



Scripture Studies in
The Gospel of Matthew

By Scott Sperling



Vol. II

*“Come now, let us reason together,”
says the Lord. . .” – Isaiah 1:18*

SCRIPTURE STUDIES
IN
THE GOSPEL OF
MATTHEW

VOL. II

MATTHEW 8 TO 17

BY
SCOTT SPERLING

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“Oh, the depth of the riches
of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?’
‘Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?’
For from him and through him
and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

– Romans 11:33-36

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1 - MATTHEW 8:1-4

The Healing of a Leper

¹ When He came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed Him. ² A man with leprosy came and knelt before Him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” ³ Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. ⁴ Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

— Matthew 8:1-4

AFTER JESUS FINISHED the Sermon on the Mount, **“the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority”** (Matt. 7:28-29). In chapter 8, Matthew begins a section that details some of the miracles that Jesus performed. In this way, Matthew shows that Jesus, indeed, had authority to teach the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. “It was fitting that the greatest sermon ever preached should be immediately followed by mighty proofs that the preacher was the Son of God. Those who heard the Sermon on the Mount would be obliged to confess, that, as none **‘spake such words as this man,’** so also none did such works.” [Ryle, 73].

The first miracle that Matthew recounts is the healing of a leper: **“A man with leprosy came and knelt before Him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’**

Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ He said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, ‘See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’” (vss. 2–4). Leprosy is a contagious disease that gradually rots away the flesh, deadening the nerve endings as it goes, eventually leading to death. It is still incurable, though there are now treatments that in most cases will arrest the disease. In the Bible, leprosy is a type of sin: loathsome, spreading, and incurable, gradually rotting away the flesh, deadening the nerve endings as it goes, eventually leading to death.

Lepers were not allowed to live in towns or villages, but were quarantined in their own areas. If anyone was seen unwittingly approaching them, they were required to call out, “Unclean! Unclean!” (see Lev. 13:45). (Oh, if only those infected with sin were required to call out “Unclean!”, so that their contagion could not spread). Thus, the leper in this episode displayed boldness, as well as a great amount of faith, in coming out to Jesus to be healed. The leper stated his faith: **“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean”** (vs. 2). The leper had faith that Jesus had the power to heal him, saying with no qualification, **“You can make me clean.”** In the leper’s mind, the only question was whether Jesus was **“willing”** to heal him. The leper knew of the complex ways of God. God has His purposes. Though God could in a moment rid the world of all sickness and pain, it is not His will to do so right now. The leper knew this, and decided to ask God’s son directly if He was willing to heal Him.

Jesus, when He walked the earth, never denied a request for healing; He never said, “I will not.” We are often told that Jesus **“healed all”** that came to Him (see Matt. 4:24; 8:16; 9:35; 12:15; 14:36; Mark 6:56; Luke 4:40; 6:19). This case is no

exception. Jesus said: **“I am willing. Be clean!”** (vs. 3). With this, Jesus stated His will, and then demonstrated His power to carry out His will. It is worth noting that “every other worker of miracles in the Old or the New Testament constantly ascribes the power and the glory to another; Jesus alone uses such expressions as **‘I will, be thou clean’, ‘I charge thee, come out of him’, ‘I say unto thee, arise’**” [Broadus, 176].

Note also that Jesus did not only speak to the leper to heal Him: **“Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man”** (vs. 3). Relive this scene in your mind: A leper, feared and reviled as unclean, approaches Jesus, who is surrounded by a crowd. As the leper approaches, the crowd no doubt withdraws in fear, leaving only Jesus and the leper. The leper, out of respect for Jesus, surely did not approach too nearly, just close enough to make his plea. Jesus does not withdraw, as the rest of the crowd surely did. Instead, Jesus approaches the leper, **“reaches out His hand and touches the man.”** The gentle touch of Jesus was undoubtedly the only human contact the leper had since he contracted the disease. “Jesus could simply have spoken the healing words, but we should not miss the compassion implied in the **‘he stretched out his hand and touched him’**” [Morris, 189]. The leper must have had mixed feelings as, to the amazement of the withdrawn observers, Jesus reached out to him. Quite probably, the leper shied away a bit as Jesus reached out, knowing that a leper is required by law to avoid human contact because those who touch a leper themselves become ceremonially unclean. Yet, he wanted to be healed, and he knew that Jesus could heal him. And so, Jesus touched him, and instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the leper was cleansed **“immediately”**. The healing power of Jesus was clearly demonstrated. The touch of Jesus did not merely cause the beginning of a remission of the disease. Rather, the leper was cleansed **“immediately”**, right there on the spot. Jesus

was the only one who could touch a leper and cleanse the defilement, rather than Himself being defiled. In this way too, leprosy is a type of sin.

After the healing, Jesus said to the leper: **“See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them”** (vs. 4). Many are puzzled by Jesus’ command to the leper: **“See that you don’t tell anyone.”** The reason for this command is made clear from Mark’s account of this episode. It turns out that the leper did not heed Jesus’ command: **“Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places”** (Mark 1:45). The hysteria caused by the reports of healings prevented Jesus from carrying out other important works, such as **“teaching in the synagogues”**, and **“preaching the good news of the kingdom”** (see Matt. 4:23). “Our Lord would not increase His own reputation. He sought no honor of men, and He did not wish to swell the crowds which, even now, made it almost impossible for Him to go about His work. He sought usefulness, and not fame... It would have been hard for the leper to have held his tongue, but he ought to have done so when bidden. Be it ours to speak, or to be silent, as our Lord requires” [Spurgeon, 87]. By disobeying this command, the leper, no matter what his motive, only served to make Jesus’ mission more difficult.

Jesus also commanded the leper: **“But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”** In Leviticus 13 and 14, the laws concerning the ceremonial cleansing of a healed leper are given. The cleansing of the leper’s body was followed by his ceremonial cleansing through the presentation of a sin offering to God for atonement. This is compatible with leprosy being a

type of sin: the cleansed body represents the cleansing from sin. At the time that this leper was healed, these laws stood. The laws concerning sin offerings for atonement, however, were not to stand for long. Jesus, through the sacrifice of His body, was to fulfill these laws once and for all. We are now cleansed from sin, not through the blood of goats and bulls, but through the blood of Jesus Christ. By accepting His sacrifice for our sins, we can enter into the presence of God guiltless and cleansed from sin. May the Lord be praised!

2 - MATTHEW 8:5-13

The Faith of the Centurion

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.” ⁷ Jesus said to him, “I will go and heal him.” ⁸ The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” ¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said to those following Him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.” And His servant was healed at that very hour.

— Matthew 8:5-13

MATTHEW, showing that Jesus had the authority to say what He said in the Sermon on the Mount, continues to recount some of the miracles that Jesus performed. The next miracle was performed on behalf of a centurion: **“When Jesus**

had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 'Lord,' he said, 'my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.' Jesus said to him, 'I will go and heal him.' The centurion replied, 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. **But just say the word, and my servant will be healed**'" (vss. 5–8). From these few verses, there is much commendable we can say concerning this centurion. First, he showed great care for his servant, humbling himself to ask Jesus to heal the servant. We too should show such care for others, helping them in their needs, even those who, from a worldly point of view are "below" us. Second, he went to the best possible place for help for his servant: to Jesus Christ, Lord of the Universe. We too should seek help from the Lord Jesus Christ first, bringing our needs and the needs of others before Him, with the faith that He can tend to our needs. Third, he came to the Lord in humility. From a worldly point of view, the centurion was in a position of authority over Jesus. But he humbly came before Jesus, stating his request, and acknowledging that he did not even deserve to have Jesus in his house. And we too should come to the Lord in humility, acknowledging our unworthiness as sinners before Him who alone is worthy in the eyes of God.

Then also, the centurion showed great faith that Jesus could heal his servant without even coming near his servant: **"But just say the word, and my servant will be healed."** The centurion explained the rationale for his faith: **"For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."** (vs. 9). The centurion applied his understanding of the rules of authority in the Roman guard in order to understand how Jesus' authority works. The centurion was a subordinate commander, so he knew well what it was both to command and to be

commanded. He understood that true authority and power comes not from within oneself, but from being under the authority of someone greater than oneself. For example, the authority that the centurion had over people came from the fact that (ultimately) the Roman emperor stood behind his authority. Thus, the centurion was, in effect, vested with the authority of the Roman emperor: people obeyed the centurion as if they were obeying the emperor. In the same way, the centurion understood that Jesus is under the authority of God the Father, the Creator of the Universe. Thus, Jesus has authority over the Creation, just as God does. Given this, the centurion correctly reasoned, Jesus could command the forces of nature such that his servant would be healed. The centurion realized the Jesus' healing power was not magic and did not depend on ritual, but was power as given under the authority of the Father.

“When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said to those following Him, ‘I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith’” (vs. 10). Some may be surprised that Jesus, God in the flesh, was **“astonished”**. However, Jesus, having come as a man to earth, was limited in His knowledge when He walked the earth. “Jesus [could be **‘astonished’**] as a man, while as God nothing could [**‘astonish’**] Him. It is only the same difficulty that we meet with in such facts as His growing in wisdom (see Luke 2:52), and His not knowing the day and hour (Mark 13:32)” [Broadus, 179]. “Though amazement is not appropriate for God, seeing it must arise from new and unexpected happenings, yet it could occur in Christ, inasmuch as He had taken on our human emotions, along with our flesh” [Calvin, cited in Morris, 194]. Jesus was all the more **“astonished”** because the man who showed so much faith was not a Jew, but a Roman centurion. One of Jesus' primary missions on earth was to be the Messiah

to the Jews and to fulfill the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. Yet, sadly, as Jesus told those following Him: **“I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.”**

The lack of faith of the Jews would have dire consequences for those who did not believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah: **“I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (vss. 11–12). Many Jews thought that mere descendency from the patriarchs **“Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”** earned them entrance into the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus here explicitly teaches us that many of the original **“subjects of the kingdom”**, the descendants of **“Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”**, because of their lack of faith, **“will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** “The centurion comes from the camp to Christ, and the Israelite goes from the synagogue to hell. The harlot bows at Jesus’ feet a penitent, while the self-righteous Pharisee rejects the great salvation.” [Spurgeon, 90]. Let us note here that there are only two choices: the kingdom of heaven, and the outer darkness. And one’s final destination is tied to his faith in the power of Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus as the Messiah to the Jews, and the Savior of all, leads to the **“feast”** in the kingdom of heaven. Rejection of Jesus Christ leads to the outer darkness. We may differ on our understanding concerning what hell is like—whether it is literally a burning fire or not—but let us understand clearly that, whatever the specifics of hell may be, hell is always described in the Bible as a place of great torment and suffering.

The immediate result of the centurion's faith was the healing of his servant: **“Then Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.’ And His servant was healed at that very hour.”** (vs. 13). Jesus, though He had the power to heal all who were afflicted, chose often to respond to faith. And He responded to faith, not only in the act of healing, but also in the manner of healing. Had the faith of the centurion been weaker, Jesus was prepared to go to his house and lay hands on the servant (see vs. 7). Because the centurion had strong faith in the absolute power of Jesus over sickness, Jesus responded to his faith and healed the servant immediately, without going to the centurion's house, or even seeing the suffering servant. So even now, Jesus chooses often to respond to our faith, when we pray for need. Thus, it is very important to strengthen our faith in the power of Christ, in the sovereignty of God, through meditation, and through study of the Bible, which chronicles His wonderful works.

3 - MATTHEW 8:14-17

The Healing Power of Jesus

¹⁴ When Jesus came into Peter's house, He saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. ¹⁵ He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on Him. ¹⁶ When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to Him, and He drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."

— Matthew 8:14-17

MATTHEW, by recounting some of the miracles that Jesus performed, continues to demonstrate that Jesus had the authority to say what He said in the Sermon on the Mount. This section begins with Jesus healing the apostle Peter's mother-in-law: **"When Jesus came into Peter's house, He saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on Him"** (vss. 14–15). Note first, parenthetically, that Peter was married. Some traditions claim that Peter was not married, yet the fact that he had a **"mother-in-law"** refutes this. In fact, it seems that Peter (whose Greek name was Cephas) sometimes took his wife on missionary journeys. Paul mentions this when he speaks of the rights of the apostles: **"Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?"** (I Cor. 9:5).

When Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, He **"touched her hand."** We saw in the previous section, that Jesus healed the centurion's servant without even coming near him. He spoke the word and the servant was healed, though he was far away. However, most of the time, there was some bodily contact between Jesus and the ones He healed. One reason for this is that Jesus responded to the amount of faith of the one making the request of Jesus. As we saw in the previous section, Jesus was going to visit the centurion's servant to heal him. But when the centurion convinced Jesus that his faith was such that he believed Jesus could heal his servant without visiting him, Jesus, after commending the faith of the centurion, healed the servant without visiting him. One problem with Jesus healing in this way is that people could claim that the healing was a coincidence. One might say, "Ah. The servant just happened to be cured that same day. Jesus had nothing to do with it." And so, another reason, quite possibly, that Jesus healed often by physical contact was so that there would be no doubt that the healing resulted from the power of Jesus. "Our Lord several times wrought miracles without touching, and even at a distance, as in the healing of the centurion's slave in the preceding verses; but He usually performed some act, such as touching the person, taking Him by the hand, etc., which would make it evident to all concerned that He was the cause of the miraculous cure" [Broadus 181].

The quick recovery of Peter's mother-in-law is notable: **"He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on Him."** We would have expected the fever to have left her weak, but the Lord healed perfectly, and completely. **"She got up and began to wait on Him."** There were no after effects of the fever. "In the case of Christ's miracles, it was with diseases as with the sea. After the storm there is a swell, before the sea sinks into a calm. But Christ

reduced the fury of the sea by a word to perfect calm, as He did the rage of the fever to perfect health” [Wordsworth, in Broadus, 181].

It is quite beautiful that the hand that had been touched and healed by the Lord, immediately began to serve the Lord. **“She got up and began to wait on Him.”** The best testimony to others of the work the Lord has done in your life is to serve Him.

News of Jesus’ healing power must have spread quickly: **“When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to Him, and He drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick”** (vs. 16). The writers of the Gospels document in detail only a few of the numerous healings that Jesus performed. Every indication is that Jesus healed *all* those who came to Him. We find throughout the Gospels numerous summary statements, like the one here in vs. 16, that say that Jesus healed **“all”** the sick who were brought to Him (see also Matt. 4:24; Matt. 12:15; Matt. 14:36; Mark 6:56; Luke 4:40). We learn from this that Jesus healing power is absolute and unlimited: no illness was beyond His power to heal. Some of His healings even required the physical transformation of the healed individual, such as the healing of the shriveled hand (see Matt. 12:9–13). A visit of Jesus to a town must surely have been a remarkable event, to say the least, transforming the whole community. “The sun which had set upon an expectant crowd of miserable creatures, arose the next morning upon a city from which disease had fled” [Kitto, in Broadus, 181].

Jesus’ healing of all who came to Him fulfilled, we are told by Matthew, a prophecy from the book of Isaiah: **“This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases’”** (vs. 17). Matthew here is citing Isaiah 53:4. In Isaiah 53, the writer

prophesies the Messiah as the Suffering Servant. The verse that Matthew cites is part of a passage that tells how the Messiah will bear our sins and die for us: **“Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to His own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”** (Isaiah 53:4–6). And so, by declaring that Jesus’ healing ministry fulfills this passage, Matthew is teaching us that Jesus’ healing ministry is closely related to His act of atoning for our sins by dying on the cross for us. We learn here of the connection between sin and sickness, atonement and healing. Though we cannot say, in most cases, that a particular sickness of ours is a result of a particular sin of ours, we can say that all sickness in the world is a result of sin in the world. Sickness was not a part of the original creation, but rather came to us when death came to us after the Fall of man. So then, Jesus’ healing of *all* sicknesses and infirmities that were brought to Him looks forward to the time when, because of Jesus’ death on the cross, the results of the Fall of man will be reversed. “Jesus’ healing ministry is itself a function of His substitutionary death, by which He lays the foundation for destroying sickness” [Carson, 205]. “The healings anticipate the passion in that they begin to roll back the effects of the sins for which Jesus came to die” [Gundry, in Morris, 198]. “What He suffered in our stead made it right that we should be relieved, to some extent even in this life, and completely in eternity, of all the consequences of our sins.” [Broadus, 182].

4 - MATTHEW 8:18-22

Following Jesus

¹⁸ When Jesus saw the crowd around Him, He gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. ¹⁹ Then a teacher of the law came to Him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

²⁰ Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.”

²¹ Another disciple said to Him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

²² But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

— Matthew 8:18-22

MATTHEW HAS BEEN recounting some of Jesus’ miracles. Here, in preparation for recounting a miracle that Jesus performed on behalf of some of His disciples in the next section, Matthew gives us this episode in which Jesus teaches us some things about what it means to be His disciple. To set up the episode, Matthew tells us: **“When Jesus saw the crowd around Him, He gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake”** (vs. 18). After Jesus had been in any area for awhile, the crowds must surely have swelled bigger and bigger as they heard of the healings He performed. But alas, Jesus’ healing ministry was but one aspect of His ministry. Matthew earlier summarized what Jesus desired to accomplish in His earthly ministry: **“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their**

synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). To get large crowds of followers was not a main goal of Jesus’ ministry on earth. Crowds, as we all know, can be unruly, and can easily get out of control. Upon hearing of Jesus’ miraculous power, most of the people no doubt desired to see Jesus “perform” for them. The swelling crowd’s desire to see a miracle must surely have made it difficult for Jesus to effectively **“teach in their synagogues”** and **“preach the good news of the kingdom.”**

As Jesus was leaving, **“a teacher of the law came to Him and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head’”** (vss. 19–20). Here we have a **“teacher of the law”** stating boldly that he **“will follow [Jesus] wherever [He] go [es].”** One might think that Jesus would be glad to garner the prestige of having a mainstream **“teacher of the law”** be His disciple. Yet, Jesus seems to discourage the prospective disciple: **“Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.’”** Jesus was completely free from earthly ties, living as an itinerant preacher. The **“teacher of the law”**, by contrast, was a respected member of the community, no doubt living a comfortable life. Though the **“teacher of the law”** said that he would follow Jesus **“wherever...”**, Jesus, it seems, sensed that the **“teacher of the law”** had not given sufficient consideration to the tough life he would have to lead while following Jesus. He would not have the comforts of a house to come home to in the evening. He would not know where his next meal was coming from. Jesus wanted to make sure that the **“teacher of the law”** knew what he was getting into. Note that Jesus did not reject the man’s request. Rather, He let the

man know, forthrightly, what he would be getting into by becoming Jesus' disciple. "It was solemn warning rather than definite refusal, for perhaps He saw under the man's profession an element of superficiality and insincerity which demanded such caution." [Thomas, 113]. Jesus did not turn him away. Ultimately, He allowed the **"teacher of the law"** to make the final decision.

We should learn from Jesus' response to the **"teacher of the law"**. Some prospective disciples of Christ come forward to the altar because they think that becoming a Christian will turn their lives into a bed of roses. They think that any trial they face will be cleared away by Christ. They think that any sickness they contract will be instantly healed by prayer. This is not the case. Jesus never promised that His followers would never have any problems. On the contrary, He promised that His followers *would* have problems. He said: **"In this world, you will have trouble"** (John 16:33). Jesus teaches in this episode that "people who show a desire to come forward and profess themselves true disciples of Christ, should be warned plainly to 'count the cost', before they begin—Are they prepared to endure hardship? Are they ready to carry the cross?... Nothing, in fact, has done more harm to Christianity than the practice of filling the ranks of Christ's army with every volunteer who is willing to make a little profession" [Ryle, 78].

By the way, Jesus refers to Himself in verse 20 as **"the Son of Man"**. This is the first time in the New Testament that the term **"Son of Man"** is used to refer to Jesus. It is a term that describes the humanity of Christ, the Son of *Man*; yet at the same time the term exalts Him as the Messiah, for **"the Son of Man"** was a well-known Messianic term (e.g., see Dan. 7:13–14). Jesus frequently referred to Himself as **"the Son of Man"**. In doing so, He was explicitly claiming to be the Messiah. He was also rendering "prominent the great fact that He was

genuinely and thoroughly a man, a fact which believers in His divinity sometimes fail to appreciate” [Broadus, 185]. It is quite interesting to me that this first use of the term **“the Son of Man”** in the New Testament, here in verse 20, is within a description of Jesus’ life during His itinerant ministry, a life that lacks the comforts that even ordinary men have. The Lord of the Universe became the **“Son of Man”**, not to live the cushy life of a king, but to live the life of an itinerant preacher, in order that He may serve men by healing all their sicknesses and teaching them the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Let me point out one more thing about this passage before we go on. The phrase that Jesus uses here, **“the Son of Man has no place to lay His head,”** is ironic. John, in his gospel, describes the death of Jesus: **“When He had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that He bowed His head and gave up His spirit”** (John 19:30). In the original Greek, the words translated in the two verses **“lay His head”** and **“bowed His head”** are identical. It is as if the Holy Spirit, by using the same words in the two verses, is telling us that Jesus had no place to lay His head, until on the cross He bowed His head and died for us.

Next, **“Another disciple said to Him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus told him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead’”** (vs. 21–22). We learn from Luke that verse 21 is the disciple’s response to Jesus’ command: **“Follow me”** (see Luke 9:59). The disciple’s answer to Jesus’ request contains in essence a contradiction. He says: **“Lord, first...me...”** If Jesus is your **“Lord”**, you do not say, “Lord, first...me,” but rather, “Lord, first...You.” The will of Jesus, as our Lord, should be put above every human endeavor. If Jesus, in His Supreme Wisdom, says, **“Follow me,”** we should follow Him, no matter what obstacles lie in the way.

Now, when the disciple made the request: **“Lord, first let me go and bury my father,”** this did not mean that his father was literally already dead. Instead, this disciple used this expression to indicate that he wanted to stay with his father until he died, then he would follow Jesus. The timing of his father’s eventual death, of course, was in God’s hands, and could have happened days, months, years later. So the disciple was putting off for an indeterminate amount of time obedience to a command from the Lord.

Granted, to pick up and follow the Lord would have been a drastic step for the young man to take. In fact, our Lord has just acknowledged this in His response to the previous disciple, when He said: **“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.”** And to leave one’s family ties is a large step in itself to take. Yet, do we hesitate as much over leaving our family ties when our money-making careers call us away from them? When we are so quick to follow the “green”, why do we hesitate to follow our Lord when He calls us to? “Now we learn from Christ’s reply that sons are so to observe their duties towards their parents, as to be able to lay them aside when God’s call leads elsewhere, and to give first priority to His orders. All obligations to men come to an end, I say, when God asks attention for Himself. Individuals must see what God asks of them, what is the demand of the vocation to which they are tied, and not let earthly parents prevent them from having God retain His rights, who is the supreme and unique Father of all” [Calvin, 255].

It seems that when it comes to service to the Lord, we are so quick to find an excuse to get out of it. “An unwilling mind never lacks an excuse.” [Henry, in Broadus, 193]. “Even the strongest natural feelings must sometimes give way to Christian duties. Even sacred natural duties may have to be disregarded

for Christ's sake. How much less then should any ordinary matters turn us away from spiritual thoughts or activities?" [Broadus, 193]. So many who are called by the Lord to serve Him, even those who sincerely have a desire to serve Him, wait and wait for one thing after another to be resolved first. Just one more thing... But it is the young men and women who are needed as workers in the Lord's field. The young are strong and enthusiastic for the Lord. However, most young men and women have aging parents. If all of these young men and women waited until all family matters were resolved before they went out to serve the Lord, we would have few ministers of the Lord, and hardly any missionaries. "The Lord hath need of them, and they are heartily desirous of serving Him—*but...* They will do this and that— *but...* There is a difficulty in the way just now. As soon as that is out of the way they are ready. But what if the work required of them can only be done just now—cannot stand still till their difficulty is removed? What if, ere that is out of the way, their disposition to go has evaporated, or, if still there, has no field—'help having come from another quarter'? Young ministers are wanted as missionaries abroad, and young, ardent, female disciples, who are wanted as helpers for them. Both hesitate. 'But for those aged parents, I would gladly go; but till their head is beneath the ground I am not free.' By that time, however, they are neither so in love with the work, nor is the field open to them. While the harvest is so plenteous and the laborers so few, let those who hear the Macedonian cry, 'Come over and help us,' beware of allowing secular obstacles, however formidable, to arrest the impulse to obey the summons. Beyond all doubt it is owing to this, among other things, that the commission, '**Go, make disciples of all nations,**' remains still to so vast an extent unexecuted—eighteen centuries since it was given forth." [JFB, 55].

There is a remarkable balance in Jesus' response to the two disciples in this section: the first man was too fast, the second was too slow. The Lord seems to discourage the first, yet commands the second. We are all at different places. Some are too quick to jump, in need of counting the cost first, so that their service to God will not be a disastrous failure. Others need to stop procrastinating, need to stop putting other things ahead of stepping out in faith to serve the Lord. Oh, Lord, help us by Your Spirit, to know when and how we may serve You.

5 - MATTHEW 8:23-27

Calming the Storm

²³ Then He got into the boat and His disciples followed Him. ²⁴ Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵ The disciples went and woke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” ²⁶ He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. ²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey Him!”

— Matthew 8:23-27

WE HAVE JUST FINISHED an episode in which a disciple declared that he would follow Jesus anywhere. Here, in this episode, Jesus’ disciples do follow Him, into a boat to cross the lake. **“Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping”** (vss. 24). One might wonder, if they had known that the furious storm was coming, would the disciples have been so ready to follow Jesus **“wherever He went”**? “How many have faith and love enough to forsake all for Christ’s sake, and to follow Him whithersoever He goes, and yet are full of fears in the hour of trial? How many have grace enough to turn to Jesus in every trouble, crying, **‘Lord, save us’**, and yet not grace enough to lie still, and believe in the darkest hour that all is well?” [Ryle, 79]. “They were wise to follow Him, and safe in

so doing; but they were not therefore secure from trial. In the boat with Jesus is a happy place, but storms may come even when we are there” [Spurgeon, 94]. So, we are reminded by this episode that being a disciple of Jesus is not always a bed of roses. We will experience difficulties and trials, tests of our faith. These difficulties and trials are sanctioned by the Lord. In this episode, Jesus Himself brought the disciples into the trial: **“When Jesus saw the crowd around Him, He gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake”** (see Matt. 8:18). Trials and difficulties are necessary in order for us ourselves to know just how strong our own faith is. Untested faith is no faith at all. “We never perhaps know the weakness [or strength] of our faith, until we are placed in the furnace of trial and anxiety” [Ryle, 79]. If we pass the test of faith, we learn that our faith is strong, and thus we have more confidence as we face further tests of our faith. If we fail the test of faith, we know that we need to pray fervently that we may be strengthened in our faith, so that when the next test of our faith comes (as it surely will), we may pass it.

When the storm came, the disciples in this episode failed the test of faith: **“The disciples went and woke Him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!’ He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’”** (vss. 25–26). The **“furious storm”** put the disciples in fear for their lives. They thought they were **“going to drown”**. They must have thought that Jesus didn’t care for them, since He was **“sleeping”** during such a traumatic time for them. But they should have taken a cue from Jesus’ calmness during the storm. “He was not flurried: His trust in His great Father was so firm, that, rocked in the cradle of the deep, He slept peacefully. Winds howled, and waters dashed over Him; but He slept on” [Spurgeon, 94]. If their Lord was at such peace, they too should have been.

The disciples did, in fact, demonstrate one kind of faith. They showed that they believed that Jesus could save them, for they cried out to Him, **“Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”** But alas, their faith was **“little”**. They showed faith in the “seen”, but not in the “unseen”. They believed that they would be safe if Jesus (whom they saw) would just wake up and do something, but they failed to realize that God (whom they did not see) was in control of the situation all the time. Their fear overwhelmed their faith, and brought panic; whereas, their faith should have overwhelmed their fear, and brought peace. It would be unreasonable to expect that they would not fear at all. In fact, faith is useless unless there is fear. Why would you need faith if you did not fear? So, their feeling of fear was not wrong, and was not deserving of rebuke. On the contrary, fear that is under the control of faith is commendable. The rebuke came because the fear was not under the control of faith. They cried out: **“We’re going to drown!”** What kind of witness is this? I mean, if there was another boat nearby that looked over and saw Jesus’ disciples screaming, **“We’re going to drown!”**, what would those in the other boat have thought? “Lack of faith among those for whom faith must be central is especially disappointing.” [Carson, 215]. Disciples of the Lord of the Universe should not be thrown into a panic, especially when in the presence of their Lord.

Instead of panicking, they should have gone to their Lord and asked about the storm. Quite probably, Jesus would have reminded them that they all were in God’s hands, and that their ministry was far from being completed. Thus, God would certainly protect them from being drowned. The disciples should have realized that, since they were serving God, their lives were in His hands, fully and completely. They had been taught by their Lord that God takes care of the birds of the air

(see Matt. 6:26), why would God so carelessly turn His hand of protection away from His Son's dedicated disciples?

Though He rebuked them, Jesus did answer the prayer of the disciples: **“Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm”** (vs. 26). And so, after Jesus rebuked the disciples for their **“little faith”**, He **“rebuked the wind and the waves.”** It is interesting that Jesus **“rebuked”** the wind and the waves. Why **“rebuked”**? Some infer from this that Satan was somehow behind the storm, and that Jesus was rebuking Satan by rebuking the wind and the waves. I think more likely that Jesus is anthropomorphizing the wind and the waves, scolding them for riling His disciples. Also, by speaking aloud to the wind and the waves, Jesus demonstrated that it was through His power that the storm was calmed. If the storm had just stopped without Jesus speaking to it, some may have doubted that Jesus caused it to stop. As it was, there was no doubt that Jesus stopped the storm, for the storm did not gradually die away, but after He rebuked it, it immediately ceased: **“It was completely calm.”**

I find it interesting that in this episode, we see Jesus as both God and man. We see Him as a man, as He sleeps soundly after an exhausting day of service. We see Him as God in His power over nature, even able to command the wind and the waves. “How perfectly was the Savior's humanity manifested even when He exercised more than human power. Wearied, in body and in mind, by His labors during the day, He is sleeping on the cushion; the next moment He rises, and speaks to the winds and the waves with the voice of their Creator. So [later] He wept in human sympathy with the sisters of Lazarus, just before He spoke the word that brought him to life” [Broadus, 187].

The reaction of the disciples to Jesus' manifested power was awe: **“The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of**

man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey Him!” (vs. 27). It is ironic, and a little humorous, that the disciples were surprised that Jesus calmed the storm. After all, did they not cry out to Him in expectation that He could save them? This is evocative of the time, recounted in the book of Acts, when Peter was thrown into prison by Herod. Many people gathered together to pray for Peter. An angel, in answer to their prayer, set Peter free. Peter then went to the house where the people were praying and was welcomed by a servant-girl. She ran and told those who were praying that Peter was there. They answered: **“You’re out of your mind”** (see Acts 12:5-17). This again is the fickleness of faith: we cry out to the Lord for help, and then we are surprised when He is able to help us.

The disciples by seeing Jesus in action, were learning more and more **“what kind of man is this.”** The disciples had seen Jesus’ power over all sorts of disease and affliction. Here, they saw that He had power over all of nature. Note that, if the disciples had not been brought into the storm, they would not have seen **“what kind of man is this”**, they would not have seen demonstrated the mighty power of Jesus over nature.

6 - MATTHEW 8:28-34

The Demon-Possessed Man

²⁸ When He arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met Him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. ²⁹ “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?”

³⁰ Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. ³¹ The demons begged Jesus, “If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.”

³² He said to them, “Go!” So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. ³³ Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. ³⁴ Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they pleaded with Him to leave their region.

— Matthew 8:28-34

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, brought calm to the storm. In this section, He brings peace to raging, demon-possessed men: **“When He arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met Him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. ‘What do you want with us, Son of God?’ they shouted. ‘Have you**

come here to torture us before the appointed time?’ Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, ‘If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.’ He said to them, ‘Go!’ So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole *Matthew 8:28-34* S S P 2 9 herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water” (vss. 28–32). The first thing to note concerning this passage is that demon-possession is real. Demons are real. They are depicted in the Bible as nothing but real. They are constantly working against God, and against us.

In this passage, demons had possessed two men, causing them to act violently so **“that no one could pass that way”** (vs. 28). Their possession of the two men was so complete that the demons themselves spoke through the men. When they saw Jesus, they shouted: **“What do you want with us, Son of God?... Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?”** (vs. 29). These questions from the demons to Jesus are fraught with implications about the spirit world. First, the demons knew and acknowledged who Jesus was. They called Him **“Son of God”**. They knew that Jesus was more than just an itinerant preacher of the Word of God. They knew He had power over them. They also knew that eventually, at **“the appointed time”**, Jesus would **“torture”** them. All this implies that Jesus was pre-existent to the time He walked on earth, and that He was well-known in the spirit world.

It also implies that demons know about their ultimate fate. There is an **“appointed time”** for them, when they will be **“tortured”**. Jude speaks of this: **“And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these He has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day”** (Jude 6). Then, we learn in Revelation that, after the millennial reign, **“the devil, who deceived [God’s people], was thrown into**

the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).

But the demons knew that their **“appointed time”** to be **“tortured”** had not yet come. They knew that God, for a time, was allowing them to do their evil work on earth. Nevertheless, they knew that Jesus had power over them, and that Jesus’ ministry on earth was special. They also most likely knew that Jesus healed all the sick and demon-possessed that He came in contact with. Thus, the demons knew that Jesus would heal the men they were possessing. So, **“the demons begged Jesus, ‘If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs’”** (vs. 31). “Devils would sooner dwell inside swine than be in the presence of Jesus” [Spurgeon, 96]. Apparently, the people in the area raised pigs. We can imply from this one of two things: Either the area was a Gentile area, or the Jews in the area were in disobedience to the law, for it was illegal according to the law for Jews to raise pigs (see Lev. 11:7).

Jesus’ primary concern was for the well-being of the men. He did not show that same concern for the pigs. The pigs were secondary. He allowed the demons to do with the pigs what they would: **“He said to them, ‘Go!’ So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water”** (vs. 32). Now, pigs hate water, so we can assume that the demons drove them into the lake. The destructive desire of the demons not only operated upon the men, but also on the pigs. By the way, the destruction of the pigs by the demons demonstrates that the malady of the two men was not some psychological disorder, but was an actual case of demon-possession. When the demons left the men, the men were healed. That the demons left the men was demonstrated by the fact that they went into the pigs and destroyed them.

A possible motive for the demons' destruction of the pigs (other than their inherent desire to destroy all that they come in contact with) was to turn the townspeople against Jesus. In this, the demons succeeded: **“Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they pleaded with Him to leave their region”** (vss. 33–34). How could people, who saw a demonstration of Jesus' power over evil, beseech Him to leave? The reaction of the people showed that they were willing to endure the presence of demons in their area, as long as their moneymaking opportunities were not disturbed in any way. Should not the people rather have rejoiced that the demon-possessed men were now delivered? They would no longer terrorize the area. They would now be productive citizens.

Then also, was not their blame misplaced? The townspeople incorrectly blamed Jesus for the destruction of the pigs. It was not Jesus who destroyed the pigs, it was the demons. Why are we so quick to blame the Lord for the devil's work? And would not the departure of Jesus from their area increase the chance that demons would be destructive in their area?

There is some irony in the way that Matthew describes the town's reaction. He says: **“Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus.”** After reading this sentence, we would naturally assume that the town went out to worship Him. What a blessing! A whole town coming out to meet Jesus. But then we read: **“And when they saw Him, they pleaded with Him to leave their region.”** How sad. “A rare occurrence— a whole city meeting Jesus, and that city unanimous in their appeal to Him. Alas, it was the unanimity of evil! Here was a whole city at a prayer meeting, praying against their own blessing... What

a mercy that our Lord does not hear every prayer of this sort!”
[Spurgeon, 98].

7 - MATTHEW 9:1-8

Healing of the Paralytic

¹ Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to His own town. ² Some men brought to Him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”

³ At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!”

⁴ Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, “Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? ⁵ Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? ⁶ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” Then he said to the paralytic, “Get up, take your mat and go home.” ⁷ And the man got up and went home. ⁸ When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.

— Matthew 9:1-8

AS MATTHEW CONTINUES to recount some of the miracles that Jesus performed, he now also begins to recount some of the opposition that Jesus faced as He went about doing His good works of preaching, teaching and healing. At the end of the previous chapter, we saw some of this opposition. After Jesus drove the demons out of the men who were terrorizing the town, the people of the town **“pleaded with [Jesus] to leave their region”** (Matt. 8:34). Here in this chapter we find that Jesus answered that misguided prayer of the people of that

town: **“Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to His own town”** (vs. 1). “Christ will not force Himself on anyone’s attention and so, when besought to depart, He immediately complied” [Thomas, 116].

Jesus’ **“own town”** was Capernaum. This is where He came to live after leaving Nazareth (see Matt. 4:13). Matthew’s account of this episode is rather abbreviated. We learn in Mark and Luke that Jesus was teaching the Word at someone’s house. It was very crowded. **“Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus”** (Luke 5:18–19). Now that’s determination! The friends of the paralytic would let no obstacle get in their way as they sought to bring the paralytic to Jesus to be healed. For those in the house, the scene must have been quite humorous. Jesus was seriously teaching the Word of God, when rumblings and footsteps were heard on the roof. Then one by one the tiles were removed until daylight could be seen streaming through a hole in the roof. And next, the man was lowered into the house on a mat, right in front of Jesus, who, despite the commotion, was still teaching the Word. Those in the house must surely have wondered how Jesus would react. Would He be mad that His sermon was interrupted? Not at all, for the men who brought the paralytic gave, in effect, a sermon of their own by their demonstrated faith: **“When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven’”** (vs. 2).

Now, when Jesus said, **“Take heart...”**, there must have been great expectation that Jesus would heal the man right away. Instead, Jesus first addressed the deeper need. He said first: **“Your sins are forgiven.”** Upon hearing this, the crowd must

have felt a let down. Certainly, the men who toiled to lower the paralytic through the roof felt let down. They expected a physical healing, not a spiritual healing! What about the paralytic? Did he feel let down that Jesus forgave his sins rather than heal him? Perhaps Jesus discerned that the paralytic felt heavily burdened by his sins. And if so, the paralytic would have felt relieved to have the burden of sin removed. Perhaps the paralytic thought that his physical malady was caused in some way by his sins. In that case, for him, the more basic need would have been the forgiveness of sins.

Indeed, in general, for all of us, the forgiveness of sins is much more important than any physical healing we may require. We have heard it often said that good physical health in this life is the greatest blessing. This is not correct. Good spiritual health is much more important. Many people with crippling physical maladies lead a joyful life in Jesus Christ because of their healthy standing before God. Likewise, many physically healthy people lead miserable lives because they are not spiritually healthy: they live under the burden of their sins.

So, the crowd may have felt let down at first because they thought that they had missed out on seeing a miracle of healing. But, in actuality, Jesus' ability to forgive sin represented a much greater miracle than any physical healing He did. First, Jesus was God incarnate, so He had the authority to forgive sin. The coming to earth of God, in the body of a man, is an astounding miracle, one that we humans cannot fully understand. We can comprehend how Jesus, the Creator of the Universe, can heal a man. But how can the Creator of the Universe limit Himself and live in a human body for thirty-three years? Second, the fact that the plan of God left room for the forgiveness of men of their sin through the death and resurrection of His Son is not only a great mercy, but also a great miracle: a demonstration

of God's great love for men, despite their sin. May the Lord be praised!

Jesus' statement, **"Your sins are forgiven"**, was essentially a claim that He is God. Note that Jesus did not say, "Your sins will someday be forgiven." Rather, He said, **"Your sins are forgiven."** Jesus forgave the man's sins right then and there. The teachers of the law realized that Jesus was claiming to be God. They said, as Luke tells us, **"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"** (see Luke 5:21). God Himself told the Israelites, through Isaiah: **"I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more"** (Isa. 43:25). Matthew reports that the teachers of the law said to themselves: **"This fellow is blaspheming!"** (vs. 3). And if Jesus were a mere man, the teachers of the law would have been 100% correct! However, Jesus was not just a mere man. The teachers of the law immediately jumped to the conclusion that Jesus was blaspheming, without considering the possibility that Jesus, indeed, had the authority to forgive sins.

Jesus answers the teachers of the law with a marvelous, doubly ironic question: **"Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, 'Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?"** (vss. 4–5). At first thought, the answer to this last question is that it is easier to say, **"Your sins are forgiven"** than **"Get up and walk"**, because if you say **"Get up and walk"** then your authority to say it will be immediately verifiable. If the paralytic does get up and walk away, it will be demonstrated that you have special healing powers. However, if the paralytic does not get up and walk, you will look like a fool. Now, if you say, **"Your sins are forgiven"**, who can prove that they aren't? In fact, all false religions make the erroneous claim that "your sins are forgiven." False religions

make a claim that you can have peace with God apart from Christ. This is the same as saying “your sins are forgiven”, without having the authority to say such a thing. But who can prove them wrong? They get away with saying such a thing, because the statement, in itself, is not verifiable in this life.

So, from the point of view of us in the world, the statement “your sins are forgiven” is easier to say. However, in actuality, the statement “get up and walk” is easier to say. There is no moral reason why God should not give someone special healing power to heal paralytics. In fact, the twelve apostles, and many prophets, of the Bible were given special healing powers at times. Paul even raised someone from the dead. However, no one except God has the authority to forgive sins. Such a power is not transferable. We sin against God, and so only God can forgive sins. In God’s truth, the statement “your sins are forgiven” is the more difficult statement to say, because it could only be said by God Himself. Moreover, God’s plan of atonement for sin entailed that sins could only be forgiven through blood sacrifice. Ultimately, for Jesus to be able to forgive our sins, He had to come into the world as a man, and then die on the cross for our sins. Certainly, when this is taken into consideration, the cost, for Jesus, of being able to say, **“Your sins are forgiven”**, was much greater than any physical toll from healing the paralytic.

The bottom line is, then, that both statements are exceedingly difficult to say. None of the two by any means is **“easy”** to say. Both works—healing the paralytic, and forgiving his sins—were recognized by the witnesses as the work of God. Both were impossible for men, in and of themselves. And so, since the healing of the paralytic would be so clearly a work of God, Jesus used it as a proof that He had the authority to forgive sins. For, why would God give Jesus the ability to heal the paralytic if He preceded the healing by blaspheming God

by erroneously stating that the paralytic's sins were forgiven? As Jesus put it: **“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...”** Then He said to the paralytic, **‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’** **And the man got up and went home”** (vss. 6–7).

The witnesses to the healing realized the significance of it: **“When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men”** (vs. 8). It was clear to the witnesses of the healing that it was a miraculous event. They were **“filled with awe”**. They had witnessed a great work of God, and so **“they praised God.”** One test for true works of God is whether they result in the praising of the True and Living God. Far from “blaspheming”, this work of Jesus resulted in praise for God.

The crowd was not only awestruck by the act of healing, but also by what it signified: Jesus had the authority to forgive sins. The implications of this are astounding, earthshaking. With each miraculous work of Jesus, culminating with His resurrection from the dead, the witnesses were given another proof that Jesus indeed was who He claimed to be. Each miracle that Jesus performed provided proof that He had authority to say what He said, and provided proof that what He said was true. So, when Jesus said, **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”** (John 11:25), and then followed this by raising Lazarus from the dead, who could deny that **“whoever believes in [Him] will live”**? The healing of the paralytic gave proof that Jesus could forgive sins. And so, when Jesus later said, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6), who could deny this? The One who is able to **“forgive sins”** would also certainly know under what conditions those sins could be forgiven. Jesus

stated, **“No one comes to the Father except through me.”** This statement testifies that they are lying who say that you can come to God apart from Jesus. This statement testifies that they are lying who say that there are many paths to God. There is one way to God, only one way to forgiveness from sin. This way is through Jesus. Again, He stated, **“I am *the way*....”**

8 - MATTHEW 9:9-13

Miracle of a Transformed Life

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," He told him, and Matthew got up and followed Him. ¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with Him and His disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners?'"

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

— Matthew 9:9-13

HERE MATTHEW relates his own call into service by Jesus: "As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' He told him, and Matthew got up and followed Him" (vs. 9). Interestingly, Matthew places this episode within a section of his book in which he is recounting various miracles of Jesus. Matthew surely realized that the transformation of his own life from a tax collector to a follower of Jesus was miraculous. "It is surprising that Jesus should call a tax-collector, but even more so that that man should be ready so promptly to leave a business so lucrative" [Thomas, 125].

In that culture, tax collectors were normally very prosperous. They would bid to the Roman government for the right to collect taxes and tolls. Then, having paid the government for this right, they were free to collect as much as they could in order to make a profit. Their actions to extract every penny they could on taxes and tolls made them very much hated. Certainly, the hatred they faced must have, in turn, engendered much hatred within them. Yet, through Jesus' transforming power, Matthew became a man of love. Brothers and sisters, do not give up praying for your unsaved friends and relatives. The Lord can soften the hardest of hearts, transform the most corrupt of lives.

It appears that Matthew worked near the seaside (see Mark 2:13–14). He very likely sat in a booth and collected taxes for the transit of persons and goods across the lake, and received tolls on the fishing and trade of the lake. “We can account for his immediately leaving all and following Jesus by the reasonable supposition that at the place of toll by the lakeside he had often seen and heard Jesus, and had gradually become prepared in mind to obey such a call” [Broadus, 198]. Matthew gave up much in worldly terms to follow Jesus—much more than the other disciples. The fishermen could go back to their professions, should things not work out, but a tax collector could not return to his profession, as his contract with the government would have been awarded to someone else. And then, who would want to employ a former tax collector?

Some time later, **“while Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and ‘sinners’ came and ate with Him and His disciples”** (vs. 10). Those who are hated in society tend to flock together, and so, Matthew’s friends were tax collectors and others who were named as **“sinners”** by that society. When Matthew became a follower of Jesus, he did not shun his unsaved friends. Rather, he invited

them over when Jesus was there, most certainly hoping that they would also become followers of Jesus.

Rather than seeing the good that could come from Jesus' influence on the **"sinners"**, the Pharisees disparaged Jesus for socializing with the **"sinners"**: **"When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"** (vs. 11). Note that the Pharisees didn't go directly to Jesus with their question. They asked the disciples. Were they afraid to ask Jesus directly? Or did they want to sow seeds of doubt concerning Jesus in the minds of the disciples?

Their question, of course, was rhetorical. The Pharisees were, in effect, saying, "No true man of God would associate with such sinners." In saying this, the Pharisees were greatly misunderstanding the purpose of the ministry of the Messiah, which was to save sinners. This ministry of the Messiah was prophesied (among other places) in the book of Isaiah: **"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I'"** (Isa. 65:1). "In their proud blindness [the Pharisees] fancied that a teacher sent from heaven ought to have no dealings with such people. They were wholly ignorant of the grand design for which the Messiah was to come into the world, to be a Saviour, a Physician, a healer of sin-sick souls" [Ryle, 85]. The Pharisees were also greatly misunderstanding their own standing before God: they didn't realize that they themselves were sinners, greatly in need of salvation through Jesus. Instead, the Pharisees maintained a **"holier-than-thou"** attitude that is greatly displeasing to God. The Lord, through Isaiah, described His feelings toward those who are **"holier-than-thou"**: **"I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, after**

their own thoughts; a people that provoketh me to anger continually to my face; ...which say, 'Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou.' These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day" (Isa. 65:2,3,5, AV).

Jesus, hearing the Pharisees' question, though it was directed to the disciples, answered it succinctly and powerfully: **"On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners"** (vss. 12–13). Jesus' reply consisted of three parts: an argument from analogy; an appeal from Scripture; a declaration of His mission. First, His analogy: **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** When Jesus healed those who were physically sick, no one had any problem. But when He sought to heal those who were spiritually sick, the Pharisees found fault. Recall the three aspects of Jesus' ministry, as summarized by Matthew: **"Jesus went throughout Galilee, *teaching* in their synagogues, *preaching* the good news of the kingdom, and *healing* every disease and sickness among the people"** (Matt. 4:23). Just as Jesus' healing power would have been wasted upon the physically healthy, so also, His teaching and preaching skills would have been wasted on those who were spiritually healthy. We also would do well to remember this: it is not those who have it together spiritually who need Jesus, but those who are lost in sin, spiritually sick. "Here is a lesson needed in every age, for we are too apt to hold ourselves aloof from the vile and disreputable, when kind and patient efforts might win some of them to better things" [Broadus, 200].

Second, Jesus appealed from Scripture: **"But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" It must have been quite shocking to hear Jesus tell the respected**

teachers of the Law to **“go and learn”**. Jesus was in effect pointing out to them that their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures—which was the basis of their supposed ‘righteousness’—was lacking. The Pharisees needed to learn that the ritualistic portions of the law—the sacrifices, etc.—were worthless if one did not practice mercy. “The mere externals of religion are offensive to God, where its spirit and life are absent” [Broadus, 200]. “If sacrifice is emphasized at the expense of mercy, it loses its spiritual value, and becomes an act of hypocrisy” [Thomas, 126].

Third, Jesus declared His mission: **“For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** This statement was surprising to the Pharisees. Presently, they expected the Messiah, I suppose, to come and pick out the righteous, beginning with themselves, and lead them into the throne room to rule the earth with Him. Jesus had a more important work to do, however. By the Lord’s great mercy and grace, He came first to call sinners to Him, so that they may be imputed with His righteous. You see, at that time, there were none who were truly righteous. Some could be temporarily righteous, by performing the prescribed sacrifices of atonement for their sins. But as soon as they sinned again, they were no longer righteous. The problem with the Pharisees was that they did not know that they were not righteous. They were self-righteous, but not righteous in God’s eyes. Their self-righteousness was keeping them from the kingdom of heaven. How true are the Lord’s words: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”** (Matt. 5:3).

9 - MATTHEW 9:18-26

The Desperate Seek Jesus

¹⁸ While He was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before Him and said, “My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live.” ¹⁹ Jesus got up and went with him, and so did His disciples.

²⁰ Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind Him and touched the edge of His cloak. ²¹ She said to herself, “If I only touch His cloak, I will be healed.”

²² Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” He said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed from that moment.

²³ When Jesus entered the ruler’s house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, ²⁴ He said, “Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at Him. ²⁵ After the crowd had been put outside, He went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. ²⁶ News of this spread through all that region.

— Matthew 9:18-26

MATTHEW CONTINUES recounting some of the miracles that Jesus performed: **“While He was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before Him and said, ‘My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live.’ Jesus got up and went with him, and so did His disciples”** (vs. 18–19). We have seen, in the previous few sections, opposition to Jesus and His ministry from various

sources, even in the midst of His performing great and marvelous miracles. Jesus has been called a blasphemer by teachers of the law (see Matt. 9:3); He has been accused by Pharisees of associating with the wrong sorts of people (see Matt. 9:11); even some disciples of John the Baptist have faulted Him for the way His disciples worship (see Matt. 9:14). Many, from the outside looking in, attempt to find fault with Jesus. And then there are those whom one would expect to find fault with Jesus, who seek Him instead, because they are brought to their end, brought to their place of need for Him. In this episode, a **“ruler”** came to Jesus, and **“knelt before Him”** in an attitude of worship. This **“ruler”**, we are told in the Gospel of Mark, was a synagogue ruler named Jairus (see Mark 5:22). Being a synagogue ruler, a religious leader among the Jews, one might have expected opposition to Jesus from him. “That a member of the local establishment should seek Jesus’ aid probably means that he was desperate. It is clear that those in official positions were coming to regard Jesus as a dangerous heretic; thus there is every reason for supposing that the synagogue official would try every other source of help before turning to Jesus” [Morris, 228]. The desperate ruler made an astounding request from Jesus: no less than asking Jesus to raise his daughter from the dead. Jesus, without ceremony and without hesitation, **“got up and went with him.”**

On the way to heal Jairus’ daughter, someone else sought Jesus’ help: **“Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind Him and touched the edge of His cloak. She said to herself, ‘If I only touch His cloak, I will be healed.’ Jesus turned and saw her. ‘Take heart, daughter,’ He said, ‘your faith has healed you.’ And the woman was healed from that moment”** (vss. 20–22). Like the ruler, this woman was

desperate. We learn from the Gospel of Mark that she had tried many doctors, and was out of money. Instead of getting better, she got worse (see Mark 5:26). Her desperation was made worse by the fact that she didn't feel she could publicly come up to Jesus, for the Law said that she was ceremonially unclean (see Lev. 15:25). Thus, she resolved to sneak up behind Jesus, and just touch the hem of his cloak.

As Jesus healed, it is very interesting how Jesus responded to the faith of the people. Jesus, by His grace, always met the people at their point of faith. Earlier, a Centurion came to Jesus, telling him his servant was deathly ill. The Centurion told Jesus that He did not have to come to his house, but could heal Him with just a word. Jesus did just that. In this passage, the synagogue ruler asks Jesus to **“come and put [His] hand”** on his dead daughter to raise her. Jesus went with him to his house to do just that. And then, this woman, who believed she would be healed by touching the hem of Jesus' cloak, is healed in just that way. In fact, Jesus told her: **“Your faith has healed you”** (vs. 21). Note that it was not the cloak that healed her. It was the power of Jesus, together with **“her faith”**. The Holy Grail does not have any magical powers, nor does the Shroud of Turin. “[Jesus] speaks of **‘your faith’**; it is important that the woman understand that she had not been cured by magic of a kind that meant that anyone who touched Jesus would be healed. Her cure had been the result of a mighty power in Jesus, indeed, but it came to her because of her faith, not because of magic in a touch.” [Morris, 230].

The delay caused by healing the woman must certainly have tried the faith of Jairus. But Jesus did continue on His way to Jairus' house: **“When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, He said, ‘Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.’ But they laughed at Him. After the crowd had been put outside, He went in**

and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region” (vss. 23–26). The **“noisy crowd”** spoken of here probably consisted of professional mourners. The **“flute players”** were also hired for the daughter’s funeral. The fact that the flute players and mourners were there is clear evidence that the girl was indeed dead. In that culture, it was customary to hire professional mourners for a funeral, who would wail loudly. Jesus looked ahead at what He was to do, and told the flute players and mourners: **“Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.”** Death, when confronted by the power of Jesus, is but sleep. The mourners, out of character, suspended momentarily their mourning wails and **“laughed at Him.”** The mourners laughed in mockery. They had no faith that Jesus had power over death. “The crowd mocked Jesus, not just because He had said, ‘The girl is not dead but asleep,’ but even more because they thought that this great healer had arrived too late. Now He was going too far; carried away by His own success, He would try His skill on a corpse and make a fool of Himself” [Carson, 231]. It is a shameful, blasphemous thing to laugh at Christ. Yet, sadly, it seems *en vogue* to laugh at Christ. Here in America, there have been many movies, TV shows (especially cartoons), and so-called “art” exhibitions that laugh at Christ, in one way or another. This is extremely sad, for Jesus Christ did nothing but show love for everyone He met.

Jesus would silence the mocking laughter of the mourners. He met Jairus at his point of faith, and **“took the girl by the hand, and she got up.”** Matthew reports this so simply, and we are so familiar with the stories of Jesus’ miraculous powers, that we take them for granted. Think of what Jesus did. He demonstrated His power over death by raising a girl from the dead. Do you have a son or daughter? Think of the joy you would have if Jesus did the same for your child! And also

consider this: No one but Jesus has the power over death. You would do well to listen to and to obey the teachings of the one who has power over death.

Jesus' Tireless Service

²⁷ As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"

²⁸ When He had gone indoors, the blind men came to Him, and He asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

"Yes, Lord," they replied.

²⁹ Then He touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"; ³⁰ and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." ³¹ But they went out and spread the news about Him all over that region.

³² While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. ³³ And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." ³⁴ But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."

— Matthew 9:27-34

WITH THIS EPISODE, Matthew concludes the section of his Gospel that recounts many miracles that Jesus performed. In this chapter, we get a sense of the tirelessness of Jesus' ministry. Jesus did good for others continually, and tirelessly, always looking to the needs of those who sought Him out. He had just journeyed to Jairus' house to raise his daughter from the dead.

On the way to Jairus' house, the woman who suffered from bleeding touched Jesus' garment, and was healed. Now, concerning the return trip from Jairus' house, we read: **“As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, calling out, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David!’ When He had gone indoors, the blind men came to Him, and He asked them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ they replied. Then He touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith will it be done to you’; and their sight was restored”** (vs. 27–30).

The two blind men addressed Jesus as **“Son of David”**. This was a term for the Messiah, which, more specifically, refers to the Kingship of Jesus as the Son of David. It is appropriate that the blind men seek healing by referring to Jesus as the Messiah because it was prophesied that the Messiah would **“open eyes that are blind”** (Isa. 42:7; see also Isa. 35:5 and Isa. 29:18). One might say, even, that since it was prophesied, this was a miracle that *had* to happen. And in fact, it is recorded that Jesus gave sight to many who were blind (see Matt. 11:5; 12:22; 15:30; 20:30; 21:14; Mark 8:22; John 5:3; 9:1).

Interestingly, Jesus did not immediately heal the blind men. First, He delayed until He reached His destination. The blind men followed Him indoors, and then He asked them, **“Do you believe that I am able to do this?”** (vs. 28). They answered with assurance: **“Yes, Lord.”** Jesus responded to their faith, **“touched their eyes”** and told them, **“According to your faith will it be done to you.”** We see demonstrated here an established connection between the faith of the blind men, and their being healed by Jesus. Jesus sensed the faith of the blind men, verified it, and responded to it by touching their eyes and healing them. The faith of the blind men is similar to our faith. Their faith was based not upon what they saw, but upon what they heard from others, just as ours is. The blind men could

not see the miracles of Jesus, but heard of the miracles and great works of Jesus, and also heard the teachings of Jesus, and based on these things, believed in Him as their Lord and Messiah.

After He healed them, **“Jesus warned them sternly, ‘See that no one knows about this’”** (vs. 30). The healed men, however, ignored this command of Jesus: **“But they went out and spread the news about Him all over that region”** (vs. 31). So, although the men had faith, sadly they did not have obedience. Jesus’ command was unambiguous and definitive, **“sternly”** given. Now, someone might argue that the Lord’s command in this case didn’t make sense, was not even in the Lord’s best interest. “Some have sought to excuse the disobedience of the two men on the ground that it was very natural, and was no doubt sincerely designed to do Him honor. But still it was a fault. What can be so pleasing to Him, or so conducive to His glory, as simple, unquestioning, loving obedience?” [Broadus, 208].

Are we smarter than the Lord? Do we, more than the Lord, know what is best? It is never right to disobey the Lord, even if we do not understand the reasons for the Lord’s command. Is He not our **“Lord”**? What is quite sad here is that, though the faith of the healed men was true, their declaration that Jesus was their **“Lord”** was not true. One does not disobey one’s **“Lord”**, if he truly is his **“Lord”**. We do not, here and now, know the exact reasons for the Lord’s command to them; and clearly, the men did not know either. However, the Lord did have a reason for His command (He is a reasonable Lord), and so, they should have obeyed. We must obey the Lord’s commands, at times, without knowing the reasons behind them.

Matthew continues recounting Jesus’ tireless service to those who were in need: **“While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was**

brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, ‘Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.’ But the Pharisees said, ‘It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons’” (vss. 32–34). The demon-possessed man, naturally, did not approach Jesus, but **“was brought to Jesus”**. They are good friends who bring a man in need to Jesus.

The demon was **“driven out”** by Jesus. Note the strong term **“driven out”**. Demons do not leave without forceful expulsion. The crowd, it seems, did not expect a healing, for they were **“amazed”**, and noted their astonishment, saying, **“Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”** The reaction of the crowd is contrasted with the reaction of the Pharisees to the healing. The Pharisees said, **“It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.”** There is jealousy in their explanation of Jesus’ power. They desperately seek an explanation for Jesus’ great works that will diminish His esteem in the eyes of the people. “They were not willing to acknowledge the truth about Jesus’ miracles, for it would diminish their own consideration among the people” [Broadus, 209]. But their explanation makes no sense, as Jesus later tells them: **“If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself”** (Matt. 12:26). By their reaction, “we learn that when godlessness comes to the extreme point of blindness, there is no work of God, however plain, which will not be distorted in its eyes” [Calvin, 276].

From Hearers to Doers

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

³⁶ When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.”

^{10:1} He called His twelve disciples to Him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him.

— Matthew 9:35-10:4

MATTHEW, by way of introducing the next section, again summarizes Jesus’ ministry: **“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness”** (vs. 35). Note again the three activities that comprised Jesus’ ministry: **“teaching”**, **“preaching”**, and **“healing”**. His service was focused, and

meaningful. Jesus tirelessly carried out His service. His service to His Father was His life. And He did not perform the works of service rotely. He served because He cared for those whom He served: **“When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”** (vs. 36). Compassion is a godly trait. In fact, compassion is the first trait that the Lord Himself names as He describes Himself to Moses: **“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,...”** (Ex. 34:6). Let us not underestimate the magnitude of the blessing of having a Lord that feels compassion for us. We do not have a Lord, as agnostics may tell you, that is aloof and apart from His creation. But we have a Lord, who not only sees all that is happening, but also feels compassion for those who are in trouble, who are downhearted, who are lost. Moreover, since our Lord lived as a man, He knows what it is like to be a man, and to experience what men experience. Thus, He is all the more able to feel true compassion.

Seeing Jesus’ compassion reminds us that, if we have the mind of Christ, we will also feel compassion for the **“harassed and helpless.”** “The man who does not feel for the souls of all unconverted persons can surely not have the mind of Christ” [Ryle, 93]. Now, compassion, being a feeling, is not something that can be commanded. I cannot say to you: “Have compassion!” Rather, compassion must be cultivated. Praying for others is a great way to cultivate compassion. As you pray, put yourselves in the place of those you are praying for. Feel their needs.

In this case, Jesus’ compassion on the people was due to the fact that they were **“harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”** (vs. 36). Jesus, in all likelihood, was concerned for the lack of spiritual leadership for the people.

We have seen in the last few studies how Jesus Himself was **“harassed”** by the spiritual leaders of the day. In the midst of His good works, Jesus was called a blasphemer (see Matt. 9:3), was chastised for associating with sinners (see Matt. 9:11), was denigrated for not observing man-made ritual fasts (see Matt. 9:14), and was accused of being in league with the devil (see Matt. 9:34). Now, if the Lord of the Universe was **“harassed”** by the spiritual leaders, most certainly the ordinary people were as well. The people had it worse, though, because they not only were **“harassed”**, but also **“helpless”**. Their spiritual leaders were not actually leading them. The spiritual leaders were not giving sufficient spiritual guidance or instruction. Thus, the people were **“like sheep without a shepherd.”**

Jesus brought this to the attention of His disciples: **“Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field’”** (vss. 37–38). Jesus seems to be speaking this to His disciples in general, not just to the twelve disciples. Note well that Jesus’ first request of His disciples concerning the **“harassed and helpless”** is prayer: **“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.”** Jesus does not, at first, seek workers to send out. Rather, He tells His disciples to pray that workers would be sent out. Jesus speaks first to what is most important in evangelism: not the sending out of a few, but prayer by all. Don’t underestimate the value of prayer in this area: “By prayer we reach Him, without whom work and money are alike in vain: we obtain the aid of the Holy Ghost.— Money can pay agents; universities can give learning; bishops may ordain; congregations may elect: but the Holy Ghost alone can make ministers of the Gospel, and raise up lay workmen in the spiritual harvest, who need not be ashamed” [Ryle, 93- 94].

It is significant and instructive that Jesus spent a whole night in prayer before choosing His Twelve Disciples (see Luke 6:12,13).

Jesus' times were not unique with respect to the plenteousness of the harvest. Indeed, we could say today, in fact, anytime or anywhere: **“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”** The number ready to hear and respond to the gospel was great then, and is great now. Do not underestimate this fact. “It is surely due to lack of spiritual insight that we fail to realize how much men are hungering for God; we are apt instead to judge hastily by cold or hostile exteriors and talk of hardness of soil and need of plowing and planting, when our Master sees crop wasting for lack of reapers” [Griffith Thomas, 137].

The prayer of verse 38 of chapter nine is answered in chapter ten. To answer the prayer that God **“send out workers into His harvest field”**, Jesus **“called His twelve disciples to Him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness”** (vs. 1). Most of chapter ten consists of the instructions that Jesus gave to the Twelve disciples, as He sent them out to preach, teach and heal. But first, Matthew introduces to us the chosen Twelve disciples of Jesus: **“These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him”** (vss. 2 –4). There were Twelve chosen because there are twelve tribes of Israel. Later in Matthew, Jesus tells the Twelve that they will **“sit on twelve thrones”** and rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matt. 19:28). While Jesus instructed all of His disciples in chapter nine to pray that workers be sent out, here Jesus specially chooses twelve of them to be sent out. These were

ordinary men in their occupations and stations, but they were extraordinary men in the zealously for the gospel of Jesus Christ. We who are Christians are their children in the faith. Through them, the gospel was spread throughout the world.

In chapter five, we were told that Jesus' **“disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them”** (Matt. 5:1–2). The teachings of Jesus to all of His disciples filled chapters 5 through 7 of this Gospel. Here in this chapter, Jesus turns the hearers into doers. Jesus is sending out twelve of those who heard His teachings to put His teachings into practice. For the true disciple of Jesus, there must be a transition from hearer to doer, from listener to servant. There is much work to be done in the kingdom of God. Brothers and sisters, if you are not yet a doer, ask that God would put you to work. Seek that method of service that God has ready for you to do.

12 - MATTHEW 10:5-8

Instructions for Apostles, pt. 1

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.”

— Matthew 10:5-8

IN THIS CHAPTER, Jesus prepares the chosen twelve apostles for the very first evangelistic missionary journey, by giving them instructions concerning their journey. This is a significant moment. The Gospel of Jesus Christ will be spread throughout the world, by and large, through the efforts of missionaries going into strange lands and spreading the good news. Jesus declares the importance of evangelistic efforts by sending His apostles out during His lifetime. Later, the evangelistic efforts of these original apostles of Jesus would not only be important for the Christian religion, but historically significant for all peoples, changing the course of Western Civilization. Certainly, at this point, the apostles did not realize the significance of this journey, but Jesus did. He knew that this first journey, occurring while He was physically with them, would be crucially important to prepare them for their more expanded missionary activities later. “After a season spent in such personal labors, they will return, and remain long with

Him, receiving further instruction, which they will more earnestly desire and more fully appreciate, from their attempts at actual preaching. And finally, after His ascension, they will be ready, with the Holy Spirit as their abiding Instructor, to go and disciple all nations” [Broadus, 212].

And so here, Jesus prepares His apostles, gives them instructions concerning how they should conduct themselves, and alerts them to the inevitable opposition they will face. Though these instructions were given to the first apostles, in them are many guidelines and principles that can be applied by ministers of God’s Word today.

First, Jesus tells them where to preach: **“These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel’”** (vs. 5–6). At that time, the Gospel was to be preached to the children of Israel. This was the opportunity for the first-born of God to receive their King. “Jesus stood at the nexus in salvation history where, as a Jew and the Son of David, He came in fulfillment of His people’s history as their King and Redeemer...” [Carson, 244]. As Paul described the Gospel message: **“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: *first* for the Jew, *then* for the Gentile”** (Rom. 1:16). It was part of God’s perfect plan that the good news of the Kingdom of God come to the world through His first born Israel. As He promised Abraham: **“All the peoples on earth will be blessed *through you*”** (Gen. 12:3). Sadly though, the eventual spreading of the Gospel to the world was carried out through few rather than many children of Israel, because the children of Israel to a large extent rejected their King. As John told us: **“He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him”** (John 1:11).

Later, the time would come when Jesus would send His followers out to all nations. After His death and resurrection, Jesus commanded His disciples: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”** (Matt. 29:18–19).

After limiting this first missionary journey to **“the lost sheep of Israel”**, Jesus told the disciples what to preach: **“As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near’”** (vs. 7). This message is the same that John the Baptist preached: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”** (Matt. 3:2). It is the same that Jesus Himself preached: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”** (Matt. 4:17). This same message can and should be preached today. While topical sermons on practical living may have their place, a minister who fails to encourage repentance due to the nearness of the kingdom of heaven fails to preach the basic message of Christianity. We should all be aware of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. Certainly, in one sense, all Christians are part of the kingdom of heaven, but the kingdom has not been instituted on earth in full force. This will take place when Jesus returns, and this could happen at any time. Then also, in another sense, the kingdom of heaven is just a heartbeat away. Death brings us immediately before our Lord to face judgment.

We must all be aware of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. I think that modern medicine, with all the comfort it has brought to many people on earth, has served to make people less aware of the certainty and nearness of death. I can't help but believe that in times past, people felt more uncertain about when they would die. Nowadays, most of us live as if death is a long time off. However, for any of us, death can come

at any time. Plane crashes, natural disasters, car accidents, and other unplanned events take the lives of many people every day. And so, the message **“the kingdom of heaven is near”** is a message that should be preached. The awareness of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven brings one to the awareness of the need to make oneself right with God. If we were certain that Jesus would return this afternoon, would we not repent this morning from our sins, and seek to get right with God?

Not only were the apostles to preach, they were also to do good: **“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give”** (vs. 8). Verses 7 and 8 really sum up true Christian ministry: preach and do good. Ministers are sent out to serve, not to rule. “Happy would it be for the cause of true religion if [this] were better understood! Half the diseases of Christianity have arisen from mistaken notions about the minister’s office” [Ryle, 96].

The first apostles were given special gifts with which to minister to others: the gift of healing, of raising the dead, of cleansing lepers, of driving out demons. These gifts were to confirm the doctrine of the message they were preaching concerning the kingdom of heaven. The gifts anticipated the Day of Pentecost, when the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the church. Through the Holy Spirit, we are not only sent out to preach, but we are also given spiritual gifts to aid in making our preaching effective.

Under no circumstances were the gifts given to the apostles to be merchandised: **“Freely you have received, freely give”** (vs. 8). To merchandise God’s gifts is to give people the wrong idea about the free gift of the Gospel. The salvation offered through Jesus Christ is a free gift, based on faith, and not in any way a return for monetary offerings. We must be diligent in keeping this commandment of Jesus: **“Freely you have**

received, freely give.” In order to follow this commandment, we must make sure that any type of fundraising effort not take place anywhere near the ministry by spiritual gifts and the preaching of the gospel, lest anyone get the idea that our salvation is tied in any way to the funds being raised. Ministers in the church would do well to err on the side of caution concerning giving freely. There is far too much salesmanship in the church. A preacher preaches a sermon and records it on tape. Must he sell that tape? Why not freely give it to those who desire to hear the message of the Gospel? A minister writes a book. Must he sell it? Why not freely give it away? A worship band, the members of which have been freely given by the Holy Spirit the talents of musicianship, makes a worship tape. Must they sell it? Why not freely give to those who would be blessed by it? For the Church to **“freely give”** should be the norm, rather than the exception. Sadly, the Church is known more for appeals for money than for giving freely.

13 - MATTHEW 10:9-15

Instructions for Apostles, pt. 2

⁹ “Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; ¹⁰ take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. ¹¹ “Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. ¹² As you enter the home, give it your greeting. ¹³ If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴ If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. ¹⁵ I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”

— Matthew 10:9-15

JESUS CONTINUES His instructions to the apostles for their first missionary journey. In the first eight verses of this chapter, Jesus instructed the apostles to preach and to do good. Here He tells them how they are to sustain themselves on their journey: **“Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you”** (vs. 9–11).

Jesus was very specific in His instructions, lest He be misunderstood. He told them not to take anything extra, and to depend on those who heard the preaching to sustain them, **“for the worker is worth his keep.”** There is a fine line to be drawn here. Back in verse 8, Jesus told the apostles, **“Freely as you have received, freely give.”** Now here in these verses, He tells them to expect that those who hear the preaching sustain them. This fine line can be clearly delineated if we understand that it is the responsibility of the apostle to preach with no financial strings attached, and it is not the responsibility of the apostle to ask for sustenance. Rather, it is the responsibility of those who hear the gospel to sustain their teachers. And then, the apostle should willingly, and without any sense of guilt at all, accept any hospitality, or financial gift, that is freely offered to him. Under no circumstances should the apostle use any kind of coercion, or even pleading, to try to impel the hearers to give financially. Such coercion does battle with the idea that the gospel is a free gift. Jesus told His apostles to find a **“worthy”** person (i.e., someone who could afford to put them up), and to wait to be **“welcomed.”** If they were not welcomed, they were to move on. I can’t help but thinking that many television evangelists here in America violate these principles. They plead, and beg, and then make threats that if the money doesn’t come in, they will be forced off the air. I tend to believe that Jesus would tell them, following the principles He set forth for His apostles, to preach the kingdom of God. Do not ask for, but do welcome the sustenance received through the preaching. And if the amount received is not enough to continue preaching on the air, **“shake the dust off your feet”** and find some other medium to use to spread the free gift of the Gospel.

On the other hand, let us not forget the responsibility of the hearers, those who are ministered to by preachers. It is their

obligation to financially support their spiritual leaders. Paul tells us: **“Anyone who receives instruction in the Word must share all good things with his instructor”** (Gal. 6:6). If you are not giving at least ten percent of your gross income to your church, to support the good work of preaching the Gospel, then today, sit down, and review your finances. Make a budget so that soon, you may do your part in providing for those who minister to you, **“for the worker is worth his keep.”**

The strategy for sustenance that Jesus gave His apostles was a wise strategy for this first missionary journey for multiple reasons. First, it allowed the apostles to be acutely aware of God’s providence. Their own money was not going to sustain them. The Lord would provide for them through the goodness and hospitality of the people who heard and responded to the good news the apostles were bringing. Later, after the journey, Jesus would remind them of God’s providence on this journey: **“Then Jesus asked them, ‘When I sent you without purse bag or sandals, did you lack anything?’ ‘Nothing,’ they answered”** (Luke 22:35). Second, it kept them from staying too long in a town that was unresponsive to their message. If they could not find anyone who would put them up in a culture that valued hospitality, then they certainly would not be able to find many people willing to pay heed to their message concerning the kingdom of God.

In general, for this first journey, Jesus did not want them staying in one place too long, even if the town accepted their message. He told them to stay at the same house in any one town until they left that town. Jesus most likely wanted the twelve apostles to cover as much ground as possible in a short time. So, the length of their stay in any one town was not to be any longer than they would be welcome at any one house.

They were not to force their message upon those who were not willing to listen: **“If anyone will not welcome you or**

listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town” (vss. 14–15). Jesus prepared them for the eventuality that the hearers would not **“listen to [their] words.”** This is not an unusual occurrence for the ministers of God’s Word. “Our Lord Himself had already been rejected at Nazareth (see Luke 4:16), and in the country of the Gadarenes, and was rejected afterwards at a Samaritan village (see Luke 9:52); indeed, in general, **‘He came to His own, and His own received Him not,’** (John 1:11). We need not then be surprised if some reject us and our message, since it was so with Jesus, and so with the apostles” [Broadus, 223].

Note the response that Jesus commanded to those who did not listen: **“Shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.”** This was a symbolic gesture akin to washing the hands of a situation. No blame could fall on the apostles. The apostle would have performed his responsibility of preaching the Gospel. The attitude portrayed here is that the Gospel is a valuable thing, something precious. There’s no need to loudly rebuke or denigrate people for rejecting the good news. We shouldn’t have to beg or bribe people to accept the Gospel. It’s a precious gift, and should be treated as such. Hopefully, the **“shaking off”** of dust would cause those who witnessed it to think twice about their rejection of the good news.

Jesus bluntly tells the apostles the consequence of the rejection of the Gospel: **“I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town”** (vs. 15). This is an astonishing claim that Jesus is making about Himself. He is saying that the eternal destiny of people depends on whether they accept or reject His message about the kingdom of God.

Note how Jesus introduces this statement: **“I tell you the truth....”** This signifies that what follows is significant, and important to heed. Next, He compares the judgment for rejecting the Gospel to one of the best-known displays of God’s judgment: the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. One of the messages of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is that sin will not go forever unpunished. So too, our sins will not go unpunished. But God, in His grace, through the sacrifice of His Son, provided a way for us to escape the punishment, by accepting the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. However, if we reject the Gospel, we will have to face the judgment for our sins, just as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had to face judgment. It is a dangerous thing to do, to reject the Gospel. “This is a doctrine fearfully overlooked, and one that deserves serious consideration. Men are apt to forget that it does not require great open sins to be sinned in order to ruin a soul forever. They have only to go on hearing without believing, listening without repenting, going to church without going to Christ, and by and by they will find themselves in hell! We shall all be judged according to our light; we shall have to give account of our use of religious privileges: to hear of the ‘great salvation’, and yet neglect it, is one of the worst sins man can commit (see John 16:9; Heb. 2:13)” [Ryle, 96-97].

Make no mistake, the judgment of those who reject Christ will be terrible. They will be held accountable for all of their sins. “There is no wonder that Christ declares it will go more easily with them, than with those unbelievers who have refused to hear the Gospel. For when men refuse authority to their Creator and Maker, and grant His voice no audience, but repel His kind invitation, and undermine confidence in Him who promises all ready gifts, such impiety reaches the utmost peak of all possible wrongdoing” [Calvin, 296]. As the writer of

Hebrews warns: **“How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?”** (Heb. 2:3).

14 - MATTHEW 10:16-23

Instructions for Apostles, pt. 3

¹⁶ “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

²¹ “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²² All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³ When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

— Matthew 10:16-23

JESUS CONTINUES occasions, to speak as a prophet, who in the present saw the future, and from small beginnings looked forward to great ultimate issues” [Bruce, in Broadus, 224]. This section deals with the persecution that they will experience in doing the Lord’s work.

Jesus begins: **“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent**

as doves” (vs. 16). Now, it seems strange that our Shepherd—our Good Shepherd—would send His own apostles **“out like sheep among wolves.”** But this He does. And there really is no other choice for those who do the Lord’s work, but to be **“sheep among wolves.”** The world, sadly, is largely hostile to those who, in love, bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To be **“sheep among wolves”** is the price that ministers of the Gospel pay, but the reward far outweighs any trouble we may face in this world. The reward is no less than the Kingdom of Heaven. As Jesus promised us: **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”** (Matt. 5:10).

Note that Jesus was always forthright with His followers. He did not tell them that all in the world would be perfect after they chose to follow Him. He was upfront with them, always letting them know the hazards of what they were getting into. This is the honesty of Christianity and the Word of God. It is true. It tells us plainly that **“in this world [we] will have trouble”** (John 16:33). As a Christian, you will not win any popularity contests.

Given that the apostles will be **“sheep among wolves”**, Jesus gives advice on how to survive: **“Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”** (vs. 16). Jesus advises shrewdness with innocence. We as Christians are not to throw away our common sense, are not to abandon our brains. Rather, we are to act shrewdly. But our shrewdness is not to be a cunning shrewdness; it is to be a just, godly, innocent shrewdness.

Jesus speaks next more specifically to the apostles about what will happen to them as they preach the Gospel: **“On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say**

it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (vss. 18–19). Here we see pretty clearly that Jesus was speaking not of just the immediate missionary journey of the apostles (for we have no evidence that these things happened at that time), but He was looking ahead, speaking to apostles about what was to happen to them after His death, as these same apostles brought the good news of the Gospel to the world. And indeed, we read in the book of Acts that these exact things did occur. The apostles were arrested, jailed, brought before governors and kings, and spoke the Word of God as given to them by the Holy Spirit. Paul, though not among these twelve apostles, once enumerated what he had suffered, and we can assume that all the apostles suffered similarly. In fact, Paul cited his hardships in the context of proving that he was a true apostle: **“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked”** (II Cor. 11:24–27).

Jesus next speaks, in general, of the divisional effect of the truth of God: **“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved”** (vss. 21–22). I can think of no more extreme a division than

when **“brother”** betrays **“brother to death”**, or **“children”** have their parents **“put to death.”** Yet this, sadly, is the effect of the Gospel upon some families. In fact, conversion to Christianity, even today, has such an effect on some families, in some parts of the world. Why is this? It is a great mystery as to why conversion to a religion that is based on love for God and love for one another causes such divisions. Jesus does offer some consolation: **“...but he who stands firm to the end will be saved”** (vs. 22). Salvation and entrance into the kingdom of God is our ultimate destiny. We can take heart in this, no matter what our worldly circumstances be.

Jesus next speaks to the apostles concerning persecution they may experience during the particular missionary expedition that they were about to embark upon: **“When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes”** (vs. 23). Because this particular journey of theirs was to be short, Jesus tells them not to tarry in places where the Gospel message they are bringing is violently rejected. In fact, He tells them that they would not be able to finish **“going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”** I believe that some have made this statement out to be more enigmatic than it really is. Some commentators are misled by the phrase, **“the Son of Man comes,”** into thinking that Jesus is referring to the Second Coming, or some other eschatological event. However, Jesus often referred to Himself as **“the Son of Man”**, so I believe that the simplest reading of this passage is the correct interpretation: The apostles will not be able to finish going through the cities of Israel on this particular journey before Jesus summons them to end the missionary journey.

Instructions for Apostles, pt. 4

²⁴ “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! ²⁶ So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.

²⁸ “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

²⁹ “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

— Matthew 10:24-31

CONTINUING HIS INSTRUCTIONS to the twelve Apostles preceding their first missionary journey, Jesus has been informing them that they will face persecution. In this section, Jesus gives three reasons why they should not fear this persecution. Three times in this passage, Jesus tells His followers, **“Do not be afraid.”** In fact (so I’ve heard), the most oft-repeated commandment in the Bible given to God’s people

is **“Do not be afraid.”** With an all-powerful, and all-loving Lord, why should we be afraid of anything?

The first reason given by Jesus that they should not fear persecution is that He Himself, their Lord, faced persecution: **“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! So do not be afraid of them”** (vss. 24–26). As we learn in Mark 3:22, Beelzebub was a name given to the prince of demons. In that verse, Jesus is accused by the teachers of the law of being possessed by Beelzebub. Given this, Jesus here intimates that the apostles should not consider any persecution that they may encounter to be strange, for **“a student is not above his teacher.”** On the contrary, we should expect, even rejoice in, such persecution, as Peter tells us: **“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed”** (I Peter 4:12–13).

Moreover, Jesus next tells His apostles that they should not let any persecution deter them from spreading His message: **“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs”** (vss. 26–27). Note that the message we proclaim is one we have received from the Lord. It is not something that we make up, or deduce ourselves. It is something we receive from Him as we study His Word, and as we meditate on it. And at times, as suggested here, He speaks to us **“in the dark”**, presumably as we seek His will in prayer.

The second reason given by Jesus that His apostles should not fear persecution has to do with God's control over our ultimate destiny: **“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell”** (vs. 28). With this in mind, we would have to agree with Solomon when he said that **“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”** (Prov. 9:10). Whenever there is a conflict between what men say and what God says, it only makes sense to pay heed to the One **“who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”** “There is no cure for the fear of man like the fear of God” [Spurgeon, 128]. “In proportion as one has a true fear of God, he will feel no fear of man” [Broadus, 230]. Men have no direct control over our ultimate destiny. Any persecution we face from men is temporary, even trivial, when viewed from the perspective of eternity.

However, God would rather not win us over with threatenings. Paul would have us realize that **“God's kindness leads you toward repentance”** (Rom. 2:4). And despite the reality of His threatenings, God (as Peter tells us) does not want **“anyone to perish”**, but rather wants **“everyone to come to repentance”** (II Pet. 3:9). This brings us to the third reason that Jesus gives for us not to fear the persecution of men: God cares for us. **“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of the your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows”** (vss. 29–31). There are those that believe in God who think that God only cares about the “big” things. Jesus, our Lord, assures us here that God is concerned with absolutely everything that goes on here on earth, even down to the most trivial detail. And not only is He concerned, He directs every detail. Read again: **“Yet not one of [the**

sparrows] will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (vs. 29). The implication is clear. Since **“you are worth more than many sparrows”**, there is nothing that happens to you that is not sanctioned by God. If you are persecuted by men as a result of your apostleship, this is the will of your Father in Heaven. “Nothing can happen in this world without His permission: there is no such thing in reality as chance, accident, or luck” [Ryle, 104].

Instructions for Apostles, pt. 5

³² “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— ³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

³⁷ “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰ “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”

^{11:1} After Jesus had finished instructing His twelve disciples, He went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

JESUS CONTINUES the instructions to His disciples. He had been telling them about the persecution that they would face as they preached the Good News. Here, He speaks in general about the effects that the Gospel would have on the world. Essentially, the Gospel divides the world into two camps: those who follow Christ, and those who do not. Jesus summarizes this fact: **“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven”** (vss. 32–33). Jesus makes it clear here that He does not want any secret agents. Our faith in Christ should be known by those around us: by our fellow-workers, by our friends, by our neighbors, by our relatives. “Can a non-confessing faith save? To live and die without confessing Christ before men is to run an awful risk” [Spurgeon, 129].

The division of the world into two camps as a result of the Gospel would have its ramifications. Jesus describes these ramifications: **“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword”** (vs. 34). This statement by Jesus may seem surprising. Did not the angels herald at His birth: **“Peace on earth, good will toward men”**? (See Luke 2:14). Is not Jesus **“the Prince of Peace”**? (See Isa. 9:6). So, how can He say, **“I did not come to bring peace, but a sword”**?

The resolution of this difficulty lies in the fact that there are different sorts of “peace”, as well as a pre-ordained time (which was not to be immediate) for total peace to come. Jesus was immediately to bring spiritual peace, to make accessible peace between God and man. Jesus, in His first coming, was not to bring world peace between men, for not all men were to accept the spiritual peace that He was bringing. And in fact, in many ways, as Jesus is here pointing out, the spiritual peace He

was bringing would actually be a cause of strife between men. “There is, of course, a most important sense in which he came to bring peace. But the peace he came to bring is not simply the absence of strife; it is a peace that means the overcoming of sin and the bringing in of the salvation of God. And that means war with evil and accordingly hostility against those who support the ways of wrong” [Morris, 266]. There would have been total peace “if all the world were to subscribe with one accord to the teaching of the Gospel. But as the majority is not only opposed, but actually in bitter conflict, we are not able to profess Christ without strife and the hatred of many” [Calvin, 310]. And as it is, “the gospel does tend to bring men into peace with each other, but only in proportion as they are brought into peace with God” [Broadus, 232].

Indeed, it is sadly ironic, that the Gospel, which is Good News for absolutely everyone, does not bring peace, but brings a **“sword”**. “When Christianity divides families and produces wars, this is not the fault of Christianity, but of human nature” [Broadus, 234]. The **“sword”** is a result of people rejecting God’s Good News, and turning upon the bearers of His Good News. “Truth provokes opposition, purity excites enmity, and righteousness arouses all the forces of wrong” [Spurgeon, 129]. The cause of the strife is not the Gospel itself, but the rejection of the Gospel. Men reject the truth of the Gospel because they desire to continue in their ways of sin. As Jesus summarized elsewhere: **“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil”** (John 3:19).

The extent of the divisions that Christianity would cause is illustrated by Jesus through the divisions that would develop, in many cases, within the same family: **“For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a**

man's enemies will be the members of his own household”

(vss. 35–36). In many circumstances, our faith in Jesus Christ will adversely affect even our dearest family ties. “Wherever the gospel is received by some, it is sure to be rejected by others, even of one’s own household” [Ryle, 147]. Our spouses, parents, brothers or sisters will urge us to give up that “Christian nonsense.” Jesus makes it clear as to how we should react to such urgings: **“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”** (vss. 37). “Even if our house becomes a den of lions to us, we must stand up for our Lord. The peace-at-any-price people have no portion in this kingdom” [Spurgeon, 130]. Our love for Christ must be greater than our love for anything on this earth. “So let the husband love his wife, the father his child, and in turn the child the father, as long as human love does not overwhelm the attention that is owed to Christ” [Calvin, 312].

This claim that Jesus makes on our affections is, if you think about it, astounding. Such a claim is an outright claim of divinity by Jesus. Who but God could demand that we love Him more than our own mother? “When Jesus here demands of His followers a love beyond all that is found in the tenderest relations of life, and pronounces all who withhold this to be unworthy of Him, He makes a claim which, on the part of any mere creature, would be wicked and intolerable, and in Him who honoured the Father as no other on earth ever did, is not to be imagined, if He had not been ‘the Fellow of the Lord of Hosts’” [JFB, 65]. Given that Jesus is God, to love any person more than Jesus is akin to making an idol of them. Beware of this. The irony, though, in all this, and the great blessing, is that the more we love Christ, the more effectively and genuinely we love others.

Given the division and strife that Christianity brings, to follow Christ requires that a price be paid: **“[A]nyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”** (vss. 38–39). The first statement here is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ sacrifice. The apostles must certainly have wondered what Jesus meant when Jesus spoke of the unworthiness of someone who does not **“take his cross and follow”** Jesus. They could not have understood the full import of this statement until Jesus gave His life on the cross. And indeed, many of us do not understand the meaning of taking one’s cross and following Jesus. I have heard often people speak of some relatively minor annoyance (such as a hangnail, or some such thing) as a cross that they bear in life. To say such a thing is a gross trivialization of what Jesus is saying here. “‘Taking one’s cross’ does not mean putting up with some awkward or tragic situation in one’s life but painfully dying to self” [Carson, 257]. Jesus means nothing short of giving one’s whole life for Him, as He explains in the next statement: **“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”** (vs. 39). This statement sounds like philosophical double-talk, but the truth of this statement can be testified to by all those who have lost their lives for Christ’s sake. All I can say to expand upon it is that, if you have not experienced the truth of this statement, pray that Holy Spirit would bring you to a place where this statement rings true. Pray to lose your life for Christ’s sake, so that you may be able to find true life, in this world and the next.

Jesus concludes His remarks to the apostles concerning their first missionary journey with a blessing on those who show hospitality toward them: **“He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a**

prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (vss. 40–42). These blessings show us how much our Lord values the work of His apostles, those who are sent out to preach the Gospel, "in allowing all the services accorded them to be imputed to Himself" [Calvin, 315]. These blessings, of course, are meant to be heeded not so much by the apostles, as by us, who would be in the position to aid those whom Jesus sends out. Any and all help we give the apostles of Jesus will have its reward. "Notice that Jesus is speaking of the smallest conceivable gift to the most insignificant of people [sent in His name]. The gift is that of no more than a cup of cold water; no smaller gift can easily be conceived. Even the smallest gift, given with the right motive, does not go unnoticed. And the gift is made to *one of these little ones*; to *one* only, and that *one* from the class of *little ones*" [Morris, 271]. While we cannot all be evangelists who are sent out into a hostile world to preach the Gospel, we can all help those who are sent out, through hospitality, through prayer, through gifts of aid, etc. "Much loyalty to the King may be expressed by little kindnesses to His servants, and perhaps more by kindness to the *little ones* among them than by friendship with the greater sort" [Spurgeon, 132].

By the way, some would condemn doing any good work with an eye on a reward. However, our Lord often, as here, specifically refers to rewards in order to spur us on to good works. So, it is wrong "to condemn all reference to our own future safety and blessedness as a motive of action. For what have we here,... but an encouragement to entertain His servants, and welcome His people, and do offices of kindness, however small, to the humblest of His disciples, by the

emphatic assurance that not the lowest of such offices shall go unrewarded?” [JFB, 65]. Rather than pretend that there are no rewards for service, we should praise the Lord that our God is a loving God who does reward us for good works.

Jesus did not send the apostles out in order to take a rest Himself. On the contrary: **“After Jesus had finished instructing His twelve disciples, He went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee”** (vs. 11:1). So, He gave them instructions, and then immediately followed up their evangelism with His own. This is symbolic of the greatest wish any minister of the Gospel could have: “We are to do our best for men, and then to hope that our Lord will deign to certify and confirm our teaching by His own coming to men’s hearts” [Spurgeon, 132].

John Questions Jesus

² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask Him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”

— Matthew 11:2-6

IN CHAPTERS 11 AND 12, Matthew presents episodes in Jesus’ life where Jesus begins to assert His authority as the Son of God. For example, in these chapters, Jesus will pronounce woe upon cities that do not respond to the message He brings (Matt. 11:21ff), He will boldly proclaim that **“no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him”** (Matt. 11:27), He will proclaim Himself as Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8), and He will predict His death and resurrection (Matt. 12:40).

In Matthew 11:2-6, John the Baptist, through his disciples, questions Jesus about who He is: **“When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask Him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’”** (vs. 2). One might well wonder: was John losing his faith in Jesus as the Messiah? During his

ministry, John boldly proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah. He said of Jesus, without equivocation: **“I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God”** (John 1:34; see also John 1:15; John 1:26- 35; John 3:26-30). Yet now John asks Jesus: **“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”** (vs. 2).

We can only speculate at this time about John’s thoughts, attitudes and motives for asking this. I would guess that John’s imprisonment had a lot to do with John’s lack of certainty about Jesus’ mission. First, who knows how Jesus’ ministry was being misrepresented to John? There must have been all sorts of rumors, myths, exaggerations, etc. concerning Jesus’ ministry. And John, being in prison, had no way to verify for himself the truth. Second, it may well be that John himself had misapprehensions about what Jesus’ ministry was supposed to entail. It seems that John, during his ministry, emphasized the judgment the Messiah would bring. John said of Jesus: **“His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire”** (vs. 12). “Perhaps John was simply puzzled. He had prophesied such great things about Jesus, and specifically he had spoken of judgment (cf. 3:11-12). But there was no sign of the judgment he expected (it would have been very human for John to have looked for judgment on those who had brought his ministry to a close and made him suffer so many things in jail)” [Morris, 275]. “Jesus was not turning out to be the kind of Messiah the people had expected. Even John the Baptist had doubts” [Carson, 260]. Third, it is quite possible that John’s imprisonment had a depressing effect on John, which led to these doubts about all that God was doing. Given the importance of his ministry before he was imprisoned, John must surely have felt frustrated that he was not out and about

preaching. “As Elijah sometimes got sadly out of heart, so John, who in many respects closely resembled him, would be likely to grow despondent, in this season of enforced idleness and uncertain danger” [Broadus, 235]. “Dark thoughts may come to the bravest when pent up in a narrow cell. It was well that John’s question was put, that it might receive a distinct reply; reassuring for himself, and instructive for us.” [Spurgeon, 134].

“Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me’” (vss. 4-6). Jesus’ reply to John was effective in a number of ways. First, Jesus dealt with any false accounts that John might have heard about Jesus’ ministry. Jesus told John’s disciples to **“go back and report to John what you hear and see.”** So, Jesus was telling people that John trusted to personally report about Jesus’ ministry. Their personal account would serve to counteract any false rumors that John might have heard. Second, Jesus’ reply reflected His own confidence in what He was doing, that what He was doing was God’s will. Jesus did not try to reinterpret His actions for John’s sake. Jesus told the disciples, simply, to **“report what you hear and see.”** Third, Jesus implicitly presented evidence from prophecy that He was the Messiah. Jesus’ words, **“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor”**, are similar to language used in well-known, prophecies about the Messiah. Isaiah prophesied: **“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy”** (Isa. 35:5-6), and, in the voice of the Messiah, he wrote, **“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,**

because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Isa. 61:1). Jesus answered John’s questions with evidence from His life, acts that fulfilled prophecy. Through these acts are demonstrated not only His miraculous powers, but proofs that what He was doing was what the Messiah was prophesied to do.

Significantly, the Messianic passages that Jesus was implicitly referring to are nearby passages that speak of judgment by the Messiah. Isaiah wrote: **“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, He will come with vengeance; with divine retribution He will come to save you”** (Isa. 35:4), and also, he wrote that the Messiah was sent to proclaim **“the day of vengeance of our God”** (Isa. 61:2). So, Jesus was, in effect, telling John that there are two aspects prophesied about the coming of the Messiah. John knew well the aspects of the wrath and vengeance that the Messiah will bring. Jesus was reminding John of the grace and salvation that the Messiah was prophesied to bring.

We know now that these two aspects of the Messiah would be manifested in two separate comings. It seems that John did not realize this. John (we presume) expected the wrath of the Messiah to be manifest in Jesus’ first coming. We must all be careful that we do not get locked stubbornly into an interpretation of prophecy in the Bible that may turn out to be inaccurate or incomplete. There are many passages in the Bible about which godly people disagree, especially passages of prophecy. We must be open to growth and evolution of our understanding of the Bible, as the Holy Spirit chooses to reveal His Word to us. Strange as it sounds, people were **“falling away”** from the faith because Jesus, the promised Messiah, did not act according to their interpretation of the Bible. Thus, Jesus added to His reply: **“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me”** (vs. 6).

The Greatness of John

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears, let him hear."

— Matthew 11:7-15

IN THE FIRST PART of this chapter, the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus to ask: "**Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?**" (vs. 3). Lest this question diminish the greatness of John in the eyes of the people (since it reflects a certain amount of weakness in his faith), Jesus in this passage begins by telling of the greatness of John the Baptist: "**What did you go out into the desert to**

see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist' (vss. 7-11).

Through a series of rhetorical questions, Jesus describes some attributes of John's character. He reminds the people of what they saw in John: **"What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?"** They did not go into the wilderness to see a man who was fickle like a reed, or uncertain of himself. Nor did they go and see a man who was living comfortably as he preached: **"If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces."** The man they went out to see was a man who gave his life, his entire being, to the service of God.

And John was more than just a faithful servant of God: **"Then what did you go out to see? A prophet?"** (vs. 9). John was a true prophet of God. He spoke the very words of God to the people. He was the first prophet of God for hundreds of years. God was silent in this respect from the time of Malachi to the time of John the Baptist. Beyond this, John was more than a prophet of God: **"Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you'"** (vss. 9-10). He himself was the fulfillment of prophecy, in addition to being a prophet. He fulfilled the prophecy in Malachi 3:1, as Jesus cited. John was the one sent as a forerunner for the Messiah, sent to prepare the way for the

Messiah. This role made John the Baptist greater than any of the prophets who preceded him, as Jesus affirms: **“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...”** But then, Jesus goes on to say something surprising: **“...yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John]”** (vs. 11). How can we be **“greater than [John the Baptist]”**?

We who are **“least in the kingdom of heaven”** are **“greater than [John]”** in our knowledge about the totality of Jesus’ ministry. This discourse of Jesus’ concerning John was prompted by the questions that John asked through his disciples: **“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”** (Matt. 11:3). Apparently, because of the nature of Jesus’ ministry, John was having some doubts at this point in his life about whether Jesus was the total fulfillment of the Messianic promises. We have the privilege of looking back in history at the life and ministry of Jesus. John, as a prophet of God, was looking forward through the foggy eyes of prophecy. John’s view of Jesus was colored by his incomplete understanding of Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. In his preaching, John emphasized the judgment role of the Messiah, at the expense of overlooking the prophecies about the grace and forgiveness that the Messiah would bring as He made a new covenant with the people of God. John preached: **“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire”** (Matt. 3:11-12). We have nowhere evidence that John preached of the Messiah’s humility, nor do we have evidence that John spoke

of the Messiah suffering for our sins. We who look back at Jesus' life and ministry now understand that there were to be two visitations of the Messiah to earth. During the first, Jesus came in humility, and died for our sins. In doing so, He brought salvation to all who would believe in Him. In the next visitation, the Messiah will come in judgment. "John's question arose not from personal weakness or failure but from misunderstanding about the nature of the Messiah, owing to John's place in salvation history" [Carson, 263].

During Jesus' life on earth, a clearer understanding of the role of the Messiah was unfolding minute by minute. As Jesus explained: **"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it"** (vs. 12). Yet Jesus does not hold John's incomplete knowledge against him. On the contrary, Jesus reaffirms the importance of John. John was the last, and greatest, in the long line of Old Testament prophets: **"For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John"** (vs. 13).

Moreover, if the children of Israel were **"willing to accept"** him as such, John was the fulfillment of the prophecies that said that Elijah would precede the coming of the Messiah: **"And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear"** (vs. 14). The statement of Jesus in verse 14 was very carefully worded. In Malachi, the coming of Elijah is prophesied to occur before the Messiah comes in judgment: **"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes"** (Mal. 4:5). Jesus here does not say unconditionally that John was the fulfillment of that prophecy. He says that John would have been the fulfillment, if the children of Israel were **"willing to accept"** him as such. Of course, in accepting John as Elijah, they would have had to accept Jesus as the Messiah. This, by and large, they did not do.

God, in His perfect plan, arranged things so that the children of Israel would have no excuse not to accept Jesus as their Messiah. He even went to the trouble of sending an Elijah-like forerunner to the Messiah in order to encourage them to see Jesus as the Messiah. But the children of Israel rejected Christ. And so, it turns out, since the children of Israel were not **“willing to accept”** John as the forerunner to the Messiah, John was not the complete fulfillment of that prophecy. The Messiah will come again. And a prophet in the spirit of Elijah will also come at that time, as the forerunner for the Messiah. Oh Lord, come soon!

Spiritual Childishness

¹⁶ “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ¹⁷ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.”’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.”

²⁰ Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ²¹ “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

— Matthew 11:16-24

IN CHAPTERS 11 AND 12, the Gospel writer Matthew is presenting episodes in Jesus’ life where He asserts His authority as the Son of God. Earlier in chapter 11, Jesus answered John

the Baptist's query whether Jesus is **"the one who was to come"** (meaning, the Messiah and Savior of the children of Israel). Jesus answered in the affirmative, and gave as evidence works from His life that fulfilled prophecy. Beginning in verse 20 of chapter 11, Jesus will assert His authority as the Son of God by denouncing those who reject Him.

First though, in preparation for that denunciation, Jesus speaks of the fickleness of the people: **"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners.'" But wisdom is proved right by her actions"** (vss. 16-19). Jesus finds fault with the people for criticizing both Him and John the Baptist. The people criticized John because he was too reclusive; they criticized Jesus because He was not reclusive enough. In this way, they were childish. Essentially, because they did not get their "way", they criticized. God's servants did not live up to the peoples' expectations, so the people rejected God! Nothing could please them.

And attitudes towards God's servants have not changed. "Let a minister, or other active Christian, be grave and serious, and people will at once complain of him as sour or dull; let him be cheerful, and they will say, 'Entirely too much levity'" [Broadus, 246]. When a minister speaks out against sin, he is a prude. When he shows love towards sinners, he is a hypocrite. No matter what he does, he is misjudged and rejected. Ministers must keep in mind that they will not be judged by God based on the criticism by the people. As Jesus said: **"But wisdom is proved right by her actions"** (vs. 19).

Jesus' rebuke of the people's childishness becomes sharper, as He denounces those who have not repented: **“Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you”** (vss. 20- 22). “Gracious as is the Son of man in His exhibition of Himself as the friend of publicans and sinners, He can also insist upon repentance, and threaten judgments upon the impenitent as severely as John himself; yea, more vigorously and severely than he, since He is Himself the judge” [Spier, in Broadus, 246].

Jesus goes out of His way to denounce the cities **“in which most of His miracles had been performed.”** His emphasis on these cities reinforces the fact that knowledge brings responsibility. “It is clear that Jesus had performed a number of miracles, mostly works of healing, and He expected those who saw them to recognize them for what they were, signs that God was at work in their midst” [Morris, 287]. “Some cities were more favored with the Lord’s presence than others, and therefore He looked for more from them... The more men hear and see of the Lord’s work, the greater is their obligation to repent. Where most is given most is required” [Spurgeon, 140]. For those of us who live in America, we should take special note of this. Our nation was founded by Christians, and

we have no shortage of Christian churches. If we choose not to repent, will we not be judged all the more severely?

The importance of knowledge in determining the extent of judgment is underscored also by the cities Jesus compares to those He denounces. **“Tyre and Sidon”** were regarded by the children of Israel as wicked “despisers of God” [Calvin, 15]. They are mentioned often as recipients of God’s judgment due to their idol worship and other wicked deeds (see Isa. 23; Ezek. 26-28; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9-10; Zech. 9:2-4). And then **“Sodom”**, of course, is well known to many people, Jews and Gentiles, as an archetype of sin. Many Jews of Jesus’ time thought “themselves safe for eternity because they were Abraham’s descendants, and looked down with contempt upon all Gentiles” [Broadus, 248]. How shocking it must have been for them to come out on the short side of a comparison to the worst of Gentile cities!

What also is surprising in this passage is what Jesus, who is all-knowing, tells us about the response the wicked cities would have had to seeing these same miracles. Tyre and Sidon **“would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.”** And Sodom, wicked Sodom, would not have been destroyed in judgment, but **“would have remained to this day.”** The question one might ask: why then did not God reveal Himself to Tyre, Sidon and Sodom in a way that would have brought about repentance? This is the mystery of God’s sovereignty in election. “According to our Lord’s declaration, God gave the opportunity where it was rejected, and it was not given where it would have been accepted. This is true, but how mysterious!” [Spurgeon, 141]. Though God’s choices in election may be mysterious to us, there is nothing unjust about them. God does not owe special revelation of Himself to anyone. And indeed, God is revealed day by day, even minute by minute, to us all in a myriad of ways through His creation.

One more thing: as mentioned, the cities denounced here are the ones where **“most of His miracles had been performed.”** We know a fair amount about Capernaum, which was essentially Jesus’ home town (see Matt. 4:13), and we also have a record of some of the miracles that Jesus performed there (see Matt. 8:5ff; Mark 1:21ff; John 4:46ff). We know a little about Bethsaida, which was the home town of Philip, Andrew and Peter (see John 12:21), and we have a record of a few miracles that Jesus performed there (see Mark 8:22; Luke 9:10). However, we know absolutely nothing about **“Korazin”**, and yet by Jesus’ own words, many of His miracles were performed there. This underscores the fact that the narratives in the Gospels describe but a small portion of the great things Jesus did on earth. As the Gospel writer John tells us at the end of his book: **“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them was written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written”** (John 21:25).

Election and Free Choice Balanced

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this was Your good pleasure.

²⁷ “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

— Matthew 11:25-30

JESUS HAD JUST FINISHED denouncing the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (see Matt. 11:20-24). Those cities had not repented, despite the fact that Jesus performed most of His miracles in them. They were denounced, in effect, for not, in the exercise of their will, responding to the ministry of Jesus. Here, Jesus begins by praising God for selectively revealing the greatness of the Gospel: **“At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father,**

for this was Your good pleasure” (vss. 25-26). This section of the Bible, including the denunciation of the cities in verses 20 through 24, and continuing through the end of the chapter, deals “with three things about which there has been great disputing; namely, the responsibility of man, the sovereign election of God, and the free invitations of the Gospel. They are all here in happy combination” [Spurgeon, 140].

After reading that Jesus denounced the cities that did not repent, and then, in the very next verses, reading that Jesus, who is all-knowing, praises God for *hiding* **“these things from the wise and learned”**, one might well ask: “How could Jesus denounce the cities, when God *hid* these things from them?” This, my friends, is the mystery of election. I may disappoint you by not giving a complete answer to this question, but it is my sincere belief that it is impossible for our limited human minds to fully comprehend God’s mystery of election. Why has God chosen to reveal Himself to me, and chosen to hide Himself from my neighbor? This is, indeed, a vexing question. Am I any better than my neighbor? Both of us are sinners, so why has God chosen me? Don’t get me wrong, though. I praise God greatly for choosing me!

It is my belief that the best way to deal with questions concerning the mystery of election is to let God be God, and man be man. It is God’s job to take care of election; it is man’s job to respond to the good news of the Gospel. God is a just, righteous, all-knowing, all-loving God. He will make the correct choices. From man’s point of view, though, we have a choice to make: to respond to the Gospel message and turn to Jesus, or alternatively, to reject the Gospel message. As a man, I have no control over God’s choices. However, as a man, and a Christian, I have been given the command, by the Lord Jesus Himself, to **“go and make disciples of all nations”** (Matt. 28:18). The apostle Paul knew of and accepted God’s

sovereignty in election, but this did not stop him from preaching the Gospel wherever he went. Again, let God be God, and man be man. God will be God, and reveal Himself to whom He chooses. I, as a man, praise God for His wise choices, and pray that He would also choose my neighbor.

Jesus praises God for His choice in election: **“At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was Your good pleasure’”** (vss. 25-26). Jesus implicitly states the reason that God has the right to choose whom He will: God is **“Lord of heaven and earth.”** If you do not like the doctrine of election, well, as Paul says: **“Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?”** (Rom. 9:20).

At the time Jesus was speaking, those who were rejecting His message, “especially the religious teachers and other leading men, were wise and intelligent, well acquainted with many aspects of religious truth. It seemed strange that they should fail to comprehend and appreciate Christ’s teachings, which were understood and received by the lowly and comparatively ignorant... Jesus not only submits to this state of things, but He recognizes the propriety of it, and gives thanks for it” [Broadus, 251]. Jesus is praising God for the specific reason that one’s wisdom and knowledge on earth does not give one a leg up in being chosen by God. If anything (and this is implied in the passage), worldly wisdom hinders one from responding to the Gospel. “Intelligent and reflecting men frequently overlook the simple beauty and perfect fitness of the plan of salvation, which is plain enough to those who are consciously and confessedly weak, and who gladly receive the Lord’s teachings without cavil or difficulty” [Broadus, 251]. One of the great things about the Gospel is its simplicity: the wise and learned have no advantage in understanding its truths.

The Gospel can be understood by the most uneducated of us, by the poorest of us, by those of any nation and culture. No one has an advantage. All are on equal ground. This is something we can praise God for, just as Jesus does. **“Yes, Father, for this was Your good pleasure.”**

Jesus goes on to boldly proclaim His own role in election: **“All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him”** (vs. 27). We have mentioned that in chapters 11 and 12, Matthew is presenting episodes where Jesus asserts His authority as the Son of God. Here is an astounding example. No mere man, unless he was a blasphemous fraud, could make such a statement. Jesus is stating here that He Himself has supreme and final choice over who knows God. Jesus is unequivocal about this: **“All things have been committed to me”**, and **“... no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him”** (vs. 27). All who know God, have come to Him through Jesus Christ. No one comes to God except those who have come through Jesus Christ. The Bible is consistent in this teaching. John succinctly, and completely, summarizes: **“And this is the testimony [that God has given about His son]: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; He who does not have the Son of God does not have life”** (I John 5:11-12).

For our part, our access to God comes through faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul teaches: **“We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand”** (Rom. 5:1-2). So now we have come full circle, for we started by speaking of God’s sovereignty in election, but now we speak of faith. Does the doctrine of salvation by faith nullify

the doctrine of election? Not at all, for the doctrine of God's sovereignty in election is presented clearly, as in this chapter, even at times alongside the doctrine of salvation by faith. Does the doctrine of election nullify the doctrine of salvation by faith? It must not, for we are told many times in the Bible that our salvation comes by faith, that we must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to receive God's gift of salvation.

Some men preach what they call Calvinism. In their view, the will of men (and thus, the faith of men) has no role in their salvation. They put at odds faith and election. But even John Calvin would not subscribe to this sort of Calvinism. John Calvin wrote the following on Jesus' statement in verse 27: "The meaning therefore is that life is opened up to us in Christ Himself, so that none will be partaker of it but he who enters by the gate of faith. And so we see that He joins faith and the eternal predestination of God. Foolish people contrast these two as if they were contraries. Although our salvation is always hidden in God, yet Christ is the conduit through whom it flows to us and is received by our faith, so that it is firm and certain in our hearts. Therefore we must not swerve from Christ if we do not want to reject the salvation offered to us" [Calvin, 23-24].

Faith and election are not at odds, but they mysteriously and simultaneously work together. As I said, I do not believe that our puny brains can fully understand how they work together. Jesus, though, understood, for right after He said that no one comes to the Father except those **"to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him"**, He made an invitation for us to freely, by our will, come to Him by faith: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"** (vs. 28). What a blessing this invitation is! Yes, **"all things have been committed to [Jesus]"** and **"no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to**

reveal Him”, yet Jesus shows by this invitation that He is more than willing to impart the knowledge of God to us. We just need to **“come to Him.”**

Note well whom Jesus invites. “He does not address those who feel themselves righteous and worthy: He addresses **‘all that labour and are heavy laden.’**—It is a wide description: it comprises multitudes in this weary world” [Ryle, 118]. Who does not feel **“weary and burdened”** by this life? Jesus makes a beautiful promise, here, to those who come to Him: **“I will give you rest.”** God has seen to it that we, in this life, will not find rest for our souls, until we accept Christ’s invitation, and find rest in Him.

When we come to Him, we will need to take off the yoke of the world, so that we may **“take His yoke upon us”** (vs. 28). But we need not fear His yoke, for He is **“gentle and humble in heart”**, and under His yoke, we will **“find rest for our souls.”** “No doubt there is a cross to be carried, if we follow Christ; no doubt there are trials to be endured, and battles to be fought: but the comforts of the Gospel far outweigh the cross. Compared to the service of the world and sin, compared to the yoke of Jewish ceremonies, and the bondage of human superstition, Christ’s service is in the highest sense easy and light” [Ryle, 120].

The Pharisees and the Sabbath

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. ² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.”

³ He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. ⁵ Or haven’t you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? ⁶ I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

— Matthew 12:1-8

IN CHAPTERS 11 AND 12 of his Gospel, Matthew presents some episodes in which Jesus asserts His authority as the Son of God. These episodes give us an understanding of why the religious leadership turned against Him, despite His early popularity (which was a result of His miraculous works). Jesus told the truth. When the Pharisees were wrong in their teaching, He let them know, convincingly and authoritatively. “In the first days of His ministry it is plain that Jesus won a wide

measure of acceptance. He did works of mercy and was a popular preacher. But in the course of time the Jewish establishment came to see that what He was doing and what He was teaching were incompatible with an acceptance of their essential position. So they came to oppose Him, and that with a virulence that would eventually lead to His death” [Morris, 298].

In this section, Jesus debunks the Pharisees’ understanding of Sabbath day observance, and proclaims authority to do so as the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus’ teaching is prompted by a challenge by the Pharisees: **“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, ‘Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath’”** (vs. 1-2). (Incidentally, one thing we learn from this episode is that Jesus and His disciples were poor in things of this world. Here, they apparently could not afford a meal, but had to glean what they could from the fields. “He who fed the multitudes did not use His miraculous power to feed His own followers, but left them till they did what poor men are forced to do to supply a little stay for their stomachs. Our Lord bribes none into following Him: they may be His apostles, and yet be hungry on a Sabbath” [Spurgeon, 145].)

The Pharisees try to deny the disciples their meager sustenance, citing violation of the Sabbath law. Apparently, their interpretation of the Sabbath law held that gleaning for one’s meal on the Sabbath constituted forbidden work. “Plucking was reaping, rubbing the grain from the husk was threshing, to their hypercritical minds” [Spurgeon, 145]. The Sabbath day, by definition, is a day of rest: a day to honor God, and rest from one’s work. The religious leaders had turned the Sabbath day into a day of burden: a day on which the people

had to be constantly monitoring their own behavior to make sure that they did not break any of the Pharasaical regulations concerning the Sabbath. The Lord, in the Old Testament, stated the law concerning the Sabbath very simply: **“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God”** (Ex. 20:9-10). The Sabbath “was a day for refreshing people, for meeting their need. But for the Pharisees it was primarily a day for keeping the regulations that expressed their desire to honor God” [Morris, 300]. “It is not even clear how [the disciples] were breaking any OT law, where commandments about the Sabbath were aimed primarily at regular work. The disciples were not farmers trying to do some illicit work, but they were itinerant preachers casually picking some heads of grain” [Carson, 281].

Jesus does not merely respond to the Pharisees with a reason why this particular act of His disciples was permissible, but He goes further and lets the Pharisees know that their whole understanding of the Sabbath law is incorrect. He begins by citing an episode in David’s life: **“He answered, ‘Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests’”** (vss. 3-4). Though this episode in David’s life did not concern Sabbath observance, it applies to the case of the disciples because it describes an event where the injunctions to care for those in need superseded the ritualistic laws. “And if the law about the hallowed bread might be set aside by necessity, so might the law about the hallowed day” [Broadus, 259]. Rather than criticize the disciples for satisfying their hunger, the Pharisees would have done much better to invite Jesus and the disciples over for a Sabbath meal.

Next, Jesus points out that there is work that is permissible, according to the law, on the Sabbath: **“Or haven’t you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent?”** (vs. 5). The gist of these two last responses that Jesus gave the Pharisees is that there are times that two laws conflict. And when two laws conflict, proper discernment concerning the spirit of the Laws is required. In David’s case, the law of love (concern for those who were hungry) conflicted with the laws concerning the consecrated bread. In the case of the priests, the laws that detailed the work the priests were to perform on the Sabbath, conflicted with the laws prohibiting work on the Sabbath. The work that the priests did “was right, because the temple with its sacrifices was of higher importance than the Sabbath, and would override the requirements of its sanctity” [Broadus, 259]. The eating of the consecrated bread was permissible because the law of love is the greatest commandment.

Jesus points out the precedence that the law of love takes over the ritualistic laws, by citing a prophet in the Old Testament: **“If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent”** (vs. 7). The central emphasis of the religions of those in the lands around the children of Israel was sacrifice to their false idols. “It is the practice of compassion that should distinguish the people of God rather than the punctilious observance of outward regulations” [Morris, 304]. In this statement, **“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”**, is a great principle in discerning the correct behavior when any regulations of the law seem to conflict with each other: “No ordinance of God is to be pressed so far as to make us neglect the plain duties of charity” [Ryle, 123].

To conclude His response to the Pharisees, Jesus asserts His authority to give such definitive answers concerning

questions of the law: **“I tell you that one greater than the temple is here... For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath”** (vss. 6, 8). “If rulings about Sabbath observance are to be made, it is not the Pharisees but ‘the Son of Man,’ as ‘Lord of the Sabbath,’ who has authority to say how to observe properly the day of rest” [Filson, in Morris, 302]. Even if what the disciples were doing was prohibited by the rules of the Pharisees, “acting under their Master’s authority, they had a right to do what would not usually be proper on the Sabbath, for Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath” [Broadus, 260].

The guidance that Jesus gives concerning the Sabbath reflects that our God is a reasonable God, not interested in us showing our devotion through meaningless ritualistic exercises. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus has interpreted the Sabbath, “not with license, but with a sweet reasonableness which the more rigid of religionists do not exhibit” [Spurgeon, 147]. There is a great danger when anyone adds to God’s perfect law. They run the risk of misrepresenting God, thus skewing people’s understanding about the nature and personality of God. We have a loving God, a caring God, and a reasonable God. The teachings of the Pharisee’s did not reflect that. Thank God that He sent His Son to represent Him perfectly, that we may know, through the character of Jesus Christ, the true nature of God.

Healing on the Sabbath

⁹ Going on from that place, He went into their synagogue, ¹⁰ and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked Him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

¹¹ He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

¹³ Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

¹⁵ Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed Him, and He healed all their sick, ¹⁶ warning them not to tell who He was. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear His voice in the streets. ²⁰ A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out, till He leads justice to victory. ²¹ In His name the nations will put their hope.”

— Matthew 12:9-21

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION, Jesus defended His disciples against the accusations of profaning the Sabbath by the

Pharisees. Jesus convincingly did so, teaching the Pharisees the spirit of the Sabbath. Jesus also proclaimed Himself the Lord of the Sabbath.

Not content to “leave well enough alone”, the Pharisees set up a situation to confront Jesus publicly concerning His own observance of the Sabbath: **“Going on from that place, He went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked Him, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ He said to them, ‘If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath”** (vss. 9-11). This episode, I think, is quite surprising, in demonstrating clearly the evil attitude of the Pharisees. For they had faith that Jesus could miraculously heal the man with the shriveled hand. And in fact, they believed in Jesus’ goodness, for they knew that Jesus would heal the man. Given such knowledge of His power, and His goodness, how could they deny that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath? But rather than responding to their faith with repentance, and then taking to heart the teachings of the Lord, the Pharisees looked **“for a reason to accuse Jesus.”**

Jesus answered their attempt to accuse Him by pointing out the absurdity of their rules concerning the Sabbath, while at the same time appealing to their common sense: **“He said to them, ‘If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath”** (vs. 11-12). The Pharisees, by their rules, would have been able to help a sheep, but not a man. Jesus ignored their rules and did what was right and good: **“Then He said to the man, ‘Stretch out**

your hand.’ So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other” (vs. 13).

The Pharisees had a curious reaction to witnessing so grand and glorious a miracle: **“But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus”** (vs. 14). “What evil had our Lord done, that He should be so treated? None, none at all: no charge could be brought against His life. He was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners; His days were spent in doing good” [Ryle, 125]. In plotting to kill Jesus, the Pharisees demonstrated that their hearts were hardened beyond repair. “His arguments had not convinced them of their error, and His miracle mercy had only intensified their hostility” [Thomas, 173]. “What a stubborn rage it is that drives the reprobate to resist God! Let them be convicted, and their poison will only pour out the more” [Calvin, 34]. The Pharisees also demonstrated a great amount of hypocrisy. For they accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath for healing a man, and yet, did they not break their own rules concerning the Sabbath by plotting His death? “What a reproach upon human nature, to see men maintaining that it was a mortal sin to heal disease on the Sabbath, and yet foully plotting on that same sacred day, how they might destroy the innocent Teacher and Healer” [Broadus, 263].

Jesus, somehow, either by human or divine intuition, knew of their plot, and responded to it: **“Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed Him, and He healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who He was”** (vss. 15-16). Jesus did not withdraw because He was afraid of the Pharisees. He could have, of course, through divine power, destroyed His enemies. Yet, to do such a thing was not a part of the plan of God, under which the Messiah came to this earth, the first time, in humility. “His reaction was to avoid provocation; He would die courageously when the right time

came, but He would not engage in needless provocation of His enemies until His ministry drew to its close” [Morris, 309]. He did not want His quarrels with the Pharisees to hinder His ministry to the people. There would come a time when He would allow His confrontation with the Pharisees to run its course, but until then, Jesus was determined to do as much good, for as many people as He could.

Though He withdrew from where the Pharisees were, He was hardly alone, for **“many followed Him.”** Jesus’ reaction to His followers was not to shoo them away, but to **“heal all their sick.”** Such is the love of Christ. The contrast between the behavior of Jesus and the behavior of the Pharisees (the so-called religious leaders of the time) is stark: Jesus **“healed all the sick”**; the Pharisees planned to murder the Healer of All.

In order that His ministry not be hindered by further confrontation with the religious leaders, Jesus warned those whom He healed **“not to tell who He was”** (vs. 16). “Jesus did not want unnecessary publicity. Obviously with a large crowd following Him a certain amount of publicity was inevitable. But He was no publicity seeker, apparently not because He would be in danger if His enemies knew where He was, but because He preferred to do His work quietly and without fuss” [Morris, 309]. Jesus’ warning was intended only for His followers *at that time*. We, of course, are under no such warning. We should declare His great works to anyone who will listen.

We have seen throughout the book of Matthew that one focus of Matthew’s Gospel is to show how Jesus fulfilled prophecy. So here, Matthew takes an opportunity to point out that Jesus’ passive response to the Pharisees was as the Messiah was prophesied to act: **“This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put**

my Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out, till He leads justice to victory. In His name the nations will put their hope” (vss. 17-20). And indeed, Jesus’ behavior fulfills this prophecy. When confronted by the Pharisees, Jesus did not shy away, but He spoke the truth, **“proclaiming justice to the nations.”** Yet, He did not push the point so as to **“quarrel or cry out.”** He did not demand to defend Himself by raising **“His voice in the streets.”** “He did not aim at raising Himself in the esteem of the multitude by successfully contending with the Pharisees; for His method was of another sort” [Spurgeon, 150]. “He shall do His office meekly and humbly, and not manage His spiritual kingdom by violence, nor unnecessarily contest with the Pharisees, who consulted how to destroy Him” [Westminster Divines]. Jesus’ behavior is greatly contrasted to that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees sought out confrontation, as they **“looked for a reason to accuse Jesus”** (vs. 9). They were angry at Jesus for no reason, for Jesus was merely speaking the truth of God. Though Jesus had just cause and reason to be angry at the Pharisees, He did not seek out a confrontation, but rather withdrew so that He could continue His good works in peace.

As pointed out in the prophecy cited here, many of Jesus’ good works concerned His help to the helpless: **“A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out”** (vs. 20). Leon Morris explains the metaphor: “The natural thing was to discard an imperfect reed and replace it with a better one. But the Lord’s servant does not discard those who can be likened to shattered reeds, earth’s broken ones... A wick that functioned imperfectly was a nuisance: it would not give out good light and its smoldering released a certain amount

of smoke. The simple thing was to snuff it out and throw it away. A little bit of flax did not cost much, so replacing it was the normal procedure. It took time and patience and the willing to take pains to make anything useful out of a bruised reed or a smoking wick. People in general would not take the trouble. In a similar fashion, most of us regard the world's down-and-outs as not worth troubling ourselves over; we do not see how anything can be made of them. But love and care and patience can do wonders, and that is what the prophet is talking about" [Morris, 311]. In my view, those servants of the Lord who are most Christ-like are those that minister to the **"bruised reeds"** and **"smoldering wicks"** of society: the poor, the down-trodden, the homeless, those who are in prison. May the Lord bless the work of these ministers of Christ.

This prophecy concerning Christ is especially important because most of the children of Israel did not expect their Messiah to act in this way. "In popular expectation Messiahs exercised their authority by crushing opposition, but Jesus showed His authority in His concern for the helpless and downtrodden" [Morris, 309]. "God laid on His Son a humble and lowly role. But the simple might be offended at His contemptible and obscure life; and so the prophets and Matthew agree that this was no accident but came to pass by the decree of heaven" [Calvin, 35]. "The Jews expected the Messiah to be a great conqueror, whose warlike exploits would attract universal attention; and as the character and course of Jesus were quite the reverse of all this, it was important for Matthew's purpose of convincing the Jews that He was the Messiah, to point out that His action in this respect was in accordance with Messianic prediction" [Broadus, 263].

Blasphemy Against Jesus

²² Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. ²³ All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”

²⁵ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.

²⁸ “But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹ Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.

³⁰ “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. ³¹ And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

³³ “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶ But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

— Matthew 12:22-37

MATTHEW HERE CONTINUES to present episodes in Jesus’ life where He asserts His authority as the Messiah. In this section, He does so through actions and words. First, through actions, by performing a miraculous healing: **“Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’”** (vs. 22-23). This man was blessed to have such good friends, who would bring him to Jesus. “The evil spirit had secured himself by stopping up the windows and the door of the soul: the victim was blind and mute. How could he escape? He could not see his Savior, nor cry to Him... It is well when men take to bringing others to Jesus: good is sure to come of it” [Spurgeon, 152].

The miracle had a powerful effect on those who witnessed it, and turned their thoughts to thinking that Jesus could be the promised Messiah, the **“Son of David.”** The main obstacle, apparently, to their absolutely conceding that He was the Messiah was their own expectations of how the Messiah would act. They were expecting in the Messiah a mighty conqueror of their foes; in Jesus, they found a humble servant of the people.

The Pharisees, however, reacted to the miracle in a totally different way. Instead of advancing the more obvious conclusion that Jesus was sent by God to do these great works, they irrationally made the claim that Jesus' benevolent miracles were the work of the evil one: **“But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons’”** (vs. 24). Ironically, the Pharisees were apparently in a much worse condition than the blind and mute man, even before he was healed. For though they could see, the Pharisees chose to be blind to the great works of the Lord. And though they could speak, their words were a detriment to them, leading them to destruction.

Indeed, their words were so absurd that, undoubtedly, what they said was purposely malicious. “There is not one of us who does not perceive in this story, as in a mirror, the extraordinary power of God. From which we infer that the minds of the scribes were infected with a devilish venom, when they did not hesitate to speak ill of such a wonderful work of God” [Calvin, 39]. Clearly, the Pharisees understood that what they witnessed was extremely miraculous. Yet, they could not bring themselves to ascribe to Jesus power from God. So they chose to blaspheme His work instead. They did this for selfish motives, for to acknowledge that Jesus acted with the power of God, would also be to acknowledge that Jesus spoke with the power of God. They did not want the people to follow the teachings of Jesus, because in many ways, Jesus' teachings contradicted their own. “The Pharisees saw that if His miracles were recognized the people would believe that He was sent from God (see John 3:2), and then all His teachings must be received as true, and all His claims admitted as just. They could not question the reality of the healing, nor ascribe it to mere human agency; they therefore resorted to the absurd idea of a

league with Satan, though Jesus was really destroying Satan's work" [Broadus, 267]. Indeed, many absurd things are said by those who are stubbornly set against belief in the True and Living God. In my mind, Jesus shows remarkable restraint in answering the Pharisees. Rather than replying with the wrath that the blasphemous charge deserved, Jesus first answered it with simple logic: **"Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand'"** (vs. 25-26). Why would **"the prince of demons"** give Jesus the power to drive out demons? It doesn't make sense. "It is not to be presumed that Satan is stupid: the Pharisees were taking up an impossible position. Theoretically, of course, it might be argued that Satan could allow the expulsion of one demon in order to effect some diabolical purpose, but this would be met by the fact that Jesus kept on expelling demons; He carried on an unrelenting war against all the demonic forces" [Morris, 315]. Next, Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees: **"And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges"** (vs. 27). The Pharisees of the time sanctioned certain Jewish exorcists. And whatever work they did, whether actual exorcism or fraud, it could not have been as clear a miracle as what Jesus just did before their eyes. So, it made no sense that the Pharisees would sanction the work of their exorcists, and yet call Jesus' work, which was so much more clearly true exorcism, the work of the devil. Indeed, given the magnificence of Jesus' miracle, it should have caused the Pharisees to realize that a whole new age had been ushered in: **"But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"** (vs. 28). For it is logical that part of the

work of ushering in the kingdom of God would be to drive out demons: **“Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house”** (vs. 29). In the rest of this section, Jesus speaks (in a more general way) of the seriousness of what the Pharisees were doing: **“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come”** (vss. 30-32). “Our Lord now solemnly declares that a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only unpardonable sin; and it is distinctly implied that their accusation, that He cast out demons by the help of Beelzebub, was a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and so was past forgiveness” [Broadus, 271]. By aligning themselves against the One who was sent by God to save them, the Pharisees were aligning themselves against God Himself. Moreover, to align themselves against Jesus, with full knowledge that He was sent by God (as testified by the Spirit of God in their hearts), was a sin that **“will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”** This is the so-called unforgivable sin. The Pharisees were not just guilty of blaspheming against Jesus, they were blaspheming against the Spirit of God, because the Spirit revealed to them that Jesus was sent by God and was doing the work of God. Given this knowledge, they were under an obligation to treat Him as Lord, and to obey His teachings. They chose instead to reject this knowledge and blaspheme Him. As Jesus states, to blaspheme Jesus, in itself, is not unforgivable. Even Paul the Apostle (at one time) blasphemed Jesus, but he did so in ignorance (see I Tim. 1:13). The

Pharisees blasphemed with full knowledge of who Jesus is, as given to them by the Spirit of God. And so, they were guilty of committing the unforgivable sin. This sin is spoken of elsewhere in the Bible. The writer of the book of Hebrews teaches: **“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace”** (Heb. 6:4-6). Given that the concept of the unforgivable sin is difficult, let us hear from some learned theologians concerning the matter: “Let us gather from these verses the exceeding sinfulness of sins against knowledge” [Ryle, 131]. “The sin that cannot be forgiven is not to be understood as the utterance of any particular form of words. It is impossible to hold that any form of words is unforgivable, granted that the sinner subsequently repents and turns to God. Jesus is talking about the set of the life, not any one isolated saying. When a person takes up a position like that of the Pharisees, when, not by way of misunderstanding but through hostility to what is good, that person calls good evil and, on the other hand, makes evil his good, then that person has put himself in a state that prevents forgiveness. It is not that God refuses to forgive; it is that the person who sees good as evil and evil as good is quite unable to repent and thus to come humbly to God for forgiveness. And there is no way to forgiveness other than by the path of repentance and faith” [Morris, 318]. “It denotes the conscious and wicked rejection of the saving power and grace of God towards man” [Beyer, in Morris, 319]. “He who is guilty of this outrageous crime has sinned himself into a condition in which spiritual feeling is dead, and repentance has become morally

impossible” [Spurgeon, 155]. “We do not hold that those who fight against His grace and power with determined malice are blaspheming the Spirit of God; but we do hold that such sacrilege is committed only when we strive knowingly to extinguish the Spirit dwelling within us. And the reason why the Spirit, rather than the Son or the Father Himself, is said to be blasphemed is that, in depreciating God’s grace and power, we are making a direct assault on the Spirit, from whom they proceed and in whom they are manifest to us. Does some unbeliever curse God? It is as if a blind man came into collision with a wall. But he is not cursing the Spirit unless he has been enlightened by Him and is aware of his ungodly rebellion” [Calvin, 46]. Finally, Jesus points out that the blasphemous words that the Pharisees spoke reflected the state of their evil hearts: **“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”** (vss. 33-34). “The life of the scribes was not notorious for gross wickedness; yet their slanders were the symptoms of the poison of their pride, ambition and envy. Because all this was hidden from the ordinary folk, Christ draws the inner evil out of darkness into light” [Calvin, 48]. And in general, the speech of men reflect the state of their hearts: **“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”** (vs. 35-37). Have your words gotten you into trouble lately? Have you found recently your mouth to be uncontrollably speaking evil? Do not dismiss such lapses as

merely **“careless words”**, for **“out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.”** Rather, seek help from the Lord, by His Spirit, to heal your heart, and purify your mind, so that what comes out of your mouth may be pure grace.

Request for a Sign

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.”

³⁹ He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

⁴³ “When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. ⁴⁴ Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.”

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, His mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to

Him. ⁴⁷ Someone told Him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”

⁴⁸ He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹ Pointing to His disciples, He said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

— Matthew 12:38-50

MATTHEW HAS JUST related how, after Jesus amazed the crowds by miraculously healing a blind and mute man, the Pharisees attributed the miracle to the power of the devil. Now, the Pharisees request a miraculous sign: **“Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you’”** (vs. 38). The Pharisees show amazing arrogance here. The wondrous and beautiful miracles that Jesus had performed were not good enough for them. They want to dictate to Him when and where to do a miracle, in order that they might (possibly) believe He is sent from God. They are like many today, who “flatter themselves that they only require a little more proof to become decided Christians; they fancy that if their reason and intellect could only be met with some additional arguments, they would at once give up all for Christ’s sake, take up the cross and follow Him” [Ryle, 135]. Many today say, “Oh, if God would just come down and reveal Himself directly to me, in a miraculous way, then I would believe.” Such arrogance! In saying this, they make themselves a ruler over God, dictating to Him how to reveal Himself. They ignore all the revelations of God that can be found in His creation, and through the work of His people. More importantly, they ignore the time when He did come down and show Himself to the world, through Jesus Christ.

Jesus denied their request to perform a sign at their bidding: **“He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here’”** (vss. 40-42). Though Jesus denied their request for a sign at their bidding, He did offer to give them a sign in His time, the sign of Jonah: **“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”** (vs. 40). Jesus, of course, was speaking of His death and resurrection. This sign should have turned out to be sufficient for the skeptical Pharisees, and indeed, should have been sufficient for skeptics throughout the ages. No other sign is needed. If the power of Christ’s resurrection is not sufficient to believe, then nothing is.

By citing the history of Jonah here, Jesus teaches us a couple of things. First, Jesus affirms that the story of Jonah was true—as true as the death and resurrection of the Lord Himself. Jesus states: **“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”** (vs. 40). “Jesus refers to the story of Jonah, and his miraculous preservation in the whale’s belly, as undeniable matters of fact. Let us remember this if we hear men professing to believe the writers of the New Testament, and yet sneering at the things

recorded in the Old Testament, as if they were fables: such men forget that in so doing they pour contempt upon Christ Himself. The authority of the Old Testament and the authority of the New stand or fall together; the same Spirit inspired men to write of Solomon and Jonah, who inspired the Evangelists to write of Christ” [Ryle, 135].

Second, Jesus teaches us that Jonah’s history foreshadowed Jesus’ life, as so much of the Old Testament does. “Jonah’s case was analogous to this, as being a signal judgment of God, reversed in three days, and followed by a glorious mission to the Gentiles” [JFB, 75]. “Jesus’ life story is well symbolized by that of Jonah. They cast our Lord overboard, even as the sailors did the man of God. The sacrifice of Jonah calmed the sea for the mariners; our Lord’s death made peace for us. Our Lord was a while in the heart of the earth as Jonah in the depth of the sea; but He rose again, and His ministry was full of the power of His resurrection. As Jonah’s ministry was certified by His restoration from the sea, so is our Lord’s ministry attested by His rising from the dead. The man who had come back from death and burial in the sea commanded the attention of all Ninevah, and so does the risen Saviour demand and deserve the obedient faith of all to whom His message comes” [Spurgeon, 158]. This is just one example of many, many typological passages in the Old Testament that prefigure Jesus and His ministry. The whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, speak of Jesus. We can find Him on every page.

Jesus compares the Ninevites’ response after hearing the preaching of Jonah, to the Pharisees’ (and, in general, the children of Israel’s) response to Jesus’ ministry: **“The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here”** (vs. 41). The Pharisees had a much greater advantage

than the Ninevites to believe the words of the man of God that came to them. The Ninevites were heathens, while the Pharisees already professed a belief in the True and Living God. Jonah the prophet, though he preached to them, had no desire that the Ninevites be saved, while Jesus tirelessly carried out His ministry, and went to great lengths (even dying for them) to save the children of Israel. Jonah's preaching was accompanied by one miracle, and that a rather odd one, in that he was spit up onto the beach by a large fish; Jesus performed all sorts of signs and miracles, culminating in His resurrection from the dead. Surely, in every way imaginable, the Pharisees had the advantage of having **"one greater than Jonah."** Indeed, the Ninevites, in addition to standing in judgment and condemning **"that generation"**, could stand in judgment and condemn many generations since then, including our own. We, who have the revelation of Jesus Christ, and the great news of the Gospel, have much more evidence to repent and turn to God than the Ninevites did. "It was a sublime spectacle when the whole population of that vast heathen city, the proud king, the nobles and all, down to the very humblest, repented at the preaching of Jonah" [Broadus, 277].

Significantly, the example of the repentance of the Ninevites is an example of Gentiles turning to God. Jesus gives one more example of a Gentile turning to God: **"The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here"** (vs. 42). "As the fame of Solomon brought the queen of the south from the uttermost parts of the earth, so does the doctrine of our Lord command attention from the utmost isles of the sea" [Spurgeon, 159]. The example of the Queen of Sheba, the **"Queen of the South"**, is also notable here because she turned to God through the preaching of the

wisdom of God, without the benefit of signs and miracles. Jesus, of course, spoke many words of wisdom, in addition to performing signs and wonders. The Queen of the South will surely **“rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.”**

One of the points that Jesus was making with these examples was that the children of Israel at the time Jesus walked the earth had a great advantage over those of any generation that preceded them, for the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy was occurring before their eyes. The Messiah Himself walked with them, talked with them, taught them, and even served them. Such first-hand knowledge of the Messiah brought with it a great amount of responsibility for them to respond to it, repent and totally turn their lives over to their Lord.

Does this sound radical? To totally turn your life over to the Lord. To do any less is actually dangerous. Jesus speaks next of the dangers of partial religious conversion: **“When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation”** (vss. 43-45). Jesus here teaches us a bit about the spiritual world and the dynamics of an aspect of the spiritual war. He speaks here of a man who experienced a partial religious conversion. We are not told the details of the conversion experience, but we are told that **“an evil spirit came out of the man.”** Perhaps he was a drunkard who overcame his addiction; or a violent man who became a man of peace; or a profligate who put behind his evil ways.

However, he did not follow up on his conversion and turn his entire life over to God. His conversion was incomplete. The **“evil spirit”** left, but nothing came to replace it. The man did not replace the power of the evil spirit with the power of God. A void was left. And so, the evil spirit returned and found **“the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.”** Note the wording here. The man’s life was not messed up, but **“put in order.”** From all external appearances, the man had it altogether. No doubt he was often congratulated on his transformation, on his renewed spiritual state. And yet, there was spiritual emptiness inside—a vacancy left to be filled. The evil spirit took advantage of this spiritual emptiness, and took with it **“seven other spirits more wicked itself”**, to go back and live in the man. **“And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.”** The partial conversion was actually detrimental to him. He chose to only partially turn his life over to God, and the result was that his entire soul was lost. “There is a terrible persistence in wickedness: it returns, and the soul not indwelt by the rightful Tenant is always beleaguered. Mere reformation is never enough...” [Buttrick, in Morris, 329].

In context, Jesus, with His story about the partially converted man, may have been specifically referring to the children of Israel, their initial partial response to the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus Himself, and then their subsequent rejection of Jesus. “The dispossession may refer to the great impression made by John and Jesus, which in most of the people was proving temporary, so that in finally rejecting the Messianic reign they would become more completely than ever the subjects of Satan, and in forty years more would plunge into sore calamity and ruin” [Broadus, 279].

At this point in His teachings, Jesus is interrupted: **“While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, His mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to Him.**

Someone told Him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’” (vs. 46-47). We learn from Mark, a little more background to this episode. Before Jesus started teaching, He entered a house, **“and again a crowd gathered, so that He and His disciples were not even able to eat. When His family heard about this, they went to take charge of Him, for they said, ‘He is out of His mind’”** (Mark. 3:20-21). So, Jesus’ family had good intentions. They were concerned that, in Jesus’ zeal for service, He was harming Himself by neglecting to eat and rest. However, they misinterpreted His zeal for service as insanity. How familiar does this sound? This scene has been played out countless times throughout the history of Christianity: family members and friends of Christians who think that the zealous, spirit-filled, untiring servants of God are crazy. What Jesus’ family members didn’t realize at the time was that Jesus received His power, zeal, sustenance, and guidance from God, and that the Spirit of God would dictate when Jesus would rest.

Jesus pointed out to His earthly family that there is a new sort of kinship: **“He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to His disciples, He said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’”** (vs. 48-50). Jesus took this opportunity to “teach there is higher kinship, supreme over even the closest earthly one; it is based on union of life with God and expressed in deeds of righteousness... It is striking that He uses these words in detail, clearly originating new and holy humanity, to be known by one great characteristic, its devotion to the will of God” [Thomas, 182]. For the believer, the spiritual bond to Jesus is much greater than any earthly relationship. What a privilege that we are blessed with a personal relationship with the Lord of the Universe. “All believers in Jesus are of the royal

family, princes of the blood, brothers of the Christ” [Spurgeon, 162].

Jesus Speaks in Parables

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then He told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop— a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear.”

¹⁰ The disciples came to Him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

¹¹ He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables:

“Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.”

¹⁴ “In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵ For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

¹⁶ “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

¹⁸ “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. ²² The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

— Matthew 13:1-23

CHAPTER 13 of the Gospel of Matthew is, for the most part, a chapter of parables: **“That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then He told**

them many things in parables” (vss. 1-3). It seems that, on **“that same day”**, Jesus began to speak more in parables than He had previously. The disciples noticed that the teaching was in a manner that was more obscure than what had preceded it. It is probably significant that the change came on the same day that the Pharisees ascribed to the devil the power that Jesus was using for His miracles. This, it seems, was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Whereas before, Jesus taught everyone in a clear, unambiguous way, now He begins to speak to the general public in a veiled way, and reserves clear teaching to those disciples who seek it out.

The disciples, noticing the different style of teaching, asked Jesus about it: **“The disciples came to Him and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’”** (vs. 10). The answer that Jesus gave may seem surprising: **“He replied, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand’”** (vss. 11-13). “Jesus’ answer cannot legitimately be softened: at least one of the functions of parables is to conceal the truth, or at least to present it in a veiled way” [Carson, 307]. We tend to think of parables as aids to understanding, but Jesus tells us, and the disciples seem to agree, that the parables hinder understanding.

The main reason the parables hindered understanding was that Jesus did not reveal the interpretation of the parables to His hearers. If one is provided with the proper interpretation of the parables, then yes, parables can be a great aid in understanding spiritual things, because a parable takes that which is well-known in ordinary life and compares it to a

spiritual concept. But when one is not given the interpretation, a parable can lead to confusion, because if one's personal interpretation is incorrect, the parable can actually lead to a misunderstanding of spiritual truths. And so, here in this chapter, since Jesus was speaking to the crowd entirely in parables, the spiritual truths were veiled to them. To truly understand the spiritual truth behind a parable, without being given the interpretation, requires some measure of commitment by the hearer: requires thought, meditation, and prayer. Why, even the disciples needed to ask Jesus for proper interpretations. The difficulty of properly understanding the parables will become apparent as we study them, because, as we will see in our discussion of them, some of the parables for which no interpretation is provided by Jesus, have been historically given radically differing interpretations.

In Jesus' answer to the disciples, we have, as happens many places in the Bible, the concept of God's sovereignty juxtaposed with the idea of man's responsibility. God's sovereignty is expressed when Jesus says: **"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them"** (vs. 11). "It is not a merit in the disciples that they understand where others do not; their comprehension is due to the fact that God has chosen them and given them the gift of understanding" [Morris, 339]. And yet, Jesus' decision to hide the secrets of the kingdom seems to be due to the stubbornness of the people, who do not heed His clear teachings: **"This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand'"** (vs. 13). "By its nature the Word of God is always light; but its light is quenched by men's darkness... It is always a settled principle that God's Word is not obscure save insofar as the world darkens it by its blindness" [Calvin, II, 64].

Many people nowadays think that the concepts of God's sovereignty in election, and man's responsibility to have faith in the Gospel message, are in contradiction. The Biblical writers (and thus the Holy Spirit of God) did not consider these concepts as contradictory, because the same writer will refer to one, and then the other, in the same passage. "Biblical writers in both the OT and the NT have, on the whole, fewer problems about the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility than do many moderns. This is not because they fail to distinguish purpose and consequence, as many affirm, but because they do not see divine sovereignty and human responsibility as antitheses. In short they are compatibilists and therefore juxtapose the two themes with little self-conscious awareness of any problem" [Carson, 309].

The stubborn attitude of those who heard the clear teaching of Jesus, yet rejected it, was prophesied by Isaiah, as Jesus points out: **"In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them'"** (vss. 14-15; see Isa. 6:9-10). This prophecy seems to be a general prophecy of the stubbornness of those through the ages who reject God's Word. Many who heard Jesus first-hand had this stubbornness, had **"calloused"** hearts; many today have this same stubbornness. We who believe are frustrated to see some of our closest friends, neighbors and relatives show this same stubbornness in rejecting the Word and call of God. If only they would cast aside their obstinate refusal to believe the Word of God, **"they might see with their eyes, hear with their**

ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and [God] would heal them.”

But for those who have cast aside their obstinacy, and have put their faith in the Word of God, they are blessed, even blessed by Jesus Himself: **“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear”** (vs. 16). And especially blessed are we, who have the revelation of God through Jesus Christ; we who can read the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings; we who know of God’s plan of salvation, as brought about by Jesus’ offering of Himself on the cross. As Jesus points out: **“For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it”** (vs. 17).

Chapter 13 contains seven parables about the kingdom of heaven. As we will see, all of these parables contain a common theme. They all speak of the division of men into two sorts of people: those who belong to the kingdom of heaven, and those who do not. The parables point out that these two sorts of people dwell together, intermixed, until the end of this age, when a separation of the two sorts of people will take place.

The first parable speaks of how the division comes about: the differing responses to the Gospel message. Jesus tells the parable: **“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear”** (vss. 3-9).

Earlier, we talked about the difficulty of coming up with a proper interpretation for the parables of Jesus. For this parable, we are blessed to have an authoritative interpretation from Jesus Himself, which makes my task of discussing this parable very easy: **“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown”** (vss. 18-23).

The main point of this parable is that the preaching of the Gospel message can “produce different results in different hearers” [Morris, 335]. Interestingly, the differing results in this parable have nothing to do with the skill of the preacher. “Even if preaching were in itself perfect, it would have a very different effect upon different classes of hearers” [Broadus, 294]. In fact, in this parable, not much at all is said about the preacher. Only this: **“A farmer went out to sow his seed”** (vs. 3). We know only that this preacher was diligent in his work, for he sowed his seed everywhere, far and wide, in good and bad soil, hoping to produce results.

The first result Jesus speaks of is represented by the seed falling on the path: **“As he was scattering the seed, some**

fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up” (vs. 4). Of this seed, Jesus says: **“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path”** (vs. 19). Notice that the birds represent the evil one, the devil. The birds are given the opportunity to snatch up the seed because it fell on soil (in this case, a hardened path) that was not amenable for the seed to take any root, let alone flourish.

Note also that the **“evil one”** here is not part of the parable, but part of the interpretation. In other words, the devil is a real being, and Jesus treats him as such. In this case, the devil actively, and successfully, **“snatches away”** the seed of the Gospel sown in the unbeliever’s heart.

The second result of the preaching is represented by the seed falling on rocky places: **“Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root”** (vss. 5-6). Of this seed, Jesus says: **“The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once received it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away”** (vss. 20-21). It seems that this hearer was willing to take the good that comes with the Gospel, but not willing to pay the price that comes with it. Persecution, the testing of faith, will come to all believers. So, believers must be ready and willing to endure the trials and persecution that come from their faith. As Jesus told us: **“Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”** (Matt. 10:38).

Note here that the joy (and whatever amount of faith that accompanied it) initially produced by the hearing of the Gospel

was worthless. Untested faith is worthless faith. Tested faith is proven faith.

The third result of the preaching is represented by the seed that fell among the thorns: **“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants”** (vs. 7). Of this seed, Jesus says: **“The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful”** (vs. 22). The faith of this hearer is choked out by the things of this world. “We may really like the Gospel, and wish to obey it, and yet insensibly give it no chance of bearing fruit, by allowing other things to fill a place in our affections, until they occupy our whole hearts. Alas, there are many such hearers! They know the truth well: they hope one day to be decided Christians; but they never come to the point of giving up all of Christ’s sake” [Ryle, 143]. Note that it is the **“deceitfulness”** of riches that is the barrier to faith. Riches deceive men because they promise all happiness and all contentment. Yet riches never deliver on this promise. In fact, the woes and miseries of the rich are well-documented (perhaps, too well) in the newspapers and tabloids every day. We must all see through the deceitfulness of riches, so that we may turn to Him who truly can give us happiness and contentment.

The fourth result of the preaching is represented by the seed that fell on good soil: **“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown”** (vs. 8). Of this seed, Jesus says: **“But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown”** (vs. 23). The preaching, thankfully, does yield a good result in some. However, “even of those who truly understand and receive the word, some exhibit better results than others....

That which yields a less abundant harvest is still called good ground, seeing that it does produce a real crop.... Yet we should all desire and strive to be not merely of those who bring forth, but of those who bring forth a hundredfold” [Broadus, 293].

The truth of the message of this parable is strikingly demonstrated over and over, wherever the word of God is preached. Some will be deeply moved and in tears at hearing the glorious Gospel; others, hearing the same words, will scoff. These reactions, as the parable points out, have little to do with the preacher himself. The sower, the preacher of God’s Word, can “scatter the seed committed to his charge, but he cannot command it to grow: he may offer the word of truth to a people, but he cannot make them receive it and bear fruit” [Ryle, 142]. In fact, as in the parable, the reaction has much more to do with the “character and preparation of the soil” [Broadus, 290], than with the skill of the preacher.

More Parables, pt. 1

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸ “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

³¹ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

³³ He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

³⁴ Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable.
³⁵ So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden
since the creation of the world.”

³⁶ Then He left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to Him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

³⁷ He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

— Matthew 13:24-43

MATTHEW CONTINUES HERE in chapter 13 relating some of the parables that Jesus spoke. As we have stated, all of the parables in this chapter speak in some way about the division of people in this world into those who belong to the kingdom of God, and those who do not. The different parables deal with various aspects and consequences of the fact that the people of the world are divided into these two groups.

In this section, there are three parables that are closely related. I believe that the fact that they are closely related is reflected by the structure of this section. First, we have Jesus telling the parable of the wheat and the tares (or weeds, as the NIV translates). Then, two more parables are told: the parable of the mustard seed, and the parable of the leaven (or yeast, as the NIV translates). Next, the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares is given. So, the telling of the second and third parables in this section is bracketed by the telling of the first parable and its interpretation. This implies, I believe, that the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares guides us in the interpretation of the other two parables.

The parable of the wheat and the tares is told by Jesus in verses 24 through 30. The interpretation is then given later in verses 37 through 43. We will look at both the telling of the parable and its interpretation together. Jesus tells the parable: **“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn’”** (vss. 24–30).

Later, **“His disciples came to him and said, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field’”** (vs. 36). We are

blessed that Jesus answered the disciples with a definitive interpretation of this parable, so that there is no room for error in our understanding of this particular parable. First, Jesus gives a very specific key to the symbols used in the parable: **“He answered, ‘The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels’”** (vs. 37-39). We are told in the telling of the parable that the sower **“sowed good seed in *his* field”** (vs. 24). The world is Jesus’ field. He, as Creator, sowed good seed, and continues to sow good seed, raising up **“sons of the kingdom.”** Jesus’ parable departs a bit from real-life, in that the owner of the field normally would not sow the seed, but his servants would. But in the parable, the owner does sow the seed, as if to say it is through Jesus’ work, not His servants, that sons of the kingdom are raised up.

“But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away” (vs. 25). That the enemy sowed while **“everyone was sleeping”** does not mean to imply that the devil was given an opportunity because of the servant’s negligence (in fact, according to Jesus’ interpretation, the servants do not represent anything specific in the parable). Rather, it implies that the enemy selects the most opportune time to sow his seed.

Interestingly, and realistically, it became evident to the servants that the enemy had sowed seed some time after the enemy did it. The servants were taken by surprise primarily because, at first, the weeds looked just like the wheat. The presence of the weeds mixed in with the wheat came as a surprise to the servants, but it did not take the owner by surprise. He knew right away that **“an enemy did this”** (vs.

28). The servants only noticed the weeds **“when the wheat sprouted.”** In the same way, the ungodliness of most people is not immediately evident. “When such men first profess the true Religion, they so cunningly hide their principles in obscure terms, and veil their wickedness with shows of holiness, that it cannot presently appear, who are good, and who evil: but afterwards, when good men are nearer their maturity, and the wicked to their height of maliciousness, an evident difference appears” [Westminster Divines]. There are many false professors of Christianity, and these people are the most dangerous to the cause of Christ. Those who openly reject Christ are less a danger than false professors, because the world thinks that the false professors are true believers. So, when the false professors do ungodly acts, the cause of Christ is blamed for their actions.

The fact that the ungodly and godly live together in this world is a source of frustration to many godly people. To try to get around this, there have been many attempts throughout history when godly people have tried to separate themselves from the rest of the world. But these attempts have only had limited, and temporary, success. For godliness is not hereditary. When the next generation comes along, even though they may come from godly parents, there is no guarantee that they will be as godly as their parents were. “Nowhere on earth can we maintain a settlement of saints alone” [Spurgeon, 178]. We must face the fact that, in this age, the children of God must share this world with the children of the enemy. In all places, in all levels of society, even within church fellowships, the godly intermingle with the ungodly. The best way to remedy this somewhat is to always do your part in bringing the ungodly to a knowledge of our glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through a godly example, and through a faithful witness.

As pointed out in the parable, there will come a time when the godly and the ungodly will be separated. It will come at **“the end of this age”**: **“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out His, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear”** (vss. 40-43). This parable was important in educating the disciples about God’s ultimate plan. Most of the Jews at the time believed that the Messiah would come and immediately execute His judgment on the ungodly. **“The Jews, including our Lord’s disciples, would naturally think, with their rooted notions of Messiah’s reign, that He would promptly destroy all those who did not submit to His authority, as was common with Oriental conquerors, as David himself was known to have done. Their views and feelings are illustrated by the wish of James and John to call down fire from heaven and consume the Samaritan village, for refusing to receive Jesus (see Luke 9:54)”** [Broadus, 299]. This parable definitively teaches that the ultimate execution of God’s judgment would take place at **“the end of this age”**, at some time future to the Jews of that time, and still future to us.

It is important to note the reason given for the owner not destroying the weeds immediately: **“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them’”** (vs. 29). The weeds are not destroyed, for the owner does not want to harm the wheat in the process of destroying the weeds. This tells us that, at the end of the age, the ungodly will not suffer God’s wrath along with the ungodly. As Paul tells us: **“For God did not appoint**

us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thess. 5:9).

More Parables, pt. 2

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸ “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

³¹ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

³³ He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

³⁴ Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable.
³⁵ So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden
since the creation of the world.”

³⁶ Then He left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to Him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

³⁷ He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

— Matthew 13:24-43

HERE WE CONTINUE where we left off in the previous article with the study of these parables. As I said in there, I believe that the meanings of the three parables in this section are similar, and that a hint of this is given by the structure of this section. First, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the tares (or weeds, as the NIV translates). Then, two more parables are told: the parable of the mustard seed, and the parable of the leaven (or yeast, as the NIV translates). Next, the

interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares is given. So, the telling of the second and third parables in this section is bracketed by the telling of the first parable and its interpretation. This implies, I believe, that the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares guides us in the interpretation of the other two parables.

The interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares is given by Jesus, and so the meaning of that parable is not in doubt. That parable depicts that the children of God coexist in this world with the wicked until the end of the age, when the Lord will separate them. Likewise, the other two parables depict the coexistence of God's people and the wicked, even within the church.

“He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches’” (vss. 31-32). Concerning this parable, most commentators agree that the mustard seed plant depicts the church and its phenomenal growth from very small beginnings. Some commentators stop there, and see the parable as having strictly a positive message. However, others (myself included) see the birds as a corrupting influence that invades (as it were) the church from the outside. In the first parable of chapter 13, the parable of the sower, recall that when the sower scattered seed on the path, birds came and ate it up. According to Jesus' own interpretation of the parable, the birds depicted the evil one, who came and snatched away what was sown in the heart (see 13:4,19). So, in the parable of the mustard seed, once again, in my opinion, the birds have a negative interpretation: a corrupting influence that invades the church. We have then, according to this interpretation, a

depiction of the coexistence of the righteous and the wicked, just like in the parable of the wheat and the tares. This time though, this coexistence takes place within the church. Throughout the history of the church, sadly, we have seen much evidence of such a corrupting influence. In the name of the Christian church, many evil deeds have been done, and are being done. Any student of history is well aware of this, as are those who have read the newspaper recently, and so I will not enumerate the evil deeds here.

The next parable is similar: **“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough”** (vs. 33). This parable describes yeast permeating through a large amount of dough. Some commentators interpret the yeast as being the church’s influence in the world. I would interpret it in the opposite way: the yeast depicts the world’s influence in the church. Yeast (or leaven) is used as a symbol many times in the Bible; nearly always it symbolizes some sort of evil. “Leaven appears in Scripture about thirty-five times, and in virtually every passage, its meaning seems to be unmistakably corruption in some form; thus, there seems no valid reason why we should take the symbol as found in this one verse and make it stand for something exactly contrary” [Thomas, 199]. Jesus Himself, elsewhere in the Book of Matthew, uses yeast as a negative symbol: **“Be careful,’ Jesus said, ‘Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees”** (Matt. 16:6).

An equally compelling reason for interpreting yeast as being a corrupting influence in this parable is that such an interpretation fits the context. Again we have a depiction of the wicked living among the righteous. Here, I believe, the dough represents the church, and the yeast represents the ungodly, internally within the church, corrupting it. “The outward,

visible development of Christendom, would be permeated by a form of impurity, gradually spreading until all of it was affected” [Thomas, 201]. This parable is a variation on the previous parable. The birds (the corrupting influence) entered the tree (the church) from the outside and corrupted it. Here, the yeast corrupts from within. Again, I do not think I need to validate this interpretation by reciting the evils that have been perpetrated in the name of Christendom. Sadly, they are far too prevalent and well known.

The Treasure and the Pearl

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

— Matthew 13:44-46

HERE JESUS tells two closely related parables. As we have previously stated in our studies of the other parables, all of the parables in this chapter deal, in some way, with the division of men into the righteous and the wicked; they deal with the division of men into those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and those who are not. This common theme actually aids us in the interpretation of the parables told in verses 44 and 45. In interpreting these parables, we will go against the interpretation given by the vast majority of commentators, yet our interpretation (we believe) makes more sense, even if the parables stood alone and out of the context of the rest of the parables. However, within the context of the other parables, our interpretation is vastly more sensible than the common interpretation, because the common interpretation does not relate at all to the themes of each and every other parable in this chapter.

Jesus tells the parables: **“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it”** (vss. 44-45). The common interpretation of these parables is as follows (in the words of an eminent commentator): “The general idea which the parable illustrates seems to be this. If a man fully discovers and appreciates the advantages of Christ’s service, he will be so anxious to make those blessings his own as to sacrifice any and everything that may be necessary for that purpose” [Broadus, on vs. 44]. Concerning the second parable: “In like manner, to be a subject of Messiah’s reign is so precious a privilege, that a man might willingly sacrifice everything else to obtain it; whatever pleasures, honors, possessions, or attainments it is necessary to give up he might willingly abandon—whatever efforts are requisite he might make—in order to secure that which is worth so much” [Broadus, on vs. 45].

Certainly, these interpretations are well written, and in some way compelling. It is true that the gospel message is valuable and to be a member of the kingdom of heaven is a great privilege. However, I cannot bring myself to agree with these interpretations for two primary reasons: First, the kingdom of heaven is not for sale; it is the free gift of God. Both parables depict a man giving up all he has to buy the desired object. We Christians in no way buy any of the manifestations of God’s grace. On the contrary, God’s grace is a gift, freely given by God: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son...”** (John 3:16); **“For the wages of sin is death, but the *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Rom. 6:23); **“For it is grace you**

have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the *gift* of God” (Eph. 2:8).

The second reason I do not agree with the common interpretation is that (as I have mentioned) the common interpretation does not fit the context of the other parables in the chapter. All of the other parables deal in some way with division of men in the world into those who are members of the kingdom and those who are not. In summary, the parable of the sower (vss. 3-9) deals with the sowing of the gospel message and the differing responses to it by different hearers, thus dividing people into those who respond to the gospel and those who do not; the parable of the tares (vss. 24-30) deals with coexistence in the world of the members of the kingdom and the non-members, until the end of the age when the two types of people are separated; the parable of the mustard seed (vss. 31-33) depicts the growing Church, with a corrupting influence invading and coexisting in the Church along with the members of the kingdom; the parable of the yeast (vs. 33) depicts the growing Church being corrupted from within; the parable of the net (vss. 47-50), as we shall see, similar to the parable of the tares, speaks of the separation at the end of the age of the righteous and the wicked. The common interpretation of the parable of the treasure and the parable of the pearl speaks solely of the gospel message and its value to the members of the kingdom. In my opinion, this interpretation does not fit the context of the five other parables in the chapter.

To guide us to (what I believe is) the proper interpretation of the parables in verse 44 and 45, let me ask: in the Gospel message, who is it that does the buying? It is Jesus, of course, who buys (or redeems) the Church with His blood. As Paul tells us: **“You are not your own; you were bought at a price”** (I Cor. 6:19, 20). He also tells the Ephesians, in his farewell

message to them: **“Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood”** (Acts 20:28). Peter specifically tells us that our redemption does not come at the price of worldly things: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect”** (I Pet. 1:18, 19). From these verses, it becomes clear that the man in parables is none other than Jesus, and the treasure (in the first parable) and the pearl (in the second parable) is the Church. Just as the men in these parables sell everything to buy their treasures, “so did Jesus Himself, at the utmost cost, buy the world to gain His Church, which was the treasure which He desired” [Spurgeon, on vs. 44]. Jesus **“made Himself nothing”** (see Phil. 2:7). **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich”** (II Cor. 8:9).

So, in verse 44, the field is the world (significantly, just as **“the field is the world”** in the parable of the tares, see vs. 38), and the treasure is the Church hidden in the world. Again, we have the coexistence of the wicked and the righteous in the world, just as we have in each of the other parables in this chapter. In this parable, the thing that distinguishes the members of the kingdom from those that aren't is that Jesus **“in His joy went and sold all He had and bought the field”** so as to obtain the treasure, which is the Church. Note that it was **“in his joy”** that the man sold all he had to buy the field. We are told that Jesus also redeemed **“in His joy”**: **“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the *joy* set before Him endured the cross,**

scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

Likewise, in verse 45, the merchant is Jesus. This parable emphasizes the importance of the individual to Jesus. The merchant **“found one [pearl] of great value.”** And for this one pearl, **“went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”** This is reminiscent of the parable of the lost sheep, where Jesus is typified as especially searching for the one lost sheep. Jesus died specifically for each one of us, and to Him, each of us is a pearl of great value.

Separation of the Wicked from the Righteous

⁴⁷ “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

— Matthew 13:47-50

JESUS TELLS one more parable about the kingdom of heaven: **“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away”** (vss. 47-48). Jesus also gives an interpretation of the last part of this parable: **“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (vss. 49-50). This parable keeps with the theme of all of the parables in this chapter, that is, the intermingling of the righteous and wicked in this world. In the

last part of the parable, Jesus speaks of the divisional judgment of these men, when the wicked are thrown into the **“fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** Note that when Jesus speaks of the **“fiery furnace”**, this is the interpretation of the parable. The **“fiery furnace”** is not part of the parable, but part of reality. The punishment of the wicked is real, and horrid. The Lord of the Universe has stated that it is real. “Those who would have us think lightly of the punishment of the ungodly have no countenance in the teachings of the Lord Jesus” [Spurgeon, on vss. 49,50].

Jesus tells us that the final separation of the wicked from the righteous will take place **“at the end of the age.”** Until then, of course, the wicked and righteous share this world. The **“righteous”** are not righteous by their own merits, **“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Rom. 3:23). Rather, they are those who have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ, through faith in His atoning sacrifice on the cross. The **“wicked”** are those who have not accepted the divine forgiveness offered freely to them, and so, they will be judged on their own merits; and on those merits, they will come up short.

Jesus does not give us an interpretation of the first part of the parable, where the gathering of the fish into the net takes place. We will assume that the gathering into the net is the preaching of the Gospel, in an attempt to draw people into the fellowship of believers. Note that the gathering into the net seemed successful, for the net was full. However, the success was not as great as it seemed, for there were many bad fish that were gathered in. In the same way, churches often mistakenly count success in terms of attendance. But the success of a church should be measured by the quality of believers, not the quantity of attendees.

Understanding Jesus' Teachings

⁵¹ “Have you understood all these things?”
Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied. ⁵² He said to them,
“Therefore every teacher of the law who has been
instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the
owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom
new treasures as well as old.”

— Matthew 13:51-52

AFTER HE FINISHED telling His disciples the parables, Jesus asked them: **“Have you understood these things?”** The disciples replied: **“Yes.”** Hmm. If the disciples truly understood all of the parables correctly, I sure wish they had given us an interpretation of all of them! As we have pointed out in our discussion of the parables in this chapter, there are many disputes as to the proper way to interpret them.

A possible motive for Jesus asking this question was to impress upon us the importance of understanding His teachings, beyond merely hearing His teachings. “The mere form of hearing a sermon can profit no man, unless he comprehends what it means... His intellect must be set in motion, and his heart impressed: ideas must be received into his mind; he must carry off the seeds of new thoughts. Without this he hears in vain... There are thousands who go regularly to places of worship, and think they have done their religious duty, but never carry away an idea, or receive an impression... Let us take with us to church, not only our bodies, but our minds, our reason, our hearts, and our consciences” [Ryle, 155]. And then, once we have understood the teachings of our Lord,

we are to go beyond understanding and apply His teaching to our lives.

In addition, we are to share our understanding with others: **“He said to them, ‘Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old’”** (vs. 52). Having understood, we are to be hospitable with our knowledge, and give it freely to others. “Fresh knowledge, Christ is saying, carries fresh responsibility” [Thomas, on vs. 52].

Actually, Jesus, in this case, is speaking to the **“teachers of the law”** who are instructed in the teachings of the Old Testament. Having heard and understood Jesus’ teachings, they were to bring out **“new treasures as well as old.”** They were to still teach the truths of the Old Testament, as well as teach the truths of the Gospel.

Jesus in His Hometown

⁵³ When Jesus had finished these parables, He moved on from there. ⁵⁴ Coming to His hometown, He began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. ⁵⁵ “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t His mother’s name Mary, and aren’t His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ Aren’t all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” ⁵⁷ And they took offense at Him.

But Jesus said to them, **“Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”**

58 And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

— Matthew 13:53-58

“WHEN JESUS had finished these parables, He moved on from there” (vs. 53). Jesus was always on the move, making the most of His short time on earth.

“Coming to His hometown, He began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t His mother’s name Mary, and aren’t His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’ And they took offense at Him” (vss. 54- 57). Here we have a classic case of familiarity breeding contempt. Despite the wisdom of His teachings, and despite His astonishing miraculous powers, both of which the people acknowledged, rather than worshipping Him, they took **“offense at Him.”** “This episode shows how easily men are made willing to oppose truth if it happens to go contrary to their own preconceived ideas and inclinations” [Thomas, 210]. They weren’t expecting the Messiah to come from their hometown Nazareth, and so Jesus (in their eyes) could not be worthy of respect.

Jesus responded to His treatment in Nazareth: **“But Jesus said to them, ‘Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor’”** (vs. 57). There seems to be a bit jealousy in the townspeople’s reaction to Jesus. They took offense, thinking, “Well, I’m from Nazareth. Why wasn’t I given such powers, such wisdom?” We should learn from this not to despise God’s work on those who are close to us, not to be jealous of God’s anointing upon our family members or

close friends. We should rather rejoice in the work of God in those around us, and support them in their service to our Lord.

The offense they took was only to their detriment: **“And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith”** (vs. 58). “The despising of Christ turns to the disadvantage of the despiser. Despising of the ministers prejudges men of the blessing of the ministry, and misbelief is punished by the Lord’s hiding His power from the misbeliever” [Dickson, on vs. 58]. “Unbelief bound His hands. Why should He spend His sacred energy among a people who would not be profited thereby?” [Spurgeon, 185].

The Death of John the Baptist

¹ At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, ² and he said to his attendants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him.”

³ Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴ for John had been saying to him: “It is not lawful for you to have her.” ⁵ Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet.

⁶ On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much ⁷ that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” ⁹ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted ¹⁰ and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. ¹² John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

— Matthew 14:1-12

JESUS’ FAME was spreading throughout the land: “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers

are at work in him” (vss. 1-2). The Herod spoken of here is Herod Antipas, the son of the King Herod who ordered the slaying the baby boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the Messiah (see Matt. 2:16). Herod Antipas ruled a portion of the land that his father had ruled.

When faced with reports about the miraculous works of Jesus, Herod came to the conclusion that somehow the spirit of John the Baptist had entered Jesus, and was working through him. This was a strange conclusion for Herod to draw, especially since (as far as we know) John the Baptist did not perform any miraculous works. All of us who hear of Jesus must at some point come to a conclusion about Him. We must respond in some way to the claims that Jesus made about Himself. Jesus stated, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6). We must make a determination whether the claims that Jesus made are true. The miraculous signs and wonders that Jesus performed are a great testimony to the truthfulness of the claims He made. Herod should have realized this and sought to discover more about the teachings of Jesus. Instead, Herod came up with an absurd notion that Jesus was not who He said He was, but rather was possessed by John the Baptist.

In this section, Matthew tells us about the circumstances surrounding the death of John the Baptist. As we see here, John, in addition to being a great prophet, was one in a long list of martyrs for the cause of God. **“Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, for John had been saying to him: ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’ Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet”** (vss. 3-5). John, to his great credit, pulled no punches concerning the law of God. No matter who John preached to, whether pauper or king, he

told it like it is. “What was a king to him if that king dared to trample on the law of God? [Spurgeon, on vss. 3-4]. Herod and company saw themselves as above the law. John did not see them as being above the law. John was fearless in his demands that people repent and keep the laws of God. John preached in no uncertain terms of the unlawfulness of Herod’s relationship with Herodias. John preached this at great peril to himself. In fact, he lost his life because of his forthrightness in preaching to Herod. Oh, if only we could have the courage of John, to faithfully stand up for right, in all circumstances. We face much milder consequences for our boldness than John did, and yet we cower before weak, and powerless men.

“Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet” (vs. 5). Herod, though in name ruler of the people, was a slave to his own weaknesses. It was because of Herod’s weakness as a ruler that John remained alive for a time in prison. “Wicked men do not abstain from any sin, but for worldly reasons; they do nothing for regard to God: nothing else did Herod look to but **‘the fear of the people’**” [Dickson, on 3-5].

“On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist’” (vss. 6-8). The depraved life of Herod and his family is clearly seen in this episode: the party, the dance, the oath, the request for John’s head. Herodias, through her daughter, requested John’s head to ensure that Herod would have to execute John then and there. Her strategy worked: **“The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to**

the girl, who carried it to her mother” (vss. 9-11). Here we have the ultimate in peer pressure: Herod kills John because of **“his dinner guests”**. As for **“his oaths”**, it would have been a virtue to break such oaths.

The king must not have been so greatly **“distressed”**, for John the Baptist was quickly put to death. “If ever there was a case of godliness unrewarded in this life, it was that of John the Baptist” [Ryle, 160]. Many would ask, “How could God let such a great man of God die so early in life?” Clearly, it was God’s will that John die at that time, for John’s life, since he was a faithful servant of God, was completely in God’s hands. So, why would God allow such a faithful servant of His to die? John’s work on earth must have been finished. John himself had a premonition (of sorts) of this. He said concerning Jesus’ and his own ministries: **“He must become greater; I must become less”** (John 3:30). “John’s work was ended; he had come as the herald of the Messianic reign, and that reign was now being established” [Broadus, 320]. John’s ministry in some ways got in the way of Jesus’. John had followers who would not become disciples of Jesus. In fact, thirty years later, Paul met up with people who knew only of John’s baptism (see Acts 18:25; Acts 19:3).

So, by His wisdom, God allowed John to be put to death. At times, we learn of faithful ministers and servants of God dying at a young age. We must not fault God for this, but realize that such deaths are allowed by God, according to His will, through His wisdom.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed Him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

¹⁶ Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

¹⁷ “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

¹⁸ “Bring them here to me,” He said. ¹⁹ And He directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

— Matthew 14:13-21

WE GO FROM an account of Herod’s depraved birthday feast, to an account of a glorious feast hosted by our Lord. This glorious feast occurred as an indirect result of Herod’s feast, for “**when Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed Him on foot from the towns**” (vs. 13). Upon hearing of John the Baptist’s death, Jesus tried to withdraw “**to a solitary place**”, presumably to grieve for His

good friend. Yet, Christ was not allowed to rest. This was one of His great trials when He was on earth. He was a tireless servant of men. This He chose to be most of the time. But even when He desired solitude, He was recruited into service by the crowds. Nevertheless, far from being angry with the crowds for interrupting His solitude, Jesus **“had compassion on them”**: **“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick”** (vs. 14).

Jesus’ disciples anticipated a problem: **“As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said, ‘This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food’”** (vs. 15). Their solution was to **“send the crowds away”**, and yet, would Jesus ever send anyone away who seeks Him?

“Jesus replied, ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat’” (vs. 16). Jesus gives His disciples a command: **“You give them something to eat.”** Jesus’ message to the disciples is that they should tend to the needs of the people. This particular command is one that the disciples could not carry out in their own power. They needed Jesus’ help to work through them, so that they may tend to the needs of the people. Our Lord chooses primarily to carry out His work through His people. He supplies the power; we do the footwork.

The disciples found some food: **“‘We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,’ they answered”** (vs. 17). We are told in the Gospel of John that the loaves and fishes belonged to a boy (see John 6:9). What child-like faith the boy had in bringing his food to share with all the people!

Jesus accepted the boy’s gift: **“‘Bring them here to me,’ He said. And He directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking**

up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children” (vss. 18-21). Jesus used the meager offering of the boy, and turned it into a meal for more than five thousand people. Our Lord often does this: takes a meager offering of money or talent or time, and turns it into something great.

And make no mistake, this was a great display of our Lord’s power. Some would have us believe that no miracle occurred here, that the boy’s sharing inspired the crowd to share food with each other. But such an explanation does not fit the text, for Jesus **“gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.”** It was the boy’s food that was given to the people, supplemented in some miraculous way by the creative power of our Lord. The event was undoubtedly miraculous. “It was a thing that no magician, impostor, or false prophet would ever have attempted. Such a person might possibly pretend to cure a single sick person, or to raise a single dead body, and by jugglery and trickery might persuade weak people that he succeeded; but such a person would never attempt such a mighty work as that which is here recorded. He would know well that he could not persuade ten thousand men, women, and children that they were full when they were hungry: he would be exposed as a cheat and impostor on the spot” [Ryle, 162].

There is some significance, I believe, in this miracle, in that it was a miracle that supplied ordinary needs, rather than extraordinary ones. Jesus showed compassion, not only for those who needed healing from physical maladies, but also for those who needed their daily bread. Our Lord is a help, not

only to those who are in desperate situations, but also to His faithful followers, toiling day to day in this world, serving Him faithfully year after year.

Jesus Walks on Water

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowd. ²³ After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ "Come," He said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught him. "You of little faith," He said, "why did you doubt?"

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

³⁴ When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. ³⁵ And when the men of that place

recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to Him ³⁶ and begged Him to let the sick just touch the edge of His cloak, and all who touched Him were healed.”

— Matthew 14:22-36

EARLIER IN THE DAY, Jesus had heard of the death John the Baptist. He had tried to **“withdraw to a solitary place”** (Matt. 14:13), presumably to mourn the death of His friend and to pray, but the crowds prevented Him from doing so. Jesus **“had compassion on them and healed their sick”** (Matt. 14:14). He also performed a magnificent miracle, and fed the crowd of thousands.

Having tended to the needs of the people, Jesus still desired to be alone, and so: **“Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the others side, while He dismissed the crowd”** (vs. 22). Dismissing the crowd after such a grand miracle must have been a difficult task. And it seems that the disciples themselves did not want to leave Jesus, for He had to compel them to go.

Jesus was able to find solitude, but the disciples ran into trouble: **“After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it”** (vss. 23-24). Note that the disciples were not exempt from trouble just because the Lord sent them on their journey.

“During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake” (vs. 25). “To our poor, weak minds, the whole event is utterly incomprehensible” [Ryle, 167]. We simply cannot imagine such power over the elements. This miracle demonstrated that there is nothing in all creation that

is not under Jesus' control. "Christ is Lord of Sea and Land, and can make way unto His people's relief, through the most stormy sea, no impediment can under Him, nor hold Him from His disciple's society" [Dickson, on vs. 26].

The sight of Jesus walking on the water understandably astounded the disciples. So much so that they did not recognize that it was Jesus: **"When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear"** (vs. 26). In fact, it seems that the sight of Jesus walking on the water terrified the disciples more than the fierce winds and waves.

Jesus sought without delay to calm their fears: **"But Jesus immediately said to them: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid'"** (vs. 27). One of the most oft spoken commands of our Lord to His disciples is **"Don't be afraid."** "Wheresoever Christ shows Himself present, there is no reason to be afraid of any trouble or danger, for He is able to deliver His own in whatsoever strait" [Dickson, on vs. 27].

Peter showed boldness, and desired to join His Lord on the water: **"'Lord, if it's you,' Peter replied, 'tell me to come to you on the water.' 'Come,' He said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus"** (vss. 28-29). "What a wonderful proof was this of our Lord's divinity! To walk on the sea Himself was a mighty miracle; but to enable a poor weak disciple to do the same, was a mightier miracle still" [Ryle, 168]. "We usually remember that Peter's faith failed and that Jesus drew attention to this. But we should bear in mind that it took courage for the apostle to venture on the water at all" [Morris, on vs. 29].

But was Peter ready to do such a thing? **"But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"** (vs. 30). "It is safest to ponder all that faith is to meet with, if we can overtake it, before we enter in

the conflict with difficulties; for Peter should have prepared against the wind, as well as against the sea, and waters” [Dickson, on vs. 30]. We can learn a lesson from Peter’s experience. We should take care before plunging into any activity. We should prayerfully seek the Lord’s timing, rather than dictate to the Lord our timing. We should also make sure that the activity is suitable to our gifts and abilities. “When men mistake the measure of their own strength and gifts, they are ready to seek a calling ere it be given them, and to enterprise things too hard for them” [Dickson, on vs. 28].

Ah, but we often mistake the soundness of our abilities. “Sometimes peril presseth a man more when he is in the dangers, than before; and a man may seem stout before the experience of the danger, who shall prove feeble in it: men know not readily their own weakness, till they be put to a proof; Peter doubted nothing to walk on the sea, till now” [Dickson, on vs. 30]. Peter’s faith was strong enough to get him out of the boat, but not strong enough to persevere through the storm. “How many there are who have faith enough to take the first step in following Christ, but not faith enough to go on as they began. They take fright at the trials and dangers which seem to be in their way. They look at the enemies that surround them, and the difficulties that seem likely to beset their path: they look at them more than at Jesus, and at once their feet begin to sink; their hearts faint within them; their hope vanishes away: their comforts disappear. And why is all this? Christ is not altered: their enemies are not greater than they were. It is just because, like Peter, they have ceased to look to Jesus, and have given way to unbelief. They are taken up with thinking about their enemies, instead of thinking about Christ. May we lay this to heart, and learn wisdom!” [Ryle, 169]. “When men look more to the dangers than to God (who called them to it), no wonder

that their faith be shaken: for Peter seeth the wind too much, and Christ's presence too little" [Dickson, on vs. 30].

At least Peter knew well what to do when his faith wavered: he **"cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"** "Whatsoever be our danger, let Christ's power be exalted, as sufficient to help us" [Dickson, vs. 30]. Jesus was quick to respond to Peter's cry for help: **"Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught him"** (vs. 31). Then Jesus gave Peter a mild rebuke: **"'You of little faith,' He said, 'why did you doubt?'"** (vs. 31). "To doubt where we have warrant to believe, is worthy of reproof" [Dickson, on vs. 31]. Jesus' question, **"Why did you doubt?"**, "helps both Peter and the reader recognize that doubts and fears quickly disappear before a strict inquiry into their cause" [Carson, on vs. 31]. "He had been armed with Christ's command and already knew His power, but he fell away from that twofold firmness into a vain and perverse fear" [Calvin, on vs. 31].

"And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down" (vs. 32). "It is well to be safe in a storm, but more pleasant to find the calm return and the hurricane end" [Spurgeon, on vs. 32]. Those in the boat were amazed by all the happenings: **"Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'"** (vs. 33). "Storm and struggle make us enjoy more the calm that follows, and appreciate more highly the Lord who delivers us" [Broadus, 331]. From their response, we see that the experience in the boat made more of an impression on the disciples than did the feeding of the five thousand. "Delivery out of imminent death, speaketh more of God's power to the humble soul, than the greatest works doth speak unto the secure, as the delivery of the disciples from the raging sea, maketh them more sensible of Christ's Godhead, than the miraculous feeding of five thousand with so few loaves in the wilderness; for now it is,

and not till now, that they say, **“Truly you are the Son of God”** [Dickson, vs. 33].

When they reached the other side of the lake, Jesus’ busy life, full of works of service, continued: **“When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to Him and begged Him to let the sick just touch the edge of His cloak, and all who touched Him were healed”** (vss. 34-36). The Gospel writers, for the most part, recount certain specific episodes of Jesus’ works of service. What we learn from passages such as verse 34 through 36 is that there were innumerable more episodes that have not been told to us: innumerable more magnificent and astoundingly miraculous works; innumerable more lives that were changed through the touch of Jesus’ healing hand.

Tradition vs. the Law

¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

³ Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ ⁶ he is not to ‘honor his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

⁸ “‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’”

¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, “Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’”

¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”

¹³ He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵ Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.”

¹⁶ “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”

— Matthew 15:1-20

MATTHEW NEXT tells us of a dispute that the Pharisees had with Jesus concerning the behavior of His disciples: **“Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!’”** (vss. 1–2). The Pharisees were faulting the disciples for not following the ceremonial washing ritual, which was a **“tradition of the elders.”** They were not faulting the disciples on hygienic grounds, but rather on religious grounds. They were not questioning Jesus’ disciples for being unsanitary, but for being ungodly. The Pharisees considered the disciples’ failure to wash their hands before eating to be sinful.

Now, it is difficult enough to struggle with our sin nature as we try to live a holy and godly life, according to the precepts of God’s Word. Given this difficulty, it is sinful to add to the laws of God precepts of men, and to claim that these precepts of men must be obeyed as well, in order to live a holy and godly life. To add to God’s Law is as sinful as to subtract from it, for to add to God’s Law is to misrepresent God, and to add burdens to people’s lives that God never intended there to be.

It could have well been that the teachers of the law who espoused the **“tradition of the elders”** originally meant well. The tradition of the elders “was a body of teaching handed down from the religious leaders of the past. Some of it was concerned with the way those leaders had understood passages in Scripture, especially passages whose meaning was not obvious or was ambiguous. It also gave guidance as to how passages that might be construed in more than one way were to be understood. In origin the tradition was praiseworthy and useful, but through the years, with the contributions of many teachers, some with less insight than others, it had come to amount to a very burdensome body of doctrine. Its huge volume meant that by New Testament times even to know what it comprised was a difficult chore, while to obey all its multitudinous regulations was too big a task for most people” [Morris, 390].

So, the Pharisees were wrong, as the religious leaders of the people, to burden them with commands written by men. They were also wrong in valuing the **“tradition of the elders”** over the true word of God, as Jesus points out: **“Jesus replied, ‘And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, “Honor your father and mother” and “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.” But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,” he is not to “honor his father” with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men”’”** (vss. 3–9). Jesus responds to the question of the Pharisees by pointing out that, from a religious point of

view, the commandments of men mean nothing. Moreover, He takes the Pharisees to task for allowing their traditions to supersede the commandments of God. “Traditions, when once invested with anything like authority, tend to obscure commands and displace supremacy of Scripture; indeed, there is nothing more solemnly significant than that in proportion as tradition, even Church tradition, gains sway, reverence for Scripture declines” [Thomas, 228]. Jesus gives the Pharisees an example of where this has happened. There was a **“tradition”** of theirs, which the teachers of the Law sanctioned, that allowed children to dodge their God commanded obligation to honor their parents by helping to support them when in need. Broadus explains the tradition: “If a man’s father or mother wanted any article from him— it might be food or clothing, or what not—he could just say, ‘Corban, it is a gift, a thing consecrated to God (comp. Lev. 27:9,16), and he was then, according to the traditional rules, not only at liberty to withhold it from his parent, but solemnly bound to do so. The Mishna tells of a former discussion as to whether a vow could be set aside through regard for parents, and all but one Rabbi declared in the negative. The Jews reached this conclusion by arguing that vows, as they had respect to God, were more important than things pertaining to men; and hence that devoting a thing to God was sufficient to set aside the highest obligation, even that to one’s parents. Here was a correct principle, greatly abused in the application. We learn from the Talmud, which has copious directions on this subject, that a man was not bound, after saying, ‘Corban’, actually to dedicate the article in the temple, but might keep it indefinitely for his own use, or might give it to some person, only not to the one had in mind when he made the vow” [Broadus, 334].

As Jesus points out, and as Isaiah prophesied, by allowing their **“tradition”** to overrule the spirit and letter of God’s Law,

they were worshiping God **“in vain”**, with teachings that are but **“rules taught by men.”** So, Jesus showed that the **“tradition of the elders”** was at best worthless in the eyes of God, and at worst, harmful to those who follow it, for following it may cause one to neglect the true Law of God.

In general, men have no business inventing religious traditions or rituals. God has prescribed in His Word the proper way to worship Him. Anything added to the Word of God, detracts from it. “At the present day many persons claim a divine authority for ideas and practices which are simply of human origin. We are not only under no obligation to conform to these, but it is our duty to oppose them wherever they tend to the violation or neglect of God’s commandments” [Broadus, 336].

The Pharisees, in accusing the disciples, were flawed in their thinking as to what makes a person “unclean” in the eyes of God. Jesus directly straightens them out on this question: **“Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, ‘Listen and understand. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him “unclean,” but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him “unclean.”’”** (vss. 10 –11). The Pharisees took the ceremonial laws that were given to the children of Israel in the desert concerning clean and unclean things, and expanded those ceremonial laws so as to make them moral laws. “The Jews had come very largely to confound ceremonial with moral defilement. To correct this confusion of ideas, our Lord points out that articles of food cannot really pollute, because they pass through the body and out of it, and do not ‘enter the heart’ (see Mark 7:19)” [Broadus, 338]. It was as if the Pharisees literally lived by the saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” Now, clearly, to be physically clean is not a bad thing, but it doesn’t make one more spiritual. And certainly, one should not be more concerned with how one washes his hands, than how

one treats his neighbor. This may sound ridiculously obvious, and yet, do we not place too much emphasis on appearance, than on godliness? Even Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, noticed this: “Even in the church we see such a custom prevailing amongst the generality, and men giving diligence to come in clean garments, and to have their hands washed; but how to present a clean soul to God, they make no account” [Chrysostom].

Jesus’ disciples were puzzled at His criticism of the Pharisees: **“Then the disciples came to him and asked, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?’”** (vs. 12). I guess the disciples had not yet fully caught on that Jesus is the Lord of Heaven and Earth, for they were puzzled that Jesus would dispute with the Pharisees about fine points of the Law. We must be wary to put too much credence on what any mere man, even religious leaders, says about the things of God. We must seek the guidance of the Spirit, and diligently study God’s Word, so that we can properly discern right and wrong.

Jesus let the disciples know that the teaching of Pharisees would not endure, for it was not rooted in God’s Word: **“He replied, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit’”** (vss. 13–14). So we see that the Pharisees were original model for the phrase, “the blind leading the blind.” “Blind guides’ is a devastating description of the Pharisees, men who prided themselves on their enlightenment” [Morris, 397].

Peter still had problems understanding Jesus’ corrected teaching: **“Peter said, ‘Explain the parable to us’”** (vs. 15). Peter thought that Jesus was speaking parabolically, though He was not. What Jesus said should have been clear to the disciples.

But the Pharisees had so emphasized external cleanliness, external holiness, an external impression of godliness, that the disciples could not understand that a clean heart is much more valued in the eyes of God than a clean body.

Jesus chides the disciples on their lack of understanding, and then explains the principle once again: **“Are you still so dull? Jesus asked them. ‘Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man “unclean.” For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man “unclean”; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him “unclean””** (vss. 16–20). “Familiar though these sayings have now become, what freedom from bondage to outward things do they proclaim, on the one hand, and on the other, how searching is the truth which they express—that nothing which enters from without can really defile us; and that only the evil that is in the heart, that is allowed to stir there, to rise up in thought and affection, and to flow forth in voluntary action, really defiles a man” [JFB, 86].

Perseverant Faith

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to Him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.”

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So His disciples came to Him and urged Him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before Him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

²⁶ He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

— Matthew 15:21-28

JESUS AT THIS TIME withdrew to an area that was primarily Gentile, presumably to avoid more conflicts with the Pharisees, with whom He had recently had some run-ins: **“Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon”** (vs. 1). There, a woman who was familiar with Jesus’ work, and even familiar with the religion of the Jews, came to Him for

help: **“A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to Him, crying out, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession’”** (vs. 22). Significantly, though a Gentile, she called Jesus **“Son of David”**. Thus, she knew of the promised Jewish Messiah, and she believed Jesus to be him. She also understood that anything Jesus did for her would be an act of **“mercy”**. She came to Jesus not arrogantly, as if claiming a reward for something meritorious she had done, but she came to Jesus humbly, crying, **“Have mercy on me!”**

Interestingly (and uncharacteristically?), **“Jesus did not answer a word”** (vs. 23). Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus healing all comers; yet here, He seems to be ignoring a poor woman crying out to Him. Why? Certainly He is teaching a lesson here. Perhaps He is teaching us through this episode that we must persevere in prayer despite God’s silence, despite our perception that God is not listening.

The disciples wrongly interpreted Jesus’ silence as disapproval, and a desire to be rid of the woman: **“So His disciples came to Him and urged Him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us’”** (vs. 23). “Christ’s people are often less gracious and compassionate than Christ Himself... There is only too much of this spirit among many who profess and call themselves believers” [Ryle, 181]. They said to Jesus, **“Send her away.”** But what a ridiculous request that was? Did Jesus ever send anyone in need away? Although men tire of being nagged, Christ does not tire of our prayers. “Continued importunity may be uneasy to men, even to good men; but Christ loves to be cried after” [Henry].

Jesus ignored the disciples’ request and spoke to the woman: **“He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel’”** (vs. 24). Jesus stated His primary mission on earth at that time; that is, to be the Messiah for the Jews. She was

well aware of this; she did call Him **“Son of David.”** In fact, she saw that He was the Messiah for the Jews more clearly than many of the Jews did. She continued to persevere, in faith that Jesus’ mercy would extend beyond the Jews: **“The woman came and knelt before Him. ‘Lord, help me!’ she said”** (vs. 25).

Jesus continued to test her faith: **“He replied, ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs’”** (vs. 26). It may be surprising to some to see Jesus speak with such harshness to a woman in need, but His purpose was to draw out her faith. Jesus was mimicking somewhat the Jews’ tendency to look down on the Gentiles, for the Jews regularly called the Gentiles “dogs”. Yet He was also pointing out that the Jews did and do have a place of pre-eminence in the eyes of God, being the chosen people of God. This place of pre-eminence in the eyes of God has not ended, even though they largely rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Paul wrote of the special place the Jews have in the heart of God: **“As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable”** (vs. 28).

The woman, in her faith, was not to be put off by theological technicalities. “Faith can find encouragement even in that which is discouraging” [Henry]. She knew her Lord had the power and grace to heal her daughter. She accepted that Jesus’ primary mission was to minister to the Jews, but knew that there was enough of Jesus to go around for everybody: **“‘Yes, Lord,’ she said, ‘but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’”** (vs. 27). She knew that the crumbs of Jesus are greater fine gold.

Note that she did not contradict what Jesus said, but said, **“Yes, Lord.”** This is refreshing. So many of God’s people in

the Bible (and in modern day life) say, **“But, Lord...”** The woman of faith said, **“Yes, Lord,”** and intelligently framed her request so that it would be consistent with His mission and His teaching. Jesus honored her for this, and rewarded her for her faith: **“Then Jesus answered, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour”** (vs. 28). This woman, through her faith, did what the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were unable to do: she held her own in a verbal wrestling match with Jesus. She wrestled with Jesus, just as Jacob wrestled with the Lord. Her faith persevered, and was victorious. And certainly Jesus was glad to give her the victory. “Howsoever Christ seem to wrestle with a believer, yet He is purposed to give faith the victory, and to yield Himself in this conflict to the believer” [Dickson].

The Feeding of the Four-Thousand

²⁹ Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then He went up on a mountainside and sat down. ³⁰ Great crowds came to Him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at His feet; and He healed them. ³¹ The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

³² Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.”

³³ His disciples answered, “Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?”

³⁴ **“How many loaves do you have?”** Jesus asked.

“Seven,” they replied, **“and a few small fish.”**

³⁵ **He** told the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶

Then He took the seven loaves and the fish, and when **He** had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. ³⁷ **They** all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ³⁸ **The** number of those who ate was four thousand, besides women and children. ³⁹ **After** Jesus had sent the crowd away, **He** got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.”

— Matthew 15:29-39

AFTER HEALING the daughter of the woman of faith: **“Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then He went up on a mountainside and sat down”** (vs. 29). Jesus was not to be alone, though; nor was He to be inactive: **“Great crowds came to Him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at His feet; and He healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel”** (vss. 30–31). Jesus was still (most likely) in an area with many Gentiles. In fact, this passage seems to indicate that much of the crowd was Gentile, for the passage specifies that they praised the God of **“Israel.”** It could well be that the people had heard of the healing of the daughter of the woman of faith, and so they too brought their sick. If so, then that one woman’s faith had beneficial effect upon many in the area.

Matthew here relates the miraculous feeding of the four thousand. This episode is very similar to the feeding of the five-thousand, which occurred earlier (Matthew told of that event

in chapter 14). But clearly, they were two separate events, for the same author speaks of them both. And yet, if they both had not been referred to by the same author, but strictly by different authors, critics would have claimed that they were the same event with inconsistencies between Biblical authors. This episode teaches us that similar events related by more than one Gospel writer may very well have been separate events, especially if they contradict each other in some way. Jesus' life on earth was full of great works and magnificent miracles, enough to fill many books. Many of these were similar, yet separate events.

Jesus must have been an engaging and captivating person, for, without planning to ahead of time, the people remained with Him for an extended period of time: **“Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, ‘I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way’”** (vs. 32). We see again that Jesus does not send people away without meeting their needs.

Despite witnessing the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples seemed clueless as to how these people could be fed: **“His disciples answered, ‘Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?’”** (vs. 33). It could well have been that the disciples were hesitant to suggest another miraculous feeding, because Jesus had rebuked some people for following Him expecting to get free food (see John 6:26). If this was not the case, we really must wonder at the disciples. They are typical of those who forget to turn to Jesus in times of trouble. “Past experience must teach us to hope for the future the same blessing which God has once or often bestowed upon us” [Calvin, 174].

Request for a Sign

¹ The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven.

² He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ ³ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴ A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” Jesus then left them and went away.

— Matthew 16:1-4

RELIGIOUS LEADERS from the two prominent sects of Judaism of the time had a request to make of Jesus: **“The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven”** (vs. 1). This is similar to a request the Pharisees made earlier, as recounted in Matthew 12:38. At that time they requested a **“miraculous sign.”** Though Jesus did not accede to their request at the time, He had performed many miraculous signs since then. This time, beyond asking for a miraculous sign, they wanted **“a sign from heaven”**, such as, making the sun stand still, or calling down fire from heaven. “They neglect the signs by which Christ revealed Himself familiarly to them. How

much less, then, will they profit from a distant and obscure sign?" [Calvin, 176].

They mistook Jesus' ministry: He was not a circus act. He did not frivolously perform miraculous signs. Rather, the signs He performed had purpose and meaning. They were service-oriented (such as healings, the feeding of the crowds, etc.), or message-oriented (in order to teach a lesson, such as the cursing of the fig tree, and the changing of the water into wine). "It is fit that the proofs of divine revelation should be chosen by the wisdom of God, not by the follies and fancies of men" [Henry].

Yet, are we any better than the Pharisees and Sadducees? There are many today who say, "If God will just give me some miraculous sign, I will believe in Him." Those who ask for a sign want to make themselves God themselves, ordering God around, while not believing the many proofs of His existence.

It was unusual that the Pharisees and Sadducees united in this request, for they were rivals. The Pharisees were a conservative sect that insisted on a legalistic obedience to the Law of God (as interpreted by them); the Sadducees were a liberal sect that did not believe in the supernatural or life after death. Yet they were united in their opposition to Jesus, whose Truth threatened their power over their constituents. "The ungodly may disagree, but their mutual discord never prevents them from conspiring against God and, as if by a pact, reaching out their hands to oppress the truth" [Calvin, 176]. "Satan's children, how opposite soever one to another, can agree to oppose Christ" [Dickson].

Jesus' first reply to the request was to tell them, essentially, that they didn't need any further sign: **"He replied, 'When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot**

interpret the signs of the times” (vss. 2–3). “For those with eyes to see, the **‘signs of the times’**, if not the kind of sign the Pharisees and Sadducees demanded, were already abundant” [Carson, 361]. “The miracles Christ wrought, and the gathering of the people to Him, were plain indications that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, that this was the day of their visitation” [Henry].

Next, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for their request: **“A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.’ Jesus then left them and went away”** (vs. 4). They were **“wicked and adulterous”** because they were unfaithful to the God whom they pledged allegiance to. Their request was not **“wicked”** in itself, but they asked it in the context of a multitude of signs that Jesus had performed. Thus, they chose willfully to ignore all the abundantly clear proofs provided to them that Jesus is the Son of God.

Jesus was not to play circus for them. He would not perform a sign specifically on their behalf. Rather, He spoke of the sign that is the primary sign for all of us concerning who Jesus is: **“...but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.”** As Jesus said elsewhere: **“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”** (Matt. 12:40). The sign for all of us that Jesus is the Son of God is His death for our sins, and His resurrection from the dead. We need no other sign. We do not need God to perform specifically for us, for the sending of His Son to die for us was enough.

By the way, we have noted that this meeting with the Pharisees and Sadducees is similar to the event described in Matthew 12:38ff: Jesus was asked to perform a sign, and He gave essentially the same answer. We know that these were two

separate events, for they were recorded by a single author. This teaches us that Jesus would repeat similar teaching in different situations. In the four Gospels, there are various passages that are similar, and yet different enough to cause some to think that they are contradictory. A better explanation for the differences, in many cases, is that the differing passages refer to separate events.

The Yeast of the Pharisees

⁵ When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. ⁶ “Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

⁷ They discussed this among themselves and said, “It is because we didn’t bring any bread.”

⁸ Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? ⁹ Do you still not understand? Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹¹ How is it you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ¹² Then they understood that He was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

— Matthew 16:5-12

THIS SECTION, in my mind, demonstrates that Jesus has a sense of humor, for He presented a play-on-words concerning what the disciples were talking about. Jesus must have overheard the disciples speaking about not having brought

bread: **“When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. ‘Be careful,’ Jesus said to them. ‘Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees’”** (vss. 5–6). Yeast was a familiar symbol of insidious corruption, used many times in the Bible as such, for it infiltrates internally, and spreads itself throughout the dough.

Jesus, in the play-on-words, related the physical bread the disciples were concerned about, to the spiritual yeast of the Pharisees. The play-on-words was lost on the disciples. They thought Jesus was talking about literal bread: **“They discussed this among themselves and said, ‘It is because we didn’t bring any bread’”** (vs. 7). Apparently, the disciples thought that Jesus was warning them not to accept bread from the Pharisees and Sadducees. Such a warning would have been absurd, and had Jesus meant that, would have gone against His teaching that says it is not what you eat that corrupts. The disciples were implying that Jesus was falling into the same kind of ridiculousness as the Pharisees by saying there was something unholy about physical bread from the Pharisees. Jesus mildly rebuked the disciples for their mistaken interpretation of what He said: **“Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, ‘You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? ... How is it you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees’”** (vss. 8, 11).

Interestingly, Jesus did not spell out the entire meaning of what He said, but gave them the hint that He was not speaking of physical bread. He then let them figure out the rest: **“Then they understood that He was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees”** (vs. 12). The insidious corruption of the Pharisees and Sadducees was their wrong

teaching. It was all the more dangerous because it was coming from the primary religious leaders of the time. “Disciples are in most danger from hypocrites; against those that are openly vicious they stand upon their guard, but against Pharisees, who are great pretenders to devotion, and Sadducees, who pretend to a free and impartial search after truth, they commonly lie unguarded: and therefore the caution is doubted” [Henry]. The wrong interpretation of Jesus’ comment by His own disciples demonstrates that we all must take care when interpreting the words of Christ, lest we wrongly interpret them. “Readily are our Lord’s words mistaken, even by disciples, and upon a mistake, wrong conclusions are drawn, and so the intent of Christ’s words are lost” [Dickson]. Diligent study and prayer for guidance are greatly needed when interpreting what Jesus said.

“Who Do You Say I Am?”

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ “But what about you?” He asked. “Who do you say I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then He warned His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ.

— Matthew 16:13-20

TO DRAW HIS DISCIPLES OUT, Jesus asked them some questions: **“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’”** (vs. 13). When Jesus spoke of the **“Son of Man”**, He was referring to Himself; He often referred to Himself that way.

The disciples summarized the opinions of the people concerning Jesus: **“They replied, ‘Some say John the**

Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (vs. 14). The opinions of the people are interesting, in that they were all respectful, yet not respectful enough. The opinions of the people were somewhat in agreement: they all thought Jesus was a prophet. Some held the same opinion that Herod had (see Matt. 14:1–2), that Jesus was some sort of reincarnated John the Baptist (although Jesus and John lived, for the most part, concurrently, and John had only recently died). Others thought that Jesus was Elijah, in fulfillment of the prophecy that Elijah would return before the Messiah came (see Mal. 4:5). Others thought Jesus was **“Jeremiah or one of the prophets”**, and so opinions were consistent that Jesus was a prophet, even a well-respected prophet, as were John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah. However, to believe Jesus was a human prophet falls far short of believing Him to be Lord of the Universe. “Note, it is possible for men to have good thoughts of Christ, and yet not right ones; a high opinion of Him, and yet not high enough” [Henry].

“Clearly many people were impressed by Jesus and saw Him doing the kind of thing they thought prophets would do” [Morris, 420]. However, the people apparently did not think Jesus was acting as the Messiah would, for the popular view of the Messiah was as a conqueror. “No group was openly and thoughtfully confessing Jesus as Messiah... What we must recognize is that Christological confession was not cut and dried, black or white. It was possible to address Jesus with some messianic title without complete conviction, or while still holding some major misconceptions about the nature of His messiahship, and therefore stopping short of unqualified allegiance or outright confession” [Carson, 365].

Jesus asked another question: **“But what about you? He asked. Who do you say I am?”** (vs. 15). For each of us, this

is a far more important question than the previous one. As far as our personal destiny is concerned, it doesn't matter what others think about Jesus; it only matters what we think. Each of us must answer this question for himself.

Peter speaks up with his answer: **“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’”** (vs. 16). Peter gives a brief answer, “but one which contains the whole sum of our salvation” [Calvin, 184]. In this answer, Peter confesses Jesus as Savior (**“You are the Christ”**), and as Son of God.

Jesus was pleased with Peter's answer: **“Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven’”** (vs. 17). Indeed, all those who make a confession of Christ are **“Blessed”**: They are **“blessed”** to have the eternal life that accompanies saving knowledge of Christ; and they are **“blessed”** that such knowledge was **“revealed”** to them by our gracious **“Father in heaven.”** Peter was especially **“blessed”** to this have realization of who Christ is, because he was living amongst those who did not realize who Christ is. The religious leaders of the time were hostile towards Jesus. Even those who were not hostile thought Jesus to be at best a prophet. “Men forget that it is a widely different thing to believe in Christ's divine mission when we dwell in the midst of professing Christians, and to believe in it when we dwell in the midst of those who are hardened and unbelieving. The glory of Peter's confession lies in this—that he made it when few were with Christ and many against Him. He made it when the rulers of his own nation, the Scribes, and Priests, and Pharisees, were all opposed to his Master; he made it when our Lord was in the **‘form of a servant’**, without wealth, without royal dignity, without any visible mark of a king. To make such a confession at such a time, required great faith and great

decision of character” [Ryle, 196]. “To lift them out of all the perplexed conceptions due to their education and environment, and fix them in the conviction that one without scepter or army or even home, is the Messiah, required revelation from the Father” [Broadus, 355].

Peter’s confession of Christ prompted Jesus to reveal what He had in store for Peter: **“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it”** (vs. 18). Jesus used the name of Peter, which means “rock”, to illustrate the role Peter would have in building the eternal body of Christ, His church. Peter, the “rock”, was to be the foundation; and indeed, in the book of Acts, we see that Peter was the foundation. With his magnificent sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter ushered in the church age (see Acts 2). And since that day, true to Christ’s words, despite much opposition throughout the ages, the **“gates of Hades”** have not overcome the Church.

Jesus expanded on His promise: **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”** (vs. 19). This last promise was not limited to Peter. We know this because, later, Jesus would make the same promise to His disciples in general: **“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”** (Matt. 18:18). This promise is somewhat cryptic: it is not clear at all to me what Jesus means by **“loosing”** and **“binding”** things in heaven and earth. Our inability to fully comprehend what this promise means is understandable, for we know so little about the heavenly realm. Given the vagueness to us of the promise, there is, of course, much controversy as to what it means. But from the passage in Matthew 18, we can infer that it has something to do with prayer, for there Jesus followed this

promise with another promise: **“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”** (Matt. 18:19–20). Then also, the promise about **“binding”** and **“loosing”** in heaven and earth is preceded by a passage on church discipline, and how to deal with a brother who sins against you (see Matt. 18:15–17). Given this, one interpretation of the promise is that, through fervent prayer in agreement with our brothers, we have the power to affect the course of spiritual warfare in the heavenly realms, so as to aid a brother who has fallen into sin.

Another possible interpretation of this promise turns on the fact that the phrases **“will be bound in heaven”** and **“will be loosed in heaven”** could also be translated **“will have been bound in heaven”** and **“will have been loosed in heaven”**. This translation would imply that the disciples do not so much have power to affect the heavenly realms, but rather, through the guidance of the Spirit, can administer the church according to God’s will as established in heaven. “Good reasons may be brought forward for holding that Jesus meant that the new community would exercise divinely given authority both in regulating its internal affairs and in deciding who would be admitted to and who excluded from its membership” [Morris, 427].

Jesus followed these promises with a warning: **“Then He warned His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ”** (vs. 20). This was a command to His disciples specifically for that time. The reason for the command was that many people had the wrong idea about what the Messiah would do. If the disciples went around proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah, there would have been a movement to crown Jesus the political ruler. “The term Messiah could all too easily be

misinterpreted and understood, for example, in political terms. If the disciples had gone out proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah, both they and their hearers would have thought of a glorious, conquering Messiah. They would have looked for armies and bloodshed and victories. To know that Jesus was the Messiah was one thing; to understand what messiahship really meant was quite another” [Morris, 427]. This command, of course, is no longer in effect; though ironically and sadly, it is an oft-kept command. We are free to proclaim from the rooftops the Lordship of Jesus Christ, yet we remain silent.

Peter Stumbles

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what He has done. ²⁸ I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

— Matthew 16:21-28

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION, Peter triumphed, as he answered the Lord’s question, “Who do you say I am?” To that question, Peter answered: “You are the Christ, the Son

of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Sadly, Peter’s triumphancy was not to last, as we shall see in this section.

The result of Peter’s confession of Christ was that Jesus felt that His disciples were ready to receive some difficult teaching: **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life”** (vs. 21). The phrase **“From that time on...”** implies that Jesus changed His teachings, now that the disciples realized that He was the Messiah. This change in teaching was necessary, because the disciples’s concept of what the Messiah would do was very different from the path Jesus was to take. **“Like most of the Jews, they could form no idea of a suffering Messiah”** [Ryle, 199]. **“The time of the struggle was at hand and Jesus knew that they were quite unequal to it unless they were armed with a new fortitude. But what was specially necessary was for Christ to show them that His Kingdom would be ushered in, not in great pomp, not with great riches, not with the joyful applause of the world, but by a shameful death”** [Calvin, 191]. **“All this must have fallen sadly on the ears of men who still indulged visions of a kingdom of a very different sort”** [Spurgeon, 227].

Not that this teaching of Jesus’ was all somber. In fact, it ended on a triumphant note: **“...and on the third day [Jesus was to be] raised to life.”** But for the disciples, the triumph was lost in the suffering.

It was not that the disciples had not had hints of this in Jesus’ previous teaching. Jesus had alluded to His death and resurrection earlier: **“Then the Jews demanded of Him, ‘What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’** The

Jews replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple He had spoken of was His body” (John 2:18–21); Jesus said, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die” (John 12:32–33); “Jesus answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”’ (Matt. 12:39–40).

Note this about this teaching of Jesus, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus did not come as a surprise to Him. Jesus knew His mission, and He knew all of the details of it. It was planned through the counsel of the Father from eternity.

Peter would not accept this teaching of His Lord: **“Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’”** (vs. 22). Peter’s exclamation is self-ironic. He said, **“Never, Lord!”**, but how can one say **“Never”** to one’s **“Lord”**. Far from subjecting himself to the will of his Lord, Peter dared to rebuke his Lord. And this rebuke of Jesus by Peter was based solely on Peter’s will for God. “Thoughtless enthusiasm moves men and even drives them, so that they do not hesitate to subject God Himself to their will” [Calvin, 192].

Clearly, part of the impetus for Peter to previously declare Jesus as Messiah was his expectation that Jesus would do something like exert His power to overthrow the political authorities, and declare Himself king. “For Peter, it is unthinkable that the one he has just pronounced **‘the Messiah, the Son of the living God’** should be rejected and killed” [Morris, 429]. “There has always been a tendency, and

especially in our day, to decide questions of religious truth and duty from the human rather than the divine point of view” [Broadus, 369]. We must always realize that God’s ways are wiser than ours. “From this [rebuke of Jesus] it also appears how mad men are in their perverse zeal. For when Peter tried to interrupt the Master’s course, it was no thanks to him that he did not deprive himself and the whole of mankind of eternal salvation” [Calvin, 193].

For his protestation, Peter received from Jesus much more than a mild rebuke: **“Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men’”** (vs. 23). This was the sharpest rebuke that Jesus ever gave any of His followers, and Peter must surely have been astounded to be addressed as **“Satan”**. But, unbeknownst to Peter, he was being used by Satan. “It is the subtlety of Satan to send temptations to us by the unsuspected hands of our best and dearest friends... Those who have their spiritual senses exercised, will be aware of the voice of Satan, even in a friend, a disciple, a minister, that dissuades them from their duty” [Henry]. Satan, through Peter, was trying to persuade Jesus to give up His mission to die for all mankind. Jesus “felt in it a Satanic lure, a whisper from hell, to move Him from His purpose to suffer” [JFB, 89].

As stated, at the root of Peter’s protestation was his expectation that Jesus, as Messiah, had come at that time to set up a political kingdom on earth. With that expectation, Peter had also anticipated, as the chief of his disciples, ruling with Jesus, and gaining all the material advantage that would accompany doing so. Jesus, wanting to correct these faulty expectations, went on to describe the nature of true disciples: **“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and**

follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (vss. 24–25).

The prospects were even more dire than Peter suspected: not only was the Messiah to be punished and put to death, but His disciples were expected to be prepared for the same fate. “Christ, having shown His disciples that He must suffer, and that He was ready and willing to suffer, here shows them that they must suffer too, and must be ready and willing... What it is to be a disciple of Christ is to come after Him. When Christ called His disciples, this was the word of command, **‘Follow me’**” [Henry]. Such discipleship necessarily entails **“denying oneself”**, giving up all one’s worldly expectations for the sake of doing what our Lord would have us do.

Jesus went on to explain that such self-denial is what true life consists of: **“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”** (vs. 26). True life is more than this world. We have a soul, and the soul lives on. The whole world is not worth as much as even the most decrepit man’s soul. “Thus, in language the weightiest, because the simplest, does our Lord shut up His hearers, and all who shall read these words to the end of the world, to the priceless value to every man of his own soul” [JFB, 90]. And yet, sadly, so many a man **“forfeits his soul”** for much, much less than **“the whole world”**—for a very small portion of it, indeed.

“In order that the former teaching might penetrate their minds the better, Christ sets the future judgment before their eyes. For if this transitory life is to become paltry to us, we must be deeply touched by a sense of the heavenly life. But to look up to heaven, our slow and sluggish minds need help” [Calvin, 195]: **“For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what He has done”** (vs. 27).

Finally, Jesus informed His disciples that they would soon have clear proof of the existence of realms beyond this world, and proof of Jesus' Lordship over those heavenly realms: **“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom”** (vs. 28). Many have trouble with this verse, because they think (improperly) that Jesus is speaking of His second coming. But clearly, He wasn't speaking of His second coming, for all of His disciples have already **“tasted death”**. Alfred Plummer lists seven events that Jesus may have been speaking of, six of which occurred in the disciples' lifetime: (1) the transfiguration; (2) the resurrection and ascension; (3) Pentecost; (4) the spread of Christianity; (5) the internal development of the gospel; (6) the destruction of Jerusalem; (7) the second coming of Jesus. I myself have not a definite opinion about specifically which of these Jesus was referring, but clearly Jesus' kingdom was manifest in many ways during the lifetime of the disciples, thus fulfilling this verse. “It seems best to take 16:28 as having a more general reference—viz., not referring simply to the Resurrection, to Pentecost, or the like, but to the manifestation of Christ's kingly reign exhibited after the Resurrection in a host of ways, not the least of them being the rapid multiplication of disciples and the mission to the Gentiles. Some of those standing there would live to see Jesus' Gospel proclaimed throughout the Roman Empire and a rich 'harvest' (see 9:37–38) of converts reaped for Jesus Messiah” [Carson, 382].

The Transfiguration

¹ After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” He said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

— Matthew 17:1-9

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, Jesus spoke of His death and resurrection. In this chapter, Jesus gives three of His disciples a taste of His glory. “The order in which it is recorded is beautiful and instructive. The latter part of the last chapter showed us the cross: here we are graciously allowed to see

something of the coming reward. The hearts which have just been saddened by a plain statement of Christ's sufferings, are at once gladdened by a vision of Christ's glory" [Ryle, 205]. Without this vision, Christ's glory may not have been apparent to the disciples. Though glorified in heaven, Jesus was soon to be mocked and scourged on earth. So even now, Christ's glory, in the absence of faith, is not immediately apparent to us on earth. Jesus is mocked on earth; His followers are ridiculed and persecuted. And so, for those of us who believe in the truth of the Bible, visions of Christ's glory, as told by eyewitnesses, are precious, edifying for our faith, and reassuring for the hope we hold so dear.

Matthew relates what happened: **"After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves"** (vs. 1). The phrase **"After six days"**, correlates this event directly with the events at the end of the previous chapter. At the end of that chapter, Jesus made a promise: **"I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom"** (Matt. 16:28). When commenting on this verse in last month's issue, we pointed out that there were various events to which Jesus could have been referring (the resurrection and ascension, Pentecost, the miraculous spread of Christianity, etc.). But, we can't help but thinking that the primary fulfillment was the event that occurred just **"after six days"**. Indeed, **"some who were standing there"**, namely Peter, John and James, were **"led up"** by Jesus to a **"high mountain"**. They saw Jesus as He is glorified in the kingdom of heaven, and when He bodily returns to earth, it is the glorified Christ that the inhabitants of the earth will see as He **"comes in His kingdom."**

Jesus chose just three of His disciples to see the vision, trusting that "the conviction wrought in their minds by what

they witnessed would impart itself to all the Apostles, through their tone and general influence” [Broadus, 370]. We learn that “our Lord will not use all His servants alike, but some, such as He pleases, He will make in some cases more intimate” [Dickson, 200]. Peter, James and John were clearly more intimate with Jesus than the other disciples. They alone were chosen to see the raising of Jairus’ daughter (see Mark 5:37); and later, they alone would be chosen to witness Christ’s agony in Gethsemane. Perhaps the vision on the mount of transfiguration was necessary to sustain their faith upon seeing Christ’s agony in Gethsemane [Spurgeon, 231].

On the mountain, **“There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light”** (vs. 2). The scene here is clearly indescribable and incomprehensible for we who were not there. And it must have been awesome for the three disciples. Jesus’ transfigured appearance “was intended to give the disciples some idea of the majesty in which Jesus will appear to the world, when He comes the second time, and all His saints with Him. The corner of the veil was lifted up, to show them their Masters true dignity. They were taught that if He did not yet appear to the world in the guise of a King, it was only because the time for putting on His royal apparel was not yet come” [Ryle, 205].

This event was not an unnecessary display of power by Jesus. It was something that the disciples needed to see, especially given their resistance to the idea that Jesus was to be put to death. “Christ wanted to testify that He was not dragged unwillingly to death but went to it of His own free will, to offer the sacrifice of obedience to His Father” [Calvin, 197]. The disciples needed to see His power, so that they would have no doubt that He could not be overpowered by any man, except willingly. “And so we learn that He was subject to death because He wished to be, that He was crucified because He

offered Himself. For that same flesh which was sacrificed on the cross and lay in the tomb could have been immune from death and sepulcher, since it had already been partaker of the heavenly glory. We are taught that although Christ took the form of a servant and existed in the world and His majesty was hidden under the weakness of the flesh, nothing had been taken away from Him, for He emptied Himself of His own free will” [Calvin 197].

“Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus” (vs. 3). This event is quite beautiful in its symbolism. With Moses representing the Law, and Elijah representing the prophets, we have the entire revelation of God pointing to Jesus. “As to why these two appeared rather than others from the band of holy fathers, it should be sufficient for us to realize that the Law and the prophets had no other goal than Christ” [Calvin, 199]. We are told in the Gospel of Luke that the three of them—Jesus, Moses and Elijah—were speaking of Jesus’ death (see Luke 9:31). Whenever we read of the transfiguration, we tend to focus on what a great experience this event was for Peter, John and James, but also consider what a great experience it was for Moses and Elijah: to speak to Jesus about His sacrifice, about the event to which so many of their writings and prophecies alluded.

Peter came up with an idea: **“Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah’”** (vs. 4). Peter’s desire, apparently, was to stay upon that mountain, and spend time in worship of the three great men of God. Peter, it seems to be implied, was putting Moses and Elijah on equal footing with Jesus. God immediately responded, and made it clear that Jesus was to be more exalted than the other two: **“While [Peter] was still speaking, a bright cloud**

enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!’” (vs. 5). “Moses and Elijah were great men, and favorites of Heaven, yet they were but servants, and servants that God was not always well pleased in; for Moses spoke unadvisedly, and Elijah was a man subject to passions; but Christ is a Son, and in Him God was always well pleased” [Henry, 557].

Note well the message to the disciples from the mouth of God: **“Listen to Him!”** “It is better to hear the Son of God than to see saints, or to build tabernacles. This will please the Father more than all else that love can suggest” [Spurgeon, 233].

It seems the voice of God was more awesome even than the sight of the transfiguration: **“When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ He said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’”** (vs. 7). Jesus never loses an opportunity to comfort His disciples.

“When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus” (vs. 8). Again, we see beautiful symbolism in this event: “Compared with God’s revelation through Him, all other revelations pale” [Carson, 387]. “Accordingly, we find the founder of the law, and the great reforming prophet, coming to attend on the Messianic King; and as *they* disappear, a heavenly voice calls on men to hear *Him*” [Broadus, 371].

Sadly for the disciples, they were still men who must live in this world, and so they could not stay on the mount of transfiguration, but were constrained to come down the mountain: **“As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’”** (vs. 9). This certainly must have been a tough mountain for the disciples to come down from: to return to the fallen world from

the mountain of glory. But they could (and we can) look forward to the blessed time when they would forever be in Christ's glorious presence.

Surprisingly to some, **“Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’”** (vs. 9). Why would Jesus instruct them not to tell anyone until after He rose from the dead? Quite probably, the disciples were disappointed to hear this command. “This descent in the summer morning must have been accompanied by delightful reflections on what they had witnessed. Here was new and wondrous confirmation of their faith that Jesus was the Messiah. They would naturally wish to speak of it to the other disciples and all the people; and were doubtless surprised and disappointed when Jesus” commanded them not to tell anyone [Broadus, 372]. However, Jesus demonstrated great wisdom in giving this command. It was an extremely practical command. For, in the absence of the knowledge of Christ's resurrection, who would believe the story of the transfiguration? “The transfiguration would be as hard to believe as the incarnation itself; and there could be no practical use in making demands upon a faith which scarcely existed. Until the greatest confirmation of all was given in our Lord's resurrection, the vision on the Holy Mount would be rather a tax upon faith than a support of it in the case of those who did not themselves personally see it, but only heard the apostles' report of it. It is wise not to overload testimony. There is a time for making known the higher truths; for out of season these may burden, rather than assist, inquiring minds” [Spurgeon, 235]. “The discharging of the disciples to tell no one until the resurrection, teaches us that the Lord has His own set time, when He will make use of what He reveals to His servants, and will bring forth every truth in His own time, when it may be most useful” [Dickson, 202]. “Note, Christ observed a

method in the manifestation of Himself; He would have His works put together, mutually to explain and illustrate each other, that they might appear in their full strength and convincing evidence. Everything is beautiful in its season” [Henry, 560].

We, of course, are under no such restriction. We can shout from the rooftops the glory of our Lord. “Now that **‘the Son of man is risen again from the dead’**, no doctrine needs to be kept back” [Spurgeon].

A Question Concerning Elijah

¹⁰ The disciples asked Him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”

¹¹ Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that He was talking to them about John the Baptist.

— Matthew 17:10-13

THE THREE DISCIPLES (Peter, John and James), having just come down from the mount of transfiguration, were more convinced than ever that Jesus is Son of the living God, and the promised Messiah. And the sight of Elijah on the mountain probably reminded them of the prophecy that said that the return of Elijah would precede the coming of the Messiah. So, **“The disciples asked [Jesus], ‘Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?’”** (vs. 10). The prophecy about Elijah comes from Malachi 4:6: **“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.”** The teachers of the law foresaw only one coming of the Messiah. The prophecy in Malachi (we now realize) refers to the second coming of Jesus, for it says that Elijah will come **“before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.”** The phrase **“the great and dreadful day”**

refers to the end-times of tribulation and judgment which will occur when our Lord returns.

So, Jesus replied to the disciples: **“To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things”** (vs. 11). Note, He says **“will restore all things.”** Jesus knew that He was to return in the future, and that Elijah would precede Him then. But then also, there was a man who preceded Jesus in His first coming, who came in the **“spirit and the power of Elijah”** (see Luke 1:17). Jesus told the disciples: **“But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that He was talking to them about John the Baptist”** (vs. 13). The children of Israel **“did not recognize”** John as fulfilling the prophecy about Elijah, nor (by and large) did they accept Jesus as their Messiah. Had Jesus been accepted by His people as the Messiah in His first coming, John the Baptist would have fulfilled the prophecy concerning Elijah, for John came in **“the spirit and the power of Elijah”**. But Jesus will come again, and another man will precede Him, and, as Jesus taught, **“will restore all things.”** “There seems no doubt that the prophecy in Malachi, like many other OT passages, has a two-fold interpretation; the secondary and symbolic meaning referred to John at Christ’s first appearing, and then literally before Christ’s second coming. This entire section, suggesting Scripture to be fulfilled in a wider sense than appears on surface, shows how often God’s Word is found to be much deeper and fuller in meaning than its mere words seem to imply; and it is therefore wise to follow disciples’ example and ask Divine guidance in its interpretation” [Griffith Thomas, 259].

Faith

¹⁴ When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before Him. ¹⁵ “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶ I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not heal him.”

¹⁷ “O unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” ¹⁸ Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

²⁰ He replied, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. ²¹ But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”

— Matthew 17:14-21

IN ALL THREE GOSPELS, which contain the transfiguration (Matthew, Mark and Luke), this episode closely follows. Therefore, I assume that this episode took place not long after Jesus and His disciples came down the mountain: **“When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before Him. ‘Lord, have mercy on my son,’ he said. ‘He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not heal him’”** (vss. 14–16). In these last few chapters of Matthew, lapses of faith by the disciples and other failures are a recurring theme (see 14:16–21; 14:26–27; 14:28–31; 15:16; 15:23; 15:33; 16:5; 16:22). In this case, the disciples

(presumably the nine of the Twelve who did not go to the mount of transfiguration) were not able to heal a demon-possessed boy. “This failure in their healing ministry at first seems strange, since Jesus had clearly given them power to heal and exorcise demons (10:1, 8). Yet it is part of the pattern of the disciples’ advance and failure. In other situations they had shown lack of faith (14:26-27, 31; 15:5, 8)—a reminder that their power to do kingdom miracles was not their own but, unlike magic, was entirely derivative and related to their own walk of faith” [Carson, 390].

Jesus was not happy with their failure: **“O unbelieving and perverse generation,’ Jesus replied, ‘how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?’”** (vs. 17). Nothing grieves our Lord more than people’s unbelief, for this obstructs all the blessings which are appointed to come by faith” [Dickson, 204].

Note the two rhetorical questions, **“How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”** The implication of these questions is that lack of faith drives Jesus away. “The longer that Christ hath offered Himself to a people or person, and the more patience He hath shown towards them, the more He is provoked by their unbelief to reject them, and depart from them” [Dickson, 204].

Jesus made up for their lack of faith: **“Bring the boy here to me’ Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment”** (vss. 17–18). “Note, Christ’s glories do not make Him unmindful of us, and of our wants and miseries. Christ, when He came down from the mount, where He had conversation with Moses and Elijah, did not take His estate upon Him, but was as easy of access, as ready to poor beggars, and as familiar with the multitude, as ever He used to be” [Henry].

By way of application, parents whose children have gone astray may take hope from this episode. “Bad as this boy’s case was, of whom we read in these verses, he was **‘cured from the very hour’** that he was brought to Christ! Parents, and teachers, and ministers should go on praying for young men, even at their worst. Hard as their hearts seem now, they may yet be softened: desperate as their wickedness now appears, they may yet be healed” [Ryle, 211].

The disciples themselves were surprised that they could not drive out the demon: **“Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, ‘Why couldn’t we drive it out?’ He replied, ‘Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting”** (vss. 19–21). The disciples, it seems, treated the gift of healing given to them by Jesus, as a sort of magic, which they could use unconditionally, when and where they wanted. We learn here that the spiritual gifts of God are not unconditional, but must be accompanied by faith, and dependence on God. “Unbelief, and other unrepented sins, may mar the exercise of most excellent gifts” [Dickson, 205]. And in this particular case, it was necessary that the gift of healing be accompanied by other spiritual weapons in order to be successful: **“But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting”** (vs. 21). “When we find Satan strong and violent, and not yielding ground to us, when He is opposed, or set upon by us, then must we set an edge upon our faith by prayer and an edge upon our prayer, by fasting and separation of ourselves unto the exercise of prayer” [Dickson, 206]. In fact, undoubtedly, if the disciples went about exercising their gift properly by faith and dependence on God, the Spirit of God would have led them to

success through leading them to prayer and fasting. “Faith would have suggested and supplied these special means: since they were absolutely necessary in the case if the disciples were to succeed in it, faith would have exercised herself in them” [Spurgeon, 240].

Jesus teaches us of the power of God that can be exercised through the faith of His people: **“I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible to you”** (vs. 20). Of course, for us to move a mountain through faith, it must be commissioned to us by God to move the mountain, just as it was commissioned by Jesus to the disciples to drive out demons (see Matt. 10:1, 8). “It is possible to misunderstand the will of God and to try to move a mountain that should not be moved. In that case the believer will be disappointed” [Morris, 449]. “He does not mean that God will give us whatever comes heedlessly into our minds or mouths. In fact, since there is nothing more contradictory to faith than the foolish and unconsidered wishes of our flesh, it follows that where faith reigns there is no asking for anything indiscriminately” [Calvin]. However, when commissioned by God, we can do great things, with even a tiny amount of faith, **“faith as small as a mustard seed.”** “It is not necessary to have great faith; even a small faith is enough, as long as it is faith in the great God” [Morris, 449].

The Temple Tax

²² When they came together in Galilee, He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. ²³ They will kill Him, and on the third day He will be raised to life.” And the disciples were filled with grief.

²⁴ After Jesus and His disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?”

²⁵ “Yes, He does,” he replied.

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. “What do you think, Simon?” He asked. “From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?”

²⁶ “From others,” Peter answered.

“Then the sons are exempt,” Jesus said to him. ²⁷ “But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.”

— Matthew 17:22-27

JESUS ONCE AGAIN spoke to His disciples concerning His death and resurrection: **“When they came together in Galilee, He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and on the third day He will be raised to life.’ And the disciples were filled with grief”** (vss. 22–23). We cannot help but

notice how Jesus repeatedly spoke of His death and resurrection to the disciples. It was, of course, necessary to prepare them for this painful trial that they were to experience, and to speak of it ahead of time, so that the disciples would know that it was not unexpected: that the death and resurrection of Jesus was all part of God's plan. "Christ now was chiefly devoting His time and attention to His disciples, revealing, as they became spiritually ready, deep truths about Himself, His Church, and the future" [Griffith Thomas, 262]. "Their minds were far too receptive of other notions in reference to His kingdom, and therefore He set before them the truth again and again, almost in the same words. He would banish all dreams of a worldly monarchy from their souls. His death would be a grievous trial to them, and He would prepare them for it" [Spurgeon, 241].

"After Jesus and His disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, 'Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?' 'Yes, He does,' he replied" (vs. 25). The temple tax of those times fulfilled for the people the requirement that they pay to the temple atonement money, as commanded in Exodus 30:11–16. Jesus, being sinless, would be exempt from such a payment, for He needs no atonement. Peter, though, answered in the affirmative that, yes, Jesus did pay the temple tax. It seems that this was a bit of a fib, for it seems to be implied in the next few verses that Jesus had not been paying the tax.

"When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. 'What do you think, Simon?' He asked. 'From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?' 'From others,' Peter answered. 'Then the sons are exempt,' Jesus said to him" (vss. 25–26). Here we have a case of Jesus **"knowing our needs before we ask"** (see Matt. 6:8). Peter was most likely

trying to think of a way to broach the subject of paying the temple tax. Jesus brought up the subject Himself. In addition to not needing to make payment for atonement, there is another reason Jesus did not need to pay the temple tax: Jesus is the Son of God. Peter himself well knew and believed this (see Matt. 16:16).

Jesus chose not to seek a confrontation with the temple official concerning this matter: **“But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours”** (vs. 27). Jesus did not want to put unnecessary stumbling blocks to prevent anyone from believing in Him, so He paid the tax, even though He had every right, as the Son of God, to be exempt from it. “Some would have said that He did not keep the law, did not perform a recognized duty of every Israelite, and so He certainly could not be the Messiah ... Matthew probably recorded this incident to show his Jewish readers on the one hand that Jesus felt Himself entitled to the respect due to the Messiah, and on the other, that He was very careful to keep the law in all respects, so that no Jew had a right to stumble at Him” [Broadus, 380].

This should be a lesson to us, that we should seek to obey the laws and customs of the land in which we live (assuming, of course, that there be nothing unlawful in the eyes of God in them), in order not to put any stumbling blocks in the way of nonbelievers. “Our Lord’s example in this case deserves the attention of all who profess and call themselves Christians. There is deep wisdom in those five words, **‘lest we should offend them.’** They teach us plainly that there are matters in which Christ’s people ought to sink their own opinions, and submit to requirements which they may not thoroughly

approve, rather than give offense and ‘hinder the Gospel of Christ’” [Ryle, 217].

Jesus certainly chose an unusual way to pay the tax. “This was the only miracle worked in any sense for His own benefit (cf. Matt. 4:4), and even this was primarily for the sake of others” [Griffith Thomas, 264]. Ironically, the way He chose to pay the tax, strengthened His case for not paying it, for He demonstrated His almighty rule over Creation. “He makes a dumb creature bring the tribute-money to meet the collector’s demand” [Ryle, 216].

Note, it is significant that Jesus also paid Peter’s atonement money, not just His own. He was soon to pay for the atonement of all of us, at much greater cost. “Far greater and deeper truths lie slumbering down below. They are such as these: the glorious freedom of the Son, His coming under tribute for our sakes, and the clearance of Himself and us by the one payment which He Himself provided” [Spurgeon, 244].

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