperatures at  $34^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $90^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) and  $39^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $103^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) respectively, although Thomson (*Land and Book*, II, 77) measured  $38^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $100^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) *at midnight* when encamped at Tiberias even in March. In April he experienced intolerable heat over the Mediterranean. (*ibid.*, 312)

The protestors had worked hard for about twelve hours in these conditions.

Their conclusion is, "Despite these gross differences in our performance, **you have made them equal to us.**" You is probably addressed to the householder who is standing nearby watching the payline move forward as each receives his pay. Their grumbling smacks of the same jealousy of the prodigal son's self-righteous elder brother. (Lk. 15:25-32) Unsatisfied with their pay, they are envious because of their unjustified expectations for themselves and because of the bounty given to "the undeserving." Their objection is based on the principle of Jesus' story: they who expected to be first and highest paid last in order and least in their own expectations. In terms of the sum paid for actual work done, the owner of the vineyard had not actually **made them equal unto** those who had worked all day. In reality, he had made them far superior, since all those who were called later were given what it had taken the others all day to earn. The superiority of grace for all without distinction of merit is a major point in the story's application.

In the application, this jealousy of religious status based on human effort or initiative will be shown for the worthless enterprise it is. **You have made them equal to us**, means, "Does it mean nothing to you that we have earned our goodness by \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)?" Men are forever filling in that blank with "good works," "circumcision," "being a male (a female)," "being a Jew (or Gentile)," "being free (or slave)," "rich (or poor)," "going to church every Sunday for the past 50 years," "tithing," "raising up my children right despite great handicaps and at great sacrifice," etc. Our greatest difficulty lies in our inability to admit the fact that in Christ religious achievements or status mean nothing as a means of exchange for our salvation. What is so shocking is that these things are simply irrelevant to the question. What really counts is doing what God wants, motivated by trust and because we want to express to Him our love. (Gal. 5:6; 6:15; 1 Co. 7:19)

The murmuring of these workers does not, as such, prove that they represent someone who finally will be cast out of the vineyard, as if even disciples could never murmur against the decisions of God they find unpleasant for themselves or judge to be wrong. The Apostles themselves had been tempted to talk this way. Rather, it is quite likely that Jesus' inclusion of the murmuring strictly warns every disciple of the injustice done by all pretenses against God's grace. He intends thereby to eliminate all sense of claim on our part. Even if some, at judgment, take the remonstrating attitude of these complainers, He is perfectly capable of giving them the salary they think

they earned without robbing anyone else or satisfying the grumblers' demands for extra rewards.

4. The Lord of the Vineyard answers: (20:13-15)

- a. "There is no injustice involved in paying you all you bargained for!" (20:13)

20:13 **But he answered and said to one of them** who perhaps had made himself spokesman for the others. **Friend** (*hetaîre*) is a general, kindly form of address to a person whose name is not known. (Arndt-Gingrich, 134), "comrade, buddy, associate" (Rocci, 776). Contrary to Lenski's opinion (citing Trench, *Matthew*, 776), *hetaîre*, in its only other appearances as an address in *Matthew*, is always a friendly correction expressed in a brotherly spirit (cf. 22:12; 26:50). As here, the speaker in all three cases has been offended by something in the conduct of the person so addressed. True, it introduces a remonstrance, but this does not make it a "word of evil omen," since the thing objected to in the other's conduct stands in striking contrast to the speaker's kindness toward the offender. It is truer to say: "We are friends, buddies, companions—and you conduct yourself this way with me?!" Its use in these texts draws special attention to an undeniable friendship that should have rendered impossible the unbrotherly conduct to which objection is made.

**I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a shilling?** These men had demanded justice both when they made their contract and now when they demand equitable payment on the basis of merit relative to those who actually earned so little but were paid a handsome bonus. They wanted justice, so they got nothing but justice. They just did not receive mercy. If they condemn grace shown to others, it cannot, in justice, be shown to them. (Cf. notes on 18:23-35) Theirs was a strictly mercenary, contractual relationship with the owner. They would have held him to the legal terms of their stipulation, had he tried to pay them less than the agreed sum. But when he correctly honors his contract with them, they inconsiderately grumble because he had not also been generous, since he gave them no bonus besides! If they stand to lose, they are legalists, but if they stand to gain, they want grace and generosity! Bruce (*Training*, 267) calls such hireling servants of God

Calculating and self-complacent . . . ever studious of their own interest, taking care even in their religion to make a sure bargain for themselves, and trust little to the free grace and unfettered generosity of the great Lord.

**I do thee no wrong** means that God violates none of our rights when He does good to our neighbor. He takes nothing from us when He graces others with distinctions we do not receive. There is no injustice done, except in our own unjustified self-esteem. Because grace gives what is not earned, it seems an injustice only to those who do not understand grace. But to condemn another's grace as unjust is to insult him who shows it and is the quickest way to lose the mercy he would have shown the critic.

So saying, Jesus deals a deathblow to the whole Judaistic scheme of merit and reward and any other systems like it. Every specific agreement will be correctly honored, but everyone will receive payment appropriate to the kind of faith shown in the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord. The lesson is that **WAGES**, measured on a strict ratio between labor and payment, are an unsatisfactory basis upon which to expect God's blessing, whereas **REWARDS**, contrary to earthly criteria but based on the goodness of the Master and calculated according to one's awareness of unworthiness and lack of claim upon Him, are most satisfying of all. This is one of the striking paradoxes of Christianity: the man who works for rewards never receives them, but he who works for the joy of service with no thought of reward, is always rewarded by God.

b. "I can do what I want to with my possessions.  
What business is that of yours?" (20:14, 15a)

**20:14 Take up that which is thine, and go thy way. That which is thine:** "You earned it, but only that: take it and leave." The denarius for this man was no reward; just the payment of a debt incurred. (Ro. 4:4) Those hired first got only what they bargained for; no more. Note the biting contrast between **that which is thine** and "what belongs to me" (20:15a). The landlord and the day laborer are both free to decide what they shall do about their own possessions. The latter had earned his denarius and so was free to take it home and spend it as HE desired. On what basis, then, could he legitimately deny that same right to the landlord? He had blundered in not

admitting the other's right to dispose of his own property as he chose.

**It is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee.** There is no compulsion, no wage-claim against the Lord which forces him to pay the late-comers a given amount. To those who were hired from 9:00 to 3:00, he had promised only "what is right," a commitment that left the payoff to his own discretion. The last hired had not even this much of a promise. Therefore, whatever he gave them above and beyond the calculated fraction of a day's wage would not be due wages, but a free gift of grace. (Ro. 4:4-6; 11:6) **It is my will** (*thέlo* = "I choose") establishes the sovereignty of God's choices without reference to human expectations and pretensions. (Cf. Ro. 9:18f; 11)

It is in this anti-legalistic standpoint that the non-Judaistic character of this Jewish Gospel is seen most clearly.

**Go thy way:** should we think of this order as the Lord's rejecting these complainers who, because of their bad spirit, should be excluded from the class of the saved? Plummer (*Matthew*, 274) works on the problem this way:

It has been objected that the murmurers are not punished for their murmuring; they receive only a gentle remonstrance, and get their pay just as the others do. But is a rebuke from Him nothing? And, although He inflicts no punishment, yet there is the punishment which they inflict upon themselves. They get the reward that was promised them; but they have lost the power of enjoying it. The discontented are never happy, and jealousy is one of the worst of torments. Heaven is no heaven to those who lack the heavenly temper; and these murmurers will have no pleasure in their reward, until they accept it with thankfulness. From this point of view the first and the last *may* be said to have changed places. Those who came first to the vineyard had the least joy, and those who came last had the most joy, in the reward given to all.

**20:15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?** There is a touch of irony in this question, because the grumblers are appealing to a law of merit as they urge that they should be paid more. The lord promptly answers their unjustified appeal to the law of his conscience by appealing to the law of property rights. Every denarius in his possession, except those which they had just earned and which he has now paid off in full according to the legal agreement, is his own. What legal right had they to dictate to him how he may or may not dispose of his possessions as he pleases. So, he

is just in justifying him who has faith in his (seemingly) arbitrary way of treating his workers. (Cf. Ro. 3:26)

c. "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (20:15b)

**Or is thine eye evil?** = "Are you jealous?" (See on 15:19.) However, Prov. 23:6-8; 28:22 and Dt. 15:9 suggest that "evil eye" includes "greediness, covetousness and calculating selfishness." See these texts in versions where the idiom "evil eye" is retained in the translation. **Because I am good**, generous or liberal. Have these complainers any legal right or justifiable motive for their ingratitude that he should have been considerate and generous with their own fellow workers? The late-comer is as needy as any other worker. Is there no neighborliness in the early worker that would gladden his heart to see his hungry fellow's need for a day's work had been met as well as his own? In fact, the lord of the vineyard did not have to hire the complainers first. He could have hired others first. It was by grace that any of them were hired at all. So we see that everything depends on the merciful generosity of God from start to finish.

Surprisingly, even jealousy can be a motive that spurs one to change his mind and return to right thinking. (Study Ro. 10:19; 11:11, 14.) Jesus deliberately organized the payoff in this story to show the fallacy of the calculating self-righteous expectations of those who think they deserve more and better than others. But their jealousy stirs them to ask the questions that bring out the truth that men's blessing and joy in the Kingdom of God depends, not on their striving and worth, but on God.

Their jealousy exposes their lack of sensitivity to the community: they are unwilling to rejoice that the Lord bestowed such gracious benefits on undeserving men at all. They were unwilling to see that the landlord's graciousness took care of definite needs of members of their own community: their own neighbors, the worried wives and hungry children of these workers had now been cared for. They were criticizing the right-minded, sovereign judgment of the one in position to help their community's needs. This is real shortsightedness.

B. GENERAL PRINCIPLE TAUGHT: Human expectations are likely to be overturned by God's free, generous decision. (20:16)

20:16 **So the last shall be first, and the first last.** What at first appears to be a harmless little tag line on a nice story is really a multiple warhead nuclear missile which, though launched once, may be directed to strike many targets!

1. In the Kingdom of God, God is first, not last. He who has been left out of consideration in all human effort to be good enough to earn enough to put Him in debt, is actually the most important consideration. It is HE who makes the **last first and the first last**. God's sovereign right over His possessions guarantees Him the right to distribute His goods as He chooses. This will have pointed significance when the Lord must correct the wrong-headed ambitions of James and John who try to put themselves first and thrust all others into last place in their thinking. He must warn them all again to put themselves last, because it is God who assigns the first places: it is HE who is the owner of the vineyard. (20:23, 26f) Everything depends upon His wisdom and grace.
2. Similarly Jesus Himself, who would be despised and rejected by men, would come from *last* place in human estimations of His person and program, to be *first* and greatest of all, seated on the throne of His glory to judge all mankind. The greatest Servant shall be the Master and Ruler of all, a theme more fully developed in 20:26-28. It is His word and example of self-giving service that is the standard by which relative rewards of the Kingdom are to be dispensed. Our *first*-ness or *last*-ness depends upon our bowing to Jesus' rule by our sincere assenting to His judgment of our unfitness, by our readiness to take every opportunity to serve others as only our loving duty to Him, and by our leaving every decision about rewards to His discretion.
3. This is the conclusion to Peter's question, "We have left everything and followed you: what shall we have?" Coming in the general context of the rich young ruler's desire to earn eternal life by doing one supremely meritorious deed (19:16, 27), Jesus' warning admonishes the disciples against the kind of spirit that would hold God to exact wage contracts based on "so much wage for so much work," so much righteousness, qualification, worthiness, seniority, etc., in exchange for so much glory. The Apostles would be assigned positions of importance and responsibility in

the Kingdom (19:28), true enough, but such rewarding would have little to do with special personal merits, since others, less blessed with the opportunities enjoyed by the Twelve, would be recipients of God's goodness too. (19:29) The Twelve's judging Israel would not hinder the saints from judging the world and angels. (1 Co. 6:2f) Being first to possess the keys of the Kingdom and open its doors to Jew and Gentile, does not put Peter on a seniority list for preferential treatment ahead of all the other Apostles and common disciples who, too, will proclaim the Gospel to Jew and Gentile alike! (See on 16:18f; 18:18f; 28:18f.) This is the kind of thinking that gives meaning to the priority of publicans and prostitutes ahead of "the pure and perfect." (Mt. 21:31f; Lk. 7:29f) Other parables taught this same truth. (Cf. Lk. 14:21-24; Mt. 21:33—22:14) No one seemed more "last" than Zacchaeus, and yet our Lord gave him the same promise He held out for everyone. (Lk. 19:1-10) This public thief, the chief tax collector, made a thief's restitution (cf. Ex. 22:1; Lk. 19:8) and turned 50% of his holdings into instant cash for the underprivileged, and this lost man was found, and he who was denied access to synagogues was proclaimed a "son of Abraham!"

4. Since Jesus has every intention of calling Gentiles into the Kingdom and blessing them on exactly the same terms as the Jews, even though there is not one word of this in this parable, He has laid down a principle here that must necessarily undermine any Jewish jealousy of their prior rights or prestigious position. (Ac. 13:46; Ro. 1:16; 2:9-11; cf. Lk. 13:22-30; Mt. 8:10-12) Greatness or importance in the Kingdom is just not based on the undisputed seniority of one's Jewishness, but upon anyone's accepting the call of God, submission to God, humble service to others, gratitude for anything received and his usefulness in helping others. (20:26-28; 18:1-20; Ro. 2; 3:9; 10:12; Gal. 3:28; 5:6; 6:15; Col. 3:11; Ac. 10:34-36; 1 Co. 7:19)
5. Here is promise for you and me: although we just came on the scene, looking for work in Christ's Kingdom, we need not despair of His gracious blessing for us too, merely because we are late to arrive in the King's vineyard.

If it be surprising that Jesus should be describing a situation likely to occur often among hard-working, self-denying people who make great sacrifices for God and His Kingdom, consider Bruce's explanation (*Training*, 268ff): the vice of self-righteousness is a live possibility.

1. when the self-denying spirit is not really a habitual way of thinking and acting, but rather a sporadic manifestation interspersed with longer periods of self-indulgence that needs to be justified by reminders of the merit of the past sacrifices.
2. when any given kind of ministry in the Kingdom comes to be highly honored because of its being in great demand, and so an opportunity for spectacular self-abnegation.
3. when self-sacrificing is organized into a sterile ritual and observed ascetically for the sake of the glory that accrues to the disciple rather than to the Lord.

To Bruce's analysis we might add

4. and, in the case of the Apostles, when their own seniority in the faith come to be regarded by them as particularly meritorious, deserving preferential treatment because of their sacrifices.

The point of Jesus' teaching, then, if expressed as an order, would be: "Do not serve in the Kingdom as mercenaries presumptuously calculating the earnings you think you merit on the basis of your own minor accomplishments. Otherwise, in your self-esteem, you will find yourselves dealt with according to the same cold, legalistic treatment due those who insist on contracts with God and work only after receiving specific guarantees. Serve, rather, saying, 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty' (Lk. 17:10), trusting in the grace of your Lord, thinking of Him as One with whom you need no carefully stipulated contracts to protect yourselves. This way, although you consider yourselves unworthy to be treated as anything but one of the hired servants (Lk. 15:19), you will find yourselves warmly welcomed as sons of the Lord."

It misses the point to think that, in the distribution of rewards, there will be no distinction made between the first and last, because, although the laborers all received the same monetary pay in the story, nevertheless, in proportion to the work done and their attitude shown, they were not at all treated equally. In fact, the trusting, generous late-comers were treated far better than the calculating grumblers. The Lord's grace and generosity will be shown to His servants in every age who give Him all they have without precise contracts to protect themselves. God will always keep His word, but, for those who trust Him, He enjoys doing better than He promised.

Are the *last* in or out of God's Kingdom? Since the point of view of this parable is not merely the Church, but God's rule over men

in general, there is no time at which these workers leave the Kingdom or control of the King once they have begun to work for Him. Thus, even if the grumbling legalists who insult God's grace end up in hell, they are still within God's domain and under His rule, although terribly lost and finally lost. The fact that Jesus did not define the denarius specifically in His story leaves us to understand Him to mean that the denarius is what anyone is to receive from God, our pay.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What contextual signposts point to the proper interpretation of this illustration?
2. State what Jesus considers the main point of His story.
3. What local customs of Jesus' day must be known to appreciate the householder's hiring and pay practices? What is meant by "early in the morning," "the third hour," "the sixth, ninth and eleventh" hours? How much is a denarius worth in our money? Who in our society gets the equivalent of a denarius a day?
4. What is the ground of the complaint of the grumbler? What motivates them to complain?
5. What are the kind, cheerful answers of the householder to the complainers?
6. What texts in Matthew 18 find practical application in this section?

### Section 51

## JESUS PREDICTS HIS SUFFERING A FOURTH TIME (Parallels: Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34)

TEXT: 20:17-19

17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples apart, and on the way he said unto them, 18 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests and scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, 19 and shall deliver him unto the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify: and the third day he shall be raised up.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you think Jesus took the Twelve to one side here?
- b. From what or whom would He be taking them aside?
- c. What effect do you suppose might ensue if Jesus made this declaration without this step?
- d. Why do you suppose Jesus provides so many explicit details while describing His suffering?
- e. How does this prediction prove that Jesus knew that He would be killed by the Romans, and not directly by the Jews themselves?
- f. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

When Jesus was on the point of going up to Jerusalem, while they were on the road, He was walking ahead of the disciples, and they were filled with misgivings, and those who were following were alarmed.

Then, taking the Twelve aside once more, He began to speak to them about what was about to happen to Him. He said, "Notice, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all the predictions that the prophets wrote about the Messiah will come true. The Messiah will be delivered to the high clergy and the theologians who will sentence Him to death. In fact, He will be handed over to the pagan Gentiles who will ridicule Him, insult Him and spit on Him. They will lash Him with whips and finally execute Him by crucifixion. But on the third day, He will be raised from the dead."

But they did not comprehend a word of it. His meaning was unintelligible to them, and they continued to fail to understand what He was saying.

### SUMMARY

During Jesus' last journey to the capital, His fearless way of going before His men filled them with apprehension about what might happen in Jerusalem. Once more Jesus gathered them around Him to announce that this is the prophetic journey of which He had so often spoken. However, this time He furnished even more detail, but the disciples listened uncomprehendingly.

## NOTES

I. FOURTH PASSION PREDICTION  
(20:17-19; Mk. 10:32-34; Lk. 18:31-34)

## A. SITUATION: Jesus and disciples on last trip to Jerusalem

20:17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. The expression *méllon anabánein* means "He was about to go up," however it does not settle whether it is to be taken geographically or metaphorically:

1. Metaphorically, it could mean He was about to journey to the highest point in Jewish thinking, i.e. to Jerusalem and the temple. However, taken with the expression *on the way* (*en tē hodō*), which Mark connects with "they were going up," it would seem less likely that Matthew intends it metaphorically here.
2. Geographically, *he was about to go up*, means that He had not yet arrived at Jericho where the final climb begins from -300 m (-1000 ft.) below sea level to 814 m (2600 ft.) above sea level. In this case, He would not have crossed the Jordan yet, so Matthew would mean that He was still in Perea. (See on 19:1.) This does not contradict Mark's assertion, "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem," if we understand Mark to mean the journey to the highest point in Jewish thinking, but not necessarily on the final uphill climb from Jericho to Jerusalem.

Whereas the rich young ruler just barely caught Jesus as He was setting out on the journey and evoked the teaching relative to the perils of wealth (19:16—20:16), Jesus and His group are now finally on their way to Jerusalem. (Mk. 10:32) Mark also signals the peculiar boldness and decisiveness with which Jesus stepped out, a fact that unnerved the Apostles. This tense atmosphere and foreboding of approaching tragedy would be left unexplained, if we did not have John's account. In fact, he records the Apostles' earlier objections to the Lord's return to Judea to be at the bedside of Lazarus: "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" (Jn. 11:7, 8) And when they saw Him determined to go anyway, it was Thomas who courageously rallied the others with his exhortation, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him!" (Jn. 11:16) They referred to the violent opposition back in December. (Cf. Jn. 10:22-39) It was then that He had moved His center of operations across the Jordan to avoid precipitating the crisis before

the last Passover. After a lightning trip to Bethany for the raising of Lazarus (Jn. 11:1-44), He faded away back into the hills again, moving in the direction of the wilderness north-north-east of Jerusalem to a hamlet called Ephraim, where He holed up with His disciples. (Jn. 11:54) From there He kept on the move toward the north, then turning east along the border between Samaria and Galilee (Lk. 11:11), until He could mingle with the Jerusalem-bound Passover crowds. (Mt. 19:2; cf. Jn. 11:55-57) It was probably this gnawing uncertainty, this constant running from opposition that broke the Apostles' courage. Now "they were amazed," because the running is suddenly over: Jesus was walking boldly ahead of them, obviously on His way to the very death-trap they had been so studiously avoiding by their recent withdrawals! So it was this realization that He is no longer running from death, but deliberately walking toward it, that seemed suicidal to them. No wonder that "those who followed were afraid." (Mk. 10:32) But the Son of God moved on ahead of His people, His mind engrossed in thought about the great work He must accomplish in the capital; and, determined to complete His mission, He pressed forward to get it started.

Considering these circumstances, it may be that Jesus noticed the Twelve hanging back, whispering among themselves, and perceived their misgivings. At this point **He took the twelve disciples apart** from the crowds of Passover-bound travellers, so that the following communication could be given in private. This detail suggests that He had every intention of entering Jerusalem as a Messianic King (Mt. 21). Since any untimely dampening of the popular enthusiasm which figured in that scenario would be out of place, this Passion Prediction required privacy. This circumspection is one of His last efforts at Messianic reserve. (See on 8:4; 9:26, 30, 31; 12:15; 14:13 introductory notes and 14:22.) He is travelling in the company of hundreds of Galilean friends and sympathizers who, were they to learn this brutal truth, might well have been incited to riot by it, bringing only more bloodshed just to resist His arrest, and so hinder the plan of God. The two expressions *apart* and *on the way* depict the deliberateness of the Lord: although He speaks privately to the Twelve, they are already moving toward His destiny.

In the self-sacrificing predicted for Jesus in His prophecy, note how totally absent is the spirit that always calculates its own advantages: "What is there going to be in it for me?" This uncalculating altruism must condemn the ambition of the Apostles who not only ask, "We have sacrificed everything—what shall we have?", but

also demand to be exalted to the positions of highest honors. (Contrast Mt. 18:1-35; 20:20-28)

### B. JESUS' REACTION: Passion Prediction (20:18, 19)

20:18 **Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.** There it is: the official admission that this is the last trip. The running is over and this is to be the showdown. Luke (18:31) records the comforting word which proves that, however painfully unclear and unwelcome for the disciples Jesus' destiny might be, it was all planned by God: "Everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished." Note the power of prophecy to stabilize the wavering disciples:

1. He pointed them to their Bible to restudy the ancient messages of God's prophets concerning His Messianic mission. (Cf. His method with John the Baptist, Mt. 11:4f) This cannot but lend sound, Biblical perspective to the seemingly tragic fatality to be confronted in His suffering and death. (Remember Ro. 15:3, 4 for our encouragement too!)
2. He prophesied in detail what must, when fulfilled, become the strongest confirmation of His total mastery over circumstances. He knew what He Himself faced and conquered it by His glorious resurrection. He can empower us to do the same too. (Cf. Eph. 1:19f; 2:5f; 3:20f)

Note the precision even more evident in this prediction: 1. Betrayal; 2. Condemnation; 3. Delivery to the Gentiles; 4. Ridicule; 5. Torture; 6. Crucifixion; 7. Victory by resurrection. These words mark an escalation in the details of His prophecies concerning the end of His suffering. (Cf. notes on Mt. 16:21; 17:9, 22f; Lk. 24:6b, 7 may represent a rewording of the prophecies made in Galilee, made by Luke in the light of the fulfilment, rather than an actual quotation of a crucifixion prophecy prior to the one in our text.) From the standpoint of His disciples, the gradual escalation of information is an act of mercy that bares the gruesome details gradually to minds unable to bear the entire blow at once. (Cf. Jn. 16:12) But they must endure at least this much pain, not for the sake of the suffering it caused them now, but, having been forewarned before the fact, they might have the greatest confidence in Him after the fulfilment. (Jn. 14:29; 16:4) For them, this was fundamentally a

faith-building exercise.

However, the very precision of these details must have been a crushing load for Jesus to bear, since, although He is furnished with the infallibility of prophetic foresight, He is also forced thereby to anticipate mentally all that to which He must then voluntarily submit Himself. (Cf. notes on 8:10) No escapist, our Lord faced His own future squarely and courageously, and continued His march to Jerusalem and His forthcoming destiny. **The third day he shall be raised up.** The Lord never omitted this promise of victory, and every time He repeated it in connection with a Passion Prediction, He expressed His unshakeable confidence in the faithfulness of God who would bring it about. Further, by His own decisive example, He taught His people to deal responsibly with life's vital issues, facing with unflinching courage the questions, the problems and the forces of evil. Although He may certainly have been tempted to seek an easy comfort in anonymity and a tight-lipped indifference to the ever-present issues crying for solution, although He may have intensely desired that the world's sins could be eliminated in some other way, although He may have hated to choose His own death as the only workable alternative, Jesus Christ confronted His responsibility and accepted it. Overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God, He faced facts which would have crippled the vitality of anyone who did not trust the Father to keep His word.

As in the previous cases (Mt. 17:23b; Mk. 9:32; Lk. 9:45), so also now, "they understood none of these things; this saying was hid from them, and they did not grasp what was said." (Lk. 18:34) Their inability to comprehend Jesus is providential for us, since it proves that the hypothesis that they expected Him to rise again and therefore believed in His resurrection without concrete proof of its reality, ignores the evidence. (See notes on 17:23 = Mk. 9:32 = Lk. 9:45.) Thus, their mental block guarantees to the Church the gloriously solid truth of the resurrection facts.

Even if Matthew and Mark did not record the disciples' obtuseness and unwillingness to grasp this clearest of literal statements, they prove that this was really the Twelve's reaction, by their inclusion of the request for positions of glory made by James and John, as well as the angry jealousy of the other Apostles. This shows that they all, enamored with visions of future glories, refused to confront the reality Jesus pictured in this prophecy.

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What additional details does Mark furnish to fill out the picture of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem?
2. In what peculiar manner did Jesus handle the disciples, preparing them to hear this prediction of His approaching suffering? Why would this particular treatment have been necessary at that moment?
3. What, in Jesus' words, is indicated about the time-period in which He was then speaking?
4. What are the details of His suffering that Jesus makes explicit now, details which before had been absent or only implied?
5. Show how Jesus' predictions harmonize with the Old Testament prophecies about His death, and how they differ. Cite some OT prophecies that predict His suffering.
6. What does the minuteness and accuracy of His predictions prove about His claims to be God's Son?
7. While Matthew and Mark do not report the disciples' inability to accept or understand Jesus' plain prediction, as does Luke, how do they prove that they do know about the disciples' failure to grasp it?
8. What texts in Matthew 18 find practical application in this section?

## Section 52

JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH HIERARCHY  
(Parallel: Mark 10:35-45)

TEXT: 20:20-28

20 Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zebedee with her sons, worshipping *him*, and asking a certain thing of him. 21 And he said unto her, What wouldest thou? She saith unto him, Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom. 22 But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? They say unto him, We are able. 23 He saith unto them, My cup indeed ye shall drink: but to sit on my right hand, and on *my* left hand, is not mine to give; but *it is for them* for whom

it hath been prepared of my Father. 24 And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren. 25 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; 27 and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: 28 even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose James and John, two of Jesus' closest intimates, would stoop to make this request so obviously selfish in its exclusion of others?
- b. Why did they use their mother to promote their own purposes? Or do you believe that she herself pushed the question and the two brothers merely went along with it?
- c. Why would they make this request rather than some other request?
- d. On what basis do you suppose they replied so confidently: "We are able to drink your cup and be baptized with your baptism"?
- e. Why could Jesus not grant their request? For whom are such honors destined? That is, to whom do you think God has already prepared the chief places?
- f. How does the indignation of the remaining ten Apostles prove that they shared the very same spirit and understanding of the two brothers against which they were indignant?
- g. Why did Jesus select the standard of humble service as the measure by which He judges greatness in the Kingdom?
- h. How does Jesus' teaching in this section address itself to the problem of hierarchy or power structures in the Kingdom of God?
- i. Why mention His own death at precisely this time, right in the middle of His rebuke of the Apostles' greedy ambitions?
- j. Why would Jesus have to die? How does His suffering for others prove His point about true greatness?
- k. How is humble service and suffering for others the only path to true greatness and real power over others?
- l. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

**PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY**

At that time the mother of James and John, Zebedee's sons, approached Jesus, with her sons. Bowing low before Him, she requested a favor of Him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we request."

But He responded, "What do you wish me to do for you?"

She answered, "Promise to grant that, when you sit in state as King, these two sons of mine may sit with you, one at your right, the other at your left."

But Jesus answered them, "You do not realize what you are asking for! Can you drink from the cup of sorrow that I am about to drink or pass through the waters of suffering I am passing through?"

"We can," they answered.

Then Jesus observed prophetically, "You shall indeed share the cup from which I must drink and you will truly be immersed in suffering as will I. But the seating arrangements according to relative positions of honor is not something I can decide capriciously on my own. I must dispense them only to those for whom my Father has planned such honors."

The request aroused the indignation of the other ten disciples against the two brothers, James and John. So Jesus gathered them all around Him and began, "You all know that the people who are considered rulers over the pagans dominate them with despotic harshness, and their superiors make them feel the weight of their authority. However, it must be different among you. If one of you wants to be great, he must be servant of all the others. If someone wants to be at the top in first position, he must be everyone's slave, just like the Son of man is. In fact, He is not here to be served by others, but to serve everyone else, and to surrender His life as the price of freedom for many."

**SUMMARY**

James and John, in complicity with their mother, requested the highest posts of honor in the Kingdom, Jesus disapproved the request for its ignorance of the real issues, the suffering involved, but tested the two whether they could qualify. Although they responded with optimism and confidence, He prophesied their share in His sufferings. However, He must deny any right to dispense honors to favorites,

since the rule of God decided those to whom such would eventually and rightly go.

The other ten Apostles became angry at the conniving of James and John, making it necessary for Jesus to bring this problem to a head and solve it. This He did by forever damning political power structures as a means of ego-feeding in the Kingdom of God. Greatness and importance to God in the Kingdom is determined exclusively on the basis of unselfish, self-giving service to others. Jesus' own example—even to the point of laying down His life for others—is the standard.

#### NOTES

#### II. THE DISCIPLES AND THE QUESTION OF POWER STRUCTURES IN THE KINGDOM: JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH A HIERARCHY OF POWER (20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-45)

##### A. JESUS' AUNT SALOME AMBITIOUSLY SEEKS ARBITRARY FAVORITISM FOR HER SONS

20:20 **Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zebedee.** An alternate newspaper headline for this title story might have been: "JESUS REFUSES TO INDULGE IN NEPOTISM." Zebedee's wife might be Jesus' own Aunt Salome. (See notes on 10:2; 13:54, 58; 27:56 and the special study: "The Brethren of the Lord" after 13:54-58, esp. Chart 5) If so, her position as kinswoman would have weight that her sons were probably counting on. In this case, her sons, James and John, would naturally be His cousins. (Mk. 10:35)

The unusual expression, *the mother of the sons of Zebedee* (here and in 27:56), instead of "the mother of James and John" or "the wife of Zebedee," has led to the hypothesis that, shortly after the call of his two sons (Mt. 4:21f), the father, Zebedee, died. Is it possible that James or John was the disciple who sought permission to go bury his father? (Mt. 8:21) This will never be known. However, Mark (10:35) describes the brothers as "sons of Zebedee." Does this contradict the foregoing theories, or merely identify the two men by their well-known patronymic, whereas their father is not thereby proven to be dead or alive?

(Cf. Mt. 4:21; 10:2; 26:37; Mk. 1:19; 3:17; Lk. 5:10; Jn. 21:2)

How should we harmonize Matthew's assertion that *the mother* approached Jesus with this request, with Mark's notice that the sons themselves asked the question? By the principle that what a man commissions another to do for him may be said to have been done by himself. In fact, the entire account proceeds as if only the sons had made the request (cf. 20:24), since everyone—Jesus and the other Ten—holds the two brothers as personally responsible for their unwarranted social climbing. In fact, once her request is stated, Jesus dealt directly with the sons themselves as if she were not even present.

**Asking a certain thing of him** sounds like a blank check request, and Mark confirms this suspicion by furnishing their actual words: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Were they hoping to play upon His sympathy and good will, pushing Him into an unretractable blanket promise in their favor? At any rate, their deviousness is betrayed by their embarrassment about asking Him outright and by their felt need to use an intermediary to request what, if asked frankly and openly, their conscience knew they had no right to, and could not but arouse the jealousy of others. (Cf. 1 Kg. 2:19f)

Whether she is Jesus' aunt or not, she is certainly not unaware that her own sons are at the very heart of the larger nucleus of intimate disciples most likely to be appointed to positions of importance. It is not unlikely that the two brothers let their mother's ambitions take the risks of censure by others. Had she learned about the underground power struggle going on among the Apostles? (Cf. on Mt. 18:1) Rather than repudiate it, she joined it to press for an advantage for her boys! And they stand complacently by, making no protest, perhaps even pleased to have her advance their interests.

20:21 **And he said unto her, What wouldest thou?** He is not deceived either by His own love for them or by their fawning for His favors. He correctly requires that they commit themselves before He will commit Himself to sign any blank checks. Had Herod Antipas done this with His Salome, his outcome might have been different. (See notes on 14:7ff.)

**Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom.** Although these two disciples had been told of the absolutely essential humility required for honor in the Kingdom (18:1-35), nevertheless, Jesus had indeed

intimated that the Twelve would be honored over the rest of the twelve tribes of Israel by their being seated on thrones to judge them. (19:28) Consequently, James and John perhaps envisioned a throne-room with Jesus enthroned at the center of the back wall, with the Twelve seated on lesser thrones, half on His right, half on His left, arranged in a semicircle around the room. If so, those enthroned closer to Him would be presumed as worthy of greater honor than those seated farther to the left or right. (Cf. *Ant.*, VI, II, 9; 1 Sa, 20:25; 1 Kg. 2:19; Psa. 110:1) Those seated on His immediate left or right would be most honored as greatest. If this is their idea, their sin lies in boldly and stubbornly requesting the best of the seats for themselves alone, a request that necessarily excluded any consideration of the other, perhaps equally worthy, Apostles. Were they using this method to cut out Peter? Because of what Jesus had already committed to him, he would be a formidable rival. If James and John foresaw the indignant reaction of the others and yet plowed ahead, their heartless selfishness is the more inexcusable. The extent to which they did not foresee it only measures how much they were totally absorbed in their own self-centered planning. Bruce (*Training*, 274) eases our shock at the conduct of these intimate friends of the Lord, by noticing that

These were the two disciples who made themselves so prominent in resenting the rudeness of the Samaritan villagers. The greatest zealots among the twelve were thus also the most ambitious, a circumstance that will not surprise the student of human nature. On the former occasion they asked fire from heaven to consume their adversaries; on the present occasion they ask a favour from Heaven to the disadvantage of their friends. The two requests are not so very dissimilar.

They are asking to be the Messiah's most exalted, most influential counsellors.

The terrible incongruity between His predictions of death at Jerusalem (20:17-19) and this expectation of glory, both of which were known to James and John, is explicable only if we see the intensity of their unwavering confidence that the outcome of His suffering ("whatever THAT is supposed to mean!") must include a glorious Kingdom. Undoubtedly they judged His passion predictions as mere, unjustified pessimism, the result of fatigue and pressure of endless campaigning. Consequently, they express their confidence in His final victory by seeking those positions which could only come about

because of that triumph. Is this an attempt to cheer Him up and push His gloomy talk of crosses into the background? This, sadly, measures how fervently they disbelieved His prophetic passion predictions. So, *in thy kingdom* means "in your glory." (Mk. 10:37) Whatever else may be criticized about their request, it must be conceded that the plea is based on the unshaken certainty (= faith) that, despite the many stormclouds on the horizon, He and the Twelve would be enthroned in His Kingdom. (19:28) Further, the urgency that stirs her to present her request now on the way up to Jerusalem, points to her assumption (not unshared by many others, see Lk. 19:11) that, upon arrival in the capital, Jesus intended to establish His glorious government and announce His cabinet and begin His reign.

The perverse incongruity of this scheming for power by these crude Christians, so utterly contrasting with Jesus' approaching sufferings about which He had just spoken (20:17-19), rather than confirm the judgment that it is apocryphal because of our shock at the audaciousness these disciples show, should convince us of the authenticity of the narrative that contains it. Not only do the Evangelists bare the disciples' sordid presumption, but, in that act, convince the reader of the genuineness of its history. We are not in the presence of mythology created to glorify Christians heroes, but in the presence of an ugly fact too true to human nature to be denied. These disciples were yet rough-hewn Christians to whom the temptation to ambition was real.

### B. JESUS PARRIES THEIR REQUEST (20:22, 23)

#### 1. REBUKE: "You do not understand what you are asking for!" (20:22)

**20:22 But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask.** Their expectation that He would proclaim His Kingdom upon their arrival at Jerusalem, was a popular notion (cf. Lk. 19:11; 17:21; 9:27), not totally unfounded. What was completely misunderstood was the manner and kind of reign He intended to establish. James and John ask for these positions of honor from a King who would shortly be exalted to a cross with two thieves nailed at His right hand and at His left! **You know not what you ask.** Their wrong-headed, selfish prayer is instructive because it illustrates the principle that

prayer, to be effective, must reflect one's sense of community as well as submission to God's will. James and John's prayer must be frustrated by the Lord, if the wishes of the other ten should be recognized, and vice versa. (See note on 18:19.) Further, it totally ignored God's planning for the Kingdom. (See on 20:23c.) Theirs was an appeal He could not admit without denying His own sense of fairness and being untrue to His instructions given in the Sermon on Personal Relations. (18:1-35) Worse, the two brothers are vain in their certainty that the promotion they seek could only promote the true interests of the Kingdom of God. They anticipate no negative effects from this request, either from the other Apostles, or even later. They cannot foresee that disaster could be forecast for a Kingdom that honors men of their views. Listen again to Bruce (*Training*, 275f) sketch their position:

James and John not only thought of the kingdom that was coming as a kingdom of this world, but they thought meanly of it even under that view. For it is an unusually corrupt and unwholesome condition of matters, even in a secular state, when places of highest distinction can be obtained by solicitation and favour, and not on the sole ground of fitness for the duties of the position. When family influence or courtly arts are the pathway to power, every patriot has cause to mourn. How preposterous, then, the idea that promotion can take place in the divine, ideally-perfect kingdom by means that are inadmissible in any well-regulated secular kingdom! To cherish such an idea is in effect to degrade and dishonour the Divine King, by likening Him to an unprincipled despot, who has more favour for flatterers than for honest men; and to caricature the divine kingdom by assimilating it to the most misgoverned states on earth.

Indeed, they did NOT know what they were asking!

## 2. QUESTION: "Are you able to suffer with me?"

**Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?** Because they steadily refused to see Him as a suffering King, they cannot see that a prayer for glory beside Him must be a request for suffering. They should have imagined that, on the principle that anything worthwhile requires renunciation, greatness in the Kingdom would demand sacrifice too. But they cannot imagine that only the way

of the cross leads to the throne. In other words, the path to promotion in the Kingdom does not take the route of self-indulgent clamor for position nor that of political prizes handed out to favorites. It must pass through the bloody baptism of suffering. To *drink a cup* is to experience its contents, whether good or bad. Biblical allusions are plentiful to illustrate positive experiences (cf. Psa. 16:5; 23:5; 116:13) and negative ones (Psa. 11:6; 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15f; 49:12; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:32-34; Hab. 2:16; Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 17:4; 18:6) From the point of view of the host who pours it out for others, *the cup* would mean "the portion assigned," i.e. what God pours out for the individual. (cf. Jn. 18:11) So Jesus, later would speak of His cup of suffering (Mt. 26:39, 41 = Mk. 14:36 = Lk. 22:42). Mark (10:38b) adds: "and to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Since *baptism* is nothing but an immersion, that to which He alludes here is an overwhelming suffering in which one is immersed. (Cf. Psa. 69:1f; 124:3-5; Lam. 3:54) In the case of James and John, He refers to the painful experience of martyrdom and exile in His cause. Suffering for His sake is a theme underlined many times before. (5:10-12; 10:16-39; 13:21; 16:24-27) It would become one of the main themes in Peter's first epistle. (1 Pt. 1:6f; 2:20-25; 3:13-18; 4:12-19; 5:9f) His own Passion Predictions had been so many, so precise and recently so frequent, that His suffering, theoretically, should have been no mystery to any of them. They could not have been ignorant to what *cup* or to what *baptism* He so often, so honestly and so realistically had made allusion. (Cf. Lk. 12:50) They had come to Him with their request for a blanket promise of honor. Now He hands them His blank check of suffering, asking them if they are willing to sign it without knowing precisely what lay in their own future.

**They say unto him, We are able.** They still do not know what they are saying! These two men have a curious mental block that permits them to picture their own suffering for His cause, that yet contemporaneously and totally blocks out every concept of His death suffered for them, even though He talks about their suffering in figurative form and discussed His own in literal language!

**We are able.** With what mixed emotions do they answer this way? THEY are signing the blank check now. They had expected honors, wealth and glory, but He handed them a mysterious, sinister cup to drink. How much of their certainty partakes of the bravado of Peter who just as confidently asserted, "Though they all fall away, I will not deny you . . . I am ready to go with you to prison and

death . . . even if I must die with you, I will not deny you"? (Cf. Mt. 26:33; Lk. 22:33; Jn. 13:37; Mt. 26:35) Is this readiness to promise anything a brave front put on to cover an unexpected turn in the conversation, a stubborn continuation of their selfish request for positions of honor, as if His brutally frank question were but part of the necessary preliminaries? No, these fiercely loyal disciples cannot be charged with insincerity here. It is rather their over-confidence that believers themselves capable in their own strength of meeting anything that might come, that is blameworthy. If they envision His cup and baptism as suffering or difficulty in connection with some great battle or struggle surrounding the inauguration of the Kingdom, these fearless Galileans answer sincerely and perfectly in the character of their people. (Cf. *Wars*, III, 3, 3) It is unfair at least to John to claim that, in Jesus' last tragic hours of His rejection, all the disciples including these two were unfaithful to Jesus, deserting Him rather than share His cup of pain. The (traditionally) youngest of them proved to be the most intrepid. John, no doubt often dreadfully scared, courageously stayed on the scene through the trials and crucifixion. Their devotion expressed here is honestly meant even if wrongly understood.

This strange mixture of character traits in these two disciples is not intended as a passing curiosity, but rather for our instruction. The thoughtful reader must ask himself what it is, in this clashing combination of the Christlike and the diabolical, that makes the case of Zebedee's sons sound so familiar. Honesty compels us to confess the same zeal for the Lord and the same selfish ambition; the same high courage and the same cruel disregard for brethren; the same readiness to suffer and the same readiness to make others suffer; the same concern for the Lord's honor and the same disregard for the disaster that must come to the Lord's work if our own ambitions were to be realized. Only this kind of honest identification of ourselves in these disciples in this moment of weakness will help us feel the need for the teaching Jesus will give us to convert our thinking to His.

### 3. PROPHECY: "You will truly suffer with me."

20:23 **He saith unto them, My cup indeed ye shall drink:** "and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." (Mk. 10:39b) With what a grave manner He must have pronounced

these words as, in the Spirit, He peered into the future to pronounce their fate. Yes, their present commitment would be fully carried out. Rather than angrily expose their short-sightedness and self-seeking devotion by giving them an impatient scolding which they certainly deserved, He shared His cup with them. This is the fellowship of Christ's sufferings in which so many others would share. (Cf. Phil. 3:10; Ro. 8:17; 2 Co. 1:5-7; 4:10; 1 Co. 15:31; 2 Ti. 2:3, 11-13; 1 Pt. 4:13) In so saying, He generously gave them a word and a motive that would hold them steady in the years to come. The mere observation that John was not beheaded with James, his brother, by Herod Agrippa I in A.D. 44 (Ac. 12:2), but permitted to live to suffer imprisonment (Ac. 4:3; 5:18); and beating (5:40) and at last the persecution of exile on Patmos island at an extremely old age (Rev. 1:9), cannot be interpreted to mean that he did not also experience the suffering the Lord predicted for both dauntless brothers. True, the circumstances of their suffering differed, but their undying devotion to the Lord was identical.

It may be doubted that, at this point, the brothers would have considered beheading or exile to be such precious honors, had they known to what He referred, since it would have meant being stripped of earthly glory and freedom, and being hurled into the grave or miles and years distant from the center of the action. And yet, despite the blunt promise of suffering ahead for these men, it did not even occur to them to back down. They fully intended to maintain their loyal commitment to Him, cost what it might. Only later would they agree that to suffer for the name of Jesus is the source of true joy and privilege. (Mt. 5:10-12; Ac. 5:41; 16:25; 1 Pt. 4:13)

For us, sharing in Christ's suffering may mean the limited cruelty of martyrdom or the long-suffering of daily Christian living, living out a lifetime of self-giving service. This latter discipline, so constant and so full of struggle, is as fully to follow Christ as is the other. We must dedicate ourselves daily to be ready for either.

#### 4. REFUSAL: "God's rules decide places of honor."

**But to sit on my right hand, and on my left hand is not mine to give; but . . . for whom it hath been prepared of my Father.** What, if anything, should be inserted in the space represented by the dots in this elliptical phrase?

1. Does Jesus mean that the right to assign such honor is not in His own hands at all, but is the exclusive right of the Father? Arndt-Gingrich (37) believe that the phrase in question has been shortened from "it is not mine . . . but the Father, who will give to those for whom it is prepared by Him," as if the Greek phrase ran: *ouk emòn . . . allà tou patròs, hòs dósei hois hetoimastai hup'-autoù*. This invention of "missing" words, however, could misunderstand how Jesus will reward His followers. (Mt. 16:27; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:22-30; Ac. 10:42; 17:31; Ro. 2:16; 2 Ti. 4:1, 8; 1 Co. 4:4f; 2 Co. 5:10; Rev. 22:12; cf. Isa. 62:11)
2. Or does Jesus mean He can give the places of honor only to those for whom they were planned by God? If so, He is saying, "To sit . . . is not mine to grant except to those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." Evidence that "but" (*allà*) can mean "except" comes from Roccia (73) who, among other uses of *allà*, affirms that "in the sense of a restrictive adversative after a negative proposition . . . expression with *ou*, *oú tis*, *oudeis*, *tis*, etc., *allà* can be translated: except, unless, apart from, but." To state Jesus' proposition positively, we have: "I can grant such honors only to those for whom my Father has prepared them."

It really makes little difference, because the fact that Jesus limits His distribution of honors to follow the Father's ordaining means that God has already decided, even if Jesus Himself will make the actual distribution.

The meaning, then, is: "I cannot assign such honors on the basis of patronage and favoritism, or on any basis other than God's principles of perfect fairness." Not caprice, then, or personal preferences, but the eternal will and counsel of God is the standard upon which such judgments are made. Precedence and preference will proceed on this basis established by God, and Jesus has no intention of changing it by nepotism, favoritism or patronage. So Jesus does not, indeed cannot, deny that differences of rank in the Kingdom exist. (See on 18:4.) Rather, He specifies in whose hands rightly rests the judgment about their proper distribution. His principle of precedence is the Father's choice that only those who perform the greatest service for others shall be most highly awarded. This is no esoteric doctrine, but the common principle of loving service that He will repeat in 20:25-28 and which constituted the fundamental basis of the entire message on personal relations. (Mt. 18) So, the only predestination here is the Father's choice of what kind

of character would be judged worthy of honor. It is then up to men to take Him at His word and qualify for the honors by rendering the most useful service in Jesus' name. This is the same kind of predestination seen in our own salvation, i.e. God determined what class of people are going to be saved, and we determine to be in that class. (Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Pt. 1:2; 2 Pt. 1:3-11)

This means that, although man must commit himself in total devotion, everything depends upon God whose will determines the distribution of the honors. (Cf. 19:30—20:16) Thus, Jesus stresses His own faithfulness to God's will. God is in total control, hence no man can take this control out of His hands by putting God in debt to him on the basis of supposed worthiness or merits, good deeds or fleshly relationship to Jesus, or anything else. This theme of the total Lordship of God is an important, security-building concept intended to strengthen disciples tempted to throw everything overboard and return to Judaism or the world and make shipwreck of their souls. (See on 10:26-31; 40-42; 11:25-27; 17:5; 20:1-16; Cf. Heb. 10:26-39; 12:25-29; 13:10-16; 1 Ti. 1:18-20; 6:13-16; 2 Ti. 4:10)

So the right to preregister for chief places in the Kingdom is a claim made by human pride, hence unworthy of anyone who understands that his own position in the Kingdom is itself only possible because of the grace of the King and the essential humility of the servant.

### C. THE OTHER APOSTLES ARE JEALOUS OF JAMES AND JOHN (20:24; Mk. 10:41).

20:24 **And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren.** Is not this sulking, small-minded jealousy typical of us all? Their own self-pride moved them to resent the opportunistic pride of James and John who had merely taken unfair advantage to seize what they all coveted! The two brothers had only shown shrewd initiative in expressing the identical desire that motivated the ambition of every one of them! They all wanted to be at the top of the hierarchical pyramid, but James and John had outmaneuvered them. (See on 18:1.) And yet, little did the Ten dream that so far as earthly prizes were concerned, the honors that would fall to the sons of Zebedee would be James' honor of being the first apostolic martyr and John's distinction of having his suffering prolonged.

This unedifying spectacle of Jesus' band of disciples is surprisingly edifying just because of its being true to life. This is not the sort of fanciful saint-forging that a fiction writer would produce in those days. (Check out the apocryphal hack writing being published as "Gospels" in the first century!) Whereas the ancient pagans did depict the sordid lives of even the greatest heroes and their gods, they were not objectively employed in the service of a true living God whose stern standards of truth and righteousness had been drilled into His people for centuries. Such inappropriate pride and selfishness as we witness here must disqualify the disciples for sainthood in the eyes of the creators of fiction. Nevertheless, for the Gospel writers who tell it like it is, this spectacle traces a real situation that actually occurred in the lives of men who later developed into the spiritual giants we so highly respect now.

#### D. JESUS REPEATS HIS PRINCIPLE OF TRUE GREATNESS (20:25-28; Mk. 10:42-45)

1. "Worldly greatness consists in the power wielded over the most people."

20:25 **But Jesus called them unto him**, almost like a father would gather his quarrelling children around him to admonish them. He must stop this incipient fracture in His group at once. Yet His tone is the quiet solemnity of a Man who first controls His own emotions in order to cool the flames of others. Rather than enter into greater detail about the martyrdom and suffering of James and John about which they probably would have longed to know more, Jesus turns the conversation to what must inevitably involve the self-sacrifice of every other disciple. Rather than prophesy the gruesome details of every Apostle's future destiny, and so crush them with information they could not bear, Jesus repeated the concepts that would mature them to face something perhaps more difficult than heroic martyrdom: to face and conquer the daily humdrum of life. Learning to give one's life without reservation to Christ and others in the ordinary service of life is the only way to be mature enough to gain the honors in the Kingdom.

**Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.** Does He intend a parallelism here, or is He describing a hierarchical pyramid?

1. In form, Jesus' words have the sound of a typical Hebrew parallelism which in the second member repeats a concept stated in the first. This explanation has the advantage of finding itself in the company of another parallelism in vv. 26, 27, which begins with "Not so shall it be among you," and the shorter parallelism of v. 28 after "even as the Son of man came . . ." If so, He may intend to indicate nothing more than the picture of any governmental system where people issue orders and expect others to serve them.
2. Or does He mean to describe a hierarchical pyramid? If so, *the Gentiles* at the bottom are ruled by their *rulers* who are themselves subject to the authority of *their great ones*. By an interesting ambiguity involved in "their" and "them" (the third time), it is left unclear whether the tyranny of the subordinates is directed at their own subordinates or at their own superiors. In the first case, He is saying that the abusive treatment shown the people by their kings or emperors is bad enough, but tyrannizing by the royal representatives and time-serving bureaucrats is intolerably worse. In the second, if "them" refers to the *rulers*, then He means that kings and emperors may be masters over the people, but the ruler's lieutenants actually manage those on the throne as "the power behind the throne." In an absolutist oriental monarchy the first sort of despotism would be the case; in a more democratic type of government the latter would be the case. Either way, however, the people are always under the heel of their superiors who repress and oppress them wherever they can.

What is Jesus' fundamental emphasis: power struggle or power structure? Both, because the nouns picture the structure, while the verbs picture the struggle: **lord it over them** (*katakurieúo*, cf. Ac. 19:16: "to master"; 1 Pt. 5:3: "to domineer") and **exercise authority over them** (*katexousiázo*, used only here in NT and apparently unknown elsewhere.)

It is highly significant that Jesus contrasted His own messianic community with the civil government of pagan nations. Since this pyramid of power had been the basis of the disciples' thinking, by reflection He quietly exposed the disciples' spirit as pagan, unrepresentative of the theocratic ideal of Israel, and not at all in harmony with His own thinking. The characteristic most typical of those societies' rulers is that same spirit which motivated His own Apostles in their own power struggle: the lording it over their subordinates

and the exercising authority over them. Jesus is not merely attacking abuse of power, but the concept of power structures itself, even when the individual rulers themselves are relatively benign benefactors of their people. (Cf. Lk. 22:25) While He is perfectly open to civil government as such (Mt. 22:21; cf. Ro. 13:1-7; 1 Pt. 2:13-17), His messianic community is not to be structured along the lines of the secular state.

2. "Greatness in the Kingdom is measured by the number of people you are able to serve." (20:26, 27)

20:26 **Not so shall it be among you.** This is the Lord's final word on the question of hierarchy and power structures in the Church. If everything said earlier (Mt. 18:1-35) had seemed unclear and noncommittal on the question of ecclesiastical hierarchy—although in fact it was not—this sentence cannot be so interpreted. In fact, the servant's attitude is the very antithesis to the type of tyrannical structure typical of pagan rulers, a concept that stresses everything Jesus taught in that discourse on personal relations in the Kingdom. (For fuller notes see on Mt. 18.) If the Church is to be different from the struggle and structure of civil government, the Christian who is the moral opposite of those who tyrannize others, then, is a person who serves them. He follows a policy diametrically opposed to that so characteristic of the unbelieving world. In the Christian community, the duty of serving, paradoxically, falls to those who are its great ones. In fact, if they do not serve, they are simply not great ones! As Gonzàles-Ruiz (*Marco*, 187) said it:

Therefore any Church that is not the image of the State completely turned upside down does not correspond at all to the original plan of its Founder. This is why the worst sin of the Church is that of organizing itself along lines that reflect the image and likeness of the State, or of inserting itself into its structure to become an integral part of it.

Nothing could be clearer, or as little respected, as the Lord's intolerance toward the priestly despotism shown in all versions of Christendom, whether it be the Catholic (Latin or Greek) or Protestant systems, or whether it be the virtual dictatorships exercised over their constituencies by local preachers, editors, elders of churches of Christ who, despite their proclaimed aversion to hierarchical systems

and monarchical bishoprics as practiced by others, nonetheless crack the whip "to maintain the purity of the faith" (meaning: "keep things under my control").

**Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; 27 and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant.** (For fuller notes, see on 18:1 where comment is made on Mk. 9:35.) Are **minister** (*diákonos*, v. 26) and **servant** (*dóûlos*, v. 27) synonyms, or do they represent a descending scale at which the ministry and death of the Son of man is the very bottom? (v. 28) If this latter is the case, then, according to Jesus, the lower we go on the scale of human values, the higher we rise in God's judgment!

Whereas the **minister** (*diákonos*) might be thought of as a "servant" free or slave, the **slave** (*dóûlos*, from *déo*, "to bind" and *holos*, "wholly") would have been considered as anyone bound to his owner to serve in whatever capacity he could. His lot was as varied as his masters, from the very best to the unspeakably bad, with all shades and grades in between. It is not clear whether the Lord intended these words in their denotative or connotative sense, i.e. the legal and social status of these persons or their resultant attitude and character.

1. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 749, note 713) balks at translating these two words "servant" and "slave," because of the connotative ideas of "lack of freedom, unwilling service, cruel treatment, etc." so closely attached especially to the word "slave." He opts for "servant" for *diákonos* and "humble attendant" for *dóûlos*.
2. However, as Bartchy (*First-Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians 7:21*, 37-120) has shown we are the ones who must revise their concept of "slavery" in the Greco-Roman world of the centuries preceding and immediately following the Christian revelations.

In addition to what has already been written on 18:1-35, we must ask what would the first century Christians have understood Jesus to mean by urging that the only proper attitude in His Kingdom was to identify themselves with the position and character of a *diákonos* or a *dóûlos*? To appreciate the position of slaves and freedmen (who were little better than slaves and often crippled by contracts yet to fulfil toward their former master), one must have a clear picture of the Mediterranean world of that century. Scott Bartchy's *First-Century Slavery* is especially helpful in this regard, not only because he furnishes a wide-ranging historical survey of both law and customs in this field, but especially because of the necessary

corrective he brings to our common preconceptions about what it meant to be a slave or a freedman in the times of Jesus and Paul.

So, if we sincerely intend to identify ourselves with the slave class and take Jesus seriously, making ourselves the voluntary slaves of others, it would be very worthwhile to examine what Christian exhortations were addressed to those who were legally slaves as part of a definite, wide-spread social structure in the first-century world. (Study Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Ti. 6:1, 2; Ti. 2:9, 10; 1 Pt. 2:18ff in harmony with 2:16!)

In short, there are no ring-side seats for honored spectators in God's Kingdom, just places of service down beside the King Himself who is busy washing feet, mediating for others and dying for sinners. (Jn. 13:12-17; Ro. 8:29; 1 Pt. 2:21ff)

3. "My own life of service and death for others is the standard!"  
(20:28)

20:28 **even as the Son of man** means that His marvelous self-sacrifice is the standard whereby greatness is to be measured. (See all notes on 18:1-14, studying specifically how everything Jesus affirmed in that section so aptly applied to Himself.) And yet His own supreme example is not set forth here as a mere model of humility. His sentence structure reveals another emphasis: **Whoever would be great . . . and . . . first among you must be . . . even as the Son of man.** Although the disciples refused at that time to accept His "uncomfortable, pessimistic talk about crosses," they must learn that the cross lay not only squarely across His path to the crown, but was also at the heart of His great mission to earth. They had interrupted His talk about death, in order to talk about position and power. He must now interrupt their pursuit of power, to make them see that self-denial and service—**EVEN TO DEATH**—is the shortest route to real power, to being *first* and *great*. He expected the disciples to learn that His own case furnishes illustration of His personal method of gaining the mastery over men. They must learn the connection between self-giving service and arriving at power in the spiritual world. They must see that, however strange or original it may have seemed to them, His own method for earning His crown is superior to all other methods of receiving thrones, whether it be by inheriting them respectably, or by seizing them in battle, or by base bribery. This is because these latter methods either left the will

of the governed completely out of the account, or, worse, forced or tricked them into compliance against their will. But the uniqueness of Jesus' method lay in His mission to place Himself at the service of mankind, so that men would love Him and willingly submit to Him as their King, and thus He would become Ruler over a people eager to please Him, swept to the throne by their sense of grateful devotion. Even more striking than the originality of Jesus' method, when contrasted with the usual routes to glory, is its unquestionable success. Let us add our "Amen" to the voices of millions of Christians who with all their hearts have echoed the doxology of the Apostle John: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." (Rev. 1:5, 6) Nothing could be clearer than the way Jesus connected self-giving service and the right to rule. Love that sacrifices itself for others has power to conquer and rule over others' hearts, and thus guarantee the kind of sway over others that can be attained in no other way than by girding oneself with the towel of humility and placing oneself at the disposition of others as their servant. The expression, **even as the Son of man**, demonstrates for all time how this King proved the effectiveness of His method by taking upon Himself the form of a servant, and by winning for Himself the sort of sovereignty that we willingly confess today. In short, Jesus applies the pragmatic test to His method and, by His results, demonstrates that it will work for us as it did for Him! This is the reason for His paradoxical ecclesiology and the motivation of His unusual government policy: loving ministry to others is the secret of success and the road to true greatness. So, if greatness in the Kingdom and usefulness to God depends upon being like the King, and sharing His viewpoints and mission, then the greatest distinctions and highest titles will obviously fall to those who are most like Him in sacrificial service even to the point of death for others.

**The Son of man came to give his life a ransom for many.** Whether or not the disciples fully appreciated what it meant to be the son of man come from glory (see notes on 8:20), however, now, after His triumph, this sentence measures the full height and depth of His love. (2 Co. 8:9; Eph. 5:25; 1 Jn. 4:10; Jn. 15:13; Ro. 5:6-11) But even before, the disciples had witnessed nothing but generous ministering to the needs of others on the part of Him whom they had come to recognize as their Messianic King. Had they yet no basis for understanding the King or His Kingdom? He will *give his life*:

His self-sacrifice will be voluntary. (Cf. Jn. 10:11, 15, 18) He was not only sent by the Father, but of His own accord **He came to give His life a ransom.** Whereas we cannot choose to be born nor do we normally choose our own death, Jesus claimed these as acts born of His own free choice.

**Give his life a ransom for many.** (Cf. Isa. 53:4-8, 10-12) Here is the foundation for the expiation for our sins and for our justification: Jesus will lay down His own innocent life in payment for (*anti pollōn*) the lives of many who cannot ransom themselves. (Cf. Psa. 49:7-9, 15) Literally, a **ransom** (*lútron*) is the price paid to free a slave or someone held prisoner for redemption. It may also be an expiation for wrong-doing. (Rocci, 1167; Arndt-Gingrich, 483f) It is the agreed legal equivalent for the persons redeemed. **Many** has two emphases:

1. Potential: **Many**, does not mean "not all," as if we ought to think Jesus did not intend to die potentially for every man. (1 Ti. 2:6; 1 Jn. 2:2) **Many** is the antithesis of a privileged "few" or perhaps the antithesis of the one Human Being who can accomplish this for many, not merely dying for Himself alone. **Many**, here, has the same meaning as that of "many" (*polloi*) in Paul. (Ro. 5:15, 19) Contextually, it is clear that Paul meant "all" (*pántas anthrópous*). (Ro. 5:18)
2. Actual: and yet, sadly, this word **many**, considered, not as the potential of Jesus' sacrifice but as describing the real number of people who will finally avail themselves of it, in the end, really does mean "not all," (Mt. 7:14)

An interesting question for further investigation involves Jesus' unusual demand in this text that those for whom He would **give His life as a ransom** should consider themselves, not primarily as free men, but as *servants* and *slaves*. The modern reader might ask, "But if He ransomed them, surely they would not thereafter consider themselves slaves in any sense." But it does not work that way. The person who is dearly purchased out of bitter slavery owes his happiness, fruitful employment and present security to his new Master. For a person who owns nothing and owes everything, to repay such a debt of gratitude is only possible through willing personal service. In fact, the decision to ransom this slave may have been based on a contract made with the new Master. Therefore, the ransomed do not move into the insecurity and uncertainty of absolute freedom with its attendant dangers for which the former slave is unprepared

to cope, but into the good service of a kind Master whose slavery is pure joy compared with the alternatives. (Study Ro. 6:15-23, esp. v. 18; 1 Co. 6:19f; 7:22f; 1 Pt. 1:18f; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22—4:1; Philemon 16; cf. Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*.) In fact, the slavery to Jesus Christ is so radically different from that to self, sin and Satan, that paradoxically there is a sense in which the redeemed can be thought of as the only truly "free men." (Study Peter's interesting paradox: "as free men . . . as slaves of God" (*hos eleútheroi . . . all'hos theoū dōûloi*, 1 Pt. 2:16). This fresh understanding of slavery to Christ should turn on new lights in texts where Paul and others willingly declare themselves "bondslaves of Jesus Christ" (e.g. Ro. 1:1) and "your slaves for Jesus' sake." (e.g. 2 Co. 4:5)

What is the picture, then? The world into which Jesus Christ came is a world full of slaves, a world characterized by oppression and abuse of power, a world where might makes right, and back of it all is the devil. But to purchase these slaves from their just condemnation, Jesus did not come to be, together with His Church, merely a new king or emperor or benefactor, but armed with the same sort of structured imperial might as that encountered in the world systems. Rather, to defeat the cruel world power that leaves men its slaves and bring them out of their bondage, paradoxically, He too became a slave to minister and to turn His own life over to suffer the righteous verdict of death for sin, in exchange for the freedom of sin's victims. (Mt. 26:28; Romans; Phil. 2:5-9; 1 Ti. 2:6; Heb. 2:9, 14-18; 9:27; 1 Pt. 1:18f; 2:24; 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:2; 2 Co. 5:14f, 21) To free the victims He Himself became a Victim to end the victimizing. The point? His Church must not present itself as a "Christian Government" as a political alternative to the "demonic world or state governments of the present age." Jesus categorically refused to fight fire with fire. And His Church must live and function and conquer as a community in whose heart the cancer of power—whether ecclesiastical or political—does not exist. It is rather as a fellowship of servants that it will be able, without political ambitions or power structures, to help free humanity from the forces that enslave it. (Cf. González-Ruiz, *Marco*, 189)

NOTE: This concept does not speak directly to the problem of Christians' participation in civil government and the execution of its laws. The Lord is, rather, discussing what His disciple as a private citizen must be in relation to other private citizens and what His Kingdom must be in relation to other world kingdoms.

Ministering in the service of God as a sword-bearing magistrate is already assumed as a valid option. (Ro. 13:1-7) So also is the disciples' responsibility to pay the bills of civil government. (Mt. 22:21) So, Jesus' discussion of pagan rulers does not intend to reject the proper authority of civil government.

What does this magnificent declaration reveal to us about Jesus?

1. Plummer (*Matthew*, 281) asks:

Is not the combination of humility and majesty which is found in this saying a guarantee for its genuineness? Could it have been invented? Who is this, who in the same utterance, and in the most simple and natural way, declares that He is the servant of everybody, and that His single life is able to ransom many? There is no boasting and no manifest exaggeration in either declaration; nothing but a calm statement of fact, made by One who is confident that He is saying the simple truth.

2. Bruce (*Training*, 288) sees it too:

Then this saying, while breathing the spirit of utter lowliness, at the same time betrays the consciousness of superhuman dignity. Had Jesus not been more than man, His language would not have been humble, but presumptuous. Why should the son of a carpenter say of himself, I came not to be ministered unto? Servile position and occupation was a matter of course for such a one. The statement before us is rational and humble only as coming from one who, being in the form of God, freely assumed the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death for our salvation.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. How did Jesus answer the request for chief seats in the Kingdom? What did He mean by His "cup" and "baptism"?
2. In whose hands and on what basis rightly rests the distribution of the highest honors in the Kingdom?
3. Who is the greatest in the Kingdom? How did Jesus illustrate His own answer to this question? Where else is this same question discussed in Matthew?
4. Who asked such a boon? Who aided their request? Why was

- this particular person enlisted to word their desire? From what point of view did the request arise?
5. In what respect did Jesus say emphatically that His Kingdom would be different from that of the "rulers" of the nations of the world?
  6. Quote Matthew 20:28 and Luke 19:10. What else did Jesus say at any time about the cause and purpose for which He came into the world?
  7. Did James and John prove true to their confident assertion of readiness to drink of Jesus' cup and be baptized with His baptism? If so, how or when? If not, why not?
  8. According to Jesus, are there really any chief places in the Kingdom to grant? If so, how are they to be distributed?
  9. According to Jesus, what kind of ambition must a Christian have?
  10. What does this section have to say to the larger question of power structures and hierarchical control among Jesus' disciples today?
  11. List the texts in Matthew 18 which find their practical application in this section.

### Section 53

## JESUS HEALS TWO BLIND MEN AT JERICHO (Parallels: Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43)

TEXT: 20:29-34

29 And as they went out from Jericho, a great multitude followed him. 30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the way side, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David. 31 And the multitude rebuked them, that they should hold their peace: but they cried out the more, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David. 32 And Jesus stood still, and called them, and said, What will ye that I should do unto you? 33 They say unto him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened. 34 And Jesus, being moved with compassion, touched their eyes; and straightway they received their sight, and followed him.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose Matthew would include this little miracle-story at this point? Of course, it took place at Jericho just before the Lord ascended to Jerusalem for the Final Week, and Mark and Luke both document it at this point. However, our author omits interesting details provided in the other two Gospels, as if his editorial pen intends to underline one major truth. What is it? The title by which the blind men addressed Jesus has significance in pointing out that truth. What does the title mean, and how does this help to explain why Matthew would be particularly interested in recording this scene at precisely this point in his narrative?
- b. Where did these blind men get the faith they expressed in their plea for help from Jesus?
- c. Why do you think the crowd rebuked these blind men, ordering them to be silent? There may have been several reasons.
- d. Why did the blind men ignore the scolding of the passers-by who tried to silence them?
- e. Jesus usually ordered people to silence when they addressed Him as "Son of David." Here, however, He did not do so. How do you interpret this strange change in policy?
- f. Why did Jesus ask the blind men: "What do you want me to do for you?" when the most perfectly obvious need of a blind man is SIGHT?! (or is it?)
- g. Whereas Luke concludes his narrative by stating that "immediately he received his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God," and whereas Mark, too, says "he received his sight and followed him on the way, Matthew, on the other hand, simply affirms, "Immediately they received their sight, and followed him." Do you think Matthew is just giving a severely simple account, or is he pushing the reader to decide whether, on the basis of the evidence furnished that Jesus is truly the long-awaited Son of David, he too will humbly and joyfully follow Him who is the Light of the blind? Or is this reading more into the text than is there? What do you think?
- h. Why do you think the blind men followed Jesus? Where was Jesus going that would have been so interesting to these newly-healed beggars?
- i. Of what principle(s) in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships

- in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?
- j. How does this section prepare for the events that follow in chapter 21?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

So Jesus and His disciples arrived at Jericho. As they approached the city, a blind man was sitting at the side of the road begging. When he heard the noise of a crowd going past, he began to inquire, "What is happening?" Someone told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is going by."

Later, as Jesus was going out of the city with His disciples, a vast throng surged along behind Him. Two blind men were sitting at the roadside, one of whom was named Bartimaeus (= Timaeus' son). Upon hearing that Jesus the Nazarene was passing by, they shouted out, "Jesus, Son of David, take pity on us!"

But many of those who were in the front part of the crowd sharply scolded them, telling them to shut up. But they yelled even more loudly, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Then Jesus stopped there in the road and called them to Him, commanding others to bring them to Him, "Tell them to come here."

So they called the blind men, saying, "It's all right now. Get to your feet: He is calling you."

Bartimaeus, casting aside his overcoat, jumped up with his companion and made his way to Jesus. When they were quite close, Jesus addressed them, "What do you wish me to do for you?"

The blind men said to Him, "My dear Teacher, we want our eyes to be opened: let us see again!"

Then Jesus, deeply moved with compassion, touched their blind eyes, saying, "Begin seeing again! Go your way. Your faith in me has healed you."

Instantly they were able to see again and began following Him along the road, giving thanks and praise to God. All the others who witnessed the miracle gave praise to God too.

### SUMMARY

Having crossed the Jordan, Jesus and His company of Passover-bound travelers arrived at Jericho. Too late a blind beggar learned

that Jesus had just passed him. Later, as Jesus left the city for Jerusalem, the blind beggar with another blind man, upon learning that the Lord's group was then departing from Jericho, began to appeal to His help, calling Him "the Son of David." Scolded by the travelers nearest them, they only shouted that much louder. Jesus mercifully halted the caravan, called them to Him, asked them what favor they sought. They asked only for sight which He instantly gave them. In gratitude, they sing praise to God and follow Jesus. Everyone else was affected the same way by the miracle, joining in to praise God too.

## NOTES

III. PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION OF JESUS' TRUE  
MESSIAHSHIP OF SERVICE  
(20:29-34; Mk. 10:46-52; Lk. 18:35-43)

A. SITUATION: Blind men appeal to Jesus for mercy  
as "Son of David."

20:29 **A great crowd followed him.** Because several eastern routes converged at the Jordan River just east of Jericho, this city had long been a natural stopping place for festival-bound pilgrims arriving from various directions on their way to Jerusalem. **Jericho** means that Jesus and His company will approach Jerusalem from the east, as "the city of palms" is located 25 km (15 mi.) from the capital, near the ford of the Jordan.

**And as they went out from Jericho.** Mark (10:46) very precisely notes their arrival at Jericho, then, in agreement with Matthew, just as clearly registers their departure and the following miracle. However, because Luke's parallel (18:35) seems to locate the healing incident "as he drew near to Jericho," rather than upon His departure, several attempts have been made to produce an intelligent harmony of the facts so as to eliminate any possible accusation of error. It should be noticed, first of all, that the presence of problems is not evidence of inauthenticity, but undesigned proof of the correctness of the facts narrated. For had the Evangelists perversely desired to foist a falsification off on the world, they would have taken more care to eliminate such a slip-up. Again, the very existence of problems in harmonizing these three Synoptic texts is proof of the independent

drafting of these Gospels. If these accounts were copied from a common source, as some affirm, how may these obvious differences be explained, especially where the divergence is so great as to cause accusations of outright contradiction? On the other hand, if we find that a reasonable explanation of the apparent contradiction can be found, what had at first seemed to be a contradiction becomes, instead, evidence of the truth of the testimony. What are the possibilities?

1. Matthew and Mark clearly agree that the miracle occurred at the departure from Jericho. Luke alone organizes his material in some other fashion. Now, if it be correctly assumed that two witnesses are sufficient to establish any fact (Dt. 19:15), the former two Synoptic writers must be judged to be relating the objective, chronological order of the facts. Further, if we may assume Luke's fundamental accuracy, we may judge that he has done some theological editorializing in the organization of his facts. This must be concluded from the fact that, following the Lucan narrative of the blind man's healing which apparently takes place "as he drew near to Jericho" (18:35), we have the continuation: "He entered Jericho and was passing through" (19:1), at which time Jesus encounters Zacchaeus. Therefore, unless we are to accuse Luke of deliberate misrepresentation of history, we must attribute to him the intention to set aside strictly chronological considerations for what may have had greater theological importance for his purpose. (See below under 4b.)
2. There is also evidence that Luke does not really locate the healing on the east entrance of Jericho:
  - a. He simply mentions that the blind man was sitting by the roadside begging as Jesus drew near to Jericho. (Lk. 18:35)

Although some writers note the possible existence of two or even three Jerichos in Jesus' day, because of its being built, destroyed and rebuilt on different sites (See Unger, *Archeology and the Old Testament*, 146-148, 243; Pfeiffer (ed.), *The Biblical World, A Dictionary of Biblical Archeology*, 305f), hence the scene of the miracle could be located between the various locations as Jesus left one Jericho and approached another Jericho, however certain questions arise:
    - (1) Would the older sites have been inhabited and called simply "old Jericho," or "old city"?

- (2) In that day would not the Herodian Jericho have been the more famous city of that name? (Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XV, 4, 2, 4) If so, were there two sites involved in our story, it would be thought certain that some distinction would have been made, such as "new city" (Neapolis). So, until archeological evidence demonstrates conclusively that more than one site of Jericho was inhabited in Christ's day, it is better to opt for the conclusion that only one city-site was involved in our story.
- b. Then, from the noise people were making as they passed, the blind man concluded that a multitude was going by, so he began asking what this meant. He is then told that "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." The crowd was already passing by him at the time he learned the significance of this particular multitude. Hence, some time is lost for him to start calling to Jesus for mercy. The answer of the people in the crowd who say, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by," is not fatal to this hypothesis, because they could still say it, even if Jesus had already gone by, because it would be meant in the sense that the group travelling with Jesus is passing by, Jesus being the most important personage in the entourage.
- c. The fact that the crowd's passing was already in progress at the time he first learned that "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by," taken together with the fact that, when he began to implore Jesus' help, it is surprisingly "those who were in front (who) rebuked him," points to a change of the blind man's position with respect to the crowd. For, if the ones in front had already passed him on the road to Jericho and were thus closer to the city are the ones who rebuke him, then they must have turned completely around and, inexplicably ignoring the calmness of the people at that moment passing in front of the shouting Bartimaeus, begin to rebuke him for his impertinence! On the contrary, the rebuke by "those who were in front" may be more reasonably explained by some change in the relative positions of Bartimaeus and the crowds, a fact omitted by Luke as unimportant for his purpose. But what was the change in positions? Matthew and Mark supply the missing information? Consider the following harmony:

MATTHEW 20:29-31

MARK 10:46-48

LUKE 18:35-39

29 And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him.

30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the roadside,

When they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, "Have mercy on us. Son of David!"

31 The crowd rebuked them...

46 And they came to Jericho;

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude,

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside,

47 And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

48 And many rebuked him...

35 As he drew near to Jericho a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging; 36 and hearing a multitude going by, he inquired what this meant. 37 They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

38 And he cried, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

39 And those in front rebuked him...

3. The harmonization of the three accounts, reflected in the "Paraphrase/Harmony," is based on the following steps:

a. The party in which Jesus was travelling approached Jericho. Jesus and His disciples were in the lead ahead of the others who would thus be strung out along the road behind them. (Did Jesus keep up His pace ahead of the others even after the Passion Prediction and His rebuke of the selfish ambition of the Twelve? Cf. Mk. 10:32) If so, at least Jesus and His disciples passed the blind men before the latter could react. (Lk. 18:35) As the main body of the multitude with its hubub of voices and shuffling feet began to come by, he began to make inquiry about what was happening, too late to make contact with Jesus. (Lk. 18:36f) This much is seen as a separate fact that occurred before Jesus entered into Jericho.

**WEAKNESS:** is it likely that a sharp-eared blind man could miss the soft tread of 26 feet as Jesus and the Twelve pass by him, when he was seated "by the roadside begging" (Lk.

18:35)? Is it likely that absolutely no one in Jesus' immediate group said a word as they approached and passed the blind man to enter Jericho? And, if the blind man heard them and asked for alms, is it likely that Jesus and His group completely ignored his appeals?

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

1. Jesus may have been walking alone in silence, ahead of the group, and so was not detected by the blind man. It may have been that He knew that He could heal the man later in circumstances that would accomplish more good. He may therefore have deliberately ignored the man this time, in order to reach that higher goal.
  2. Then, when the Twelve and others passed, their noise attracted the blind man's attention and he asked the meaning of the noise. Upon learning that Jesus' group was passing, he began calling, but too late to make himself heard by Jesus personally who had already gone by. The disciples and others do not disturb Jesus to call Him back to see what the blind beggar wanted.
  3. So, Jesus and His group got clear into Jericho before the blind man could successfully make his request known.
- b. Then, while Jesus stopped in the city to be the guest of Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10), the blind man, who by this time had completely lost contact with Jesus' particular group, may have reasoned that they would likely rest in Jericho before the final ascent to Jerusalem. This fact would give him ample time to find his way to the west side of town where he could wait for their departure and accost them as they left Jericho for Jerusalem.
- (1) Did this blind beggar take time to locate another blind beggar he knew, to share with him the hope of recovering his sight too? This would perhaps help to explain Mark and Luke's interest in Bartimaeus, whereas Matthew mentions two blind men.
  - (2) That a blind man could "find" anything or anyone and move so deftly around a city crowded with pilgrims is no problem for a beggar who has no doubt worked that city for years, deriving his only income from begging. He would naturally have learned to make his way around this ideal place for begging, since Herod the Great had built this city as a new capital and it became the resort for the rich from Jerusalem. And, because of its ideal geographical location as the last

stopping place for pilgrims bound for Jerusalem, beggars could hope for some alms from the pious among them who accounted alms as highly meritorious. In fact, on how many other occasions had Bartimaeus met the crowds coming from the east on one day, to beg from them, and then moved around to the west gate the next day to ask alms from them again as they left?

- c. Then, when he once again heard the movement of many people next day and asked the meaning of the sounds, he cried out to Jesus for the first time as He left the city for Jerusalem. (Mt. 20:30; Mk. 10:46b, 47; Lk. 18:38)
- 4. The legitimacy of Luke's reorganization of the materials need not be questioned.
  - a. As a literary device his style is a procedure completely vindicated by the deliberate style of Moses in composing *Genesis*. That is, even as Moses so often completed a given person's history immediately upon mentioning him before returning to take up that of another more prominent figure, even though the former was not yet dead, so here too Luke may be thought of as desiring to complete the blind man's story after the first notice, in order to return to narrate Zacchaeus' story. He succeeded thus in preserving the unity of the story of healing by finishing it before the visit with Zacchaeus, although the healing actually occurred thereafter. Then, having disposed of the healing incident, Luke omitted any mention of it after Zacchaeus, proceeding rather to the Parable of the Pounds. (Lk. 19:11)
  - b. Why did Luke put the blind man first? This may be the wrong question. The real question may be: why did he desire to put Zacchaeus' story last? Perhaps for theological, rather than chronological considerations. (Matthew does a lot of this too. See on "The Problem of Order in Matthew's Narration," Vol. II, p. 1ff; "What is Matthew's Order or Plan of Presentation?" Vol. I, pp. 4-6) Accordingly, Luke may have wished to give particular emphasis to the salvation of Zacchaeus. However, he did not desire to ignore the healing of the blind man, because of its well-established importance for a correct understanding of Christ, and certainly because of its place in the historical information Luke had gathered from his sources. (Cf. Lk. 1:1-4) Since he alone narrates the salvation of Zacchaeus before Jesus' arrival at Bethany for the beginning of the Final Week events, and since he concludes Jesus' reaction to

Zacchaeus' decisions with the words: "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk. 19:9f), it may well be that he chose this method to underline Jesus' purpose for going to Jerusalem, even as Matthew and Mark state the death-mission of Jesus in the preceding section (20:28; Mk. 10:45). He may also have considered the salvation of Zacchaeus as illustrating, a bit more vigorously than the healing of the blind men, the astoundingly merciful condescension of Jesus. So he arranged his materials, so that, as the reader pondered the self-revelation of Jesus at Jericho, the last thing upon which his mind would linger is the amazing grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ who can so gracefully and graciously win the incredibly unworthiest of sinners, a chief tax collector!

There have been other attempts to harmonize these same details. (Cf. Plummer, *Luke*, 429f) However, the above explanations seem to be the simplest, most cohesive and least problematic.

**20:30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the way side.** Were there two, as Matthew affirms, or only one, named Bartimaeus, as Mark and Luke have it? Both, because where there are two, there is at least one! Matthew recorded the objective fact that there were two such beggars, but the names were not important for his narration, whereas Mark named one of the two and then carefully translated his Aramaic name into Greek, as if something connected with the man or his name would be important for his readership. (Was Bartimaeus and/or his father, Timaeus, a well-known disciple in Christian circles of Mark's and/or Peter's acquaintances?) Another motive for noticing this blind man may have been the high quality of his trust in Jesus (cf. Mk. 10:50), whereas the other man was perhaps less spectacular, less memorable for his expression of faith.

**Two blind men sitting by the way side.** Because Jericho was the winter palace of Herod and resort for the rich from Jerusalem, it is more than understandable that any one should place themselves by the roadside to beg. Moreover they could especially hope for alms during this period, because of the heavy traffic of Passover pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem via Jericho. Their deplorable situation, arising as it does out of their physical handicap, is the more pitiable, since they had to depend upon the capricious generosity of passers-by. It is remarkable that neither Matthew nor Mark affirm that they were now begging. If the above-suggested harmonization of the

Synoptics' data is correct, the two blind men, convinced that Jesus' coming would bring them sight and relief from all future begging, calmly await His arrival, whereas Luke, the only Evangelist to affirm that Bartimaeus was begging, only affirms this *before* the blind man learned that Jesus was in the neighborhood. No longer begging, their entire attention is directed toward regaining their sight. The single-mindedness of their straining to learn of the near approach of the Messiah rebukes those fools who, although their only Source of spiritual light and life is passing by as the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed, divide their attention between the immortal value of their soul and their busy collecting a few pennies by the wayside! These blind beggars, customary objects of public charity, knew when to sacrifice temporal, material gain for grander blessings. O my soul, are you really earnest about receiving the blessing of Christ that you will consider it so important and so urgent that every other problem must wait until you have settled this momentous question?

**When they heard that Jesus was passing by.** They could determine that a multitude was passing by the growing murmur of voices talking and laughing and by the scuffle of feet. From some passerby they learned that their only Hope was drawing near. **They cried out, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David.** That they understood what we do by the title, *Lord*, is doubtful. Since *Lord* (*kúrie*) is also the standard form of respectful address for persons with whom one is not familiar (= "Sir, Mister"), it may not indicate special faith in Jesus as Lord of all. What can be affirmed is that their understanding is greater than those who think of Jesus as "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Mt. 16:13f). Others might refer to the Son of David as merely "Jesus of Nazareth" (Mk. 10:47; Lk. 18:37), a man differing from others only in hometown. But the bold faith of these blind men asserts itself when they unashamedly entitle Him *Son of David*, the Messiah. (See on 1:1-17, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22.)

By now, Jesus' Davidic lineage is known, but more significantly, His ample qualifications for this Messianic title are common knowledge among disciples. Even these isolated beggars in a city where Jesus had probably never before preached, know His name and fame. How significantly is this event placed! Jesus is ascending to Jerusalem to suffer and die, to be defeated—as men deem it (20:17-19; Lk. 18:34; Mt. 20:28)—and yet He is the Son of David, the Messiah of the prophets. Even though He is about to face the decisive suffering that would complete His earthly mission, He does not hesitate to

stop to help these blind men who address Him as *Son of David*. He does not forget to serve men by healing their bodies nor to do the far more important things, such as dying for them too, because both are at the heart of His true mission, two facets of the same loving obsession.

20:31 **And the multitude**, i.e. "those who were in front" of the crowd moving toward the beggars, **rebuked them, that they should hold their peace**. What motives could have produced this reaction? Did they suppose that this raucous shouting was out of character for the high dignity of Jesus? Were they irked that these tatterdemalian mendicants were using inflammatory language loaded with embarrassing, political implications that could lead to trouble with the Jerusalem authorities who regularly vacationed at Jericho? In their own blindness to Jesus' mercifulness and true Messianic dignity, did they merely suppose that the blind beggars, by this piteous yelling, were only asking that the great Rabbi accord them alms? Or are they merely angry that their shouting interrupted their own conversations? If so, the people are far less concerned about the needs of these unfortunates than they are about their own comfort. Are there some slit-eyed enemies of Jesus in this crowd, who resent anyone's attributing Messianic dignity to Jesus by the use of such titles? Were there friends who, hoping to stage a Messianic demonstration in Jerusalem, hurriedly shush up this premature acclamation? Were there disciples crowding around Jesus, even now straining to pick up His every word, who resented this vigorously noisy interruption of their concentration? Whatever the cause, these cold-hearted, presumptuous people have more concern that everything operate smoothly than that two suffering human beings should receive the blessing of their lives! Some might have growled, "The participation of ragged beggars lowers the spiritual tone of our pilgrimage! We're on our way up to Jerusalem to worship God; neither we nor Jesus can be bothered with your problems now. We have our schedule to meet and our program to follow. Perhaps the Teacher could work you into His schedule when and if He returns this way sometime after the Passover. Don't call us—we'll call you!" These pitiless patrons of orthodoxy were despising "little ones who believe in me" (18:10), forbidding and blocking their way to Jesus. (Cf. 18:6-9; Mk. 9:38f)

**But they cried out the more.** This frustrating hindrance only increased the intensity of their determination to receive help. Unlike the rich young ruler, these undiscourageable believers would not be

rebuffed by setbacks and baffling handicaps. Their persistence evidences their conviction that *the Son of David* is their only hope and help. What spirit: the greater the resistance encountered, the more they throttle their rising despair and struggle to overcome it and gain their goal! They feared that the opportunity of a lifetime was slipping through their fingers, so they grasped it the tighter lest it be forever lost. (Cf. the Syrophenician woman's pluck and persistence, 15:21-28)

### B. RESPONSE: A miracle of mercy proves Jesus to be the Messiah.

20:32 **And Jesus stood still.** Whereinsofar He was the central figure in the westbound caravan now, when Jesus stopped, He drew instant attention to Himself and what He is about to do. By this single action, He halted the thoughtless crowd plunging sightlessly past two blind men who need help. Despite the din and hubbub of people's voices, He too heard the passionate cry of human need over there on the edge of the road. A person can hear what he is listening for!

**Jesus stood still, and called them,** but, because of the crowd noise ("What are we stopping for?"), He apparently could not make Himself sufficiently heard by the blind men themselves, so He gave two quick orders: "Call him!" (Mk. 10:49), or better yet, "Bring him to me!" (Lk. 18:40). The reason Jesus did not personally leave His place in a merciful gesture to save the blind men the effort of having to feel their way forward to Him, may have been to let their anticipation grow into confidence in His power to heal them. At this point people in the crowd encourage the blind men: "Take heart; rise, He is calling you." (Mk. 10:49) What a rebuke is thus handed to those who had rebuked the blind men!

Mark (10:50) provides a vivid touch of human realism to Bartimaeus' faith: "Throwing off his mantle, he sprang up and came to Jesus." His mantle is the long overcoat so essential to the protection and comfort of the inhabitant of the Middle East. Why he threw it off is a mystery, but the eloquence of the fact that he did is not. If this blind man casts aside his most precious article of clothing (cf. Dt. 24:13; Ex. 22:26, 27) and risks disorientation in a crowd of strangers, he has only one solid hope of refinding it later: he can go looking for it afterwards, after David's Son has given him his sight! If Jesus should fail, his one hope of breaking out of his dark

world would be gone anyhow, so what comfort could an old overcoat offer against the chilling disappointment of a world in which the one Man who had seemed to be gifted with God's power had suddenly failed in this case? But He would not fail! What is an old, dusty overcoat to a man with EYES who can SEE to work and earn a thousand suits of clothes? But why did he throw it off? Could he not have worn it? Did he consider it a hindrance in reaching Jesus through the crowd? More likely, since an overcoat might be laid aside when the wearer must begin strenuous exercise, such as walking or running, his casting it aside here may suggest his hurry and earnestness to get to Jesus as quickly as possible.

**And Jesus stood still, and called them, and said, What will ye that I should do unto you?** There is no partiality with Jesus. Note how He turns His full attention equally to blind beggars or wealthy rulers. (19:16ff) **What will ye?** The men had asked for an unspecified expression of His mercy. "The Lord therefore in His royal majesty asked Bartimaeus to name the mercy, thus suggesting to him the fulness of the treasury of power and grace to which he came." (McGarvey, *Fourfold Gospel*, 561) **What will ye?** What a question! And yet, Jesus needs to ask it, for even though it is roughly the same request made by the mother of James and John (cf. 20:21; Mk. 10:36), He has no fear that these blind men will abuse His generosity. They would not ask for gold and glory, honor and positions of power in the Kingdom. Rather, they will shame the Apostles by paring away from their request all those superficialities, and seize upon the one essential that will bless their life more than any other.

Because His intelligent question is not intended to seek information from men so obviously in need of sight, it is clear that He means to imply, "What do you believe that the Messiah can do for you?" The Lord's query, rather than elicit information, aims to draw public attention to what He, who has just been repeatedly addressed publicly as *Son of David*, is about to do. Whereas these men had been beggars asking alms earlier (Lk. 18:35), is that the extent of their asking pity of Him? Let the crowd pause for their answer and witness His reaction.

**20:33 They say unto him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened.** This simple request is the result of countless hours of sightless meditation upon the meaning of life. All that is extraneous and superfluous has been eliminated: this is rigorous reduction to the essential. It goes straight to the point: nothing less than sight will do! Were the Lord to ask us what we need specifically when we pray for His

grace, would our answer readily reflect our self-knowledge, our real needs and our long-range goals? Or is there much vagueness and unreality to our requests? If so, it may be that we receive not specifically, because we ask not specifically. (Jas. 4:2c) Let us learn to answer with true insight the Lord's question: "What will ye that I should do for you?"

Matthew eliminates many interesting details in this story which are included by Mark and Luke. May we not ask if it is his point to lay the essential facts before his reader, as if to ask, "Dear Jewish reader, as you contemplate Him whom these sightless men hail as the Messiah, *the Son of David*, Him who not only accepts this high title, but majestically proves His right to wear it by answering their prayer, cannot their prayer become yours? —**Lord, that our eyes may be opened!?**"

20:34 **And Jesus, being moved with compassion, touched their eyes.** The warmth of Jesus' compassion for these blind men stands out in marked contrast with the cold, heartless hindering by the crowds. He heard their piteous cry, felt deeply their need, suffered with them their hurt, was thrilled by their persistence that pushed their abilities to the limit, and was touched by their irrepressible, unembarrassed faith in Him. No wonder He willingly showed Himself to be the Rewarder of those who by faith diligently seek Him! (Heb. 11:6) Mark (10:52) and Luke (18:42) record His words: "Receive your sight; go your way; your faith has made you well." Absent from His words is any order to be silent. He does not bother to recommend circumspection now. Since the final hour is about to strike, the earlier concern about ill-timed, wrong-headed publicity now has little if any reason to exist. In fact, the entrance into Jerusalem which will occur shortly, will be nothing but the most public proclamation possible that He is indeed the Son of David. (See on chapter 21.)

As He **touched their eyes, straightway they received their sight.** With this single, majestic, yet warmly human, act, He fully justified their confidence in Him and the appropriateness of their use of the glorious Messianic title, "Son of David." Without any direct word and by His own tacit acknowledgement, He let the full impact of this miracle ripple over the multitude. Naturally, this sign of Jesus' true Messiahship would not be lost on people sensitive to Isa. 29:18 and 35:5 in their relative contexts. (See notes on 11:5.)

Although Jesus had said, "Go (your way)," Matthew says they **followed him.** Naturally enough, they chose His way. This is not

disobedience, but grateful loyalty, because their reaction means: "Lord, your way is now our way!" These two blind men who had formerly had little hope of traveling clear to Jerusalem, except with someone patiently guiding them the 25 km (15 mi.) uphill trip, now march spiritedly along with every other pilgrim on the way to worship God. No wonder their exuberant joy pours itself out in unabashed praise to God! (Lk. 18:43) Their infectious enthusiasm and the exciting effect of the miracle opened the mouths of their fellow travellers who also took up God's praise for the miracle they had witnessed. These penniless beggars, rather than seek first a stable income to care for their creaturely necessities, seek first the Kingdom of God in the personal discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

Matthew concludes the final section of Jesus' public ministry before the Last Week with this significant tag line: **They received their sight and followed him**, almost as if to nudge the reader: "And you, does this miracle by the Son of David say anything to you? If so, let it be written of you, as it is of them: They received their sight and followed Him!"

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Who called Jesus "Son of David"? What others in Christ's ministry also called Him this?
2. Why did they call Jesus this? What did they mean by it?
3. What difficulties did Bartimaeus have in making his request known and in coming to Jesus?
4. What difficulties are there in the accounts about the blind men?
5. How did Jesus perform the miracle of healing their blindness, i.e. with words, acts, clay, etc.?
6. What text(s) in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 find their practical application or illustration in this section?

Who said the following? To whom? Why? Under what circumstances? Be sure to give all various forms in different gospel accounts, all possible manuscript readings, translations and interpretations.

What do you think is the true meaning?

1. "Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister."
2. "So the last shall be first, and the first last."
3. "Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David."
4. "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."
5. "Why askest thou me concerning that which is good? One there is who is good: . . ."
6. "There are eunuchs, that made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake."
7. ". . . for to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven."
8. "If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that which thou hast, and give it to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me."
9. "Who then can be saved?"
10. "Whoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery."
11. "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."
12. "If thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments."
13. "Ye who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

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