

Expository Notes Excerpt

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Gospel of Matthew Chapters 5 - 7

Gordon Lyons

EXPOSITORY NOTES EXCERPT

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTERS 5-7

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GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

New Testament Expository Notes: Gospel of Matthew

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Sermon on the Mount

Over many generations, the Jewish people had been accustomed to hearing and learning the teaching of the Scriptures as they had been explained to them by the rabbis and other religious leaders. However, the scribes and Pharisees had augmented the Word of God with their own traditions and had altered the meaning of God's unchangeable Word by their own false interpretations.

Thus, when the Lord Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, he began to give the people the true interpretation of God's holy and inerrant Word. However, because the people had been so long accustomed to mistaken teaching and misapplications of their Scriptures, much of the Lord's teaching must have seemed to them like new or revolutionary teaching. Rather, the Lord Jesus was applying the Scriptures in the way that God the Father had intended them to be understood and applied throughout the preceding ages.

Of course, the principles of this same teaching applied to the Lord's followers in all ages—whether, formerly, in the congregation of Israel, or, latterly, in the New Testament church.

Essentially, the Sermon on the Mount concerns the practical application of the moral law in the lives of God's children—a law which is not applied legalistically or in connection with rites and ceremonies, but from a pure and sincere heart filled with love for God and love for others. For the most part, then, this Sermon is applicable only to those who know the Lord, who possess the Spirit of the Lord, and who are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit. As we shall see during our studies of this Sermon, unregenerate men and women cannot fulfil the requirements, or abide by the principles, laid down in this passage by the Lord Jesus.

This is not to say that the Sermon on the Mount is of no value to those who are presently outside of Christ and still in their sins. There is much within this teaching that is designed to instruct and challenge the hearts and minds of the unregenerate. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit can use such teaching to convince of sin, righteousness and judgment, and to convert a person to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, although addressed primarily to his followers, the Sermon was being heard also by a great crowd of unregenerate men and women. Certain sections of the Sermon—such as the 'Narrow Gate'—were intended to warn all his hearers against following the broad way that led to destruction.

Bearing in mind, therefore, the intended audience and purpose of the Sermon on the Mount, let us look at Matthew chapters 5 – 7 in more detail. The principal topics of these chapters are listed below:

Topic	Sub Topic	Chapter & Verses
		Matthew Chapter 5
The Beatitudes		5:3ff
Salt and Light		5:13f
Jesus Fulfils the Law and the Prophets		5:17-20
Murder & Termination of Life		5:21
Anger, Hatred and Resentment		5:22-26
Anger:	Forgiveness and Reconciliation	5:23-24
Sexual Immorality:	Adultery and Lust	5:27-28
	The Radical Remedy	5:29-30
	Divorce	5:31-32
Solemn Oaths & Vows		5:33-37
Responding to Evil		5:38-42
Love Your Enemies		5:43-48
Be Perfect		5:48

		Matthew Chapter 6
True Piety		6:1-4
True Prayer		6:5-8
The Lord Jesus Teaches His People to Pray	'The Lord's Prayer'	6:9-13
True Forgiveness		6:14-15
True Fasting		6:16-18
True Treasures		6:19-21
True Trust in God's Providence		6:25-34
	Anxiety over Clothing & Food	6:28-34
		Matthew Chapter 7
Judge Not		7:1-6
Ask, Seek & Knock		7:7-11
The Royal Law		7:12
The Narrow Gate		7:13-14
False Prophets		7:15-23
The Two Foundations		7:24-27
Astonished by The Lord's Authority		7:28-29

GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 5

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:1 - 7:29

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

Before proceeding, we should note that whereas the Lord Jesus speaks in Matthew of *'the kingdom of heaven'* in the corresponding passages in Luke, the Lord speaks of *'the kingdom of God'*. Clearly, the Lord considers these terms synonymous.

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

Matthew 5:1-2

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

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

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

We next learn from this verse that the disciples came to Jesus, or gathered around him. Principally, we are to understand the Twelve. However, we note also from the passage that many others followed the Lord Jesus up the mountain, and these too gathered around to hear his words. Nevertheless, we must understand that the Lord was not about to teach unbelievers—as the subsequent context will show clearly. Rather, he was about to teach his disciples, who in turn would teach the early church. However, also included among this vast crowd would be many who had believed on the Lord Jesus, but who were not one of the Twelve. Therefore, a considerable number of believers could have been present on this occasion, in addition to the Twelve.

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

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

The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:3-12

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

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

Matthew 5:3

Jesus begins by declaring:

Matthew 5:3 ESV

(3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

(Cf. Luke 6:20; cf. also Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14 with Luke 18:17)

We must be very careful to note what the Lord is saying here. He is not declaring that it is a blessing to be poor, to be in financial straits or to be impoverished. The Lord Jesus is referring specifically to a category of people: *the poor in spirit*. (Isa. 66:2; Luke 4:18) The poor in spirit are those who are humble and contrite in heart. (Ps. 51:17; Isa. 57:15) They are those who acknowledge their great need of God and of his salvation, and they are those who seek and find the Lord; who experience his mercy and forgiveness, and who then seek to live to the praise, honour and glory of the One in whom they have come to trust. (Ps. 34:18; Matt. 11:25; 18:1-3)

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

They are described as poor in spirit; but spiritually they are among the most highly favoured of God’s redeemed children, and the most richly blessed in the things of the Spirit. Thus, the Lord declares emphatically, “...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Such as these are the truly blessed of the Lord, and such as these find true spiritual blessedness in their hearts and lives. This applies whether they

are rich or poor in relation to this world's goods, and completely regardless of their standing or status before men.

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

Matthew 25:34 ESV

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

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

Matthew 5:4

Next, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 5:4 ESV

(4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

(Cf. Luke 6:21,25; cf. also Isa. 61:2-3; John 16:20-22; 2 Cor. 1:4-7; Rev. 7:17)

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

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

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

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

So, whether in this life or in the life to come, the Lord's words remain forever true: *'they shall be comforted.'* And, because they shall be comforted of God, their cause of mourning is assuaged and the

peace of God that passes all understanding fills their hearts and souls. (Isa. 26:3; Php. 4:7) Thus indeed they are blessed—or they are a privileged, especially favoured, or fortunate people.

Matthew 5:5

Next, the Lord Jesus states to his disciples:

Matthew 5:5 ESV

(5) "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

(Cf. Ps. 37:11,34; cf. also Num. 12:3; Ps. 25:9; Isa. 11:4; 29:19; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 3:4)

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

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

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

Thus, the Lord Jesus proclaims:

Matthew 11:28-29 ESV

(28) "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

(29) Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

In verse 29 above, the word translated 'gentle' (Gk., *prabj*, *praos*) is a variant of the word translated 'meek' in Matthew 5:5. Indeed, it is translated 'meek' by the KJV and other versions. However, we know that although the Lord Jesus was gentle (or meek) and lowly, he never deviated from the truth. On the contrary, the Lord held steadfastly to the word and will of God, even although it was to cost him his life. (John 4:24; 5:30; Mark 8:31)

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

Thus, here we see the strength of character exemplified by the One who, above all others, was meek and lowly.

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

Numbers 12:3 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

Matthew 5:6

Next, the Lord Jesus affirms:

Matthew 5:6 ESV

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

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

To '*hunger and thirst for righteousness*' is a common metaphor for the earnest desire to seek God's will and do it. It begins with the heartfelt desire to seek the LORD while he may be found. (Isa. 55:6) However, this spiritual desire is not found in the natural man, but only in those whom the Holy Spirit is

convicting of sin, convincing of their need of redemption, and drawing to Christ the Redeemer. (cf. John 16:7-11)

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

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

Matthew 5:7

Next, the Lord Jesus states:

Matthew 5:7 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

Matthew 5:8

Next, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 5:8 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Firstly, those that shall 'see' God are those who *experience the salvation of God*. This, of course, is true of all believers. In this sense, they all see or experience God's salvation, together with all the blessings and benefits of their redemption in Christ Jesus. (Luke 9:27; John 3:3)
- Secondly, those that shall 'see' God are those who *see the Father in his Son*; or those who see in Christ the very image and likeness of the Father. This, of course, is true of everyone who believes that the Lord Jesus is one with the Father; that he dwells in the Father and that the Father dwells in his Son. This much the disciples of Jesus were able to see literally, through believing on the teaching of the Lord Jesus. We, by faith in Christ and his Word, see this union of the Lord Jesus with the Father mystically and spiritually (since we were not present to see the Lord in the flesh). Nevertheless, we remain utterly convinced of the truth that the Lord Jesus and his Father are One—one in essence or substance, or one in being; yet,

distinct Persons of the Godhead. (John 8:58; 14:7-11; 17:11; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3)

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

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

Matthew 5:9

Next, the Lord asserts:

Matthew 5:9 ESV

(9) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

(Cf. Rom. 14:17-19; Jas. 3:16-18; Heb. 12:14; cf. also Matt. 5:44-45)

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

However, the Lord Jesus is not referring to the peacemakers of the world, for the peace that the world brings is transient. It can never be guaranteed to endure. It is fragile at best, and founded usually on compromising agreements. Therefore, the peace that the world seeks to achieve is not an internal peace (peace of heart) nor is it an eternal peace (as God provides through the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20)). Rather, the world's peace is an external peace (cessation of hostilities, etc.) and a peace lacking the certainty of absolute permanency. (Cf. Isa. 57:21)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Matthew 5:10

Next, the Lord asserts:

Matthew 5:10 ESV

(10) "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

(Cf. vv.3,19; Luke 6:22-23; cf. also Ps. 37:12; 1 Pet. 3:13-14)

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

Unfortunately, in this fallen sinful world, persecution of varying kinds and degrees is widespread, and many people suffer unjustly and intensely at the hands of evil men. Nevertheless, for the most part, these people are not enduring persecution for righteousness' sake, in the sense that the Lord Jesus is using that term here. Indeed, only those who belong to the Lord can be persecuted for righteousness' sake. For the righteousness of which the Lord is speaking is that righteousness that comes from God the Father; which he imputes and imparts to every believer, and which—in the form of sanctification—is associated with a life of holiness and godliness. Righteousness, therefore, is both the righteousness of Christ credited to the believer (forensic or legal righteousness) and also the righteous life of the believer that flows from the fruit of the Spirit (practical righteousness; i.e., holiness and godliness).

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

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

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

But what does this involve?

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

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

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

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

Notice what the Lord Jesus is saying here: He is not promising these persecuted believers a place in the kingdom of heaven in the future. Certainly, this is true, but it is not what the Lord is saying. Rather, he is saying of these persecuted believers that 'theirs *is*' (present tense) the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in the future, they will inherit their place in heaven. But, even now, the kingdom of heaven is theirs. No harm done to them on earth can ever change this fact or remove that kingdom and its inheritance from them. Though they be persecuted even unto death, yet then shall they experience the greatest blessedness of all—for *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*, and there they shall abide for all eternity, delivered forever from persecution, pain, suffering, sorrow, grief and tears. (Php. 1:28; 2 Tim. 2:12; 1 Pet. 4:12-16)

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

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

We must always remember this Scripture:

Isaiah 64:6a ESV

(6) We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment...

Our own righteous acts, deeds, or works of merit are '*as filthy rags*' (KJV). This is the reason why a person can never win the favour of God by his own meritorious actions or good deeds. A sinful person

can receive the righteousness that God requires only through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus' righteousness alone is fully sufficient to justify and clothe the sinner. That perfect righteousness alone makes a repentant and believing sinner acceptable in the sight of the most holy God. Then, the justified believer receives the gift of the Holy Spirit in sanctification: and from the Spirit's work of grace and sanctification in each believer's life flows the fruit of the Spirit, or a life of holiness, godliness and righteousness. However, those who practice a godly lifestyle and hold faithfully to the truth of God's Word often bring upon themselves the reproach and ill-treatment of the world. They are being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Nevertheless, *theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 5:11

Next, the Lord Jesus says to his faithful followers:

Matthew 5:11 ESV

(11) "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

(Cf. Luke 6:22; cf. also Isa. 51:7; Heb. 11:26; 1 Pet. 4:14)

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

We learn from God's Word that we are called not only to believe on the Lord Jesus, but also to suffer for his sake. (Php. 1:29) Thus, the believer must expect to suffer in one way or another when he lives by the Gospel and when he endeavours to make known the truths of God's Word to a hostile and unbelieving world. (Matt. 10:18-22; 24:9; Mark 13:9)

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

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

Thus, in their bitterness and desperation against the things of God, they endeavour to strike out at the people of God. This may be physically (as intimated in the previous verse), for evil thoughts often result in evil actions. However, in many cases, sinful men and women may attack the Lord's faithful people by their evil words, or by their evil words expressed in written form. Thus, the Lord's people may be subjected to false accusation, slander, libel, vilification of their character (character assassina-

tion), innuendo, idle gossip, tale-bearing, exposure to foul or obscene language, and many other kinds of evil expressions or evil reports—all of which are falsely grounded and have no foundation in fact.

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

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

Matthew 5:12

The Lord Jesus concludes the above remarks by declaring:

Matthew 5:12 ESV

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

(Cf. Luke 6:23; cf. also Acts 5:41; Rom. 5:3; Jas. 1:2)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-14

Now, the Lord Jesus expresses to his followers their responsibilities before God for witnessing to a lost and perishing world. Fallen and sinful mankind were bringing ever-increasing decay and degeneracy upon the world by their evil expressions and lifestyles. They were living in gross spiritual darkness—a darkness that spoke of the rampant evil permeating every strata of society, and of fallen mankind’s love for unrighteousness and hatred of righteousness.

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

Matthew 5:13

The Lord begins by saying:

Matthew 5:13 ESV

(13a) “You are the salt of the earth...”

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

(13) “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.”

(Cf. Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34-35; cf. also Col. 4:6)

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

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

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

Salt possesses the following characteristics. It:

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

Now, let us consider each characteristic individually.

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

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

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

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

Salt stings: It can burn. In moral terms, the effects of a believer's godly life or testimony on unbelievers can produce resentment or give offence. They are offended by the lives of the believer and by the Word of the Lord. Both testify to the holiness and righteousness of God. Both assert that God is a

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

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

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

Matthew 5:14-16

Now, the Lord Jesus declares to his followers:

Matthew 5:14-16 ESV

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

The following is true of light. It:

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

- Discloses: Concealed matters (morally and spiritually), unrighteousness, sin, etc.

Now, we will consider each point individually.

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

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

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

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

Light exposes: What light reveals it also exposes to the eye (or to the ‘eye’ of the heart or mind). When, by their example and testimony, a believer’s life constrains sinners to see the truth, or to acknowledge the truth of God’s Word), then they begin to see the true state or condition of their fallen sinful nature. They begin to comprehend that God’s wrath and judgment on sin and sinners is both righteous and just. They begin to realise their very great danger—for the light has exposed this to

them; i.e., they have begun to understand the truths of God's Word as it has been revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. Thus, as the Spirit of God enables them, they begin to seek the Lord and to call upon his name for mercy. All those who thus seek the light of God's Word with a truly repentant and believing heart, will indeed experience the mercy of the Lord. (Rom. 10:8-13) Yet, without the believer acting as a light to the world, this person would never have found salvation in Christ through the godly witness of that believer's life or testimony. If he were the elect of the Lord, the Lord would have saved him—but he would have saved him by some other means, or by means of some other person.

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

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

Jesus Fulfils the Law and the Prophets

Matthew 5:17-20

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

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

Nevertheless, as we shall see, what the scribes and Pharisees understood as being the Law of God was not necessarily the same as the Law that God had given to Moses. In many instances, the teachers of the law (i.e., the scribes or rabbis) had misunderstood, misinterpreted and misapplied the Law of God. In other instances, the Pharisees and others had encumbered God's holy Law with their own

traditions. (Matt. 15:3-6; Mark 7:8-13) The Lord Jesus would correct these misapplications of God's Law, and would provide the true interpretation of God's unchanging Word.

Matthew 5:17

Therefore, the Lord begins by declaring:

Matthew 5:17 ESV

(17) "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."

(Cf. Luke 16:17; Rom. 3:31; 7:12)

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

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

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

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

- Firstly, there was the Ten Words or Ten Commandments. (Ex. 20:1-18; Deut. 5:6-22) This is the moral law. This law is unchangeable or immutable. It applies as much today as it did when the LORD God first gave it to Moses on Mount Sinai. However, the purpose of this holy, righteous and good law was not to be the means of salvation and life, but to demonstrate God's righteous standard and requirements to the Hebrew people, and more generally to fallen sinful men and women everywhere. It was given to show to sinners that they could never attain to these standards, and thus it was intended to convict them of their sin and need and lead them to seek the mercy of the Lord. As Paul says, the law was our servant or guide (ESV, 'tutor', KJV, 'schoolmaster'¹) to lead us to Christ. (Gal. 3:21-26; 4:1-7) In this respect, what the believer was wholly unable to do in keeping the Law's demands perfectly throughout his or her lifetime, Christ did by his perfect and unwavering obedience to that Law throughout the time that he lived on this earth. Thus, in respect of righteousness (both concerning himself and also on behalf of the believer) the Lord Jesus fulfilled the Law. He did not abolish the Law.
- The second major element encompassed by the Law was the laws of sacrifices and ordinances. These laws had been given by God until the time of reformation: i.e., they were to be performed or obeyed unflinchingly until the time that the Lord would reform the sacrificial system. (Heb. 9:9-14) Thus, offerings and sacrifices—including the sacrifice of atonement—

¹ tutor / schoolmaster: Gk. *paidagwgoj* (*paidagogos*), meaning, 'servant', 'guardian', 'leader' or 'guide'; but not 'teacher'. [BDAG; Hogg and Vine]

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

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

Matthew 5:18

The Lord Jesus continues by declaring to his disciples:

Matthew 5:18 ESV

(18) "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."

(Cf. Isa. 40:8; Matt. 24:35; Luke 16:17; 21:33)

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

... Till heaven and earth pass...

This simply asserts that no change can occur in what the Lord is about to say until the conditions have been fulfilled completely or until heaven and earth shall pass away: i.e., the words that follow

were to last until their complete fulfilment. Thus, the Lord Jesus is emphasising the importance and permanence of God's Law. It cannot change; it cannot cease to apply; it cannot pass away, until everything of which the Law has spoken has been fulfilled completely.

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

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

Matthew 5:19

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

Matthew 5:19 ESV

(19) "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

(Cf. Deut. 12:32; Luke 11:42; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14-24)

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

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

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

At no time, did the Lord Jesus ever set aside the Ten Commandments, or their attendant duties and responsibilities toward God and man. This Law was never given as a means of salvation and righteousness for sinful mankind. Nevertheless, it was given to convict men and women of sin and guilt; to make them aware of their very great and eternal danger apart from God's mercy and to induce them to seek the mercy of the Lord. Again, the Law of Commandments was given to set forth God's standard of righteousness: a righteousness without which no one could approach God or inherit the king-

dom of heaven. However, since sinful men and women could not keep this Law unto perfection, God provided his own Son to fulfil ever jot and tittle of the Law on behalf of sinners, and to provide them with his own perfect righteousness so that they would be acceptable before God.

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

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

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

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

Matthew 5:20

Next, the Lord Jesus declares to his disciples:

Matthew 5:20 ESV

(20) “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

(Cf. Matt. 23:2-5, 23-28; Luke 11:39-40; 18:10-14; 20:46-47)

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

Man, however, looks on the outward appearance, whereas God looks on the heart. The Lord Jesus knew that the scribes and Pharisees were very religious outwardly and before the people. Nevertheless, the Lord was well aware that, with a few notable exceptions,² the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was not a righteousness of the heart, but merely a show and pretence at piety or godliness. (Cf. Rom. 10:3) To the people, the scribes and Pharisees appeared as the most upright and godly people on earth. However, the Lord saw past their external veneer of ‘righteousness’ to expose the thoughts and intents of their hearts or minds. In most cases, Jesus described these professors of religion as hypocrites; likening them to whitewashed sepulchres. They appeared ‘beautiful’ (morally pure or clean) on the outside. Inwardly, however, they were full of dead men’s bones (morally impure and corrupt). (Matt. 23:27-28)

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

² *exceptions*: e.g., Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea; both members of the Jewish Council or Sanhedrin, and both of whom later demonstrated support for the Lord Jesus Christ. (Mark 15:43; John 19:38-39) Joseph of Arimathea is said expressly to have been a disciple of the Lord Jesus. (John 19:38)

Jesus Expounds and Applies God's Law

Matthew 5:21-48

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

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

Murder and Termination of Life

Matthew 5:21

The Lord begins this section by declaring:

Matthew 5:21 ESV

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

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

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

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

"You shall not murder..."

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

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

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

“and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” (Cf. Deut. 16:18)

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

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

Anger, Hatred, and Resentment

Matthew 5:22-26

The Lord continues:

Matthew 5:22 ESV

(22) “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother³ will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

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

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

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

Concerning anger, we should observe that not all anger is sinful. The Lord God is angry with the wicked every day. The Lord visits wrath upon the ungodly and the impenitent. The Lord expresses anger on many different occasions and for many different purposes. (Judges 2:14; Ps. 7:11; Jer. 7:20; Lam. 1:12; Mark 3:5; John 3:36) Again, the Lord Jesus expressed anger against those who defiled the

³ Some mss insert ...*brother without cause*...

temple at Jerusalem for their desecration of that holy place. (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-46)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before we leave this verse, we should note that 'anger' comprehends more than just anger alone—as the New Testament epistles make clear. Those also who may be guilty of sinful anger are those who

conceal in their hearts—or exhibit openly—hatred toward another person, or who cherish resentment or bitterness in their hearts, or who hold grudges against other people, or who hold on resolutely to an unforgiving spirit, etc. (1 John 2:9; 3:10, 14-15; 4:20-21)

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

Anger: Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Matthew 5:23-24

Next, the Lord declares to his hearers:

Matthew 5:23-24 ESV

(23) “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, (24) leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

(Cf. Matt. 18:15-17; Mark 11:25-26)

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

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

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

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

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

Matthew 5:25-26

The Lord Jesus now declares:

Matthew 5:25-26 ESV

(25) “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. (26) Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

(Cf. Prov. 6:1-5; 25:8; Luke 12:58-59; cf. also Isa. 50:8-9)

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

The setting here is that of a plaintiff (i.e., an accuser) versus a defendant at law. It is assumed that the defendant is being pursued for some outstanding debt, for the return of borrowed property, or for some other similar matter involving money, goods or services. By neglect or dereliction of his duties and responsibilities toward others, the accused (i.e., the defendant) must not permit a situation to arise where he would justifiably be required to appear before a court of law. Should this happen, the accused would find himself in the hands of the judge. (Historically, if before the Sanhedrin on monetary matters, this would take the form of a tribunal or ‘bench of three’; latterly, if before the civil law courts, a magistrate, sheriff or judge would preside over the case).

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

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

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

Sexual Immorality: Adultery and Lust

Matthew 5:27-28

(Cf. Matt. 19:1-9)

The Lord Jesus now expounds and applies the seventh commandment:

Matthew 5:27-28 ESV

(27) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

(28) But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

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

The Lord now moves on to expound and apply the seventh commandment relating to adultery.⁴ As with other commandments, we will see that the prohibition of one specific act (in this case, adultery) is not confined to the adulterous act alone, but extends to all related matters of this kind or category. However, to apply the commandment so comprehensively was contrary to the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, and demonstrated once more how these religious teachers had misunderstood and misapplied the Law of God.

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

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

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

⁴ *adultery*: At this point, we should note that when these matters are being discussed and expounded in the New Testament epistles, illicit sexual relations are not confined to adultery. In keeping with the teaching of the Lord Jesus, the apostle Paul makes it unmistakably clear that all forms of sexual misdemeanours are included in this category. Therefore, it would be better to understand the Lord's teachings here in the light of the whole New Testament teaching on this subject. In this case, we should consider 'adultery' as comprehending every form of sexual impurity or immorality, of whatever type, whether in thought, word, gesture or deed. This would include any immoral or questionable matters that a person chooses to listen to or watch, any impure conversations in which he participates, any corrupt company with which he associates, or any impure media that he reads or views. (GL)

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

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

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

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

Thus, those who are married to a husband or wife in God's appointed way may enjoy those marital and conjugal relations as God intended, in purity, holiness and honour. (1 Cor. 7:1-5) Those who remain unmarried God will yet bless abundantly as they seek to honour and serve him in the way that he intended. (Cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-33)

Sexual Immorality: The Radical Remedy

Matthew 5:29-30

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

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

Matthew 5:29 ESV

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

In this passage, the Lord Jesus is emphasising the very serious nature of sexual sin. Those who are guilty consistently of breaking the seventh commandment, in thought, word or deed, must search their

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

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

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

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

Mark 7:20-23 ESV

(20) And he [Jesus] said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. (21) For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, (22) coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

(23) “All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

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

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

So serious does the Lord consider this sin to be that he reckons it better to lose one part of the body than to suffer the loss of our entire body in hell. Thus, the Lord is declaring that the cause of sin (the eye feeding the mind or thoughts) must be dealt with radically. For, if a person indulges persistently in the sins of the old nature, and if he refuses wilfully to mortify that sinful nature and allow the Holy Spirit to sanctify and control his thought life, then that person effectively denies any saving relationship with Christ and any sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit within. If this is so, then it is certain that this person does not belong to Christ and therefore will be cast into hell, unless—by the grace of God—he repents and forsakes his sinful lifestyle. (Rom. 8:5-9; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 21:8)

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

Matthew 5:30 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sexual Immorality: Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32

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

Matthew 5:31-32 ESV

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

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

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

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

Matthew 19:3-9 ESV

(3) And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

(4) He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (5) and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? (6) So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

(7) They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"

(8) He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. (9) And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (see also Luke 16:18)

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

Testament teaching elsewhere, the unfaithful wife ought to acknowledge and repent of her sin, and confess it to God. She ought also to confess her sin to her lawful husband, and the husband ought to forgive her freely and willingly, receiving his repentant and forgiven wife once more to himself and to the marriage bed. (1 Cor. 7:3-5, 10-11; Heb. 13:4)

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

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

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

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

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

Solemn Oaths and Vows

Matthew 5:33-37

(Cf. Matt. 23:16-22)

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

Exodus 20:7 ESV

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

Exodus 20:16 ESV

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

With this in mind, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 5:33-37 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leviticus 19:12 ESV

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

Numbers 30:2 ESV

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

Deuteronomy 6:13 ESV

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

Deuteronomy 10:20 ESV

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

Deuteronomy 23:21-23 ESV

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

(22) But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

To this end, James declares:

James 5:12 ESV

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

To fall under condemnation meant the judgment or discipline of the Lord. However, the phrase is related to another similar expression, '*the condemnation of the devil*'. The devil is the 'father' or originator of all lies. As such, he lies under the condemnation of God. Those who emulate the evil one by engaging in lying or broken pledges or deceptive promises also fall under a like condemnation. This is why the Lord Jesus in verse 37 of the passage in Matthew 5 that anything other than 'Yes' or 'No' comes from evil.

Responding to Evil

Matthew 5:38-42

Matthew 5:38-42

(Cf. Exodus 21:22-27)

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

1. The 'evil' to which the Lord Jesus is referring here is not *moral* or *spiritual* evil, for such forms of evil must always be resisted. Rather, here, the Lord Jesus is speaking of *physical* or *verbal* evil: e.g., any verbal abuse or physical attack directed against a person. This includes also any civil action pursued in a court of law on unjust grounds against an individual.
2. The law to which the Lord Jesus refers on this occasion was contained in the civil code (not the moral code). Although not part of the Ten Commandments, the civil code formed part of God's Law: i.e., it was included among the statutes and ordinances given by God to Moses. The LORD had imparted these civil ordinances to Moses for the guidance of magistrates, judges and other law officers of Israel. The precepts and principles laid down in the civil code were not intended for the use of individuals in a private capacity, but for the guidance of Israel's law officers alone.

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

Matthew 5:38 ESV

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

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

This, however, was never God's intention when he set down this particular principle—'*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*'. This principle was intended as a direction to judges and other administrators of the law to apply the law equitably and exactly as the offence deserved. No judge was to impose a lesser or greater penalty than the offence merited. Rather, the punishment was to equate with (or 'fit') the crime (*lex talionis*—law of exacting like for like). Thus, for the crime of murder (culpable homicide), the equitable and just punishment for taking a life that God had created in his own image was death. For all lesser crimes, a corresponding punishment was to be imposed. Such punishments could range from loss of liberty (imprisonment), loss of dignity (corporal punishment) loss of income (fines) to loss of property (forfeiture, seizure or impounding of goods). However, the principle of '*an*

eye for an eye' was never intended to imply the amputation of parts of the body (e.g., eye, tooth, hand, etc.) for any criminal or civil offence.

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

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

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

Thus, the Lord continues:

Matthew 5:39 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

the courts—not for the offended individual—to impose any necessary sanction or punishments on the offender.

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

Matthew 5:40-42 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is not to imply that the Lord's people were to act unwisely or naively when responding to such pleas for assistance. Clearly, certain street beggars might not use any money given them for essentials such as food, but for other things such as alcohol or drugs. Thus, where there may be doubt, a person may respond by providing food or clothing, etc., rather than money. Where, however, a neighbour was begging for assistance for some household or family distress which was evident to others, then their need was to be met by whatever means was within our power and at our disposal.

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

Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

Matthew 5:43

Matthew 5:43 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

Leviticus 19:33-34 ESV

(33) "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.

(34) "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, *and you shall love him as yourself*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Emphasis added; see also Deut. 10:18-19)

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

Furthermore, in Exodus, God had commanded:

Exodus 23:4-5 ESV

(4) "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him.

(5) "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him."

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

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

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

Thus, in verse 44, the Lord continues:

Matthew 5:44 ESV

(44) “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

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

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

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

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

Matthew 5:45 ESV

(45) “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

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

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

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

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

Taking this a step further, the Lord declares:

Matthew 5:46-47 ESV

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

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

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

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

Be Perfect

The Lord concludes this section by declaring:

Matthew 5:48 ESV

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

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

Luke 6:36 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

Again, it is no surprise when the Lord declares that his followers' righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees before they could enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:20) From what we have seen already, it is evident that the scribes and Pharisees did not possess the righteousness of

God, but merely their own self-righteousness. Furthermore, by their gross distortions, misinterpretations and misapplications of God's righteous and holy Law, they had twisted out of all recognition God's righteous standards and requirements for his people. (Matt. 23:13-15, 27-28)

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

The righteousness that God requires is:

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

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

GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 6

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

True Piety

Matthew 6:1-4

Matthew 6:1-2

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

Matthew 6:1-2 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares to his disciples:

Matthew 6:3-4

Matthew 6:3-4 ESV

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

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

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

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

At this point, we must emphasise again that the Lord did not consider a person’s neighbour to be only those people living nearby, or who were known to that person. When used by the Lord in this context, a person’s neighbour is anyone who stands in need. This applies whether that person lives near or far, and it applies irrespective of that person’s status, colour, culture or creed. Once again, we must remember the story of the Good Samaritan, where the Samaritan willingly helped a Jewish person—

knowing that many of the Jews looked upon Samaritans with deep suspicion, or treated them with outright hostility. Thus, we ought to learn from this what Jesus meant by our 'neighbour'. (Luke 10:29-37)

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

Deuteronomy 10:18-19 ESV

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

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

Matthew 25:35-40 ESV

(35) "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, (36) I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

(37) "Then the righteous will answer him, saying,

'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? (38) And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? (39) And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

(40) "And the King will answer them,

'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

And the writer of Hebrews declares:

Hebrews 13:1-2 ESV

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

True Prayer

Matthew 6:5-8

Matthew 6:5

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

Matthew 6:5 ESV

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

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

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

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

Luke 18:9-14 ESV

(9) He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:

(10) “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus:

‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’

(13) “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying,

‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

(14) “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Those who praise themselves—like the Pharisee—are not praying to God and will not be heard by God. (Jas. 4:6) These are the hypocrites—or ‘play actors’—of whom Jesus speaks; but there are no parts for actors in the kingdom of God. The Lord says that they have received their reward—the ac-

claim (or the pity!) of men. There will be no reward for hypocrites in heaven, for no hypocritical person will ever enter heaven.

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

Matthew 6:6

Matthew 6:6 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

Matthew 6:7-8

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

Matthew 6:7-8 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Lord Jesus Teaches his People to Pray

(The Lord’s Prayer) ⁵

Matthew 6:9-13

(Cf. Luke 11:2-4)

Having discussed the importance and manner of prayer, the Lord Jesus now gives a model or example of prayer to follow. This prayer summarises the most important aspects of prayer, praise and peti-

⁵ *The Lord’s Prayer*. This prayer is known commonly as ‘*The Lord’s Prayer*’. Due to its wide acceptance, we will retain this title here. However, we should bear in mind that this prayer is more accurately the model of prayer that he taught to his disciples, and thus to all his followers. The ‘Lord’s Prayer’ ought to be considered as that prayer recorded by John in chapter 17 of his Gospel.

tion to the Father. However, although it may be useful to memorise, it is not strictly necessary to make use of the exact words. Furthermore, a believer must be careful of repeating this prayer in a formal manner, or merely out of habit. Each word, sentence and section is important, and we ought to pray these words only from a sincere, humble, believing and receptive heart, and with a sense of gratitude, thankfulness and praise to our heavenly Father for all the wonders of his love toward us, and for his assurance of answered prayer.

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

Matthew 6:9-13 ESV

The Lord Jesus said:

(9) "Pray then like this:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

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

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

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

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

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

Matthew 6:13 NKJV

(13) "And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

Matthew 6:9

Matthew 6:9 ESV

(9) "Pray then like this:

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

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

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

The Lord Jesus then adds the words, ‘...in heaven...’ Again, this is not an unnecessary expression of the obvious. By acknowledging that our Father is ‘in heaven’, we are acknowledging that heaven is God’s throne and the earth is his footstool. In other words, we are acknowledging the absolute sovereignty and supremacy of our Father in heaven. (2 Chron. 20:6; Isa. 57:15; 66:1) Again, by acknowledging that our Father is in heaven, we are acknowledging that this is the place in which righteousness dwells, the place of unparalleled beauty and holiness in the presence of God upon his throne, and the place where myriads of holy angels worship the Lord in holy array. Furthermore, we are acknowledging that heaven is our home or place of final abode. (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 7:11)

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

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

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

Matthew 6:10

Matthew 6:10 ESV

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

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

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

Here, God’s kingdom consists of his rule in the hearts (or innermost beings) and lives of men and women (‘*the kingdom of God is within you*’ (Luke 17:20-21 NKJV)). God’s kingdom is not only a real kingdom comprehending all his redeemed people; it is also and primarily a moral and spiritual king-

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

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

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

Matthew 24:14 ESV

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

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

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

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

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

Of these matters, the Lord Jesus now speaks:

Matthew 6:11

Matthew 6:11 ESV

(11) “Give us this day our daily bread...” (Cf. Luke 11:3)

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

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

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

Of course, as God’s Word makes plain elsewhere, we must work to earn the bread we eat—unless prevented from doing so by adverse health or other incapacitating circumstances. The assurance of our daily needs being met by our Father in heaven does not imply that we do not need to work for our living. (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:12; cf. also Eph. 4:28)

Some older commentators (e.g., *Theophylact*) believed that the phrase, “Give us this day our daily bread...” did not indicate a request to provide bread alone, but to provide the petitioner with sufficient bread (or food) each day to nurture and support the body in order to maintain health and strength. Others among the early church fathers believed that the phrase included both a request for the provision of daily literal bread or food and also a request for daily spiritual ‘bread’ or spiritual nourishment through God’s grace and by the means of grace. (Cf. Matt. 4:4; cf. John 6:35,51)

Matthew 6:12

Matthew 6:12 ESV

(12) "...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."
(Cf. Luke 11:4a)

Here, the believer petitions his Father in heaven to forgive him his debts: i.e., his sins or transgressions. The believer's debt of sin has been paid, of course, by the Lord Jesus' atoning sacrifice at Calvary. Nevertheless, although justified in the sight of God and although being sanctified daily by the Spirit of God, the believer will not attain to perfection of character or conduct until he is glorified. (Php 3:12-14; Heb. 12:23) Thus, he needs to seek the Lord's mercy and forgiveness for sins committed unwittingly or unintentionally. (Those who practise a sinful lifestyle *habitually* while claiming to belong to Christ show by their ungodly way of life that they have not experienced God's grace in regeneration and sanctification. Thus, they are still at enmity with God and still separated from Christ. Rom. 8:9))

The truly regenerated believer, however, is assured that his heavenly Father will indeed forgive his sins, whenever they are acknowledged, confessed to him through his Son, and renounced. Thus, the apostle John declares in his first epistle:

1 John 1:6-10 ESV

(6) If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. (7) But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

(8) If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

(9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(10) If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

The Lord Jesus then adds these words, '*...as we also have forgiven our debtors.*'

It was unthinkable that those whom the Lord had forgiven would fail to forgive others. Yet, many people in Jesus' day, and in the present day, do not consider themselves under any obligation to forgive those who are indebted to them, or who have wronged them in some way. On the contrary, although claiming to be the Lord's people, some are quite content to harbour bitterness, resentment, malice and ill-will against other people, rather than forgiving them their wrongs. (Matt. 18:21-35; Mark 11:25)

This, of course, is to despise the grace and mercy of the Lord: For if we cherish such evils in our hearts, we show by so doing that our hearts are not right with God. We ourselves stand in need of God's forgiveness. Thus, we must repent of our sin and seek God's mercy, and then we must seek reconciliation—involving full forgiveness—with those whom we have wronged or who have wronged us. (Matt. 5:22-24)

Again, some who claim to belong to the Lord Jesus are quite willing to forgive their own brothers and sisters (the family of believers), but not outsiders or strangers. This, however, cannot be. The Lord Jesus forgave us when we were not only outsiders and strangers to grace and to God, but also when we were positively the enemies of God, or at enmity with God. (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21-22) If, out of his

great love for us in Christ Jesus, God should so forgive his enemies and make them his own beloved children, how much more should these redeemed children demonstrate something of God's love and forgiveness toward their enemies or toward those who have wronged them? (Cf. Luke 7:40-48)

(In verse 15 below, the Lord Jesus makes it plain that those who are not willing to forgive others will not themselves be forgiven. (Cf. Matt. 18:28-35; James 2:13))

Matthew 6:13

Matthew 6:13 ESV

(13) "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Cf. Luke 11:4b)

God, of course, does not tempt anyone in the sense that he causes that person to sin; nor does he lead anyone into (moral) evil. Thus, James declares:

James 1:13-14 ESV

(13) Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. (14) But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

The meaning of '*lead us not into temptation...*' is illustrated aptly by the Psalmist:

Psalms 141:4a ESV

(4a) Do not let my heart incline to any evil... (cf. Ps. 121:7)

In other words, this is a plea that God will not permit his servant to be led into, or to stray into, the paths of unrighteousness, nor allow his servant's heart or mind to tend toward that which is displeasing or dishonouring to the Lord.

We may consider also the Lord's words to his disciples later in this Gospel:

Matthew 26:41 ESV

(41) "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

God permits his people to be tempted by evil or by Satan (as was the Lord Jesus). However, our Father in heaven is never responsible for causing his people to yield to temptation or to sin.

God permits temptation to sin, but with the temptation he provides a way of escape. (1 Cor. 10:13). Therefore, when we fail to take this way of escape, we are wholly responsible for yielding to temptation and for committing sin. God is in no way responsible for our disobedient, faithless or otherwise evil actions or for the consequences of those actions.

The word 'temptation', however, may be understood in another way: God may be said to 'tempt' his people in the sense that he subjects them to, or permits them to endure, trials, tribulations, afflictions, pains, or sorrows etc. This sense of the word 'temptation' is found in the older versions of the Bible. However, more modern versions render the word as 'testings' or 'trials' or similar. Testings or trials are not temptations to sin. Rather they are intended for the strengthening of a believer's faith and character. Thus, God 'tempted' Abraham and Job very severely (i.e., God 'tested' or 'tried' them very

severely) by God. Abraham, however, obeyed God and proved his faith and faithfulness to God. Similarly, when tested, Job held steadfastly to his faith in God. (Gen. 22:1; Deut. 8:2,16; John 17:15; Rev. 2:10)

The second part of the petition, '*...but deliver us from evil*', may be understood *either* as a plea to be delivered from sinful inclinations, tendencies, dispositions or intentions of the mind and from any sinful acts, *or* as a plea to be delivered from the temptations of the evil one himself. Both are valid, because temptations to sin arise both from our old fallen, sinful nature, and also from the wiles, deceptions and enticements of the devil. (Eph. 6:11; Jas. 1:13-14)

In the second part of the petition, the Greek text has the definite article, which translates as, '*...lead us not into **the** evil.*' This may be understood in either of two ways (or both):

- a) '*the evil*' is that temptation, enticement to sin, or other allurements which is presenting itself to us at that moment in time (i.e., the evil thought, thing, etc.)
- b) '*the evil*' is an ellipsis or abbreviated form of words for the 'evil one' (i.e., the devil or Satan).

Whichever is correct is immaterial. By petitioning God for deliverance from evil, we are petitioning him for deliverance from evil in all its forms, shapes or guises, and not just from one particular type of evil.

In passing, we should remember that, in Scripture, the word translated 'evil' has two distinct meanings. The more usual meaning relates to all forms of moral or spiritual evils, such as the Lord Jesus is referring to here. However, in Scripture, catastrophes, calamities and disasters—such as war, famine or plague—are also referred to as 'evils'. In this case, God's Word is not referring to moral or spiritual evil, but to physical evil. In the case of natural disasters, etc., these may have absolutely no moral connotations, and do not necessarily imply sin or judgment, unless that disaster has been sent expressly as a judgment from God. Such divine judgments did occur, for example, with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (a moral judgment on an immoral and wicked people (Gen. 13:13; 19:24-25; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 1:7)) and the destruction of the world in Noah's day (a moral judgment on an immoral and wicked world (Gen. 6:5-8, 11-13; 7:21-23; 1 Pet. 3:20)).

Although omitted by the ESV, NIV and other translations, the NKJV, NASB and certain other versions include a doxology in the second part of verse 13. The NASB, etc. shows this doxology in italics, indicating that the sentence is not present in all manuscripts. It would appear that the following doxology is almost certainly a gloss or marginal appendix. However, since it expresses the truth of God's Word, we will include it here for consideration while bearing in mind that these words were not spoken by the Lord Jesus nor were they included in the earliest manuscripts of this Gospel:

Matthew 6:13b NKJV

(13.) "...For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen."

'...For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'

These words sum up God's sovereign government or rule over the entire universe (universal dominion), the infinite extent of his power (omnipotence) or authority, and the extent of his glory or the sum total of his attributes (infinite perfection).

A similar doxology can be found in 1 Chronicles:

1 Chronicles 29:11 ESV

(11) Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. (see vv.10-13)

The kingdom and sovereign rule of God, the power or authority of God, and the glory or attributes of God are immutable. They endure throughout the eternal ages, for they are everlasting and cannot change any more than God himself can change. (Exod. 15:18; 1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 41:13; 47:2; 145:10-13; 1 Tim. 6:15-17)

Thus, having worshipped and hallowed the Name of their Father in heaven, and having placed their petitions before him to answer according to his will, the believer can rest assured that their heavenly Father will never fail to answer them or to meet their needs.

Our Father in heaven is the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. He rules over the kingdoms of men, disposing events as he pleases for the good of his church and for the ultimate benefit and blessing of his people. No one in all creation can thwart or even hinder the purposes or decrees of God. What God has determined, will be fulfilled. Thus, his people can be assured that the kingdom of God, which is within them and about them, cannot in any way be interfered with by prevailing circumstances or by the plans, purposes or intentions of evil men or of evil spiritual beings. (Dan. 4:25, 34-35)

This assurance can be guaranteed to all the redeemed children of God; for—to God and to his Son—all power belongs, both in heaven and on earth. God is infinite in all his attributes: For example, he is omnipotent or all-powerful. (Matt. 28:18; Mark 14:62) Therefore, no human being, power or authority, and no spiritual being, power or authority, can begin to equate with or overcome the power or the authority of God. No created being in heaven or on earth possesses infinite power or authority: i.e., no created being in heaven or on earth is omnipotent. Therefore, since God alone is all-powerful, no one can hinder him from accomplishing his will throughout the universe, nor can anyone prevent God from answering the prayers of his redeemed and holy people.

Our Father in heaven is also the God of all glory. He is majestic in holiness; and in love, mercy, grace, righteousness, holiness, truth, and justice, etc. he is infinite. He is pure and perfect Spirit; exalted in the heavens, full of glory, and shedding forth the light of his glory and truth to all around his glorious throne; and, through his Son who was the glory of God incarnate, revealing something of his eternal power and glory to mankind. (Exod. 15:11; Ps. 57:11; 72:19; Isa. 6:1-5; Rev. 4:8)

Thus, concerning our Father in heaven, whose Name is to be hallowed, his is the kingdom, his is the power, and his is the glory forever or throughout the eternal ages. Amen—so let it be!

True Forgiveness

Matthew 6:14-15

Matthew 6:14-15

Matthew 6:14-15 ESV

(14) "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, (15) but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Here, the Lord Jesus makes it plain to his followers that their Father in heaven does not treat with impunity an unforgiving spirit. Those whom God has forgiven must be ready and willing to forgive others. Failure to do so is to harbour a grudge in one's heart, or to cherish an angry, bitter and resentful spirit.

Those who are unwilling to forgive others their trespasses against them will find that the Lord will not forgive theirs. This is because the Lord will not forgive sin until that sin is acknowledged, confessed to him in genuine repentance, and renounced. Those, however, who continue to hold grudges against others, are refusing wilfully to acknowledge and confess their sins to God. Rather, they are cherishing hatred or bitterness in their hearts. Therefore, in justice and righteousness, God cannot and will not forgive them—until they are prepared to acknowledge and renounce their sin. (Matt. 7:2; Jas. 5:9)

Only when they resolve the issue that is causing them to harbour anger or bitterness, will God hear their prayers. Thus, before seeking God's forgiveness, they must seek reconciliation with the one who caused offence or who otherwise wronged them. Then, they must be prepared to forgive that person's offences willingly and unreservedly. Having done this, they must then acknowledge and confess their earlier sins of anger or bitterness, etc. to God. Then, of course, the Lord will forgive their sin—willingly and unreservedly. (Matt. 5:23-24; 11:25-26; 18:21-35)

This principle applies to all kinds of offences, wrongdoings, and misunderstandings, and also to unkind, thoughtless, or intolerant attitudes, words or actions, etc. The Lord's people ought always to forgive one another—just as the Lord Jesus has forgiven them.

Granted, it can be very difficult in practice to obey the Lord's instructions here. Nevertheless, they are essential to our spiritual well-being, for the good of God's church, and for our living witness or testimony before others. Yet, each of us must seek the Lord's grace, to make and keep us humble and contrite in spirit: for, anger, bitterness, resentment, and an unforgiving spirit arise from our old sinful nature and from a proud and evil heart. (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13)

True Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

Matthew 6:16

Matthew 6:16 ESV

(16) "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."

In keeping with their outward show of piety, the Pharisees and others ensured that people were aware of just how assiduously they practised their religion—for they valued the commendation of men more than the commendation of God. Thus, when they fasted or abstained temporarily from certain foods, drinks, or legitimate pursuits, they *'disfigured their faces'*: That is, they made themselves look solemn, grave or downcast, so that others would take note of their 'pious', 'holy' or 'godly' appearance. Yet, it was from men alone, and not from God, that such hypocrites would receive their reward or praise. (John 5:41,44; 12:42-43)

The outward show of 'piety', as practised by people like the Pharisees, made a mockery of true religion. For those who desired to spend time alone with God in prayer, etc., the Lord honoured periods of fasting—as long as they were undertaken with a sincere heart or mind and with pure motives. (Cf. Luke 2:37) However, the Lord detested the practice of fasting from an insincere heart and a hypocritical mind.

The ordinary Jewish people believed that the Pharisees were honouring God. However, they equated a sombre countenance with piety or godliness and holiness of life. Yet, God does not look on the outward appearance, but on the heart. The Lord knew that these apparently pious individuals were corrupt inwardly, filled with iniquity and far from his saving grace and presence. They were pretenders to godliness and holiness; but, like all pretenders of the faith, they were excluded from the kingdom of heaven and from the people of God. (Matt. 23:13-28)

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD had rebuked his people's insincerity and had made it abundantly plain how his people ought to fast. The passage begins with the people asking why the LORD did not acknowledge their fasts:

Isaiah 58:3-12 ESV

(3a) 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'

To which the LORD responds:

(3b) "Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. (4) Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

(5) "Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?"

(6) “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

(7) “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

(8) “Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

(9) Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’

“If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, (10) if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

(11) “And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

(12) “And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”

Thus, the Lord Jesus instructs his disciples how they should fast:

Matthew 6:17-18

Matthew 6:17-18 ESV

(17) “But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, (18) that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

According to the Psalmist, fasting is a humbling of one’s soul before God. (Ps. 35:13) Those who would fast from a sincere and humble heart were not to make it obvious to others that they were abstaining from or curtailing certain foods, drinks, or legitimate activities. They were not to put on an appearance of solemnity, sullenness or seriousness merely for outward show—as did the Pharisees. Rather, if their fasting was associated with repentance, grief or mourning, etc., they were to show only those signs of repentance, grief or mourning that originated from their hearts and that were a genuine (and not a pretended) expression of their feelings.

In verse 17, Jesus declares, ‘...*when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face...*’

Anointing one’s head and washing one’s face was simply a reference to the common method of cleansing oneself or ‘freshening oneself up’. (Cf. 2 Sam. 12:20). Observing this practice indicated also that the person was not in a state of mourning. (Cf. Dan. 10:3)

Thus, since the person fasting was not making their worship obvious to others, other people might remain unaware of that person's religious state. Their fasting, or temporary abstinence from or curtailment of food and activities, would remain known only to themselves and to God. Thus, their Father in heaven to whom all secrets are revealed, would see that person's humble and contrite act of worship, and would honour and reward him accordingly.

In passing, we might observe that fasting does not *necessarily* imply total abstinence from food or drink, etc. A person can fast on a light or meagre diet, as, for example, did John the Baptist. (Matt. 3:4) When speaking of fasting unto the Lord, the Bible is not implying that a person should deprive himself *totally* of essential food or drink.

Again, we might observe that fasting was still being practised by New Testament believers, usually in conjunction with prayer. Thus, the practice has not been set aside, although today it is rarely observed in the Biblical manner. The paramount example of fasting is that of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. (Matt. 4:2) The disciples of John the Baptist fasted. (Mark 2:18) The widow, Anna, frequented the temple, worshipping God with fasting and prayer night and day. (Luke 2:37) The early church was fasting and praying when the Holy Spirit instructed them to set apart Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 13:2) (For further examples, see Acts 10:30; 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5)

True Treasures

Matthew 6:19-21

Matthew 6:19

Matthew 6:19 ESV

(19) "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal..."

Here, the Lord Jesus is applying the principles of the commandment that says, '*You shall not covet...*' (Ex. 20:17)

Although contrary to their creed, certain of the Pharisees (and others) stored up for themselves great wealth or possessions. However, like the rich farmer who filled his barns with plenty (Luke 12:16-21), they took no thought for their spiritual wellbeing or for the state of their soul. They professed piety while accumulating plenty and preaching health, wealth and prosperity to the people.

It is one thing to make necessary provision for our family, etc.; and God commands that his people work to earn their living so that they might provide adequately for their loved ones, for the church, and for the poor of society. (Acts 20:35; 2 Thess. 3:7-12) Furthermore, the Lord is not discouraging or condemning the accumulation of wealth or possessions as such, as long as these have been gained honestly by diligent labour or received as gifts or legacies. God blessed Abraham with great wealth. Abraham, however, did not set his heart on his wealth or possessions, but on the LORD his God. Those who set their hearts or minds on their earthly wealth or possessions forget that they cannot retain these possessions, nor can material goods benefit them spiritually. (Eccl. 5:10-14; 1 Tim. 6:8-10, 17; Heb. 13:5; Jas. 5:1-3)

Thus, the Lord Jesus tells his people quite clearly, '*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...*'

To do so—in the sense of setting our hearts on the accumulation of earthly wealth or possessions, or on ambition or achievement at the expense of our commitment to God—would be spiritual idolatry or

the worship of false gods (the gods of lust or greed, materialism, etc.). Furthermore, those who would increase their goods or wealth on this earth, increase also the probability of corruption and loss (such as that occasioned by devouring insects, etc, or by corrosion or decay). They increase also the risk of misappropriation of their property or wealth since their possessions provide a greater target for thieves and other criminals.

Where, then, ought the Lord's people to store their most valuable treasures?

Matthew 6:20

Matthew 6:20 ESV

(20) "...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal..."

By saying that his people were to store up their treasures in heaven rather than on earth, the Lord Jesus is making it plain what constitutes real or true treasure. It is not the things of this earth, such as material goods, money, or any other kind of possessions. All these things will pass away. Not one of our earthly goods or possessions would be of any use to us in heaven, even supposing we could take them there. (Matt. 19:21; Luke 12:33; 18:22)

True treasure—such as should be stored in the heavenly vaults—are the treasures of the soul. The believer's greatest treasure should be the knowledge of God as his Father and of Jesus Christ his Son. It should be to walk with him and to fellowship with him. It should be to worship and praise him who loved us and who gave himself for us.

Again, treasures of the soul include such things a humble contrite spirit, a gentle and compassionate mind, and a loving, pure and sincere heart. Also, any acts performed toward others in the name of Christ, and from a humble and godly heart, results in treasures—or great rewards—in heaven.

Furthermore, those who are content with what the Lord is pleased to provide for them, and who honour God with the little or much that he has committed to their stewardship, will store up treasure in heaven by using that stewardship wisely, and with concern for God's glory. Those, however, who seek to add unnecessarily to their needful provision, will add unnecessary sorrows and heartbreaks associated with worldly attitudes or desires. For those who desire the riches of the world or the pleasures of this life at the expense of heavenly riches, ultimately make this life and this world's goods the real object of their affections, and their real god. (1 Tim. 6:8, 17; Heb. 13:5)

The followers of Christ must bear in mind that they are heirs to the Father's heavenly inheritance—where their true treasures lie—and joint-heirs with the Son in his glory. This inheritance is incorruptible; it is undefiled, and it will never fade away. On that inheritance in glory each believer ought always to set his heart or mind; for, in Christ Jesus, his true treasures lie. (Heb. 10:34; 11:26; 1 Pet. 1:3-5)

Matthew 6:21

Matthew 6:21 ESV

(21) "...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

By laying up treasures in heaven, we show that God is the supreme object of our love, affection and desires. Those who place their treasures in his hands cannot forfeit them: for, there no thief can enter; neither can corrosion or corruption spoil this vast wealth of heavenly riches.

Those who accumulate earthly wealth must spend time maintaining or improving that wealth. For some, this can be done without compromising their commitment to God or to his church and people. For many others, however, the time and energy spent pursuing monetary matters detract from the time and energy spent pursuing spiritual matters. Thus, monetary matters become ever more important to them. However, whatever is the most important matter in our lives is the true object of our worship, whether it be God, or whether it be wealth or possessions—false gods or idols.

This, of course, holds true for anything that we hold as the most important person or object of our desires. For example, if our wife (or husband) and family are the most important people in our lives, then we have made them our false gods or idols. For none but God himself must occupy the supreme place in our lives. Again, if we think more of other interests, ambitions, pursuits or activities, than we do of God and his Word, then we have made these other matters our false gods or idols. For God must come first in our lives.

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares, "...*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"

Our treasure—the most important person or object in our lives—is where our heart really lies. That person or object is the object of our devotion, whether it is God or something else. For, if our hearts are right with God, the Lord must come first in our lives, above all others.

Those, however, whose hearts are set in heaven find their treasure there, both in the knowledge of God as the Father and of his Son as their Saviour and Lord, and in the assurance that he is their true and everlasting portion and possession. From the wealth of his riches in glory flow an abundance of grace, mercy and every good thing necessary for life and godliness. (2 Pet. 1:3-4)

Matthew 6:22-23

Matthew 6:21-23 ESV

(22) "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, (23) but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Cf. Luke 11:34-36; cf. also Matt. 13:15)

Here, the Lord Jesus illustrates and expands on what he has just said concerning laying up treasures in heaven.

The eye is not itself the source of light, but it admits light into the body: i.e., it feeds the brain and the soul (including mind, will, reason, intellect, etc.) with information upon which a person may act. If the

'eye' is healthy,⁶ i.e., if a person sets his gaze on those things that are beneficial to the soul, then his mind and his entire body will benefit from the influx of light, goodness or truth. Again, if a person looks constantly upon his Lord and the things of the Spirit, then his eye (or his mind's 'eye') will be the means through which great blessings are admitted to his soul. Furthermore, if a person sets his mind's eye on things above and not on things of this earth, *and lives his life accordingly*, then he is storing up treasure for himself above, where Christ is seated at God's right hand. (Col. 3:1-2) In all these ways, a person ensures that his body and his mind is being filled with light—i.e., spiritual truth, goodness and virtue, together with the multitude of blessings that accrue from them.

If, however, a person's eye is bad (i.e., defective or diseased), then his mind cannot receive true light or information. Thus, being unable to see the way ahead (spiritually), that person stumbles in the darkness. His rational senses—will, reason, intellect, etc.—are darkened or blinded to the light or the truth. Spiritually, therefore, he is blind. He is unable to look upon (i.e., to understand, apprehend or appreciate) those things that benefit the soul. In his spiritual blindness, he has no desire to lay up treasures in heaven for he has no desire for the things of God. Rather, in the darkened condition of his soul, he can see or appreciate only that which lies in his immediately proximity: in other words, the things of this world, the goods of this world, and the wealth or riches of this world. On these, he sets his benighted gaze; and for him these become the true objects of his devotion, or his false gods. (Rom. 1:21; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 4:8; Eph. 4:17-18) To such people, the Lord Jesus addresses these solemn words, "...*If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*" (v.23b)

We must remember, of course, that many of those who were listening to the Lord Jesus as he taught his followers were still in spiritual darkness. Although, as Jews, they may have been very religious people, for many of them their religion was outward and formal. Those, however, whose religion is outward and formal, are still in their sins. Although perhaps morally 'upright', they are still in spiritual darkness. (Matt. 23:26-33; Rom. 2:17-23)

Spiritual darkness, of course, arises from spiritual death. Those who are dead spiritually, or dead in trespasses and sins, are without God in this world, abiding under his just wrath, and heading for a lost and dreadful eternity in hell. Thus, any person who believes that he is a follower of the Lord Jesus, yet whose mind's eye is set on the things of this world has to consider very carefully whether he has ever experienced salvation. And any person who claims to be a follower of the Lord Jesus, while still living in the darkness of sin—i.e., while still practicing a sinful lifestyle—has no part in the kingdom of God. For the Spirit of truth, holiness and righteousness cannot dwell in a body blackened and defiled by habitual sin. (Rom. 8:9) Hence, the reason for the Lord's solemn pronouncement. Those who are still in darkness are still unforgiven. They are without God and without hope in the world, unless—by the grace of God—they repent and seek his mercy. (1 Cor. 2:14; 6:9-10; 1 John 2:11)

⁶ *healthy*. KJV, 'single'; from a Greek word meaning 'without guile', 'sincere' or 'straightforward'. Implies steadfastness in pursuing a particular object with a pure and sincere heart: in this case, setting one's eye (or gaze) upon those things that produce righteous or godly living, etc.

Matthew 6:24

Matthew 6:24 ESV

(24) “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Cf. Luke 16:13)

Here, the Lord Jesus expounds and applies further the principle that he has just enunciated above.

The Greek word translated ‘serve’ can mean ‘*to submit or yield willingly to the service of another*’, or ‘*to be owned by another*’. Thus we see that a person can submit willingly to the service of another person or to the pursuit of something, or he can be ‘owned’ (i.e., bound or enslaved) by that other person or thing.

It is impossible for any person to commit himself wholeheartedly and entirely to two different masters simultaneously. By its very nature, wholehearted and complete commitment demands dedication either to one person or to another, or to one aim or object or to another. It is impossible to pursue both at the same time without compromising our loyalty and commitment to both. (1 Tim. 6:9-10)

Thus, in the sphere of worship, the Lord Jesus is declaring to his listeners that he who commits himself wholeheartedly and completely to one person, object, interest, or pursuit does so at the expense of all others. Essentially, this means that whatever person, aim or object is paramount in someone’s life is the real love of that person’s heart and soul. From this, it follows that all other people, aims or objects must occupy a lesser place in his heart and life. To all intents and purposes, these lesser interests are ‘despised’ or ‘hated’; i.e., they are considered of no importance, relatively or absolutely, in that person’s life. (Luke 14:26-33)

Ultimately, however, those who choose to seek and serve anyone or anything before God will become bound to, or enslaved by, their cherished objects, desires, wealth or possessions.

The point, therefore, of what the Lord is saying is that those who set their hearts or minds on anything other than the Lord their God are guilty of worshipping or idolising these other people or objects, and of despising or contemning God. Thus, in the context of money, wealth or possessions, the Lord is declaring that a person must choose to dedicate his life either to the worship of materialism (which is idolatry), or to the worship of God. He can possess both, but he cannot dedicate his heart and life to the pursuit of both. (1 Tim. 6:17; Jas. 4:4; 1 John 2:15-16)

True Trust in God’s Providence

Matthew 6:25-34

At this point, the Lord Jesus comforts and reassures those whose wealth and possessions were negligible or non-existent. Of course, at this time, and with some notable exceptions, many of those listening to the Lord’s teaching were either poor or very poor. Was not poverty or lack of possessions a genuine cause for concern? How would those poor people who followed the Lord find their daily bread?

The Lord Jesus addresses these matters in the following verses.

Matthew 6:25

Matthew 6:25 ESV

(25) "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

The word translated '*anxious*' here, is from a Greek word (μεριμνάω) meaning 'to be apprehensive about', 'to be unduly concerned about' or 'to be unnecessarily distracted with'.

Many of those to whom the Lord was speaking had never been wealthy, nor did they own much by way of material possessions. Some of the Lord's disciples had been men of business, such as fishermen or tax collectors. However, they were not rich by the world's standards. (Matt. 4:18-20; Mark 2:14-17)

Now, however, the Lord Jesus had called these men to forsake everything to follow him. They had left their secular vocations and apparently were without means of support. Some of the women who followed the Lord Jesus had their own private means, but this did not apply to the majority of the Lord's followers. (Luke 8:2-3) Thus, the Lord Jesus begins to reassure his disciples. Those whom he had called to follow him would not suffer to the extent of being deprived of their most basic needs. By his providence and grace, the Lord would provide their essential needs from day to day. (Gen. 22:14; 30:30; Ps. 107:9; cf. Acts 14:17)

The Lord Jesus begins with the expression, '*Therefore, I tell you....*' This is an emphatic introduction to an authoritative or solemn declaration or promise to follow. '*I*' emphasises the person, office and authority of the One who is about to make the pronouncement—the Eternal Son of God. '*I tell you....*' emphasises that the assurances that the Lord is about to give to his people cannot fail of fulfilment, since they are the words spoken by God the Son himself—the Everlasting Word. (John 1:1; 10:30) God cannot fail, nor can he prove unfaithful to his Word or to his promises. (Jos. 21:45; Isa. 55:11; 2 Cor. 1:20)

Thus, the Lord asserts, '*Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life....*'

This does not mean that a person should neglect his life or become carelessly indifferent about his life, health or welfare. Nor does it mean that a person should 'trust the Lord to provide for his daily needs' without making the least effort to provide for himself. (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:12) Rather, the Lord is telling his people not to become unduly concerned, alarmed, or worried by their apparent or real lack of resources or necessary provisions. Whatever may be the cause of their concern, they were not to permit a genuine concern for their wellbeing to turn into an unhealthy anxiety; or worse, a lack of trust in God to meet their needs. (Deut. 8:3-4; Ps. 84:11; Luke 12:30:33; Php. 4:19)

Thus, the Lord continues, '*...do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on....*'

Those whom the Lord had called to follow him were to put aside any unhealthy and unnecessary anxiety for their daily provisions. God had called them to himself and to his service. Therefore, they were not to worry about how they were going to provide for the necessities of life. The Lord would provide. (Ps. 55:22; Php. 4:6) If they lacked food or drink while engaged in the Lord's service, then he would

meet their needs—as he did with prophets such as Elijah. If they required clothing, the Lord would provide all that was necessary, often by means of his own people. (1 Kings 17:13-16)

In principle, this truth applies not only to those whom the Lord has called specifically to his service, but to all those who belong to the Lord and who are serving him faithfully in one capacity or another, whether formally or informally. Those in need of provisions for their lives will find that the Lord will meet their needs, as long as they continue to trust him, and to honour and obey him in their lives. (Php. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:7)

At this point, the Lord Jesus reminds his disciples of the true meaning of ‘life’ by asking, ‘...*Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?*’

‘Life’ is not associated primarily, nor confined to, that which is physical, material or visible. Indeed, this form of life is transient. All too soon, when death intervenes, this present earthly form of life will pass away. (Cf. Luke 12:16-21) No, ‘life’ is much more than physical life. True life is spiritual and eternal. Thus, the Lord Jesus said,

John 17:2-3 ESV

(2) “...Since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. (3) And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (Cf. John 10:28; Acts 13:48; 1 John 5:11-12)

Those who know God and his Son personally and savingly possess eternal life. (John 3:16,36) This is true life, and this life can never pass away.

Thus, the Lord's followers were to trust him to provide for their everyday needs. However, at the same time, they were to realise that this life and its provisions were fleeting or transitory. Their real life was spiritual life; and the food for that life was the Word of God. This life was eternal life, and long after their earthly existence had ceased, their immortal souls—together with their resurrected and glorified bodies—would live forever in the presence of God. (John 6:32-40; 11:25-26; 1 Cor. 15:52-58)

Matthew 6:26

Matthew 6:26 ESV

(26) “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Cf. Luke 12:24)

Now, the Lord takes an everyday example of God's providence. Jesus speaks of the birds. These creatures prepare a nest to raise and feed their young. However, they make no other preparation for their own or for their offspring's welfare. By contrast, men and women labour by sowing, reaping, gathering and storing up for the future. They work to earn their living in order to procure goods and services necessary for their life and welfare, and for that of their families.

Apart from preparing their nests, however, birds expend no corresponding labours in making advance provisions either for themselves or for their offspring. They seek their food when the necessity arises—and find it supplied by the hand of the Lord; i.e., by his providence. In the normal course of events, the Lord ensures that every need for his creation is met providentially from nature itself. By

these means, God provides for every living thing. (Job 38:41; Ps. 104:21,27-28; 136:25; 145:15-16; 147:9; Luke 12:6-7)

Since, from the creation of the world, God has made necessary provision for all living creatures, then it is certain that he will supply the needs of his own children; almost invariably, providentially—but not excluding the occasional miraculous intervention and provision, of which we have a number of examples in the Bible.

It may be argued that there are certain times, places or circumstances where provision for men and animals is not merely scarce but positively lacking, and that God's creatures are suffering hunger, thirst and other forms of deprivation or want. Certainly, this is true in places—as a result of the curse on the earth; of man's misuse of the planet and its resources, and of his failure to distribute the vast wealth or resources of the planet equitably to all peoples. It is true also for individuals, groups and societies among mankind who have chosen to ignore or reject the true and living God and who worship false gods or idols. Those who choose to follow other gods, or other objects of their desires, cannot call God their Father in heaven. Since they are not his children, they cannot be guaranteed their food in due season in the same way that God guarantees to provide for his own. (Cf. Ps. 104:27) Nevertheless, although not blessed with such promises as the Lord gives to his own, God provides for fallen, sinful mankind out of his common grace and ordinary providence. (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17)

God's providence cannot be hindered or thwarted either by the effects of the curse brought about by man's rebellion and fall, or by man's failure to rule the earth wisely, justly, and with equal concern for all peoples whom God has created. (Cf. Dan. 4:35) When Jesus was speaking these words, shortages were well known. Yet, this did not prevent the Lord from assuring his disciples that they should have no anxiety about meeting their basic needs. God, who provided food for the birds of the air, would meet all the needs of his redeemed people, regardless of the prevailing circumstances. (Php. 4:19)

Why should we not be anxious about these things? Because the Bible tells us that not one sparrow can fall to the ground apart from the will of our Father in heaven. Thus, in chapter 10 of this Gospel, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 10:29-31 ESV

(29) "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. (30) But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. (31) Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

God is concerned for his entire creation, from the very least living creature to the highest living creature on earth—mankind. Mankind is a form of creation superior and completely distinct from the animal kingdom; for, unlike them, God created Adam and Eve in his own image and likeness: i.e., as completely rational, moral and spiritual beings, and with an immortal soul. (Gen. 1:26-28; Acts 17:26-29)

However, if even the least of God's creation cannot escape his notice or his providential care, how can those possibly escape whom he loves with an especial and everlasting love? These are his elect and redeemed children. These are his special possession. Thus, compared with the lesser forms of creation, such as the birds which are the objects of his ordinary providence and common grace, the Lord Jesus asks rhetorically: '*...Are you not of more value than they?*'

And, since of intrinsically greater value to the Father than the birds for which he cares and for which he provides, how much more care and provision will he bestow on those who love him? How much more concern will he show toward his redeemed children? He who provides grass for the oxen and seed for the sower will most certainly provide food for his people—for his people are of more value to him than all others. (Exod. 19:5; Mal. 3:16-17; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9; see also Matt. 25:34; Rom. 8:32)

This is not to say that a child of God will never suffer from a temporary shortage of food, clothing, or other basic necessities of life. This, however, brings us back to the principle that—for the believer in Christ—this physical life is not the most important form of life. Should, in his infinite love and wisdom, it be the will of God that any believer lose his life in this world, then it is so that the Lord may take him home to his presence to enjoy life and riches in glory for evermore.

Matthew 6:27

Matthew 6:27 ESV

(27) "...And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" (Cf. Luke 12:25-26; see also Ps. 39:4-5)

Then, as now, anxiety was commonplace among men and women. However, those who believed with all their hearts on the Lord Jesus and trusted his Word and his promises had no cause for anxiety or needless worry. This was because they knew that their lives—their circumstances and their destiny—was in the hands of the Almighty God, their heavenly Father. (Ps. 31:5) Nothing could ever happen in their life that was unknown to their Father in heaven or outside his control. Indeed, nothing could set upon his people to harm or distress them except by the express will, purpose or decree of Almighty God. (Ps. 31:15)

This is not to say that God's people cannot suffer loss—sometimes, grievous loss, hurt or sorrow. God's people do suffer in common with all mankind. However, their suffering, grief or loss is not to be compared with those who do not know God as their heavenly Father; for these people are without God and without hope in the world. (Cf. Eph. 2:12) The child of God, however, belongs to God and to his Son. His hope is in Christ and in his promises. He believes that God works out everything in his life in accordance with his own plan and purposes; and that ultimately, everything works together for good to those who love God, and who are the called according to his purpose. (Rom. 5:1-5; 8:24-31; Heb. 12:6-12; 1 Pet. 1:7-8)

With such assurances of God's love, grace and mercy, the Lord Jesus teaches his followers that it is needless to feel anxious or worried about events or circumstances. Certainly, there may be a place for genuine concern over certain matters (cf. 2 Cor. 8:16; 11:28; Php. 2:20), but not for needless anxiety or worry—which would amount to a lack of faith in God and in the promises and assurances of his Word.

Thus, Jesus points out that worry or anxiety will do nothing to improve or resolve matters. It cannot increase a person's stature or lengthen a person's life by the least amount. Indeed, constant and needless worry and anxiety may lead to a decline in health—physically, psychologically and spiritually. Thus, we are exhorted and encouraged to trust God; to believe his Word and to accept his promises, concerning our lives and our future. For our times are in his hands; and no amount of worrying will alter the course of events that God has charted for our lives on earth. (Ps. 127:2; Php. 4:6)

Anxiety over Clothing and Food

From the general principle of trusting our heavenly Father to provide, the Lord Jesus now moves on to specific examples of his providence. Thus, concerning clothing, the Lord declares:

Matthew 6:28-30 ESV

(28) “And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, (29) yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (30) But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” (Cf. Luke 12:27-31)

Then, as now, one of the most common matters of anxiety concerned clothing and other personal necessities. For the rich, this rarely presented a problem—unless indecision over their abundant choice of apparel led them to needless concern or anxiety about which they should wear! However, most of the Lord’s hearers were poor, or relatively so. For them, procuring or purchasing clothing could be a major issue, and often a cause of worry. Such needless worry could distract them from other important issues (as it did with Martha (Luke 10:40-42)), or it could fill them with unnecessary apprehension or tension. Thus, here, the Lord Jesus is encouraging his people to trust their Father in heaven about matters such as clothing; for even these matters are in his almighty and sovereign hands.

By way of illustration, the Lord uses the example of the lilies.⁷ Here was a wild plant of the field strikingly arrayed in nature’s apparel. However, their intrinsic beauty had been provided to them not by nature alone, but by God who created the lilies and who continues to sustain the laws of nature that he instituted at the creation of the world.

Now, the Lord Jesus draws a comparison between the natural, but God-given, beauty of these flowers of the field and the artificial beauty of King Solomon’s magnificent attire. With all his great wealth, Solomon could afford to array himself in the most costly and beautiful finery then known to man. His royal robes were of the most exquisite and unique design. All who beheld King Solomon in his glorious apparel could not fail to appreciate the magnificence of his wardrobe and the vast expense of his regal garments. (1 Kings 10:4-7; 2 Chron. 9:20-22)

Nevertheless, the Lord declares that even Solomon in all this glory was not arrayed like a solitary lily of the field. God’s providence in nature exceeded by far man’s provision for himself. Again, God’s providence was guaranteed to all his creation, and especially to his own people. Man’s provision for himself was transient or ephemeral; and his ability to make such provision was uncertain at best and likely to change or pass away at any moment.

All too soon, also, the beauty of the lilies would fade and pass away. (Jas. 1:10-11) Yet, God would continue to provide in nature all that was necessary to sustain the natural creation until the end of time. However, Jesus declares that if God clothes the flowers of the fields, which soon die only to be burned in the oven, how much more will he clothe his own people? Their lives are more important by far than that of any plant or flower—however beautiful; for their lives will endure for the days that the

⁷ *lily*: The Lord may not have been referring only to the plant of this name. Rather, he may have been using the term ‘lily’ comprehensively to include many or all of the flowers of the fields which, in all their varieties, displayed their natural God-given beauty. (GL)

Lord is pleased to allot to them. Therefore, if God makes abundant provision for the lilies, how much more will he provide for his redeemed children?

Thus, the Lord Jesus exhorts his followers not to be anxious about meeting their need for clothes or for other basic necessities. The Lord will provide. Yet, God's people are expected to trust him implicitly to make that provision—for God cannot fail or prove unfaithful to his Word or his promises. (Cf. Matt. 10:10; Luke 22:35)

Clearly, some of the Lord's hearers doubted God's willingness or ability to provide such things as clothing. Therefore, the Lord finds it necessary to add a mild rebuke to his words, by declaring, '*...O you of little faith*' (v.30c). Their faith needed to grow, so that they accepted God's Word and promises as unfailing and infallible. So, too, we need to ensure that our faith continues to grow to the point where we accept God's Word, the Bible, as unfailing and infallible in its entirety. (Cf. Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8)

If there was one other matter of anxiety or concern to those on limited incomes, it was in connection with food and drink. We must remember, of course, that—in Jesus' day—there was no equivalent to the modern welfare state system that provided basic support to those in need. If a person had relatives who were more comfortably off, then those relatives might assist their poorer kindred. However, in many cases, the people and their relatives were poor. Those who were desperately poor had no option but to beg for their basic support—as did Lazarus (who lay neglected at the rich man's gate) and many others. (Luke 16:20)

The Lord Jesus continues by declaring:

Matthew 6:31-32 ESV

(31) "Therefore do not be anxious, saying,

'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

(32) "For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all."

If God, our Father in heaven, had promised to provide his people with clothing to meet their needs, then it is certain that he would meet their needs for food and drink. Therefore, the Lord Jesus encourages these dear children of God to trust him to provide their daily bread. They were not to become concerned over their shortages of food, and their apparent inability to feed either themselves or their families. They might be poor in this world's goods and they might find great difficulty in buying even the most basic of necessities. However, they belonged to their Father in heaven, and their Father in heaven knew their circumstances precisely. He knew exactly what needs they had, and when these needs had to be met. Whether it was for food, drink, or clothing, all was known to the Lord—and the Lord would provide. (Matt. 4:4; Luke 12:29)

We are speaking, of course, predominately of those who were unable to provide for themselves, or who were too poor to meet all the necessary needs of their families. In these cases, the Lord would feed and clothe his children by providing for them (usually, by means of other people) as circumstances required. (Cf. Luke 3:11) However, while the Lord promises to meet every genuine need of his people, this assurance must never be understood as an encouragement to anyone not to make every necessary provision for themselves and for their families. For those who are able to work, God's provision comes through their health, strength and ability to labour and to earn a wage or salary, and thus to provide for themselves and for their loved ones. However, for those who are prevented from

providing for themselves in the normal way, the Lord will take care of their needs by other means. (Acts 20:35; 1 Thess. 4:11-12)

Thus, Jesus exhorts his people to refrain from worrying about such matters. People who do not know God as their heavenly Father (the 'Gentiles') may seek after and worry about all these things. However, those who know God as their Father in heaven need have no such concerns. Their Father in heaven knows their every need; and, from his abundance, and by the counsels of his own inscrutable will, the Lord will provide.

Emphasising spiritual priorities, the Lord Jesus asserts:

Matthew 6:33 ESV

(33) "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Cf. Luke 12:31)

Rather than fretting and setting their hearts on the things of this life and this world, the Lord encourages his people to set their hearts and minds on the kingdom of God and to follow after his righteousness, or to live in conformity with the righteous standards of God's kingdom. (Ps. 84:11; Matt. 5:6)

It is often said that those who set their minds on heavenly things are no earthly good. This, however, is to misunderstand completely what is involved in setting one's heart and mind on things above. Those who set their minds on the things of God are setting their priorities in the right order. By putting God first in their lives and by seeking the things of his kingdom from above, they are being prepared to serve the Lord effectually and powerfully on this earth. Those who would help others and minister to their needs must first be fed with the bread from heaven and nourished in their own souls by their communion with God. Only then, can they become an effective witness or servant to the people of the world. (Rom. 8:6; 2 Cor. 4:18; Col. 3:1-2) Those, however, who seek to perform good works in the world without seeking first the kingdom of God or setting their hearts and minds on things above, cannot succeed merely by human effort. Nor can they please or honour God, since they have not given him the first and foremost position in their hearts and lives.

Thus, the Lord Jesus teaches his disciples, and us, to seek first the kingdom of God; i.e., to seek with the utmost diligence those things that pertain to righteousness and holiness of character and conduct, together with all other aspects of seeking the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Those who seek the kingdom experience the blessings of the King on their lives and on their endeavours in this world. Again, those who seek the kingdom and its truth and righteousness, become the most effective servants of the Lord among sinful and lost mankind.

Because of their constant communion and intercession with their Father in heaven, faithful believers experience God's answers to their prayers, God's blessing on their work or ministry, and the attendant power of the Holy Spirit operating in the hearts of believers and unbelievers through the all-powerful application of God's living Word to their lives.

Matthew 6:34 ESV

(34) "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

The Lord Jesus closes this part of his discourse with these most comforting words. There was no need for undue concern or for worry or anxiety. All things pertaining to each believer's life would be taken care of by their Father in heaven. Every genuine need would be met. God would not fail his own

children, nor leave them desolate. He had loved them with an everlasting love and he would never let them go or suffer want.

The Lord adds, ‘... *for tomorrow will be anxious for itself...*’: In other words, there was no point in worrying about what might happen in the future. The future would be filled with anxieties and uncertainties, and the world would be oppressed and often overcome by them. However, this was not to be the case with God’s redeemed and beloved children. Whatever uncertainties lay before people, nothing was uncertain to God or with God. Every eventuality lay in God’s hands and could take place only by his decree and permission. Thus, God’s children were to trust their heavenly Father, knowing that he controlled and disposed all events in the universe. Let tomorrow—or the future—be filled with uncertainties and let ungodly men and women concern themselves with the cares of this world. However, God’s children were to take no thought for the morrow—i.e., they were not to concern themselves unduly or become anxious about what might take place tomorrow or in the future: For the future was under God’s control, and believers’ lives were in God’s hands. It was not in the hands of unknown circumstances, chance, fate or anything else. (Cf. 1 Sam. 17:46-47; Ps. 31:15; 135:5-6; Dan. 4:25)

The Lord closes with the words, ‘*Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*’

Essentially, the Lord was telling his people to live their lives one day at a time. They were to fulfil God’s purposes for them for that day; to perform their labours for that day, and to enjoy life with their families and friends for that day. They did not know what might happen on the morrow. Indeed, they did not know whether they would live to see tomorrow. Whatever might be their age, they might at any moment be taken home to be with the Lord—far away from all trouble, toil and anxiety. Or, together with the Lord’s people worldwide, they might be gathered home to be with the Lord forever—never to see another day on this present earth. Thus, Jesus exhorts his followers to live one day at a time, and to live each day as though it might be their last on this earth.

Having said this, however, the Lord was not implying for one moment that a believer should not, or did not need, to make wise and necessary provision for their future and for their families. Other passages of God’s Holy Word make it abundantly clear that it is believers’ duty and responsibility to make such provision. Indeed, those in the church who failed to provide for their relatives were declared to be worse than unbelievers because of their irresponsibility and neglect toward their own kindred. In Matthew’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus is making it abundantly plain that anxiety for the future is unnecessary and sinful. However, when he forbids us from becoming needlessly anxious or concerned about the future (since God will provide), he is not suggesting that anyone need not work to earn a living and to provide for themselves and their families. (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:7-12)

GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 7

Do Not Judge

Matthew 7:1-6

Matthew 7:1-2

(Luke 6:41-42)

In this section of his discourse, the Lord Jesus warns his followers against making private judgments on others: i.e., judging other people unjustly or criticising them unfairly.

Thus, in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 7, the Lord declares:

Matthew 7:1 ESV

(1) "Judge not, that you be not judged..." (Cf. Luke 6:37)

The Lord is speaking here of those who, like the scribes and Pharisees and other carping and captious individuals, sought to pass judgment on people for the least inconsistency in their speech or behaviour. However, their judgment was not according to God's law and to God's standards of justice and righteousness tempered with his love and mercy. (Mic. 6:8; 7:18) Rather, it was in accordance merely with these religious rulers and teachers' personal opinions, ideas or traditions. They were making a personal assessment of an individual's words or actions, without reference to God's standards (correctly understood and applied), and they were passing judgment on those whose speech or behaviour did not conform to their cherished opinions or personal standards of righteousness (i.e., self-righteousness). (Matt. 23:25-32)

Thus, the Lord Jesus expressly forbids his redeemed children from passing judgment of this kind on anyone else. Those who judge others in such a manner are, like the scribes and Pharisees, acting hypocritically. None of us ought to pass judgment on another person, or criticise them unfairly, on the basis of our own personal views or opinions; for we ourselves are not above reproach and are in no position to sit in judgment upon anyone else. (Rom. 2:1-2; 14:3-4; 1 Cor. 4:5; Jas. 4:11-12)

This is not to say that there is no place for judgment or censure in a believer's life. However, where judgment or censure for particular actions is required, it must follow the principles laid down in God's Word. For example, where a brother or sister has caused offence (wittingly or unwittingly), the offended person ought to meet with his brother or sister in Christ to discuss the cause of the grievance, and with a view to full reconciliation. The offended person may point out the offender's fault, but he may not accuse him unjustly or judge him on account of that fault. (Matt. 5:22-24; 18:15-17)

Again, where a believer refuses to acknowledge his offence, or any sin affecting others in the church, then it is for the church leadership to call that person to account; and, if necessary, to judge him by implementing some form of church discipline. However, this is not private judgment but the collective and corrective judgment of the church leadership exercised in love and with a view to restoring the offending believer to God and to church fellowship.

It should go without saying that the Lord's prohibition of private judgment between individuals has no bearing on official or legal judgments. The judgments of the law courts are accomplished by the appli-

cation of the law of the land. The law officers or judges are acting as God's representatives for the upholding of law and order and for the good of society. (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17)

This is not to say that all judgments of this kind are righteous or acceptable to God. Those that conflict with the moral standards or the explicit teaching of God's Word, and are therefore contrary to God's express commands, are reprehensible to God. Indeed, those lawmakers who make such unrighteous laws, and those who apply them in the courts, will answer to God—the Supreme Judge—at the Final Judgment for condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty.

After forbidding private judgment among his followers, the Lord Jesus continues by declaring:

Matthew 7:2 ESV

(2) "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." (Cf. Luke 6:38)

(This is exactly the same principle as '*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth...*' (Cf. Exod. 21:22-25) God's law requires a penalty commensurate with the offence: i.e., full equivalence for the offence committed. According to God's Law, anyone found guilty of committing a criminal offence should be punished in a measure proportionate to that offence. However, except where expressly stated to the contrary in God's Word—as in the case of wilful murder or culpable homicide (Gen. 9:5-6)—equivalence (i.e., a '*like for like*' penalty) does not necessarily or invariably mean that the judicial punishment should be identical in every respect to the offence. Rather, equivalence of punishment can be imposed by means of a fully appropriate term of imprisonment, a fine, restriction of liberty, or by some other justifiable method.)

Thus, when the Lord Jesus speaks of being judged as we have judged others, he is referring to the principle of judicial equivalence. Although, of course, the law courts are not involved in this situation, the same principles apply. Those who pass private judgment on their fellow human beings, or criticise them unfairly, can expect others to pass judgment on them and to criticise them—in like measure. Thus, the Lord is warning his disciples against making private judgments, lest their condemnatory spirit should return upon their own heads. However, it is also a reminder to the Lord's disciples that, later—when acting in their capacity as apostles, church leaders and teachers—the Lord Jesus would require his under-shepherds to exercise extreme care in ruling and judging God's church in love, mercy, justice, equity and righteousness.

Again, we must bear in mind that we will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to account for the deeds done in the body. Then, the Lord will judge us for every inconsiderate, idle or careless word spoken while on earth. Thus, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 12:36-37 ESV

(36) "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, (37) for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

And the apostle Paul asks:

Romans 14:10-13 ESV

(10) Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; (11) for it is

written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

(12) So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (13) Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Again, the apostle writes:

2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV

(10) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

In respect of believers, the reference here is to rewards or loss of rewards. The genuine believer cannot forfeit his salvation, for this was bestowed upon him as a free gift of God's sovereign grace quite apart from any works. However, believers will be judged for their deeds or actions on earth subsequent to their conversion, and they will be rewarded accordingly. Those who have proved faithful to the Lord Jesus will receive rewards or blessings commensurate with their service on earth. Those, however, who have not honoured the Lord wholeheartedly or who have marred their testimony by their words or by their manner of life, will forfeit part or all of their rewards. They will be saved eternally—yet, like one escaping through the flames. Nevertheless, they will not experience the same degree of responsibilities, blessings or other benefits as those who have honoured the Lord wholeheartedly while on earth. (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 1 Pet. 4:17-18)

This is one of the reasons that the Lord Jesus warns us against judging others unjustly, unfairly or without just cause or reason—for we ourselves will face the judgment of the Lord.

Matthew 7:3-5

The Lord Jesus now begins to expound this teaching further. Thus, he declares:

Matthew 7:3-5 ESV

(3) "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? (4) Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?"

(5) "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Cf. Luke 6:41-42)

It is all too easy to see infinitesimally small faults in others but fail to behold the glaring faults in our own lives. Thus, Jesus calls attention to the incongruity of passing judgment on others for the most minor or insignificant of 'offences', while ignoring totally major faults in our own life. However, those who would point out and remove the 'specks' and 'splinters' in another person's life must be able to see clearly what they are about to do: i.e., their own moral conduct must be above reproach, so that they can 'see' spiritually to apply corrective measures *out of love and concern* for the other person. However, if, morally and spiritually, their sight is obscured by the presence of a large log or beam,

then they are hardly in a position to correct or advise anyone else—until they have removed the log (the glaring offences) from their own lives. (Cf. 2 Sam. 12:5-7; Luke 18:11)

Thus, the Lord Jesus warns his followers against exhibiting a critical and hypocritical spirit. Many religious people were, and are, guilty of this sin. (Matt. 23:15-28) However, sins of this nature are detestable to God, since God alone is able to see a person's heart and judge him as his thoughts and deeds deserve. (Cf. 1 Sam. 16:7; Heb. 4:12) Those who would honour the Lord must endeavour to seek the welfare of their brothers and sisters in Christ at all times, *and to correct them in love* and with a genuine concern for their spiritual wellbeing. (Gal. 6:1) We ought to confess our faults to one another, and to forgive one another, but we ought never to judge, criticise unjustly or unfairly, or condemn one another. (Jas. 4:11-12; 5:9,16)

Matthew 7:6

The Lord Jesus turns now to sacred matters insofar as these relate to the believer's presence in, and witness to, the world of lost mankind. The treasures of God's kingdom are of inestimable value, and must not be wasted or squandered on those who would despise them. Thus, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 7:6 ESV

(6) "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."

To the apostles originally—and ultimately to his entire church—the Lord Jesus has entrusted the duty and responsibility of making known his name to a sinful world by proclaiming to lost mankind the Gospel of eternal salvation. However, the Gospel, and the Word of God more generally, is immeasurably holy. That Word is the Word of the Living, Sovereign, Immutable and Eternal God. To treat God's Word with contempt, or to neglect or reject the Gospel of eternal salvation, is a sin of the utmost magnitude. Such a sin leaves the offender without remedy, and facing only the final and eternal judgment of a holy and righteous God who will by no means clear the guilty. (Exod. 34:6-7; Heb. 10:26-31)

In the Scriptures, 'dogs' is a derogatory term for the ungodly Gentile nations; and especially those who despise and repudiate the providence of God in nature and the grace of God in salvation. (Cf. Matt. 15:26-28; Php. 3:2; Rev. 22:15)

The Lord Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the Gospel and to take that Gospel to the ends of the earth. (Matt. 28:18-20) For out of every nation on earth, God would gather together a people for himself. These are his elect: those called to belong to him through repentance toward God and faith in his Son, and drawn by the Holy Spirit from every nationality, ethnic group, colour, creed, condition or standing in society. (Matt. 24:30-31) Every one of these individuals who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved—eternally. (Rom. 10:12-13) Although previously many may have been grossly unrighteous and ungodly, the Lord will receive them and they will be cleansed by the atoning blood and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

However, should the Lord's disciples proclaim the Gospel to those who reject and despise that Gospel *consistently and repeatedly* then the Lord's servants must withdraw both themselves and the Word of life and salvation from that area and from those people. To continue in such a situation would be to '*give dogs what is holy*'. To continue presenting the imperishable Gospel to those who repudiate the message and despise the messenger would be to '*throw [your] pearls before pigs*'. The great danger here, of course, is that these same wicked individuals or groups would set upon the Lord's servants to attack them—as did wicked Israelites to God's faithful messengers, the prophets. (Matt. 10:14-15; 23:37; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:10-11)

Thus, the Lord is telling his disciples expressly not to continue proclaiming the Gospel to those who *aggressively and repeatedly* despise the Gospel. This is not to say that no one living among a wicked people or nation can or will experience the salvation of the Lord. In Noah's day, a wicked world perished because it repudiated the message of grace and despised the ark of salvation. Nevertheless, Noah and his family experienced the full salvation of the Lord—and so could anyone else among the depraved multitude that perished, if they had repented, believed the message, and entered with Noah into the ark. But, in their wickedness and unbelief, they held back until it was too late to escape the impending judgment of God. (Gen. 6:5-8; 11-13; 7:21-23)

So it is today with those who repudiate Christ and his Gospel. By despising the way of salvation, nothing remains for them but the final and eternal judgment of God and their place in the eternal torments of hell. Yet, not one person will ever enter hell—even from among the most iniquitous or immoral of people—whom God calls to genuine repentance and true faith in his Son. (Luke 15:1-32; 23:39-43)

Ask, Seek and Knock

Matthew 7:7-11

Matthew 7:7-8

Now, the Lord Jesus teaches his disciples that they must persevere in prayer, and not give up or grow weary when petitioning their Father in heaven. Thus, the Lord says:

Matthew 7:7-8 ESV

(7) "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (8) For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Cf. Luke 11:9-10)

Earlier in this discourse, the Lord Jesus had taught his disciples how to pray to their Father in heaven. (Matt. 6:9-15) Now, the Lord expands on this theme by teaching his followers to remain faithful and constant in prayer to their heavenly Father, even when their pleas seemed to go unheard. (Luke 18:1-8) Of course, no prayer or petition made to our Father in heaven ever goes unheard. In the good counsels of his will, and according to his express purposes, God may not always answer his people's prayers immediately. Again, the Lord may not answer our prayers in the manner that we had anticipated. Nevertheless, God does answer prayer—and no child of God will ever be refused an answer from their loving, caring heavenly Father. (Matt. 6:6-8; 1 Pet. 3:12)

Having said this, however, it is necessary to exercise faith, patience and perseverance in regard to prayer. Furthermore, it is essential to accept the providential hand of God in answer to prayer, even if this means a delay in answering prayer, a negative answer to prayer, or an answer different to the one hoped for and anticipated. When God answers our prayers, he does so in a manner consistent with his holy and righteous character—yet in accordance with his love and mercy—and in a manner consistent with the greatest good of his beloved child or children. (Rom. 8:26-28)

However, in petitioning our Father in heaven, we must ensure that we are petitioning him aright—and from a pure heart. (Ps. 24:3-4) God will not answer our prayers if we are harbouring sin in our hearts, or if we are cherishing a grudge against another person. These matters must be confessed first and resolved. (Mark 11:25) Then, the Lord will answer his people's prayers, in accordance with his will and purposes.

To this end, the LORD declared to Solomon:

2 Chronicles 7:13-14 ESV

(13) "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people,
(14) if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

With the greatest assurance of being heard and answered, the Lord Jesus teaches his followers to ask... '*Ask, and it will be given to you...*' (Cf. Ps. 145:18-19; John 15:7; 16:23; Php. 4:6; 1 John 3:22; 5:14)

We must not hesitate to ask God to help us or to help others in their time of need. We must ask—and *keep on asking*—knowing that God will hear and answer for he has promised to do so. (Luke 18:1-8)

Likewise, the Lord's people must seek... '*Seek, and you will find...*' (Cf. Prov. 8:17; Jer. 29:12-13; Matt. 6:33)

Having committed the request or petition to the heavenly Father, it is then necessary to watch for answers to that prayer. Yet, watching need not and should not be passive or inactive. Rather, the Lord teaches his followers to seek—to actively see and to search for signs of God's answers to our prayers. This is not to imply that our actions in themselves are God's answers. It is to imply merely that we must be actively watchful for God's answers to our prayers, as he may answer us directly—or indirectly through his acts of providence.

The Lord then adds, '*Knock, and it will be opened to you...*'

Once again, we see that prayer is not necessarily passive or inactive. It requires action or activity on our part, in addition to the bare petitions or requests to our heavenly Father. This is the manner in which God normally answers the prayers of his people: i.e., by means of providential acts or occurrences, rather than by miraculous acts or occurrences. The latter are not excluded, but they are not the usual means that God uses to answer his people's prayers. Where prayer can be answered indirectly (i.e., providentially), the Lord will often use those means to apply his answers.

Thus, we are to 'knock'—meaning, we are to knock, and keep on knocking. Having presented our prayers and petitions to God, we are to do everything within our power or ability to seek God's answers through everyday means or circumstances. We are to knock at any doors (avenues of opportunity) that we believe might lead to an answer from the Lord; and we are to keep on knocking on other 'doors' if one or more doors are closed against us.

Thus, then, we see that God answers his children's prayers through changing circumstances or events in their lives. This, however, is not according to chance or fate, but according to the express providence of God who guides and alters all things in accordance with his divine will and counsels. Thus, circumstances and events are under God's control, and can turn out to be an answer to his people's heartfelt prayer.

Hence the reason the Lord declares unequivocally,

“For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” (v8)

Of course, there are certain types of prayer that cannot be answered indirectly or through circumstances or events alone. Such may be prayers for those who are seriously ill and perhaps beyond further medical help. Here, an answer to prayer might require God’s direct intervention. This kind of answer and intervention is usually termed ‘miraculous’; and we have many examples of miraculous answers to prayer in the Bible.

However, what is miraculous to us is not so to God. It is simply a direct exercise of his omnipotence; in this case, on behalf of one who is suffering. Such exercises of God’s power are not unusual in the universe; as the very universe itself is sustained by God’s omnipotence (not by natural laws alone). Thus, if God deems to demonstrate something of his almighty and sovereign power in order to answer specific prayers of his people, then he will do so—*if it accords with his sovereign will and purpose for those concerned, for their ultimate good, and for his own sovereign praise and glory.*

Matthew 7:9-11

Matthew 7:9-11 ESV

(9) “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? (10) Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?”

(11) “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Cf. Luke 11:11-13)

In using this analogy, the Lord Jesus is emphasising the reality and power of prayer, and the certainty of prayer being heard and answered practically.

If a son or daughter asks his or her parents to provide them with necessary food, then it would be incongruous for the parents either to turn a deaf ear or to refuse their child’s plea. Likewise, it would be absurd and bizarre for any parent to offer inedible materials (like stone) in place of food, or potentially poisonous food (represented by a serpent) instead of wholesome and nourishing fish. Parents have a responsibility before God to feed and clothe their growing children. They know, before their children ask, what material things are necessary for their health and welfare. And, insofar as they are able, they will provide all that is necessary for the good of their children.

Since no responsible and caring parent would offer to their children anything that failed to meet their necessary needs to nourish and sustain them, then it is certain that God our heavenly Father will not treat his children any differently. Indeed, as the Lord Jesus points out, if we who are evil know how to give good and wholesome gifts to our children, how much more will our Father in heaven, who is infinitely holy, righteous, just and good? (Ps. 84:11; Jas. 1:17)

Yet, as the Lord Jesus makes plain, God gives all that is necessary for our health and wellbeing—when we ask him. Even although he knows our every need in advance, we are still required to ask our Father in heaven to provide our daily bread, or whatever may be necessary to meet our needs. We can be assured absolutely that God will never offer a stone for bread or a serpent for fish. He will meet our needs in the best way possible—sometimes far above our imaginings—and always in accordance with his own sovereign will and pleasure. (Eph. 3:20-21)

The Royal Law

Matthew 7:12

Matthew 7:12 ESV

(12) “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Luke 6:31)

Very frequently, this verse has been misunderstood, misquoted and misapplied. All too often, we hear this verse being used as a so-called ‘golden rule’, which supposedly is applicable to all mankind; and, if practiced, would result in much more peace and tranquillity among people and nations. However, we must remember that, in this discourse, the Lord Jesus is not addressing fallen mankind generally (although, undoubtedly, many sinners would have been present among the multitude). Rather, he is speaking expressly to, and teaching, his own followers—those for whose sins he would shed his blood and lay down his life at Calvary. They alone had experienced the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and therefore they alone would be able to apply and live by this teaching. Fallen and sinful mankind, however, cannot put this teaching into practise in the manner intended by the Lord Jesus. This is because—without the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit—it is not within a person’s power or ability to experience and apply the spiritual qualities of this teaching. (Rom. 8:6-8; cf. Eph. 2:1-3))

Addressing, then, his followers, the Lord commands, ‘*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...*’ (Cf. Isa. 1:17; Matt. 22:35-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8)

This is the ‘Royal Law’ or the ‘Law of the Kingdom’: That is, it is a rule laid down for those who acknowledge Christ as their personal Saviour, Master, Lord and King, and who are the citizens of the kingdom of heaven or of God. It is intended for, and applies to, no other category or class of people.

Here, the Lord Jesus is making it perfectly plain to those who belong to him that they must treat other people in precisely the same manner as they themselves would wish to be treated; i.e., they must respond to others and to their needs from a loving, caring and compassionate heart. This indeed seems a very rigorous law (or principle), and this is why it requires the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to apply it as God intended. The Holy Spirit indwelling and sanctifying the believer creates within him new desires or aspirations, together with the desire or aspiration to honour and please his Lord and Master at all times and in all possible ways. Thus, knowing that the Lord expects his children to treat other people as they themselves would want to be treated, they seek the Lord’s help in putting this principle into practice. However, those who succeed most in applying this principle are those who are walking closest to the Lord and who exhibit a loving, kind, humble and contrite spirit in their lives. (Mic. 6:8) These are they whom the Lord delights to honour, for these are they who are endeavouring with all their heart to honour him by their lives, speech and actions.

The Narrow Gate

Matthew 7:13-14

Many within the vast crowd listening to the Lord Jesus at this time were not counted among his true followers. These were outside his kingdom, and still in their sins. However, among those people were a number, known only to God, whom God would yet call to belong to him. Therefore, in order to make

known to them the only way of salvation, and to make clear to his disciples what that way entailed, the Lord Jesus proclaims to the crowd:

Matthew 7:13-14 ESV

(13) "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. (14) For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Cf. Luke 13:24; John 10:7,9)

Then, as now, people had different ideas about how to enter God's kingdom or about how to worship him and be accepted by him. For the vast majority of the Lord's hearers, their belief was in their Jewish faith and in the system of Judaism. They professed belief in God, as revealed in the Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament). They worshipped God according to the teaching laid down in these Scriptures, and observed the necessary rites, ceremonies and sacrifices required by the Old Testament Law. Even now, those who were listening to the Lord's teaching were present in the area because they were on their way from many outlying districts and countries to one of the major Jewish feasts in Jerusalem.

Thus, to those Jews, and to any non-Jews (Gentiles) who might have been present among this teeming throng, the Lord declares, '*Enter by the narrow gate....*' (v.13a)

The Lord, of course, is speaking of a spiritual 'gate' or way of access into the presence of God. The gate, door, or way of access to God was narrow: i.e., it was restricted exclusively to one single and unique entry point. Access to God's presence could be achieved by no other way or means under heaven except by the way that he himself had appointed, and that way was through his Son. (Acts 4:12) Thus, in John's Gospel, the Lord Jesus declares unequivocally, '*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*' (John 14:6)

This is what the Lord Jesus meant by 'the narrow gate'. He alone was (and is) the only way of access to the Father. No one can ever approach God in any other way but this, or by any other Person than the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Tim. 2:5) Thus, to enter by the narrow gate means to enter into the Father's presence through his Son.

This means, of course, that the Father in heaven does not promise to hear or answer the prayers of anyone who calls upon him, unless he calls upon God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who may never have heard of Christ will yet be led to acknowledge him, if they seek the Lord with all their heart. For God will reveal his Son to them so that they may call upon the Father's name through the Son, and thereby enter by the narrow gate into the presence of God. (Deut. 4:29; Isa. 55:6-7)

In verse 14, the Lord Jesus says,

(14) "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

We have seen already what the Lord Jesus meant by the 'narrow gate'. Now, he adds that '*the way is hard that leads to life....*'

This can be understood in two ways:

- 1) **Concerning unbelievers:** '*The way is hard that leads to life*' because:

- a) For the vast majority of fallen and sinful mankind, it is not the kind of way that they would have chosen; or it is not the way in which they have been brought up, or which their religion has taught them to believe.
- b) It is contrary to human reasoning and inexplicable to the fallen, sinful mind; and therefore—to their spiritually-dead mind—it must be rejected.
- c) It sets forth one particular way of salvation, through Christ alone; thereby excluding totally, and rendering invalid and unacceptable to God, all other religious faiths or modes of worship. Therefore, argue its opponents, it cannot be accepted.
- d) It promises salvation by grace through faith—without taking into account good works, meritorious actions, acts of charity or any other commendable or praiseworthy human effort. Therefore, it is argued, it must be false.

For the above and other reasons, we can see why the Lord Jesus added the words, ‘...and those who find it are few.’ Only those called by the grace of God to exercise faith in Christ are able and willing to enter by the ‘narrow gate’. The vast majority of mankind cannot, and would not be willing to, pass through that gate. (1 Cor. 1:18-19; 2:14; 3:19)

However, as we have said, the above verse can be understood in a second way.

2) **Concerning believers:** ‘*The way is hard that leads to life*’, because:

Although entry by the narrow gate is ‘easy’ for those whom God calls to believe on Christ, yet walking on the road to life can be fraught with many trials and difficulties.

- a) Those who belong to Christ are called not only to believe on him but also to suffer for his sake. (Php. 1:28-30; 1 Pet. 2:21)
- b) Suffering may involve difficulties in life, perplexities, physical or mental abuse, afflictions, torture or even death itself. (Mark 13:9; 2 Cor. 11:23-33)
- c) Those who would follow the way of righteousness may be despised and rejected by ungodly men and women. (Matt. 10:21-24; John 15:18-23)
- d) Those who determine to follow Christ with all their heart and soul may find themselves forsaken by their family and friends. (Matt. 10:21; Mark 13:12-13; Luke 12:51-53; 21:16-17)

These are just a few examples that fulfil the expression, ‘...*the way is hard that leads to life*’. For those who are called to believe on Christ, it is not hard to enter and experience life abundant and eternal. However, before a person experiences the fullness of joy and blessing in the presence of God, he must first walk the Christian pathway—the way of suffering, sorrow, pain and grief. It is this way that is ‘hard’ at times. Nevertheless, it is the only way to life and glory. (1 Pet. 1:1-9; 4:12-19)

The Lord had said,

(13) “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.”

Those who are not willing to enter eternal life by the narrow gate (i.e., to come to God only through repentance and faith in his Son) must, of necessity, enter the path to eternal death by the wide gate. There are no alternatives. Either a person finds life eternal and forgiveness of sin through Christ, or

he remains outside of Christ's kingdom, still in his sins, and bound for a lost eternity. (John 3:16-18, 36)

This wide gate is so called because the greater part of fallen and sinful mankind enters by that gate and is on the road or pathway to final judgment and destruction. (Luke 13:23-28; 2 Thess. 1:5-10)

This applies to all those who will not enter by the narrow gate. It applies to all those who will not accept that Christ alone is the way to God the Father. It applies to all those who hold steadfastly to some other faith or belief and will not submit to Christ as the only Saviour of men and the only Mediator between God and man. (1 Tim. 2:5-6)

Again, it applies to all those who—while denying the existence of any gods—yet cling tenaciously to their futile and foolish idols of atheism, agnosticism or any other philosophy that denies the existence, power and glory of the true and living God and Jesus Christ his Son. (Ps. 14:1-3; Luke 12:20; Rom. 1:21) All alike have entered by the wide gate, and are walking on the road to death and destruction. All alike face the dreadful prospect of final judgment at the hands of Almighty God and a place in hell throughout the ages of eternity. (Matt. 13:40-42; Rev. 21:8)

Even so, it is not impossible for individuals who have started on the road to destruction to realise their folly, to turn back from this evil way and to seek God's mercy. All whom God calls from the road to destruction and whom he brings to repentance and faith in his Son, have—by God's grace and mercy—forsaken the way that leads to death to enter by the narrow gate on the way that leads to life. Prior to his remarkable conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) had been on the road to destruction and eternal hell. (Acts 9:1-22)

Thus, it is essential that those who would find life, forgiveness of sins, and acceptance by God the Father, do so by entering through the narrow gate: i.e., through repenting and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. The remainder of fallen and sinful mankind is bound for a lost eternity, where God will deal with them as their sins of wilful unbelief and rebellion deserve. (Mark 16:16; Heb. 2:3; 12:25; 1 John 5:10)

False Prophets

Matthew 7:15-23

Matthew 7:15

The Lord Jesus has just made it abundantly clear that there is only one way to God the Father: i.e., through his Son. God will not hear or accept anyone who attempts to approach his most holy presence by any other person or means. Thus, in the Lord's teaching, we see that no other religion or faith is acceptable in the sight of God except that which he has established and revealed to us through his Son, and in the Bible. The Gospel alone presents to fallen mankind the way of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life; and this way is in Christ alone, to the total exclusion of all others.

Having clarified this point, the Lord Jesus speaks of those who would teach the way of God. This would include prophets, preachers, pastors or anyone else who professed to make known the ways and will of God for men and women. In course of time, the Lord would call, set apart, and commission to his service individuals from among his church. These appointed servants of the Lord were to preach the Gospel and to teach God's Word faithfully and consistently to the people. Thereby, God would bless his people, bring others to a saving knowledge of his Son, and build up his church in their most holy faith.

However, not every prophet, preacher or pastor, etc. would be a genuine servant of God. Impostors would arise within the church, or would infiltrate the true people of God from outside. (2 Pet. 2:1-2). It is to these impostors that the Lord Jesus now turns his hearer's attention when he declares:

Matthew 7:15 ESV

(15) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

In succeeding ages, many false teachers would arise within the church. However, these false teachers would not immediately appear to be so, as they would do everything in their power to conceal their true character from God's people. By devious and subtle methods, they would deceive the church into believing that they were genuine servants of God. Thus, the Lord Jesus describes these evil impostors as 'ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing'. Unlike the innocent and harmless sheep, these individuals are like wolves—ravenous or rapacious wolves—intent only in dividing the flock of God and tearing it apart. (Acts 20:29-30; cf. Ezek. 13:1-10)

This is exactly what these evil individuals would attempt to do within the church of God. Their aim would be to teach false doctrine, or to contaminate the truth with a tissue of lies, misconceptions and misrepresentations. However, they would do this subtly or insidiously, so that it would not appear harmful to those who digested or assimilated their false or distorted teaching. Gradually, they would deceive people in regard to the true teaching of God's Word. They would lead them astray and away from these unchanging truths, and bring them into the pathways of error and heresy. Ultimately, they would cause many to stumble and to fall. These evil individuals would succeed in leading many away from the paths of righteousness into unrighteousness. The only exception would be the elect of God. Although possibly, some of God's elect might be deceived temporarily, in due course they would realise their error and return to the way of truth and righteousness. (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22; see also John 10:1-15)

Thus, the Lord Jesus warns his followers that such false and evil teachers would arise; acting like avaricious wolves waiting to beguile and destroy those who were seeking the truth. (Matt. 24:11-12; cf. Jer. 23:16) However, if and when they were discovered, such false teachers were to be expelled from among God's people. These were not the servants of Christ. Even although—to all outward appearances—these impostors seemed like angels of light (i.e., as pure and faultless as holy angels), they were in fact the servants of darkness, ministers of Satan, and destined to the same hell as the devil and his fallen angels. (Matt. 25:41; 2 Cor. 11:13-15)

But how were such impostors to be recognised? The Lord answers this at length in the verses that follow.

Matthew 7:16-17

Matthew 7:16-17 ESV

(16) "You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (17) So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit."

Teachers of God's Word are known by the type and quality of the fruit they bear. No genuine teacher can prove false to the truth of God's Word, or expound it in such a way as denies or questions any doctrinal truth or principle or any revealed fact contained within the pages of God's Word.

One kind of plant cannot produce fruit that belongs to a different kind. This would be contrary to nature. Thus, no true teacher of God's Word can impart any teaching that is contrary to the teaching of God's Word. (Luke 6:43-45)

If, however, any person teaches anything contrary to God's Word or who distorts, misapplies or denies wilfully and consistently any of the truths of God's Word, then that person is no servant of Christ. The fruit that he is producing—in the form of false teaching—demonstrates that he is not part of the True Vine (Christ). (John 15:1-2,6) In fact, it shows that he has originated from another plant or source altogether: viz., from the seed of Satan's sowing. (cf. Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43)

Thus, by their fruit, such false teachers prove that they do not belong to Christ, that they have no genuine concern for Christ, for his kingdom, or for his church, and that their true intention is to poison the hearts and minds of those seeking to learn the truth by feeding them on false doctrine and by denying the essential truths of God's holy and unchangeable Word. These 'wolves' among the flock are determined only to rend apart and to destroy the spiritual lives of God's people—if that were possible. (Cf. Jer. 14:14; Luke 6:26; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1)

Frequently, such impostors or 'wolves' may be found occupying some of the highest positions or offices within the visible church. Yet, they are easily recognisable to spiritually mature believers by the quality of their lives and speech, and by the unbiblical nature of their teaching. Thus, we can see that those who live ungodly, immoral or perverted lives or who approve of, or condone, such behaviour in others—while at the same time professing to be true servants of God—deny by their evil conduct the very God whom they profess to serve. (Rom. 1:18-19,32)

These are just some of the 'wolves' that infiltrate the church in order to waste and destroy the spiritual lives of those seeking to know the truth.

Matthew 7:18-20

Matthew 7:18-20 ESV

(18) "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (19) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

(20) "Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."

It is utterly impossible for a healthy tree to bear bad or corrupt fruit. In like manner, it is just as impossible for a diseased or corrupt tree to produce good, healthy or beneficial—i.e., profitable and nourishing—fruit. If a tree is discovered to be riddled with disease, and yet is allowed to remain, that tree would soon contaminate all surrounding trees with its deadly disease and decimate them. Therefore, to arrest the spread of untreatably diseased trees, they are cut down and the trunk and branches are consumed in the fire. (Matt. 3:10)

So it is with false teachers and impostors within the church of God. These are like 'untreatably diseased trees', or wolves who are incapable of acting contrary to their nature; and, as predators, their nature is to hunt, kill and destroy (morally and spiritually). Therefore, at God's appointed time, these false teachers will be struck down from their present position and destroyed—by God.

As we see from the Lord's teaching elsewhere, to be 'cut down and thrown into the fire' is analogous to being separated from the loving presence, power and glory of God; to be condemned by him, and

to be sentenced to eternal separation from him in the everlasting torments of hell or the 'lake of fire'. (Cf. Matt. 25:32-46; Rev. 19:20; 21:8)

Irrespective of their rank, office or status within the visible church, God will judge such evil individuals most severely on the Last Day. The Lord will hold them to account for their ungodly and hypocritical lifestyles and fallacious teaching, for bringing the Gospel into disrepute by their evil deeds, and for the harm they have caused to so many people by condoning their sins and approving of their unrighteous behaviour.

Therefore, the Lord Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that false teachers would arise and would profess to be his followers. However, they would be wolves in sheep's clothing that would endeavour to seek, kill and destroy, and they would be recognised as such by the nature of their fruit. Such fruit might be determined by:

1. **By the ungodliness of their lifestyle:** e.g., by their practise of, or involvement with, anything that God's Word condemns, such as a sexually immoral, unnatural or perverse lifestyle, or any form of speech or behaviour that involves deceit, dishonesty, or a denial of God's Word or of the Lord's teaching, or that participates in any acts or deeds that are inconsistent with true godliness and holiness of life. (Titus 1:15-16; 3:9-11; 2 Pet. 2:1-9; Jude 1:4-19)
2. **By the unbiblical nature of their teaching;** teaching that denies God's Word, or that denies the truth of essential doctrines: e.g., the Divine inspiration and infallibility of God's Word in its entirety; the full and true humanity of the Lord Jesus; the full and true deity of Christ and his co-equality and co-eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit; the miraculous conception and virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the physical and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, or the physical and bodily return of the Lord Jesus in power and glory. (Matt. 10:33; 2 Pet. 2:1)

Anyone who denies such essential truths by their lives or by their words is denying the truth of God's infallible and unchanging Word, the Bible. And anyone in a leadership position who knowingly teaches error, heresy or any other form of false doctrine is not a true servant of God. Rather that person is an unfaithful and unworthy servant, or an impostor or false teacher. Impostors or false teachers, however, must be recognised as such and cut off or expelled from among the people of God. Failure on the part of a church leadership to expel such evil individuals will result in others becoming contaminated by their corrupt or misleading teaching and led into doubt, unbelief, error and sin—sometimes, grievous sin.

But what will be the Lord's response to such individuals at the Last Day? This is answered for us in the verses that follow. Thus, in verse 21, the Lord Jesus solemnly asserts:

Matthew 7:21

Matthew 7:21

(21) "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Many people who profess faith in Christ fail ultimately to follow Christ. (Matt. 10:22; 24:8-13) This is because their profession was spurious and not the result of the Holy Spirit's work in effectual calling and regeneration. (cf. 1 Cor. 1:8; Heb. 3:6) A number of these people turn away from the faith and return to the sinful world to which they belong. These people have no inheritance in the kingdom of God or of his Son. (Heb. 6:6-9; 10:39)

However, not all of these false professors turn away from the faith immediately. Indeed, a large number continue to make an outward profession of faith (although they have never been regenerated, justified or sanctified). Some of these unregenerate individuals ultimately assume church office as leaders, bishops, pastors, deacons, etc. Yet, none of these individuals have been called or appointed to these offices by God, but often by spiritually immature men or by 'religious' men completely devoid of the Spirit of God. Thus, these are not genuine servants or ministers of God, but rather another class of impostors—another pack of ravenous 'wolves' among the flock of God.

From this we see that false teachers can infiltrate the church from outside, or they can arise from within the church itself: i.e., from among those professing faith in Christ. These men and women profess Christ as 'Lord'—although, of course, not from their heart and soul, because they are unregenerate and still in their sins. Nevertheless, these same 'church leaders' expect the Lord Jesus to own them and to honour them. Yet, what does the Lord Jesus say? *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven...."*

Professing Christ as 'Lord' does not prove that a person belongs to Christ. Indeed, those who say that they acknowledge Christ as their 'Lord' while living an ungodly and sinful lifestyle contradict their profession by their actions. Similarly, many so-called leaders or teachers within the church profess Christ as their 'Lord'. Nevertheless, by living a consistently ungodly lifestyle and by denying the truths that God requires his servants to proclaim or expound, they are denying any knowledge of Christ. Therefore, their profession is tantamount to a false profession. Their position, rank or status in the church has never been given to them by God. Therefore, when they expect the Lord Jesus Christ to welcome them into his eternal kingdom, they will find themselves rejected and disowned—for they have denied his name by their actions and they have failed consistently to do the will of the Father in heaven.

Yet, in their pride, arrogance and utter disbelief, these same individuals will presume to challenge the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the Lord declares:

Matthew 7:22

Matthew 7:22 ESV

(22) "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'"

Not only did these so-called servants of Christ claim to acknowledge him as 'Lord', they also were able to perform miraculous signs. According to them, they had prophesied in the name of the Lord Jesus. They had cast out demons in his name. They had performed many other outstanding and miraculous signs in the name of the Lord Jesus. Surely, only a genuine servant of God could perform such supernatural works!

Those, however, who believe that the ability to perform miracles is a mark of God's approval and favour and proof that the person performing them is a servant and child of God, may be greatly mistaken. In and of itself, the ability to perform miracles is no evidence that a person is acting in the name of Christ or that he belongs to Christ. All miracles are *supernatural* acts, but not all miracles are *Divine* acts: i.e., not all miracles derive from God or from his Son. Although much more limited in power or extent, a person can perform supernatural signs or 'miracles' that have no connection with God or with goodness. Such were the magicians of the Pharaoh's court, and such too were those who cast out demons in Jesus' time, although not by his power or authority. In these cases, the supernatural

power or authority to perform such counterfeit miracles derived from the evil one, not from God. (Exod. 7:9-12; 19-22; Deut. 13:1-5; Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9-11; Rev. 19:20)

Another example is that of Judas Iscariot. Judas professed to be a believer of Christ. He professed Christ as 'Lord'. He even performed miracles, in common with the other disciples. However, Judas was no child of God. Rather, the Lord Jesus termed this evil man, '*the son (or child) of perdition*'. (John 17:12; cf. 2 Thess. 2:3) Notwithstanding his profession of faith, and irrespective of all the miracles that he performed, supposedly in the name of Christ, Judas did not belong to Christ. Rather, he belonged to Satan, and he was attempting to deceive others while carrying out the evil one's purposes—albeit, unsuccessfully.

Thus, many false professors will stand before Christ at the Last Day only to find themselves—and their works—rejected. None of the good that they imagined they had accomplished will avail them in the least on the Day of Judgment: For they had made their profession insincerely, from an unregenerate heart. Furthermore, they had performed their works from an unsanctified life—a life that was still at enmity with God by 'wicked works' or deeds or unrighteousness. For all their protestations to the contrary, these men and women were still in their sins. (Luke 13:24-28)

What, then, will be the outcome for these impostors who masqueraded as church leaders and teachers?

Matthew 7:23

Matthew 7:23 ESV

(23) "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

There will be only one dreadful outcome: Christ will pronounce the terrible sentence of judgment and condemnation upon each of these false ministers of the Gospel, and ministers of a false gospel:

"...I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

How dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God; for our God is a consuming fire: i.e., he searches the heart and mind to the uttermost hidden recesses and he judges each one according to the true state of his heart. (Heb. 10:29-31; 12:29)

"...I never knew you..."

The Lord Jesus is not saying that he was not aware of these individuals or their works. On the contrary, the Lord was fully aware of these false preachers and of all their evil deeds. Rather, the Judge is declaring to these impostors that their lives and deeds have finally been exposed as a sham. They have been weighed in the balance, and they have been found wanting. (Dan 5:27) Thus, the Lord will declare most solemnly, "*...I never knew you...*" That is, 'I never knew you as mine'; 'I never acknowledged you as belonging to me—for you do not belong to me'. 'You are not, and never have been, mine.' (Luke 13:25-27; contrast John 10:14,27; 2 Tim. 2:19)

How dreadful is that pronouncement. Yet, it is only the ungodly who will hear such terrible words from the lips of the Lord Jesus. But the Lord has not finished. He has exposed the lives and deeds of these hypocrites and impostors, but he has yet to pass sentence on them. But it is the sentence of eternal condemnation:

"...depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

Those who must depart from Christ on the Day of Judgment must of necessity depart to that hell which God has prepared for the devil and his angels. And to this place these false teachers belong, because they were Satan's emissaries and servants—not the servants of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. (Matt. 25:41; 2 Cor. 11:13-15)

The Lord Jesus calls them, '*workers of lawlessness.*' However, the Lord is not referring merely to lawless in general, but to a specific type or category of lawlessness: viz., that extreme form of lawlessness or iniquity that is associated with rank ungodliness and wickedness and which is fulfilled to its utmost level of iniquity in the man of lawlessness or the man of sin. (2 Thess. 2:3-12) Thus, the Lord Jesus considers these so-called church leaders and teachers to be guilty of practising the most extreme form of lawlessness. In part, this is because they professed to be servants of Christ, deceiving others in the process, when in fact they were not Christ's servants. It is also because they turned the truth of God into a lie (Rom. 1:25). They proclaimed evil as good, and good as evil. Furthermore, it is because they promoted the practice of the vilest sins and iniquities, while indulging in such wicked and pernicious practises themselves. And they did this while acting in the capacity of church leaders or teachers. (Rom. 1:32 – 2:11)

Thus, we see how dreadful it will be for those who assume a position of leadership within God's church, but whom God has not called and appointed to that position, and who attempt to teach or preach the Word of God from an unregenerate heart and therefore while still in an unjustified and un-sanctified state before God. By the grace and mercy of God, some may be brought to repentance and faith before it is too late—and undoubtedly this has happened in the past with some who subsequently became true and faithful preachers of God's Word.

However, for those false leaders and teachers who never experience regeneration, repentance and true faith in Christ, then the Lord will certainly say to them:

"...I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

The Two Foundations

Matthew 7:24-27

Matthew 7:24-27

Now, the Lord Jesus draws his teaching to a close. Before concluding, however, he emphasises the importance of not only hearing his teaching but of putting that teaching into practice. Similarly, the Lord speaks of the foolishness of hearing the truth of God's Word, but ignoring its teaching and application, rejecting it, or by otherwise repudiating the words of the Lord Jesus.

Thus, in verses 24-25, the Lord says:

Matthew 7:24-25

Matthew 7:24-25 ESV

(24) “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (25) And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”

The Lord Jesus knew the hearts and minds of all those who were listening to his words that day—and of all those who would hear or read these words in future generations. The Lord was fully aware of the true state and condition of a person’s heart or inward life. He knew that the natural (unregenerate) man would not welcome these words. (1 Cor. 2:14) He knew also, however, that even some of his own followers would find it difficult to accept and apply all of these teachings from the Sermon on the Mount.

Yet, it was not the Lord’s intention that his own people should pick and choose which parts of his teaching they would accept and which they would reject. All alike was the teaching of God the Son. All alike was worthy of full acceptance, and all alike was applicable to the heart and lives of God’s redeemed and holy people. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

Thus, the Lord Jesus begins by demonstrating the wisdom of building one’s life on a sure and unassailable foundation. The foundation stone or Rock, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. (1 Cor. 3:11; 10:4; Eph. 2:20) When a person believes on Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour, that person must accept and apply to his life all of the Lord’s teachings; for they are the teachings of God the Son.

To this end, the Lord declares that the person who hears his words (i.e., his teaching or doctrine), and does them (i.e., who puts that teaching into practice), is like a wise man who lays the foundation of his house on solid rock. (Jas. 1:22-25)

Those who hear *and apply* the teaching of the Lord Jesus to their hearts and lives are building their lives on a rock-solid foundation. Thus, in the day of adversity, trial, tribulation, sorrow, pain, grief or any other adverse circumstance of life (represented by the torrential rain, overwhelming floods and raging wind), their faith will stand. However, it will stand because Christ is the Rock upon which it is founded, and the Lord’s teaching is the structure upon which the believer’s faith has been built. Therefore, although severely buffeted by the trials of life, those who abide in the Lord Jesus and who love his word will surely stand in the day of adversity—for they have built their lives upon the solid Rock. (1 Pet. 1:6-7)

What, however, happens to those who hear or read this teaching of the Lord Jesus, but who fail to apply it or who reject it completely? The Lord answers this in the next few verses.

Matthew 7:26-27

Matthew 7:26-27 ESV

(26) “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (27) And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” (Cf. Luke 6:49)

The majority of those who heard the Lord’s teaching on the Mount were not his followers. Therefore, since they had not experienced the power of new life in Christ through regeneration, repentance and faith, they were still in their fallen sinful condition. As such, they could not appreciate or respond to teaching of a spiritual nature. It was incomprehensible or seemingly impracticable to their unspiritual minds. However, this was no fault of the teaching itself, but rather of their own sinful nature which rebelled against the truths of God’s Word and which refused wilfully to seek the Lord or to repent of their evil deeds. (John 3:19; 5:40; 12:37-41)

Granted, they had come to listen to the Lord Jesus. Many indeed may have been genuine seekers after the truth of God—and God would reveal his truth to such people. However, many others were not seeking God’s truth. Rather, they were curiosity seekers. They had come to listen to the Lord because they thought that he was a great or remarkable person. They did not necessarily believe that he had come from God. Even some of those people who did believe that God had sent the Lord Jesus, thought that he had been sent as a deliverer from Roman occupation. These people believed (mistakenly) that the promised Messiah would come to deliver them from foreign rule and political oppression and that he would set up his Messianic kingdom on earth. Therefore, these individuals followed him and listened to him, hoping to hear something that would meet their material or political aspirations. With their unregenerate hearts and minds, they could not grasp the fact that the kingdom of God was a spiritual kingdom.

For these and many other reasons, a sizeable proportion of the crowd listening to the Lord Jesus would never accept his teaching or apply it to their lives. Thus, the Lord makes it abundantly plain how foolish is the neglect of these people. They had heard the truth, yet they had no intention of believing or applying the truth. They could not do so because their fallen nature and sinful minds disinclined them to spiritual verities. Thus, because of their spiritual blindness and rejection of God’s Word, they have no sure foundation on which to build their lives. They would be left floundering in a world without God and without hope.

Yet, in his unimaginable folly, what does such a person do to establish his place in life? Why, he builds his life on his work, his career, his profession, his pursuits, his interests, or even his family—but all to the exclusion of God in his life. This is folly of the utmost magnitude. To build our lives on anyone or anything other than the Lord Jesus Christ is tantamount to idolatry—but idols cannot save, nor can they ever provide a secure foundation for a person’s life. They are fantasies flitting about with every wind of change, and ultimately disappearing into oblivion leaving their adherents without a leg to stand on.

So it is with those who refuse the teachings of the Lord Jesus, or of God’s Word, as revealed in the Bible. Whether they build their lives on their family, career, profession or anything else, they are building their lives on sand—shifting sand, or quicksand. As soon as real difficulties arise, or real adversities arise, these people find themselves without any hope of support or deliverance. Their lives and careers may be shaken by events and circumstances (represented by the elements); their hopes may be overturned or dashed to pieces; they may need to forego their cherished ambitions.

Others, however, may succeed very well in this world. Many may appear to be prospering even although they take no thought for God or for spiritual matters. Yet, what will they do in the end thereof? They have rejected the Lord and his teachings only to build their lives on sinking sand. Ultimately, that sand—that precarious foundation—will slip, slide and subside; and then the entire structure of their lives will collapse.

All they have achieved in this life will be of no avail to them on the Day of Judgment. Rather, they will stand before God spiritually naked—not having Christ’s righteousness to cover their sin. As such, the Lord will condemn them to spend a lost eternity in hell. Even while they lived, they had been living under the wrath and condemnation of God, since they refused the salvation that God had offered in his Son. Now, on the Judgment Day, they must answer for their refusal to respond to the Gospel and they must pay the due penalty of rejecting Christ and his words.

Such will be the outcome of all those who build their house (i.e., their lives) on sand; i.e., on anything other than the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the Word of God.

Astonished by the Lord’s Authority

Matthew 7:28-29

Matthew 7:28-29

Matthew 7:28-29 ESV

(28) And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, (29) for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

The One who was the Eternal Word (Gk., *Logos*, *Logos*) of God incarnate had now concluded these words or ‘sayings’ (Gk., *logous*, *logous*) of light and life imparted to the crowd in his Sermon on the Mount. (John 1:1,4; 1 John 1:1; 5:7; Rev. 19:13)

Yet, the effect that the Lord Jesus’ teaching produced on this vast assembly of people was electrified amazement or utter astonishment. Never had they heard such powerful, convincing or challenging teaching. (Matt. 13:54; Mark 1:22; 6:2; Luke 4:32; John 7:15,46) The Lord’s teaching was completely unlike that of the religious leaders and teachers of the day—the scribes. The scribes taught what had been taught to them in the theological or rabbinical schools, or they taught the Scriptures as they had been interpreted over many generations by the Jewish commentators or rabbis. Therefore, their teaching lacked power, authority and spiritual vitality: for, although they were expounding the (Old Testament) Scriptures, they were doing so in a lifeless manner and in accordance with the traditions of men, with the opinions of the ancients, or with the philosophies common to their age and generation.

However, when the Lord Jesus taught, he did not rely on any human method. Rather, he taught the very Word of God as it had originated from the Father himself. He taught that Word with full power and authority, because he—the Eternal Son of God—was the Eternal Living Word (*Logos*). This Word was God’s final expression to mankind, spoken by his Son. (Heb. 1:1-2) Furthermore, the Lord Jesus taught with full power and authority because every word that he spoke was the word of the Father being applied by the power and person of the Holy Spirit. (cf. Matt. 28:18)

Thus, when the people heard the expressions and teaching of the Lord Jesus, they were hearing the expressions and teaching of God the Father. These were the very words of God delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit through his Son. (John 7:16; 8:28,38; 12:49; 14:10; 17:8) Therefore, there could be no meaningful comparison between the teaching of the religious leaders (scribes or Pharisees) and the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus imparted the very Word of God directly to the people because he was God—God the Son—and because he was the Word, or direct and final expression of God to mankind.

For these reasons, the people responded in absolute amazement to the Lord's teaching. They had just heard the voice of God speaking to them through his Son. How dreadful then was it to reject that voice or that teaching! (Heb. 2:1-4; 10:28-31) On the contrary, how blessed would be those who heard the voice of the Father speaking to them through his only Son, and who responded to that voice by applying the Lord's teaching to their lives! (Luke 11:27-28; Rev. 22:14)

Note: The text of the above excerpt will appear in *Expository Notes: The Gospel of Matthew* which will be released at a later date (DV).