

## Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)

### **#1 What is Easiest To Say?**

*Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?*

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When Adam and Eve had fallen into sin and were hiding from the Lord God among the trees of the garden, he came seeking them not with a rebuke but with a question: *"Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:9.)

Obviously, divine questions are never asked to get information. God knew where they were, they didn't hide so well that he couldn't find them. So the question *"Where are you?"* was meant to be answered on a deeper level. He asked the question because he wanted Adam and Eve to discover things that they were hiding from themselves.

Answering God's questions teaches us truths about ourselves that we would otherwise not know. The penetrating questions of God prepare us to hear the rest of what he will say, the words of comfort, challenge, warning, correction, promise, prophecy, salvation, and hope.

We live in a culture awash in possessions and drowning in information, but with a profound sickness of soul. I propose that we spend some weeks considering diagnostic questions posed by the Physician, who came to care for damaged souls.

The gospel of Mark is the most vivid and dramatic of the gospels. It doesn't have long teaching sections such as the Sermon on the Mount, which is in Matthew. Mark is a shorter gospel in which events move quickly. Often we find one of Jesus' penetrating questions at the heart of Mark's description of events. These questions in this gospel will be our focus in this sermon series.

*MT 9:1-2 -- <sup>1</sup>A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. <sup>2</sup>So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.*

*LK 5:17-21 WITH MK 2:3-4, MT 9:2 -- <sup>17</sup>Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. <sup>18</sup>Some [four<sup>MK</sup>] men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. <sup>19</sup>When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and [made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it<sup>MK</sup>] lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.*

*<sup>20</sup>When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend [take heart, son<sup>MT</sup>], your sins are forgiven."*

*<sup>21</sup>The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

*MK 2:8-12 WITH MT 9:4 -- <sup>8</sup>Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these [evil<sup>MT</sup>] things? <sup>9</sup>Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? <sup>10</sup>But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralytic, <sup>11</sup>"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."*

*LK 5:25-26 WITH MT 9:8 -- <sup>25</sup>Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. <sup>26</sup>Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God [who had given such authority to men<sup>MT</sup>]. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."*

With amazing speed the news spread that a miracle-working Teacher had come to Capernaum; and wherever our Lord went, great crowds gathered. They wanted to see Him heal the sick and cast out demons. Had they been interested in His message of the Gospel, these multitudes would have been an encouragement to Jesus; but He knew that most of them were shallow in their thinking and blind to their own needs. Often the Lord found it necessary to leave the city and go out into the wilderness to pray (Luke 5:15-16). Every servant of God should follow His example and take time away from people in order to meet the Father and be refreshed and revitalized through prayer.

Now the time had come for Jesus to demonstrate to the people what His ministry was all about. After all, He had come to do much more than relieve the afflictions of the sick and the demonized. Those miracles were wonderful, but there was something greater for the people to experience—they could enter into the kingdom of God! They needed to understand the spiritual lessons that lay behind the physical miracles He was performing.

Jesus, as we have seen, had already attracted the crowds. Because of that he had attracted the notice of the official leaders of the Jews. The Sanhedrin was their supreme court. One of its great functions was to be the guardian of orthodoxy. For instance, it was the Sanhedrin's duty to deal with any man who was a false prophet. It seems that it had sent out a kind of scouting party to check up on Jesus; and they were there in Capernaum. No doubt they had annexed an honourable place in the front of the crowd and were sitting there critically watching everything that was going on.

When they heard Jesus say to the man that his sins were forgiven it came as a shattering shock. It was an essential of the Jewish faith that only God could forgive sins. For any man to claim to do so was to insult God; that was blasphemy and the penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning (*Leviticus 24:16*).

At the moment they were not ready to launch their attack in public, but it was not difficult for Jesus to see how their minds were working. So he determined to fling down a challenge and to meet them on their own ground.

It was their own firm belief that sin and sickness were indissolubly linked together. A sick man was a man who had sinned. So Jesus asked them: "Whether it is easier to say to this man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk!'" Any charlatan could say, "Your sins are forgiven." There was no possibility of ever demonstrating whether his words were effective or not; such a statement was completely uncheckable.

But to say, "Get up and walk" was to say something whose effectiveness would either be proved or disproved there and then. So Jesus said in effect: "You say that I have no right to forgive sins? You hold as a matter of belief that if this man is ill he is a sinner and he cannot be cured till he is forgiven? Very well, then, watch this!" So Jesus spoke the word and the man was cured.

The experts in the law were caught in a dilemma: on their own stated beliefs the man could not be cured, unless he was forgiven. He *was* cured, therefore he *was* forgiven. Therefore, Jesus' claim to forgive sin *must* be true.

Jesus must have left a completely baffled set of legal experts; and, worse, he must have left them in a baffled rage. Here was something that must be dealt with; if this went on, all orthodox religion would be shattered and destroyed. In this incident Jesus signed his own death warrant—and he knew it.

The first part of Jesus' two-part question in this passage is "Why are you thinking these things?" The second part is "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk!'"

As illustrated earlier by God's question to Adam and Eve when they were hiding in the Garden, Jesus didn't ask the teachers of the law, "Why are you thinking these things?" because he didn't know. Rather,

he wanted them to answer the question, to consider why it was that what they believed about God led them to anger and rejection of the possibility of forgiveness of sins rather than hope.

Put another way, he was asking them, "What is it you believe about God? What sort of God do you serve?" Many people who have a religious heritage, who are familiar with "church," possess a distorted view of the grace of God. That is at the root of Jesus' question, "Why are you thinking these things?"

The second part of Jesus' question is more logic-based. He asked them to draw a conclusion, and then he acted to prove the point: *"If I can do the apparently more difficult, visible, thing, then doesn't it seem that I can also do the invisible thing?"*

### **THE CIRCUMSTANCES OBSERVED**

Before we concentrate on these questions, let's make some observations about the story. In Mark 2:1, we are told that Jesus was at home in Capernaum. Some translations say, "in the house," but it's probably an idiom that means "at home." We know that Jesus grew up in Nazareth.

Capernaum and Nazareth are not far from each other. Luke 4:16 tells us that Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth, after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, but was then so thoroughly rejected by the people with whom he grew up that he left Nazareth and made Capernaum, a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, his home base for the three years of his public ministry.

Commentators are uncertain of exactly what the notion of Jesus' being "at home" means. Perhaps his mother and brothers had also moved to Capernaum, and it was their home in which he had a room. It may have been the home of Simon Peter's family, as mentioned in chapter 1, where Jesus lived. He may have had his own place, not one that he owned, but one that was made available to him for use as needed.

In verse 11 the paralytic was told to take his mat and "go home," which may suggest that he was also from Capernaum or nearby.

Verse 4 tells us that these four companions dug through the roof to lower their paralyzed friend to Jesus, bringing us to the questions of the physical circumstances in which this event took place. Capernaum is not an easy place in which to maneuver if you are disabled. The roads are not paved smoothly, stairs and vertical rises make it difficult to get around, and you must rely on your friends to help you travel there if you're not ambulatory.

The homes were small. The crowd filling this home might have numbered fifty, at most one hundred, and we know they were spilling out into the street. The walls were made of stone, but the roofs had beams across them, between which straw and thatch were packed together with clay.

Most homes had stairways leading to the rooftops so people could ascend on hot evenings and enjoy the breeze, using the roof as a sort of porch. Apparently what these men did was climb up the exterior stairway to the roof, dig out the clay and the thatch from between the beams to open a hole in the roof, and lower their friend down to Jesus.

### **WHAT DOES FAITH LOOK LIKE?**

Another observation to make is that Jesus reacted to the faith of this paralyzed man and his four friends (verse 5). Jesus discovered faith everywhere. He had a wonderful way of seeing faith when people might not have even been aware of it in themselves.

Let's consider why Jesus concluded that he was seeing faith as this man descended before him from the hole in the roof. If you were going to visit a famous rabbi who had a large following, who possessed some degree of prominence, and if you wanted to treat the rabbi respectfully, as Jews were taught to do, and in addition you wanted him to heal your friend, you would certainly try to make a good impression by treating him well.

The last thing you would do is tear up his house! It is completely counterintuitive that you would destroy this rabbi's house and then ask him for a favor, that you would expect him to treat you well after that. It is that exact counter-intuitiveness, I believe, that Jesus read as faith.

These men evidently had heard him talk about himself. He said the Son of Man had come to seek and to save that which was lost. He said the Shepherd would leave the ninety-nine in the pen and go out and find the one that was still lost and desperate. He said he was the Physician who had come for the sick rather than for the well.

I am sure that throughout his teaching in these opening days in the Galilean ministry, Jesus repeatedly made the point that needy, broken, hurting, and desperate people were the very ones for whom he had come and on whom his ministry was focused, that he was God's representative to meet their need.

And these men were audacious enough to believe him! They were boldly saying, "If you say so, we are going to trust that you care more about people than buildings, and we are going to tear a hole in your roof and put before you one of the very kinds of people you said you have come to help." They believed the things that he had said about himself and they acted on their belief. They were willing to go to lengths that other people would question.

We must admire several characteristics of these men, qualities that ought to mark us as "fishers of men." For one thing, they were deeply concerned about their friend and wanted to see him helped. They had the faith to believe that Jesus could and would meet his need. They did not simply "pray about it," but they put some feet to their prayers; and they did not permit the difficult circumstances to discourage them. They worked together and dared to do something different, and Jesus rewarded their efforts. How easy it would have been for them to say, "Well, there is no sense trying to get to Jesus today! Maybe we can come back tomorrow."

That illustrates a point about how we experience the Christian life. Is there anything bold about your faith? Jacob wrestled with the angel, the preincarnate Jesus. He held on all night and said, "*I will not let you go unless you bless me*" (Genesis 32:26). We can have a passion for God based on believing his promises, that is willing to break out of ruts and do the extravagant thing.

When we are asked to describe our relationship with God, if the first adjective that springs to our minds is "polite," then we have a problem. It means that we are not listening. There needs to be a boldness with which we confront the Lord, and insist in his presence that we are going to take his word seriously and we likewise expect him to take us seriously.

A hole in the roof was no problem for Jesus. People have always been, and remain, more important than buildings to him. So he saw faith in the choices made by these five men.

### **HOPE AND DESPERATION**

Let's take a further step back and look not at the details, but at the whole, rather peculiar story. There are a number of unaddressed questions in this passage. For one, how did the paralyzed man's situation come to be so urgent? Jesus was at home. He had been traveling, but was now home with no indication that he would be going anywhere soon.

The paralytic evidently also lived in Capernaum, which was not a very big town, and he was not likely to be going anywhere. The condition of being paralyzed is the opposite of an emergency. The very physical condition meant that his circumstance didn't change, which was one of the things that made it awful.

The circumstances for this man were going to be the same the next day, and the next. So we need to ask how his friends came to decide, "This is so important that we can't wait a moment longer. "They could not wait for Jesus' teaching to end and for the crowd to disperse."

The urgency in this case was not the man's physical condition. Later, when Jesus was invited to come and heal a synagogue official's daughter, the official pleaded, "*Hurry, she's dying, there's not a moment to lose!*" (Mark 5:23). When Lazarus was dying, his sisters sent word, "*Please come and help, he's on the verge of death. It's a crisis!*" (John 11).

But in Capernaum that day, it was not a life-or-death situation, yet these men felt tremendous pressure to accomplish quickly the concern that brought them to Jesus. Why would that be?

I believe the lame man was in spiritual crisis. Hebrews 4:7 offers us a warning: "*Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today... Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*"

There comes a time in every relationship when a decision must be made that will change everything. And when God himself draws near and we hear his voice, **postponement can lead to a hard heart.**

The Holy Spirit was speaking to the lame man and the man could not wait till later to know what Jesus would say to him. His despair, depression, bitterness, perhaps years of having blamed God for his paralysis, the way he treated people around him, the sorrows he experienced, all had finally become so heavy that he realized he could not go on anymore without some response from the man of God. And so his friends assisted him with this urgent visit.

Another peculiarity about this story is that nobody talked about the obvious. I can be distracted by sitting next to a wiggly child in church; and here these people were having a Bible study with Jesus when a hole opened in the roof, with falling dust and straw and noise.

Not one person asked, "Why in the Sam Hill are you putting a hole in the roof? Who do you think you are?" There was no indignation, no anger, no question, no order to get off the roof, nothing! It was as though nobody noticed.

Another thing nobody appeared to notice was that the man was paralyzed. His friends lowered him down, and, being immobilized, all he could do was stare up into Jesus' eyes, yet nobody said, "This poor man-what a horrible life he must live." There was no expression of compassion or sympathy.

The two most obvious things in the story went completely unaddressed. Now that's an odd story, but it's odd on purpose, isn't it? Again, the missing elements tell us something.

The need this man had was for his sins to be forgiven. The paralysis was not the main point, and the hole in the roof was not something that concerned Jesus, because people were more important to him than buildings. Jesus' focus, then and now, is on what is important, not on the curiosities of the moment.

(2:8-11) **Forgiveness:** the source of being forgiven. Jesus revealed His power to forgive sins in four strong steps.

1. Jesus revealed that He knew the human heart: exactly what man thinks, His motives and reasonings
2. Jesus revealed His God-like wisdom and fearlessness. He suggested that He be tested with the impossible.
3. Jesus stated His purpose: to prove that He is the Son of Man.
4. Jesus proved His power to forgive sins. He must be able to forgive sins, for He healed the man and caused the man to arise and walk. His power is indisputable.

**Note the proof of His power to forgive sins.**

a. Jesus *willed* the man to walk. He simply *spoke the Word* "arise," and the man arose and walked. The power was in Jesus' *will and Word*. His will is His Word, and His Word is His will.

b. It follows, then, that if Jesus *wills* to forgive sins, all He has to do is *speak the Word*, "Thy sins are forgiven"; and the sins are forgiven. (Cp. Ephes. 1:7; 1 John 1:9; 1 John 2:1-2; Acts 5:31; Acts 13:38; Luke 24:47.)

### **WHAT SORT OF GOD DO YOU SERVE?**

Finally, let's return to the two questions that Jesus asked the teachers of the law. He had forgiven the paralytic's sins and given him relief from his desperation over all the things he had done to drive a wedge between himself and God. The man was free of his urgent spiritual burden. The knocking of a hole in the roof was of no consequence to Jesus. He had looked at the man and called him "Son," or "my child," a very tender endearment.

Then Jesus asked the first of two questions of the experts in the law: "Why are you thinking these things?" What are we to learn from this? Remember that he was not asking because he wanted information. He already knew what they were thinking in their hearts and why they were thinking it: "Why, this man is a blasphemer. He is claiming to do what only God can do!" "How dare he?" He's flippant about things that God takes very seriously!" Knowing all of that, Jesus still asked them the question, "Why?" I believe what he was truly asking was, "What kind of God do you serve?"

Jesus had driven demons from people. He had been teaching extraordinary truths. We know from chapter 1 that he taught with authority, unlike other teachers, and that great crowds of people were following him to hear what he had to say. John the Baptist, a man of undoubted prophetic credentials, had proclaimed him the Messiah, "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29.)

What the teachers of the law ought to have asked him, even if they could not yet believe, was, "What do you mean? How can these things be? What new thing might God be doing from which we can learn?" But they did not ask those things, because they had already concluded that God does not forgive sins so easily.

It is the kind of problem religious people always have: The more knowledge we gain, and the more we are involved in churches and Bible studies and Christian groups and so on, the more we learn to hide sin rather than see it forgiven.

The more acquainted we are with religious hypocrisy, the more certain we are that God does not want sins out in the open, that he does not want them forgiven, that he does not want to relieve people of burdens. The weight of sinfulness and uncertainty and hypocrisy often make people excellent church members.

One of the ways religious institutions manipulate people is by keeping them uncertain of their forgiveness. No one should utter such a simple statement. In one sentence the entire burden of a lifetime of failure is lifted: "Child, your sins are forgiven." It cannot be that easy. What will the great institutions built around religious performance do if forgiveness is so easily obtained?

The simple point is, Do we serve a God who is passionate about forgiving sins, who loves to remove burdens from people, who is generous with grace and mercy, who characteristically does good for us rather than raising his eyebrow at us and remaining distant? *Of course*. Of course his Son will speak of mercy and love, the removal of burdens, and the giving of life. That is God's nature.

I believe the problem these teachers of the law had was the problem that folks like us have, so it is worth asking, "Why do we have so much trouble forgiving ourselves? Why do we have so much trouble welcoming hardened sinners or difficult people and sharing with them a word of forgiveness? Why are we more comfortable with performance? Why would we rather live with cover-up than with forgiveness?"

Ultimately, the answer to all of that is that underneath we don't truly believe God is gracious. We think such speech is blasphemy.

### **DOES JESUS HAVE AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE?**

Jesus' other question is one of logic: "If I can do the more difficult, external, visible thing, isn't it likely that I can also do the invisible thing?" This addresses the question of whether Jesus Christ has the authority to declare, "Your sins are forgiven. The struggle is over. You and God are in perfect relationship again. There is nothing from your past that clings to you any longer."

If Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, then who has the authority to bind them to us? What voice inside us has the right to put guilt trips back on us? Where does that voice come from? If Jesus himself says we are forgiven, on what basis should anyone else claim we are not?

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins because he is God the Son, born into the human family. He lived a sinless life. At his baptism his Father spoke from heaven and said, "*You are My son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*" (Mark 1:11).

At his Transfiguration his Father spoke from heaven and said, "*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*" (Mark 9:7.) He gave up his life voluntarily as the sin-bearer and was raised again on the third day. That is why he has the authority to tell people like us that our sins are forgiven, and no one has the right to challenge him. The guilt trips that we hold on to are a denial of his authority to set us free.

Jesus said, "Child, your sins are forgiven." This is his message to people like us—people who are aware of our failure, who know there are things about us that we would be ashamed if anyone else ever knew, who long for some relief from the struggle, who want to believe that God will be for us, not against us, who want to start today's battle with a sense that God is on our side, not removed from us by some distance or barrier, who need the hope that goes along with forgiveness.

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. Let us shake off paralysis, pick up our mats, and walk.

**I. DIFFICULTIES ARE READILY OVERCOME WHERE THERE IS FAITH.** The house was probably a poor one, roofed with mud and shingle. It would be easy, therefore, to dig a hole and obtain entrance in that way. But doing it required a certain amount of ingenuity and effort, which proved that the man and his friends were resolved to get to Jesus and obtain the cure. All this trouble and thoughtfulness was the outcome of faith in Christ. Their boldness was the confidence of faith. Where the heart is right, difficulties in the way of seeking or following the Saviour will only call forth keener ingenuity and higher resolution.

### **II. FAITH EVER SECURES THE SYMPATHY AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF CHRIST.**

Christ's first words were not chiding, but a welcome. He said, "Son [child], thy sins are forgiven." There would be tenderness and sympathy in the tone as well as in the words. He spoke as a father or an elder brother. The sick man may have been young. But in the midst of all the kindness the guilty past of the man is not forgotten. A thrill of wonder and fear, mingled with more hopeful feelings, would pervade him as he listened. Here was one who knew all about him, and yet had compassion on him! The faith of the patient and his bearers (possibly relatives) was thus rewarded beyond their hopes. A greater boon was conferred than they sought. Christ is never satisfied with half measures. He goes at once to the root of the evil, and seeks to save a man altogether, in soul as well as in body and fortune.

**III. IN SHOWING MERCY CHRIST ASSUMES THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY.** Whilst the nature of the case before him demanded that the cure should be thus radical, the mere utterance

of the words, "Thy sins are forgiven," involved a claim which those looking on were not ready to acknowledge.

1. *Faith in being taxed is rewarded.* The believing men were required to believe more, and more definitely, than they had already done. And to him chiefly concerned there were already inward witnesses in favor of the new claim. That Christ should have divined the secret source of the bodily weakness and mental unrest was a presumption that he was what he professed implicitly to be. Doubtless, with the rising of his spirit to the new duty of recognizing the authority of Jesus, the sick man's conscience would receive sudden and unlooked-for relief. The tide of life would turn again in the glad flush of peace and happiness. Christ's demands upon men to believe more than they already do are intended as conditions of his bestowing greater blessings.

2. *In order to do all that he was sent to do, Christ required to be Divine.* The argument was perfectly sound, which the scribes carried on "in their hearts." Only God can, in the ultimate, forgive sins. Yet his power is sometimes delegated according to fixed principles and appointments. But probably they included in their reasoning the unspoken evidence given in Christ's manner, that he forgave out of and from himself. The entire circumstances of the case show that he must have done this. And so ever, when men come to him, it is that he may exercise this authority and power. What they did not think of was the possibility of him whom they accused being "very God of very God."

**IV. DIFFICULTIES ARE CREATED WHERE FAITH IS ABSENT.** The simple soul of the paralytic grasped the secret of Divinity which escaped the subtlety of the scribes. Their very knowledge stood in their way, because it was not spiritually acquired and employed.

**V. THE POWER OF CHRIST IS A PRACTICAL DEMONSTRATION OF HIS AUTHORITY.**

1. Strictly speaking, healing the paralysis of the man was not, when taken by itself, on the same level with the forgiveness of his sins; but the two actions are distinctly declared to be in connection with one another. They both appealed to the same Divine power. If, therefore, the pretension to this power made in the former utterance was blasphemous, the ability to perform the consequent miracle would not have been forthcoming. It is also possible that the visible fact of the cure may have been meant as a making good of the invisible transaction declared in the first words. They were shown thereby not to be mere words.

2. And similarly, but even more cogently, is the proof of our Lord's divinity furnished by the spiritual experience of those whom he redeems. That they are forgiven is witnessed to in the subsequent power given to live righteously, and to continue in fellowship with a reconciled God. To those who are conscious of this inward result ("kept by the power of God through faith, unto salvation") there is no other evidence so conclusive.



*Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

## **#2 Good Or Evil, Life or Death?**

*Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"*

In this series of messages we are considering questions Jesus asked in a variety of settings. These questions always prove to be more provocative and important when the context in which they occur is carefully examined.

The question before us now comes from Mark 3:4. Jesus was addressing Pharisees who were looking for an excuse to oppose him. They were poised to pounce as soon as he did something that contradicted tradition. So *"Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent."*

The law, of course, was an expression of God's heart. So Jesus' question was, *"What would please God on the Sabbath day, to do good or to do evil, to give life or to kill?"* This should not be a difficult question. The answer is so obvious that we would easily trust them to correctly answer this question.

However, Jesus' antagonists refused to answer the question. Eventually they would indicate an answer that defied the heart of God. By the end of this passage we'll find that they were choosing both evil and death. They were determined to kill Jesus.

### **Taking a step back**

In Mark 2:23-3:6 there are two Sabbath stories back-to-back. For most of us Sabbath activities are not an ethical problem. But we have similar habits and behaviors. Something you're doing to please God will look foolish or hurtful, if you take a step back and examine it. We are capable of doing the ungodly things in God's name. Sometimes we need to be asked the sort of simple question Jesus asked: "Why are you doing this? Is this what God really wants human beings to live like? Is this healthy and honoring and sane and wise? Is it right in God's name to do good or evil? Is it right to kill or make alive?"

Let's read the first of the two Sabbath stories in 2:23-28:

*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"*

*In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."*

*Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."*

This was not a tense exchange. Jesus' questioners were clearly disapproving, but this text doesn't describe them as being angry or antagonistic to the Lord. They asked a real question, and he gave them a very thoughtful, challenging answer. Jesus made powerful claims about the nature of the Sabbath and about himself, drawing on the Scriptures.

The second story, in contrast, is filled with confrontation. Let's read 3:1-6:

*Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."*

*Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.*

*He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*

Here, Jesus was in the presence of enemies. His actions were a clear challenge ("Stand up in front of everyone.") Jesus was both angry and sorrowful at the hard hearts of traditionalists in this synagogue. Now, to make sense of these stories, we need to ask, What is the point of the Sabbath? Why is the Sabbath a reason for the difficulties that are in this passage?

As I was considering these questions, I realized that we would do well in this culture to ask the Lord to teach us the lessons of Sabbath, or rest. We live in a time and place in which people are wound too tightly and they take themselves too seriously and work at a feverish pace. Therefore, let's consider the lessons as we examine the two accounts in Mark.

### **SABBATH LESSONS**

The Sabbath is an important theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The fourth commandment concerns the seventh day, and there were other laws about the seventh and 49<sup>th</sup> year. There is a simple core to the idea of Sabbath. The word *shabbâth*, transliterated into English as Sabbath, is the word for rest in Hebrew. It means at its heart to relax, to cease from activities.

Sabbath rest is not a reward that is earned. It is a determination to not take ourselves seriously, to not add up our accomplishments and decide whether or not they're good enough, to deliberately set ourselves aside and gaze at God and all that he has made. It's the choice to make God important and ourselves unimportant, on a regular basis, from the heart.

### **YOU CAN REST**

There are two different reasons given for the fourth commandment, in which the children of Israel were told to keep the Sabbath holy and do no work. The ten commandments are listed twice, in Exodus and Deuteronomy. First, Exodus 20:11: *For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

The reason to keep the Sabbath in this case is that God rested, having completed everything that needed to be done. How many of us live with a desperate sense that no matter how much we do, it's never enough? But, tasks can be finished. Work doesn't have to go on forever. We aren't required to carry every burden. Some of us fear that a moment's relaxing of vigilance will lead to the unraveling of everything. Who knows what horrible things will happen if we relax? But God's Sabbath calls for us to rest in Him.

Psalm 127:1-2 makes a wonderful point about vigilance:

*"Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat- for he grants sleep to [or while they sleep he provides for] those he loves."*

It's foolishness to imagine we are indispensable. God makes the watchman successful and the builder successful, and he gives to his beloved in their sleep. God's work is done, and he invites us to enjoy a sense of completion with him, not to be distracted and pressed always to do more and more.

### **THE SLAVERY IS OVER**

The second reason for the Sabbath is that slavery is ended. Deuteronomy 5:15:

*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.*

We can identify with the children of Israel. Once we too were enslaved, to ourselves and to the world. We were guilty of failing to meet the requirements, and we had to live a life of slavery. But now we're free, and we don't have to think like a slave anymore.

We are no longer under the command of anyone but God himself, and he intends for us to exercise our freedom. Every time we act in fear, believing that we don't deserve anything better than toil and desperation, we're violating the call the Lord gives us to be free people. God calls us to reject the sense of foolish responsibility that makes us live without rest.

The Sabbath is a marvelous gift, an incredible blessing. But it is a gift that every generation resists. Sabbath rest is physically refreshing, it encourages community, it makes worship a priority, it teaches us the deep lessons of dependence on God.

The freedom to let go, to relax and enjoy the world God has made, the privilege of setting ourselves aside and gazing at him, the marvel of enjoying each other, of not having to pay attention and keep records and account for everything-it's an incredible gift. And we resist it. Why is grace so hard to receive?

The law of the Sabbath was undermined quickly in Israel's history. The questions became, If God says to do no work on the Sabbath day and keep it holy, what is work? In order for us to do no work, we need some accurate sense of measurement as to who's working and who isn't. And since this is a test, not only do I want to get it right, but I want to do better than everybody else. And so the ancient teachers wrote lengthy commentaries, trying to decide what was work and what wasn't. These commentaries on Sabbath-keeping bring us back to the story in Mark 2:23-3:6.

Dragging a stick on the ground was forbidden on the Sabbath as a form of plowing. It was permitted to spit on a rock but not on the ground. If you spit on a rock, the spit would eventually evaporate, but if you spit in the dirt, it might actually make the dirt come together and form some sort of clay, which could conceivably be made into a brick.

I am told that there is a hotel in Jerusalem that has a "Sabbath elevator" in the hotel. This elevator is programmed to stop at every floor all twenty-four hours of the Sabbath. The rationale is that if you happen to be walking down the hall and the door opens, you can step into the car, and then if the car comes to a floor where you want to be anyway and the door opens, you can walk out, without having done any work. But if you push the button, that's work, and you're violating the Sabbath.

I have long told my children of a particular issue that arises in the church: we have congregations and individuals who are quick to "draw lines" that God did not draw. They seek to 'legislate' where they have no authority. This is wrong! We should not "add to" "or take away" from God's Word. God knows how to instruct His people and God knows what we need. Let's leave it to Him!

We must also admit that there is also an element in our brotherhood that seeks to "erase lines" that God has drawn. This is also wrong!

We need to avoid the Pharisaical attitudes which Jesus condemned in Matthew 23! We must not "bind loads on people" and do it with no willingness to "lift a finger" on their behalf.

The very commandment that called for joyful rest became an incredible burden. You have to work very hard to keep the Sabbath, as it turns out. You have to plan ahead and do many things on the sixth day, getting everything prepared, in order to be ready for the seventh. So the sixth day becomes especially

burdensome. Further, you spend all of the seventh day wary of inadvertent failure: "What if I look the wrong direction? What if I say the wrong thing?"

The interaction that Jesus had with his accusers is very much like the struggle we have. Whenever God wants to give us something, we resist.

- Why does it feel like I'm being a better witness for the Lord when I'm most judgmental of my non-Christian friends?
- Why does it feel like I'm the best parent when I'm the most severe?
- Why do I imagine that God is pleased when I am the least joyful?
- Why do I think that the harsher I am, the better I am, or, conversely, that the more spontaneous I am, the more wicked I am?
- Where does that thinking come from? If we just take one step back and look at it, we see that it doesn't make any sense at all. That was Jesus' argument. The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath. Rest is a gift, not a burden.

### **FREEDOM AND CONFRONTATION**

Regarding the picking of heads of grain on the Sabbath, Jesus was asked, "*Why are your disciples doing what is unlawful?*"

In reply he asked them an important question: "*Haven't you ever read the Bible? God often appoints his servants to break conventions.*"

God is interested in love and righteousness. People who hear the message of the Bible will find themselves unable to settle for rigidity and narrowness and negativity. They won't assume that it's a good thing to do evil on the Sabbath, to kill rather than to make alive on the Sabbath, because the Bible is not like that.

Finally, note that Jesus said that he is Lord of the Sabbath. Do you think of him with that name very often? He is in charge of dispensing freedom and rest, taking off burdens. We're not supposed to be driven and desperate and confused.

He intends for us to experience rest and contentment and joy that come from the Spirit. The work has been accomplished, the slaves are free, life is a gift. He is the Lord of the Sabbath, and if he is your Lord, that is his intention for you.

## **Did Jesus Violate the Sabbath? by Wayne Jackson**

### **Question:**

A Christian writer/speaker, who travels extensively and lectures on "Does God Exist?", has written that the Bible indicates that Jesus, on one occasion, "violated" the Old Testament Sabbath-day law. He has cited the Gospel of Mark 2: 23-24. Would you comment on this?

It is very unfortunate that the misguided gentleman made such a reckless and unfounded assertion. The statement is not only wrong, it involves both the Scriptures, and the Lord Jesus, in serious difficulty. Note these two points.

First, if Christ "violated" the law of God, then he sinned. Transgression of the law is sin (1 Jn. 3:4). If the Lord sinned, the biblical affirmations regarding his perfection are false (see Jn. 8:29; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22). Thus, the brother's careless statement casts a reflection upon the integrity of the sacred Scriptures. Second, if Jesus broke the law of God, he would have been unable to function as the spotless sacrifice for our sins (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 1:18-19). Consequently, we would remain unredeemed, and of all men, be most pitiable.

And so, to contend that the Son of God “violated” the sabbath law is a concept that has dreadful consequences. The fact is, such a claim reveals a profound misunderstanding of the circumstances connected with Mark 2:23ff. Let us survey the details of that narrative.

On a certain sabbath day, Christ and his disciples were passing through a grain field. The disciples, being hungry (Mt. 12:1), began to pluck ears of grain and to husk them with their hands (Lk. 6:1).

The Pharisees saw the Lord’s men, and began to question Jesus as to why his disciples did that which was “not lawful” on the sabbath. These are the basic facts of the episode. Let us analyze the case. First, Christ himself was not directly accused of breaking the law on this occasion. Only the disciples were charged with the violation. But the Pharisees were hoping to hold Christ accountable for the conduct of his students. How many teachers today would be persuaded by such an argument?

Second, the truth is, however, not even the disciples actually violated the sabbath law of the Mosaic system. Hebrew law made provision for those in need to eat when they passed through a field of grain (Dt. 23:25; cf. Ruth 2:2-3). So it was not “stealing” that was the focus of the Pharisaic criticism. Rather, this was the crux of the matter. Over the years, Rabbinic tradition had evolved a host of infractions (some 39) that, allegedly, violated the law’s prohibition of work on the sabbath. (This matter has been discussed in detail in Emil Schurer’s, **A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ** (New York: Chas. Scribner’s Sons, 1891, II, pp. 96-105.)

One of these forbidden acts was “grinding,” which, by a nit-picking Pharisaical stretch, the disciples’ actions would be perceived to be doing. The activity, however, was hardly that of commercial grinding, as contemplated in the law.

Third, Jesus, in commenting upon the disciples’ conduct, plainly said they were “guiltless” (Mt. 12:7). The Greek term describes one who is not liable to blame in the matter of a crime (see W.E. Vine, **Expository Dictionary**, Iowa Falls: World, 1991, p. 367). The disciples broke no law.

Christ did not intend to let these arrogant, law-making Pharisees usurp the place of God in binding unauthorized burdens upon his men. With brilliant logic he demolished the charges of the opposition. Here was his procedure.

First, by an *ad hominem* argument (i.e., one designed to expose the inconsistency of an adversary) the Lord cited the case where David unlawfully ate of the tabernacle showbread (Mt. 12:4; cf. 1 Sam. 21:6). Since the Pharisees did not condemn David, who actually did what was “not lawful,” they were hopelessly illogical in censuring the Master’s men, who had breached no more than Pharisaic, uninspired traditions. This was a blistering exposure of their insincerity.

Second, Christ demonstrated that not all labor on the sabbath was condemned. The priests served (worked) on that holy day without any guilt whatever (Mt. 12:5; cf. Num. 28:10). The priestly “profaning” of that day was merely one of perception, not reality. What the priests did was authorized by God.

Jesus then said: “one greater than the temple is here” (v. 6). The expression “greater than the temple” is a clear affirmation of Christ’s authority as deity. If the priests, implementing Jehovah’s business, could work on the sabbath, surely the disciples, operating on behalf of God, the Son, were equally blameless in their conduct.

Third, another argument which justified the disciples’ conduct was Christ’s use of the expression “lord of the sabbath,” with reference to himself. As an agent in the creation of the universe (Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), certainly Jesus had the authority to regulate the use of the day of rest that followed the creation activity. One aspect of the term “lord” (*kurios*) signified “one who has full control of

something” (F.W. Danker, **Greek-English Lexicon**, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000, 577). It affirmed that Jesus had the right to exercise “authority over the rules that govern the Sabbath” (J.B. Green, S. McKnight, I.H. Marshall, **Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 1992, 489). Christ actually was contending that he had the authority to determine *how* the sabbath would be used, because he possessed the very nature of God.

Finally, the Lord argued for the legitimacy of the disciples’ conduct on the ground of the purpose of the sabbath law. It was designed originally for the benefit of man. It was an act of “mercy” from God to grant the Hebrews a respite one day a week – to rest the body and refresh the soul with religious exercises. The sabbath law was never intended to be a slavish regulation that functioned as an “end” within itself. Had the Pharisees recognized this principle, they would never have condemned these “guiltless” disciples of the Savior (Mt. 12:7).

And so, it is quite obvious, when all the facts are considered, that Jesus did not “violate” the sabbath, nor did he sanction the disciples’ violation of that sacred day. Those who take it upon themselves to be public teachers should study carefully before they make such irresponsible statements as that contained in the quotation under review.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#3 Why Are You So Afraid?**

*He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"*

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*That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"*

*He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

*He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"*

*They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*

#### **STORM-TOSSED LIVES**

The question Jesus asked is preceded by one that was asked of him, and it too is a provocative question. The disciples on the boat woke the Lord and asked him, *"Don't you care if we drown?"*

This story not only describes an incident that happened in history on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus and his disciples almost two thousand years ago, but it also illustrates conditions of life that resonate with most of us. There are times when life is overwhelming and treacherous for us, when there are anxious and threatening circumstances.

We petition God, we seek out friends, we read the Bible, we fast and pray, hoping to penetrate to heaven. And it seems as if our Savior and Lord is asleep. The thing we're most aware of is the hardship, and the thing we're least sure of is his love.

Human beings live storm-tossed lives. The most difficult question that non-Christian skeptics ask is the question of suffering. How can God be all-powerful and all-loving and allow his people to live in fear and anguish?

The place Jesus ended in this story is the place that everybody who believes has to come to in theology and experience. He asked the disciples, "Do you still have no faith?" In the long run, the problem of human suffering is the problem of faith. It requires that we be persuaded by One whose presence mitigates the need to have our questions answered.

### **WHY JESUS SLEPT IN THE BOAT**

Let's observe the details of the story. Verse 35 starts out, "*...When evening came....*" A long day of demanding public ministry preceded this account. Jesus was exhausted. "*...He said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side'....*"

They set out across the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, leaving the region of Galilee where Jews predominated and going to a region that was mostly Gentile, the Decapolis area. "Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him." The words "just as he was" remind us of how tired he was, and indicate why he quickly fell asleep.

It's helpful to see Jesus unable to keep his eyes open. Have you ever felt that way? We struggle with our weakness and weariness. We wish we could be better parents late in the day, and often we're too tired to be. Weary husbands and wives have little to offer each other. Making it through the day becomes a major accomplishment.

But it's encouraging to see Christ in that very same condition, because the words of Hebrews 4:15 come back: "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet was without sin.*"

He knows what it's like to be human. He's been in every human place, been pressured by every human pressure, even such a simple thing as weariness from a day's hard work. The next time you feel that way, remember you have a high priest who will minister to you with sympathy and understanding.

Another observation that's worth making from this scene is that after a day of teaching, the Lord decided to leave, precisely because the day of teaching was over. It was useful to those he had taught for him to leave. To hear Jesus speak for an entire day, to fill a notebook full of the themes of the kingdom of God, to be given instruction in the truth in wonderful and creative and picturesque ways, and then for him to leave, suggests to us that there comes a point when learning should lead to obedience.

Rather than allowing these people to spend the next day in another seminar, and the next, as if more information were the key to everything, Jesus realized, "I've taught them more than they can handle. And it is thinking harder about what they have already been told, deepening their experience with the truth they already have, that this group in Galilee needs. So I'm going elsewhere for a time." Similarly, the majority of us in this church have more information than we have experience with the truth, we know more than we believe, we've been told more than we act on.

### **THE PROBLEM OF OVERREACTING**

Moving farther into the story, we ought to consider the nature of the storm. Mark records this, probably from Peter's telling of it, as a "furious squall," as the New International Version translates it. On the Sea of Galilee, which is roughly the size of Lake Tahoe, there are seasons when gusts of wind blow down off the Golan Heights. It's set in a valley between hills that form a corridor for the winds. This was not a supernatural event; it was a storm of the type that still happens on the Sea of Galilee. It was a very serious storm. It was at night, which made it even more dangerous. The text is very clear that the disciples faced a treacherous set of circumstances.

But the question that we might ask is whether this was the zenith of testing that these disciples thought it was. Were they in the most extreme of conditions? Were they at their wit's end, completely overcome, with nowhere to turn? Is that what the passage is telling us? Or was this a storm like storms they had seen before? After all, these were fishermen who had spent their life on this lake. I believe the disciples were overreacting, and we can learn why as we hear Jesus' question to them.

Jesus was never worried about the storm. When he was awakened, he wasn't shaken by an awful storm-wracked sea. He rebuked the storm the way you would rebuke an overzealous puppy: "Quiet, stop! Calm down!" One translator renders it, "Pipe down!" And he stopped the storm not because he felt lives were threatened, but so he could have a conversation. He was calming noise and confusion. Jesus treated the storm as a difficult test, a demanding set of circumstances, a hard lesson, but not as if all were about to be lost at any moment.

Many of us conclude at times that we are in emergency situations when we are not. Many of us feel overwhelmed by pressures and demands and stresses. We give ourselves permission to throw up our hands and tear our clothes and wail and feel sorry for ourselves and expect others to come rushing in to help. We declare ourselves to be at the end of our rope and rail at the unfairness of it all. That is essentially a declaration of immaturity.

This was a hard storm, but the disciples' sense that their lives were momentarily to be forfeit was an overreaction.

Rather than grab Jesus and accuse him of lovelessness in this out-of-control way, they had the opportunity to face the storm with faith, bail out the boat, and work together with the sailors in the other boats in case someone fell overboard. They had the opportunity to trust God and strengthen each other in very trying conditions.

Young Christians often have the mistaken notion that coming to the Lord means the end of life's troubles. Did you ever think that? And for many, in the earliest months of Christian life there is wonderful provision. Doors open at just the right moment, the sun comes out just when the clouds seem to be gathering, and wonderful possibilities abound. Then the storm strikes. Maturity comes from trusting God when there is no evidence of his presence. Storms are the school in which we learn faith. Emotional overreaction to demanding circumstances is one indicator of how much we have left to learn.

It was, of course, completely legitimate for the disciples to awaken Jesus. A faithful response in waking him up would be to say, "Here's a bucket-you need to start bailing," or, "What do you think we ought to do?" or, "These kinds of storms are nothing to trifle with, and we need all hands on deck." The problem with their response was that they had concluded that Jesus had stopped loving them, and they had given way to panic.

### **THE WORST FEAR OF ALL**

Let's consider the struggle that elicited their question and Jesus' question in response. They grabbed him and said, "Don't you care? How could anyone who loves us treat us the way you're treating us?" The sleeping Savior, who had performed miracles for others, was unresponsive to their plight.

Job wrestled with some of the same issues: a God who didn't respond to the suffering of his loved one. What we usually say to God when we're hurting is this: "I need you to wake up and change the circumstances. If you really care for me, you'll do something to get me out of the mess I'm in. But at a minimum, if you don't change the circumstances, at least explain them." The Lord could act if he chose to. We know his power is great enough, but the fact that we are still struggling, anxious, uncertain, confused, and weighed down is evidence that he doesn't care.



It is not physical danger or even the prospect of death that we fear the most. The deepest fears are about eternity and the character of God.

The disciples had placed ultimate hope in Christ. They had seen him release sufferers from the power of demons. They had heard him tell them truths that no one else had ever spoken before. They had heard him pray as only he could pray, with a Spirit-given intimacy with God in his prayers that they had no experience with. They had seen him challenge fleshly religion and declare the love of God. They believed that he was a source of hope, that he could be trusted, that life would make sense with him at the center. But now he was asleep in their hour of need, and they were beginning to say to themselves not, "I fear I am going to die," but, "I fear he is not who he claims to be."

I have trusted my life to Jesus of Nazareth who lived as no other has and died as no other has and is now seated at God's right hand. I would be shaken to the core if these things proved to be a hoax. The disciples on the lake were not most afraid of physical death (by drowning). They were deeply shaken by the possibility that Jesus would put them in extreme circumstances and then ignore their plight-that he was not who he claimed to be. "Do you not care...?"

"The boat won't sink, and the storm won't last forever." The gospel won't "sink"; it will bear all the weight you put on it. The hope of the gospel doesn't dim over time or fail under pressure. The Lord will supply our needs for every day of this life and for eternity.

But the second phrase is important, too: "The storm won't last forever." It is not true that being a Christian is to be assigned to suffer forever and ever. The end of the story is not more suffering. The end of the story is joy, glory, the approval of God, being made like Christ, fellowship with other people who believe, the end of evil.

### **A HEALTHY FEAR OF GOD**

This account has a great ending. "They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" A moment earlier they had been terrified by the storm; now they were more terrified! They saw the one who, with a word, banished wind and waves.

That's what it means to have faith: to be more impressed with Christ than we are with the problems, to have a fear of God in the proper sense. This is no one to be trifled with, and when he engages our enemies, they will fall. However we evaluate our circumstances, whatever our feelings tell us-and very often they are negative and hurtful, with no reason for hope-against all these is the word of Christ. We ought to be more impressed with him than we are with our analysis of our circumstances.

Moses preached a wonderful sermon in the book of Deuteronomy. He stood before the children of Israel at the end of their wilderness wanderings. He was at the end of his life, he knew, and he would not be with them much longer. He preached of law and covenant, of the past and future, of blessings and curses. At the end of the sermon, this great patriarch, this great man of faith, the friend of God, used one of my favorite metaphors for thinking about God's love.

*Deuteronomy 33:26-27: "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."*

Always underneath everything is the embrace of God, the one who holds on to us. His arms are everlasting; they will not fail. Storms, problems, pressures, failures, inadequacies, anxieties, confusions-underneath them all are the everlasting arms of God. He will embrace us and hold us up.

"There is no one like the God of Jeshurun...." That's what Jesus helped these men in the boat see. Faith that believes that underneath everything are the everlasting arms of God will give us the courage we need, whatever the circumstances.

*Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

## **#4 What Is Your Name?**

*Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" Mark 5:1-20*

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In the last message we looked at a storm on a lake, a story of circumstances that were out of control. We talked about the times when the events of our lives are chaotic and frightening. Jesus asked the disciples in the midst of the storm on the lake, "*Why are you so afraid?*" There are answers to the fear of the turmoil of storms.

The issue before us in this message is related but different. It concerns not external circumstances that are chaotic, but inward conditions that are frightening and terrible. The question the Lord will ask in the center of this story is, "*What is your name?*" It's a question of identity, of untangling and bringing to light what is inside. We'll return more than once to ask that question of ourselves as we read the passage.

Verse 35 tells us that it was late in the evening when Jesus and his friends set sail. The Lake of Galilee is 13 miles long at its longest, and 8 miles wide at its widest. At this particular part it was about 5 miles across. They had made the journey and, on the way, they had encountered the storm, and now had reached land. It was a part of the lake-side where there were many caves in the limestone rock, and many of these caves were used as tombs in which bodies were laid. At the best of times it was an eerie place; as night fell it must have been grim indeed.

In Mark 5:1-20 it is still the same night as in 4:35-41. That day Jesus had had a teaching ministry all day long. At the end of the day he was very tired. He said, "*Let us go over to the other side.*" They got in the boat, probably at dusk or sometime late in the day, and the harrowing experience with the storm that I just mentioned. Now the storm and the journey are over. It is sometime in the middle of the night.

**(Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39)**

<sup>[MK 5:]</sup><sup>1</sup>They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.<sup>NIV-6-43</sup> <sup>[which is across the lake from Galilee<sup>LK</sup>]</sup> <sup>2</sup>When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil<sup>NIV-6-44</sup> spirit [two demon-possessed men<sup>MT</sup>] came from the tombs to meet him. [For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>3</sup>This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. <sup>4</sup>For he had often been chained hand and foot [and kept under guard<sup>LK</sup>], but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet [and had been driven by the demon into solitary places<sup>LK</sup>]. No one was strong enough to subdue him. [They were so violent that no one could pass that way.<sup>MT</sup>] <sup>5</sup>Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

### **MARK 5:6-10 WITH LUKE 8:28, 31, MT 8:29**

<sup>6</sup>When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. <sup>7</sup>He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God [I beg you<sup>LK</sup>] that you won’t torture me! [before the appointed time<sup>MT</sup>]” <sup>8</sup>For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!”

<sup>9</sup>Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.”  
<sup>10</sup>And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area [into the Abyss<sup>LK</sup>].

If we piece together the synoptic narratives, we discover that Jesus probably left Capernaum between six and seven p.m. (cf. Mk 4:35). Because of the storm, it likely took three to four hours to go across the lake (less than five miles). Thus, it is now probably sometime between 9 p.m. and midnight. The action takes place under a starlit sky with an audience of hired hands who watch the swine.

This is a powerful and tender narrative. Jesus has just subdued the natural forces of the storm. He now subdues the spiritual forces of darkness.

The characteristics of demons other than the ones given in the outline above are said to be as follows:

1. They are spirits (Matthew 12:43-45).
2. They are Satan’s emissaries (Matthew 12:26-27).
3. They know their fate is to be eternal doom (Matthew 8:29; Luke 8:31).
4. They affect man’s health (Matthew 12:22; Matthew 17:15-18; Luke 13:16). Apparently, demon-possession is to be distinguished from mental illness.
5. They seduce men to a false religion of asceticism (1 Tim. 4:1-3).
6. They seduce men to depart from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1).
7. They are cast out of people (exorcism) in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:18).

Evil spirits are enemies of Christ and of man. As such, they oppress, possess, and obsess people.

- (1) They delude the world and blind people to Christ (Ephes. 2:2).
- (2) They attack theology (1 Tim. 4:1-3).
- (3) They attack society (Rev. 9:3, 20-21).
- (4) They attack individuals (Luke 8:29).
- (5) They influence people to commit the sins of demon-worship, idolatry, sorcery, fornication, theft, murder, and much more (Rev. 9:20-21).

The believer’s defense is the Lord. The believer must pray and fast and take on the armor of God in order to stand against their power (Matthew 17:21; Ephes. 6:12f).

This passage is excellent for studying the character of evil spirits and the Lord’s power to deliver men from evil spirits.

The reference to demons here is not easy, of course, for modern, educated people. It is thought that civilization and education dispel the superstitious fears of the ancients, and that there are no such things as demons, only human fears that get called by these names. But the Bible is quite clear that there are in fact fallen angels in the world, evil personalities that are bent on destroying what God loves.

Some persons are extremely controlled by evil; others are just slightly controlled.

- Some men are said to be controlled by *demons*.
- Mary Magdalene is said to have been possessed by seven devils (Mark 16:9).
- Jesus referred to one devil being replaced by seven devils and the last state of the man being far worse (Luke 9:26).
- The man in the present passage is said to have been possessed by a Legion, that is, hordes of demons.

Jesus said of the devil and, by implication all the fallen angels, that he could be summed up as having two priorities or passions: murder and lies. "*[The devil]...was a murderer from the beginning...he is a liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44). Demons are finite in number, and God has placed limits on their capacity for destruction.

Further, the world, the flesh, and the devil, which the New Testament says is the array of problems that assail us, are related along a continuum. Rivalry with God and worship of self, with their attendant degradation and hypocrisy, are similar whether they're encountered in demons, in the proud ideas and patterns of the world, or in our own flesh.

This terrible account of a tragic figure demonized by not just one evil personality but a legion of them is a worst-case scenario. But this most dramatic version of the lesson will have application to people who are not invaded by foreign personalities. It will also be applicable to the potential for sin that resides in us: our own rebellion against God, our own pride and love of self, our own inclination to do what's wrong, to prefer unrighteousness.

### **THE EFFECT OF AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT**

With that in mind, let's look at the passage. Do your best to imagine the eeriest, most frightening sort of landscape. Jesus and the disciples landed their boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Gerasenes.

Jewish cemeteries were always located outside the city or town. This was necessary because Jewish law said that a person became temporarily defiled if a grave was touched. Some of the cemeteries were located around limestone hills or mountainous terrain. This enabled men to find caverns or else to hew out tombs in the limestone facing.

There were some caves and tombs, and in the moonlight there may have been evidence of the recent storm-branches and other debris. There were also these two thousand pigs moving around restlessly on the adjacent hillside, upset from the storm. Devout Jews to this day feel revulsion at the presence of pigs.

Out of the tombs there came a demon-possessed man. It was a fitting place for him to be, for demons, so they believed in those days, dwelt in woods and gardens and vineyards and dirty places, in lonely and desolate spots and among the tombs. It was in the night-time and before cock-crow that the demons were specially active. To sleep alone in an empty house at night was dangerous; to greet any person in the dark was perilous, for he might be a demon. To go out at night without a lantern or a torch was to court trouble. It was a perilous place and a perilous hour, and the man was a dangerous man.

The man was uncontrollable, unrestrained, untamed, wild, mad, violent tempered, often possessing super-human strength. All human efforts to help him had failed. He could not be helped, nor controlled, nor tamed.

Matthew tells us there was at least one other man who lived in the tombs, and that travelers avoided the place because of their violent behavior.

God's Servant, Jesus Christ, is the Master of every situation and the Conqueror of every enemy. If we trust Him and follow His orders, we need never be afraid. *Victory* is the major theme that binds this long

section together. Mark recorded four miracles that Jesus performed, and each miracle announces even to us today the defeat of an enemy. We look at the second of the four miracles today.

We see in this scene three different forces at work: **Satan, society, and the Saviour**. These same three forces are still at work in our world, trying to control the lives of people.

**First, we see what *Satan* can do to people.**

Satan is a thief whose ultimate purpose is to destroy (John 10:10; and see Rev. 9:11). We are not told how the demons entered these men and took control.

Because of Satan, the thief, these two men lost everything! They lost their homes and the fellowship of their families and friends. They lost their decency as they ran around in the tombs naked. They lost their self-control and lived like wild animals, screaming, cutting themselves, and frightening the citizens. They lost their peace and their purpose for living, and they would have remained in that plight had Jesus not come through a storm to rescue them.

Never underestimate the destructive power of Satan. He is our enemy and would destroy all of us if he could. Like a roaring lion, he seeks to devour us (1 Peter 5:8-9). It is Satan who is at work in the lives of unbelievers, making them “children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1-3). The two men in the Gerasene graveyard were no doubt extreme examples of what Satan can do to people, but what they reveal is enough to make us want to resist Satan and have nothing to do with him.

**The second force at work on these men was *society*, but society was not able to accomplish very much.**

The man was cut off from society. He did not live among the living; he lived among the dead. He represents *the living dead*; that is, all men without Christ are “dead in their sins” and are cut off from the *society of God*.

The disciples must have been confused and scared; “What in the world is going to happen now? What have we gotten ourselves into? This night has already been so terrible, how can things get even worse?”

Let's consider what Mark tells us about the demonized man. What was his life like before this night? We're told that he had an unclean spirit, or a demon. He was unfit for the company and approval of others, and not only that, but association with him was contaminating by his unclean status. He was isolated. There was at least one other demonized soul who lived there, but the very horror that made up their lives forbade them any kind of meaningful contact with each other. The people of the town had last approached this man with claims which he tore apart.

He could not stop himself from being violent to others and to himself. He hated who he was. He was tormented and self-destructive, slashing himself with stones and going about unclothed.

- We know what it's like to rebel against God. We know what it's like to feel unclean, unworthy of association with good people, to feel as if our life contaminates others.
- We know what it's like to be isolated, to try to have relationships with other people and have them retreat from us.
- We know what it's like to be out of control, to have habits and pressures and thoughts that make us want to do what we hate doing, and whatever chains we use to stop ourselves prove inadequate.
- We know what it's like to be tormented and self-destructive. The Gerasene demoniac experienced in the extreme what all of us experience in some degree.

About all that society can do for problem people is to isolate them, put them under guard and, if necessary, bind them (Luke 8:29). Often these men had been chained, but the demons had given them strength to break the chains.

Even the attempts to tame these men had failed. With all of its wonderful scientific achievements, society still cannot cope with the problems caused by Satan and sin. While we thank God that society does offer a limited amount of restraint and protection, we must confess that society cannot permanently solve these problems and deliver Satan's terrorized victims.

### **THE CONVOLUTED PATH TO FREEDOM**

The heart of this passage is the conversation that began when this man saw from a distance that the boat was occupied by no ordinary captain. He began to rush toward the boat and its terrified occupants.

The order in which events are told is peculiar. Verses 6-7 say the man saw Jesus from a distance, ran and fell on his knees in front of him, and shouted at the top of his voice, *"What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!"* Now that sounds like the first statement made, but notice verse 8 says, *"For Jesus had [already] said to him, 'Come out of this man, you evil spirit!'"*

We shall not even begin to understand this story unless we see how serious a case of demon-possession this man was. It is clear that Jesus made more than one attempt to heal him. Verse 8 tells us that Jesus had begun by using his usual method—an authoritative order to the demon to come out. On this occasion that was not successful. Next, he demanded what the demon's name was. It was always supposed in those days that, if a demon's name could be discovered, it gave a certain power over it. An ancient magical formula says, "I adjure thee, every demonic spirit, Say whatsoever thou art." The belief was that if the name was known the demon's power was broken. In this case even that did not prove enough.

Mark didn't record the events in the order in which they occurred. And he wrote it that way deliberately, I'm convinced, because freedom from interior rebellion often comes in tangled fits and starts.

Jesus saw the man running down the hill looking and sounding terrible. The first thing Jesus said was, *"Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"* Jesus was not unfamiliar with addressing demonized people.

In Mark 1 he rebuked an unclean spirit and the spirit departed. I think the Lord assumed here that he had spoken a command and that the command had been obeyed. In that case the statement in verse 7 would have been the words of a desperate man. *"What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!"*

These sentences spoken together are the doctrine of hell. To have such clear knowledge of the person and status of Jesus, yet believe he's a torturer—one come to hurt and condemn—is the worst condition of all.

### **TWO LEVELS OF IDENTITY**

When Jesus heard the man still expressing demonic thinking, he realized that his initial command banishing the demon had not finished the job. So he asked, *"What is your name?"* Jesus was determined to sort out what was tangled in this man's life.

This is a provocative question on many levels, but right now we'll concentrate on two: (1) "What is your name?" can mean "What identity is going to finally remain? When it becomes clear to you who you are, by what name will you be known? What father is going to give you a name that you will bear throughout the days of your life?" And, (2) "What is your name?" can mean "What dark things are there within you?"

This sense of the question makes dark realities take their name-things that we would hide from and deny: lust, addictions, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, obsession. These things influence us destructively, but they stay hidden from view, like a legion of demons.

Scripture teaches four facts about the devil and his angels (messengers, demons, evil spirits) that should always be kept in mind.

1. They believe there is One God and they tremble (James 2:19).
2. They have nothing to do with Jesus; that is, their nature is entirely different from the clean spirit of Jesus. Evil and evil spirits are diametrically opposed to the purity and holiness of Jesus.
3. The Son of God has come to destroy the works of the devil. All evil and evil spirits are to be destroyed (1 John 3:8; cp. Hebrews 2:14-15).
4. They are doomed to everlasting torment

When Jesus asked this question, these evil personalities who had resided in this man and had terrorized the community were forced to speak of themselves. The reason they hadn't been banished the first time is that there were too many of them. Jesus hadn't understood the level of ruin that this man was living with, but now he would address them all.

They begged him not to make them leave the area. Now, Jesus didn't have a soft spot for demons. He didn't answer, in effect, "I'm sorry it's hard for you. I know you don't want to leave-let's find some alternative." That wasn't the issue at all.

This hoard of horrible entities longed to stay in that region. It was a place of death, with caves where dead people were buried. It was a place of unclean animals. It was a place of fearful circumstances. It was a place where violence was accomplished and lives were ruined. It was a stronghold of evil by the sea of Galilee, the region where the Messiah was born. That's why they said, "Don't make us leave."

Jesus knew that in order for anybody to be sure that they had been banished, he had to do something dramatic. If he just invisibly banished them, no onlooker would know for sure whether they were gone, whether the wicked place had been cleansed.

**This brings us to the third force, that of *the Saviour*.**

What did Jesus Christ do for these men? To begin with, He graciously came to them in love, and even went through a storm to do it. Nothing could stop the Lord from coming to that graveyard and bringing deliverance to those men.

Not only did Jesus come to them, but He spoke to them and permitted them to speak to Him. The citizens of that area avoided the two demoniacs, but Jesus treated them with love and respect. He came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).

It is interesting to note that, as the demons spoke through the man, they confessed what they really believed. Demons have faith and even tremble because of what they believe (James 2:19); but neither their faith nor their fear can save them.

Demons believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He has authority over them. They believe in the reality of judgment and that one day they will be cast into hell (see Matt. 8:29). This is more than many religious people believe today!

Nowhere does the Bible explain either the psychology or the physiology of demon possession. The man who spoke to Jesus was under the control of *a legion* of demons, and a Roman legion could consist of as many as 6,000 men! It is frightening to think of the horrors this man experienced day and night as thousands of unclean spirits tormented him. No doubt the other demonized man experienced his share of agony too.

Satan tried to destroy these men, but Jesus came to deliver them. By the power of His Word, He cast out the demons and set the men free. They begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss, the place of torment (Mark 5:7; Luke 8:31). It is encouraging to note that the demons did not know what Jesus planned to do.

Mark 5 tells of three requests: the demons requested that Jesus send them into the pigs (Mark 5:12); the citizens requested that Jesus leave the area (Mark 5:17); and one of the former demoniacs requested that Jesus allow him to follow Him (Mark 5:18). Our Lord granted the first two requests but not the third one.

#### **MARK 5:11-13 WITH MATTHEW 8:30-31**

*[<sup>30</sup>Some distance from them<sup>MT</sup>] <sup>11</sup>A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. <sup>12</sup>The demons begged Jesus, “[If you drive us out<sup>MT</sup>] Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” <sup>13</sup>He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.*

#### **MARK 5:14-17 WITH MATTHEW 8:34, LK 8:37**

*<sup>14</sup>Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. <sup>15</sup>[Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus.<sup>MT</sup>] When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there [at Jesus’ feet<sup>LK</sup>], dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. <sup>16</sup>Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. <sup>17</sup>Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region [because they were overcome with fear<sup>LK</sup>].*

#### **MARK 5:18-20**

*<sup>18</sup>As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. <sup>19</sup>Jesus did not let him, but [sent him away [and]<sup>LK</sup>] said, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” <sup>20</sup>So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis<sup>NIV-6-45</sup> how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.*

So he gave them what they wanted, but not what they intended. He gave them permission to go into the pigs, which proceeded to drown themselves in the lake. Then it became clear that this place was no longer inhabited by demons. The stronghold had been taken by One who was stronger.

Mark doesn't make clear whether the townspeople reacted with ungodly motives or not. He just says they were afraid. You can understand why. I think the disciples were terrified. It was presumably the next morning by the time the pig-herders had gathered everybody to come out and see what occurred. During the night a storm had suddenly stopped, a howling demoniac had been made well, and a herd of pigs had been destroyed. What would all these events lead to?

The next scene is that of a people who callously rejected God by begging Jesus to leave them. Five acts are seen here:

1. There was the logical action: the swine keepers ran into the city to the owners of the swine to relate what had happened. The whole herd had been destroyed; it was a huge and devastating loss financially. They had to make sure the fault was not laid at their feet.

2. There was the logical investigation by the owners and city folk: they came to Jesus to investigate the loss. They saw the man sitting before Jesus—clothed and in his right mind. (Note: when Jesus cleanses a man, the man comes to his *right mind*. He is truly cured.) They were stricken with fear of Jesus’ power, for they had known the man and his hopeless condition. What power this Jesus must have!

3. There was the logical account by eyewitnesses: they shared with the owners and city folk. Note: they told the good news of what had happened to the man, but they also added what had happened to the swine. They could not get over the financial loss. They thought more of the world and its money than of God meeting people’s needs.

4. There was the illogical request: they asked Jesus to leave. “They were taken with great fear” (Luke 8:37). They were gripped with fear, not a fear of reverence and humility, but a fear of dread and hatred that He had caused so much loss and that He might punish them even more.



5. There was the tragic end: Jesus left. He did exactly what the people requested Him to do.

The final scene is that of a man deliberately commissioned by Jesus. The man was naturally thankful, very appreciative. He immediately wanted to become a follower of Jesus, but Jesus saw something unique in the man, something that would make him a dynamic evangelist among his own people. Consequently, Jesus commissioned him to be a disciple at home. Two significant things are said about his witness: he was faithful and he was successful.

Jesus left them with a witness. He told the man to go back to the people in the area and tell them what had happened. Later the gospel flourished in the Decapolis. We know from the book of Acts that there was a strong church in Damascus, one of the cities of the Decapolis (that's where Paul went when he was first converted, and he was welcomed and disciplined there).

So this region became a fertile field for evangelism, partly because, like the account of the woman of Samaria, awareness of an extraordinary act of mercy and power made people ready to hear more of the Savior..

Did Jesus have the right to destroy 2,000 pigs and possibly put their owners out of business? If these men were Jews, then they had no right to be raising and selling unclean pigs anyway. However, this was Gentile territory, so the owners were probably Gentiles.

Certainly, Jesus was free to send the demons wherever He desired—into the abyss, into the swine, or to any other place that He chose. Then why send them into the swine? For one thing, by doing it that way, Jesus gave proof to all the spectators that a miracle of deliverance had really taken place. The destruction of the pigs also gave assurance to the two men that the unclean spirits were actually gone.

The swineherds did not want to be blamed for the loss of the pigs, so they immediately ran to tell the owners what had happened. When the owners arrived at the scene, they were afraid as they beheld the dramatic changes that had taken place in the two men. Instead of running around naked, the men were clothed, seated, and in their right minds.

Why would the owners ask Jesus to leave? Why not ask Him to stay and perform similar cures for others who were also in need? The owners had one main interest—business—and they were afraid that if Jesus remained any longer, He would do even more “damage” to the local economy! Our Lord does not stay where He is not wanted, so He left. What an opportunity these people missed!

Why did Jesus not permit the healed demoniac to follow Him? The man's request was certainly motivated by love for the Lord Jesus, and what a testimony he had! But Jesus knew that the man's place was in his own home, with his loved ones, where he could bear witness to the Saviour.

After all, effective Christian living must begin at home where people know us the best. If we honor God there, then we can consider offering ourselves for service elsewhere. This man became one of the earliest missionaries to the Gentiles. Jesus had to leave, but the man remained and bore faithful witness to the grace and power of Jesus Christ. We trust that many of those Gentiles believed on the Saviour through his witness.

### **THE ONE WHO IS IN COMMAND**

The question Jesus asked remains crucial. "What is your name? With what identity will you make your way in the world?" A lot of people will tell us who they think we are. Voices from our past will try to lay claim to us in the present. We must insist that Jesus' claim on us, and nothing else, answers the question of our identity.

Further, it is helpful to see Jesus at work, exposing the dark things inside that flourish when they remain unnamed. We will never experience healing if we keep our sin covered up. What things in your life need

to be named? What are you hiding from yourself, what dead body has been walled up in the crevice down in the basement? The Lord calls for the legion to name itself. It is the work of a loving Savior. He calmly does the surgery and banishes the terrible things, just as he did for the man who had screamed, "Have you come to torture me?" and who was sitting calmly at Jesus' feet by the end of the story, clothed and in his right mind.

This was a wild night. It started with a threatening storm on a lake. It proceeded directly to tombs and pigs and death and violence in a region of the lake that had become a stronghold for evil. The disciples went from the frying pan to the fire to a bonfire. Every time they turned around, conditions grew more frightful. Jesus stilled the storm, calmed the waves, banished the demons, and healed the man from the tombs.

He is no different today. He understands who we are and cares enough about us to want to make us whole. He intends us to be the kind of people of faith who can go into our world and say, "I have something to tell you about what God has done for me." He is no less committed, no less in charge, not overwhelmed by the things that we bring to him. He doesn't find them too hard to handle.

**A. We have here a representation of THE WRETCHED STATE OF THE SINNER.**

1. That state is attributable to *possession by an evil power*. This does not, indeed, affect man's responsibility, but it affirms the action of supernatural agency. Sinners "have fallen into the snare of the devil."
2. The signs of that state are many and distressing. Like the demoniac, the sinner is injurious to himself, is harmful to others, and consequently is unfit for society.
3. A picture is here painted of the sinner's *hopeless condition*. As the demoniac's possession was manifold ("we are legion"), was prolonged, and was so severe that all human efforts had failed to bring relief, so was the condition of the heathen world when the Saviour came to earth in condition so debased and so confirmed in its misery that to the human eye no dawnstreak of hope was visible. And the heart, abandoned to the control of evil, is in a state for which no human relief or help is available.

**B. We have here a representation of THE SINNER'S MIGHTY SAVIOUR.** A greater contrast than that between the wretched and raving maniac and the calm and holy Jesus it would not be possible to imagine. Yet the two came together. Divine authority and compassion encountered human sin, foulness, and degradation, and the demon was exorcised and the sufferer made whole.

1. Observe the *Divine authority of the Lord is acknowledged*. It is certainly remarkable that from the mouth of the demoniac should come the confession that Jesus is "the Son of the Most High God." This Christ is; and, were he not this, his approach would bring no comfort to the sinner's heart.
2. In addition to this verbal acknowledgment, we observe *an actual submission* to and experience of Christ's power. "The unclean spirit came out." Jesus is "mighty to save." As during his ministry, so wherever the gospel is preached, the power of Christ is proved in actual experience. However formidable the foe may be, Jesus is the Conqueror.

**C. We have here a representation of THE SINNER'S SALVATION.**

1. There is *complete deliverance* from the tyranny of former enemies. "Taken captive by the Lord's servant unto the will of God" — such is the description given by an apostle of the great and spiritual emancipation which nevertheless brings souls into a new and better bondage.
2. Sanity is a consequence of our Lord's interposition. "When he came to himself" is the description of the change which took place in the repenting prodigal. Only he who turns to God can be truly said to be "in his right mind."
3. *Tranquility* is a natural sign of a spiritual restoration. The Saviour is the Prince of peace, and the gospel is a gospel of peace, and peace is a fruit of the Spirit. True religion calms agitation, stills the tempests of the soul, and brings harmony to human life.

**D.** We have an example of the WITNESS OF THE SAVED SINNER TO THE SAVIOUR. The conduct of the healed demoniac is an emblem of the consecrated testimony of the ransomed soul to the great Deliverer.

1. It is prompted by grateful affection — A affection that would fain abide in the valued society of the Redeemer.
2. It is appointed and authorized by the Lord himself: “Go to thy house,” etc.
3. It is borne especially to those nearest and dearest: “thy friends.”
4. It consists of personal experience: “how great things the Lord hath done for *thee*.”
5. It excites interest and wonder. Such testimony from such a witness cannot be without effect. The saved lead others to the same Saviour whose virtue they have themselves experienced.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#5 Who Touched Me? -- Mark 5:21-34**

*Mk 5:30-31 with Lk 8:45--<sup>30</sup>At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"*

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*Mk 5:24b-29 with Lk 8:42, Mt 9:20 -- A large crowd followed and pressed around him [almost crushed him<sup>LK</sup>]. <sup>25</sup>And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. <sup>27</sup>When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched [the edge of<sup>MT</sup>] his cloak, <sup>28</sup>because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." <sup>29</sup>Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.*

*Mk 5:30-31 with Lk 8:45--<sup>30</sup>At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" [When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master"<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>31</sup>"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"*

*Lk 8:46--<sup>46</sup>But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me."*

*Mk 5:32-34 with Lk 8:47, Mt 9:22 --<sup>32</sup>... Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup>Then the woman, [seeing that she could not go unnoticed,<sup>LK</sup>] knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. [In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>34</sup>He said to her, "[Take heart<sup>MT</sup>] Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."*

On July 19, 1848, some 153 years ago, a convention of women and men, most of whom had worked together in the movement to abolish slavery, ratified the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. This declaration deliberately used the language of the Declaration of Independence in its

insistence that all men and women were created equal. The convention and this declaration were the beginning of a 70-year campaign to secure for women the right to vote in this country, and it is hailed as the beginning of modern feminism.

The desire for significance and respect is God-given. Men and women are made in God's image, created to lead lives of dignity and purpose.

However, those who celebrate the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 do not go back far enough in history in seeking to renew a commitment to the dignity of all persons. Despite the fact that Christian teaching and practice have often been accused of undermining women, in reality it is Jesus Christ who gives meaning and worth to every life, to women and men alike.

### **THE SUFFERING OF UNCLEANNES**

This sermon series focuses on questions Jesus asked. The question in this message is "Who touched me?" It is answered by a woman in desperate circumstances stemming from a physical malady unique to women.

The woman in this story suffered from a trouble which was very common and very hard to deal with. The Talmud itself gives no fewer than eleven cures for such a trouble. Some of them are tonics and astringents; but some of them are sheer superstitions like carrying the ashes of an ostrich-egg in a linen rag in summer and a cotton rag in winter.

No doubt this poor woman had tried even these desperate remedies. The woman had a hemorrhage that was apparently incurable and was slowly destroying her. One can only imagine the pain and emotional pressure that sapped her strength day after day. When you consider her many disappointments with the doctors and the poverty it brought her, you wonder how she endured as long as she did.

But there was one added burden: according to the Law, she was ceremonially unclean, which greatly restricted both her religious and her social life (Lev. 15:19ff). What a burden she carried!

The physicians had had no success with the treatment of this woman's case, and she had heard of Jesus. But she had this problem—her trouble was an embarrassing thing; to go in the crowd and to state it openly was something she could not face; and so she decided to try to touch Jesus in secret.

The twelve-year span of uncleanness that this woman experienced meant that she must have lived with questions about herself: "What is it about me that makes me the object of such unending struggle? Where is God, and why doesn't he answer my prayers? Why am I forced away from him, forbidden to go into the temple for refreshment of public worship?" She was isolated from people, too. Others would stay away to avoid ritual contamination.

However, she let nothing stand in her way as she pushed through the crowd and came to Jesus. She could have used any number of excuses to convince herself to stay away from Him. She might have said: "I'm not important enough to ask Jesus for help!" or "Look, He's going with Jairus, so I won't bother Him now." She could have argued that nothing else had helped her, so why try again? Or she might have concluded that it was not right to come to Jesus as a last resort, after visiting all those physicians. However, she laid aside all arguments and excuses and came by faith to Jesus.

This woman is apparently acting out of Hellenistic superstition which assumed that a healer's power was transferred to his clothes. But she gets results! Jesus respects her faith, and she is healed through her deliberate act of touching the edge of his cloak. This was most likely one of the tassels which hung from the corners of his prayer shawl (Num 15:38-39; Deut 22:12). This is, admittedly, an odd healing miracle. But it will not be the only time such a thing takes place (cf. Acts 5:15 [the shadow of Peter]; Acts 19:11-12 [the handkerchief of Paul]). God respected her faith even if it flowed from the superstitions of the day.

What kind of faith did she have? It was weak, timid, and perhaps somewhat superstitious. She kept saying to herself that she had to touch His clothes in order to be healed (see Mark 3:10; 6:56). She had heard reports of others being healed by Jesus (Mark 5:27), so she made this one great attempt to get through to the Saviour. She was not disappointed: Jesus honored her faith, weak as it was, and healed her body.

Here was a woman who came to Jesus as a last resort; having tried every other cure that the world had to offer she finally tried him. Many and many a man has come to seek the help of Jesus when he himself was at his wits' end. He may have battled with temptation until he could fight no longer and stretched out a hand, crying, "Lord, save me! I perish!" He may have struggled on with some exhausting task until he reached the breaking-point and then cried out for a strength which was not his strength. He may have laboured to attain the goodness which haunted him, only to see it recede ever farther away, until he was utterly frustrated. No man should need to be driven to Christ by the force of circumstances, and yet many come that way; and, even if it is thus we come, he will never send us empty away.

*"When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me."*

### **Faith of the hopeless**

This approach always lays hold of Jesus. Jesus senses the touch of the hopeless and always helps the hopeless who come to Him. A hopeless approach involves four attitudes.

#### **\* There is the last resort attitude.**

The woman had been hemorrhaging for twelve years; it was uncontrollable. No one could touch her nor anything she had touched. By law she was considered unclean, so unclean that she was to be divorced by her husband (Leviticus 15:25-27). She was to be totally cut off from society and religious worship. This particular woman had tried all she knew. She had seen "many physicians" and "spent all that she had," and yet she "grew worse." There was nowhere else to turn except to Jesus.

There is no need to reach the point of hopelessness; no need to reach the *end of our ropes*; no need to become utterly depressed. Circumstances should never be allowed to destroy us, not to the point of utter hopelessness. Nevertheless, many reach that point. The one thing to remember is that Jesus does care and will never turn away from the hopeless. He opens His arms to all who come—even to the hopeless.

#### **\*There is the shy, embarrassed, unworthy attitude.**

Note the woman elbowed her way through the crowd and came up behind Jesus. She wanted to touch Jesus without being seen or noticed. Why? She was embarrassed and felt unworthy. Her hemorrhaging was a personal, intimate matter for her, something she did not want to be known and discussed. She was considered unclean; therefore, she felt unworthy to approach Jesus.

It is the sense of unworthiness and hopelessness that touches the heart of Jesus; it is not being shy and fearing embarrassment. Being shy and fearing embarrassment are only the attitudes that create a sense of unworthiness and hopelessness. Jesus accepts any of the hopeless who truly come to Him, no matter what causes their sense of unworthiness.

Embarrassing matters, personal matters, secret matters—all are understood by Christ. He wishes no one to suffer ridicule or shame. He will accept the shy, quiet approach that comes to Him. There are personal, embarrassing matters that we all wish to keep secret. These sometimes cause problems for us, serious problems that drive us to the point of hopelessness. Even a shy, embarrassed attitude that approaches Jesus will be acceptable. A sense of unworthiness and hopelessness touches His heart.

#### **There is the expectant, believing attitude.**

Note that the hopeless woman believed what “she had heard of Jesus.” She believed the gospel, that Jesus loved and cared and would make her whole. Note the thoughts of her mind, “If I may touch but His clothes, I shall be whole” (Mark 5:28). She believed in her thoughts, in her heart. She believed two things: the gospel (what she had heard about Jesus) and the power of Jesus to make her whole.

**There is the confessing attitude.**

Jesus had made the way easy for her. He had allowed her to be healed without embarrassment, but it was not enough to believe in secret. The secret disciple had to be brought to the point of confessing her faith.

The healing had cost Jesus. Spiritual virtue had flowed out from Him into the woman. The expenditure of virtue took its toll, sapping His physical strength. Jesus felt virtue drain from His body. He turned and asked the pressing throng surrounding Him, “Who touched my clothes?” The disciples were unaware of what it cost Jesus to minister. They were insensitive to the spiritual energy He was exerting. They were ignorant of what Jesus was doing.

The disciples were somewhat surprised at Jesus’ question: “Who touched me?” He was completely surrounded by a mass of people. In their surprise, they asked Him why He was asking such a question in the midst of so many people. How could He possibly expect not to be touched?

**The result is glorious.**

Jesus granted the request of the hopeless. “Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole, go in peace, and be whole” (Mark 5:34). The result was twofold. She received peace. The fear and trembling were taken away and she was flooded with peace. Second, she was made whole both physically and spiritually.

There is a good lesson here for all of us. Not everybody has the same degree of faith, but Jesus responds to faith no matter how feeble it might be. When we believe, He shares His power with us and something happens in our lives. There were many others in that crowd who were close to Jesus and even pressing against Him, but they experienced no miracles. Why? Because they did not have faith. It is one thing to throng Him and quite something else to trust Him.

The woman planned to slip away and get lost in the crowd, but Jesus turned and stopped her. Tenderly, He elicited from her a wonderful testimony of what the Lord had done for her. Why did Jesus deal with her publicly? Why did He not simply permit her to remain anonymous and go her way?

For one thing, He did it for her own sake. He wanted to be to her something more than a healer: He wanted to be her Saviour and Friend as well. He wanted her to look into His face, feel His tenderness, and hear His loving words of assurance. By the time He finished speaking to her, she experienced something more than physical healing. He called her “daughter” and sent her on her way with a benediction of peace (Mark 5:34). To “be made whole” meant much more than receiving mere physical healing. Jesus had given her spiritual healing as well!

By Jesus’ kind words, he not only removes her fear for having touched him, but he removes the public stigma over her problem. She has been fully healed, therefore should be fully reinstated into her community.

Here is the only place where Jesus addresses someone as “daughter.” Furthermore, his words, “Go in peace” would echo the Hebrew word, “Shalom.” This was more than a greeting or a wish for one’s physical well-being. It was a prayer for a person’s wholeness before man and God. For the first time in twelve years she can receive such a greeting.

**JESUS' RESPONSE TO AN APPEAL FOR HELP**

We can all learn from this story to be more sensitive. It's not required that we always be completely clueless as these first disciples of Jesus were. We can learn to think as the Lord does. We can learn to

expect that there are people everywhere who want him more than they are able to articulate, who are reaching out on some level for the life-restoring power of God.

They don't always know how to ask for help. They may not know what to say, what to do, or where to go, but they desperately want God to love them and they want the freedom to love him back. We can learn to see what's going on in people's hearts and lives. We should be more tender, more caring, more expectant, more compassionate. We're supposed to be like our Lord.

### **RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS, NOT JUST HELP**

We're at the 153<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Seneca Falls Declaration. The best things the women's movement in western culture has done in the last 150 years have been very good: securing for women the right to vote, opened doors to employment and education, giving attention to reproductive health. But none of them are ultimately liberating. It is not enough for any group to articulate areas of need and call for the culture and the laws and the institutions to change to meet them. We do not achieve peace and wholeness and healing that way. The only One who can give us what we long to have, men or women, is Jesus.

Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" He asks it still. Some in the crowd today have reached out a hand to him for help, but remained afraid to say the whole truth.

If you have a face-to-face relationship with Jesus, you're not in control anymore. You can touch his robe and then run away. But if you're in a face-to-face relationship he will call for honesty and obedience. He's going to be in charge of who you are and what you do and where you go and what you think.

But as scary as it is to respond to his question "Who touched me?" it is far worse to fail to respond, to have a relationship with God that *you* are in charge of, to get only an occasional gift instead of being made whole and given peace on the inside. It's a terrible mistake to fail to answer, when he's looking intently for you, wanting to bless you.

### **Study Notes from the Pulpit Commentary**

**Ver. 24.** — **And he went** (kai< aiph~lqe met aujtou~) — literally, *and he went away with him* — **and a great multitude followed him**, they thronged him (sune>qlibon aujto>n); literally, *pressed close upon him, compressed him*. This is mentioned purposely by St. Mark, on account of what follows. St. Matthew says (<400919>Matthew 9:19), "And Jesus arose, and so did his disciples." Observe here the promptitude of Christ to assist the afflicted. St. Chrysostom suggests that our Lord purposely interposed some delay, by healing, as he went, the woman with the issue of blood, in order that the actual death of the daughter of Jairus might take place; and that so there might be full demonstration of his resurrection power.

**Vers. 25, 26.** — **A woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years.** All the synoptic Gospels mention the length of time during which she had been suffering. Eusebius records a tradition that she was a Gentile, a native of Caesarea Philippi. This disease was a chronic hoemorrhage, for which she had found no relief from the physicians. Lightfoot, in his 'Horae Hebraicae,' gives a list of the remedies applied in such cases, which seem quite sufficient to account for St. Mark's statement that **she was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse**. St. Luke, himself a physician, says that she "had spent all her living upon physicians, and could not be healed of any."

**Vers. 27, 28.** — **This woman, having heard of Jesus** — literally (ta< peri> tou~ jIhsou~), *the things concerning Jesus* — **came in the crowd behind, and touched his garment**. St. Matthew and St Luke say "the border (tou~ kraspe>dou) of his garment." St. Matthew tells us that "she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole." From this it appears that, though she had faith, it was an imperfect faith. She seems to have imagined that a certain magical influence was within Christ and around him. And the touching of the border of his garment (the blue fringe which the Jews were required to wear, to remind them that they were God's people) was supposed by her to convey a special virtue. Yet her faith, though imperfect, was true in its essence, and therefore was not disappointed.



**Ver. 29.** — **And straightway** — St. Mark's favourite word — **the fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt** (e]gnw) — literally, *she knew* — **in her body that she was healed of her plague** (o[ti i]atai ajpo< th~v ma>stigov); literally, *that she hath been healed of her scourge*, The cure was instantaneous.

**Ver. 30.** — The words in the Greek are ejpignou<v ejn eJautw~| th<n ejx auJtou~ du>namin ejxelqou~san: **Jesus, perceiving in himself that the power emanating from him had gone forth, turned him about in the crowd, and said, Who touched my garments?** Christ sees the invisible grace in its hidden operations; man only sees its effects, and not always these.

**Ver. 31.** — St. Luke (<420845>Luke 8:45) adds here, “When all denied, Peter said, and they that were with him, Master, the multitudes press thee and crush *thee*. But Jesus said, Some one did touch me; for I perceived that power had gone forth from me.” This incident shows the mysterious connection between the spiritual and the physical. The miraculous virtue or power which went forth from the Saviour was spiritual in its source and in the conditions on which it was imparted, but it was physical in its operation; and that which brought the two together was faith. Multitudes thronged the Saviour, but only one of the crowd *touched* him.

**Ver. 32.** — **He looked round about** (perieble>peto) — another favourite word of St. Mark.

**Ver. 33.** — **The woman fearing and trembling**, etc. Every word in this verse is expressive. It was her own act. She seemed to herself as though without permission she had stolen a blessing from Christ; and so she could hardly venture to hope that the faith which had prompted her would be accepted. Hence her fear and terror, and her free and full confession. We thus see the *gentleness* of Christ in his dealings with us. Perhaps the woman had intended to escape, satisfied with a temporal benefit, which would hardly have been a blessing at all, if she had been suffered to carry it away without acknowledgment. But this her loving Saviour would not permit her to do. It was the crisis of her spiritual life. It was necessary that all around should know of the gift which she had endeavored to snatch in secret. Our Lord might have demanded from her this public confession of her faith beforehand. But, in his mercy, he made the way easy to her. The lesson, however, must not be forgotten, that it is not enough to believe with the heart. The lips must do their part, and “with the mouth confession must be made unto salvation.”

**Ver. 34.** — Our Lord here reassures this trembling woman, who feared, it may be, lest, because she had abstracted the blessing secretly, he might punish her with a return of her malady. On the contrary, he confirms the benefit, and bids her be whole of her plague. The Greek expression here is stronger than that which is given as the rendering of what she had used when we read that she said within herself, “I shall be saved (swqh>somai).” Here our Lord says, **Go in peace, and be whole** (i]sqi uJgih<v). It is as though he said, “It is not the mere fringe of my garment, which you have touched with great faith, and with some hope of obtaining a cure — it is not this that has cured you. You owe your healing to my omnipotence and your faith. Your faith (itself my gift) has delivered you from your issue of blood; and this deliverance I now confirm and ratify. ‘Go in peace.’” The original Greek here (u[page eijv eijrh>nbn) implies more than this. It means “Go for peace.” Pass into the realm, the element of peace, in which henceforth thy life shall move. It is here obvious to remark that this malady represents to us the ever-flowing bitter fountain of sin, for which no styptic treatment can be found in human philosophy. The remedy is only to be found in Christ. To touch Christ's garment is to believe in his incarnation, whereby he has touched us, and so has enabled us by faith to touch him, and to receive his blessing of peace.

#### *Faith conquering timidity.*

Far from withdrawing from scenes of distress and woe, our Lord Jesus was found wherever human sin or misery invited his compassion and invoked his aid. On this occasion he was passing towards the house of mourning, the chamber of death, and on his way paused to pity and to heal a helpless, timid, trembling sufferer.

**I. A PICTURE THIS OF HUMAN NEED AND SUFFERING.** Amidst the thronging multitude were persons of various circumstances, character, and wants. In all companies there are those who have

spiritual ills which only Christ can heal, spiritual desires which only Christ can satisfy. Sin and doubt, weakness, sorrow, and fear, helplessness and despondency, — these are to be found on every side. The case of this poor woman deserves special attention.

1. Her need was *conscious and pitiable*.

2. It was of *long continuance*: for twelve years had she suffered and had obtained no relief.

3. Her case was *beyond human skill* and power. She had gone to many physicians, had endured much in undergoing treatment, had expended all her means, and yet, instead of being better, was worse than before. And now apparently hope was taking flight, and the end seemed near. An emblem this of many a sinner's case — conscious of sin and of a tyranny long endured, yet helpless and despairing of deliverance.

**II. A PICTURE THIS OF THE APPROACH AND CONTACT OF TREMBLING FAITH,** The graphic narrative of the evangelist is very suggestive as well as very impressive.

1. There *was faith*, in the woman's coming to Christ at all. She might have questioned the possibility of his curing her. She might have fancied that, lost in the crowd, she should not gain his notice and help.

2. The faith, however, seems to have been *imperfect*. Something of superstition probably impelled her to seize the hem or sacred fringe of his garment, as though there were magic virtue in the bodily presence of the Saviour.

3. Yet the venture of faith *overcame the natural shrinking* and timidity she experienced. Doubt and diffidence would have kept her away; faith drew her near, and she stole to him. It was the last resource; as it were, the dying grasp.

***"I have tried, and tried in vain, Many ways to ease my pain; Now all other hope is past, Only this is left at last: Here before thy cross I lie; Here I live or here I die."***

4. Faith led to *personal contact*, to the laying hold of the Redeemer. Jesus often healed with a touch, by the laying on of his hand; and here he acknowledged the grasp of trembling confidence. They that come to Jesus must come confessing their faults and needs, applying for his mercy, and laying hold upon him with cordial faith.

**III. A PICTURE THIS OF CHRIST'S TREATMENT OF A BELIEVING APPLICANT.** The conduct of Christ has been recorded in detail, for the instruction and encouragement of all to whom the gospel comes.

1. Remark his recognition of the individual. This woman was one of a multitude, yet she was not unobserved by the all-seeing and affectionate Saviour. He never overlooks the one among the many; his heart can enter into every case, and succor every needy soul.

2. Remark the immediate and efficacious exercise of his healing power. What others could not accomplish in long years, the Divine Healer effected in a moment. Thus Jesus ever acts. His grace brings pardon to the penitent, justification to the guilty, cleansing to the impure. Immediate grace is the earnest of grace unailing.

3. We see our Lord accepting grateful acknowledgments. Pleasing to him was the courage that, spite of timidity, "told him all the truth." He ever delights in the thankful tribute of his people's praise and devotion.

4. We hear our Lord's gracious benediction. The language is very rich and full. There is an authoritative assurance of blessing; there is the adoption of the healed one into the spiritual family, conveyed in the one word, "Daughter;" there is the recognition of her saving faith; there is the dismissal in peace; and there is the assurance that the healing is complete and permanent.

*The little of things of Christ great things for men.*

How great an idea this woman had of Christ! If there was any fault, it was that she believed in the power, but did not trust the love of Christ. Yet her humility, which was as manifest as her faith, and her shame may account in great part for the stealth and surreptitiousness of her action.

**I. MEANS OF GRACE ARE NOT TO BE DESPISED BECAUSE THEY APPEAR OUTWARDLY INSIGNIFICANT.** Superstition, ritualism, etc., deprecated; yet an error incident to the opposite extreme.

We are not saved by works, neither (literally) are we saved by faith. It is *Christ* that saves. This woman was touching Christ. God's sufficiency so different from man's.

**II. NOT THE OUTWARD CHARACTER OF ANY ACT, BUT THE SPIRIT IN WHICH IT IS DONE, IS TO BE CONSIDERED CHIEFLY.** The great end of religious acts is to bring us into communion with Christ. This of the woman was a mere touch, scarcely perceptible in the pressure of the crowd. The disciples had not observed it. But Christ felt that it had taken place, and had been effectual. There are manifold ways in which he reaches souls and is reached by them. The common experiences of life may be channels of greater blessing than the ordinances of the Church, when they are regarded in a believing, pious spirit.

**III. PIETY IS OFTEN APPARENTLY OUT OF PROPORTION TO ADVANTAGES AND OPPORTUNITIES.**

1. *Small things way often bring people to Christ, or keep them away from him.*

2. *Faith may often discover itself in the midst of ignorance and the absence of conventional religion.*

3. *Spiritual privileges may hinder instead of helping religious progress if they be not spiritually used.*

This poor woman will rise in judgment against many who have made great show of religious observance, and condemn them. We may hear too often, if we do not lay to heart and obey. We require "grace for grace." —

**Vers. 30-33. —**

*"Who touched me?"*

**I. CHRIST'S SAVING GRACE IS ALWAYS CONSCIOUSLY EXERCISED.**

**II. IT IS FAITH WHICH MAKES EFFECTUAL AND PECULIAR THE SINNER'S TOUCH OF THE SAVIOUR.**

**III. THE SECRET BELIEVER IS SUMMONED TO AN OPEN TESTIMONY.** For the sake of:

(1) *honor;*

(2) *spiritual health;* and

(3) *the advantage of others.*

*The Lord amongst the needy.*

The two miracles recorded in this passage were blended both in fact and in narrative, and together they illustrate some of the beauties of our Lord's character and work. Of these we select the following: —

**I. HIS DISINTERESTED KINDNESS.** NO doubt his miracles were attestations of Divine power, but none of them were wrought with the idea of gaining personal fame. On the contrary, he endeavored to silence the demands of gaping curiosity, and rebuked those who sought for signs and wonders. He refused the worldly homage which the people proffered when they wished to make him a king. He checked the spread of his own fame, lest men should care too much for material blessings, or should offer him the adulation a wonder-worker would have sought. If he had willed it, all the riches of the world would have been poured at his feet; but he had not where to lay his head; and although Jairus and others would have given all their possessions as the price of the benefits they sought, Christ bestowed the blessing "*without* money and without price." Herein he appeared as the true Representative — "the express image" of him who delights in mercy for mercy's own sake. God gives air and sunshine without any effort, or solicitation, or thanksgiving on the part of man. He makes the garden of the cottager as fruitful as the fields of the rich, who can do so much more in return for his gifts. Ferns grow in shady hollows, and flowers adorn lonely cliffs, and even heaps of refuse. With a lavish hand the Creator bestows his gifts. "He is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works."

**II. HIS PERSONAL CONSIDERATION FOR EACH SUPPLIANT.** If we are acquainted with many subjects, our knowledge of each is often proportionately inaccurate; if we know many persons, our acquaintance with them is but casual. If we concentrate our thought upon a person or a thing, that concentration is often exclusive of other persons and things. It was never thus with our Lord. Though he

rules the worlds, there is not a single prayer unheard, or a feeble touch of faith unfelt. One who has been left alone to battle with his griefs may still say to himself, "But the Lord cares for me." He will no more hurry over a case than over that of the poor woman in the crowd, nor will he allow any delay to prevent the full coming of a blessing such as that which Jairus had at last.

**III. HIS CONSTANT DESIRE FOR SPIRITUAL RESULTS.** The temporal was to be the channel of the eternal. Healing of the soul often accompanied his healing of the body, and for the former he chiefly cared. On this occasion every moment was precious. The result of delay would be death and mourning in Jairus's home; yet he stayed not only to cure the woman, but to get her acknowledgment, and to give her and others fuller instruction. Had it been only her physical cure he sought, she could have waited a few hours; but the delay was largely for the spiritual good of Jairus. This ruler had not the faith of the centurion, who believed that Christ need not touch his servant, or even enter his house. Jairus's faith needed strengthening, and it was with this end in view that he saw what he did — a woman shut out from the synagogue of which he was ruler, who was saved by her simple faith, and this with the greatest possible ease on the part of the Lord. Hence it was that when the news came, "Thy daughter is dead," Jairus was not utterly dismayed, and under the influence of the cheering words of our Lord his faith revived in purer form. It is still true that delay in answer to prayer, during which grief and loss comes, is meant to work in us the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

**IV. HIS BROAD SYMPATHIES AND ACTIVITIES.** The love of Christ was not like some little stream which is confined between its two banks, and must be so confined if it is to be a blessing; but it was like the sea, which, when the tide rises, floods the whole shore, and fills every tiny creek as well as every yawning bay. He was never so absorbed in one mission as to neglect the side opportunities of life. Son if us have a tendency to absorption in one single duty, and the temptation is strong in proportion to the intensity and earnestness of our nature. But intenseness must not be allowed to make us narrow. To set before ourselves a special end is good, but this may lead to a neglect of other duties which is unnecessary and sometimes sinful. For example, some concentrate their interests in business or in pleasure, and declare that they have no time for devout thought; and at last they will find that they have grasped shadows and lost the substance. Christians fall into a similar error. Some do public service, and their names are widely known in the Church, but they have scarcely exercised any good influence at home. The Church benefits, but the children are neglected. And often the opposite is true; for to many the home is everything, and the Church is nothing. Others, again, are so absorbed in one special work (that of the Sunday school, or temperance reform, for example), that they have little sympathy for their brethren who are engaged in other spheres of the manifold life of the Church. And there are others more guilty by far than these, who are absorbed in future work. They are always "going to do" this or that; but meanwhile their neighbors are uninfluenced and their own children are neglected. As they are not faithful with the few things, it would be contrary to God's law if they became rulers over many things. If our Lord had been animated by the spirit displayed by any of these, he would have said to the woman, "My errand is one of life and death; there must be no touching even the skirts of my garment now. All else must wait till I have discharged this mission? But, by the course he took, he taught us this lesson. There is nothing within the range of our power that is beyond the range of our responsibility. In all these respects Christ has left us an example, that we should follow his steps.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#6 Why Do You Weep? -- Mark 5:35-43**

<sup>39</sup>He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? [Stop wailing,<sup>LK</sup>] [Go away<sup>MT</sup>] The child is not dead but asleep." <sup>40</sup>But they laughed at him [knowing that she was dead.<sup>LK</sup>]

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In his Holy Sonnets, the 17th-century British poet John Donne reflects on the truths of the gospel and praise of God. The most famous of these sonnets is the tenth. It's addressed to the grim reaper, death personified. It begins,

*"Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so."*

I invite you to have in your mind's eye death personified. The Scriptures describe death as the last great foe of the human race and of the purpose of God. But death is not to be proud. There is One who is greater and mightier than this dread enemy.

Mark 5:35-43 is a story about a child who died. In it we're going to hear another of the questions of Jesus that we've been tracking in this series. Jesus asked penetrating questions that not only were pertinent at the moment, but they have a way of helping us examine ourselves today.

There are all the elements of tragedy here. It is always tragic when a child is ill. The story tells us that the ruler's daughter was twelve years of age. According to the Jewish custom a girl became a woman at twelve years and one day. This girl was just on the threshold of womanhood, and when death comes at such a time it is doubly tragic.

Let me begin by making some observations about death. Medical science is, of course, blurring the boundary between death and life with various advances. Sadly, medical science is also making human beings better at killing as well as extending life. Indeed the progress of medical science sometimes leads to absurdities.

However the boundary between life and death is blurred, it remains the case that we each face the certainty of our own death.

### **THE FINAL ENEMY**

Psychologists have studied the process of grieving a death. When we get the news that someone we love has died or is going to die, or our own life is to be forfeit, there is a predictable grieving process. It begins with denial and shock, which are followed by anger, bargaining, guilt, depression, loneliness, and finally acceptance.

It is tragic that the process ends with acceptance, if all we have is the study of psychologists to go on, because what is accepted is that death always triumphs. Whatever anger, denial, or bargaining we engage in, they are like waves against a great rock that matter not at all. All of our emotional turmoil finally ends up with our having to bow before the final enemy and say, "You win."

We're going to see in the passage before us a way of mourning that existed in Palestine in the first century. Professional mourners would gather around and play flutes, wail, and act out a stylized sadness. This story, however, has something else to say about life and death. Let's read Mark 5:35-43:

#### **What about Jairus?**

*Mk 5:35-40a with Lk 8:49-53--<sup>35</sup>While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why [Don't<sup>LK</sup>] bother the teacher any more?"<sup>36</sup> Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe, [and she will be healed."<sup>LK</sup> <sup>37</sup>He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James [and] the child's father and mother.<sup>LK</sup> <sup>38</sup>When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion [and the flute players,<sup>MT</sup>] with people crying and wailing loudly. <sup>39</sup>He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? [Stop wailing,<sup>LK</sup>] [Go away<sup>MT</sup>] The child is not dead but asleep."<sup>40</sup> But they laughed at him [knowing that she was dead.<sup>LK</sup>]*

The story tells us something about this man who was the ruler of the synagogue. He must have been a person of some considerable importance. The ruler was the administrative head of the synagogue. He was responsible for the conduct of the services. He did not usually take part in them himself, but he was responsible for the allocation of duties and for seeing that they were carried out with all seemliness and good order. The ruler of the synagogue was one of the most important and most respected men in the community. But something happened to him when his daughter fell ill and he thought of Jesus.

(i) His *prejudices* were forgotten. There can be no doubt that he must have regarded Jesus as an outsider, as a dangerous heretic, as one to whom the synagogue doors were rightly closed, and one whom anyone who valued his orthodoxy would do well to avoid. But he was a big enough man to abandon his prejudices in his hour of need. Prejudice really means a *judging beforehand*. It is a judging before a man has examined the evidence, or a verdict given because of refusal to examine it. Few things have done more to hold things up than this. Nearly every forward step has had to fight against initial prejudice. When Sir James Simpson discovered its use as an anaesthetic, especially in the case of childbirth, chloroform was held to be, "a decoy of Satan, apparently opening itself to bless women, but in the end hardening them, and robbing God of the deep, earnest cries, that should arise to him in time of trouble." A prejudiced mind shuts out a man from many a blessing.

(ii) His *dignity* was forgotten. He, the ruler of the synagogue, came and threw himself at the feet of Jesus, the wandering teacher. Not a few times a man has had to forget his dignity to save his life and to save his soul.

In the old story that is precisely what Naaman had to do (2 Kings 5). He had come to Elisha to be cured of his leprosy. Elisha's prescription was that he should go and wash in the Jordan seven times. That was no way to treat the Syrian Prime Minister! Elisha had not even delivered the message personally; he had

sent it by a messenger! And, had they not far better rivers in Syria than the muddy little Jordan? These were Naaman's first thoughts; but he swallowed his pride and lost his leprosy.

There is a famous story of Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher. He was captured by pirates and was being sold as a slave. As he gazed at the bystanders who were bidding for him, he looked at a man. "Sell me to that man," he said. "He needs a master." The man bought him; handed over the management of his household and the education of his children to him. "It was a good day for me," he used to say, "when Diogenes entered my household." True, but that required an abrogation of dignity.

It frequently happens that a man stands on his dignity and falls from grace.

(iii) His *pride* was forgotten. It must have taken a conscious effort of humiliation for this ruler of the synagogue to come and ask for help from Jesus of Nazareth. No one wishes to be indebted to anyone else; we would like to run life on our own. The very first step of the Christian life is to realize that we cannot be anything other than indebted to God.

(iv) Here we enter the realm of speculation, but it seems to me that we can say of this man that his *friends* were forgotten. It may well be that, to the end, they objected to him calling in Jesus. It is rather strange that he came himself and did not send a messenger. It seems unlikely that he would consent to leave his daughter when she was on the point of death. Maybe he came because no one else would go. His household were suspiciously quick to tell him not to trouble Jesus any more. It sounds almost as if they were glad not to call upon his help. It may well be that this ruler defied public opinion and home advice in order to call in Jesus. Many a man is wisest when his worldly-wise friends think he is acting like a fool.

Here was a man who forgot everything except that he wanted the help of Jesus; and because of that forgetfulness he would remember for ever that Jesus is a Saviour.

It is beautiful to watch Jesus deal with Jairus and lead him to joyful victory. Throughout this entire event, it was our Lord's *words* that made the difference.

### **The word of faith (v. 36).**

At this point, Jairus had to believe either his friend or the Lord Jesus. No doubt all of his being responded with convulsive sorrow when he heard that his beloved daughter was dead. But Jesus assured him, "Be not afraid, go on believing" (literal translation). In other words, "You had a certain amount of faith when you came to Me, and your faith was helped when you saw what I did for that woman. Don't quit! Keep on believing!"

It was easier for Jairus to trust the Lord while his daughter was still alive, and while Jesus was still walking with him to his house. But when Jesus stopped to heal the woman, and when the friend came with the bad news, Jairus just about lost his faith. Let's not be too hard on him. We have probably given way to doubts when circumstances and feelings have overwhelmed us. Sometimes God has delayed and we have wondered why. That is when we need that special "word of faith" from the Lord, and we receive it as we spend time in His Word.

During this delay, Jairus is no doubt a bit antsy. His frustration is worsened by the tragic news that his daughter has just died. "Death" is placed at the very beginning of the Greek sentence for emphasis. It comes out something like this: "Your daughter is DEAD!"

The servants are concerned with Jesus as well as Jairus. They don't want him needlessly bothered. But Jesus ignores their message. He quickly grabs Jairus' attention and tries to refocus it from fear to faith. Mark makes it look like Jesus stops the crowd where they are and does not allow them to come to Jairus' house. Luke probably expresses it more clearly when he says that Jesus only allows three apostles in the house (Peter, James and John), along with the child's parents. These inner three are also given the

exclusive privilege of seeing the transfiguration (Mt 17:1; Mk 9:2; Lk 9:28) and following Jesus into the garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:37; Mk 14:33).

Jewish mourning customs were vivid and detailed, and practically all of them were designed to stress the desolation and the final separation of death. The triumphant victorious hope of the Christian faith was totally absent.

Immediately death had taken place a loud wailing was set up so that all might know that death had struck. The wailing was repeated at the grave side. The mourners hung over the dead body, begging for a response from the silent lips. They beat their breasts; they tore their hair; and they rent their garments.

Outside the house there is quite a commotion. According to Jewish burial rites, a crowd would gather and make a great deal of noise. Even poor families were required to hire at least two flute players and one mourner (*m. Ketub.* 4:4). The word "mourning" involves beating the chest as a sign of sorrow. It apparently takes Jesus and Jairus long enough to get there that a funeral crowd has already gathered.

The rending of garments was done according to certain rules and regulations. It was done just before the body was finally hid from sight. Garments were to be rent to the heart, that is, until the skin was exposed, but were not to be rent beyond the navel. For fathers and mothers the rent was on the left side, over the heart; for others it was on the right side. A woman was to rend her garments in private; she was then to reverse the inner garment, so that it was worn back to front; she then rent her outer garment, so that her body was not exposed. The rent garment was worn for thirty days. After seven days the rent might be roughly sewn up, in such a way that it was still clearly visible. After the thirty days the garment was properly repaired.

Flute-players were essential. Throughout most of the ancient world, in Rome, in Greece, in Phoenicia, in Assyria and in Palestine, the wailing of the flute was inseparably connected with death and tragedy. It was laid down that, however poor a man was, he must have at least two flute-players at his wife's funeral. W. Taylor Smith in *Hastings' Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* quotes two interesting instances of the use of flute-players, which show how widespread the custom was. There were flute-players at the funeral of Claudius, the Roman Emperor. When in A.D. 67 news reached Jerusalem of the fall of Jotapata to the Roman armies, Josephus tells us that "most people engaged flute-players to lead their lamentations."

The wail of the flutes, the screams of the mourners, the passionate appeals to the dead, the rent garments, the torn hair, must have made a Jewish house a poignant and pathetic place on the day of mourning.

When death came, a mourner was forbidden to work, to anoint himself or to wear shoes. Even the poorest man must cease from work for three days. He must not travel with goods; and the prohibition of work extended even to his servants. He must sit with head bound up. He must not shave, or "do anything for his comfort." He must not read the Law or the Prophets, for to read these books is joy. He was allowed to read *Job*, *Jeremiah* and *Lamentations*. He must eat only in his own house, and he must abstain altogether from flesh and wine. He must not leave the town or village for thirty days. It was the custom not to eat at a table, but to eat sitting on the floor, using a chair as a table. It was the custom, which still survives, to eat eggs dipped in ashes and salt.

### **The response of Jesus**

Jesus tells them to stop mourning because she is not dead but only asleep. He used that same figure of speech to describe Lazarus (Jn 11:11; cf. Mt 27:52; Acts 13:36; 1 Cor 11:30; 15:20, 51; 1 Thess 4:14). The crowd, taking his words literally, laugh at him. They know when someone has died. They are not stupid, but they think Jesus is. Then again, Peter had just committed the same error when Jesus said, "Someone touched me."

### **[Response of Jesus in John 11]**



Jesus responded to death (or what death did to others) in **John 11:33**: "*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*"

The Greek language is vivid here: it's from a word {embrimaomai: *em-brim-ah'-om-ah-ee*} that means "to snort with anger like a horse." The presence of these Jews, the grief of Mary, Christ's own concern, the problem of the raising of Lazarus—all greatly agitated the spirit of Jesus...He struggled for self-control.

**The word of hope (v. 39).**

"*The child is not dead but sleeps!*" were our Lord's words of hope to Jairus and his wife. To the believer, death is only sleep; for the body rests until the moment of resurrection (1 Thes. 4:13-18).

The spirit does not sleep; for in death, the spirit of the believer leaves the body (James 2:26) and goes to be with Christ (Phil. 1:20-23).

This truth is a great encouragement to all of us who have had Christian loved ones and friends depart in death. It is His word of hope to us.

**Faith—Fear:** fear is the opposite of belief. Believing God eliminates fear. Believing that God actually cares and will deliver one through any and all circumstances of life erases fear. If God does care, there is nothing to fear. However, if one does not believe that God cares, then fear is present. Why? Because there is no one beyond man to help, and man's help is limited—very limited. There are many times in life when man's help is not enough, or even close to being enough. Therefore for the unbelieving man, there are all kinds of things to fear: unfortunate circumstances, bad health, accident, loneliness, death, the loss of anything and everything—family, profession, friends, business, home.

**The word of love and power (v. 41).**

There is a very lovely thing here. In the gospel itself, "Maid! Arise" is "Talitha Cumi", which is Aramaic. How did this little bit of Aramaic get itself embedded in the Greek of the gospels? There can be only one reason. Mark got his information from Peter. For the most part, outside of Palestine at least, Peter, too, would have to speak in Greek. But Peter had been there; he was one of the chosen three, the inner circle, who had seen this happen. And he could never forget Jesus's voice. In his mind and memory he could hear that "Talitha Cumi" all his life. The love, the gentleness, the caress of it lingered with him forever, so much so that he was unable to think of it in Greek at all, because his memory could hear it only in the voice of Jesus and in the very words that Jesus spoke.

This passage is a story of contrasts.

(i) There is the contrast between *the despair* of the mourners and *the hope* of Jesus. "Don't bother the Teacher," they said. "There's nothing anyone can do now." "Don't be afraid," said Jesus, "only believe." In the one place it is the voice of despair that speaks; in the other the voice of hope.

(ii) There is the contrast between *the unrestrained distress* of the mourners and *the calm serenity* of Jesus. They were wailing and weeping and tearing their hair and rending their garments in a paroxysm of distress; he was calm and quiet and serene and in control.

Why this difference? It was due to Jesus' perfect confidence and trust in God. The worst human disaster can be met with courage and gallantry when we meet it with God. They laughed him to scorn because they thought his hope was groundless and his calm mistaken. But the great fact of the Christian life is that what looks completely impossible with men is possible with God. What on merely human grounds is far too good to be true, becomes blessedly true when God is there. They laughed him to scorn, but their laughter must have turned to amazed wonder when they realized what God can do. There is nothing beyond facing, and there is nothing beyond conquest—not even death—when it is faced and conquered in the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Unbelief laughs at God's Word, but faith lays hold of it and experiences the power of God. Jesus did not make a spectacle of this miracle. He was sensitive to the feelings of the parents and grieved by the scornful attitude of the mourners. *Talitha cumi* is Aramaic for "Little girl, get up!" Jesus added, "I say unto thee" (with the emphasis on the *I*), because it was by His authority that her spirit returned to her body (Luke 8:55). The words were not some magic formula that anybody might use to raise the dead.

The girl not only came back to life, but was also healed of her sickness, for she was able to get out of bed and walk around. Always the loving Physician, Jesus instructed the astounded parents to give her some food lest she have a relapse. Divine miracles never replace commonsense human care; otherwise, we are tempting God.

As with previous miracles, Jesus told the witnesses to keep quiet (Mark 1:44; 3:12). Perhaps the word got out from the mourners that the girl had been "in a coma" and had not actually been dead. According to them, there had not been a miracle after all! However, there had been witnesses to the miracle. The Law required only two or three witnesses for confirmation of truth (Deut. 17:6; 19:15), but for this miracle there were *five* witnesses! We have reason to conclude that Jairus and his wife became believers in Jesus Christ, though there is no further mention of them in the Gospel record. All her life, the daughter was a witness to the power of Jesus Christ.

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.

*Mk 5:40b-43 with Lk 8:54-56--After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. <sup>41</sup>He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl [my child<sup>LK</sup>], I say to you, get up!"). <sup>42</sup>[Her spirit returned, and<sup>LK</sup>] Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they [her parents<sup>LK</sup>] were completely astonished. <sup>43</sup>He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat <sup>26</sup>News of this spread through all that region.*

When Jesus raises this little girl from the dead she is completely restored. She does not just "wake up;" she gets up and starts walking around. Furthermore, Jesus tells her parents to get her something to eat. (She must have been a typical teenager).

It is also curious that Jesus commands the parents not to tell anyone about the miracle. If Jesus ever said anything unreasonable, this was it! The crowd already knows that she is dead. It would be pretty difficult to conceal her once she is revived. Likely what Jesus means is to conceal the details of the raising. In other words, don't talk about *how* Jesus did it. We can understand why. The crowds are already oppressive. The Gerasene demoniac was commanded to go tell what had happened since that country needed to develop faith.

This place is bursting with faith, curiosity, and crowds. Jesus does not need any more publicity here! In fact, in the very next chapter (Lk 9:7-9) Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker is going to lead to an official inquiry by Herod.

All this attention would lead to a premature announcement and incomplete understanding of his Messiahship. The crowds have already been told that she was only sleeping. They may accept this as a resuscitation from a coma. This would still be considered a wonderful miracle but not quite as phenomenal as raising her from the dead. Despite Jesus' attempt to "play down" this miracle, news of it spreads like wildfire.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means,

"Little girl, I say to you, get up!") Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

### **WHAT VOICE WILL WE LISTEN TO?**

Yes, God's Servant is the conqueror over danger, demons, disease, and death. This series of miracles illustrates how Jesus met and helped all kinds of people, from His own disciples to a pair of demoniacs; and it assures us that He is able to help us today.

This does not mean that God *always* must rescue His people from danger (see Acts 12) or heal every affliction (see 2 Cor. 12:1-10); but it does mean that He holds the ultimate authority and that we need never fear. We are "*more than conquerors through Him who loved us*" (Rom. 8:37).

Jesus' question was directed to the mourners, not the other people in this story-his disciples and the grieving family. The role of mourners was to insist that everyone pay homage to the facts: Death had won again. A beautiful little girl's life was forfeit, and they all had to bow before reality. The final enemy had claimed another victim. But Jesus challenged the mourners.

The question he asked the mourners is more obscure than the other questions we've looked at in this series "Why all this commotion and wailing?" In that culture there were no telephones, email, or other ways of getting the word out. When someone died, professional mourners would gather and a wail would start. They probably had been standing by, since this was a prominent man and his daughter had been sick. As soon as she died, they would have started playing the instruments, crying aloud, throwing dust in the air, and tearing their clothing. Thus word would begin to spread that the child had died.

We see a tension beginning in verse 35 when some men from among these mourners came from the house and said very matter-of-factly to the synagogue ruler, "Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?" That is, "Let's face this terrible reality. Jesus has nothing left to say. Leave behind the rabbi and his religious instruction. It's all useless in the face of death. Maybe the spokesmen for God have something to say when there is still reason to hope, but there is no reason to hope. The child is dead." Jesus deliberately ignored them and challenged what they said. He turned to the heartbroken father and urged him to believe rather than despair.

So the tension is, Who are we going to listen to-the voice that is announcing the victory of the grim reaper, insisting that we bow before him; or the voice of Someone else who says, "Don't be afraid; rather, believe"?

Let me clarify that the issue here is not grief. Grief in the face of death is always appropriate. Sorrow, confusion, numbness of heart and mind, questioning, loneliness-none of the emotions that go with losing someone you love were in view when Jesus challenged these professional mourners.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 Paul writes, "*Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.*"

The statement there is not, "Don't grieve." Paul's point is that you should not grieve hopelessly. Jesus, you remember, cried at the tomb of Lazarus. Even knowing that Lazarus would be given life again for some years to follow, Jesus wept. He wept for the loneliness that people experience when a beloved one is taken. But the calling for Christians is not to break down in the face of the final enemy's awful death's-head smile and his claim, "I win." The challenge of faith is to acknowledge our hurt, but not give way to hopelessness.

### **THE TENDERNESS AND THE SEVERITY OF JESUS**

This is the second of three raisings Jesus performed. The first was the widow's son at Nain (Lk 7:11ff). The third will be Jesus' personal friend Lazarus, in Bethany (Jn 11). Like his OT counterparts, Elijah and

Elisha (cf. 1 Kgs 17:20-24; 2 Kgs 4:17-37), the power of God flowed through Jesus even to raise the dead.

There are two ways I'm going to ask you to look at the ministry of Jesus in this story. One is the tenderness with which he cares for the family, and the other is the severity with which he treats the mourners. Both of them show us something important to believe about him.

Let's consider the kindness of the Lord. He was tender with this father who had just heard that his child had died. The father's heart must have sunk like a stone. He had hoped that Jesus would get there before the child died. Now it was too late. The man didn't see any miracle to believe in, only the word of the Lord. "Trust me; I have something left for you. This is not the end of the story."

We see the kindness and gentleness of the Lord in the room where the little girl lay on her bed deceased. He took her by the hand. I've mentioned before how easily Jesus ignored all the laws of ritual cleanness. Touching a dead body would have rendered him unclean. But of course this body was not going to stay dead for long. Then he used a wonderful phrase in Aramaic, the language of the household, of the townspeople, not the language of commerce and the wider world. As Peter told Mark this story, and it was recalled by the disciples, they couldn't help but repeat the phrase Jesus used because it was so touching: "Talitha koum!"-"Dear little girl, get up!"

Commentators have made some wonderful observations about this phrase. This child had probably heard the phrase, "Little girl, get up!" scores of times in her life. When she was just learning to walk as a toddler, stumbling and falling to the ground, her parents would reach down and say, "Dear little one, get up!" as they helped her up. And as a youngster she would sometimes want to stay in bed when she should have been up doing something else, and her parents would lovingly say, "Dear little one, get up!" People who loved her would have often said, "Talitha koum!" So when Jesus touched her and spoke these words to her, they were the tender words that someone who cared for her would say.

The last observation we can make about Jesus' tender care for these people is that it was he who was sensitive enough to ask that she be given something to eat. This child had been sick for some time and had probably not been able to get nourishment regularly. She would have needed something to eat. Everyone else was so shocked by what happened that they didn't even think about it. But the Lord stayed tenderly focused on her needs.

All of this is to make a point. When we are in extreme situations, when death itself threatens and all seems lost, when we seem gripped by the power of the final enemy to destroy and blight our existence, when we find ourselves desperate and falling and hopeless, there is wonderful theology that can be brought to bear: the great themes of heaven, eternal life, the victory gained when Jesus was raised from the dead, and so on. But it's also important to have the tender touch, the intimacy of Jesus, knowing that he is with us even though we're going through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4). We can call on Someone who is present, strong, caring, and understanding, and who even remembers that we need something to eat.

The other ministry of Jesus in this text is his challenge to the mourners. I don't think he had any particular grievance with them as individuals, but he was denying the role they were playing in the drama, urging acceptance of the loss of everything. They were advocating a kind of emotional acquiescence that says, "There's no reason to appeal to God or those who teach in his name. It's time for us to do the hard work of giving death its due." In that sense Jesus refused them. He ignored them, he challenged them, they in turn ridiculed him, and he subsequently threw them out.

We need to see the Lord here as directly opposing proud death, personified for us in John Donne's sonnet. Almost always in Scripture when there is a crisis moment, it takes place in a face-to-face confrontation between the champion of heaven and the destroyer with his lies. It happened in the Garden when Eve was faced with the tempter and she and then Adam fell before his persuasion (Genesis 3).

Jesus stood face-to-face with that same tempter in the wilderness immediately after he was baptized (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:1-13).

God commanded Moses to go into Pharaoh's court and stand by himself with only his brother as his second in the duel, facing the power of Egypt and the authority of Pharaoh. It happened when a shepherd boy named David took only five stones and a sling out to face the giant on a plain between the Israelite and Philistine armies (1 Samuel 17). The champion of heaven had to stand there against the reviler. It happened when Elijah stood on Mount Carmel by himself against four hundred priests of Baal. (1 Kings 18). Elijah was the champion of heaven, telling the truth into the darkness.

That is the way Jesus is presented in this story. He was throwing down a gauntlet, saying, "Proud death, I'm coming for you. There is going to come a day on a hill outside Jerusalem not many months from now when we're going to fight to the end. And I want you to know right now I'm giving life back to a beloved child for a family of people I care about, and I'm doing it deliberately to say, 'You don't win.' The end of the story is not death. The final enemy is not the champion."

### **"DON'T BE AFRAID; JUST BELIEVE"**

Jesus made two statements in this text that we can benefit from practically. The first is in verse 36. Jesus' word to the father was, "Don't be afraid; just believe." The writer of Hebrews makes an interesting point about the fear of death: *"Since the children have flesh and blood, [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15).*

When we assume that the grim reaper stands at the end of every life claiming it, destroying all that has gone before, when there is no reason for hope, then we live in fear of the end. It casts a terrible shadow backward from our future to our present. We're afraid that the love we experience, the friendships we have, our accomplishments will be lost and forgotten someday, and the bodies that serve us now will decay and will grow less and less useful to us. So we become willing to do anything, to listen to any kind of lie or foolishness that will numb the fear of the death that awaits us. Our enemy uses our fear to ruin us even further.

When we have One who is greater than death on our side, when we don't have to fear what's before us, when we know for sure that all the best things that have ever happened in our life are going to last forever, that the love relationships we have in Christ go on and on, that nothing of eternal consequence is ever lost to us, then instead of living in fear, we can live in confidence. When we see things begin to break down and we realize we're nearer the day that we'll be with the Lord, we can be optimistic and hopeful instead of afraid.

One of the subplots in Walt Disney's version of Peter Pan is of Captain Hook and the crocodile. At some point in his life, Captain Hook's hand was bitten off by a crocodile, and the crocodile liked the taste of it so much that he spent the rest of his life pursuing Captain Hook, wanting to eat the rest of him. Now, the crocodile had also swallowed an alarm clock, and he made a ticking noise everywhere he went. And at various points in the story, Captain Hook would hear a ticking noise, and it would terrify him. He would run scared and lose his bearings because the ticking noise always meant that the crocodile that was going to destroy his life was nearby.

That is the way the fear of death operates in us. Something reminds us that the "crocodile" is going to "eat" us someday, and we act foolishly. Instead of being firm, steady, and confident in the Lord, we find ourselves willing to do terrible, destructive, embarrassing things.

Jesus' word to the father is also a wonderful word to us: "Don't be afraid; just believe." There's a champion fighting for us who is greater than the enemy who wants to destroy us.

### **"THE CHILD IS NOT DEAD BUT ASLEEP"**

The other statement to note is in verse 39: "The child is not dead but asleep." Now, she was dead. It wasn't as if this child was just in a deep coma (which Jesus knew but no one else did) and he was going to revive her. The word "slumber" or "sleep" is used this way many times in the Bible. We read it in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 earlier. Jesus also used it of Lazarus (John 11:11).

Jesus said the child was asleep as a direct contradiction to the mourners who came in verse 35 and said, "Your child is dead, forget the rabbi." The story would have a future. This little girl was going to be given back her life.

Believing people can and should use the term "sleep" to talk about brothers and sisters who have died. If they are asleep, they can wake up. They have not expired. We are merely deprived of their company temporarily. Jesus' language of death clearly implied, even demanded, a day to come when the dead will awaken, and everything will be made new. Jesus was urging his people who love him to believe that he would triumph, not the grim reaper.

### **How Faith Faces Death**

Faith is needed in all the circumstances in life, but it is never needed more than in the face of death. I would like to remind you of four words from the Word of God which describe the relationship of faith and death.

These words are the source of true comfort, hope, and joy, in the face of death. They are words which are offered to all men, but which are experienced only by those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ.

#### **1. Faith Faces Death Squarely**

Hebrews chapter 11 has often been referred to as the "Hall of Faith". It is a summary of the faith of many of the characters described in the Old Testament. While we find the word "faith" frequently in chapter 11, there is another word (or concept) which is found alongside of faith--it is death.

While every one of these members of the "Hall of Faith" had faith, every one of them died without receiving the promises which they believed and acted upon in their lives.

We see, then, that biblical faith is that faith which faces death squarely, indeed, which looks beyond death. If men can say, "Where there's life, there's hope", the man or woman of faith can say, "Where there is death, there is hope", for faith is the basis for hope beyond death.

#### **2. Faith Takes Death Seriously**

Faith does not deal with death by minimizing it, it deals with sin as a most serious matter. Death is serious because it is the penalty which God has pronounced on sin.

Death is serious because it is a certainty for all men. Death is to be taken seriously because, as God says, *"It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that comes judgment"* (Hebrews 9:27).

Jesus took His own death seriously as well, as can be seen from His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Death must be taken seriously, for it is the unavoidable consequence of sin.

#### **3. Faith Enables the Christian to be Comforted, even to Worship God, When a Loved One Has Died**

In the first chapter of the Book of Job, we are told of the tragic death of Job's children (Job 1:18-22). Job was a man of faith. He did not merely accept the news of her children's death, he fell to the ground in worship. What was it that enabled Job to worship, when all of her children died tragically, and (from a human point of view) prematurely?

Job's faith was evidenced in **three** ways.

**a. Job had faith in the power of God.**

Job believed in God's sovereignty, in the fact that God was in control. Thus, he did not view the death of her children as a natural disaster (though, in a sense, it was), but as an act of God. He said, "*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD*" (1:20).

Job knew that his children were not his, ultimately, but God's. He knew that just as God had given her children life, God had also taken it away. To Job, it was not "their time", it was "God's time". God was in control, specifically in the manner and timing of the death of her family. Thus, Job could worship.

**b. Job had faith in His person.**

Job's faith was rooted in the character of God. God was both powerful and good. Job, we are told, "*did not sin nor did he blame God*" (1:22). He did not see God as being in any way "at fault", as doing wrong in the death of His children. He was a God whom Job trusted. Thus he worshipped him, even in this time of tragedy.

**c. Job was willing to trust God in the death of her children, even though he did not understand it.**

Job knew that God was good, and that God had taken his children in death. Job did not know why. And it would seem that his faith was such that he did not need to know why, at least not then. Time will sometimes reveal those reasons, but it is often only in eternity that they will be known. Faith finds comfort in the power, in the goodness, and in the purposes of God, even though we do not understand them at the moment.

**4. Faith Views Death Through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ**

Part of the reason why death is so difficult for men is because they fear death. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ was in order that He "*might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives*" (Hebrews 2:15).

Christians no longer fear death because of their faith in Jesus Christ. He came to die in the sinner's place, to bear the penalty of death.

He not only suffered God's wrath, He was raised from the dead, so that death no longer reigns over the Christian.

Death is a defeated foe. Death holds no fear for those who have faith in Christ.

*"Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so."*

The people we love who are in Christ and who are no longer with us, will be with us again. Jesus said in John 14:2-3, "*...I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*"

The condition of heaven is that we'll be together forever. We grieve because everyone must grieve when their heart is broken, but we don't have to grieve as hopeless people. We can be filled with confidence that heaven's Champion won the greatest of all the confrontations.

Jesus gave his life and was raised from the dead. Life wins and death loses. That changes everything, not only about the people we love who have died, because we know we'll be with them again, but about how we live our own life now. We don't live fearfully. We have the option of living confidently, aggressively, hopefully, optimistically, enthusiastically, waiting for the day, excited about life to the very end when we fall asleep, knowing that we will wake again.

John Donne's sonnet ends with these lines:

*"Death thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well*

*And better than thy stroke. Why swellst thou then? One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die."*

Below are some of the very last words of Scripture we have about the human condition in the future that will last forever. The apostle John ends his Revelation with a description of the new heavens and new earth, when, having awakened forever, we participate in the re-creation of everything, and life that is forever begins.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#7 How Many Loaves Do You Have?**

*"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."*

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There are three stages of growing in maturity in a relationship with Christ that we can discover reading the gospels.

#### **The first stage is to be a hearer.**

There were a great many occasions in Jesus' ministry, in Galilee and Judea, when crowds would gather around to hear what he said. People would know of his miracles. They would be amazed by his insights, his parables, his stories, his commands, his authority. But they would gather to hear without a commitment to obey. They were merely observers, merely hearers.

#### **The second stage is to respond to his word, "Follow me."**

Jesus used that statement a number of times when he called on hearers to become his disciples, to come under his instruction and name him Lord and Master.

#### **The third stage in the process is to become an ambassador, a representative of the Lord in the wider world.** That's what we've come to in Mark 6:30-46.

We've been going through the gospel of Mark, stopping at places where Jesus asked a question. The question before us now was addressed to ambassadors: "How many loaves do you have? What has God given you that he can put into service to himself?"

Mark 6:30-31:

*The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."*

The disciples returned from their mission and reported to Jesus. They reported two things: what they had done and what they had taught.



How they had lived and what they had taught were both of vital interest to Christ. He had given them precise instructions in both areas. This report would reveal their obedience to Him, the degree of commitment and effectiveness of each disciple. Jesus needed to know, for the salvation of the world depended on their lives and teaching. He was soon to leave all in their hands.

*Mk 6:32-34 with Lk 9:10-11, Jn 6:2-3 --<sup>32</sup>So they went away by themselves in a boat [to the far shore<sup>JN</sup>] to a solitary place [to a town called Bethsaida.<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>33</sup>But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them [because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick<sup>JN</sup>] <sup>34</sup>When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, [he welcomed them and<sup>LK</sup>] he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he [went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples[, and]<sup>JN</sup>] began teaching them many things [about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing<sup>LK</sup>].*

Jesus sent the 12 Apostles out to minister because He had compassion on the needy multitudes (Matt. 9:36-38). This time, the needy multitudes came to them—and the disciples wanted to send them away! As yet, they had not learned to look at life through the eyes of their Master. To them, the crowds were a problem, perhaps even a nuisance, but to Jesus, they were as sheep without a shepherd.

There were times when Jesus desired to withdraw from the crowds. He was under continuous strain and needed rest. Moreover, it was necessary that sometimes he should get his disciples alone to lead them into a deeper understanding of himself. In addition, he needed time for prayer. On this particular occasion it was wise to go away before a head-on collision with the authorities took place, for the time of the final conflict had not yet come.

From Capernaum to the other side of the Sea of Galilee was a distance of about four miles and Jesus set sail. The people had been watching with astonishment the things he did; it was easy to see the direction the boat was taking; and they hastened round the top of the lake by land. The River Jordan flows into the north end of the Sea of Galilee. Two miles up the river were the fords of Jordan. Near the fords was a village called Bethsaida Julias, to distinguish it from the other Bethsaida in Galilee, and it was for that place that Jesus was making (Luke 9:10). Near Bethsaida Julias, almost on the lakeside, was a little plain where the grass always grew. It was to be the scene of a wondrous happening.

At first Jesus went up into the hill behind the plain and he was sitting there with his disciples. Then the crowd began to appear in droves. It was nine miles round the top of the lake and across the ford, and they had made the journey with all speed. We are told that the Feast of the Passover was near and there would be even bigger crowds on the roads at that time. Possibly many were on the way to Jerusalem by that route. Many Galilaean pilgrims travelled north and crossed the ford and went through Peraea, and then re-crossed the Jordan near Jericho. The way was longer but it avoided the territory of the hated and dangerous Samaritans. It is likely that the great crowd was swelled by detachments of pilgrims on their way to the Passover Feast.

A danger is losing sight of people who are as sheep without a shepherd. Again the scene is descriptive. As the boat approached the shore, Jesus stood in the boat watching the multitude clamoring for space on the seashore. He needed rest, and the disciples needed rest even more. But He was not annoyed or irritated with the people. Contrariwise, He was moved with deep, intense compassion because the people were as sheep without a shepherd. He could not turn from them. He could not send them away despite the need for rest. He could do only one thing. He had to meet their need; He had to teach them, so He began “to teach them many things.”

1. Sheep without a shepherd are bewildered and wander about, not knowing where they are or where they are going. They get lost ever so easily, and cannot find their way back to the flock. So it is with people. People without the shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, are bewildered. They do not

know where they have come from, where they are going, nor why they are where they are. They wander about, getting lost in place after place, never finding the way to true life.

2. Sheep without a shepherd go hungry. They do not have adequate nourishment. They cannot find sufficient food to live. So it is with people. People without the Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, go hungry. They do not have the Shepherd of God to feed and inspire their souls, nor to satisfy their inner longings for peace, love, and joy (Galatians 5:22-23). They have only themselves to depend upon as they seek to meet their craving for life.
3. Sheep without a shepherd cannot find shelter or safety. The sheep are exposed to all the dangers of the wilderness. So it is with people. People without the Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, are exposed to all that is within the world, and they are doomed. They are doomed because the beasts, the temptations and trials of the world, attack at every opportunity and destroy all who wander about.

Everyone can list a few things in their life which might fit into the category of "impossible." Jesus had already shown His disciples some pretty "impossible" things; and great crowds of people were beginning to also take notice.

Thousands of people have gathered in the area around the Sea of Galilee to celebrate the Passover, and after preaching to them all day, Jesus and the disciples desperately need rest and relaxation.

They had been watching the signs which Jesus had been doing for a long time (2:23), though John does not give them to us in his gospel (Mark 1:29f; 2:1; 3:1; 6:5). The people were eager to hear him again (Luke 9:11) and to get the benefit of his healing power of them that were sick.

Mark (6:46) and Matthew (14:23) tell us that after the miracle Jesus went further up into the mountain (vs. 3) to pray.

There were at least four things which led Jesus to seek retirement:

1. the news of the death of John the Baptist (Matt. 14)
2. the sudden, and probably evil, interest of Herod
3. the return of the 12 from intense evangelistic labors (Matt. 9-10)
4. the great multitude pressing upon Him continually (Mark 6:33)

This was likely the Lord's Passover (2:13; 5:1; 6:4 and 13:1), but due to the hostility (7:1) He did not attend this one.

The feeding of five thousand is the *only miracle* recorded by all four gospel writers. The apostles were deeply affected by the miracle. It made a dramatic and lasting impact upon them.

**Needs, Attitudes Toward—Stewardship:** there are two attitudes toward human need. Christ had been teaching for many hours, and now it was late afternoon, probably after 3 p.m. The disciples were exhausted and still wanted some rest. They came to Jesus and reminded Him of the time because there was little time left in the day for them to rest. They suggested, "Send the multitude away so they can go and buy food *for themselves*. But Jesus said, "No. You give them food to eat." In these words are seen the two attitudes toward human need.

1. There is the attitude of individual or personal responsibility. It is true that neither the disciples nor Jesus had invited the crowd. In fact, the crowd was not even wanted. The disciples and Jesus had planned something else. The crowd was interfering; therefore, the disciples sensed no responsibility for the crowd. They wanted to get rid of the people so they could be free to do as they wished. Their attitude was: "They are responsible for themselves, so send them away to fend for themselves."

2. There is the attitude of corporate responsibility. Jesus said very simply, "You give them food. They are hungry, and they are your neighbors, part of your world. You are responsible for your world and the people in it. If you know of people who have need, then you are the one who is responsible to

help them. They may be irresponsible. They may not have been invited, and they may be interfering with your plans; but they have need, and you know about their need. So meet it. Feed them.”

As far as the disciples were concerned, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and nothing could be done! With that kind of approach, they would have made ideal committee members! Someone has defined a committee as a group of people who can turn a donkey into a zebra.

Too many try to escape their responsibility for the world. When looking at or hearing about the poor and hungry, lonely and depressed, problem centered and burdened, too many say: “Send them away. They got themselves into this mess because they were too lazy or irresponsible or sinful. If they wanted to be straight and responsible they could. I’m too busy to become involved with such shiftless and irresponsible people.”

Such an attitude misses the whole point of Christ. Man is responsible for his world, no matter the condition. We are responsible for our neighbors. In fact, the worse off a neighbor is, the more we are responsible to help. The cause of his condition does not matter: whether sin and shame, or clear and understandable circumstances.

⇒ If his condition is sin and shame, then we are to share the gospel and teach him how to live and work responsibly.

⇒ If his condition is due to clear and understandable circumstances, then we are to help restore and replace him to a position of responsibility and self-worth.

Jesus looked at the situation, not as a problem, but as an opportunity to trust the Father and glorify His name. An effective leader is someone who sees potential in problems and is willing to act by faith. Acting on the basis of human wisdom, His disciples saw the problem but not the potential. How many times God’s people have complained, “If we only had enough money, we could do something!” Two hundred pence (denarii) would be the equivalent of a year’s wages for the average laborer! The first step is not to measure *our* resources, but to determine God’s will and trust Him to meet the need.

Great opportunities are often disguised as unsolvable problems. Let’s watch as a humanly unsolvable problem becomes a great opportunity when seen from a divine viewpoint:

**- From a Human Perspective.**

With their limited, human understanding, these weary fishermen can see only a swelling sea of humanity threatening to wash over them. In verse 10 we’re told that this great multitude numbered 5,000 men. Including women and children, this figure could easily have been 8,000-10,000.

**- From a Divine Perspective.**

From Jesus’ point of view, the crowds weren’t an infringement but an opportunity--a chance to reveal His glory and, at the same time, stretch his disciple’s faith.

Here are lessons for ambassadors. We can identify two very important ones that I hope to explain. One is the ministry Jesus wants to have to those who have gone out to represent him in the world. It is his ministry of rest and reflection and camaraderie and concern. The other lesson is that there is a need to be more generous than we want to be, to allow God-given interruptions, to offer for the Lord’s use what little we have so he can make more of it.

**(Mt 14:15-21; Mk 6:35-44; Lk 9:12-17; Jn 6:4-13)**

<sup>[JN 6:14]</sup>*The Jewish Passover Feast was near. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" <sup>6</sup>He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. <sup>7</sup>Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages<sup>NIV-7-1</sup> would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"*

*Mk 6:35-38 with Lk 9:12 -- <sup>35</sup>By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples [the Twelve<sup>LK</sup>] came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. <sup>36</sup>Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages [and find food and lodging<sup>LK</sup>] and buy themselves something to eat." <sup>37</sup>But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages<sup>NIV-7-2</sup>! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" <sup>38</sup>"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."*

*Jn 6:8-11 with Mt 14:18-19, Mk 6:41, Lk 9:16 -- <sup>8</sup>Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, <sup>9</sup>"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many [unless we go and buy food for all this crowd<sup>LK</sup>]?"*

*<sup>10</sup>Jesus said, "[Bring them here to me.<sup>MT</sup>] Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down [in groups of hundreds and fifties<sup>MK</sup>], about five thousand of them. <sup>11</sup>Jesus then took the [five<sup>MT,MK,LK</sup>] loaves [and looking up to heaven, He<sup>MT,MK,LK</sup>], gave thanks [and broke the loaves,<sup>MT,MK,LK</sup>] and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the [two<sup>MT,MK,LK</sup>] fish.*

*Jn 6:12-13-<sup>12</sup>When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." <sup>13</sup>So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.*

*Mt 14:21--<sup>21</sup>The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

It was Andrew who found the lad with the lunch (John 6:8-9). The Lord had the people sit down in organized groups on the green grass (see Pss. 23:2; 78:19), quite a contrast to Herod's glittering sensual feast. Jesus took the little lunch, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the hungry people. The miracle took place in His hands, not in theirs; for whatever we give to Him, He can bless and multiply. We are not manufacturers; we are only distributors.

John tells us that Jesus used this miracle as the basis for a sermon on "the bread of life" (John 6:22ff). After all, He did not perform miracles just to meet human needs, though that was important. He wanted each miracle to be a revelation of Himself, a sermon in action. For the most part, the people were amazed at the miracles, appreciated the help He gave them, but failed to get the spiritual message (John 12:37). They wanted the gift but not the Giver, the enjoyment of physical blessings but not the enrichment of spiritual blessings.

### **COMPASSION FOR THE SEEKING CROWDS**

We can't demand such experiences, however. They are the Lord's to initiate for us. In this case, although Jesus invited the twelve to come away to a quiet place for rest, the rest wasn't allowed.

His heavenly Father had something else in mind, and a crowd of people rushed around the lake to the place where he and the disciples were going for their retreat. Thousands of them eventually showed up, and Jesus, not under compulsion, with other people dictating his schedule-Jesus never lived that way-but because of compassion, seeing that these were sheep without a shepherd, needy people, lonely, uncertain, foolish, and lost, he began ministering to them, rather than pushing them away so that the retreat could go on uninterrupted.

This was an important lesson for the disciples, too. He invited them to rest; he also indicated that God sometimes interrupts the plan. And he most often interrupts it for compassion's sake.

What are sheep without a shepherd like? Perhaps you have friends who drift through life for reasons they don't understand, pushed back and forth by each "latest thing," who are forever looking for answers

without being able to find them. We don't have to look very far to see people like that. This world is filled with them. They go from one seminar to another, one guru to another, one fad to another. Sheep without a shepherd are difficult people. They show up when we don't expect them. They bleat and complain and demand. It's easier to avoid them. But Jesus' compassion wouldn't let him avoid them, and he won't let us let us avoid them either, if we're his ambassadors.

Jesus had compassion on such people. He directed his ambassadors, his representatives, to have compassion as well. He made a place for the seeking crowds. They were invited. Where he was, they belonged.

But what Jesus didn't do was encourage them to spend the time articulating their longings. He didn't focus on the fact of their search. He didn't speak to them of their felt needs. He didn't encourage them to know better how desperate and unsure and sheeplike and lost they were. What he did was teach them. The sheep without a shepherd were welcome, but he was going to tell them the great themes of the gospel. He was going to teach them how to have security of heart and purpose. He was going to offer them truth in place of the endless insecurities they came with. It says that he taught them "many things." He gave them truth that began with him and made sense of everything else in life. And he expected his ambassadors to learn from him, to have compassion and to offer truth in the place of lostness.

**Resources:** there are six attitudes toward resources. It takes resources to meet human need. In consideration of this, there is a fact that needs to be acknowledged. Every person has something he can give. Every person can help and do something to meet a need when a need confronts him. The problem is not lack of resources nor a lack of ability or money or time. The problem is attitude—attitude toward the resources which one has.

1. There is the attitude of questioning one's ability to give (Mark 6:37). Jesus had just said, "Give them food." The disciples were shocked and even disturbed with the instructions, for the crowd was enormous and the task *impossible*. They were already upset over the presence and burden of the crowd. Irritated, the disciples fired back at Jesus, "Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread, and give them to eat?" This amounted to about six months' labor for the disciples. They did not have the money, so the request by Jesus was ridiculous to them. There was no way they could give food to meet the need of the crowd. But note something: the disciples forgot two things.

- a. They forgot that they did have something. The need of the crowd in this instance was for food, and the disciples had food for themselves (or at least enough money to buy food for themselves). Yet, they did not think to mention this fact. They were thinking only of what excess, what above their own needs they had to give.
- b. They forgot the power of God. They forgot that God loved and cared for these people as well as for them. They forgot that God would meet the needs of any and all, if only they would put what they had at His disposal. They forgot that God's power could take little and multiply it.

2. There is the attitude of checking to see what one can give (Mark 6:38). In response to the disciples' impatience, Jesus remained cool, asking rather forcefully, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." The disciples checked and reported that they had five loaves of bread and two fish. Note two facts.

- a. They had resources that were *overlooked*. Why were they overlooked? Because the resources were so little. There was no possibility the resources could ever meet the need. In fact, two fish and five loaves of bread could not even make a dent in the hunger of five thousand men. In the eyes of the disciples it was impossible for the resources to do any good whatsoever.
- b. Jesus did not ask the disciples to check on how to feed all five thousand men. He asked them to check on *what resources they had* to give. They were to look at what they themselves could give, not at how the whole task could be done. Their eyes and perspective were to be on using what they had, not on the mammoth impossibility of the task. This is a critical point and it should be carefully noted when looking at the vast needs of the world.

3. There is the attitude of organizing what resources one has so that they might be used (Mark 6:39-40). This is an important step Christ takes and it should be well noted. The hour was late. Darkness was

rapidly approaching. Distribution could have easily become a problem. The people had to be organized into small circles or rows which left room for the disciples to walk between them and distribute the food.

4. There is the attitude of being thankful for what one has and can give (Mark 6:41). What Jesus did was impressive. He took into His hands what they had, and He looked up to heaven and gave thanks for it. It was small; it was insignificant. It looked like it would do little, like it would be insignificant; but He took it anyway and *looked up to heaven, and blessed it*.

5. There is the attitude of giving what one has (Mark 6:41-42). After giving thanks, Jesus took the food and gave it to the disciples to set before the people. And a miracle happened! The resource multiplied: all the people were fed and were filled (Mark 6:42).

6. There is the attitude of being careful in the handling of resources (Mark 6:43-44). Very simply, Christ teaches that resources are not to be wasted. They are to be used day after day. When there is more than enough to meet one need, what is left over is to be gathered up to use elsewhere.

Note three lessons.

1) There is no room in Christ's economy for extravagance. When there is more than what is needed, the excess is to be saved for another need.

2) There is no room for wasting. No resource is to be wasted; it is to be used elsewhere.

3) There is no room for resources to be stored and banked; there is not any excuse for allowing resources to lie around unused. All resources—abilities or money—are to be used to meet needs as long as needs exist.

### **THE MIRACLES GOD WANTS TO DO THROUGH US**

Jesus taught these men two lessons by calling on them to feed the people. Jesus says, "You feed them," to people like us as well.

Our tendency is to look at what is humanly possible: the money, the conditions, whether we have the right computers and the right building, whether we're set up for this, whether we can make it happen, and so on—and we conclude that it's impossible. We don't have what it takes. The human players in this drama can't do what God says they should do.

The tendency, further, is to leave people to their own devices. They had been listening to teaching, but now they needed to go solve their own problems. They were going to get hungry and they needed to go do something about it. There was nothing miraculous or heavenly about the thinking of these ambassadors. That is probably why Jesus had the crowd broken up into circles of fifty and one hundred, just to make the point that five thousand people, when looked at only as a whole, is overwhelming to consider; but if it's a hundred groups of fifty, you can begin caring for them.

Jesus was trying to help the disciples not to reflexively be overwhelmed by the huge difficulty. "Evangelize all the world" sounds impossible. But instead of seeing that as the assignment, we can see "Share Christ with the folks in front of you" as an assignment that is possible. It's still risky and difficult. It still requires the power of God. But it's not impossible.

The second lesson here is that Jesus didn't do the miracle without their cooperation. He could have. Previously, he had done miracles without assistance. He had cast out demons, healed the sick, given a lame man the strength to walk, brought back a little child from the dead. But now he was training those who would serve him, and he called on them to offer what they had. And what little they had became that which he used to bless the crowd, and by extension, as we learn from him, to bless the world.

How many loaves do you have? What do you have to offer? What house do you live in? What bank account do you own? What place do you work? What friendship network do you have? What has God given you that he can expand in his service, that he could turn around and use, through you, to bless and challenge and change and give life where there is no life? When we become his representatives in the world, he intends to use us just as we are. There's no difficulty in qualifying for this responsibility. You

don't need a degree. You don't need the approval of your organization. You don't need a title. To become an ambassador is to become willing to offer him what you have for him to use to change the world.

There is joy in Christian service. Becoming an ambassador is the most marvelous thing in the world. Our God has, in a peculiar way, limited himself to using people like us. We are the body of Christ, God's incarnation, now. He needs our willingness to offer the loaves we have. He needs us to take up the gifts that we've been given, to walk through the open door set before us, to buy up the opportunities we have. The cause of Christ needs our contribution. But even more, we need what we receive by acting in faith. We were made to serve. It's what God intended for us, and resistance to the opportunities depletes us. We're not what we were made for if we don't learn the lessons that Jesus was teaching these folks.

So I urge ambassadorship on you. There's nothing you'll enjoy more in life. There is no greater way to live. **Mt 14:22-23; Mk 6:45-46; Jn 6:14-15**-- <sup>[JN 6:14]</sup> *After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."* <sup>[MT 14:12]</sup> *Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side [to Bethsaida<sup>MK</sup>] [Capernaum<sup>JN</sup>], while he dismissed the crowd.* <sup>[JN 6:15]</sup> *Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself [to pray<sup>MT,MK</sup>].*

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#8 Are You So Dull? –Mark 7:16**

*"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. <sup>17</sup>"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? [In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean."<sup>MK</sup>] <sup>18</sup>But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'"*

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This is one of the most startling things Jesus ever taught. It shook the world of His day, and it has disturbed and gnawed at the minds and consciences of men ever since. It revolutionizes man's idea of evil and wrong-doing, of just what evil is and what causes it. It knocks the props out from under man's religion and morality. It lays man bare before God making him totally dependent upon God for salvation and life.

Jesus asks this question with some impatience. "Don't you get it yet? Haven't you figured it out? This is important!" He demonstrates concern that his disciples aren't paying attention to the content of his life and message. Having expressed his impatience, he goes on to speak of the specific area of concern in this context, namely what makes a person unclean.

This is not really familiar language to us-being clean or unclean is a ceremonial determination that doesn't seem relevant today. But, I hope that we'll see before we're done that this has very profound application to us, even though it comes in an unfamiliar package.

**(Mt 15:1-20; Mk 7:1-23; Jn 7:1)**

<sup>[JN 7:1]</sup> *After this, Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life.*

The Passover was near when Jesus fed the five thousand. John makes it clear that Jesus did not attend this Passover. He describes the events following the day of furious debate in the synagogue in

Capernaum: "After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for he would not walk in Judaea, because the Jews sought to kill him."

These plots against His life did not come from the Zealots, but from the national leaders at the capital—the Pharisees and Sadducees. The miracles, the growing power of His movement, His assertions of deity all led to renewed plots against His life. The national leaders were also moved to send out a delegation of trained controversialists to attempt to undermine the success of Jesus.

The feeding of the 5,000 and the sermon on the bread of life create quite a stir. In fact, the furor is transported to Jerusalem by the crowds Jesus fed. When they arrive in Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus' Galilean activities become the hot topic of conversation. The Pharisees respond to these rumors by sending a delegation to "check out" what is happening with this budding "Jesus movement." They are so shocked by the blasphemous reports of Jesus' sermon, they are now prepared to kill him (cf. Mk 3:6).

They come at a point of vulnerability, after the majority of Jesus' disciples have abandoned him. So Jesus takes off for one last Galilean tour (Jn 7:1), prior to escaping her borders for Phoenicia and Caesarea Philippi.

*Mk 7:1-4--<sup>1</sup>The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and <sup>2</sup>saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup>(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup>When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.<sup>NIV:7-8</sup>)*

This passage is of critical importance for the destiny of both man and religion. Why is it so important? Because neither man nor religion can survive being institutionalized, that is, being based and focused upon tradition, ritual, ceremony, and works. Survival depends upon the hearts of man and of 'real' religion. The heart of both must be focused upon acceptance and reconciliation, approval and redemption, peace and love, humility and giving, joy and hope.

The difference and the argument between Jesus and the Pharisees and the experts in the law, which this chapter relates, are of tremendous importance, for they show us the very essence and core of the divergence between Jesus and the orthodox Jew of his time.

The question asked was, Why do Jesus and his disciples not observe the tradition of the elders? What was this tradition, and what was its moving spirit?

Originally, for the Jew, the Law meant two things; it meant, first and foremost, the Ten Commandments, and, second, the first five books of the Old Testament, or, as they are called, the Pentateuch. Now it is true that the Pentateuch contains a certain number of detailed regulations and instructions; but, in the matter of moral questions, what is laid down is a series of great moral principles which a man must interpret and apply for himself. For long the Jews were content with that. But in the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ there came into being a class of legal experts whom we know as the *Scribes*.

They were not content with great moral principles; they had what can only be called a passion for definition. They wanted these great principles amplified, expanded, broken down until they issued in thousands and thousands of little rules and regulations governing every possible action and every possible situation in life. These rules and regulations were not written down until long after the time of Jesus. They are what is called the *Oral Law*; it is they which are *the tradition of the elders*.

The word *elders* does not mean, in this phrase, the officials of the synagogue; rather it means *the ancients*, the great legal experts of the old days, like Hillel and Shammai. Much later, in the third century



after Christ, a summary of all these rules and regulations was made and written down, and that summary is known as the *Mishnah*.

There are two aspects of these scribal rules and regulations which emerge in the argument in this passage. One is about *the washing of hands*. The Scribes and Pharisees accused the disciples of Jesus of eating with unclean hands. The Greek word is *koinos*. Ordinarily, *koinos* means common; then it comes to describe something which is ordinary in the sense that it is not sacred, something that is *profane* as opposed to sacred things; and finally it describes something, as it does here, which is ceremonially unclean and unfit for the service and worship of God.

There were definite and rigid rules for the washing of hands. Note that this hand-washing was *not* in the interests of hygienic purity; it was *ceremonial cleanness* which was at stake. Before every meal, and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a certain way. The hands, to begin with, had to be free of any coating of sand or mortar or gravel or any such substance.

The water for washing had to be kept in special large stone jars, so that it itself was clean in the ceremonial sense and so that it might be certain that it had been used for no other purpose, and that nothing had fallen into it or had been mixed with it. First, the hands were held with finger tips *pointing upwards*; water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist; the minimum amount of water was one quarter of a log, which is equal to one and a half egg-shells full of water.

While the hands were still wet each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other. That is what the phrase about using the fist means; the fist of one hand was rubbed into the palm and against the surface of the other.

This meant that at this stage the hands were wet with water; but that water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands. So, next, the hands had to be held with finger tips pointing downwards and water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off at the finger tips. After all that had been done the hands were clean.

To fail to do this was in Jewish eyes, not to be guilty of bad manners, not to be dirty in the health sense, but to be unclean in the sight of God. To omit so to wash the hands was to become liable to poverty and destruction.

That to the Pharisaic and Scribal Jew was religion. It was ritual, ceremonial, and regulations like that which they considered to be essence of the service of God. Ethical religion was buried under a mass of tabus and rules.

The last verses of the passage deal further with this conception of uncleanness. A thing might in the ordinary sense be completely clean and yet in the legal sense be unclean. There is something about this conception of uncleanness in *Leviticus* chapters 11 to 15, and in *Numbers* 19. Nowadays we would talk rather of things being *tabu* than of being *unclean*. Certain animals were unclean (*Leviticus* 11). A woman after child-birth was unclean; a leper was unclean; anyone who touched a dead body was unclean. And anyone who had so become unclean made unclean anything he in turn touched. A Gentile was unclean; food touched by a Gentile was unclean; any vessel touched by a Gentile was unclean. So, then, when a strict Jew returned from the market place he immersed his whole body in clean water to take away the taint he might have acquired.

Obviously vessels could easily become unclean; they might be touched by an unclean person or by unclean food. This is what our passage means by the washings of cups and pitchers and vessels of bronze. In the *Mishnah* there are no fewer than twelve treatises on this kind of uncleanness. If we take some actual examples we will see how far this went. A *hollow* vessel made of pottery could contract uncleanness *inside* but not outside; that is to say, it did not matter who or what touched it outside, but it did matter what touched it inside. If it became unclean it must be broken; and no unbroken piece must

remain which was big enough to hold enough oil to anoint the little toe. A flat plate without a rim could not become unclean at all; but a plate with a rim could. If vessels made with leather, bone or glass were *flat* they could not contract uncleanness at all; if they were *hollow* they could become unclean *outside and inside*.

We have taken some time over these scribal laws, this tradition of the elders, because *that is what Jesus was up against*. To the scribes and Pharisees these rules and regulations were the essence of religion. To observe them was to please God; to break them was to sin. This was their idea of goodness and of the service of God.

*Mk 7:5-8--<sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" [They don't wash their hands before they eat!<sup>MT</sup>] <sup>6</sup>He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>7</sup>They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."<sup>NIV-7-9</sup> <sup>8</sup>You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."*

The Pharisees hold sway over the people. These guys are the religious giants. So when they question Jesus about the behavior of his followers, the crowd is going to tune in to the controversy. His followers are going to feel quite uneasy about being the center of their attention. This is a religious heavyweight bout. Jesus is up for the challenge. Characteristically, he doesn't directly answer their question, but he gets to the real issue.

Jesus doesn't defend the disciples because they are guilty as charged in their disregard for Oral Tradition. Furthermore, they have learned it from Jesus (cf. Lk 11:38). Instead, Jesus blasts the Pharisees on two fronts. First, he calls them hypocrites. The word finds its meaning on the Greek stage. An actor would hold up a mask to conceal his real identity while he played the part of another.

Essentially, Jesus is calling the Pharisees two-faced. They put on a mask of honoring God, but their true nature is self-serving. Second, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 and lays it directly at their doorstep (cf. Hosea 6:6 in Mt 9:13 & 12:7). They say all the right stuff, but for all the wrong reasons. Their hearts are not bent on loving God. Therefore, their worship is worthless and their teachings are contaminated.

The scribes and Pharisees saw that the disciples of Jesus did not observe the niceties of the tradition and the code of the oral law in regard to the washing of hands before and during meals, and they asked why. Jesus began by quoting to them a passage from *Isaiah 29:13*. There Isaiah accused the people of his day of honouring God with their lips while their hearts were really far away. In principle Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of two things.

(i) He accused them of *hypocrisy*. The word *hypokrites* has an interesting and revealing history. It begins by meaning simply *one who answers*; it goes on to mean one who answers in a set dialogue or a set conversation, that is to say *an actor*; and finally it means, not simply an actor on the stage, but *one whose whole life is a piece of acting without any sincerity behind it at all*. Anyone to whom religion is a legal thing, anyone to whom religion means carrying out certain external rules and regulations, anyone to whom religion is entirely connected with the observation of a certain ritual and the keeping of a certain number of tabus is in the end bound to be, in this sense, a hypocrite. The reason is this—he believes that he is a good man if he carries out the correct acts and practices, *no matter what his heart and his thoughts are like*.

A hypocrite gives lip service while keeping his heart far from God. He acknowledges God and attends worship, but this is about all he does. However, there are some who are *religiously deceived* (cp. the Pharisees and Scribes). They study the Scripture, pray, witness, help the needy, and keep the rules. They would even fight to maintain religious tradition. Yet, Jesus says they are hypocrites. Why? Because their

heart is not God's. They refuse to personally accept Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah and Savior of the world. They do not know God personally, not in the depths of their heart (John 14:6).

To take the case of the legalistic Jew in the time of Jesus, he might hate his fellow man with all his heart, he might be full of envy and jealousy and concealed bitterness and pride; that did not matter so long as he carried out the correct handwashings and observed the correct laws about cleanness and uncleanness. **Legalism takes account of a man's outward actions; but it takes no account at all of his inward feelings.** He may well be meticulously serving God in outward things, and bluntly disobeying God in inward things-and that is hypocrisy.

There is no greater religious peril than that of identifying religion with outward observance. There is no commoner religious mistake than to identify goodness with certain so-called religious acts. Church-going, bible-reading, careful financial giving, even time-tabled prayer do not make a man a good man. The fundamental question is, how is a man's heart towards God and towards his fellow-men? And if in his heart there are enmity, bitterness, grudges, pride, not all the outward religious observances in the world will make him anything other than a hypocrite.

(ii) The second accusation that Jesus implicitly levelled against these legalists was that *they substituted the efforts of human ingenuity for the laws of God*. For their guidance for life they did not depend on listening to God; they depended on listening to the clever arguments and debates, the fine-spun niceties, the ingenious interpretations of the legal experts. Cleverness never can be the basis of true religion. True religion can never be the product of man's mind. It must always come, not from a man's ingenious discoveries, but from the simple listening to and accepting the voice of God.

*Mk 7:9-13 with Mt 15:4-6--<sup>9</sup>And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe<sup>NIV-7-10</sup> your own traditions! <sup>10</sup>For Moses [God<sup>MT</sup>] said, 'Honor your father and your mother,'<sup>NIV-7-11</sup> and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'<sup>NIV-7-12</sup> <sup>11</sup>But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), [he is not to 'honor his father'<sup>NIV-7-13</sup>, with it<sup>MT</sup>] <sup>12</sup>then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. <sup>13</sup>Thus you nullify the word of God by [for the sake of<sup>MT</sup>] your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."*

Jesus has just accused the Pharisees of setting aside the Word of God for the traditions of men. Now he will illustrate the fact with a "case in point." The command to honor one's parents was priority for the Jews (and for God). In fact, it was such a serious obligation that it carried a death penalty for any who broke it (Deut 21:18-21).

Tradition can be man-made commandments. A religionist teaches tradition as God's commandment. He teaches his tradition as he practices it or proclaims it. Tradition is man's *idea* of what should be or what should not be done. Some traditions are good; however, they are not to be taught as though they were the commandments of God. As important as some traditions may be, they are not as important as God's Word.

Among the rules of the Oral Tradition was this "King's X" called Corban (e.g., *m. Ned.* 1:2-4; 9:7).<sup>7-31</sup> By labeling something as Corban, you promised to give it to God, if not sooner, then upon your death. It could be a cart, or a house, or savings, or property, etc. Since it was Corban, you could not sell it or give it to anyone, including your parents. But you, yourself, could still use it. Then, when you died, it would be given to the Lord or sold and the proceeds donated to God.

Corban arose out of a correct theology, that obligations to God are more important than obligations to any human, including parents. But the opportunity for abuse is all too obvious. If I have something that you want or need, I just label it as Corban. It is then off limits to you ... but not to me.

Since we don't practice ritual washings or use the word "Corban," we feel safe to leave this text in the first century, pointing at the Pharisees. But this text is not merely about cleanliness and Corban, it is about replacing God's requirements with religious duties. This has some rather broad implications.

You see, aside from the entry rite of circumcision, Jews were identified and evaluated based on three criteria: (a) Observation of the Sabbath and festivals (days), (b) Observation of clean and unclean (diet), and (c) Ritual dress. If you meticulously followed these three things, then you were considered a "good Jew." If you slacked up on one or more of these, then you weren't quite as good.

Jesus was attacking a system which put rules and regulations before the claim of human need. The commandment of God was that the claim of human love should come first; the commandment of the scribes was that the claim of legal rules and regulations should come first. Jesus was quite sure that any regulation which prevented a man from giving help where help was needed was nothing less than a contradiction of the law of God.

We must have a care that we never allow rules to paralyse the claims of love. Nothing that prevents us helping a fellowman can ever be a rule approved by God.

Jesus accused the religionists of worshipping in vain. "Ye worship ye know not what" (John 4:22). A religionist worships, but with an empty heart. Jesus taught that true worship must be *in spirit and in truth*, not only *in spirit*, but *in truth* as well (John 4:24). A person who denies Christ or denies God's Word cannot truly worship God (John 14:6; John 17:17). He may worship; but his worship is empty, worthless, unacceptable.

The religionists of Jesus' day were professing religion with their lips, but denying Christ, God's Son, in their hearts (cp. John 17:17-20).

A religionist teaches tradition as God's commandment. He teaches his tradition as he practices it or proclaims it. Tradition is man's *idea* of what should be or what should not be done. Some traditions are good; however, they are not to be taught as though they were the commandments of God. As important as some traditions may be, they are not as important as God's Word.

Tradition can make the Word of God ineffective. Jesus charged the religionists with setting aside God's Word for tradition. Religious traditions may be described as institutional or personal:

1. Institutional traditions are such things as rituals, rules, regulations, schedules, forms, services, procedures, organizations—anything that gives order and security to the persons involved.
2. Personal traditions are such things as church attendance, prayers, habits, ceremonies, objects which a person uses (somewhat superstitiously) to keep himself religiously secure.

Jesus was attacking the fact that so many religionists put their traditions first while neglecting and ignoring God's Word

*Mt 15:10-14 with Mk 7:14--<sup>[14]Again<sup>MK</sup>]</sup> <sup>10</sup>Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. <sup>11</sup>What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" <sup>12</sup>Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" <sup>13</sup>He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. <sup>14</sup>Leave them; they are blind guides."<sup>NIV-7-14</sup> If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."*

Simply stated, a man is not defiled by what enters his body, but by what comes out of his heart. Now note Mark 7:16. The importance of the point is again stressed: if any man has ears, let him hear. But the disciples were spiritually dull. They did not understand the parable. They asked Him to explain.

Now that Jesus has critiqued the behavior of the Pharisees, he returns to the original question and critiques the behavior of his disciples. Our Lord sees no danger in becoming "defiled" by eating with unwashed hands. Hocus-pocus uncleanness, even if it should enter the body while eating, will be "flushed" out soon enough (v. 17). No, what makes a man unclean is what enters his mind and comes out his mouth via the heart.

All their lives, these disciples have revered the Pharisees. And now, by following Jesus, they find themselves on the other side of the fence from these pillars of Judaism. More than that, they find themselves the center of this theological controversy. The Pharisees have apparently gone away in a huff (v. 12). The disciples, no doubt, are still trembling as they ask Jesus, "Do you know the Pharisees were offended?" Jesus refrains from all those clever retorts that seem so appropriate to us: "So!," "Ask someone who cares," or "If you think they are mad at me, you should see how God feels about them!" Instead Jesus employs the familiar figure from Matthew 13:28-30. Just because a plant is in the garden does not mean it is a good plant. God, like a good gardener, will weed his ground.

Although it may not seem so now, this passage, when it was first spoken, was well-nigh the most revolutionary passage in the New Testament. Jesus has been arguing with the legal experts about different aspects of the traditional law. He has shown the irrelevance of the elaborate handwashings. He has shown how rigid adherence to the traditional law can actually mean disobedience to the law of God. But here he says something more startling yet. He declares that nothing that goes into a man can possibly defile him, for it is received only into his body which rids itself of it in the normal, physical way.

No Jew ever believed that and no orthodox Jew believes it yet. *Leviticus* 11 has a long list of animals that are unclean and may not be used for food. How very seriously this was taken can be seen from many an incident in Maccabean times. At that time the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, was determined to root out the Jewish faith. One of the things he demanded was that the Jews should eat pork, swine's flesh but they died in their hundreds rather than do so. "Howbeit many in Israel were fully resolved and confirmed in themselves not to eat any unclean thing. Wherefore they chose rather to die, that they might not be defiled with meats, and that they might not profane the holy covenant; so then they died." (1 *Maccabees* 1:62, 63.)

In effect Jesus was saying that *things* cannot be either unclean or clean in any real religious sense of the term. Only *persons* can be really defiled; and what defiles a person is his own actions, which are the product of his own heart. This was new doctrine and shatteringly new doctrine. The Jew had, and still has, a whole system of *things* which are clean and unclean. With one sweeping pronouncement Jesus declared the whole thing irrelevant and that uncleanness has nothing to do with what a man takes into his body but everything to do with what comes out of his heart.

What defiles a man is not what he eats and drinks. What a man eats and drinks does not enter his heart; it enters his digestive tract and passes through his body. Therefore, food and drink, or eating with unwashed hands, or doing any other outward thing cannot defile a man—not spiritually.

Note exactly what Jesus was saying: "It is not things that defile a man. It is the heart that defiles a man. A man's heart is corrupt; therefore, he corrupts himself. Man is not made unclean by things; he is unclean because of his polluted heart. *It is he himself who takes things and does unclean things with them.*

**Sin, Source—Defilement:** the first explanation—the thing that enters the body does not defile. What defiles a man is not what he eats and drinks. What a man eats and drinks does not enter his heart; it enters his digestive tract and passes through his body. Therefore, food and drink, or eating with unwashed hands, or doing any other outward thing cannot defile a man—not spiritually.

There is no connection between what we eat and spirituality. That is not to say that excessive eating and intemperance are not wrong. Lustful and excessive appetites come *out of the heart*. But when it comes to

the items themselves, the food and drink, there is no merit or value, no morality or virtue to them—not within themselves. It is *what we do with the things*, what our heart does, that makes us either good or bad, spiritual or carnal.

The second explanation—the thing that comes out from the heart does defile. Note exactly what Jesus was saying: “It is not things that defile a man. It is the heart that defiles a man. A man’s heart is corrupt; therefore, he corrupts himself. Man is not made unclean by things; he is unclean because of his polluted heart. *It is he himself who takes things and does unclean things with them*

The third explanation—the source of evil is the heart. The problem of evil is from within, not from without; it is internal, not external. Evil comes from man’s heart (spirit), not his body. Consider the news report of any city on any given day. Notice the evil things reported and keep in mind—it is within one’s own city that such evil is happening. Multiply that evil by every city of any size. Just think of all the evil that is being done every day, and that is only the reported evil, the major evil. Think of the evil words and evil treatment and evil thoughts—all the evil things done within all the cities (Mark 7:21-22)—and one has a picture of what Jesus meant. Man’s heart is his problem. It is from the heart that *these evil things* come. Man knows better. He has more intelligence than to allow so much evil in his life and home and community and city and world. He just cannot control his heart.

Man makes three fatal mistakes when dealing with the problems of the law and evil, that is, with the problems of his heart.

1. Man judges evil to be external only. He judges only the sinful act, only the deed. In the eyes of society, a man would be considered perfect if he never did bad—never broke the law and never did the forbidden thing. A person is considered good if he seldom does bad—seldom breaks the law and seldom does the forbidden thing (for example, breaking the speed limit or taking a pencil from the office).

2. Man fails to see (or confess) that evil arises from the heart, from within. He does not consider that evil things come from an evil heart. Therefore, man puts little if any restraint upon the lust and inward thought. Man seldom thinks beyond the act; he seldom digs into the reason for the lust and thought; he seldom gives any attention to the heart. The result: man still grapples and always will have to grapple with the problem and tragedy of evil.

3. Man fails to see and acknowledge that the human heart needs to be changed, that is, converted. He refuses to face up to the fact that is so clearly seen: a new man is what is needed. Somehow man’s heart needs to be reborn.

*Mt 15:10-14 with Mk 7:17, 19--<sup>17</sup>After he had left the crowd and entered the house<sup>MK</sup> <sup>15</sup>Peter [his disciples<sup>MK</sup>] said, "Explain the parable to us." <sup>16</sup>"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. <sup>17</sup>"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? [In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean."<sup>MK</sup>] <sup>18</sup>But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'"*

Jesus did not say in His fundamental principle that nothing entering a man from the outside can defile him. Quite the contrary! He limited the principle to things you eat. The eye and ear give ready entrance to the heart. Things may defile that enter thus. Even accidental sight or hearing may introduce foul, vile things into the heart. When poison is taken, an emetic or stomach pump or antibiotic may save the life if applied promptly. In the heart the Christian must brave strong resistance of character and use spiritual antidotes.

### **The same thoughts presented in a different way**

There are four stages in this drama, and the first is *accusation* (Mark 7:1-5). The Jewish religious leaders were now openly hostile toward the Lord and His ministry. It was not unusual for them to follow Him from place to place simply to watch for something to criticize. In this case, they accused the disciples of failing to practice the Jewish ceremonial washing. These washings had nothing to do with personal hygiene, nor were they commanded in the Law. They were a part of the tradition that the scribes and Pharisees had given to the people to add to their burdens (Matt. 23:4).

Our Lord had already violated their Sabbath traditions (Mark 2:23-3:5), so the Jews were eager to accuse Him when they saw the disciples eat “with defiled hands.” Why would such a seemingly trivial matter upset these religious leaders? Why would they feel compelled to defend their ceremonial washings? For one thing, these leaders resented it when our Lord openly flaunted their authority. After all, these practices had been handed down from the fathers and carried with them the authority of the ages! The Jews called tradition “the fence of the Law.” It was not the Law that protected the tradition, but the tradition that protected the Law!

But something much more important was involved. Whenever the Jews practiced these washings, they declared that they were “special” and that other people were “unclean”! If a Jew went to the marketplace to buy food, he might be “defiled” by a Gentile or (God forbid!) a Samaritan. This tradition had begun centuries before to remind the Jews that they were God’s elect people and therefore had to keep themselves separated. However, a good reminder had gradually degenerated into an empty ritual, and the result was pride and religious isolation.

These washings not only indicated a wrong attitude toward people, but they also conveyed a wrong idea of the nature of sin and personal holiness. Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that true holiness is a matter of inward affection and attitude and not just outward actions and associations. The pious Pharisees thought they were holy because they obeyed the Law and avoided external defilement. Jesus taught that a person who obeys the Law externally can still break the Law *in his heart*, and that external “defilement” has little connection with the condition of the inner person.

So the conflict was not only between God’s truth and man’s tradition, but also between two divergent views of sin and holiness. This confrontation was no incidental skirmish; it got to the very heart of true religious faith. Each new generation must engage in a similar conflict, for human nature is prone to hold on to worn-out man-made traditions and ignore or disobey the living Word of God. It is true that some traditions are helpful as reminders of our rich heritage, or as “cement” to bind generations, but we must constantly beware lest tradition take the place of truth. It does us good to examine our church traditions in the light of God’s Word and to be courageous enough to make changes. (Note that the word *tradition* in 2 Thes. 2:15 refers to the body of doctrinal truth “handed down” from the Apostles to leaders in the church. See also 2 Tim. 2:2.)

The next stage can be labeled *condemnation* (Mark 7:6-13) as Jesus defended His disciples and exposed the hypocrisy of their accusers. The first thing He did was to quote from the Prophet Isaiah (Isa. 29:13), and then He brought in the Law of Moses (Ex. 20:12; 21:17; Lev. 20:9). How could the Pharisees argue with the Law and the Prophets?

In defending their tradition, the Pharisees eroded their own characters and also the character of the Word of God. They were hypocrites, “playactors,” whose religious worship was practiced in vain. True worship must come from the heart, and it must be directed by God’s truth, not man’s personal ideas. What a tragedy that religious people would ignorantly practice their religion and become the worse for doing it!

But they were not only destroying their character; they were also destroying the influence and authority of the very Word of God that they claimed to be defending. Note the tragic sequence: teaching their doctrines as God’s Word (Mark 7:7); laying aside God’s Word (Mark 7:8); rejecting God’s Word (Mark 7:9); finally, robbing God’s Word of its power (Mark 7:13). People who revere man-made traditions above the Word of God eventually lose the power of God’s Word in their lives. No matter how devout they may appear, their hearts are far from God.

History reveals that the Jewish religious leaders came to honor their traditions far above the Word of God. Rabbi Eleazer said, “He who expounds the Scriptures in opposition to the tradition has no share in the world to come.” The *Mishna*, a collection of Jewish traditions in the *Talmud*, records, “It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself.”

Once He had exposed their hypocrisy, Jesus then turned to the Law of Moses and indicted them for breaking the fifth commandment. They had an ingenious way of breaking the Law and not feeling guilty. Instead of using their wealth to support their parents, the Pharisees dedicated that wealth to God (“Corban” = “an offering, a gift”; see Num. 30) and claimed that the wealth could now be used only for “spiritual purposes.” However, they continued to get the benefit of that wealth, even though it technically belonged to God. These men claimed to love God, but they had no love for their parents!

The third stage is *declaration* (Mark 7:14-16). Jesus announced to the whole crowd that the source of holy living is from within, not from without. Actually, He was declaring null and void the entire Mosaic system of “clean and unclean” foods; but at that time, He did not explain this radical truth to the crowd. Later, He did explain it in private to His own disciples.

But this declaration was surely understood by His enemies. They realized that He was breaking down one of the “walls” that separated the Jews from the Gentiles. Of course, the Law itself was not set aside until Jesus died on the cross (Eph. 2:14-15; Col. 2:14), but the principle Jesus announced had been true throughout the ages. In every period of history, true holiness has always been a matter of the heart, a right relationship with God by faith. Ceremonial purity was a matter of external obedience to a law as evidence of that faith (Ps. 51:6, 10, 16-17). Moses made it clear in Deuteronomy that God wanted love and obedience to come from the heart, and not be merely outward obedience to rules (note Deut. 6:4-5; 10:12; 30:6, 20).

Our Lord’s *explanation* (Mark 7:17-23) was given privately to His disciples when they asked Him “concerning the parable.” His explanation seems obvious to us, but we must remember that these twelve men had been brought up under the strict Jewish dietary code that categorized all foods as either “clean” or “unclean” (Lev. 11). In fact, Acts 10:14 suggests that Peter kept a kosher household for years even after he had heard this truth. It is not easy to change our religious traditions.

The human heart is sinful and produces all manner of evil desires, thoughts, and actions, everything from murder to envy (“an evil eye”). Jesus had no illusions about human nature, as do some liberal theologians and humanistic teachers today. He realized that man is a sinner, unable to control or change his own nature; *and that is why Jesus came to earth—to die for lost sinners.*

The Jewish dietary laws were given by God to teach His chosen people to make a difference between what was clean and what was unclean. (No doubt there were also some practical reasons involved, such as sanitation and health.) To disobey these laws was a matter of ceremonial defilement, and that was an external matter. Food *ends up* in the stomach, but sin *begins* in the heart. The food we eat is digested and the waste evacuated, but sin remains and it produces defilement and death.

This dramatic lesson on “truth vs. tradition” could only irritate the Jewish religious leaders more and make them want to silence Jesus. This increased opposition was the reason why He departed from the crowded places and took His disciples into Gentile territory.

Before we leave this section, however, it might be good for us to contrast man’s traditions and God’s truth.



<i>Man's traditions</i>	<i>God's truth</i>
Outward forms—bondage	Inward faith—liberty
Trifling rules	Fundamental principles
Outward piety	True inward holiness
Neglect, replace the Word	Exalts the Word of God

*Mk 7:20-23 with Mt 15:20--<sup>20</sup>He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' <sup>21</sup>For from within, out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup>greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'; [but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"<sup>MT</sup>]*

Jesus revealed the problem so clearly in this passage. Note the progress of sin within man. (1) It begins in human nature: "within, out of the heart." (2) It develops in the human mind: in "evil thoughts." (3) It is expressed in human acts: "adulteries, fornications...."

Just like the sermon in parables (Mt 13), when Jesus leaves the crowd he enters a house. This gives the disciples the opportunity to ask Jesus privately what he meant by this parable. Again we find Peter speaking for the group. Since there is no definite article with the noun "house" we have no indication that it was Peter's house in Capernaum. Since Jesus is on a tour of Galilee, this could have taken place anywhere in that region.

His meaning is obvious—even if some morsel should be ceremonially defiled, it doesn't stick around to do you any harm. It just passes through. Note: Jesus is addressing the issue of ceremonial defilement, not truly harmful substances.

What does make a man defiled, however, is what comes out of his mouth. Our words express the goodness or badness of our heart (Mt 12:34; Lk 6:45). This rule is so consistent that we can even be judged by our words (Mt 12:36).

This list, unusual for Jesus (but cf. Rom 1:29-31; Gal 5:19-21), illustrates the kinds of things that are talked about and practiced from the overflow of one's heart. Human behavior often moves from mind to heart to words to behavior.

Mark adds this important parenthetical comment, "In saying this Jesus declared all foods clean." The issue of "clean and unclean" will come up again in the Church (Acts 10:9-16; 15:20; Rom 14:13ff; 1 Cor 8). And it's not just about food; it's about people. This is the obvious lesson for Peter in Acts 10-11. The structure of this text is also suggestive. In both Matthew and Mark the very next scene is Jesus' interaction with the Syro-Phoenician woman and the healings in Decapolis. Jesus' ministry is not about sanitation but sanctification; it is not about purity but people.

The problem of evil is from within, not from without; it is internal, not external. Evil comes from man's heart (spirit), not his body. Consider the news report of any city on any given day. Notice the evil things reported and keep in mind—it is within one's own city that such evil is happening. Multiply that evil by every city of any size. Just think of all the evil that is being done every day, and that is only the reported evil, the major evil. Think of the evil words and evil treatment and evil thoughts—all the evil things done within all the cities (Mark 7:21-22)—and one has a picture of what Jesus meant. Man's heart is his problem. It is from the heart that *these evil things* come. Man knows better. He has more intelligence than to allow so much evil in his life and home and community and city and world. He just cannot control his heart.

**Heart** (kardia): in the Bible the word "heart" refers to both the major organ of the body (Leviticus 17:11) and to the most important part of a person, that is, to man's innermost being. The heart is the central part, the very center of man's life. It is the most vital part of man's being.

The heart is man's inward life. It lies deep within, containing the *hidden man* or the real man (1 Peter 3:4); that is, the heart contains what a man really is, his true character. The heart determines what a man does, his behavior, whether good or depraved (Matthew 15:18; Mark 7:21-23).

1. The heart is the source of man's rational being: reasoning (Mark 2:6), understanding (Matthew 13:15), thinking (Matthew 9:4).

2. The heart is the source of man's emotional being: joy (John 16:22; Ephes. 5:19), affections (Luke 24:32), desires (Matthew 5:28).

3. The heart is the source of man's spiritual being: conscience (Acts 2:37), will (Romans 6:17), faith (Mark 11:23; Romans 10:10), evil (Matthew 15:18; Mark 7:21-23; cp. Jeremiah 17:9).

Man makes three fatal mistakes when dealing with the problems of the law and evil, that is, with the problems of his heart.

1. Man judges evil to be external only. He judges only the sinful act, only the deed. In the eyes of society, a man would be considered perfect if he never did bad—never broke the law and never did the forbidden thing.

A person is considered good if he seldom does bad—seldom breaks the law and seldom does the forbidden thing (for example, breaking the speed limit or taking a pencil from the office).

2. Man fails to see (or confess) that evil arises from the heart, from within. He does not consider that evil things come from an evil heart. Therefore, man puts little if any restraint upon the lust and inward thought. Man seldom thinks beyond the act; he seldom digs into the reason for the lust and thought; he seldom gives any attention to the heart. The result: man still grapples and always will have to grapple with the problem and tragedy of evil.

3. Man fails to see and acknowledge that the human heart needs to be changed, that is, converted. He refuses to face up to the fact that is so clearly seen: a new man is what is needed. Somehow man's heart needs to be reborn.

Jesus revealed the problem so clearly in this passage. Note the progress of sin within man. (1) It begins in human nature: "within, out of the heart." (2) It develops in the human mind: in "evil thoughts." (3) It is expressed in human acts: "adulteries, fornications...."

Matthew records Peter's protest; the saying was so graphic, so revolutionary that it seemed to them like a riddle. Mark as usual omits the leading part played by Peter in this discussion.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#9 “Do You Still Not See or Understand? – Mark 8:11-26**

*Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"*

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In this series, we have been moving through the gospel of Mark and stopping at points where the Lord asks a question that illumines truth or calls for a response. The passage we will study in this message contains several questions, and it begins with a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. They tried to test him, and he responded with the question, "Why do you seek a sign?" Jesus challenged his own disciples with the questions, "Do you still not see or understand? Do you have eyes but fail to see?" The final section of the passage describes Jesus' interaction with a blind man. In caring for the blind man, the Lord asked him, "Do you see anything?"

Throughout all of these encounters, the issues of blindness, failure to perceive, and inability to understand are of concern to our Lord.

These issues should be our concern as well. It's easy to be oblivious to our surroundings. We are often unaware of the significance of the things that happen around us. We can be blind in relationships with our friends, our spouses, and our children. We are in desperate need of our Lord's ministry to us in our blindness.

Let's now turn to Mark 8:11. There are three scenes in this passage: the first (verses 11-13) is Jesus with the Pharisees. The second (verses 14-21) is Jesus in a boat with his disciples, and the third (verses 22-26) is Jesus alone with a blind man in Bethsaida.

**(Mt 15:39-16:4; Mk 8:9b-12); [cf. § 62, 106, & Jn 2:18-23; 6:30]**

<sup>[MT 15:39]</sup> *After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat [with his disciples<sup>Mk</sup>] and went to the vicinity of Magadan [the region of Dalmanutha.<sup>Mk</sup>]*

<sup>1</sup>*The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.*

After the feeding of the 4,000 in Decapolis, Jesus returns to Jewish territory.<sup>7-44</sup> The Pharisees again accost Jesus (cf. Mk 7:1). This time they are accompanied by the Sadducees. These two groups generally fought with each other (cf. Acts 23:7-8), but their mortal hate for Jesus draws them together. This is the first time the Pharisees and Sadducees have gotten together since their investigation of John the Baptist (Mt 3:7; Jn 1:19, 24). It has primarily been the Pharisees alone who have pursued Jesus (Mt 9:11, 34; 12:2, 14, 24, 38; 15:1; Lk 5:17; 7:36-39), but from here to Golgotha, they will team up with the Sadducees (Mt 21:45; 22:34; 27:62), as well as with the Herodians (Mk 3:6; 12:13).

Jesus and the disciples crossed to the western side of the Sea of Galilee where they were met by the Pharisees who were still angry at Him because of His earlier indictment of their hypocrisy (Mark 7:1-23). This time they tempted Him to prove His divine authority by giving them a sign from heaven. They did not want an earthly miracle, such as the healing of a sick person. They wanted Him to do something spectacular, like bring fire from heaven or bread from heaven (John 6:30-31). This would prove He was indeed sent from God.

Our Lord's response was one of deep grief and disappointment (see Mark 7:34). How tragic that the religious leaders of God's chosen people should be so hardhearted and spiritually blind! Their desire for a sign from heaven was but another evidence of their unbelief, for faith does not ask for signs. True faith takes God at His Word and is satisfied with the inward witness of the Spirit.

The Judean<sup>7-45</sup> delegation conceals their insincerity. First, they ask for a sign rather than a miracle. They make it look as if they are asking for reasonable evidence as opposed to neat tricks. Second, they ask for a sign from heaven, such as was given by Elijah or Moses, as if these would be categorically different than the miracles Jesus already performed.

Their question is neither new nor sincere. Jesus has heard it at least three times before (Jn 2:18-23; Mt 12:38-45; Jn 6:30). They don't really want to believe Jesus. Both Matthew and Mark capture their motive in the word "test." Literally, they were tempting Jesus—looking for a reason to accuse him.

Since Mark was writing primarily for Gentile readers, he did not include our Lord's words concerning the sign of the Prophet Jonah (Matt. 16:4; and see Matt. 12:38-41). What is "the sign of Jonah"? Death, burial, and resurrection. The proof that Jesus is what He claimed to be is the fact of His own death, burial, and resurrection (Acts 2:22-36; 3:12-26).

Paul correctly assesses his compatriots when he says, "*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (1 Cor 1:22-24).

*MT 16:2-3 WITH MK 8:12 --<sup>2</sup>He replied [sighed deeply<sup>7-46</sup> and said<sup>MK</sup>],<sup>NIV-7-16</sup> "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,'<sup>3</sup> and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

Palestinian weather generally comes from the west, off the Mediterranean Sea. At dawn, the rain clouds from the west, reflect a reddish hue from the morning sun coming up over the eastern horizon. In the evening, however, that same reddish hue would indicate clear skies in the west.<sup>7-47</sup>

Jesus is visibly upset over the myopia of the Jewish leadership. They are more attentive to weather than to the Messiah. They have plenty of reason to believe in Jesus (cf. Jn 5:31-47); but have clearly refused, attributing Jesus' miraculous power to Beelzebul (Mt 9:34; 12:22-37; cf. Lk 11:14-36).

*MT 16:4 -<sup>4</sup>A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away.*

Why is it wicked and adulterous to look for a miraculous sign? Does God expect us to believe without proof? Is faith really some leap in the dark? NO! Sign seeking is wicked for the following reasons:

- (1) It ignores what Jesus has already done. It essentially says, "Jesus, we don't believe you. You must prove yourself again ... and again ... and again."
- (2) It places us as judge over Jesus. It essentially says, "Jesus, you perform for me and I will decide whether or not you are valid."
- (3) It places miracles over testimony. Miracles are used to attract our attention to valid testimony. Once the testimony has been given, the miracles have served their purpose. In addition, it often places emotions over reason. Instead of thinking through the testimony we want to feel our way along with souped up experiences.
- (4) It places self over Jesus. Miracles used for human gratification point in the wrong direction. Instead of pointing to Jesus they point to self. They become shallow and selfish.
- (5) It denigrates true faith. Instead of believing what we can't see based on true testimony, we demand validation at every point (Jn 20:29).

Again, the resurrection is promised as a sign for this generation. And even this will be concealed from unbelievers (cf. Mk 8:12; Acts 10:41). Jesus is again forced to leave the region due to the animosity of

his enemies. He has been rejected and nearly ejected from Jerusalem, Nazareth, Capernaum, and now Magadan.

**(Mt 16:5-12; Mk 8:13-21)**

*[Mt 16:4 = Mt 12:39]*

*[MK 8:]<sup>13</sup>Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. <sup>14</sup>The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. <sup>15</sup>“Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees [and Sadducees<sup>MT</sup>] and that of Herod.” <sup>16</sup>They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.”*

After another tense confrontation with the Jewish religious hierarchy, Jesus retreats with his disciples across the lake to the north shore. Jesus left them and crossed to the east side of the Sea of Galilee, and en route taught His disciples an important spiritual lesson. It appears that they were almost as blind as the Pharisees! The men were having a private discussion about their food supply, because somebody had forgotten to pack bread. Who was to blame?

It must have grieved Jesus that His handpicked helpers were so spiritually obtuse. The fact that He had multiplied bread on two occasions and fed over 10,000 people had apparently made little impression on them! Why worry and argue over one loaf of bread when you have Jesus in the boat with you? Their minds were dull, their hearts were hard (see Mark 6:52), their eyes were blind, and their ears were deaf (see Mark 4:11-12).

En route to the other side<sup>7-48</sup> Jesus warns his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples are thinking about food while Jesus is thinking about teaching (cf. Jn 4:31-34; 6:27). Jesus' words remind them that they have no lunch, save one measly loaf to split thirteen ways.

It is hard to tell how they interpret Jesus' warning. Perhaps they think he cautions them about poisoned bread. After all, the Pharisees have already expressed a desire to kill Jesus, both in Judea and Galilee (Mk 3:6; Jn 5:18; Mt 12:14). Poison was a common form of murder in those days. Perhaps their hunger hinders them from thinking much at all about what Jesus means. All they know is that it's slim pickings for dinner and they somehow connect Jesus' warning to their negligence to get groceries (v. 16).

The Pharisees and Herodians were strange bed-fellows. (Matthew substitutes Sadducees for Herodians, who were probably political envoys from the Sadducean party. Although they did have their distinctions,<sup>7-49</sup> here the Sadducean Herodians surely represent the liberal counterpart to the Pharisees.) These two groups are nearly polar opposites and yet Jesus describes their yeast as a singular evil. What error do these two groups share? The subtle but blatant rejection of Jesus. They feign a willingness to accept Jesus, by asking for a sign (Jn 2:18-23; Mt 12:38-45; 16:1-4). But there is no way they will ever accept him as leader or Lord.

Leaven is often spoken of as evil (cf. Lev 2:11; Mt 16:6; Lk 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6-8; Gal 5:9), but not always (cf. Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21). Some commentators suggest that the leaven removed from the Passover meal represents sin (cf. Exod 12:8 etc.). However, it could just as well represent the hurried nature of the meal. That is, they did not have time to wait for the yeast to cause the bread to “rise.” In other words, “evil” is not the dominant characteristic of leaven, but rather it is “pervasive influence.” With this understanding, we hear Jesus say, “Beware of the pervasive influence of unbelief of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” This comes at a time of mass defection among Jesus' disciples (cf. Jn 6:60-71). They need a warning against social seduction, when Jesus' popularity wanes.

*MK 8:17-21 WITH MT 16:8 <sup>17</sup>Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “[You of little faith,<sup>MT</sup>] Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? <sup>18</sup>Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? <sup>19</sup>When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”*

"Twelve," they replied.

<sup>20</sup>"And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

They answered, "Seven."

<sup>21</sup>He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

*Mt 16:11-12 -- <sup>11</sup>"How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." <sup>12</sup>Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*

Their "little faith" is lamentable (cf. Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 17:20). Not only do they fail to understand Jesus' sublime teaching on faith, they even miss the mundane meaning of food. Couched in the language of Isaiah 6:10, Jesus reminds them of his supreme ability to provide food. If five little loaves fed 5,000, with twelve baskets of leftovers, and seven loaves fed 4,000, with seven "hampers" left over, then one loaf is surely sufficient to feed thirteen men.

Having settled this little diversion about bread, Jesus gets back to the issue at hand, which is the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees—their teaching.<sup>7-50</sup> Now their teaching is not all bad (cf. Mt 23:3). Jesus would agree with the Sadducees in their rejection of Pharisaic oral tradition. He would agree with the Pharisees in their belief in the resurrection, etc. But Jesus warns us to watch out for their pervasive unbelief. It is especially insidious since it disguises itself in the garb of religious dialogue.

While clinging to orthodox practices and espousing Biblical doctrine, their self-seeking attitudes of unbelief lead them away from God's plan. This is confusing to the populace, whose shallow evaluation never looks past the dress, talk, and public display of the clergy. So often, the *heart* of the matter is indeed the heart of the matter.

Jesus refused to perform an act of power to impress the Pharisees. Those whose hearts are like those of the Pharisees cannot see signs from heaven. They are incapable of being persuaded by anything that God does.

Psalm 19 declares: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world*

God speaks of himself everywhere. Creation declares the glory of its maker, people see God at work, and hearts that are open receive benefit from him. "You will not be given a sign," Jesus said, "because you cannot see what God is doing. You are unwilling to be persuaded by God. What would be enough? What sort of sign would convince you?"

If we love to think of ourselves as intrepid inquisitors who can call God to account, if we aren't happy with the way he is doing things and insist on more, or if we proudly prefer our questions to his answers, then we will never see a sign. Nothing he does will persuade us.

People in this congregation have received healing. Cancers have disappeared, and children on death's door have been given back life. Others have given testimony to periodic visitations by God in answer to prayer. Such things persuade some people that God is at work, but others see them as coincidence. In *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, four children made the first journey through a magical wardrobe to Narnia. Three of them remembered what they experienced and were forever changed by it. The fourth child, Susan, allowed the memory of her experience to fade. As she grew up, she considered her experience to be a mere child's tale, and it ceased to persuade her.

Dramatic events happen, and we interpret them. But the lasting power and authority of signs is that they point to something. Signs must signify. A freeway sign is only useful if it gives us direction. It does no good to stop and stare at the sign, to marvel at its geometry and color, and then drive away. A sign points to something, and our attention should be directed toward the thing to which the sign points, not toward the sign itself. Because the Pharisees came to Jesus impressed with their authority to ask questions, lacking any desire to learn, the Lord said that they would never receive a sign.

Nothing he could do would ever persuade them. Recall Jesus' story about Abraham and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man wants to go back and warn his brothers, but Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Empty tombs will not persuade anybody who is determined not to be persuaded.

Remember the parable of the four soils (Mark 4:3-8). The first soil never produced anything because the seed was taken away. The second soil was rocky ground and the seed quickly withered under the heat of the sun. The fourth soil produced a crop of great bounty. The third soil also produced a crop, but the plants did not bear grain because "...the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19).

The Herodians loved worldly power and the pleasure it could produce, and the Pharisees were filled with pride. Jesus said to be careful and to watch out for the subtle influence of yeast, but he didn't just warn his disciples. He showed them where their focus should be. He wanted them to be alert to his presence. "Don't be so distracted by unimportant things that you fail to see me for who I am," said the Lord, "to hear what I say, to believe the invisible reality of the love of God." Yet, while Jesus was explaining spiritual truth, they were concerned about who forgot to bring lunch.

Their discussion of bread had no purpose and no value. They were distracted by silly things. We are very much like them, aren't we? How often do we forget to consider what is beautiful and true and valuable, what is filled with the presence and glory of God? How often do we ignore the things of God in favor of petty pursuits? We are royal sons and daughters, sacred ambassadors of the King. God has called us to serve him in a world that needs him, and yet, instead of believing that of ourselves, we feel frustrated because nobody pays enough attention to us, or because we were snubbed in some social environment or passed over for some sort of recognition. You can almost hear the Lord saying, "Why are you talking about bread? Why do you waste your attention on such silly things?"

Our bodies and minds are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We carry with us the presence of God into every place we go. We are an aroma of the divine presence wherever we are. Yet how many of us are inordinately bothered by our body shape or wrinkles or gray hair? Is the temple more important than the Spirit within us? We can again hear Jesus saying, "Why are you talking about bread? Don't you understand? Don't you perceive? Don't you see?"

Angels long to understand the gospel come down from heaven (1 Peter 1:12). They look at the words of the Prophets and marvel at the love of this God who became human. They would give anything to participate in what we take for granted, but we are fascinated by glitzy TV shows, sports celebrities, electronic toys, small, silly, petty things. "Don't you see? Aren't you paying attention? Having seen, don't you perceive what you see? Don't you value what is valuable?"

These questions of our Lord come back to us, and they are important, challenging questions. Jesus wondered at the disciples' forgetfulness and hard-heartedness. Not much time had passed since the feeding of the 4,000, and Jesus was asking, "Have you forgotten so soon?" That is a great reminder that very often the most helpful thing we can do is to make ourselves remember who we are, where we've been, and what God has done for us.

The proud Pharisees loved their ability to ask questions more than they longed for answers from God, and the disciples were distracted by unimportant things. Blindness keeps us from knowing what we need. Because we are blind, we don't know what to ask for, where to go, how to be, or what is of value, so the blindness reinforces itself. That is why the last part of our passage is so powerful and helpful.

God's people often have a tendency to forget His blessings (Ps. 103:1-2). He meets our needs, but then when the next problem arises, we complain or become frightened. As long as we are with Him, we can be sure He will care for us. It would do us all good to pause occasionally and remind ourselves of His goodness and faithfulness.

But the main lesson had to do with *leaven* (yeast) and not with bread. In the Bible, leaven is consistently a symbol of evil. Each Passover season, the Jews had to remove all leaven from their dwellings (Ex. 12:18-20), and leaven was not allowed with the offerings (Ex. 23:18; 34:25; Lev. 2:11; 6:17). Evil, like leaven, is small and hidden, but it spreads and soon infects the whole (Gal. 5:9).

The Bible uses leaven as a picture of false doctrine (Gal. 5:1-9), unjudged sin in the church (1 Cor. 5), and hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). In this context, Jesus warned them about the teaching (false doctrine) of the Pharisees and the followers of Herod. The Pharisees "said but they did not"; in other words, they practiced and encouraged hypocrisy (note Mark 7:6). The Herodians were a worldly group who catered to Herod, accepted the Roman way of life, and saw in Herod and his rule the promised kingdom for the Jewish nation. If this false teaching got into the hearts and minds of the disciples, it would infect them and pollute the truth Jesus had given them to proclaim about Himself and His kingdom.

We can never be too careful about detecting and avoiding false doctrine. Only a small deviation from the Word may get into an individual or a church, but before long it will grow and infect everything. Our Lord did not often say "Beware!" but when He did it was important!

*(Mk 8:22-26) --* <sup>22</sup>*They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. <sup>23</sup>He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"*  
<sup>24</sup>*He looked up<sup>7-51</sup> and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."*  
<sup>25</sup>*Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. <sup>26</sup>Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village."<sup>NIV-7-17</sup>*

Likely this "Fisher-town" (Bethsaida) is the home of Peter and Co. After all, they would need to dock their boat(s) before leaving the country to travel to Caesarea Philippi. As they arrive "home," they are met by a delegation on behalf of this blind man. We can't tell his level of faith, but the faith of his friends is obvious (cf. Mk 2:3-12; 7:31-37). If he lacked faith, this might explain Jesus' odd actions as an attempt to bolster his belief.

This scene has become all too familiar. Jesus has often healed blindness (Mt 9:27-30; 11:5; 12:22; 15:31; Lk 7:21-22; Jn 5:3). It was, and is, a common problem in third world countries. Yet this pericope is unique. It has a number of similarities to the healing of the deaf-mute (Mk 7:31-37):<sup>7-52</sup>

- (1) Both are recorded by Mark alone.
- (2) Both take place in a period of retirement/retreat.
- (3) Both men are taken aside.
- (4) Jesus uses spittle and touch with both.
- (5) Jesus tries to avoid attention with both.

What makes this healing such an oddity is that it is the only "two-step" healing Jesus ever performed. Any guess as to Jesus' motives is speculative. But Wessel (p. 691) offers a nice suggestion: "Jesus may have moved only as quickly as the man's faith would allow (in Mark's Gospel faith as a requisite for



healing is emphasized). But Calvin's suggestion that Jesus was demonstrating his sovereign freedom seems more likely. One thing is certain. The early church did not make up this story!"<sup>7-53</sup>

The use of spittle aligns with the common Jewish belief in its healing properties. The fact the man sees people as if they were "walking trees" indicates he is still nearsighted and probably that he was not born blind since he has some point of reference to make such a comparison. Then, when Jesus lays his hands on him, his sight is restored. Mark uses a rare word which indicates clear sight at a distance. Not only can he see, but he can see well.

Perhaps Wessel is correct in suggesting that this two-step miracle prefigures Peter's confession in the next pericope. His chart showing this comparison in Mark is insightful:

8:22	Circumstances	8:27
8:23-24	Partial Sight—Partial Understanding	8:28
8:25	Sight—Understanding	8:29
8:26	Injunction to Silence	8:30

Consider the third scene, which begins at verse 22. Of all Jesus' healings this one is, in some ways, the most curious. For one thing, Jesus rarely healed anybody in stages. In this case, the blind man was given partial sight, then a second work of the Lord gave him clear sight. Also, the passage tells us that a group of people brought the man to the Lord. Note, however, that Jesus took the man by the hand and pulled him away from the crowd, out of the village. Jesus deliberately chose to interact with the blind man in a personal and intimate way, and after healing him, he told him not to go back to the village.

The use of saliva, which people of that time believed to be of medicinal value, indicated a loving intimacy as well. On another occasion, Jesus healed a blind man by spitting on the ground, then applying the mud to the eyes of the blind man (John 9:6). On this occasion recorded in Mark, Jesus spit directly on the blind man's eyes knowing that the man would receive it as an act of love.

It is a curious story, but the dominant theme is intimacy with Jesus. We are reminded of creation. God shaped clay, then brought his face near to breathe life into the shaped clay. Likewise, Jesus came very near to the blind man in Bethsaida, first applying saliva to his eyes, then touching him with his hands, and then touching him again. Jesus asked, "What do you see now? Do you see anything?" The man answered, "I can only see a bit. I'm still confused. I'm unsure." The Lord allowed the man to speak of his uncertainty, then he ministered to him again. Everything about this scene is tender and intimate, and the passage makes a statement to those of us who are spiritually blind. Jesus challenged Pharisees who could not see the work of God because they would not see; they were more interested in their ability to ask questions than in God's ability to answer them. He challenged disciples who were petty and small-minded, silly and self-absorbed. He calls on us to awaken and perceive.

In the end, however, it is Jesus who gives sight. He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He takes us by the hand and draws us near to him. He touches us and allows us to speak of our uncertainty and lack of clarity, to ask for more help, and then he helps us again. There is gospel in this-good news, not just challenge. There is a work of Christ. We are too blind to even know how to proceed from here. We are oblivious to what is important. We don't know how to ask for help, and when it's offered, we don't know how to receive it. We make a mess of things. The blind can only follow at Jesus' initiative. It starts with his concern. It's true that we may know what concerns him and yet not believe or act upon that knowledge, but it is also true that, in our blindness, most of us need more help than we know how to get. We don't even know the direction to turn.

What we need is the intimate touch of the Lord, "I will come. I will take you by the hand. Just you and me. I will love you. I will touch you. I will touch you again. I will ask you questions. I will let you speak. I will draw you out. I will make the changes."

The gospel of John describes the incarnation in an amazing way: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us..." (John 1:14a, NASB). What a remarkable statement. God the Son, in fellowship with the Father from eternity, became a child, took on flesh, and dwelt among us. But that is not the most remarkable part of that sentence. The work of God is true whether we perceive it or not. It remains true that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us whether we are able to perceive it or not. But the wonder of what John wrote is this: "...we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14b, NASB). God acted, and we were allowed to see it. He opened our eyes so that we could see the Lord as he is—glorious, filled with grace, filled with truth. He has persuaded us of who he is. He has let us believe it. Our lives are changed.

John was once a disciple arguing about bread in a boat; at the end of his life, he would write of seeing the Lord as he is in all his glory. The apostle Paul wrote, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints..." (Ephesians 1:18, NASB). That is our hope, not only that the incarnation took place, but that we are going to be allowed to believe it and have our lives changed by it. His glory, grace, and truth will grow ever greater in our experience because he will lead us into it himself. He will come for us, touch us, awaken us, and open our eyes.

In both these situations, friends brought the men to Jesus; and in both situations, Jesus led the men away from the crowds. In fact, in the latter case, He took the man *outside the city*. Why? Probably because the city of Bethsaida had already been judged because of its unbelief (Matt. 11:21-24). No more evidence would be given to them.

The unique thing about this miracle of healing is that it occurred *gradually* and not instantly. The Gospels record the healing of at least seven blind men, and they show that our Lord used a variety of approaches. Perhaps it was the atmosphere of unbelief in Bethsaida that hindered Him (see Mark 6:5-6), or it may have been the spiritual condition of the man himself. For some reason not given, the man was not ready for instant sight, so Jesus restored him gradually. The fact that the man recognized men and trees suggests that he had not been born blind but had been blinded by accident or disease.

The man was not from Bethsaida, for Jesus sent him home and cautioned him not to enter that town. Now that he had been healed, why go to unbelieving Bethsaida where Jesus had been rejected? His job was to go home and spread the Good News of the kingdom, and to demonstrate its power by showing others what Jesus had done for him (see Mark 2:11; 5:34; 10:52). Should he not give another opportunity to the people in Bethsaida? Perhaps they would believe if they heard how Jesus had restored his sight. No, Bethsaida had been given adequate evidence, but still had refused to believe. It is a dangerous thing for anybody to reject the message of God and harden his or her heart in unbelief.

The disciples learned some valuable lessons on this trip, lessons that they would need to remember and apply in later years of ministry. We today need to learn these same lessons: (1) don't seek after signs, but live by faith in His Word; (2) trust Jesus to meet needs; (3) avoid the leaven of false doctrine; (4) let Jesus work as He wills, and expect variety in His working.

## The Fault of the Spiritually Blind, 8:10-13

(8:10-13) **Introduction:** spiritual blindness is a problem for every generation. Most men are spiritually blind (2 Cor. 4:4). They are blind to the “signs,” to the presence, mercy, care, and gifts of God to men. God is easily seen by men who openly and honestly seek the truth. He is seen in the world and happenings of life, in the merciful actions that often occur in life, in the care and love often experienced, and in the gifts of goodness to help a person get along in an antagonistic world. Yet, so few look for God and give thanks to Him for all He is and does. Man chooses rather to reject a personal God and to attribute the happenings and things of life to his own efforts (humanism). Why? There is one clear reason: if man acknowledges a personal God, he has to surrender his life to that God. Therefore, man challenges: “If there be a God, prove yourself, show yourself, give us a sign.” And all the while he expects no sign, and even if he saw one, he would deny it—all because he is spiritually blind to the truth.

What Jesus does in this passage is discuss the faults of the spiritually blind who want more signs.

1. Jesus crossed the lake (v.10-11).
2. They sought a sign (v.11).
3. They grieved the Lord (v.12).
4. They received no sign from the Lord (v.12).
5. They were left behind by the Lord (v.13).

**1. (8:10) Jesus Christ, Opposition to:** Jesus crossed the lake (Sea of Galilee) to the west side and to the lands close to Dalmanutha. As soon as He stepped off the boat, the religionists confronted Him. Note that Mark mentions only the Pharisees (Mark 8:11). Matthew says the Sadducees had joined forces with them in an attempt to discredit Jesus before the people.

**2. (8:11) Spiritual Blindness—Signs, Seeking:** the spiritually blind sought a sign. Note several things.

1. There is a sharp difference between man’s natural and spiritual senses. Man’s *natural senses can be very sharp and discerning*. He is skillful in drawing conclusions from his observations and experiences of the natural world. Weather is an example. However, *when it comes to the spiritual senses, man is dead and undiscerning*. He does not observe nor does he experience the spiritual world, not really. The signs of the times are an example.

The people of Jesus’ day had signs. They lived in critical times, times that foretold the coming of the Messiah. A thoughtful and genuinely spiritual person could see the signs. Some did, such as Simeon and Anna (Luke 3:25f).

Some of the signs were as follows.

- a. The sceptre, that is, the lawgiver, had come from Judah (Matthew 1:2).
  - b. The weeks or ages predicted by Daniel were closing out.
  - c. The predicted return of Elijah, who was fulfilled in the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist, had come and proclaimed the Messiah to be Jesus (Matthew 3:1-12).
  - d. The baby Jesus had been born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1).
  - e. Many throughout the world were expecting the coming of some great person, some Messiah (Matthew 1:18).
  - f. Many godly Jews were looking for the coming of the Messiah, God’s great Deliverer of Israel (Luke 2:25f).
  - g. The message and works of Jesus were great evidence, phenomenal miracles given by God to substantiate His claims.
2. The people of our generation and every generation since Christ have had signs.

- a. There are the signs of the natural world, the marvels of which are being revealed every day. But men refuse to acknowledge the Creator to whom creation points (cp. Romans 1:20; cp. Romans 1:18-32).
- b. There are the privileges of life, the beauty of the world, and the experience of God's daily mercy. But men ascribe them all to natural happenings or to the laws of nature or to humanistic ability and evolution.
- c. There is the Old Testament. But men, while perhaps appreciating some of its history, reject its prophetic promises of God's Messiah and salvation.
- d. There is conscience or consciousness of sin (inner thought). But men deny sin. They deny it even while experiencing guilt and wondering deep within what the truth really is.
- e. There is Jesus Christ and His claim to be the Messiah, the very Son of God. But men reject and deny His claim. They reject and deny while extolling the morality and value of all else He taught.
- f. There is the death and resurrection of Christ and its enormous effect upon so many down through the generations. But men deny a substitutionary death in behalf of men, and they deny the resurrection despite all the evidence validating it.
- g. There are the changed lives of teeming thousands who proclaim that *the living Lord* has saved them from destruction and indwells their being. But men attribute such change to psychological causes.

3. The reason men are spiritually blind is because of their motive. The motive of the religionists was not open and honest, nor was it the motive of men seeking the truth. They were out to *trick* Jesus, to disprove His claim and discredit Him before the people. They were out to show Him to be an imposter.

Man can be very intelligent and discerning within the natural world, yet very ignorant and blind to the spiritual world. Too often the reason is his motive. His motive is to discredit the spiritual world, whether by denying and disproving its existence or by minimizing its influence and authority.

If man truly admits the existence of a spiritual world or of a Messiah, then he must surrender and follow the Messiah as Lord, or he must reject the Messiah and await his condemnation. Man does not want to be put into such a position. He does not want a sense, a constant nagging of being condemned, nor does he want to change his life-style. So he closes his mind and says he will believe only if God gives him a personal sign, a miraculous sign, a sign from heaven. And all the while, he expects no sign, just knowing there will be none.

There are, of course, plenty of signs. It is a very simple matter to see God and the spiritual world behind the physical world. Any thinking man who is open and honest and seeking the truth will be touched by God. There is not a chance that God will not open the honest man's eyes and heart so that he can see and know. Such an honest and seeking man can clearly see that the world shows a Supreme Designer, a Supreme Intelligence and Force, an eternal purpose, a first cause.

The problem is that natural man seeks justification for his worldly motives, desires, and life-style. He does not want to change his life and desires. He wants to do his own thing, to control his own destiny. In fact, man's morality, desires, motives, and life-style determine his beliefs. Natural man wants to justify himself, prove himself and his thoughts right. He does not want to discover a heavenly world and a spiritual Lord who would demand righteousness and love, total giving and sacrifice. He does not want to be under a Lord who requires all he is and has to meet the needs of a desperate world.

**3.** (8:12) **Spiritual Blindness**: the spiritually blind grieved the Lord. There is no excuse for spiritual blindness. Evidence after evidence, sign after sign, work after work can be clearly seen to the *honest, thinking* man. Yet man continues to deceive his own heart, and he does it knowingly. Man knows that God is; he knows down deep within the quiet recesses of his heart. Yet he outwardly denies, deceiving himself. Such is obstinate unbelief, and obstinate unbelief is both irrational and inexcusable.

Jesus faced a sad fact. The men who were standing before Him were spiritually blind, but they were not ordinary secular men. They were religionists who had the enormous evidence of His life and miracles before their very eyes. Yet even they chose to keep their lives in their own hands and to deny the Son of God who loved them and came to save them.

**4.** (8:12) **Spiritual Blindness—Signs, Seeking**: the spiritually blind receive no sign from the Lord. There are seven reasons why “no sign shall be given this generation.”

1. The Jews refused to look at the signs of the times (chose to be spiritually blind) because they were wicked and adulterous. There were never enough signs or evidences to convince them, to change their lives, nor to lead them to turn to God.

2. The Jews were totally unjustified in seeking additional signs from Jesus. There had been sign after sign, miracle after miracle, work after work—enough to lead any man to the firm belief: “*Truly, this man is the Son of God*” (Mark 15:39; cp. Acts 2:22).

3. The Jews just did not believe. In fact, they did not want to believe. The result, of course, was what always happens to wilful unbelievers: they became obstinate in their unbelief.

4. The Jews did not understand the love and the faith of God, that is, the true religion of God. They failed to see what God was after: faith and love, not signs and works. God wants a man to simply believe and love Him because of who He is and because of what He has done and does do for man. The true religion of God is not a religion of works and signs, but of faith and love in Christ Jesus, His own Son.

5. The Jews sought a sign because they were an evil and adulterous generation. The reason was simple. They were apostates, going after the false gods of works and signs instead of seeking the God of faith and love. In seeking signs and works they were committing spiritual whoredom, turning from God and His Messiah to the false gods of signs and works. (Note: It is human reason that seeks signs and works and proofs. The spirit of man seeks belief and trust and love—the spiritual qualities that bind life together and make sense of life in all its facets.)

6. The Jews wanted signs of their own choosing, not the signs God had chosen to give. Men are always wanting

7. God’s great concern is not “signs from heaven,” signs outside man. God’s great concern is meeting people in their lives and hearts where they really need Him if they are to live abundantly and eternally. God wants to meet people in their sickness and sorrow, corruption and death. Meeting man in the areas of his need is an irrefutable sign given to every generation.

**5.** (8:13) **Spiritual Blindness—Jesus Christ, Rejected**: the spiritually blind are left behind by the Lord. Note the force of the words, “He left them.” They refused to believe despite all the evidence. Jesus had no choice. The decision was theirs. He had to turn and leave them.



## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#10 Who Do You Say That I Am? -- Mark 8:27-38**

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Most men do not object to the idea of a Messiah, that is, a deliverer, savior, provider, and protector. Most men want a leader who is going to bring about a utopian society that will provide social justice and plenty for everyone. What men want is a Messiah who fits into the wants and passions and power structures of their world.

Men want their bellies full, their bodies clothed and housed, and their urges satisfied. They want the *good things* of this world. If a Messiah can give these, then men are ready and willing to accept the Messiah. Jesus deliberately set out to make sure that the disciples saw Him as God's Messiah and not man's Messiah. He had to make sure they understood God's way of salvation and utopia, that God was after victory over death and a life that lasted eternally, not just for seventy or so years.

Jesus had been preparing His disciples for this private meeting at which He intended to reveal to them what would happen to Him at Jerusalem. He had given hints along the way, but now He would explain matters to them more fully. For the site, He selected Caesarea Philippi, a town about twenty-five miles north of Bethsaida, sitting at the foot of beautiful Mt. Hermon. The town was named after Augustus Caesar and Herod Philip, and it contained a marble temple dedicated to Augustus. It was a place dedicated to the glory of Rome, and that glory is now gone, but the glory of Jesus Christ remains and will go on eternally.

Caesarea Philippi sits at the base of Mt. Hermon whose snowcapped peaks can be seen as far away as Nazareth on a clear day. It is a beautiful and fertile setting.<sup>7-54</sup> At 1,150 feet above sea level, it provides an impressive view of the upper Jordan. Even the scenery seems to say, "Something big is about to happen." But what that is, and whether it is good or bad, the Apostles don't yet know.

Commentators generally consider Mark 8:27-38 to be the turning point in Mark's gospel. The previous chapters have moved us toward a crescendo in the form of Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" What follows is Jesus' preparation of his disciples for the cross that is before them in Jerusalem.

Jesus was facing the end very, very soon and there was still much to teach the disciples. It was time for them to learn that He was building a church—an assembly of people who would be confessing Him to be the Messiah. The present passage is one of the most dramatic revelations ever made. It is also one of the most demanding questions ever asked.

The answer given determines one's eternal destiny and requires a single answer: "Thou art the Christ." The importance of the question and its confession is clearly seen by glancing quickly at the points of the passage.

**(Mt 16:13-20; Mk 8:27-30; Lk 9:18-21)**

We are now well into the third year of Jesus' ministry. To date, the disciples still do not have a clear understanding of who Jesus is. It's getting to be crunch time for such a confession.

For the last couple of months Jesus has been skirting the edges of Jewish territory. Now he abandons Galilee altogether. He travels twenty-five miles north of Capernaum into the heart of Gentile territory. At

the time, this must have seemed like a crisis in Jesus' ministry. But Peter's present confession will become a centerpiece of the synoptic Gospels and a watershed for Jesus' ministry.

**MT 16:13-14 WITH MK 8:27, LK 9:19**

<sup>13</sup>When Jesus came to the region of [villages around<sup>Mk</sup>] Caesarea Philippi, [on the way<sup>Mk</sup>] [when Jesus was praying in private<sup>Lk</sup>] he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup>They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets [of long ago has come back to life.<sup>Lk</sup>]"

This is an important moment for Jesus. He bathes it in prayer (Lk 9:18) as he does other pivotal events (Lk 3:21; 6:12; 9:28; 22:41). There have been other confessions about Jesus (e.g., Jn 1:29-34, 49; 3:2, 36; 4:42), but none have reached such a level. None have elicited such a response from Jesus as when he plainly predicts his death for the first time (although cf. Jn 2:19; 3:14; 6:53; Mt 9:15; 10:38-39; 12:39-40).

Somewhere along the way, sometime after his prayer, Jesus turns to the Twelve and asks two carefully crafted questions. They are not designed for answers but for response. First, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" That's an odd question for Jesus. Does he really not know? Even without his ability to read men's minds (cf. Mt 12:25; Lk 5:22; 6:8; 7:39-40; Jn 2:24-25), Jesus is not deaf. He can hear as well as the Twelve what people are saying about him. Besides, since when does Jesus really care what people think of him? He does not ask this question to get an answer, but to get his Apostles to think along with him about who he really is.

If you were to go around asking your friends, "What do people say about me?" they would take it as an evidence of pride. What difference does it really make what people think or say about us? We are not that important! But what people believe and say about Jesus Christ *is* important, for He is the Son of God and the only Saviour of sinners.

Your confession concerning Jesus Christ is a matter of life or death (John 8:21, 24; 1 John 2:22-27; 4:1-3). The citizens of Caesarea Philippi would say, "Caesar is lord!" That confession might identify them as loyal Roman citizens, but it could never save them from their sins and from eternal hell. The only confession that saves us is "Jesus is Lord!" (1 Cor. 12:1-3) when that confession comes from a heart that truly believes in Him (Rom. 10:9-10).

There are several opinions. The confession of men shortchanged Jesus. Most men saw Jesus only as a great man, a man who was highly esteemed and respected. He was considered one of the greatest of men, but note a crucial point: these *professions* were not only untrue, they were dangerous. They contained only half-truths, and people were deceived and misled by them.

Some thought Jesus was John the Baptist (cf. Mt 14:1-2). It is remarkable the number of different opinions the people held about Jesus, though the same situation probably exists today. That some thought He was John the Baptist is especially perplexing, since John and Jesus had been seen publicly together. They were quite different in personality and ministry (Matt. 11:16-19), so it seems strange that the people would confuse them.

John the Baptist came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), in a ministry of judgment, whereas Jesus came in a spirit of meekness and service. John performed no miracles (John 10:41), but Jesus was a miracle-worker. John even dressed like the Prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; Mark 1:6). How could the people confuse the two?

They professed Jesus to be a great spirit of righteousness, a spirit that was willing to be martyred for its faith. Herod and others thought this (Matthew 14:1-2). Upon hearing of Jesus' marvelous works, Herod fancied that either John had been revived or else his spirit indwelt the man Jesus.



The common people also saw some similarity between John and Jesus: both were doing a great work for God; both were divinely chosen and gifted by God; and both proclaimed the Kingdom of God and prepared men for it. Therefore, when some looked at Jesus and His ministry, they thought Jesus was not the Messiah Himself, but the promised forerunner of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5).

Some thought he was Elijah (Mal 3:1; 4:5-6). Some said that Jesus was one of the prophets, perhaps Jeremiah (Matt. 16:14). Jeremiah was “the weeping prophet,” and Jesus was a Man of sorrows; so there is a definite parallel. Jeremiah called the people to true repentance from the heart, and so did Jesus. Both men were misunderstood and rejected by their own people, both condemned the false religious leaders and the hypocritical worship in the temple, and both were persecuted by those in authority.

Now, the Jews did not believe in reincarnation. What they did believe was that departed souls might empower living men to carry out their work. Thus, Jesus either divinely resembled or was metaphysically helped by these great men.

Why does Jesus “look like” these guys? Aside from the obvious fact that all of these men were dead, they had three common characteristics that Jesus also shared. (1) They never pulled any punches. They spoke the raw truth in the face of antagonism and potential persecution. (2) They confronted the religious and political powers of their day. And (3) they all got beat up for their boisterousness. The crowds have noticed the mounting aggression against Jesus in the ranks of the religious hierarchy. All of these opinions are quite complimentary, but inadequate.

In His words and His works, Jesus gave every evidence to the people that He was the Son of God, the Messiah, and yet they did not get the message. Instead of diligently seeking for the truth, the people listened to popular opinion and followed it, just as many people do today. They had opinions instead of convictions, and this is what led them astray. Elbert Hubbard defined public opinion as “the judgment of the incapable many, opposed to that of the discerning few.” Thank God for the discerning few!

The same false confessions about Christ exist in every generation.

1) He was only a great man of righteousness who was martyred for His great faith. As such He leaves us a great example of how to live and stand up for what we believe.

2) He was one of the greatest teachers and prophets of all time.

3) He was only a great man who revealed some very important things to us about God and religion. As such He can make a significant contribution to every man in his search for God.

4) He was only a great man, a prophet sent to the people (Jews) of His day from whom we can learn by studying His life.

*Mt 16:15-16 - <sup>15</sup>“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ<sup>NIV-7-18</sup>, the Son of the living God.”*

Now comes the real question ... the only one that really matters: “Who do *YOU* say that I am?” The NIV properly stresses the “you” by repeating it. Although Jesus addresses the whole group, Peter characteristically answers for all of them. Sometimes he says some really stupid things (Mt 16:22-23; 26:31-35; Jn 13:6-11). At other times he speaks brilliantly (Mt 14:28-31; 16:16-18; Jn 6:68-69; Acts 2:14ff). But never does Peter shine more brightly than he does right here. He has already made a preliminary confession (Jn 6:69), and he obviously has much ground to cover in his Messianic understanding (vv. 22-23). But who could deny, especially in light of Jesus’ response, the majesty of this simple statement of faith.

“Christ” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah.” Both words mean, “The anointed one.” In Hebrew culture, this represents “one set apart” for the work of God and endowed with the power of God.

The practice of pouring oil over one's head was primarily reserved for the consecration of prophets, priests, and kings (Exod 29:7, 21; 1 Sam 10:1, 6; 16:13; 2 Sam 1:14, 16).

The confession is momentous, arising from a personal conviction. It is both the confession that saves the soul and the confession that lays the foundation for the church. The very life and survival of a man's soul and of the church as a whole rest upon this simple, yet profound conviction.

These three positions, of course, describe Jesus' ministry for the Christian. We gladly accept Jesus as prophet and priest, but unfortunately too many professing Christians reject His Majesty's reign in their life. We are simply not given the option of selecting two out of three. "Christ," then, became an official title of the Jewish Messiah. This single individual was to liberate Israel from all bonds and extend her rule over all the earth (cf. Dan 9:25-27).<sup>7-55</sup>

"Son of the living God" was as kosher a title as "Christ." It comes from the Hebrew idea that God is "living" as opposed to the dead idols of pagans. Hence, Peter is speaking not only for the Twelve but for the Jewish populace as well.

*Mt 16:17-18 -- <sup>17</sup>Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you that you are Peter,<sup>NIV-7-19</sup> and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades<sup>NIV-7-20</sup> will not overcome it.<sup>NIV-7-21</sup>*

Jesus' response parallels Peter's. Peter identifies Jesus as the Son of God; Jesus identifies Peter as the son of Jonah (Jn 21:15 has "of John"). Peter identifies Jesus' position as Messiah; Jesus identifies Peter's position as the foundation of the church.

That much is simple. But verse 18 complicates things a bit. What exactly is Peter's position as the "rock" of the church? Does this mean that Peter was the first pope with the power of Apostolic succession? That is the traditional Catholic response. Protestants have protested, however. They suggest that it is not Peter, but his confession that is the foundation of the church. They base this on the fact that Jesus' play on words changes from masculine [Petros = Peter] to feminine [Petra = rock]. Furthermore, they claim that a petros was a small throwing stone, but that petra was a huge rock. Thus, they hear Jesus say, "Peter, you are a little rock (cf. Jn 1:42; also 1 Cor 15:5; Gal 1:18), but the confession you have made is great enough to build a church upon," or "I, Jesus am the true bedrock of the church" (cf. 1 Pet 2:5-8).

We conclude, therefore, that Peter is the rock, but not the first pope. Peter's specific function will be explained below. Suffice to say here that the church is built on Peter, a representative figure of the Twelve (cf. Eph. 2:20).

The word "church" [ekklēsia] is a compound word whose roots literally mean "called out." It is only used three times in the Gospels (Mt 16:18; 18:17 [twice]). Some have overemphasized this etymology and stressed that the church is "called out of darkness" and/or is to be "separate" from the world. But the word merely meant an assembly, sometimes pagan (Acts 19:32), sometimes Christian. A more important background than its Greek etymology, is its Hebrew counterpart, the word qahal—an assembly of God's people. "The Assembly" or "church" represents the citizenry of God's kingdom—those who share God's purpose, program, and authority.

The bad news is that this "assembly of God's people" will soon have to confront the "gates of Hades." The good news is that the church wins the contest. The question is, what in the world is Jesus talking about? There are a number of possibilities.<sup>7-56</sup> But we should recognize at least this much: (1) "Gates" are normally located at the fortress being defended. But this metaphor also symbolized "power." Thus, the gates of Hades might be either offensive or defensive. (2) "Hades" is not necessarily equivalent to hell. Properly, it signifies the abode of the dead, and by extension, death itself (Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps 9:13; 107:18; Isa 38:10). And (3) it is the church as a whole, not Jesus or Peter, which confronts the Gates of

Hades. So we wind up with something like this: The church is not overpowered by death. Neither the cross nor martyrdom can stifle the progress of the church.

*Mt 16:19-20 -- <sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be <sup>NIV-7-22</sup>bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be <sup>NIV-7-22</sup>loosed in heaven."*  
*<sup>20</sup>Then he [strictly<sup>LK</sup>] warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.*

Again Jesus calls for silence, but not because he shrinks from this overpowering Messianic revelation. This confession of Christ is not too strong, just too early for the general populace to accept it. However, many people today still believe that Jesus was a prophet, that he was a good teacher who spoke the ways of God. Prophets are ordinary people. We can choose whether or not to respond to their messages. We determine the nature of our relationship with a prophet. It is much safer to consider Jesus a prophet than it is to recognize him as the Son of God.

The question still resonates. Who do you say that he is? Many people say, "I believe that he was a prophet, that he said unique and wonderful things, that his life is worth emulating." Peter answered differently. "You are the Christ. You are the savior of the world, sent by God. You are the one with authority."

Much harm is done in the world today by zealous disciples who love Jesus but have not taken the time to be instructed by Him. They represent their faith and their loyalty to him in ways that actually contradict what he is about. Jesus wisely told Peter to be quiet until he learned what sort of Messiah he served.

In verse 31, Jesus calls himself the Son of Man. That is a messianic title. Jesus was agreeing that he is the Christ. The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law; he must be killed and after three days rise again. Jesus had challenged the corrupt religious leadership in Jerusalem. The people expected their Messiah to relieve suffering, but Jesus said that the Son of Man must himself suffer. Rather than cleansing the corruption and replacing it with godly leadership, the Son of Man will be killed.

What kind of Messiah is this? What good is a messiah who will not change the world? Peter was the only one with courage to say what other disciples thought, and he rebuked Jesus. "What kind of Messiah are you? The world is a mess. Unless you do something, it will be even more of a mess. You shouldn't suffer; you should relieve suffering. You shouldn't undergo rejection in Jerusalem. You shouldn't die; you should heal those who are dying."

Jesus answered in two parts. First he said, "Get behind me, Satan." His heart was pained. The cross that lay in Jesus future bore down on him every day of his life. He was tempted every day from the beginning of his ministry to the night of his arrest in the garden at Gethsemane. Every day, the tempter said "You don't have to do this. You don't have to live with the humiliation. You don't have to live with the limitations of your humanity. You don't have to be misunderstood. You don't have to do any of it." Day after day the temptation was close at hand, and day after day Jesus resisted it. Now here was his friend adding pressure, and the response from his heart was, "Stop it! This is hard enough without hearing it from you. Your voice is adding to the voice of evil."

The second part of his answer is this: "You are thinking the way men think, Peter, not the way God thinks. You are concerned about the kind of salvation you would bring if you were God. You would throw off the Roman yoke and install new priests in Jerusalem. You would make sure the good people were happy and the bad people would suffer. You would do all of that with a wave of your arm." But acting as if we were God does not fix anything. We are terrible at being God. The way our Lord brings righteousness is by interior revolution. Jesus must suffer so that we can be free to receive life from God. He offers us self-denial, a cross, and a Messiah to follow. Jesus is not the kind of messiah people expected, but he is the Messiah of God. He is the Messiah who gives life, the One in whom we may hope.

The disciples had just made the profound confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. At this point Jesus launched a new stage. He began to indoctrinate them into the way of God's Messiah, for God's Messiah was not man's messiah.

Note several things.

1. The phrase "He began to teach them" is significant. Matthew says, "From that time forth"; that is, from the time of the profound confession that Jesus is the Messiah—beyond question the Messiah—something significant happened. A new stage was being launched. He revealed with a powerful thrust that the "Son of the living God" was going to be killed and raised again from the dead. Never before had this happened. Never again would it happen. History would be made. "Jerusalem...that killed the prophets" would now commit the ultimate crime: Jerusalem would kill God's own Son (cp. Matthew 23:27).

2. Jesus had been telling His disciples about His death and resurrection for some time. But they had not understood. First, the idea of a suffering Messiah differed radically from their own idea of the Messiah. And second, the revelation had been hidden in pictures and symbols.

The difference now was that Jesus no longer spoke in pictures and symbols. He told them in simple and direct words (Matthew 20:18-20; Luke 18:31-33). A new stage in the revelation of God's plan for the world was now to take place: God's Son was to die and be raised again for the sins of the world. God's plan for saving the world was to take place through a suffering Messiah, not a conquering Messiah. God's Messiah was not going to deliver a materialistic world into the hands of His followers. Contrariwise, He was to die, and His death was to usher in the Kingdom of God and make it possible for His followers to live eternally in the very presence of God Himself.

3. The words "must [dei] suffer" are strong. "Must" is constraint, an utter necessity. It was absolutely necessary by the very nature of the case for Jesus to suffer. God is love and man is corruptible, so God, in love, must provide salvation for man. But God is also just, so He must provide salvation in such a way that justice will be done. The penalty must be paid; death must be carried out. Some Ideal Man must die for man so that His Ideal Death can stand for and cover all men. There is only One Ideal Man: Jesus, the Son of God. The Son of God must become the Son of Man, the Ideal Man:

- ⇒ He must live a perfect life providing for the world the Ideal Righteousness or Ideal Life.
- ⇒ He must die, providing for the world the Ideal Death.
- ⇒ He must arise from the dead, providing for the world the Ideal Resurrection.

4. The words "suffer many things" include much more than just the sufferings surrounding His death. This is often overlooked. Hebrews 5:8 makes this clear: "Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered." However, the point is not seen unless one acknowledges the truth of the word Son, that is, Jesus' deity. Jesus is *the Son of God* who left the very presence of God. He left heaven with all the majesty and splendor, glory and worship, praise and honor due Him. He is *the Son of Heaven*, but He became the Son of a woman. He belonged in heaven, but He was present on earth. He had ruled in the perfect, incorruptible world, but He was now a servant in this imperfect and corruptible world. Every sight, sound, touch, taste—every experience and awareness was a world of distance from what He had known. He suffered through every moment and through every experience. Every experience drained "virtue" out of Him, for He always had before His face the truth and glory of heaven and the sin and corruption of earth.

5. Jesus' prediction of His resurrection is clear to us because we can look back upon it. But it was never clear to His disciples. Why? Very simply, it was to be a new experience. No one had ever risen from the dead, not a person who was never again to die. It had never happened before; it was unprecedented. Perhaps the disciples believed somewhat like Martha, that there was to be a future resurrection of all men (John 11:24-26). Such a belief was an expression of the hope that is within every man, the hope to continue on in some form of existence. Such a belief is easy to hold. But to think of an immediate

resurrection, to think of a person arising from the dead today is difficult (just think about it). The idea of the Messiah dying and arising from the dead would be almost unimaginable to those who had not been taught the truth.

Just what the disciples thought Jesus meant by “being raised again” is not known. The fact that they did not fully understand is clear from the fact that their spirits were crushed when He was killed. But some of His followers seemed to grasp more of a real bodily resurrection than others. This is clear by an immediate remembrance of His words after His resurrection. For example, there was John who did believe immediately (John 20:8-9); there was Mary Magdalene who was shown that He had risen (Matthew 28:6). However, others were slower to understand and believe (Mark 16:11; John 20:24-25).

Now that they had confessed their faith in Christ (but see John 6:66-71), the disciples were ready for the “secret” Jesus wanted to share with them: He was going with them to Jerusalem where He would die on a cross. From this point on, Mark will focus on their journey to Jerusalem and the emphasis will be on Jesus’ approaching death and resurrection (Mark 9:30-32; 10:32-34).

This announcement stunned the disciples. If He is indeed the Christ of God, as they had confessed, then why would He be rejected by the religious leaders? Why would these leaders crucify Him? Did not the Old Testament Scriptures promise that Messiah would defeat all their enemies and establish a glorious kingdom for Israel? There was something wrong somewhere and the disciples were confused.

True to character, it was Peter who expressed their concern. One minute Peter was led by God to confess his faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:17), and the next minute he was thinking like an unbelieving man and expressing the thoughts of Satan! This is a warning to us that when we argue with God’s Word, we open the door for Satan’s lies. Peter began rebuking his Master, and Mark used the same word that describes our Lord’s rebuking of the demons (Mark 1:25; 3:12).

Peter’s protest was born out of his ignorance of God’s will and his deep love for his Lord. One minute Peter was a “rock,” and the next minute he was a stumbling block! Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said, “The man who loves Jesus, but who shuns God’s method, is a stumbling block to Him.” Peter did not yet understand the relationship between suffering and glory. He would eventually learn this lesson and would even emphasize it in his first epistle (note 1 Peter 1:6-8; 4:13-5:10).

Note, however, that when Jesus rebuked Peter, He also “looked on His disciples,” because they agreed with Peter’s assessment of the situation! Steeped in Jewish traditional interpretation, they were unable to understand how their Messiah could ever suffer and die. To be sure, some of the prophets had written about Messiah’s sufferings, but much more had been written about Messiah’s glory. Some of the rabbis even taught that there would be *two* Messiahs, one who would suffer and one who would reign (see 1 Peter 1:10-12). No wonder the disciples were confused.

But the problem was more than theological; it was very practical. Jesus had called these men to follow Him, and they knew that whatever happened to Him would happen to them. If there was a cross in *His* future, there would be one in *their* future as well. That would be reason enough to disagree with Him! In spite of their devotion to Him, the disciples were still ignorant of the true relationship between the cross and the crown.

They were following Satan’s philosophy (glory without suffering) instead of God’s philosophy (suffering transformed into glory). Which philosophy you accept will determine how you live and how you serve.

Mark 8:34 indicates that, though Jesus and His disciples had met in private, the crowds were not far away. Jesus summoned the people and taught them what He taught His own disciples: *there is a price to pay for true discipleship*. He knew that the crowds were following Him only because of the miracles, and that most of the people were unwilling to pay the price to become true disciples.

Jesus laid down three conditions for true discipleship: (1) we must surrender ourselves completely to Him; (2) we must identify with Him in suffering and death; and (3) we must follow Him obediently, wherever He leads. If we live for ourselves, we will lose ourselves, but if we lose ourselves for His sake and the Gospel's, we will find ourselves.

Denying self is not the same as self-denial. We practice self-denial when, for a good purpose, we occasionally give up things or activities. But we deny self when we surrender ourselves to Christ and determine to obey His will. This once-for-all dedication is followed by a daily "dying to self" as we take up the cross and follow Him. From the human point of view, we are losing ourselves, but from the divine perspective, we are finding ourselves. When we live for Christ, we become more like Him, and this brings out our own unique individuality.

But note the motivation for true discipleship: "for My sake and the Gospel's" (Mark 8:35). To lose yourself is not an act of desperation; it is an act of devotion. But we do not stop there: personal devotion should lead to practical duty, the sharing of the Gospel with a lost world. "For My sake" could lead to selfish religious isolationism, so it must be balanced with "and the Gospel's." Because we live for Him, we live for others.

Discipleship is a matter of profit and loss, a question of whether we will *waste* our lives or *invest* our lives. Note the severe warning Jesus gives us here: once we have spent our lives, we cannot buy them back! Remember, He was instructing His *disciples*, men who had already confessed Him as the Son of God. He was not telling them how to be saved and go to heaven, but how to save their lives and make the most of their opportunities on earth. "Losing your soul" is the equivalent of wasting your life, missing the great opportunities God gives you to make your life count. You may "gain the whole world" and be a success in the eyes of men, and yet have nothing to show for your life when you stand before God. If that happens, though you did own the whole world, it would not be a sufficient price to give to God to buy another chance at life.

Is there any reward for the person who is a true disciple? Yes, there is: he becomes more like Jesus Christ and one day shares in His glory. Satan promises you glory, but in the end, you receive suffering. God promises you suffering, but in the end, that suffering is transformed into glory. If we acknowledge Christ and live for Him, He will one day acknowledge us and share His glory with us. Now let's look at verse 34. "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself," the Lord declares. Coming after him is a privilege. He invites us to follow him, but he doesn't appease his followers. We are invited to have life from him on his terms; we follow his way or not at all.

There is another point to his message here. Jesus offers allegiance to him as an opportunity, but he also issues a warning: "Depending on the choice you make, you will either save or lose your life. You will either gain or forfeit your soul. You will either find approval or disapproval when the Son of Man comes in his father's glory. You are playing for very high stakes."

Two vivid pictures come to mind here. The first is of people who have immense riches and world renown. Their every word and deed are recorded, but they have lost their capacity for any good thing. Such people are not capable of love, friendship, prayer, or worship. They have it all, yet they really have nothing. They are nothing. The other picture is of people with worldly religion, who avoid all the stigma of faith in Christ. They never have to suffer for faithfulness to the Lord. They never take a stand if it will cost them something. They are ashamed of the one who has bought them with a price, who has included them in his embrace, and at the end of the day, when the Lord comes in his Father's glory, he will withdraw from them as they did from him. These are very powerful pictures. Such people gain the whole world but lose their souls. The way of discipleship is given in three phrases in verse 34. Jesus said that anyone who would follow him must: first, deny himself; second, take up his cross; and third, follow me.

A follower of Jesus must deny himself and take up his cross. As followers of Jesus, we must be willing to be humiliated, broken, set aside. We must be willing to undergo whatever treatment the Lord requires

of us to destroy the love of self and confidence of self with which we are all born. Our *selves* need to be crucified. Instead of resisting the corrective surgery God intends for us, we should embrace it.

(8:32-33) **Messiahship**: the way of man's messiah. Note the word "openly" (*parresia*). It means plainly, unmistakably, frankly, without hesitation. Jesus literally indoctrinated His disciples with the fact and meaning of His death. He talked about it so much that it shook the apostles, so much so that they had Peter to confront Christ. Note three points.

1. Natural man rejects God's Messiah. He rebels at the idea of the cross. He wants another way other than the cross. This is what Peter was doing: rebelling against the idea that *God's Son* was to die, that His blood was to be shed for the sins of the world (1 Peter 2:24). Peter could accept Jesus as *the Son of the living God*, but not as the Suffering Savior. Such an idea was repulsive and unacceptable to him. Therefore, he tried to stop the idea. Peter did two things.

- a. "Peter took Him" (*proslabomenos*). The Greek is strong. It means *caught hold*. Peter took hold and grabbed Jesus. Peter bodily took Jesus aside for a conference.
- b. Peter "began to rebuke [*epitiman*] Him." This again is strong. It is not just a wish, but a forcible attempt to stop the idea of the Suffering Savior: "This shall not be unto thee. This must not and cannot happen to you." *God forbid* is the equivalent idea. Peter was out to stop the cross. He was urging Jesus to be the Messiah of power, fame, and sensation that the Jews were expecting. Peter was urging Jesus to follow his own human schemes instead of God's way. And by such, he was tempting Jesus with the very same compromises that Satan used to tempt Jesus, the compromises of power, fame, and sensations (Matthew 4:1-11). Peter was zealous for God, but He was mistaken and ignorant in his zeal. He did not understand that God was planning to save the world through the death of His Son.

Peter's behavior is the way of the world. It is the natural, carnal mind. Man just rebels and recoils against the idea of a Suffering Savior who dies for the sins of the world, a Suffering Savior who demands the same sacrifice and denial of His followers. Such an idea is unacceptable and repulsive.

The natural man's idea of God and of God's plan for man is seen in three concepts.

- 1) Some think the path of life is an indulgent love. God is seen as a giving, loving, indulgent *grandfather type* of person. He is seen as One who tolerates (and rewards by accepting) even the worst behavior, no matter how much human suffering and devastation is wrought by the hands of a person. To think of the cross and the blood of Christ as an emblem of suffering is repulsive. The cross is viewed only as an emblem of love, not of sin and shame. The way of love is thought to be the path of life that man is to follow.
- 2) Some think that comfort and pleasure are the path of life and God's way. God again is viewed only as an indulgent *grandfather type*. His will for man is to have *the good life* of things: comfort and pleasure, ease and plenty, health and leisure. And again the cross is only an emblem of love and care for the world, not of suffering and sacrifice and self-denial. Its shame and pain and agony and its purpose of reconciling a world lost in sin and depravity are denied.
- 3) Some feel that triumph, victory, power, and reigning supreme are God's way. This was the idea of most Jews in Christ's day. It was Peter's concept of the Messiah. A quick glance at the notes and applying man's ideas to his emotional and mental state of being, as well as to his physical and material being, is revealing. The ideas show how some view the concepts of *Self-Image*, *Self-Improvement*, and *Personality Development* as being God's plan and path for man. Again, the idea of suffering and sacrifice and self-denial is rejected.

2. Natural man is of Satan. The literal meaning of the name Satan is *Adversary*. Calling Peter "Satan" was stern, yet such sternness was necessary. Peter was tempting Christ with the very same temptation Jesus had faced in the wilderness. All the world's glory that could be His flashed across His mind. The loyalty and allegiance of men without the cross was again being suggested to Him. How this

must have cut the heart of Jesus! This time the temptation was coming from one of His own disciples. When a man refuses to accept God's plan for life, he becomes an adversary to God. He opposes God's will. In essence the man says that he knows what is best; he is *wiser* than God. Think! When a man does not accept God's plan for life, the crux of what he says to God is, "The cross is not necessary. Jesus' death to save the world is a useless plan. It is not needed."

This is what Peter was doing and saying. He was opposing God's plan for life, that is, opposing the salvation of the world through the death of God's Son. Peter was saying that he was wiser than God. Note: Jesus abruptly turned to Peter before Peter could say anything else and stopped him in his tracks. He charged Peter with being Satan, with being under the authority of Satan, with speaking for Satan. He had become as Satan, an adversary against God's plan for His Son and for the salvation of the world.

3. Natural man sets his mind on material things, not on the things of God. The words "thou savorest not" (ou phroneis) mean to think, to mind. Peter did not have his mind, his thinking in line with God's mind and thoughts. His tastes were different from God's tastes. Peter's thoughts and tastes were worldly and self-pleasing, not spiritual and not pleasing to God. He was using human reasoning, not God's reasoning. The death of God's Son by shedding His blood for the sins of the world was distasteful to Peter. In his mind such a concept was unfit for God.

Note Jesus' words to Peter and how true they are: "Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." The death of Jesus reveals man's true nature, a nature that uses natural and carnal reasoning instead of spiritual reasoning.

Who do you say that he is? Is it time for you to make a decision about who Jesus is? Is it time to acknowledge what you already know to be true? If you say he is Christ, if you declare that he is God's answer from heaven, are you willing to hear him if he calls you to follow him? Will you give your allegiance to a Messiah who wants to change you from the inside out? If you have never named him Messiah, today is the day to do so for the first time. If you already know him as Messiah, but you are resisting him, this is the day to give up your resistance to his call to discipleship. The time to make the decision is now.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#11 What Did Moses Command? – Mark 10:1-16**

*"What did Moses command you?" he replied.*

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In this series, we have been learning that very often Jesus asks questions to help people understand themselves and God in a new way. The passage we are going to study now concerns divorce and marriage, and the question that Jesus asks is, "What did Moses command?" Through this question, we will learn much of God's own heart on the subject of marriage.

I recently heard of a newspaper cartoon of a mother reading a bedtime story to her little, curly-haired



daughter. The book was called *Grim Reality Fairy Tales*, and the text read, "and the prince kissed her and they fell in love, dated a while and moved in together, broke up, got back together, got married, got a baby, got separated, got back together again, broke up, got divorced, spent time alone rediscovering themselves, met someone new, fell in love and repeated the pattern habitually ever after."

This worldview is sad, hopeless, and far from what God intended. More than ever, our children wonder what marriage is and what they might hope for in a relationship. In this message, we will consider God's clear intent for marriage.

Let's look at Mark 10:1-16:

*Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.*

*Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"*

*"What did Moses command you?" he replied.*

*They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."*

*"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."*

*When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."*

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What about divorce? Of all the tough questions that we are looking at in our series, surely not a single one will touch more lives and have a more devastating impact than the question of divorce. The most recent statistics are absolutely alarming. For example, divorce in this century in America has escalated 700 percent.

Right now in America there is one divorce for every 1.8 marriages. In this year there will be one million children involved in divorce cases and right now in America there are 13 million little children under the age of 18 who have one or both parents missing. This kind of escalation led a reporter in *Newsweek* to lament the rhetorical question, "Is there anyone left in the land who has not heard a friend, a child or a parent describe the agony of divorce?"

And the silence echoes the answer. Upon hearing this led one of America's best known theologians to state, "We have entered the age of the death of lifelong marriage."

I pray to God that he's wrong, but I know this, whether or not we have entered such an age, let me tell you without a doubt that God hates divorce. There are few, if any, things that are more abominable in His sight. From God's perspective, marriage is for keeps -- it is permanent -- it is a covenant.

If I had to choose one theme passage for the answer to this question in our lesson today, it would be Malachi 2:14. *"The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are His and why one, because He was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. I hate divorce says the Lord God of Israel."*

Do you notice the picture God paints? He says when two people get married there is a covenant between them, a bond of trust and they literally become one.

We are going to look at, in answer to this question, the idea about divorce and even something about remarriage. But the number one thing I would propose to you right from the beginning is to remember the view in which God holds marriage.

As you're turning, perhaps our generation can take heart over the fact that we are not the first to abuse God's wonderful intent for marriage. For example in Jesus' day, divorce was commonplace. In his particular era women were treated as if they were pieces of property and divorce was one of the most volatile issues with which the people dealt. You see, in that Jewish world for some years there had been a rabbinical feud between two renown Jewish leaders over this very issue.

Rabbi Shammi had said publicly and his disciples believed that there could be no divorce unless one partner in the marriage had been sexually unfaithful to the other. But by contrast, another leader by the name of Rabbi Hillel had said that a man could put away his wife through divorce for any reason if she displeased him. That source of displeasure might be the fact that she would have been unfaithful or that she displeased him by being a poor cook. She could displease him by snoring at night, in fact, even as she grew older and became less attractive that could, indeed, be legitimately under his theory the source of that displeasure. Well, you're probably not surprised by the fact that Hillel's views became more popular among the masses.

*"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'"*

Why would that be a test for Jesus? Why that question. Well, two reasons. (1) The Pharisees were quite aware that Jesus did not accept the lenient view that Hillel had on divorce. For example, in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had already said some things about divorce. Beginning at verse 31, he said, *"It has been said anyone who divorces his wife must give a certificate of divorce, but I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness causes her to become an adulteress and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."*

The Pharisees were thinking that if they could just get Jesus to expound upon that view, surely he would become less popular with the crowd. But there was even a more sinister reason for asking the question. You see, those Pharisees wanted Jesus dead. Five chapters before our text today, in Matthew 14, John the Baptist, the forerunner and close friend of Jesus, was put to death, beheaded.

Do you remember why, and by whom? He was killed by Herod because John preached against a relationship that Herod had with his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. And that strong teaching about the adultery that was being committed brought about John's death. And so these Pharisees were thinking - well if we can just get Jesus to make as strong a case, maybe he will end up with the same lot and we'll be rid of him. So the Pharisees were asking a very sinister question.

Oh, but look at Jesus' reply. There is such genius in it. *"Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together let man not separate."*

What a magnificent answer! I love the way it begins in verse 4; Jesus chides the Pharisees a little bit. He asks these men who are indeed the great teachers of scripture. Haven't you read the scripture from the very beginning? And then simply quoting scripture, Jesus gives in effect an answer that has four great facets.

*"At the beginning the Creator made them male and female."*

Jesus said think back, how did it all start? God made one man and He made one woman, and He made them for each other. Now just think a second, have you ever thought that divorce wasn't much of an option for Adam and Eve, was it?

*He says for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united [cleave] to his wife.*

That's the cycle for all the ages. A boy and a girl each are brought up in their own family. And when they reach that point of maturity, they just naturally gravitate to each other and they leave the family from whence they came and they start a new one. The Hebrew word there is a word that means a strong, unbreakable bond, and it carries with it the connotation of literally being stuck or glued.

*"And the two shall become one flesh. They are no longer two, but one."*

The two become a single unit. That's not just referring to the sexual union. God is giving us right there His divine perspective on this marriage. In the Lord's view, the two abandon themselves and they become one, not just in flesh. Remember Malachi 2:15, from God's view the two become one flesh and one in spirit. They are a unit -- the same purpose, the same direction, the same will.

*"So therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate."*

What an answer! And every bit of that answer from Jesus came directly from scripture. How do you refute it? Well, the Pharisees were at a loss. I can just hear them stammering at verse 7, you can just see them saying, *"Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*

It is true that in the Old Testament, particularly in Deut. 24:1-4, that Moses did **allow** a certificate of divorce. In fact, the reason given there is that if indeed the spouse was "unclean" according to the King James version, or "indecent" according to the NIV, the Hebrew word there is "erva" and it literally has a connotation about it of nakedness and shame and indecency.

And so there was, indeed, in the Old Testament from God the opportunity for a man to divorce his wife, and they bring that up. Look at what Jesus says in verse 8, *"Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce.'" Notice the change, they said, "Why did Moses command..." but Jesus said **Moses never commanded, Moses permitted it.***

But then he goes on to say that you divorced your wives because your hearts were hard, but from the beginning it was not so. What Jesus is saying here is, look, if you live the way you ought to live, loving God and loving your mate, it never would have been an issue. But their hearts were hardened and sometimes the men were brutalizing their wives.

If you want to know what God thinks about it and how strongly He views the bond, read verse 9 with me, *"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness and marries another woman, commits adultery."* the word there that's rendered marital unfaithfulness or fornication is a Greek word that means any illicit sexual activity whether it be heterosexual, homosexual...of any kind.

Jesus is saying quite clearly, unless your mate is involved in some kind of promiscuous sexual activity then you have no right to break that bond. And folks, that's the same thing he said in Matthew 5 and it's the same thing that Deuteronomy 24 says, if you divorce for any reason other than adultery, you proliferate more adultery.

That premise is even offered by the apostle Paul, listen to Romans 7:3, *"So then if while her husband liveth she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress."*

In I Cor. 7:10-11, listen to what Paul says, *"To the married I give this command, not I but the Lord, a wife must not separate from her husband, but if she does she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, and the husband must not divorce his wife."*

That's how strong it is. God says when you begin to break down the marriage plan and you begin to proliferate adultery, you get yourselves into a great mess.

Now I realize someone says, well, what about my situation, this happened and that occurred and she did this and he did this -- and I know there are a million and one contingencies -- and I don't envy the job of elders throughout this country who look into the hearts and lives of people to try and determine what is best.

But I know this, God wants the marriage bond to be together. What really concerns me more than anything is in Matthew 19:7, after Jesus had given that beautiful explanation of what marriage is all about, the Pharisees looked at him and asked him for loopholes.

Instead of listening to what God had said from the very beginning about the nature of marriage, they said we're not interested in that we are looking for loopholes.

I get people who come to me who say they are tired of my marriage, I want out, show me an escape. They are not interested in the will of God. And even worse are those who have gone through and had the divorce and never once prayed and never once sought Godly counsel, and never once looked at the Word, and then suddenly after it's all over, then they come and say, "Now I want to see God's will."

And more than once I've been candid, I said, "It's a little late now. Oh, God still has a will for your life and you can pick up the pieces, but you should have started looking a few months earlier seeking God's will."

In verse 10, the Pharisees were so perplexed by this they said, *"You know if that's the truth, it's better for a man not to marry."*

And you know, the truth is, that's right. If a man and a woman are not prepared for the seriousness of that which they are entering into, if a man and a woman are not both into the Lord and looking to the Lord as the one who gives them the guidance for their lives in marriage and in everything else, and if the couple does not have a sense of the permanence of this covenant and what it's all about, it indeed would be better if they never married. That is God's plan.

1. Marriage is a life-long commitment. Once a marriage covenant has been made, unless it is dissolved for a biblical reason (e.g., death or sexual infidelity - Rom. 7:2; Mt. 5:32; 19:9), it is an abiding obligation. ". . . [T]he woman that has a husband is bound by law to the husband while he is living," i.e., as long as he is alive (Rom. 7:2; 1 Cor. 7:39). The Bible is clear on the matter of the perpetual design of the marriage union.
2. God is the Author of the marriage institution. It is he who joins the man and woman to one another in this sacred union (Mt. 19:6). It is, therefore, only the Creator who may determine when a divorce proceeding may be initiated. And the fact of the matter is this: God has *authorized* divorce solely for the cause of fornication (Mt. 5:32; 19:9). To initiate a divorce upon any other basis, therefore, is to go beyond that which is authorized by divine law (cf. 1 Cor. 4:6 ASV).
3. When one enters a marriage relationship, he or she enters into a covenant agreement with a companion; that agreement is witnessed and sealed by God (see Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:14).
4. The marriage covenant carries inherent responsibilities. When a person commits to the marriage relationship, he or she accepts certain obligations of this relationship (see 1 Cor. 7:3-5; Eph. 5:22ff; 1 Tim. 5:8). To vacate a marriage by the utilization of an unauthorized divorce is to flaunt these sacred responsibilities.
5. Unscriptural divorce creates an environment of temptation. When a marriage partner initiates a

capricious divorce, he subjects his mate to the temptations of yielding to unlawful sexual fulfillment (cf. 1 Cor. 7:5).

This is very likely the point that Jesus made in the sermon on the mount when he declared that a man who divorces his wife, for a reason other than fornication, “makes her an adulteress” (Mt. 5:32). The meaning probably is this: He subjects her to the temptation of finding another companion, which relationship would constitute adultery (cf. Arndt & Gingrich, **Greek Lexicon**, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967, p. 528).

Are we so naive as to think that God will not hold one accountable for such neglect?

Marriage is a sacred and most serious undertaking. Our youth must be taught not to enter into this union lightly. And when one yields to this covenant relationship, he or she must remain committed to it — if at all possible.

### **Two sets of verses that must be added to the discussion**

*(Acts 2:37-40) "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" {38} Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. {39} The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." {40} With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.""*

With the mess the Jews had made for themselves in regard to marriage and divorce, where in the story of the first century church did they settle what must have been many “marriage and divorce” issues?

*(1 Corinthians 6:9-11) "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders {10} nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. {11} And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*

Those who had once been adulterers are here mentioned as having been forgiven by their response to a Savior!

### **The Devastating Effects Of Divorce**

Through the prophet Malachi, Jehovah God said to ancient Israel: “*I hate divorce*” (2:16 NASB). The Lord hates divorce because He loves people and divorce is devastating to humankind.

Man did not live one day upon this earth apart from the environment of a home. In fact, the very foundation of society is the home. Marriage is that divine union between a man and a woman who love one another, and who have welded their lives together “so long as they both shall live.” It is the cement that holds society together.

Moreover, it is this very societal cohesiveness that facilitates the spread of the redemptive gospel of Jesus Christ. When the family structure disintegrates, a significant factor in the growth of Christian faith is missing, and the gospel of God is hindered. Those who encourage capricious, unauthorized divorce undermine the cause for which the Savior died.

Divorce, generally speaking, is a tremendous evil. In fact, it is so bad that Jesus Christ allows it (together with a subsequent remarriage) on *one* basis only — that of fornication (Mt. 5:32; 19:9). Subsequent unions

following divorce — for all parties other than the innocent victim of a marriage breached by fornication — constitute adulterous relationships.

The divorce problem has reached alarming proportions. In 1970 there were 4.3 million divorced people in America. By 1994 that number had more than quadrupled to a staggering 17.4 million. According to the **Journal of Marriage and the Family**, the fairly recent phenomenon of “no-fault” divorce has significantly accelerated the plague of American divorce. The United States now leads the world in marriage break-up.

In a recently published book, **Why Marriage Matters: Reasons to Believe in Marriage in Post-Modern Society** (Pinon Press, 1997), author Glenn T. Stanton has compiled a massive amount of evidence which reveals the shocking effect that divorce is having in this country.

This book is a survey of the most authoritative social science research published over the course of the last century. It demonstrates how first-time, life-long, monogamous marriage significantly improves the lives of adults, their children and the nation at large.

Consider some of the following factors:

1. Alcoholism is much more likely to be a problem among those who have been divorced than those who have not. Those divorced only once have almost twice the rate of alcoholism as those who have never been divorced. Folks divorced more than once are almost three times as likely to have drinking problems.
2. The suicide rate is almost three times higher among the divorced than among life-long spouses.
3. The National Institute of Mental Health advises that the divorced are about four times as likely to have problems with depression as are the never-divorced.
4. Studies have shown that the prevalence of suffering from any psychiatric disorder over a lifetime was significantly lower for those in stable marriages.
5. Statistical data have revealed that children of divorced parents are much more likely to drop out of school than children from one-time-married couples.
6. Children from broken homes are much more likely to have a difficult time obtaining and maintaining steady employment.
7. The children of divorced parents are more likely to become “teen parents,” producing out-of-wedlock babies, than the children of life-long married parents.
8. The offspring of divorced parents are twenty to thirty percent more likely to have health problems, or to be injury-prone than youngsters whose original parents are still together.
9. The children of divorced parents are three times more likely to have emotional or behavioral problems than they will have if their biological parents stay together.

The evidence is all too clear. The Creator knew what He was doing when He gave strict regulations for the preservation of the original family. In view of this, Christian parents will make every effort possible to keep their marriages intact. Moreover, they will instruct their children in the concept of the permanency of marriage as designed by God.

### **Divorce and the Guilty Party**

Every now and then it pops up again. I speak of the notion that when a marriage has been dissolved by a biblically sanctioned divorce, i.e., on the basis of fornication – Mt. 19:9, the “guilty party” has as much right to remarry as the innocent victim. After all, it is alleged, if the innocent party is released from the guilty culprit, it stands to reason that the guilty is also severed from the innocent. Sound reasonable?

Superficially it may; actually, it isn't. In this brief article, let me provide some reasons as to why this theory is without merit.

1. The notion that the "guilty party" may remarry contemplates a union that is *without scriptural authority*. The New Testament grants the right of marriage to: (a) the never-married-before person (1 Cor. 7:2); (b) the widowed (Rom. 7:3; 1 Cor. 7:39); (c) the *innocent* victim in marriage breached by adultery (Mt. 5:32; 19:9).

Where is the authorization for the guilty fornicator to remarry? There is none.

2. Some are asking: "But where does the New Testament explicitly *forbid* the guilty party to remarry?" That's like asking: "Where does the New Testament explicitly forbid two 'gay' people to marry?" Nowhere – in those precise words.

The issue is: Where is the *divine authority* for such a union? It does not exist. What is authorized *excludes* what is not! To act outside the bounds of Christ's authority (Col. 3:17), is to act presumptively.

3. Furthermore, the idea that the "guilty party" is free to remarry is illogical. There is a principle in logic that suggests that any proposition implying an absurdity is itself false. The guilty-party-may-remarry view falls into this category.

For example, Matthew 19:9 clearly reveals that the person, in a divorce action, who is granted the right of remarriage, is the *same individual* who is granted the right of initiating the divorce. If it is the case that the guilty person is free to remarry, then it is equally clear that this unfaithful person is likewise granted the right to *file for the divorce*.

Here is the consequence of that reasoning. A man might desire to be rid of his wife. But she has been loyal to him, hence, he has no "cause" for divorce. Never mind; according to the theory under review, he may commit adultery, then, on the basis of *his own* transgression, file for divorce. Subsequently, then, he could – if he so chose – find a new companion. Has there been a more fanciful position? This view actually *rewards* fornication!

4. Too, consider this point. Jesus made it clear that any divorce for a non-biblical cause, i.e., no fornication is involved, prohibits either party from entering a new union. A man who grows weary of his faithful wife, and divorces her, cannot remarry; if he does, he commits adultery.

On the other hand, according to the "guilty-party" theory, if the gentleman who desires his freedom will just commit fornication, he will have the necessary justification for obtaining a divorce and entering a new marriage. Does this make any sense? None at all.

Divorce and remarriage are allowed only within the scope of divine authorization. All other sexual unions are prohibited. While this generally is viewed as a "hard saying," it is a necessary restriction for the ultimate benefit of society as a whole.

## **How Does the Church Address the Problem of Divorce in Accepting Members?**

Divorce has been the fatal disease for marriages since the beginning of time. The church of every century, including the first, has been embarrassed by a rising divorce rate. Nationally, the divorce rate is about 4.2 per thousand people. In the Bible-belt south, (Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia) the divorce rate (6.1) in 1999 was about 50% higher than the national average.

The tragic effects of this problem have placed countless souls in jeopardy. Many individuals with “marital problems” have experienced emotional, physical, and spiritual pain for their entire lifetimes. Families are ripped apart. Thousands of children suffer a lifetime of personal injury due to no fault of their own because their mothers and fathers divorced. The securities of their homes were destroyed. Church and society leaders to deal with the menace of divorce spend precious time, hours working on this problem. Certainly, “God hates divorce.”

The Lord’s church, and her people, has not escaped this problem. In a survey of 6 congregations in Texas and Oklahoma the question was asked: “*Have you, or your mate, or any member of your immediate family, been divorced?*” TRAGICALLY, 71 PERCENT ANSWERED “YES.”

What are we to do? How should leaders of the Lord’s church address the very serious problem of divorce? What practical policies must we engage, without violating the will of God, to provide spiritual leadership for both the local congregation-at-large over which we are overseers, and the individual members of that congregation as they deal with this issue?

**First, we must teach faithfully what *God has said* about marriage and divorce.**

The first provision relating to the topic is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and quoted in Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:1; Matthew 5:31; 19:7,9; and Mark 10:3-5). This “Mosaic Toleration” clause did not institute divorce, but tolerated it for any cause *but fornication*. Those who were fornicators were stoned to death! (Leviticus 20:10; Deut. 22:22). In Matthew 19:9 Jesus said the man who divorces his wife and marries another *except for fornication* commits adultery. The act of adultery is a work of the flesh, a sin, (Galatians 5:19) and those who practice such things cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. I Corinthians 7:10-24 detail teachings to God’s church in Corinth on believers being married, believers and unbelievers being married, and to the unmarrieds and widows. This passage, sometimes called the “Pauline Privilege” concludes with the admonition: “...let each one remain with God in that calling in which he was called” (7:24). The chapter concludes by giving a widow the liberty to form a second marriage after the death of her first husband, but “only in the Lord.”

The ideals of marriage should include the following teachings:

- a. Marriage is an institution ordained by God.
- b. Marriage, by Biblical example and precept, is for one man and one woman who marry for life.
- c. Marriage includes sexual privilege and responsibilities exclusively for the mates in the marriage.
- d. Fornication provides the privilege, but not the obligation, for the innocent party to divorce the guilty party. When this privilege is exercised, the marriage is dissolved.
- e. Whenever a divorce occurs, for any reason, the marriage has failed.
- f. Divorced individuals may, or may not, marry another person according to the details of the divorce, and the marital status of the person they intend to marry.
- g. No matter what any person may say about a marriage regarding whether the individuals are right or wrong will not make it right or wrong. Each individual is ultimately responsible only to God in this matter.

**We must recognize that the issues involved in marriage, divorce, and remarriage are neither simple, nor easy, to resolve.**

The apostle Paul demonstrated the complexity of marriage problems in the 40 verses of I Corinthians 7. This chapter comes soon after the most blatant example of immorality described in the New Testament, that of a brother in Christ living with his father’s wife! However, the complexities of the issues are defined in terms of two believers married, a believer and an unbeliever, and a widow who remarries. Each of the “types of marriages” received different instructions. The various instructions are difficult to understand. Terms are used that have been debated for years in our brotherhood, like “unequally yoked,” “let him depart,” “only in the Lord,” and “not under bondage.” We do not propose to define all these terms here, but only to indicate the complexity of situations in New Testament days, and today.



**We must continually resist the temptation to bind on others and ourselves positions and doctrines based on sheer human reason or implied evidence.**

Leaders especially are responsible to “take heed” to the doctrines we teach so that we can save others and ourselves. ( I Timothy 4:6-16; Revelation 22:18-19). It is critical that we bind on others only what is clearly defined by the Scriptures. This is particularly true regarding human procedures on how to apply the teachings of Scripture to individual cases. Jesus taught that it is sometimes very difficult for us to determine the difference between “wheat” and “tares.” The indistinguishable (to us!) “tares” will be separated by God at Judgment. We dare not root up “good wheat” in our attempt to destroy “the tares.” Some matters are best left to God’s judgment.

**Then, in the local congregation, we must ask, “How do we address the problems presented by individuals coming for membership with mixed marriages, remarriages, and other forms of marriages that vary from the Scriptural ideal?” (This does not address the issues of dealing with those who are already in the congregation with questionable marriages.)**

In the first place, this is an issue that must be resolved by the leaders of each local congregation where individuals are presenting for membership based on their best good-faith judgment. At West Broward the elders’ procedures for handling these situations are as follows:

- a. First, in the case of those within our membership who blatantly practice immorality with a high-handed attitude of non-repentance we must have the courage to “withdraw ourselves” (I Cor. 5). These are the individuals who say, “I know I am wrong, and I know it is a sin, but I am going to do it anyway!”
- b. Secondly, we receive those in our membership who are ignorantly innocent, spiritually weak, or whose marriages are based on vague histories. (Romans 14:1ff). We have to have the courage, and humility, to say in some cases we just “don’t know” the answer. Nor should we fear saying that our ability, or inability, to discern whether or not a marriage is right or wrong *will make* it right or wrong. In the areas where God has not spoken, we dare not speak. Our deferred judgment may be to allow the providence of God to work through the exposure of these individuals to teaching, Christian admonitions, and personal convictions.
- c. Thirdly, we must continually, and definitively teach the basics of God’s laws of marriage yet not become bogged down in the potholes of disputes over issues where there is little consensus of faith. Each of us is duty-bound to study the Scriptures and pray regarding all issues of faith and practice. However, we are equally duty-bound to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent.

**As in any other role-assignment relationship, we must use good judgment in the ways members are used in the church’s activities.**

The Scriptures clearly define some roles based on marital status (Elders and Deacons, I Timothy 3). Paul and Barnabas disagreed on how to use John Mark in the Lord’s work (Acts 12-15). The Book of Ephesians indicates that “God gave some to be . . .” active in certain roles and some in others. We understand that men and women vary in the role activities they may fill in the Lord’s work. Based on this principle, those whose marriages are “questionable,” or “the divorced and remarried” may have restricted areas of service in the Kingdom. This is a judgment-call that should be made by the elders as an expedient decision (*profitable to the influence of God*) on how, and when we match the talents and influences of each of the members under our care with the work they can do in the local congregation.

**Finally, we must respect the congregational autonomy of independent churches of Christ on matters of human judgment and leadership policies that do not violate the plain teachings of the Scriptures.**

We understand this principle in matters of worship methods, evangelism practices, and congregational work patterns. However, we also must understand that the local elders have the authority from God to act in matters regarding human choices, methods, and procedures of working for the congregation they serve. Other leaders of other congregations would be meddling in the affairs of that church to presume to “correct” a procedure that is based on human choice, but does not violate the plain teachings of Scripture. However, all independent churches of Christ should strive for harmony and unity based on the

Scriptures. Our influence for good will be compromised if we bite and devour one another on issues that involve human judgment-calls, particularly when they are in congregations not our own.

*Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*  
**#12 Why Do You Call Me Good? – Mark 10:17-22**

*"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."*

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He was a rare young man among the people of his day. This is seen in two facts.

1. He was conscientious, responsible, dependable—traits so often lacking in youth. He had already been placed into a position of leadership.
2. He was eagerly seeking eternal life—a spiritual matter often shunned by young people.

The dominant theme of the young man's experience is his sincerity, his desperate search for eternal life. Jesus takes the man's desperation and shocks the world. Desperation, sincerity, eagerness, and seeking eternal life are not enough. To inherit eternal life takes much more than just being desperate to possess it. Man has a problem in seeking eternal life.

This story is simple. An influential young "businessman" is compelled to follow Jesus. But he just can't bring himself to part with his money so he leaves Jesus instead. Few stories are more poignant for the American church. Perhaps that's why we feel it necessary to explain it away. We say, "Boy that's a powerful story for rich people." We don't think it applies to us. You see, the "rich" are people with just a little more money than we have. Or we say, "Well, Jesus doesn't ask everyone to give up wealth, only those for whom it was a problem." Yet we never consider just how much of an obstacle money is in our own pursuit of Christ.

*Mk 10:17-18 WITH MT 19:16; Lk 18:18 --<sup>17</sup>As Jesus started on his way, a man [a certain ruler<sup>LK</sup>] ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what [good thing<sup>MT</sup>] must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

<sup>18</sup>*"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."*

As Jesus weaves his way through Perea toward Jerusalem, he is once again stopped with a question. This urgent young man stands in stark contrast to the children Jesus has just blessed (Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17).

Even though he is young (probably 20-40), he has already achieved great economic success (Lk 18:23).<sup>9-</sup>  
<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, he is a respected leader in the community (Lk 18:18), probably through the synagogue. He was respectful (Mk 10:17), religious (Mk 10:20), and teachable (Lk 18:18). He appears to be the perfect "prospect."

Unlike the Pharisees, who halted Jesus' progress with a question designed to trap him (Mt 19:3; Mk 10:2), this young man seems to be sincere. After all, he approaches Jesus with utmost respect both in his posture (kneeling), appellation ("Good teacher"), and honesty ("What do I still lack?"). Hence, Jesus "loved" him (Mk 10:21). Furthermore, he asks a good question; no, the *best* question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

**Seeking Jesus:** the scene was striking. A rich young man sought Jesus—sought Him with a sense of urgency and desperation seldom seen.

1. The man was *eager*, ever so eager: he was *running* to Jesus.
2. The man was *humble*: he cast himself to the ground, kneeling before Jesus, showing extreme reverence. He esteemed Jesus ever so highly. He bowed the knee to Him.
3. The man was *respectful*: he addressed Jesus as "Good Master," which was the proper and courteous address to a revered Rabbi or Teacher.
4. The man was *concerned* about his spiritual welfare. He asked what he should do to inherit eternal life.

The young man demonstrated how we should seek eternal life. He did exactly what we should do when we wish anything: seek it. We are to *seek* eternal life as the rich young ruler did. But in seeking, there is

something critical. We must go to the right *source*. This is exactly what the rich young man did: (a) he approached Jesus, the Source of eternal life; and (b) he asked, confessing his need.

Note two things about the young man's seeking eternal life.

1. He believed that eternal life existed, that there was such a thing as eternal life. He believed there was life in another world, and he was sincere and eager (perhaps desperate) to receive it. He "came running and kneeled" before Jesus.

2. He did a rare thing. He openly confessed his eager concern for eternal life. Few of the rich would ever confess an open concern as he did, and few of the young would ever consider it important enough at their young stage of life. He lacked and had need, and he knew it and openly confessed it. He was seeking for inner peace and a sense of completeness and fulfillment and satisfaction.

**Eternal Life**: the first fact to know about eternal life is this: to praise Jesus is not enough to receive eternal life. The young man had praised and honored Jesus as much as a person could. He had eagerly sought and revered Jesus, not only kneeling before Him, but casting himself into the dust of the ground before Jesus. He addressed Jesus with as high a title as a man could address a revered teacher. He could not praise Jesus more. But note: the man's praise and honor of Jesus were not enough.

He called Jesus "Good Master," but by Master he meant *good teacher, good Rabbi*. He was acknowledging that Jesus was an honorable person to be highly regarded. But he conceived Jesus to be *only* a highly regarded teacher. He did not consider Jesus to be the divine Son of God. He conceived Jesus to be but a mere man, not God. He thought Jesus was a man who had achieved unusual moral goodness and by such had become a *good Master*, one capable of teaching the great truths of God and life.

Jesus had to correct this gross error. He attempted to correct it by simply saying, "Why callest thou me good? There is none good, but one, that is, God." He was saying to the young man, "God alone is good. No man is good, not in comparison to God, not good enough to ever stand before God in righteousness. *If I am but a mere man*, a good teacher, then I am not 'good' and do not have the words to eternal life. *But if I am God*, then you can address me as 'good' and I do have the words to eternal life."

Note two things.

1. Jesus told the young man how to enter life, that is, how to receive eternal life. Therefore, Jesus was claiming to be God.

2. Jesus was correcting the young man. He was speaking these words forcefully: "Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is God." Jesus would not have the young man thinking of Him only as a man, no matter how pre-eminent a teacher the young man thought Him to be. He is God, God's very own Son; and He is to be known and called the Son of God. Therefore, Jesus tried to lead the young man to acknowledge and honor Him as God. It was the only way the young man could ever receive eternal life.

Before Jesus answers his question, he must clarify two important issues: #1—Who is Jesus, and #2—How are we saved? Unless he has a basic understanding of these two things, he won't properly understand Jesus' answer to his question.

**Issue #1: Who is Jesus?** The young man addresses him as "Good Teacher."<sup>9-84</sup> Jesus calls his attention to what that implies. When Jesus says, "No one is good but God alone," he is not saying that he, himself, is not good. Rather, he is calling attention to the fact that he shares God's goodness. Only on that basis and only with that understanding will this young man be able to properly hear the answer to his question.

This "goodness" probably has more to do with Jesus' ability to teach truth than his moral perfection (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15). In other words, he is a good teacher because he has all the right answers. Yet God alone has a corner on the "truth." Therefore, if Jesus always speaks truth then he truly speaks as God's representative (Jn 8:28; 12:49-50). Therefore, this young man had better be prepared to listen well.

*Mk 10:19-20 WITH MT 19:17-20 -- [“If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” “Which ones?” the man inquired. Jesus replied,<sup>MT</sup> <sup>19</sup>“You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother,<sup>NIV-9-19</sup> [and love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>NIV-9-20,MT</sup>”]*

<sup>20</sup>“Teacher,” he [the young man<sup>MT</sup>] declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy. [What do I still lack?<sup>MT</sup>]”

**Issue #2: How are we saved?** The Jews were thoroughly convinced that a person gained God’s favor by their own good behavior (Deut 30:15-16). So Jesus first gives the typical Jewish response, “Keep the commandments.” He catalogues the fifth through the tenth commandments (Exod 20:12-16; Deut 5:16-20).<sup>9-85</sup> Then, as Matthew notes, Jesus summarizes the whole list by appending Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Mt 22:34-40).

These last six commandments deal only with a person’s horizontal relationships (i.e., human to human). This rich, young ruler is blameless in his dealings with other people (v. 20). That does not mean that he is absolutely sinless (Rom 3:23). But a sincere apology and the temple sacrifices made up the shortfall for occasional transgressions. He is impeccably devout and could say with the Apostle Paul, “As for legalistic righteousness, *I am* faultless” (Phil 3:6).

Even though his external righteousness is blameless, his heart and mind are not right. Something is missing, and he knows it. In the depths of his spirit he feels the words of Jesus, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20). So when Jesus gives him the classic Jewish answer to “How are we saved?” he responds, “Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard all that before, but it just hasn’t worked. What am I missing?!”

We are saved by grace through faith; not by our own works lest anyone should boast (Eph 2:8). This young man knows that none of his previous good deeds have earned him eternal life.<sup>9-86</sup> And yet he still clings to legalism for he knows nothing else. Christianity stands alone as the only world religion in which a person is saved by what God does for you rather than what you do for God. Indeed, legalism is a tenacious and pernicious religious idea. I dare say that most who call themselves Christians have not fully given up on it.

The second fact to know about eternal life is this: to be respectable is not enough to receive eternal life. Note a crucial point: the young man had asked, “What *good thing* shall I do?” He had a religion of works, not of faith. He thought man himself could secure eternal life by being good. He felt that if he could just keep some great rule or law and live a moral and clean life, then God would accept him. He believed that his acts of morality and good works just piled up a balance sheet and made him acceptable to God.

This was the man’s second major error. Again Jesus had to correct the man; He had to strike right at the root of the problem. The man was failing to love his neighbor as himself, and Jesus knew it (this will be brought out later). So Jesus told the young man very simply, “Thou knowest the commandments”; and He proceeded to quote five of the ten commandments, the five laws of respectability that had to do with his duty toward his neighbor (Exodus 20:12-16).

The man made the phenomenal claim that he had kept all five of the commandments that Jesus quoted. He, of course, had not kept them perfectly, not in God’s eyes, not in the spirit in which God intended them to be kept. He was not generous enough with others, not giving and helping like he should. Jesus was now ready to show him and lead him to do this. In summary, here is what Jesus had said to the rich young ruler: keep the commandments dealing with your neighbor—the ones especially needed by rulers and the rich—the ones so often misunderstood and neglected by rulers and the rich.

But the rich young ruler misunderstood God's law: he had a tragic sense of self-righteousness.

1. He thought some commandments were more important than others.
2. He thought man could keep God's law and build up a balance sheet with God, securing God's acceptance.

*Mk 10:21-22 WITH Mt 19:21; Lk 18:22 -- [When Jesus heard this,<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>21</sup>Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "[If you want to be perfect,<sup>MT</sup>] Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." <sup>22</sup>At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

Jesus calls this young man to be a disciple by first ridding himself of all his money. This was an especially surprising demand in light of the fact that the Jews forbade giving away more than twenty percent of your possessions (*Kethub. 50 a*). Every disciple is called to follow Jesus in faith. But sometimes there are obstacles that stand between us and Jesus so that we cannot follow him until we rid ourselves of these barriers. For this young man, the barrier was money. For others it may be family, business, reputation or self. Just because the obstacle may be different for us, the demand is no less absolute or radical (Gal 2:20; Mt 10:37-39; Phil 3:7-11).

The third fact to know about eternal life is this: to be loved by Jesus is not enough to receive eternal life. Note the exact words, "Jesus beholding him, *loved* him." Jesus' eyes penetrated into the man's innermost being and sensed a deep, deep longing and earnestness. The man's longing and ache for eternal life touched Jesus deeply. Jesus was drawn to the man and loved him in a very, very special sense.

But note the crucial point: the love of Jesus for a man's soul—even the very, very special love of Jesus for a man—was not enough to save the man. The man still lacked one thing.

The fourth fact to know about eternal life is this: to give everything is required to receive eternal life. *Giving everything* is the one thing lacking, the one thing that causes so many to lose eternal life.

Jesus knew exactly what the young man needed. His rejection of Jesus showed this. He was hoarding wealth instead of distributing it. God had given wealth to him that he might be able to help others, but he was failing to love and help his neighbor as he should (Ephes. 4:28).

What the young man needed to hear was just what Jesus said: "If thou wilt be perfect [receive heaven, really keep the commandments, as you say you have] then demonstrate to all publicly and without question, that you love your neighbor. Go and sell all you have, and give to the poor...and come *follow me.*"

In our struggle to protect the glorious truth that man is saved by grace and grace alone, we often forget and neglect another great truth: *to follow Christ is to serve and minister to our neighbor*. To follow Christ is to deny self completely—*all that we are and all that we have* (see Deeper Study #1—Luke 9:23). When we love our neighbor as ourselves, then we show that we truly love God. If we do not love and minister to our neighbor (above self), then we do not love God.

When we deny self and give all we are and have (1 John 4:20), then and only then do we receive heaven; but more importantly, we receive treasure in heaven. To deny self, *to give all we are and have* is a hard saying, but Christ demands it. Our attempt to soften it does not annul His demand.

The young man rejected Jesus for three reasons.

1. Unbelief: he was not willing to entrust his life to Jesus. There was some lack of belief that the Man Jesus standing before him was really God.

2. Self-righteousness and pride: his concept of religion was keeping laws and doing good in order to secure God's acceptance. He felt that he, as well as other men, had the power and goodness to make God approve and accept him.

3. Love of the world: he was rich and was unwilling to give up the comfort and possessions he had obtained. He made the fatal mistake that so many make with wealth, power, and fame.

a. He loved the things of the world more than he loved people. He preferred hoarding and extravagance, living sumptuously and comfortably to helping those who were so desperately needy.

b. He loved the things of the world more than he loved the hope of eternal life.

c. He loved the position, recognition, esteem, and power of the earth more than he loved Christ.

Now, note a critical point: the subject of *giving all* is a sensitive subject, so sensitive that the words of Christ are seldom taken or preached at face value. The words of the Lord are *watered down* to mean no more than an ideal in the mind of a man—an ideal that is left up to every man to decide within his own selfish, deceptive, and corrupt heart. Is the man *willing to give all*? Then his willingness is said to be acceptable to God. The fact that he does not give all is said not to matter. However, the critical point seldom crosses the mind of men: the God of all men *can never justify keeping and storing and banking and hoarding and even holding back as long as a single need exists and is going unmet*.

If all men are truly God's by creation, then God is bound to expect all needs to be met, and He is bound to hold accountable the man who has and keeps, stores and banks, hoards and holds back. The point is easily understood by the honest and thinking person when he thinks about the issue. The thinking and honest person sees both the masses and the single person...

- who are starving.
- who are without clothes, housing, medicine, treatment, education, and skills.
- who are lost from God and doomed eternally because they have never heard the gospel.

Imagine the millions who have never heard about Christ even once. When the thinking person sees the picture and is honest, he can no longer refuse to accept Jesus' words at face value. Yet, so many do not think and so many refuse to be honest. So they continue to *spiritualize and idealize what Jesus was saying* to this young man. Why? Do we fear the strictness of what Christ says? Do we fear the reaction of people? Do we fear what we will have to give up? Do we lack the faith within to trust God?

The two stories that closely follow in Luke's account show that not every disciple is called to sell everything and give it to the poor. Zacchaeus gave half of his wealth (19:1-10), and the faithful servants in the parable of 19:11-27 are called to invest their money wisely for the Master (Blomberg, p. 299). In all instances, however, God's view of money is clear: He owns it all. We are merely stewards, using his resources for his purposes. At the same time, the contemporary American church, inundated by a materialistic society, needs to carefully hear Jesus' call to abandon wealth to follow him. We almost certainly underestimate how much of this text actually does apply to us (Jas 2:14-17; 1 Jn 3:17).

One can keep the law and still love anything else (money, sex, power). But when coming to Jesus, we forsake all other loves. This man must make a choice between a relationship with Jesus and a love for his money. "No man can serve two masters. 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 both God and money" (Mt 6:24). The primary issue here is not benevolence to the poor, as important as that is, but allegiance to Jesus. His money is standing in his way. Jesus asks him to get rid of it.

The man goes away sad. Luke uses a word that might be rendered literally, "surrounded by grief." Matthew says he was "grieving." His sadness is not that he just "lost his salvation." Certainly, in his mind, he did not choose money over eternal life. Rather, he is sad because his question remained unanswered. He is still looking for a way to gain salvation AND keep his money.

He mistakes salvation as some kind of reward for righteousness rather than a personal relationship with his Messiah. If salvation is seen as a system of reward, then there is no reason a person cannot have riches or power and still be saved. But if salvation is understood as a relationship with Jesus, then you must make a choice about what you will give your time and attention to: money or the Lord.

*Mk 10:23-27 WITH MT 19:23, 25; LK 18:24 -- <sup>23</sup>Jesus looked around [at him<sup>LK</sup>] and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God [heaven<sup>MT</sup>]!”*

*<sup>24</sup>[When [they] heard this,<sup>MT</sup>] The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is<sup>NIV-9-21</sup> to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*

*<sup>26</sup>The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”*

*<sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”*

While Jesus watches this young man walk off with his chin in his chest, he says to the disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” We have become accustomed to this kind of talk. But Jesus’ Jewish audience is astonished. You see, they believed, with scriptural support, that wealth was a blessing from God. Of all people, the rich were the most likely candidates for eternal life since God favored them. If they can’t make it, then what are the chances for all the “little people”?

The crowd is perplexed. Instead of solving their conundrum, Jesus confuses them further by saying that the rich would no sooner get into heaven than a camel<sup>9-87</sup> would pass through the eye of a needle. That is obviously impossible! The camel<sup>9-88</sup> was the largest animal in Palestine and the eye of a needle<sup>9-89</sup> was the smallest “opening” in common use.

Modern guides in Jerusalem will point to a supposed gate in the wall as the “eye of the needle.” It is common to suggest that this gate is what Jesus is referring to here since the camel could just barely squeeze through it and then only on its knees. Aside from the fact that there is no evidence to support such an interpretation, it ruins the metaphor. The point is not that it is difficult for the rich to get into heaven but that it is impossible.<sup>9-90</sup>

Jesus’ audience is stunned. Their question is predictable, “Who then can be saved?” It may appear that Jesus is off on a tangent, but in fact, he is at the heart of the issue. The rich young ruler asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus points out that no amount of good works will suffice. No amount of law-keeping will “fill the gap” (Mt 19:20). We must abandon all that stands between us and Jesus and trust God alone and completely. Salvation is God’s gracious gift (Mk 10:27), which we appropriate through a response of faith (Mk 10:21).

*Mk 10:28 -- <sup>28</sup>Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”*

*Mt 19:28 -- <sup>28</sup>Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

*Mk 10:29-31 WITH LK 18:29 -- <sup>29</sup>“[N]o one who has left home [or wife<sup>LK</sup>] or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel [the kingdom of God<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>30</sup>will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”*

Peter is sharp! He starts to think to himself, “Salvation is gained through total abandonment of this world and total commitment to following Jesus. I’ve done that!” So, speaking for the Twelve, he points out the obvious to Jesus. Perhaps his motives are a bit selfish and his mindset a bit legalistic, but his logic is



sound. Jesus gives him a straightforward, legitimate answer. The Apostles' reward will be fourfold. All other disciples will share the last three of the four benefits:

First, the Apostles will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28, cf. Lk 22:28-30). That is, when Jesus returns and judgment begins, the twelve Jewish tribes will be judged by the twelve Apostles. At the same time, Christians will help judge of the rest of the world and even the angels (1 Cor 6:2-3). Jesus calls this the "renewal of all things" (cf. Isa 34:4; 51:6; 65:17; Dan 7:9-14, 18, 27; 2 Pet 3:10-13; Rev 21-22). We will finally get back to God's original plan that started in the Garden.

The second reward, which takes place in this present life (Mk 10:30), is the multiplication of the very things we are asked to give up (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields). Matthew and Mark both specify one hundred times the amount. This is 10,000% interest. This promise is literally fulfilled when the church shares its wealth with the body of Christ.

Third, along with this great wealth comes persecution (Mk 10:30). It is part of the package for standing with Jesus (Jn 15:18-25). Finally, beyond the persecutions of this life is the hope of eternal life. That will certainly make all the sufferings we endure here seem as nothing (Rom 8:18).

Who will get into heaven? Who can please God? It is impossible. No one can do it. In her great hymn, "He Giveth More Grace," Annie Johnson Flint wrote,  
*His love has no limit; His grace has no measure; His pow'r has no boundary known unto men. For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again. (2)*

We cannot please God, but because it pleases him to give, he giveth and giveth and giveth again. Everyone of us has more family in Christ than we have apart from him. You can go anywhere in the world, and people you didn't even know become friends welcoming you into their homes and churches in Christ's name. It is an extraordinary thing. To those who follow him, Jesus promises blessing and persecution in this age, and eternal life in the age to come.

In verse 31, Jesus reminded Peter that questions of who got the most or the least are not worthy of our attention. The last will be the first and the first last. Riches are no advantage because of their capacity to dull our senses, and none of us has any chance of getting to heaven except by God's grace. Rather than concerning ourselves with external things, we are to be grateful for his good gifts and enter into his service with joy and thanksgiving, looking for opportunities to express what is true.

#### **SOME SUMMARY POINTS: THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST (MARK 10:17-31)**

Of all the people who ever came to the feet of Jesus, this man is the only one who went away worse than he came. And yet he had so much in his favor! He was a young man (Matt. 19:22) with great potential. He was respected by others, for he held some ruling office, perhaps in a local court (Luke 18:18). Certainly he had manners and morals, and there was enough desire in his heart for spiritual things that he ran up to Jesus and bowed at His feet. In every way, he was an ideal young man; and when Jesus beheld him, He loved him.

With all of his fine qualities, the young man was very superficial in his views of spiritual things. He certainly had a shallow view of salvation, for he thought that he could *do something* to earn or merit eternal life. This was a common belief in that day among the Jews (John 6:28), and it is very common today. Most unsaved people think that God will one day add up their good works and their bad works; and if their good works exceed their bad works, they will get into heaven.

The young man had a superficial view of Jesus Christ. He called Him "Good Master" (Teacher), but we get the impression that he was trying to flatter the Lord; for the Jewish rabbis did not allow the word *good* to be applied to them. Only God was good, and the word must be reserved for Him alone. Jesus

was not denying that He was God; rather, He was affirming it. He just wanted to be sure that the young man really knew what he was saying and that he was willing to accept the responsibilities involved.

This explains why Jesus pointed the young man to the Law of Moses: He wanted him to see himself as a sinner bowed before the holy God. We cannot be saved from sin by keeping the Law (Gal. 2:16-21; Eph. 2:8-10). The Law is a mirror that shows us how dirty we are, but the mirror cannot wash us. One purpose of the Law is to bring the sinner to Christ (Gal. 3:24), which is what it did in this man's case. The Law can bring the sinner to Christ, but the Law cannot make the sinner like Christ. Only grace can do that.

The young ruler did not see himself as a condemned sinner before the holy God. He had a superficial view of the Law of God, for he measured obedience only by external actions and not by inward attitudes. As far as his actions were concerned, he was blameless (see Phil. 3:6); but his inward attitudes were not blameless, because he was covetous.

He may have kept some of the commandments, but the last commandment caught him: "Thou shalt not covet!" Covetousness is a terrible sin; it is subtle and difficult to detect, and yet it can cause a person to break all the other commandments. "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10, NASB).

Looking at this young man, you would conclude that he had everything, but Jesus said that one thing was lacking: *a living faith in God*. Money was his god: he trusted it, worshiped it, and got his fulfillment from it. His morality and good manners only concealed a covetous heart.

The disciples were shocked at the Lord's declaration about wealth, because most Jews thought that the possession of great wealth was the evidence of God's special blessing. Many people today still cling to this error, in spite of the message of Job, the example of Christ and the Apostles, and the clear teaching of the New Testament. In the case of this young man, his wealth *robbed him* of God's greatest blessing, eternal life. Today, wealth continues to make rich people poor and the first last (see 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

Money is a marvelous servant but a terrible master. If you possess money, be grateful and use it for God's glory; but if money possesses you, beware! It is good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money cannot buy. The deceitfulness of riches had so choked the soil of this young man's heart that he was unable to receive the good seed of the Word and be saved (Matt. 13:22). What a bitter harvest he would reap one day!

However, Peter's response indicated that there were a few problems in his own heart. "What then will there be for us?" (Matt. 19:27, NASB) This statement reveals a rather commercial view of the Christian life: "We have given up everything for the Lord; now, what will we get in return?"

Jesus assured His disciples that no one who follows Him will ever lose what is really important, either in this life or in the life to come. God will reward each one. However, we must be sure our motives are right: "For My sake and the Gospel's" (see Mark 8:35).

R.J. LeTourneau, used to say, "If you give because it pays, it won't pay!" If we sacrifice only to get a reward, that reward will never come.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#13 What Do You Want Me To Do For You? Mark 10:35-45**

*"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.*

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*MK 10:32-34 WITH MT 20:17-19; LK 18:31-33 -- <sup>MK 10:32</sup>They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve [disciples<sup>MT</sup>] aside and told them what was going to happen to him. <sup>33</sup>"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and [everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled: <sup>LK</sup>] the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, <sup>34</sup>who will mock him [[and] insult him<sup>LK</sup>] and spit on him, flog him and kill [crucify<sup>MT</sup>] him. Three days later he will rise."*

*LK 18:34 -- <sup>34</sup>The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.*

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. This was to be a momentous visit to the capital. This was the visit when the crises of His death and resurrection were to take place. He had just shared the fact of the crisis again (Mark 10:17-19). For months it had consumed His attention and private messages to the disciples (Matthew 16:13-20; Matthew 16:21-28; Matthew 17:1-13; Matthew 17:22; Matthew 17:24-27; Matthew 20:17). There was no question in the disciples' minds: this visit to Jerusalem was the momentous event for which they had long looked.

We, who live today, know what Jesus meant by His death and resurrection. He was to die for our sins and be raised again to impart new life to us. But the disciples did not know this. Jesus had not yet died and been raised from the dead. To them He was speaking of an earthly and material kingdom. Therefore, if He was about to set up His kingdom, now was the time to seize the positions of power in His kingdom. Now was the time to secure the positions of rule and authority.

This is a graphic scene. After three particularly potent encounters with the Pharisees (19:3), his disciples (19:13), and this rich young ruler (19:16), Jesus is back on route to Jerusalem. He seems to be walking with a vengeance toward the capital city, his terminal destination. It appears that Jesus is walking out ahead, leading the pack with a furious pace. His disciples follow close behind, astonished, while the more uncommitted crowds lag further behind, afraid.

Just what was going through their minds, we may never know. But this is certain, there is something in Jesus' pace and resoluteness that shouts just how serious are these moments and movements. For whatever else this holy city represented to these people, for Jesus it meant death.

What terrible expectations! One who loved him would betray him. Leaders of his own people would condemn him. He would be given over to the hated (Gentile) Romans to be humiliated and killed. He would endure these things and then rise again.

Jesus was certainly courageous enough to face martyrdom by himself. He could have told his followers, "I am going to lose my life, but I love you too much to put you through what lies ahead." He could have tried to soften the blow, but he didn't. Instead, he expected them to travel with him to the cross. Jesus knew that his cross was their only hope.

He takes the Twelve aside to teach them privately once again (cf. 16:21 and 17:22-23). Away from the crowd, he explains to his faithful band what this is all about. This is the third time Jesus clearly predicts his own death (cf. 83, 86, 88), although he has alluded to it a number of times. This particular prediction goes beyond the other two by stating the specific involvement of the Gentiles and the specific mode of execution—crucifixion.

There are essentially six elements to this prediction:

1. It must take place in *Jerusalem*.
2. He will be *betrayed*.
3. The *chief priests and teachers of the law* (i.e., Pharisaic and Sadducean leaders) will be responsible for his death.
4. He will be delivered over to the *Gentiles* for a death sentence
5. They will *mock (insult and spit), flog, and crucify* him.
6. He will *rise on the third day*.<sup>9-95</sup>

Many have doubted the integrity of this narrative. Because it is such a specific prediction, they assert that it must have been written after Jesus' death and then credited to Jesus. But if Jesus was who he claimed, and did what the Gospel writers say, then predictive prophecy is a minor miracle for Jesus. The issue boils down to this: Do you believe that Jesus was a mere man or was he God incarnate?

Luke offers two significant contributions to this narrative. First, he reminds the disciples that the prophets predicted his death (v. 31). Certainly Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 must have come to mind as well as Psalm 16:10; 118:22; Genesis 3:15. Second, he highlights their ignorance, as he did with the second passion prediction (Lk 9:45). This matter was hidden from them. The word seems to indicate that God concealed the matter from the Apostles; it wasn't merely that they were obtuse.

The events of this passage took place near the end of Jesus' life. Jerusalem was the city of God, a royal city where Messiah was to claim David's throne. Jesus had been to Jerusalem many times, but on this journey, he was entering the city as a king leading his subjects. As royal processions go, however, this was an unusual one. There was no army. The followers were few, and they were neither wealthy nor important. Of course, Jesus was an unusual king. Angelic choirs heralded his birth, but, with the exception of a few shepherds and some wise men from the far east, his birth went virtually unnoticed on earth. His life and ministry fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, though there was little recognition of this until after his resurrection. And, though they did not fully understand who he was, and were often frightened by circumstances that surrounded him, Jesus' disciples continued to follow him on this journey to Jerusalem.

If they weren't Apostles, we would be tempted to dismiss them as selfish fools when James and John ask for special position with Jesus. They think they are en route to the "inaugural ball" when, in fact, they are on their way to an excruciating execution.

*MK 10:35-37 WITH MT 20:20-22 -- MK 10:35* Then [the mother of<sup>MT</sup>] James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him [kneeling down.<sup>MT</sup>] "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

<sup>36</sup> "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

<sup>37</sup> They replied, "Let [grant<sup>MT</sup>] one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory [kingdom.<sup>MT</sup>]"

According to Matthew, it was Salome (Mt 27:55-56 with Mk 15:40), the mother of James and John, who makes this request. Likely the two boys put her up to it, thinking she will have more pull with Jesus. It is likely that Salome was Jesus' aunt (cf. Jn 19:25), and as a woman she might be able to tug his heart strings better than they. Besides, the request looks less selfish coming from their mother. But Jesus sees through their little scheme and speaks directly to James and John.

James and John, whom Jesus had nicknamed "Sons of Thunder," had been disciples of John the Baptist. They heard John declare Jesus to be the promised one sent by God. They had been present with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and heard a voice from heaven say, "this is my Son." Their love for Christ was deep, but, as it is with most of us, their love contained self-serving motives. They hoped Jesus would claim his throne and elevate his loyal followers.

**Ambition:** the deceitfulness of wrong ambition. Note what James and John did.

1. They made a secret approach to Jesus. They wanted to get the upper hand on the other disciples; they were aware that the other disciples were also ambitious for position (cp. Luke 9:46). They knew that they must get some kind of inside track. They persuaded their mother to go with them, and they approached Jesus when He was off by Himself (Matthew 20:20-21). Remember that Salome was probably the sister of Mary, the aunt of Jesus. Most likely James and John felt she would add weight to their request. Therefore, they made a secret approach to Jesus. The ambition that was gripping their heart was not healthy ambition; it was evil ambition. And evil ambition is sneaky. It tries to get an inside track, the upper hand by hook or crook. It uses any means whatsoever, including the use and misuse of people, even loved ones (cp. Salome).

2. They made an unlimited appeal. Note their words, "Do for us whatsoever we shall desire." Again, they were being sneaky. They tried to get a commitment before they revealed their request. They sensed their desire might be wrong and evil; but they subdued the sense of conscience, blinded by the lust for honor, position, power, wealth, and recognition.

These Sons of Thunder had mixed motives. They wanted personal advantage, but they were also willing to face danger because of their love for Jesus. They fully expected that God would give him the throne of David and that there would be a glorious outcome to his mission. Their request is based as much on faith as it is on self-centeredness.

Shortly before this incident, Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."* (Matthew 19:28) Jesus was a poor Galilean heading into terrible times, but his followers believed in his future victory and wanted to be included when he came into his glory.

It is significant that the Lord showed no hint of condemnation, either of James and John for their self-seeking attitude or of the other ten for their jealousy. Their desire was simply that they might be great someday. "Lord, I want to join you in your victory and be with you in your glory. I want significance that outshines every other hope for significance that I have ever had. I want to know joy and love. I want to be the person I was intended to be. I was made in the image of God, and I am destined for greatness."

Too many of us never ask to be great. We see ourselves through a lens of failure and inadequacy. We don't even know how to imagine ourselves being worthy of the love of God, of being at his side and hearing him say, "Well done." James 4:2 says we don't have because we don't ask. What do you want Jesus to do for you? He never turns aside those who ask to be made great.

Jesus fully intends to make us great, but the means for achieving greatness is not what we expect. The only way to greatness is by his cross. To become who he intends us to be, we must join him in the execution of our flesh.

Their request is open-ended: “*Do for us whatever we ask.*” It appears that they know their request is a bit out of bounds. After all, Jesus has already confronted the whole group about seeking rank and position. And he has just reiterated the importance of becoming like children, and his own impending death. As usual, they have not been listening. To make matters worse, they are going to continue to argue about which of them is the greatest even up to the very night Jesus is betrayed (Luke 22:24-27).

Jesus isn’t going to fall for their ploy. He asks them, “What is it you want?” They reply, “We want the #1 and #2 seats in the kingdom.” They are dangerously close to Jerusalem. This city represents danger for Jesus. But like Superman, Jesus consistently dodges and deflects bullets. Neither plots of the Jews, storms of the sea, nor demonic forces have overpowered him. Undoubtedly the Twelve share the expectation of the crowds that Jesus will establish his kingdom upon arriving in Jerusalem. Therefore, James and John want to beat the others to the punch. They want to seize the highest administrative appointments in the coming Messianic kingdom. And why shouldn’t they? They have the majority vote in the inner three!

**Ambition—Motive:** the possible motives for ambition. Jesus asked the two men what their request was. They answered straight to the point, wasting no time, as any conscientious leader would: “Grant us the top positions in your kingdom [glory, government] which you are going to set up when we get to Jerusalem.” The men were extremely ambitious. They wanted to be the top ministers of state in Christ’s government.

What needs to be noted is that ambition can be good or bad. The determining factor is motive. One’s motive makes ambition either good or bad. The ambition of James and John exposes several possible motives. Each one touches a sensitive spot within every man, and urges every man to examine the motives of his heart.

1. There was the motive of favoritism. James and John, along with Peter, formed an inner circle around Christ. They apparently had some feeling that they were special, the favorites of Christ; therefore, they were due the top positions.

2. There was the motive of wealth. Zebedee, the father of James and John, was apparently wealthy. He owned a fishing business large enough to furnish fish for the palace. They were better off financially than some of the other disciples. There was the possibility that the two men were acting as selfish, pampered young men seeking more. Wealth did carry weight with monarchs of their day, and they knew it.

Wealth can make a man self-centered. It can pamper and make one selfish. It can cause one to expect more attention, more honor, more recognition, more favor. Those who have wealth often want more. And they set out to get more, whether wise or unwise, whether right or wrong. The wisdom and righteousness of having wealth are determined by a person’s motive and true need.

3. There was the motive of power, position, influence, and authority. This was clearly one of the motives of James and John. They wanted to be right next to Jesus in position and influence, power and authority. It is the very thing they asked.

Men want position. Men think in terms of position and influence. Within the business world, men want a position that assures influence and reward. Within the church, some want a position of leadership and of influence. Men seldom think in terms of service or in terms of how they can help the company or the church. Too often their thoughts are on the honor, the reward, the influence, the position they will receive.

4. There was the motive of social status. James and John did have some social standing. They were somewhat wealthy and were accepted within the palace, and were personally known by the High Priest. Social standing often makes a person feel that he is entitled to more—more position, more recognition, a higher seat. Social standing can also make one feel he is better or above others. Perhaps James and John had a tinge of both feelings.

5. There was the motive of love, faith, and loyalty. When ambition is rooted in the Lord and steeped in love and loyalty, it is *always right and healthy*. There is the possibility that James and John wanted to

be next to Jesus because they were sensing some degree of love and loyalty to Him. Their love and loyalty to Him would not be the dominant force in their ambition right now, but it was definitely present.

- ⇒ They definitely believed Jesus: His Word, His promises, His kingdom, His power. They were showing loyalty to Christ by expressing confidence in His power to usher in the Kingdom of God. They were asking for positions in His kingdom. They knew He was the true Messiah, the Son of the living God who was to become the King of kings and Lord of lords.
- ⇒ They definitely wanted the positions because they wanted to be next to Him. To them He *deserved* the kingdom and the honor. He deserved it because He had done so much and was going to do so much for them and for the people of God.

*MK 10:38-40 WITH MT 20:23 -- <sup>38</sup>“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”*

*<sup>39</sup>“We can,” they answered.*

*Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared [by my Father.<sup>MT</sup>]”*

Jesus tries to open their eyes by using two metaphors for suffering: Baptism (Mt 3:11-12) and Cup (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15-28). They aren’t headed to Jerusalem for a victory celebration but for suffering. James and John want to be singled out as Jesus’ closest associates. Presently that won’t mean promotion but persecution. They are ignorantly confident that they can share Jesus’ impending experiences.

Indeed, both of them will be baptized with the fire of persecution. James will be the first Apostolic martyr (Acts 12:2). John, on the other hand, will be the last surviving Apostle. According to tradition he was the only one who did not die as a martyr. Although his life was spared, he was not exempt from suffering. In the waning years of his life, he was exiled to Patmos where he saw the vision of Revelation (1:1).

Jesus can promise them persecution but not position. That is his Father’s prerogative alone. Although Jesus will be given all authority after his resurrection (Mt 28:18), during his ministry, he lives in submission to his Father (Jn 14:28). Not only that, he submits himself to the physical and spiritual needs of sinful humanity. He comes as a servant and invites his disciples to no greater position.

*MK 10:41-45 WITH MT 20:28; LK 22:26 -- <sup>41</sup>When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. <sup>42</sup>Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup>Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant [as the youngest,<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>44</sup>and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For even [just as<sup>MT</sup>] the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

The ten are predictably upset, not because James and John misconstrue Jesus’ teaching but because they beat them to the punch. All twelve want those coveted chief seats. Even after three years of walking with Jesus, watching him serve and taking notes on his sermons, they still don’t grasp the basic purpose and method of his ministry—to die as a servant of humanity. You would think Jesus’ closest disciples would know better. But even after 2,000 years, the lesson is hardly better understood or implemented.

The problem is simply this: We are imitating the ways of the world (Gentiles), rather than Jesus. We pattern our churches after governments and businesses. We vie for power and position through titles, salaries, recognition, votes, perks, boards and authority. Jesus’ heart is broken.

The pathway to greatness in the kingdom is not up some corporate ladder. Rather, it is paved with a basin and a towel (Jn 13:1-17). This is not difficult to understand. Jesus repeats it too much for us to forget it.

But our obvious neglect to live it out reveals the difficulty we have with this sublime paradox that the greatest in the kingdom of God is to be a servant (1 Cor 9:19; 2 Cor 4:5; 1 Pet 5:2-3).

Jesus' ultimate example of the theology of humility is around the next corner, at the cross. Liberal theologians have attempted to whisk away Mk 10:45 (and Mt 20:28). It is too clear to be comfortable. But it tenaciously stands its ground. This is Jesus' mission statement: To serve humanity by dying for our sins. The word "ransom" was commonly used in Greek circles for the price that was paid for the release of a slave. Furthermore, in the LXX it is used for "deliverance" of God's people (Exod 30:12; Ps 49:7-9). Here, the Greek and Hebrew worlds come together as Jesus is pictured releasing captives from their slavery to sin (Rom 6:16-18; Isa 53:10-12).

We also find in Mark 10:45 the preposition "for" which means "in place of." It could hardly be clearer that Jesus died "instead of many" (Titus 2:14; 1 Pet 1:18). His death is a replacement, a substitute for ours.

This passage does not teach that living in the world is wrong. There is nothing wrong with Bible scholars using computers or Christians building modern hospitals or means of transportation and communication. Modern media can be used for God. The worldliness that is being condemned here is competitiveness, self-promotion, manipulation, looking down upon others—that is wrong. Instead, if we want to be great, we must be servants. Those who are greatest are those who are fully, frequently, and profoundly learning how to forget themselves and to find others they can help. Those who are great do not ask, "What's in it for me?" They do not seek to spread their name or reputation. Those who are great look for ways of giving themselves away and blessing others. If you want to recognize greatness in the world, you will look for those who serve others. If you want to be great—and you should, because you were made for greatness—the way to greatness is through the cross, through crucifying what is unholy, ungodly, and selfish.

Do you want to be great? You should, because you were made for greatness. Jesus asked his disciples, "What do you want me to do for you?" He asks us the same question today.

#### **SOME SUMMATION COMMENTS (MARK 10:32-45)**

The destination was still Jerusalem, and Jesus was still leading the way. As Mark wrote his account of the Saviour's journey to Calvary, he must have meditated much on the great "Servant Songs" in Isaiah 42-53. "*For the Lord God will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed*" (Isa. 50:7). We cannot but admire the courage of God's Servant as He made His way to Calvary, and we should adore Him all the more because He did it for us.

We must try to understand the bewilderment and fear of His followers, for this was a difficult experience for them and not at all what they had planned or expected. Each new announcement of His death only added to their perplexity. In the first two announcements (Mark 8:31; 9:31), Jesus had told them *what* would occur; but now He told them *where* His passion will take place—in the Holy City of Jerusalem!

In this third announcement, He also included the part that the Gentiles would play in His trial and death, and for the fourth time, He promised that He would rise again (note Mark 9:9). He told His disciples the truth, but they were in no condition to understand it.

In the light of our Lord's announcement of His death, we are embarrassed and ashamed to read of James and John asking for thrones. How could they and their mother (Matt. 20:20-21) be so callous and selfish? Peter had responded to the first announcement by arguing with Jesus; after the second announcement, the disciples responded by arguing among themselves over who was the greatest (Mark 9:30-34). These men seemed blind to the meaning of the Cross.



Except for one thing: they were praying selfishly, and God does not answer selfish prayers (James 4:2-3). If He does, it is only that He might discipline us and teach us how to pray in His will (Ps. 106:15; 1 John 5:14-15). James, John, and Salome did not realize that *it costs something to get answers to prayer*. For Jesus to grant their request, He would have to suffer and die. Why should He pay such a great price just so they could enjoy free thrones? Is that the way to glorify God?

Jesus compared His approaching suffering and death to the drinking of a cup (Mark 14:32-36) and the experiencing of a baptism (Luke 12:50; also see Pss. 41:7; 69:2, 15). It would be a devastating experience—and yet James and John said they were able to go through it with Jesus! Little did they realize what they were saying, for in later years they would indeed have their share: James would be the first of the disciples to be martyred (Acts 12:1-2), and John would experience great persecution.

Because their prayer was motivated by earthly wisdom, not heavenly wisdom, James and John aroused the anger of the other disciples and brought disunity to the group (see James 3:13-4:1). No doubt the men were unhappy because they had not thought of asking first! Once again, Jesus tried to teach them what it means to be an “important person” in the kingdom of God (see Mark 9:33-37).

Like many people today, the disciples were making the mistake of following the wrong examples. Instead of modeling themselves after Jesus, they were admiring the glory and authority of the Roman rulers, men who loved position and authority. While there is nothing wrong with aspiring to greatness, we must be careful how we define “greatness” and why we want to achieve it. Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44, NASB).

God’s pattern in Scripture is that a person must first be a servant before God promotes him or her to be a ruler. This was true of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Timothy, and even our Lord Himself (Phil. 2:1-11).

Unless we know how to obey orders, we do not have the right to give orders. Before a person exercises authority, he or she must know what it means to be under authority. If Jesus Christ followed this pattern in accomplishing the great work of redemption, then surely there is no other pattern for us to follow.

*Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*  
**#14 “John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?”**  
**Mark 11:27-12:17**

This is an important event. It began a series of six combative situations for Jesus. Both religionists and civil leaders confronted Jesus head-on, doing all they could to trap and discredit Jesus before the people so they could arrest Him and have Him killed. All the events of this section as well as the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24-25) seem to have taken place on Tuesday (cp. Matthew 22:23; Matthew 25:1; Matthew 26:1-2).

A quick reading of this section is an eye-opener into the great tragedy and problem with self-righteousness and unbelief. Jesus was very forceful in attacking self-righteousness and unbelief. He delivered a *sustained attack*, leaving no doubt that a person, even a religionist, who continued in self-righteousness was unworthy of God’s kingdom. Obstinate unbelief would doom any man.

**(Mt 21:23-27; Mk 11:27-33; Lk 20:1-8)**

Jesus was in the temple, apparently walking through one of the arcades meditating and praying. He seems to have been alone. The scene was dramatic when one pictures the background.

The temple actually had two arcades surrounding the Court of the Gentiles. They were just as films picture the arcades of the Greek and Roman eras: stately, magnificent, and awe-inspiring. There was an east arcade and a south arcade. The east arcade was known as Solomon’s porch. Several Biblical events took place in this magnificent arcade (John 10:23; Acts 3:11; Acts 5:12). It was an arcade for teaching, and Rabbis often strolled among the colonnades while teaching their pupils. The arcades were also large enough to allow large crowds to gather for classroom type instructions. Their magnificence can be imagined by picturing the stately columns which towered thirty-five feet above the ground. The arcades provided both shelter from rain and sun and an inspiring setting.

Jesus was apparently walking along in one of the two arcades when the religionists approached Him. Again, they were an official delegation from the ruling body of the Jews, that is, from the Sanhedrin. Representatives from the three major groups were there: the chief priests, the Scribes, and the elders. They were upset, infuriated, enraged. All that had happened—the triumphal entry, Jesus’ acceptance of the people’s homage and the title of Messiah, the cleansing of the temple and the disruption of the priests’ profits from those who sold and bought, the healing of the blind and lame, the worship of the children—naturally created a crisis for the ruling body. What Jesus was doing simply infuriated them and sent them into a rage. It aroused them to question: “Who does this Jesus of Nazareth think He is?” (Matthew 21:10-11).

Note that the question they asked was one of contempt, not of seeking. The question was an attempt to discredit, not to learn the truth. The question was aroused because their own position, esteem, and gain were disturbed; not because they really wanted to know if He was the Messiah. Their minds were closed and shut to His claims. They had many claims and many proofs of His Messiahship, but they wilfully ignored and denied His divine mission. They had plenty of opportunity to learn the truth, yet they would allow nothing to change them. They were gripped by obstinate unbelief

The last two days have been good for Jesus’ popularity polls. The Triumphal Entry on Sunday and the cleansing of the temple on Monday have attracted a lot of attention. It is now early Tuesday morning in the temple. The people have already gathered around Jesus. The Jewish leaders must do something. What we have here is their attempt to discredit Jesus and win back their following.

*Mk 11:27-30*

<sup>[MK 11:]27</sup>They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts [teaching the people and preaching the gospel,<sup>LK</sup>] the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. <sup>28</sup>“[Tell us<sup>LK</sup>] By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

<sup>29</sup>Jesus replied, “I will [also<sup>MT,LK</sup>] ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>30</sup>John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!”

Right out of the blocks the Sanhedrin is in Jesus’ face. You can already tell that this is going to be a full day, packed with questions and controversies. In fact, there are more details given about this day in the life of Jesus than any other. Matthew devotes nearly one sixth of his gospel to it.

Representatives from all three “branches” of the Sanhedrin are there: Chief priests (Sadducean), teachers of the law (Pharisaic), and elders (“lay” leaders). They come with what seems to be an innocent and fair question: “By what authority are you doing these things?” After all, Jesus had just cleared out the temple the day before. In other words, he intruded into the temple mount, the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. Part of their job would be to oversee the proceedings during the Passover at the temple. This is especially true since the Romans are looking on from the Tower of Antonia, eager to pounce on any potential Jewish revolt. Thus, it was their job to protect both the Jewish religion and the civic peace of their people.

Ostensibly their question was reasonable and fair. But Jesus saw through their motives. They were still looking for an opportunity to trap him in his words, accuse him of blasphemy, and turn public opinion away from him. So Jesus appropriately answers their question with a question. Now that may sound to us like Jesus is trying to evade their question. But it was common in Rabbinic debates to answer a question with a question. That would not sound to them like avoidance, but like leading. It was assumed that Jesus would answer their question but that he first wanted to lead the discussion in a certain direction. In addition, the answer they give to Jesus’ question will become the answer to their own. By answering Jesus, they will get the answer they seek.

Because John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus, and because their message and purposes were the same, their authority would also be the same (Jn 1:19, 26-27; 3:25-30; Mt 11:7-10). So Jesus asks this counter question: Was John’s baptism from heaven or from men. In other words, was John’s authority from God or was he just out there “doing his own thing.” Jesus concentrated on John’s baptism because it epitomized his whole ministry and because it was at that point that the Jewish leaders refused to following his teaching (Lk 7:30).

In the days that followed, the representatives of the religious and political establishment descended on Jesus as He ministered in the temple, trying their best to trip Him up with their questions.

As the official guardians of the Law, the members of the Sanhedrin had both the right and the responsibility to investigate anyone who claimed to be sent by God; and that included Jesus (see Deut. 18:15-22). However, these men did not have open minds or sincere motives. They were not seeking truth; they were looking for evidence to use to destroy Him (Mark 11:18). Jesus knew what they were doing, so He countered their question with another question and exposed their hypocrisy.

Why take them all the way back to John the Baptist? For a very good reason: God does not teach us new truth if we have rejected the truth He has already revealed. This basic principle is expressed in John 7:17: “If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself” (NASB).

“Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge,” F.W. Robertson said. The Jewish religious leaders had not accepted what John had taught, so why should God say anything more to them? Had they obeyed

John's message, they would have gladly submitted to Christ's authority, for John came to present the Messiah to the nation.

The Jewish leaders were caught in a dilemma of their own making. They were not asking "What is true?" or "What is right?" but "What is safe?" This is always the approach of the hypocrite and the crowd-pleaser. It certainly was not the approach of either Jesus (Mark 12:14) or John the Baptist (Matt. 11:7-10). Jesus did not refuse to answer their question; He only refused to accept and endorse their hypocrisy. He was not being evasive; He was being honest.

Before they had opportunity to escape, He told them a parable that revealed *where their sins were leading them*. They had already permitted John the Baptist to be killed, but soon they would ask for the crucifixion of God's Son!

The question, "Who gave you authority?" is a critical one. The eleventh chapter of Mark begins with an account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus entered the city as a king coming to claim David's throne, and the crowds shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The following day, according to Mark, Jesus drove buyers and sellers out of the temple, overturning tables and declaring that his Father's house was to be a house of prayer for all nations, not a den of robbers. Jesus' actions evoked fear in the chief priests and teachers of the law, and they demanded to know, "What gives you the right to do these things?"

In the sacred precincts there were two famous cloisters, one on the east and one on the south side of the Court of the Gentiles. The one on the east was called Solomon's Porch. It was a magnificent arcade made by Corinthian columns 35 feet high. The one on the south was even more splendid. It was called the Royal Cloister. It was formed by four rows of white marble columns, each 6 feet in diameter and 30 feet high. There were 162 of them. It was common for Rabbis and teachers to stroll in these columns and to teach as they walked. Most of the great cities of ancient times had these cloisters. They gave shelter from the sun and the wind and the rain, and, in point of fact, it was in these places that most of the religious and philosophic teaching was done.

One of the most famous schools of ancient thought was that of the Stoics. They received their name from the fact that Zeno, their founder, taught as he walked in the *Stoa Poikile*, the *Painted Porch*, in Athens. The word *stoa* means *porch* or *arcade* and the Stoics were the school of the porch. It was in these cloisters in the Temple that Jesus was walking and teaching.

To him there came a deputation of the chief priests and the experts in the law, that is the scribes, rabbis and elders. This was in reality a deputation from the Sanhedrin, of which these three groups formed the component parts. They asked a most natural question. For a private individual, all on his own, to clear the Court of the Gentiles of its accustomed and official traders was a staggering thing. So they asked Jesus, "By what kind of authority do you act like that?"

They hoped to put Jesus into a dilemma. If he said he was acting under his own authority they might well arrest him as a megalomaniac before he did any further damage. If he said that he was acting on the authority of God they might well arrest him on an obvious charge of blasphemy, on the grounds that God would never give any man authority to create a disturbance in the courts of his own house. Jesus saw quite clearly the dilemma in which they sought to involve him, and his reply put them into a dilemma which was still worse. He said that he would answer on condition that they would answer one question for him, "Was John the Baptist's work, in your opinion, human or divine?"

This impaled them on the horns of a dilemma. If they said it was divine, they knew that Jesus would ask why they had stood out against it. Worse than that-if they said it was divine, Jesus could reply that John

had in fact pointed all men to him, and that therefore he was divinely attested and needed no further authority.

If these members of the Sanhedrin agreed that John's work was divine, they would be compelled to accept Jesus as the Messiah. On the other hand, if they said that John's work was merely human, now that John had the added distinction of being a martyr, they knew quite well that the listening people would cause a riot. So they were compelled to say weakly that they did not know, and thereby Jesus escaped the need to give them any answer to their question.

The whole story is a vivid example of what happens to men who will not face the truth. They have to twist and wriggle and in the end get themselves into a position in which they are so helplessly involved that they have nothing to say.

The man who faces the truth may have the humiliation of saying that he was wrong, or the peril of standing by it, but at least the future for him is strong and bright. The man who will not face the truth has nothing but the prospect of deeper and deeper involvement in a situation which renders him helpless and ineffective.

Consider the nature of authority for a moment. What is it and where does it come from? There are two elements to genuine authority.

1. The first element is jurisdiction to evaluate what is true or valuable, to set the standard against which other things will be judged.
2. The second element is power to effect outcomes and shape events. Thus, the authoritative person evaluates and accomplishes.

The authorities knew who He was claiming to be. They just rejected His claims and refused to believe. They chose the course of obstinate unbelief. They had proof upon proof, but still refused to believe.

There are two possible answers to the question about who Jesus is.

- a. Jesus could have claimed to act by His own authority, could have said the power was His own. This would have made Him an ego-maniac or a great imposter, the greatest in history. Of course, if He had claimed to act of His own authority, the authorities would have been able to discredit Him immediately and to arrest Him for causing so much havoc.
- b. Jesus could have claimed to act by the authority of God, to be of and from God. Now note: Jesus did make such a claim time and again. But if He had made it in the face of the authorities, they would have arrested Him immediately for blasphemy. They would have claimed that God would never have given orders to cause such turmoil in the temple.

Again the leaders were asking the basic question that needs to be asked by every man: *Who gave Jesus His authority?* Who is He: a mere man or truly the Son of God? Is He of man or of God? Is His authority of men or from within, of His very own nature as God?

By his actions, Jesus claimed the right to set Israel straight and to speak for God. Ultimately, all authority flows from God. Jesus was claiming that authority, but his enemies defiantly challenged his claim in order to reject him.

Jesus' challengers included chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders. These three groups had long-standing authority in first century Israel.

- a. The priests held religious authority, especially with reference to the temple and its sacrifices.
- b. The teachers of the law held intellectual authority. They were interpreters of scripture and tradition.
- c. The elders held social and political authority.
- d. The Sanhedrin was headed by a high priest and had religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction over the people.

These groups benefited from the established social order, and they had a strong interest in maintaining the status quo. Jesus' words and actions were rightly regarded by them as a challenge.

Jesus responded with a challenge of his own, and his enemies found themselves in a quandary. If they replied that John's baptism was from heaven, they would have to acknowledge Jesus' divine authority. If they said John's baptism was from men, they would anger the people, who all believed that John was a prophet from God. If they didn't answer Jesus' question, he wouldn't answer theirs.

Jesus knew what the authorities were plotting. Note what He did.

First, He met them on their own ground. He said He would answer them, but they must first answer a question, then He would answer them.

Second, He formulated and asked a question that was astounding in its effect.

- ⇒ It actually answered their question.
- ⇒ It silenced them, for if they answered they would indict themselves.
- ⇒ It ended the discussion and their questioning of Christ and immediate threat to Him.
- ⇒ It revealed their obstinate unbelief and made them even more inexcusable before God (heaping wrath upon themselves).

Jesus simply asked them, “The baptism of John, was it from heaven [of God], or of men?” The question posed two choices to man.

1. The first choice: Was John from God? If so, then Jesus was from God. Why? Because being from God, John would not lie, and John testified:

2. The second choice: Was John a mere man? If so, then Jesus could be a mere man. But how could this ever be? If John's and Jesus' ministry were really of men, then how could so many *changed lives* and *marvelous works* be accounted for? This one question alone shows the absurdity and sin of unbelief, not only of unbelievers in Jesus' day, but of unbelievers in our day as well.

Note the words, “They reasoned with themselves” (par eantois). This means they discussed their answer among themselves. They did not just reason in (en) themselves, with each left to his own thoughts. This was a planned attack against Jesus, a deliberate rejection of Jesus.

The Lord's questioners immediately knew their predicament. If they replied that John's ministry was of God, then Jesus would ask them why they did not believe John's testimony about the Messiah. If they replied that John's ministry was of men, they would arouse the people against themselves, for the people believed strongly that John was a true prophet from God.

Note how the questioners reasoned with themselves. Their concern was not to discover the truth; but to save face and protect their position, esteem, and security. They, therefore, committed a threefold sin.

1. They deliberately denied Jesus. To confess that John was of God would force them to acknowledge Jesus. And they were not willing to confess Him. They feared the loss of all they possessed (position, power, wealth, esteem, image, security).

2. They feared men; they were deliberately cowardly. They feared the reactions of men (abuse, ridicule, persecution).

3. They chose expediency, to deliberately be ignorant. They feared being shamed, embarrassed, ridiculed. To confess Jesus would mean confessing *they* had been wrong all along. It would mean denying self completely, and doing so publicly. Most men...

- choose expediency rather than principle.
- choose to play it safe rather than to stand for the truth.
- choose to say I don't know rather than to speak the truth.

Their attempt to trap Jesus was stymied. Seeing this, Jesus told a parable that stated his point clearly, and Mark 12:12 tells us that his enemies looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them, but they were afraid of the crowd, so they went away.

*MT 21:25B-27 WITH LK 20:6; MK 11:32*

*<sup>25</sup>They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we say, ‘From men’—we are afraid of the people [[that they] will stone us,<sup>LK</sup>] for they all hold that John [really<sup>MK</sup>] was a prophet.’ <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, ‘We don’t know.’ Then he said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’*

Suddenly the hunters become the hunted. Their private discussion/ debate betrayed the fact that they were in a catch-22. No matter what they say, it will be turned against them. If they say, “John’s authority was from heaven,” then Jesus also gets his authority from the same place. What’s worse, they refused to follow John. Thus this answer would betray their blatant hypocrisy.

On the other hand, if they say, “John’s authority was from men,” they might very well get stoned on the spot. This pilgrim crowd<sup>10-17</sup> adamantly believes in John. They were still seething over his murder by Herod. Furthermore, just two days ago, they hailed Jesus, John’s successor, king at the Triumphal Entry. If these Sanhedrin delegates turn on John (and Jesus), they might very well turn this precarious crowd against them.

So they cop out. “We don’t know,” they say. Jesus responds in kind. But notice, he didn’t say, “I don’t know” but “Neither will I tell you.” Jesus knows they’re not ignorant. They simply refuse to admit the truth. And if they refused the truth before, they are not likely to receive it now. So Jesus doesn’t waste his words. They’re not looking for an answer but an opportunity. The Master is not about to give it to them.

The authorities said, “We cannot tell.” They lied. They knew perfectly well that John’s baptism was of God. They just were not willing to run the risk of losing their position, prosperity, and security. They loved the world more than they loved God and the hope He extended toward them. Therefore, they denied, acted cowardly, and chose the route of expediency.

These unbelievers made no decision. It was tragic. Indecision and agnosticism are always tragic. They just would not be convinced of the truth. It was not that they *could not* be convinced, but they *would not*. Such obstinate unbelief seldom, if ever, sees the truth of Christ. Even if Christ openly revealed the truth to them, they would reject.

### **Three Parables on Accepting/Rejecting Jesus (Mt 21:28-22:14; Mk 12:1-12; Lk 20:9-19)**

The Jewish leaders refuse to answer Jesus’ question about John’s authority. Jesus responds to their silence with three appropriate parables. Only Matthew includes all three; Mark and Luke only tell the parable of the vineyard.<sup>10-18</sup> Nonetheless, all three parables are designed to show how the Jews had rejected God’s authority through Jesus.

With each parable both the rejection and punishment grow progressively worse. In the first parable, those who reject Jesus are like the wicked son who didn’t do what the father asked. In the second, they are like the wicked servants who kill the son and will receive just recompense. In the third parable, they are like those who rejected the king’s invitation and will thus be rejected from the Messianic banquet.

(12:1-12) This is one of the most interesting parables ever told by Jesus. It is interesting because it is both historical and predictive. Jesus covered the history of Israel from God’s perspective, just as God sees it (Mark 12:1-5). And then He predicted or revealed exactly what was going to happen to Israel: they were going to reject God’s own Son (Mark 12:6) and because of their rejection and cruelty, God was going to reject them by giving the Kingdom of God to another people (Mark 12:9).

What is said throughout this passage is applicable to all people as well as to Israel. God has entrusted the vineyard of the church and of the world to us (Matthew 28:19-20), the new nation, the new creation of God. Every point covered in Israel's history should, therefore, be a dynamic message speaking to our hearts.

1. God is generous: He gives everything needed (v.1).
2. God is trusting: He gives responsibility & freedom to govern life (v.1).
3. God is exacting: He expects payment (v.2).
4. God is patient: He sends messengers to receive payment (v.2-5).
5. God is love: He sends His very own Son to the world (v.6-8).
6. God is just: He shall come & destroy evil keepers (v.9).
7. God is trustworthy: He fulfills His promises (v.10-11).
8. Conclusion: the great tragedy (v.12).

**1. (12:1) God, Provision—Care—World—Israel:** God is generous. He gives everything needed. Note three marvelous, generous things that God did for His vineyard. He provided every conceivable thing to take care of His vineyard and the cultivators. Everything was provided to assure growth and fruitfulness. The cultivators have no excuse for not producing.

1. God “hedged it round about.” This was a wall built around the vineyard to keep the animals away from the grapes. The hedge or wall *assured* growth and fruitfulness.

2. God dug a winepress. This was a trough or vat into which the wine was pressed. The trough was sometimes dug in rock, sometime built out of wood. The trough stands for the equipment which God provides to get His work done.

3. God built a tower. It was a watchtower used to guard and protect the vineyard from thieves. The tower stands for the assurance and security of God's care which He gives to His cultivators (cp. Matthew 6:25-34).

**2. (12:1) Freedom of Will—Responsibility—Trust:** God is trusting. He gives responsibility and freedom to govern life. God entrusted His vineyard to cultivators. The cultivators were the nation and people of Israel, in particular the leaders (both religious and civil). Everyone was to take care of the whole body of people. Everyone was responsible, thereby contributing to the welfare and provision of all. (Cp. the whole body of the church and every member's responsibility to labor in the vineyard doing his part.)

Note two things.

1. God trusts men. Think what a glorious privilege it is to be trusted by God. Imagine how dear God's vineyard is to Him, and then think about how He entrusts its care to us and not to angels or some other higher form of being. What a wonderful and marvelous thing that God would trust us with His most precious vineyard!

2. God gives man freedom. God left the cultivators to care for His vineyard as they wished. They were to exercise their will, their choice, their drive to care for the vineyard. They had the glorious privilege of freedom, of not having someone looking over their shoulder forcing behavior.

**3. (12:2) Accountability:** God is exacting—He expects payment. He is businesslike; He holds men accountable. God sent messengers to gather the fruits of His vineyard. The messengers would be the prophets and the good and godly leaders throughout Israel's history (judges, kings, and priests).

Note two things.

1. Fruit was expected. Every cultivator, that is, every person responsible for the vineyard, was expected to labor and produce.

2. A day of accountability did come. Every man was expected to pay his dues, to make his contribution for the wonderful privilege of living in the beautiful vineyard and being blessed by it. (The Kingdom of God, the world, the church—however one applies this passage—all are wonderful vineyards for which we are responsible to contribute what fruit we can.)

**4. (12:2-5) God, Patience of—Long-Suffering:** MT 21:33 WITH LK 20:9-16; MK 12:2-5 <sup>33</sup>“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a



winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey [for a long time.<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>34</sup>When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect [some of<sup>Mk</sup>] his fruit [of the vineyard.<sup>Mk,LK</sup>]

<sup>35</sup>“The tenants seized his servants; they beat one [and sent him away empty-handed,<sup>Mk,LK</sup>] killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup>Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. [He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.<sup>Mk</sup>] <sup>37</sup>[Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do?’<sup>LK</sup>] Last of all, he sent his son [whom I love<sup>LK</sup>] to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

<sup>38</sup>“But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other [talked the matter over,<sup>LK</sup>] ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ <sup>39</sup>So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. [When the people heard this, they said, “May this never be!”<sup>LK</sup>]

God is patient—He sends messengers to receive payment. All through Israel’s history God loved and showed His loving-kindness by not reacting and rejecting the nation. God gives man chance after chance. He sends messengers across our path time after time. He loves and aches for us to pay our dues, to bear fruit by living as we should.

Tragically, most cultivators continue as always: rebelling and claiming all rights to the vineyard and to their own lives. Therefore, they continue to react against God’s messengers. This was true of Israel. They rebelled and refused to pay the Master. In fact, their rebellion led to the persecution and murder of God’s servants.

1. Men do deliberately rebel against God. Men want to rule the vineyard themselves. They want to be the kings of the kingdom, the rulers of the earth, and even the heads of the church. They want things to go their way and to rule and reign as they desire and will. They want no authority above themselves. They want to live and do things as they wish, and they want to claim the fruits for themselves.

2. Men want their own way so much that they ridicule, slander, persecute, and even murder the true servants of God.

3. The servant of God must understand that he is called to suffer. Note the detailed description of the world’s treatment of God’s messengers.

- ⇒ They *beat and gave no fruit* to the first messenger.
- ⇒ They cast stones, wounded, and shamefully handled the second messenger.
- ⇒ They killed the third messenger.
- ⇒ They beat “many others.”
- ⇒ They killed “many others.”

Vineyards were among the most common agricultural ventures of Jesus’ day. Frequently a landowner would purchase and prepare the property and then lease it out to tenants. The tenants would then raise the crop and give a certain percentage of the product or proceeds to the owner (generally 25-30%). Furthermore, the vineyard was a frequent OT metaphor for Israel (Isa 5:1-7; Ps 80:6-16; see also Jer 2:21; 6:9; 8:13; 12:10; Ezek 15:1-8; 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1). No doubt these Pharisees are keenly aware that Jesus used the vineyard to represent their people.

Jesus describes a vineyard that is particularly well prepared with: (1) a wall, to protect the crop from wild animals and thieves; (2) a winepress, so the grapes could be harvested and “stomped” into wine right there on the site; and (3) a tower, where a worker could watch for fires or robbers.

Once the vineyard had been prepared and its workers contracted, the owner was free to take an extended leave of absence. When the harvest rolled around, he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop (Mk 12:1-2). Blomberg (p. 323) notes that Jesus’ language sounds much like John’s at this point: “Fruit in keeping with repentance” (Mt 3:8; cf. 3:10; 7:16-20; 12:33; 13:8, 24-26; 21:19). This may even allude to Psalm 1:3.

The behavior of the tenants was scandalous! Instead of paying their bills, they beat (the word can also mean to flay or flog) and killed the collectors. This didn't just happen once, but repeatedly. The owner is at his "wit's end." What can he do? He decides to send his very own son!<sup>10-20</sup> Surely in his presence they will repent and meet their obligations.

However, when they saw him coming up the road they discussed the matter among themselves. They reasoned that the owner must be dead and the son has come to collect his inheritance. So, if they kill the son, there will be no one else to demand the vineyard from them. The property and all its proceeds will be theirs. Thus, they killed the son and threw him out of the vineyard.<sup>10-21</sup> The people standing around Jesus gasp in shock. "May this never be!" they say. But it would be, and sooner than they could possibly imagine.

*Mt 21:40-42*

<sup>40</sup>"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

<sup>41</sup>"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

<sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:  
"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone<sup>NIV-10-9</sup>;  
the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes<sup>NIV-10-10</sup>?"

No landowner is going to put up with this kind of behavior. So when Jesus asks, "What will he do to those tenants?" the answer is obvious. He will destroy them and replace them with tenants who will respect the owner and pay their debts.

Just as with the previous parable, they know the correct interpretation but badly miss its application. They are the wicked tenants. God has sent prophets to them time and again whom they beat and killed (Jer 20:1-2; 26:20-23; 1 Kgs 18:4, 13; 2 Chr 24:20-21; Mt 23:34; Heb 11:37). Now God is sending them his very own Son.<sup>10-22</sup> But they are plotting to take his life in order to save their own positions and prestige (cf. Jn 11:45-54, § 119). They are about to fulfill Psalm 118:22. They will reject Jesus by killing him. With that act, Jesus will be placed by God as the cornerstone.

Jesus introduces Psalm 118:22 with this insulting retort, "Have you never read?" (Mt 12:3; 19:4; 21:16; Mk 12:10). It was a common Messianic psalm to which they had not paid much attention. You can understand why. A rejected cornerstone was a novel idea. This "cornerstone" could stand for three different construction stones. It may be a *cornerstone*. That was the first and most important stone laid in the foundation of a building. If it was laid correctly the whole building would be straight. Second, the *capstone* was the "roof" of a building and was the final stone which held all the pillars in place. Third, the *keystone* was the last stone put in the middle of an arch. Once it was in place, all the supporting beams could be removed. Now the idea of a cornerstone would best fit the first part of verse 44—falling on this stone is detrimental to your health. However, the capstone or keystone would best fit the second part of verse 44—if this stone falls on you it will crush you. Perhaps Jesus intends a dual metaphor here.

This metaphor comes from Psalm 118:22 and originally signified the Jewish nation. Other nations would mistreat them, but they were precious to God. Here, however, Jesus claims to be the representative or even the embodiment of the entire nation.<sup>10-23</sup> What is true for the nation of Israel is true of Jesus as an individual, as the Messiah. Surely we are correct in applying this Psalm messianically. The early church certainly did (Acts 4:11; Rom 9:33; 1 Pet 2:7). We read "salvation talk" in the verses that surround Psalm 118:22 (cf. 21, 25). We are called back to the Triumphal Entry (Mt 21:9) by v. 26, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."<sup>10-24</sup>

One final note on Psalm 118:22. It is followed by these words in vv. 23-24, "The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. *This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*" Although the death of Jesus was a horrible injustice against God incarnate, it is also the source of our salvation. As ugly as it is, we cherish it. Indeed, its beauty is shrouded in blood.

5. (12:6-8) **God, Love of:** God is love. Therefore, God sent His very own Son to the world, wanting to speak personally to men. He condescended and asked His Son to leave the glory of eternity and to bring His Word to earth, speaking face to face with man. Perhaps they would listen to His voice and reverence His rights.

Note five facts.

1. Jesus claimed to be God's Son. He was different from all the servants sent before. He was more than another man-servant; He was God's very own Son. There is no question that Jesus was clearly making this unique claim for Himself.
2. The cultivators saw God's Son. There were all kinds of evidence: Old Testament prophecies, the testimony of John the Baptist, Jesus' own claim and the miraculous works to prove His deity, the fulness or signs of the times (Galatians 4:4). There was a feeling that He was the promised Messiah even among those who opposed Him (see note—John 3:1-2; cp. John 11:47-53). This is the tragic indictment against the Jews. Down deep within, they had a sense that Jesus really was the Messiah; but sin and greed for position, esteem, power, and security kept them from acknowledging Him. Their unbelief was deliberate and obstinate
3. The cultivators plotted His death (cp. Matthew 12:14; John 11:53).
4. The cultivators planned to seize His inheritance. Men wanted to possess the kingdom, the nation, the property, the power, the rule, the reign, the position, the esteem, the fame, the recognition, the wealth. Whatever the possession is, men want the possession themselves. And they will deny, deceive, lie, cheat, steal, and even kill to get it.
5. The cultivators murdered the Son. They committed the worst crime of human history: they killed the Son of God Himself. Note two things: (1) Jesus' death was being prophesied. He was predicting His death Himself. And (2) Jesus' death was a willing act on His part. He knew death lay ahead, so He could have escaped. But He chose to die. It was in "the determinate counsel of God" (Acts 2:23).

6. (12:9) **God, Justice of:** God is just—He shall come and destroy evil keepers. There are three important points here.

1. Jesus said the Lord of the vineyard is coming. He is coming to revenge the death of His only Son.
2. God is coming to destroy the wicked. The destruction is to be miserable (*kakos*), terrible. Note that it was both the rulers and the people who said that justice would be executed. Man, by his very nature, expects injustice to be punished.
3. God is going to trust His vineyard to others. Again, it was the crowd who said this. Even man knows that a vineyard will not lie unkept. It will be cultivated by someone.

7. (12:10-11) **Jesus Christ, the Stone—Promise Fulfilled:** God is trustworthy—He fulfills His promises. Christ is the Head cornerstone. This is a quotation from Psalm 118:22-23. It was recognized as a Messianic prophecy. The Messiah was to be the head cornerstone who was to begin building the Kingdom of God and who was to support all other stones or leaders who came later. The religious leaders standing around Christ knew that Christ was referring to the Messiah (Isaiah 28:16; Daniel 2:34; Zech. 3:9).

But note the promises. The stone was to be rejected at first. It was to be considered unsuitable and useless for the building. The builders would not allow the stone to be a part of the building; they would cast it aside and treat it as unusable.

However, the great Architect overruled the builders. He raised the stone from the graveyard of rejected stones and exalted it to the position of head cornerstone, the stone which supports all other stones and which holds the building of God's kingdom both up and together.

The symbolism of the head cornerstone says at least two significant things to us.

1. The cornerstone is the first stone laid. All other stones are placed after it. It is the preeminent stone in time. So it is with Christ. He is *the first* of God's new movement.

⇒ Christ is the captain of our salvation. All others are crew members or soldiers who follow Him.

⇒ Christ is the author of eternal salvation and of our faith. All others are the readers of the story.

- ⇒ Christ is the beginning and the end. All others come after Him.
- ⇒ Christ is the forerunner into the very presence of God. All others enter God's presence after Him.

2. The cornerstone is the supportive stone. All other stones are placed upon it and held up by it. They all rest upon it. It is the preeminent stone in position and power. So it is with Christ. He is the support and power, the Foundation of God's new movement.

- ⇒ Christ is *the head cornerstone*, the only true foundation upon which man can build. All crumble who are not laid upon Him.
- ⇒ Christ is *the chief cornerstone* upon which all others are fitly formed together. All who wish to be fitly formed together have to be laid upon Him.
- ⇒ Christ is *the living stone* upon which all others are built up a spiritual house. All others have to be built upon Him if they wish to live and have their spiritual sacrifice accepted by God.

Note it is all God's work. He is the One who raises up the Savior. Note also, the Savior is the object of marvel and wonder.

**8. (12:12) Jesus Christ, Response—Decision:** the conclusion of the parable was a great tragedy, a tragedy that has been seen in so many people down through the years.

1. There was the tragedy of reacting instead of repenting. The leaders saw that Jesus was speaking to them. But their consciences were seared by obstinate unbelief (1 Tim. 4:2). They were insensitive to His warnings (Mark 12:9). Therefore, they reacted instead of repenting. They should have heeded His warnings, but they did not. They were set against Him, seeking to destroy Him and thereby silencing His claim.

2. There was the tragedy of holding the wrong view of the Messiah. This is seen in the people. The leaders were afraid to arrest Jesus because of the people. The people saw Jesus as some great prophet (a great Teacher), and not as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. This, too, was tragic; but God was able to use their respect to protect Christ until the appointed time for His death.

3. There was the tragedy of leaving Jesus and going their own way. Note this was exactly what they did.

*MT 21:43-46 WITH MK 12:12*

<sup>43</sup>“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. <sup>44</sup>He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”<sup>NIV-10-11</sup>

<sup>45</sup>When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them.

<sup>46</sup>They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. [So they left him and went away.<sup>MK</sup>]

The “vineyard” of God would be stripped from these wicked tenants and given to people who will give God his due. Initially we see these new tenants as tax collectors and prostitutes. But eventually they will include even the Gentiles.<sup>10-25</sup> There are great blessings in store for those who accept Jesus, but frightening consequences for those who don't. They will be crushed to dust by this very stone they attempted to cast out (cf. Isa 8:14; Dan 2:35, 44).

The implications of this parable are more than they can stand. They want to arrest Jesus in the worst way. But the crowds hang on every word he says. They were both insulted and impotent, which is a bad combination.

### **Parable of the Two Sons:**

*MT 21:28-32*<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

<sup>29</sup>“‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup>“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup>“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

*“The first,” they answered.*

*Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”*

This is a simple parable. Jesus says, “It’s not those who talk the right talk that honor God, but those that walk the right walk.” Even Jesus’ opponents readily acknowledge this. This is the first time that Jesus openly applies one of his parables to the Jewish leaders (Carson, p. 449). They are scandalized by it. Why would tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom ahead<sup>10-19</sup> of religious folks? According to the story, they repented and did what God asked them to do. Now, the Pharisees would be shocked at Jesus’ implication that they were not working for God. Their lives were devoted to his work... or so they thought.

The work God requires is not so much “church business,” but trusting Christ. Jesus put it this way, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (Jn 6:29). At first the tax collectors and prostitutes rejected God’s plan through their wicked lifestyles. But when they heard John, they repented and were baptized and subsequently followed Jesus. Their leaders, however, talk about doing God’s will, but are not obedient to it. For when John came preaching a baptism of repentance, they refused to submit (Lk 7:30). And now that Jesus stands before them, they are trying to figure out a way to kill him.

It tells us certain things about God.

(i) It tells us of *the generosity* of God. The vineyard was equipped with everything that was necessary to make the work of the cultivators easy and profitable. God is generous in the life and in the world that he gives to men.

(ii) It tells us of *the trust* of God. The owner went away and left the cultivators to run the vineyard themselves. God trusts us enough to give us freedom to run life as we choose. As someone has said, “The lovely thing about God is that he allows us to do so much for ourselves.”

(iii) It tells us of *the patience* of God. Not once or twice but many times the master gave the cultivators the chance to pay the debt they owed. He treated them with a patience they little deserved.

(iv) It tells us of the ultimate triumph of the *justice* of God. Men might take advantage of the patience of God, but in the end comes judgment and justice. God may bear long with disobedience and rebellion but in the end he acts.

This parable tells us something about Jesus.

(i) It tells us that Jesus regarded himself *not as a servant but as a son*. He deliberately removes himself from the succession of the prophets. They were servants. He was son. In him God's last and final word was being spoken. This parable was a deliberate challenge to the Jewish authorities because it contains the unmistakable claim of Jesus to be Messiah.

(ii) It tells us that *Jesus knew that he was to die*. The Cross did not come to him as a surprise. He knew that the way he had chosen could have no other ending. It is the greatness of his courage that he knew that and still went on.

(iii) It tells us that *Jesus was sure of his ultimate triumph*. He also knew that he would be maltreated and killed, but he also knew that would not be the end, that after the rejection would come the glory.

This parable tells us something about man.

(i) There could be only one reason why the cultivators thought they could kill the son and then enter into possession of the vineyard. They must have thought that the owner was too far away to act, or that he

was dead and out of the reckoning. Men still think they can act against God and get away with it. But God is very much alive. Men seek to trade on their own freedom and his patience, but the day of reckoning comes.

(ii) If a man refuses his privileges and his responsibilities, they pass on to someone else. The parable has in it the whole germ of what was to come—the rejection of the Jews and the passing of their privileges and responsibilities to the Gentiles.

**Question #1; by Herodians; Paying Tribute to Caesar (Mt 22:15-22; Mk 12:13-17; Lk 20:20-26)**

In the following passages we will read about four questions. The first three are asked by Jesus' opponents, representing the three major political/religious parties of the day: Herodians, Sadducees, and Pharisees. In turn, they each try to trap Jesus with a particularly difficult question. Not only does Jesus answer their questions so well that they don't dare ask him another, but he perceives and exposes their true hypocritical and hostile motives in the process. Finally, Jesus asks his own difficult question which no one is able to answer. This will end the discourse between Jesus and his enemies. There is nothing left to talk about. Now their only recourse is assassination.

*MT 22:15-17 WITH LK 20:20; MK 12:15*

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words [so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>16</sup>They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians, [spies, who pretended to be honest.<sup>LK</sup>] "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. <sup>17</sup>Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? [Should we pay or shouldn't we?<sup>MK</sup>]"

There is history behind this shrewd question, and bitter history too. Herod the Great had ruled all Palestine as a Roman tributary king. He had been loyal to the Romans and they had respected him and given him a great deal of freedom. When he died in 4 B.C. he divided his kingdom into three. To Herod Antipas he gave Galilee and Peraea. To Herod Philip he gave the wild district up in the north-east round Trachonitis and Ituraea and Abilene. To Archelaus he gave the south country including Judaea and Samaria.

Antipas and Philip soon settled in and on the whole ruled wisely and well. But Archelaus was a complete failure. The result was that in A.D. 6 the Romans had to step in and introduce direct rule. Things were so unsatisfactory that southern Palestine could no longer be left as a semi-independent tributary kingdom. It had to become a province governed by a procurator.

Roman provinces fell into two classes. Those which were peaceful and required no troops were governed by the senate and rule by proconsuls. Those which were trouble-centres and required troops were the direct sphere of the Emperor and were governed by procurators. Southern Palestine fell naturally into the second category and tribute was in fact paid direct to the Emperor.

The first act of the governor, Cyrenius, was to take a census of the country, in order that he might make proper provision for fair taxation and general administration. The calmer section of the people accepted this as an inevitable necessity. But one Judas the Gaulonite raised violent opposition. He thundered that "taxation was no better than an introduction to slavery." He called on the people to rise, and said that God would favour them only if they resorted to all the violence they could muster. He took the high ground that for the Jews God was the only ruler. The Romans dealt with Judas with their customary efficiency, but his battle-cry never died out. "No tribute to the Romans," became a rallying cry of the more fanatical Jewish patriots.

The actual taxes imposed were three.

(i) A ground tax, which consisted of one-tenth of all the grain and one-fifth of the wine and fruit produced. This was paid partly in kind and partly in money.

(ii) An income tax which amounted to one per cent of a man's income.

(iii) A poll tax, which was levied on all men from fourteen to sixty-five and on all women from twelve to sixty-five. This poll tax was one *denarius*, roughly 3 1/2p per head. It was the tax which everyone had to pay simply for the privilege of existing.

The approach of the Pharisees and Herodians was very subtle. They began with flattery. That flattery was designed to do two things. It was designed to disarm the suspicions that Jesus might have had; and to make it impossible for him to avoid giving an answer without losing his reputation completely.

In view of all the circumstances the question which the Pharisees and Herodians put to Jesus was a masterpiece of cunning. They must have thought that they had him impaled on the horns of a completely inescapable dilemma. If he said that it was lawful to pay tribute, his influence with the populace would be gone forever, and he would be regarded as a traitor and a coward. If he said that it was not lawful to pay tribute, they could report him to the Romans and have him arrested as a revolutionary. They must have been sure that they had Jesus in a trap from which there was no escape.

Jesus said, "Show me a *denarius*." We may note in the passing that he himself did not possess even one coin of his own. He asked whose image was on it. The image would be that of Tiberius, the reigning emperor. All the emperors were called Caesar. Round the coin there would be the title which declared that this was the coin "of Tiberius Caesar, the divine Augustus, son of Augustus," and on the reverse would be the title "pontifex maximus," "the high priest of the Roman nation."

We must understand the ancient view of coinage if this incident is to be intelligible. In regard to coinage the ancient peoples held three consistent principles.

(i) Coinage is the sign of power. When anyone conquered a nation or was a successful rebel, the first thing he did was to issue his own coinage. That and that alone was the final guarantee of kingship and power.

(ii) Where the coin was valid the king's power held good. A king's sway was measurable by the area in which his coins were valid currency.

(iii) Because a coin had the king's head and inscription on it, it was held, at least in some sense, to be his personal property. Jesus' answer therefore was, "By using the coinage of Tiberius you in any event recognize his political power in Palestine. Apart altogether from that, the coinage is his own because it has his name on it. By giving it to him you give him what is in any event his own. Give it to him but remember that there is a sphere in life which belongs to God and not to Caesar."

Never did any man lay down a more influential principle. It conserved at one and the same time the civil and the religious power. Rawlinson reminds us that Lord Acton, the great historian, said of this, "Those words ... gave to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed and bounds it had never acknowledged, and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom." At one and the same time these words asserted the rights of the state and the liberty of conscience.

On the whole the New Testament lays down three great principles with regard to the individual Christian and the state.

(i) The state is ordained by God. Without the laws of the state life would be chaos. Men cannot live together unless they agree to obey the laws of living together. Without the state there is many a valuable service no man could enjoy. No individual man could have his own water supply, his own sewage system, his own transport system, his own social security organization. The state is the origin of many of the things which make life livable.

(ii) No man can accept all the benefits which the state gives him and then opt out of all the responsibilities. It is beyond question that the Roman government brought to the ancient world a sense of security it never had before. For the most part, except in certain notorious areas, the seas were cleared of pirates and the roads of brigands, civil wars were changed for peace and capricious tyranny for Roman impartial justice. As E. J. Goodspeed wrote, "It was the glory of the Roman Empire that it brought peace to a troubled world. Under its sway the regions of Asia Minor and the East enjoyed tranquillity and security to an extent and for a length of time unknown before and probably since. This was the *pax Romana*. The provincial, under Roman sway, found himself in a position to conduct his business, provide for his family, send his letters, and make his journeys in security, thanks to the strong hand of Rome." It is still true that no man can honourably receive all the benefits which living in a state confers upon him and then opt out of all the responsibilities of citizenship.

(iii) But there is a limit. E. A. Abbott has a suggestive thought. The coin had Caesar's *image* upon it, and therefore belonged to Caesar. Man has God's *image* upon him-God created man in his own image (*Genesis* 1:26,27)-and therefore belongs to God. The inevitable conclusion is that, if the state remains within its proper boundaries and makes its proper demands, the individual must give it his loyalty and his service; but in the last analysis both state and man belong to God, and therefore, should their claims conflict, loyalty to God comes first. But it remains true, that, in all ordinary circumstances, a man's Christianity should make him a better citizen than any other man.

The first group to try their hand at outwitting Jesus is a tag-team of Pharisees and Herodians. Under normal circumstances, these two groups were enemies. The Pharisees represent the religious right-wing. The Herodians, on the other hand, believe the road to peace and prosperity in Palestine is alignment with Rome. Since no one did that better than the Herod family, they are supporters of the Herods in their various governmental positions.

Through their false flattery they act like they sincerely want an answer. They say to Jesus: (1) You are a man of integrity, therefore, we can follow your example in this. (2) You accurately teach the will of God, therefore we can trust your opinion on this. And (3) you are not swayed by men, therefore we can believe your answer will be unbiased.

No one is fooled by their false flattery. It is clear that their simple question, "Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" is designed to trap Jesus. If he says, "No," the crowds will be delighted, of course. They hate taxation. More than one third of their income goes to pay Roman taxes. In addition, the coin itself has an offensive inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus" and on the flip side, "*pontifex maximus*" ("the most high priest"). While the crowds would have loved Jesus to ban taxation, the Herodians would have immediately arranged for his arrest and execution. On the other hand, if Jesus says "Yes, we should pay taxes to Caesar," the people, urged on by the Pharisees, will stop following him. After all, any Messiah who can't throw off the shackles of Roman domination (and especially taxation) is not worthy of support. Jesus is trapped!

Governments exist because God permits them to, and they have the right to make certain demands on their citizens. We live in a fallen world, and governmental authority is preferable to anarchy. However, there is a greater authority than any government. The things of God are always greater than the things of government. In order to understand what belongs to Caesar, we must first answer the more profound question, "What belongs to God?" Jesus asked, "Whose likeness is on the coin?"

A likeness of the face of the Roman emperor was stamped on the coins used in his empire, so the answer, of course, was "Caesar's." What Jesus was asking by implication is, "In what place is God's likeness to be found?" The answer to that question defines where governments legitimately begin and end.

So where is God's image? What matters to him? What has he claimed for himself?



Every human being, each child of Adam, is made in the image of God. Our souls have his divine imprint on them. We should render to God what belongs to him—our very lives. He has the right to receive our obedience in thought and action as that which is rightfully due him..

The problem with those who were questioning Jesus is that, because they feared the crowds, loved their place in life, and wanted the security their status provided, they had learned to fear Rome so much that they wouldn't hear a new word from God. They had become so accustomed to honoring Caesar and believing in the world system, that God became kind of an afterthought to them. They began to believe that he was a distant deity and that the real world consisted solely of Caesar and what Caesar could do. Everywhere they looked, they saw Roman soldiers, Roman flags, and the image of Caesar on coins, and when they paid homage to Caesar, they paid absolute homage. They would rather kill prophets sent from God than contradict the world system.

Jesus continues to speak with authority and his commandment is clear: Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (respect government operating in its rightful sphere) and to God what belongs to God. He intends to have our entire lives: thoughts and actions, heart and soul and mind and strength. Have we yielded to Jesus' lordship or are we, like his enemies, dazzled by the powers of the world?

*MT 22:18-22*

<sup>18</sup>*But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, <sup>20</sup>and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”*

<sup>21</sup>*“Caesar’s,” they replied.*

<sup>22</sup>*Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”*

*LK 20:26 WITH MT 22:22*

<sup>26</sup>*They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent. [So they left him and went away.<sup>MT</sup>]*

Jesus knows what they are up to and calls them on the carpet. It must have hurt being identified publicly as a “hypocrite.” But the big sting is yet to come. Jesus calls for a coin. The very fact that they have a Roman denarius in their possession indicates they accept Roman rule at some level. After all, you can't accept a government's right of coinage without also admitting its right of taxation.

Jesus simply holds up the coin and asks whose picture is on it. They must have seen where he was headed even as their answer slips from their tongues. The logic is so simple and yet so profound: Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God. The word “give” is literally “give back.” Thus, Jesus implies that our taxes are obligatory. That is, we owe them to the government as surely as we have financial obligations to God as part of our stewardship.

This has some ponderous implications. First, a government does have the right to taxation. If we cheat on our taxes, we are disobeying the ordained authority of God (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). We don't obey a government because we like what it does, who's in charge, or how it spends its money. Indeed, there are appropriate occasions for civil disobedience (Acts 4:19; 5:29). However, these should only be reserved for times when the government asks us directly or individually to disobey what God has commanded us to do or not to do.<sup>10-27</sup>

Second, the image on the coin is Caesar (Tiberias). Obviously, if his picture is on it, then it belongs to him. But as Jesus looks around the audience, he sees men and women who are as clearly imprinted with the image of God. They have an obligation to give their lives to him. But even now, Jesus the Messiah stands before them. Instead of following him, as God intended, they are trying to trap him. They are, in this very moment, robbing God of his due.

The Pharisees and Herodians are stymied. They have laboriously contrived this “impenetrable” question. Their scheme was foolproof. Yet in less than fifteen seconds this uneducated Galilean dismantles their question, exposes their motives, and convicts their hypocrisy. All they can do is walk away with their tail between their legs. Strike one—the Herodians are out. The Pharisees, however, will be back for a second beating.

### Some closing summaries

(12:13-17) This was the second challenge of the leaders against Jesus. The Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, had met officially and plotted how they might “catch [Jesus] in his words” (Mark 12:13). They devised a question dealing with taxes and a person’s citizenship in the state: “Is it lawful to give tribute [taxes] to Caesar, or not?” A *yes* answer would discredit Jesus with the people because they opposed paying taxes to a foreign conqueror (Rome). A *no* answer would cause Him to be arrested by the Roman authorities for opposing the law and threatening a revolt.

Jesus, being the Messiah, the Son of God Himself, saw through their plot. And Jesus used the occasion to teach the truth about citizenship, a truth which was both astounding and earth-shaking to the people of that day. It was earth-shaking because the Jews had always believed that the loyalty of a citizen belonged only to God, and the rest of the world believed that their loyalty belonged to the ruling monarch of their territory. Jesus astounded the world of His day by declaring that there is an earthly citizenship to which some things are to be given, and there is a spiritual, heavenly citizenship to which some things are to be given.

1. The false views of the state (v.13).
2. The sins common to false views of the state (v.14).
3. Life within the state depends upon God, not money: Jesus does not have even a penny (v.15).
4. The state is ordained by God (v.16-17).
5. The state is limited in its power: God is due the things that are God’s (v.17).

**1. (12:13) State—Citizenship:** the false views of the state are seen in the Pharisees and Herodians. But it must be remembered that the world did not know the concepts were false until this experience.

1. The first false concept is that religion is supreme. This is seen in the view of the Pharisees. They believed strongly in the heavenly, spiritual world, so much so that they believed all obedience and loyalty were due God and God alone. In fact, all things on earth were due God. The state and all other power and authority were to be subject to religious rule. Therefore, they were strongly against paying taxes to a foreign king. Paying taxes to a secular government was an infringement upon God’s right.

2. The second false concept is that the state is supreme. This is seen in the view of the Herodians.

Picture the scene, how strange it was. The Pharisees held that religion was dominant over government. They despised Roman authority and taxation. The Herodians held that government was dominant over religion. They would agree that taxes must be paid to Caesar rather than to God. They and the Pharisees were bitter enemies. To find them together was strange indeed. But their hatred of Jesus had brought them together against One whom they considered a common enemy.

**2. (12:14) Citizenship—Sins:** there are the sins common to false views of the state. On the surface the question which these men asked was innocent. It was a question asked by some in every generation: “Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar [the state] or not?” But the answer was dangerous. If Jesus had said taxes were due Caesar, the people would have called Him a traitor and turned against Him as a Roman stooge. If He had said it was unlawful to pay taxes, the religionists would have reported Him to the Romans and accused Him of insurrection.

There was something even more repulsive and horrible than their trickery. It was the camouflage of their trickery with flattery. Note how the flattery flowed on and on, distastefully so. They hoped the flattery would make Jesus think they were sincere and do away with any suspicions He had.

There are sins that are often committed by those who hold false concepts of citizenship. Some of these sins are seen in the plot of the Pharisees and Herodians against Jesus.

1. There is *selfish ambition*, which often leads to compromise and intrigue. Nothing could be more surprising than to see the Pharisees and Herodians working together. They stood diametrically opposed

to one another. The Pharisees thought the Herodians were no better than the heathen doomed to hell. Yet they are seen working with the Herodians against Jesus. What was it that brought them together? Selfish ambition. They feared the loss of their position, influence, power, wealth, and security. These notes will help considerably in understanding why the rulers feared Jesus so much.)

The depth of sin in selfish ambition is seen in that the primary plotters were religious leaders. They were not only willing to plot evil, they were trying to put a man to death. Just *how evil* selfish ambition can be, in both government and religion, is clearly seen in this passage.

2. There is *deception*, which usually leads to flattery and destruction. The deception is seen in two facts.

- a. Deception is seen in that the Pharisees themselves did not go to Jesus. They sent “their disciples with the Herodians.” The disciples were learners, students who would actually be seeking the answer to such a question. The Herodians were along to give the appearance that the disciples had asked them first but were not satisfied with their answer. It would seem they wanted to know what He (One who claimed to be the Messiah) would answer. Thus, Jesus would think the question was the legitimate question of a student, never suspecting a plot to entrap Him.
- b. Deception, the lowest kind of deception, is seen in the words of flattery which are used in approaching Jesus.
  - ⇒ “Master...
  - ⇒ “we know that thou art true...
  - ⇒ “and carest for no man:...
  - ⇒ “for thou regardest not the person of men...
  - ⇒ “but teachest the way of God in truth....”

Note that everything they said about Jesus was true.

- ⇒ He was Master: a rabbi, a teacher. He was even more: He was the Master and Lord of the universe.
- ⇒ He was true and truthful: a teacher from God. (Contrast their hypocritical approach with the sincerity of Nicodemus, John 3:2.)
- ⇒ He did teach the way of God: how a man was to live and behave if he wished to please God.
- ⇒ He did not care what men said about Him: it did not influence Him or His action.
- ⇒ He did not regard man’s person: He did not show partiality or favoritism.

The problem was that they did not mean what they were professing, not in their hearts. What they were professing about Him was coming from an evil motive. They wanted to use Him to secure their own selfish purposes. In the end they were successful; they were able to do what they were plotting. They were able to have Him destroyed.

3. There are *close-mindedness and obstinate unbelief* which lead to denial of the truth and self-condemnation. The question asked of Jesus was simple: “Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?”

- ⇒ The Pharisees, sincere Jewish religionists, would shout, “No!”
- ⇒ The Herodians (and those securing position and wealth by Roman rule) would say, “Yes!”

Standing there, the questioners thought they had entrapped Jesus. If He said, “No, taxes should not be paid to Caesar,” then the authorities would arrest and remove Him; and the people would soon know that His claim to be the Messiah was false.

If He said, “Yes, taxes should be paid to Caesar,” then He would be denying the Sovereignty of God; and the people, who strongly opposed Roman rule and taxes, would rise up against Him. Both the Pharisees and Herodians were close-minded. They would see nothing beyond themselves and the threat to their position and wealth. They were steeped in obstinate unbelief. Therefore, they rejected the truth; and, as results from all rejection of the truth, they condemned themselves (cp. John 3:18-21).

**3. (12:15) Citizenship—Needs—Necessities:** life within the state depends upon God, not money. This is seen in the fact that Jesus did not have a penny. He was living in the state of Israel and living under the rule of another state, the rule of Rome. He was, theoretically, a citizen of two states, yet He did not have

a penny. His sustenance and existence did not rest in the state nor in the things of the state. It rested in God's hands. His trust was in God, not in the state.

The state is not necessary for life, but God is. The state can be and should be helpful, but it is not necessary. However, God is necessary, for man does not live by bread alone. He cannot live an abundant life apart from God. With God man has purpose, fulfillment, and life—eternally. But without God he has none of these life-giving qualities, not permanently. The state can offer some liberties that allow some opportunities to pursue life; but God can make life free, completely free, instilling within the human heart a perfect assurance that one shall live forever.

**4. (12:16-17) Citizenship:** the state is ordained by God. Jesus confirmed this fact in two points. He clearly demonstrated that there are some things which *belong* to the state. Therefore, there are some responsibilities *due* the state. What belongs to Caesar belongs to Caesar. He is responsible primarily for three functions: law and order, community services, and protection. No man is an island within a state. He owes the state for the services and goods the state provides. Citizenship carries with it responsibility.

Jesus was brilliant and brief as He dealt with the Pharisees and their false concept of citizenship. "Bring me a penny...whose is this image?" He simply asked.

Note two things.

1. He forced the Pharisees (religion is supreme concept) to admit that some things belong to an earthly power. There is an *earthly citizenship*. The image was Caesar's; the superscription was Caesar's; and the coin had been made or coined by Caesar's government. Therefore, the coin was Caesar's if Caesar said it was due him. The point was clear. Since the religionists *used what was owned and provided by Caesar*, they owed to Caesar what was due him. He strikingly said, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

2. He revealed a very important truth for believers of all time. They *have a double citizenship*. They are citizens of heaven, yes, but they are also citizens of this world. Therefore, they have an obligation to the government under which they live. They receive the benefits of government just as the worldly-minded do (for example, roads, sewage, water, protection, and public transportation). Therefore, believers are to pay their due share. (See notes—"Romans 13:1-7. This note is a thorough discussion of citizenship.)

**5. (12:17) Citizenship:** the state is limited in its power. God is due the things that are God's. A heavenly citizenship belongs to God. Jesus was just as brilliant in dealing with the Herodians and their false concept of citizenship. The Herodians not only subjected religion to the state, but they were worldly-minded and denied much of the supernatural, including life after death and the spiritual world or dimension of being.

Note two things.

- a. Jesus declared unequivocally to the Herodians: there is a spiritual world. God is; He does exist; therefore, there are some things which belong to God. "Render therefore...unto God the things that are God's." Again, the point is clear. Since the Herodians (the state is supreme concept), as citizens of the world and of life itself, used what was owned and provided by God, they owed God what was due Him.
- b. Jesus revealed a very important truth to all generations of men. They are beings of God as well as of this world, spiritual as well as physical beings. Therefore, they are responsible to live as citizens of God as well as citizens of this world. All men have received so much from God...
  - life that was made to exist with God forever; therefore man owes God his life.
  - a spirit that can be *born again* and live a self-denying life of love and joy and peace for the sake of all men everywhere (Galatians 5:22-23).

- 1) They are to love God supremely.
- 2) They are to seek the Lord.
- 3) They are to know that the Lord is God, and He alone is to be worshipped.
- 4) They are not to forget the Lord.
- 5) They are not to profane God's covenant.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

### **#15 Why Are You Bothering Her? – Mark 14:1-11**

*"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.*

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This is the beginning of the end. We watch as the various players move into position for this final act. In this section Jesus prepares for his part with one final passion prediction. The Jewish rulers prepared for their role by plotting Jesus' arrest and assassination. In the next two sections, Mary prepares by anointing Jesus as if for burial. Finally, Iscariot prepares by consulting with the Sanhedrin about betraying Jesus.

The Passover was a feast, a joyous and festive occasion. It was a celebration God's glorious deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. Yet during the very days of this joyous celebration, Jesus' murder was being plotted. And tragically, it was being plotted by religionists, the very people who should have been taking the lead in the Passover. On the one hand there was the celebration of deliverance, the saving of life; on the other hand there was the plotting of death, the taking of life. This passage deliberately sets the stage for what is to come.

While thousands of Passover pilgrims were preparing for the joys of the feast, Jesus was preparing for the ordeal of His trial and crucifixion. Just as He had steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), so He steadfastly set His heart to do the Father's will. The Servant was "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

Follow His footsteps during the days and hours of the last week, and you will be amazed to see the responses of various people to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The last crowded act of Jesus' life was now about to open. The Feast of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were really two different things. The Feast of the Passover fell on 14th Nisan, that is, about 14th April. The Feast of Unleavened Bread consisted of the seven days following the Passover. The Passover itself was a major feast and was kept like a sabbath. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was called a minor festival, and, although no new work could be begun during it, such work as was "necessary for public interest or to provide against private loss" was allowable. The really great day was Passover Day.

The Passover was one of the three compulsory feasts. The others were the Feast of Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. To these feasts every male adult Jew who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem was bound to come.

The Passover had a double significance.

(a) It had an *historical significance* (*Exodus* 12). It commemorated the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. God had sent plague after plague on Egypt, and, as each plague came, Pharaoh promised to let the people go. But, when each plague abated, he hardened his heart and went back on his word. Finally there came a terrible night when the angel of death was to walk through the land of Egypt and slay every first-born son in every home. The Israelites were to slay a lamb. Using a bunch of hyssop they were to smear the lintel of the door-post with the blood of the lamb, and when the angel of death saw the door-post so marked, he would *pass over* that house and its occupants would be safe. Before they went upon their way the Israelites were to eat a meal of a roasted lamb and unleavened bread. It was that "passover," that deliverance and that meal that the Feast of the Passover commemorated.

(b) It had an *agricultural significance*. It marked the ingathering of the barley harvest. On that day a sheaf of barley had to be waved before the Lord (*Leviticus* 23:10, 11). Not till after that had been done could the barley of the new crop be sold in the shops or bread made with the new flour be eaten.

Every possible preparation was made for the Passover. For a month beforehand its meaning was expounded in the synagogue, and its lesson was taught daily in the schools. The aim was that no one should come ignorant and unprepared to the feast, the roads were all put in order, the bridges repaired. One special thing was done. It was very common to bury people beside the road. Now if any pilgrim had touched one of these wayside tombs he would technically have been in contact with a dead body and so rendered unclean and unable to take part in the feast. So, before the Passover, all the wayside tombs were white-washed so that they would stand out and the pilgrims could avoid them. *Psalms* 120-134 are entitled *Psalms of Degree*, and it may well be that these were the psalms which the pilgrims sang on their way to the feast, as they sought to lighten the road with their music. It is said that *Psalms* 122 was the one which they actually sang as they climbed the hill to the Temple on the last lap of their journey.

As we have already seen, it was compulsory for every adult male Jew who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem to come to the Passover, but far more than these came. It was the one ambition of every Jew to eat at least one Passover in Jerusalem before he died. Therefore from every country in the world pilgrims came flocking to the Passover Feast. During the Passover all lodging was free. Jerusalem could not hold the crowds, and Bethany and Bethphage were two of the outlying villages where pilgrims lodged.

A passage in Josephus gives us an idea of how many pilgrims actually came. He tells that Cestius, governor of Palestine round about a.d. 65, had some difficulty in persuading Nero of the great importance of the Jewish religion. To impress him, he asked the then High Priest to take a census of the lambs slain at the Passover in one year. The number, according to Josephus, was 256,500. The law was that there must be a minimum party of ten people to one lamb, so that there must have been close on 3,000,000 pilgrims in Jerusalem.

It was just there that the problem of the Jewish authorities lay. During the Passover, feeling ran very high. The remembrance of the old deliverance from Egypt made the people long for a new deliverance from Rome. At no time was nationalist feeling so intense. Jerusalem was not the Roman headquarters in Judaea. The governor had his residence and the soldiers were stationed in Caesarea. During the Passover time special detachments of troops were drafted into Jerusalem and quartered in the Tower of Antonia which overlooked the Temple. The Romans knew that at Passover anything might happen and they were taking no chances. The Jewish authorities knew that in an inflammable atmosphere like that, the arrest of Jesus might well provoke a riot. That is why they sought some secret stratagem to arrest him and have him in their power before the populace knew anything about it.

The last act of Jesus' life was to be played out in a city crammed with Jews who had come from the ends of the earth. They had come to commemorate the event whereby their nation was delivered from slavery in Egypt long ago. It was at that very time that God's deliverer of mankind was crucified upon his Cross.

*(Mt 26:1-5; Mk 14:1-2; Lk 22:1-2)*

<sup>[MT 26:1]</sup>When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, <sup>2</sup>“As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

<sup>3</sup>Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, <sup>4</sup>and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. <sup>5</sup>“But not during the Feast,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.”

The first picture is that of the Passover. For months Jesus had been drilling into His disciples that He was to die. Mark points to two brief facts.

1. The Passover was to be celebrated in just two days.
2. While preparations were being made for the Passover, preparations were also being made to kill Jesus.

In these two simple statements Mark ties the death of Jesus to the Passover. Throughout history, the Passover had pictured Jesus' death. Jesus was fulfilling the Passover with the shedding of His own blood upon the cross.

1. Historically, the Passover refers back to the time when God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 11:1f). God had pronounced judgment (the taking of the firstborn) upon the people of Egypt for their injustices. As He prepared to execute the final judgment, those who believed God were instructed to slay a pure lamb and sprinkle its blood over the door posts of their homes. The blood of the innocent lamb would then serve as a sign that the coming judgment had already been carried out. When seeing the blood, God would *pass over* that house.
2. Symbolically, the Passover pictured the coming of Jesus Christ as the Savior. The *lamb without blemish* pictured His sinless life, and the *blood sprinkled on the door posts* pictured His blood shed for the believer (Exodus 12:5; cp. John 1:29). It was a sign that the life and blood of the innocent lamb had been substituted for the firstborn (believers). The *eating of the lamb* pictured the need for spiritual nourishment gained by feeding on Christ, the Bread of Life. The *unleavened bread* (bread without yeast) pictured the need for putting evil out of one's life and household

We have just ended the fifth and final discourse of the book of Matthew, as indicated by the words "when Jesus had finished saying all these things" (cf. Mt 8:1; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1). These events may have taken place as Jesus' band left the city late Tuesday afternoon after a very full day in the temple. But more likely they took place on Wednesday. That, after all, would still be counted by the Jews as two (inclusive) days before the Passover, which would begin after sundown on Thursday. Of more importance is the fact that Jesus, in this fourth prediction, specifies the exact time of his trial.

While Jesus is tucked away in Bethany (cf. Lk 21:37-38), the Sanhedrin is busily working on this sticky little problem. Some two months ago, also under Caiaphas' direction, they determined to kill Jesus (Jn 11:49-53). Now, under Caiaphas' own roof, they reiterate their purpose and redouble their efforts. Their very first assassination attempt goes back two years and two Passovers (Jn 5:18).

Since that time, however, they have learned to watch out for the crowds because the common people just love Jesus (Mt 21:46; Mk 12:12). After the Triumphal Entry (Sunday), the cleansing of the temple (Monday) and the day of discussions (Tuesday), they will have to be especially careful to avoid arresting Jesus in the presence of his growing supporters. Indeed, if the people riot, Rome would be quick to squelch the riot and replace these rulers. They fear for their country and their own positions. They determine that "one man must die for the nation" (Jn 11:50).

In verse 2 Jesus says that he will be betrayed during the Passover feast. But in verse 5 the Sanhedrin wants to avoid any confrontation during the feast for fear of the people. What they don't count on is this golden opportunity named Iscariot. When he comes along and offers to hand Jesus over to them, they just can't pass that up, even though it would entail obvious risks. We are also reminded that the following events did not proceed based on the plans of men but on the sovereignty of God. These events are on the track of God's predetermined will and are not to be derailed.

While the people were in the streets openly preparing to praise God for His delivering power and the saving of life, the religionists were behind closed doors preparing to arrest and murder Jesus. Just imagine! The religionists themselves were plotting to take the life of God's very own Son.

1. Jesus' death was *plotted by all the leaders*: the chief priests and the Scribes. Matthew adds that the elders or lay leaders were also in on the plot. Matthew also shows the secretiveness of the plot by stating that the leaders met in the home (palace) of the High Priest instead of meeting in the official court.
2. Jesus' death was to be *wrought by deception and lies*.
  - a. He was to be arrested on false charges and killed.
  - b. He was to be arrested quietly, after all the pilgrims had left the feast to return home. The *feast day* refers to all eight days of the feast. The danger of an uprising would not have passed until all the pilgrims had left the city. Of course the threat of an uprising was removed by Judas'

willingness to betray Jesus. In the crowded mass of about two million people within the city, Judas was able to show them where Jesus was, and to quietly identify Him. Judas was able to show them how Jesus could be secretly taken in the dark of the night (cp. Matthew 26:47-50).

### **Mark 14:3-9**

*While Jesus was in Bethany, while he was reclining at a table in the house of Simon the leper, there came a woman who had a phial of ointment of pure nard. She broke the phial and poured it over his head. Some of them said indignantly to each other, "To what purpose is the waste of this ointment? This ointment could have been sold for more than ten pounds, and the money could have been given to the poor." And they were angry at her. Jesus said, "Let her be! Why do you trouble her? It is a lovely thing that she has done to me. You have always got the poor with you, and you can do something for them any time you like, but you have not got me always. She has done what she could. She has taken my body and anointed it beforehand against my burial. This is the truth I tell you-wherever the good news shall be proclaimed throughout the whole world, the story of what she has done will be told, so that she will always be remembered.*

This event took place six days before Passover, which would put it on the Friday before the Triumphal Entry (John 12:1). By placing this story between the accounts of the plot to arrest Jesus, Mark contrasted the treachery of Judas and the leaders with the love and loyalty of Mary. The ugliness of their sins makes the beauty of her sacrifice even more meaningful.

Neither Mark nor Matthew names the woman, but John tells us that it was Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 11:1-2). Mary is found three times in the Gospel story; and each time, she is at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:31-32; 12:1-8). Mary had a close fellowship with the Lord as she sat at His feet and listened to His Word. She is a good model for all of us to follow.

Chronologically it fits between the time Jesus arrived in Bethany and the Triumphal Entry. But both Matthew and Mark place it topically here, to show the absolute avarice of Judas Iscariot. The only clear motive we are given for Judas' betrayal is his lust for petty cash. But this event also shows how ignorant the Eleven were of Judas' true character. Because he held the purse strings, they fell in behind him in his condemnation of Mary's act of devotion.

The account we will examine in this message begins with chief priests and teachers of the law pursuing their own dark purposes. The passage ends with a disciple betraying the Lord. In the middle is the remarkable account of a woman interrupting a dinner party. Mark 14:1-11:

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot."

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."



Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Let's begin with some cultural observations. Verse one says that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away. Both of these festivals had their origins in the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread was reminiscent of God's instruction to the Jews leaving Egypt that they were to clean out their houses and remove all traces of leaven (yeast) in preparation for the extraordinary things God was about to do. In the Bible, leaven is symbolic of sin. Just as a tiny amount of leaven can spread throughout an entire batch of dough, making the bread rise, so does sin work its way silently and subtly through our lives. It permeates and increases its influence. The yearly festival called for a ruthless cleansing of life and home, looking for any possible evidence of compromise with sin, and taking action against it.

The Passover feast told the story of God's mercy. On their last night in captivity the Israelites in Egypt were spared the death of their first born because God was gracious. A lamb died, its blood was sprinkled on their homes, and this mark caused God's judgment to "passover" them when it fell on Egypt. The purpose of the Passover feast was to reinforce gratitude, humility before God, and thankfulness for his mercy.

In Jesus' day, religious leaders were uninterested in the purpose behind the festivals. Instead of scouring their lives for evidence of sin or humbly thanking the God who spared them when they didn't deserve it, they were plotting to kill an innocent man. Verse 2 tells us that the choice to wait until after the feast to kill him was not out of respect for the holiness of the day; it was a purely strategic decision intended to avoid upsetting the people and causing a riot.

In verse 3, we read that Jesus was reclining at a table. The setting was a large dinner party held in the home of Simon the Leper, in Bethany. At such an occasion people did not eat at a table with chairs; instead, they reclined on cushions, their feet pointing away from the table. Jesus was reclining in this manner when a woman entered the room and poured perfume on his head.

John 12:3 tells us that the woman was Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. The sealed alabaster container of perfume was very costly, worth a year's wages for a working person. It was probably part of her dowry, given to make her a more desirable marriage partner. By choosing to offer such an expensive act of devotion, Mary very likely diminished her future prospects for marriage.

A similar incident is recorded in Luke 7:36-50. In the home of another man named Simon, another woman poured perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. However, the details show that this is a different event. The event recorded by Mark took place in Bethany at the home of Simon the Leper. The event recorded by Luke took place in Galilee at the home of Simon the Pharisee. The woman in Luke's account was probably a prostitute-the text says she "had lived a sinful life"-and the Pharisees couldn't understand why Jesus would let an unclean woman touch him. The focus in Luke's account is Jesus' refusal to reject a sinful woman, but in Mark's account, the focus is Mary's righteousness.

Verses 4 and 5 say that the disciples were indignant and rebuked Mary harshly. Her actions were certainly an assault on propriety. Interrupting a formal dinner party to pour oil on the guest of honor would have been a gross violation of protocol. However, their indignation was less about Mary's impropriety than it was about money. They criticized Mary's extravagance, saying that the money should have been given to the poor instead. However, they were not genuinely passionate for the poor. Rather, they wanted Jesus to lead a messianic revolt that would use concern for the poor as a strategy for gaining the support of the masses.

The disciples were just like other first century Jewish patriots who loved God, loved their nation, and had certain expectations of the promised Messiah. When they chose to follow Jesus, they fitted him with the garment of Messianic expectations. They had not yet understood the spiritual revolution at the heart of his message. They expected him to accomplish what they had already assumed to be God's plan.

Mary was different. She was so altered by Jesus' love that she saw him more clearly than anyone else did. Her beloved brother, Lazarus, had been dead but was now alive. Her Lord had spoken of his own imminent death, and she took him seriously. She was filled with gratitude and love as she entered the room and poured perfume on Jesus' head. She was unaware of the expense or the observers because the Lord filled her vision.

Mary worshipped Christ, and that is why Jesus' words are so pertinent: "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." People like Mary make us see beneath the surface of our actions. They highlight our concern about appearances, and they challenge our assumptions about what matters to God. They clarify our vision of Christ.

The poignancy of this story lies in the fact that it tells us of almost the last kindness that Jesus had done to him.

He was in the house of a man called Simon the leper, in the village of Bethany. People did not sit to eat; they reclined on low couches. They lay on the couch resting on the left elbow and using the right hand to take their food. Anyone coming up to someone lying like this would stand well above him. To Jesus there came a woman with an alabaster phial of ointment. It was the custom to pour a few drops of perfume on a guest when he arrived at a house or when he sat down to a meal. This phial held nard which was a very precious ointment made from a rare plant that came from far-off India. But it was not a few drops that this woman poured on the head of Jesus. She broke the flask and anointed him with the whole contents.

There may be more than one reason why she broke the flask. Maybe she broke it as a sign that all was to be used. There was a custom in the East that if a glass was used by a distinguished guest, it was broken so that it would never again be touched by the hand of any lesser person. Maybe there was something of that in the woman's mind. But there was one thing not in her mind which Jesus saw. It was the custom in the East, first to bathe, then to anoint the bodies of the dead. After the body had been anointed, the flask in which the perfume had been contained was broken and the fragments were laid with the dead body in the tomb. Although she did not mean it so, that was the very thing this woman was doing.

Her action provoked the grudging criticism of some of the bystanders. The flask was worth more than 300 *denarii*. A *denarius* was a Roman coin worth about 3p which was a working man's daily wage. It would have cost an ordinary man almost a year's pay to buy the flask of ointment. To some it seemed a shameful waste; the money might have been given to the poor. But Jesus understood. He quoted their own scriptures to them. "The poor will never cease out of the land." (*Deuteronomy 15:11.*) "You can help the poor any time," Jesus said, "but you have not long to do anything for me now." "This," he said, "is like anointing my body beforehand for its burial."

This story shows the action of love.

(i) Jesus said that it was a *lovely* thing the woman had done. In Greek there are two words for *good*. There is *agathos* which describes a thing which is morally good; and there is *kalos* which describes a thing which is not only good but *lovely*. A thing might be *agathos*, and yet be hard, stern, austere, unattractive. But a thing which is *kalos* is winsome and lovely, with a certain bloom of charm upon it. Struthers of Greenock used to say that it would do the church more good than anything else if Christians would sometimes "*do a bonnie thing*." That is exactly what *kalos* means; and that is exactly what this woman did. Love does not do only good things. Love does lovely things.

(ii) If love is true, there must always be a certain extravagance in it. It does not nicely calculate the less or more. It is not concerned to see how little it can decently give. If it gave all it had, the gift would still be too little. There is a recklessness in love which refuses to count the cost.

(iii) Love can see that there are things, the chance to do which comes only once. It is one of the tragedies of life that often we are moved to do something fine and do not do it. It may be that we are too shy and feel awkward about it. It may be that second thoughts suggest a more prudent course. It occurs in the simplest things—the impulse to send a letter of thanks, the impulse to tell someone of our love or gratitude, the impulse to give some special gift or speak some special word. The tragedy is that the impulse is so often strangled at birth. This world would be so much lovelier if there were more people like this woman, who acted on her impulse of love because she knew in her heart of hearts that if she did not do it then she would never do it at all. How that last extravagant, impulsive kindness must have uplifted Jesus's heart.

(iv) Once again we see the invincible confidence of Jesus. The Cross loomed close ahead now but he never believed that it would be the end. He believed that the good news would go all round the world. And with the good news would go the story of this lovely thing, done with reckless extravagance, done on the impulse of the moment, done out of a heart of love.

We can make a couple of additional observations about the text. As Jesus approached the end of his earthly life, women were the most sensitive, helpful, and honorable of his servants. Mary believed Jesus when he said he was going to die. The disciples refused, as long as they possibly could, to believe what he said, but Mary loved him for who he was and gave to him what would be a beautiful and memorable gift. The women took his body and buried it, and they loved him in his death and burial for who he was and what he had done for them. Their hearts were filled with gratitude. It was enough for them that Jesus loved them, healed them, changed them, prayed for them, and displayed the heart of God to them.

The other disciples loved Jesus too, but they expected something from him. They anticipated the building of empires and tearing down of strongholds that they expected from Messiah. They loved the Lord and the things they anticipated he would bring about, but Mary just loved him for who he was. Simple gratitude without lofty expectation is what stands out in this story. It is a lesson in adoration and worship of Jesus Christ for who he is out of gratitude for what is already true without attaching expectations to what may follow.

Another observation concerns giving to the poor. Despite their mixed motives, wasn't it reasonable for the disciples to argue that the perfume should have been sold to help the poor? We can look to the example of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-8) for the answer. The Lord reached out to Zacchaeus, whose gratitude in turn resulted in extraordinary generosity.

Generosity that intends to accomplish a goal (gaining the approval of observers or dealing a death-blow to poverty) will always end in disappointment. The poor will always be with us and the applause of onlookers will fade.

People like Mary, who live out of gratitude, who see Christ for who he is, who receive love from him and love him back, will be foolishly generous forever. The most generous people are those who are not playing to the crowd or trying to change the world. The poor are actually better off when people like Mary love Christ and ignore "the bottom line" in their devotion to him.

Jesus said that Mary would be forever remembered for what she had done. "Wherever the gospel is preached, what she has done will also be told." You cannot preach the gospel without striking this theme. The gospel is about revolution. It is about becoming peculiar. The gospel is about convention breaking, cross bearing; changes that make us misunderstood. The only way to preach the gospel is to urge people to be peculiar enough to be misunderstood for Christ's sake. May it be so with us.

When Mary gave her best at the feet of Jesus, she started a “wave of blessing” that has been going on ever since. She was a blessing to Jesus as she shared her love, and she was a blessing to her home as the fragrance spread. Were it not for Mary, her village, Bethany, would probably have been forgotten. The account of her deed was a blessing to the early church that heard about it and, because of the records in three of the Gospels, Mary has been a blessing to the whole world—and still is! The Lord’s prediction has certainly been fulfilled.

Mary gave her best in faith and love; Judas gave his worst in unbelief and hatred. He solved the problem of how the Jewish leaders could arrest Jesus without causing a riot during the feast. He sold his Master for the price of a slave (see Ex. 21:32), the basest act of treachery in history.

**(Mt 26:14-16; Mk 14:10-11; Lk 22:3-6)**

<sup>[Lk 22:]<sup>3</sup></sup>Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. <sup>4</sup>And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus, <sup>[Mt 26:]<sup>15</sup></sup>and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” [They were delighted to hear this and <sup>Mk</sup>] counted out for him [promised him <sup>Mk</sup>] thirty silver coins. <sup>[Lk 22:]<sup>16</sup></sup>He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

Luke tells us that Satan entered Judas (Lk 22:3), likely on Wednesday. Then again on Thursday evening, after Judas ate the bread that Jesus handed to him, John also says that Satan entered Judas (Jn 13:27). This sounds like Acts 5:3, when Peter said to Ananias, “How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?” Apparently Satan has the ability to plant ideas into people’s minds and hearts that they then implement. We may never know the mechanics of how Satan influences people, but we are warned that he indeed does. All three Synoptics note that Judas was one of the twelve, as if to say, “If he was not above such deviance, you too be careful!” We must be vigilant in warding off Satanic influence. By resisting his suggestions and temptations we can send him scurrying away (James 4:7).

There have been numerous suggestions as to what motivated Judas to betray Jesus. Perhaps he was jealous of Jesus or disgruntled over the Mary incident. Perhaps he was impatient and wanted to force Jesus to institute the kingdom through a final conflict with the Sanhedrin. Perhaps he was disillusioned that Jesus did not turn out to be the political Messiah that Judas expected. Perhaps Judas was trying to turn a fast buck to replace the money he pilfered from the funds. Perhaps he was trying to save himself as he saw the inevitable and ugly conflict between Jesus and the religious hierarchy coming to a head. We will probably never know the motive, only the result, both for Jesus and Judas. We do know, however, that Judas was operating under the heavy hand of predestination (Ps 41:9; Zech 11:7-14). That is not to say that he had no control over what he did. But it is to say that he, like Jesus, worked out exactly what God had ordained from long ago.

He was promised thirty pieces of silver, the price of a common slave (Exod 21:32). In return, Judas promised to hand over Jesus at an opportune time, away from the crowds.

It is with consummate artistry that Mark sets side by side the anointing at Bethany and the betrayal by Judas—the act of generous love and the act of terrible treachery.

There is always a shudder of the heart as we think of Judas. Dante sets him in the lowest of all hells, a hell of cold and ice, a hell designed for those who were not hot sinners swept away by angry passions, but cold, calculating, deliberate offenders against the love of God.

Mark tells the story with such economy of words that he leaves us no material for speculation. But at the back of Judas’s action we can distinguish certain things.

(i) There was *covetousness*. *Matthew 26:15* actually tells us that Judas went to the authorities and asked what price they were prepared to pay and drove a bargain with them for thirty pieces of silver. *John 11:57* drops a hint. That verse tells us that the authorities had asked for information as to where Jesus could be found so as to arrest him. It may well be that by this time Jesus was to all intents and purposes an outlaw with a price upon his head, and that Judas knew it and wished to acquire the offered reward. John is quite definite. He tells us that Judas was the treasurer of the apostolic band and used his position to pilfer from the common purse (*John 12:6*).

It may be so. The desire for money can be a terrible thing. It can make a man blind to decency and honesty and honour. It can make him have no care how he gets so long as he gets. Judas discovered too late that some things cost too much.

(ii) There was *jealousy*. Klopstock, the German poet, thought that Judas, when he joined the Twelve, had every gift and every virtue which might have made him great, but that bit by bit he became consumed with jealousy of John, the beloved disciple, and that this jealousy drove him to his terrible act. It is easy to see that there were tensions in the Twelve. The rest were able to overcome them, but it may well be that Judas had an unconquerable and uncontrollable demon of jealousy within his heart. Few things can wreck life for ourselves and for others as jealousy can.

(iii) There was *ambition*. Again and again we see how the Twelve thought of the Kingdom in earthly terms and dreamed of high position in it. Judas must have been like that. It may well be that, while the others still clung to them, he came to see how far wrong these dreams were and how little chance they ever had of any earthly fulfilment. And it may well be that in his disillusionment the love he once bore to Jesus turned to hate. In *Henry the Eighth* Shakespeare makes Wolsey say to Thomas Cromwell:

"Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition; By that sin fell the angels; how can man  
then,  
The image of his Maker, hope to win by it? Love thyself last."

There is an ambition which will trample on love and honour and all lovely things to gain the end it has set its heart upon.

(iv) Minds have been fascinated by the idea that it may be that Judas did not want Jesus to die at all. It is almost certain that Judas was a fanatical nationalist and that he had seen in Jesus the one person who could make his dreams of national power and glory come true. But now he saw Jesus drifting to death on a cross. So it may be that in one last attempt to make his dream come true, he betrayed Jesus *in order to force his hand*. He delivered him to the authorities with the idea that now Jesus would be compelled to act in order to save himself, and that action would be the beginning of the victorious campaign he dreamed of. It may be that this theory is supported by the fact that when Judas saw what he had done he flung the accursed money at the feet of the Jewish authorities and went out and hanged himself. (*Matthew 27:3-5*). If that is so, the tragedy of Judas is the greatest in history.

(v) Both Luke and John say quite simply that the devil entered into Judas (*Luke 22:3, John 13:27*). In the last analysis that is what happened. Judas wanted Jesus to be what he wanted him to be and not what Jesus wanted to be. In reality Judas attached himself to Jesus, not so much to become a follower as to use Jesus to work out the plans and desires of his own ambitious heart. So far from surrendering to Jesus, he wanted Jesus to surrender to him; and when Jesus took his own way, the way of the Cross, Judas was so incensed that he betrayed him. The essence of sin is pride; the core of sin is independence; the heart of sin is the desire to do what we like and not what God likes. That is what the devil, satan, the evil one stands for. He stands for everything which is against God and will not bow to him. That is the spirit which was incarnate in Judas.

We shudder at Judas. But let us think again-covetousness, jealousy, ambition, the dominant desire to have our own way of things. Are we so very different? These are the things which made Judas betray Jesus, and these are the things which still make men betray him.

### Concluding Summary Points

(14:3-9) **Introduction—Sacrifice—Sacrificial Love:** John tells us that the woman was Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who anointed Jesus (John 12:1f). The title of this passage could easily be, *A Study of Sacrifice*. The result is a strong lesson on sacrifice or sacrificial giving.

1. The woman's love was selfless and costly (v.3).
2. The woman's love was questioned and murmured against (v.4-5).
3. The woman's love was a good and lovely thing (v.6).
4. The woman's love grasped the opportune time (v.7).
5. The woman's love did all it could (v.8).
6. The woman's love was rewarded (v.9).

**1. (14:3) Love—Sacrifice—Stewardship—Giving:** Mary's love was selfless and costly. Because of the hot and dry climate, it was the custom of the day to anoint the head with oil, especially the heads of guests. But this was not Mary's purpose.

1. Mary anointed Jesus *herself*. A servant would ordinarily do the anointing; and Simon, owning a home large enough to entertain so many guests, would certainly have had servants. Mary was not a servant; she was one of the heads of the household. Mary was not just anointing to fulfill a custom of the day. Her purpose was much greater than that.

2. Mary took the most precious thing she had and *gave* it to Jesus in the most significant way, in an act of anointing. The oil used for anointing the head cost only a mite, the smallest coin in circulation (amounting to only a penny). But not the oil Mary used. She took a priceless oil which cost about 300 denarii per flask or bottle. It was the oil used by kings, and they used it only drop by drop. A denarii was the average pay for a day's work. Therefore, the bottle was worth about a whole year's wage.

Note how Mary gave the gift to Jesus. She did not just hand it to Him; she broke the neck of the flask and poured the whole bottle on His head and feet (cp. John 12:3). Why? What was Mary doing?

Mary's anointing of Jesus was a selfless act, a costly act, an act of love and faith in the Lord Jesus. Very simply put, Mary anointed Jesus to show Him how deeply she loved Him and believed Him to be the true Messiah, *the anointed One of God*. He was her Savior, Lord, and King. He had done so much for her and her family. She wanted Him to know how much she appreciated, loved, and believed Him.

Something else needs to be noted as well. Mary sensed something within Jesus: a foreboding, a preoccupation of mind, a heaviness of heart, a weight of tremendous pressure. Her heart reached out to Him and wanted to encourage and help Him. Being a young woman in the presence of so many men, she was not allowed to vocally express herself that much. Such privilege was not allowed women of that day, so she did all that she could: she acted. She arose and went for the most precious gift she could think of—a most costly bottle of perfume. And she gave it to Him in such a way that He would know that at least one person truly loved Him and believed Him to be the Messiah. Her hope was that such worship and such faith and love would boost His spirits.

**2. (14:4-5) Love—Sacrifice—Giving:** Mary's love was questioned and murmured against. The word "indignation" (*aganaktountes*) means to ache within, to be vexed and disturbed. The word "murmured" (*eneboimonto*) means to growl, rebuke, scold. It indicates strong emotions. But note: only some of the disciples felt this way; all did not.

What disturbed the disciples was *not* the fact that Mary anointed Jesus. Anointing Him was easy enough to understand since it was a common custom of the day. What disturbed them was the gift she gave. The gift...

- seemed too valuable and priceless.
- seemed unnecessary and thoughtless.
- seemed misplaced
- seemed too costly and sacrificial.
- seemed to be a foolish and senseless act

and wasted

Very simply, the disciples questioned the act, and even murmured against it. They became rather emotional about the matter. They felt a cheaper oil should have been used for the anointing, and the more expensive oil should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

**3. (14:6) Love—Sacrifice—Giving:** Mary’s love was a good and lovely thing. Jesus knew the disciples were questioning and murmuring against Mary. He reacted strongly: “Let her alone...she hath wrought a good work on me.” The word Christ used for good is not *agathos* which speaks of moral goodness. He chose to use the word *kalos* which means both good and lovely. It means something so good that it is striking, appealing, attractive, and pleasant.

Mary was driven to express her faith and love for Him in the most meaningful way she could. She did this by anointing Him as her Lord with the most expensive perfume she possessed.

The most significant person in Mary’s life was the Lord. He was the Messiah, the Savior and Lord of her life and family. She wished to show Him that He was deserving of all she was and had. Therefore, Mary’s love and sacrifice was *a good work*, *a lovely work*, and it struck the attention of the Lord. There was no way such love and sacrifice could ever escape His sight.

**4. (14:7) Love—Sacrifice—Initiative—Timing:** Mary’s love grasped the opportune time. Jesus made a significant point that is often missed by men. Opportunities come and go—and once they are gone, they are gone for good. Mary demonstrated the difference. The poor would always be present for believers to help, but the privilege of ministering to Jesus would not always be available. If the disciples were to minister to Him, they had to grasp the opportunity while Jesus was with them.

**5. (14:8) Love—Sacrifice—Jesus Christ, Death:** Mary’s love did all it could. Note two very special things.

1. Jesus said, “She hath done what she could.” She took all she had, symbolized in her most precious and priceless possession, and sacrificed it for Jesus. She could do no more. Her heart reached out toward Jesus, and she acted sacrificially with the deepest devotion.

2. The anointing of Jesus pointed toward His burial, His death. This is exactly what Jesus said: “She did it for my burial.” Some commentators think Mary knew what she was doing, having grasped what Jesus had been saying—that He was soon to die. They feel Mary grasped the fact when others did not. But this is unlikely. The atmosphere surrounding everyone was that the kingdom was about to be set up. However, whether she knew what she was doing or not, Jesus took her act and applied it to His death. He said that her love and faith, the anointing of His body, pointed toward His death. In simple terms, Mary’s love and faith, gift and anointing *were a witness of anticipation*. She was witnessing to the Lord’s death by looking ahead to it.

Today, the believer’s love and faith, gift and anointing *are a witness of fact*. The believer is to witness to the Lord’s death by looking back to it. It is a fact: He did die for the sins of the world.

**6. (14:9) Love—Sacrifice:** Mary’s love was rewarded. Jesus honored Mary because she had so greatly honored Him.

Several things about Mary stand as an ideal for all: her deep love and faith in Jesus, her sacrificial gift, her courage in proclaiming her strong love and faith by anointing Jesus before a room full of men. Such devotion and love could not be allowed to fade from history. Jesus memorialized it, and He will memorialize the faith and love of any believer who sacrifices for Him.

## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

# #16 Couldn't You Stay Awake? -- Mark 14:27-42

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**IN BETHANY—ADORED (MARK 14:1-11)**

**IN THE UPPER ROOM—BETRAYED (MARK 14:12-26)**

**IN THE GARDEN—FORSAKEN (MARK 14:27-52)**

### **THE FAILURE OF FRIENDS**

It is a tremendous thing about Jesus that there was nothing for which he was not prepared. The opposition, the misunderstanding, the enmity of the orthodox religious people, the betrayal by one of his own inner circle, the pain and the agony of the Cross—he was prepared for them all. But perhaps what hurt him most was the failure of his friends. It is when a man is up against it that he needs his friends most, and that was exactly when Jesus' friends left him all alone and let him down. There was nothing in the whole gamut of physical pain and mental torture that Jesus did not pass through.

Jesus had supremely, more than anyone who ever lived, this quality of fortitude, this ability to remain erect no matter with what blows life assaulted him, this serenity when there was nothing but heartbreak behind and torture in front. Inevitably every now and then we find ourselves catching our breath at his sheer heroism. When Jesus foretold this tragic failure of loyalty, Peter could not believe that it would happen.

There is a lesson in the word that Jesus used for "fall away." The Greek verb is *skandalizein*, from *skandalon* or *skandalethron* which meant the bait in a trap, the stick on to which the animal was lured and which snapped the trap when the animal stepped on it. So the word *skandalizein* came to mean to entrap, or to trip up by some trick or guile. Peter was too sure. He had forgotten the traps that life can lay for the best of men. He had forgotten that the best of men can step on a slippery place and fall. He had forgotten his own human weakness and the strength of the devil's temptations. But there is one thing to be remembered about Peter—*his heart was in the right place*. Better a Peter with a flaming heart of love, even if that love did for a moment fail most shamefully, than a Judas with a cold heart of hate. Let that man condemn Peter who never broke a promise, who never was disloyal in thought or action to a pledge. Peter loved Jesus, and even if his love failed, it rose again.

Men are weak and they fail. There is one basic reason for failure conveyed by Scripture: men are not perfect. By nature, that is, by thought, act and being, men come short.

- ⇒ Their thoughts come short: their thoughts are imperfect, incomplete, never absolute nor all-embracing.
- ⇒ Their acts come short: their acts are imperfect, incomplete, never all that they can be, not in an absolute sense.
- ⇒ Their beings come short: their beings are imperfect, incomplete, corruptible and dying.

Men are weak; they do fail. They are short of perfection by nature. Scripture expresses the same thought another way. Men are flesh, beings with a nature that is basically driven by self-interest and raw urges. Men desire to please and pamper their flesh and will, body and mind. They seek to please and pamper...

- their flesh through comfort and ease, pleasure and excitement, stimulation and feelings, recognition and fame.
- their will through power and conquest, achievement and position, knowledge and development.

Note, it is not the urges and the goals that are wrong. It is man who is wrong. The urges within men are good and healthy when they are put in their proper place, that is, when they are used to the glory of God and for the benefit of man as Scripture dictates. When a man acts for the glory of God and the welfare of others, there is nothing wrong...



- with comfort and ease
- with stimulation and feelings
- with pleasure and excitement
- with recognition and fame

For example, God expects His people to possess power and to conquer (spiritually, mentally, and physically). He expects us to achieve and secure better positions, to gain more knowledge and more development, ever increasing and growing. The problem arises in that man is not able to control his flesh and will, body and mind. Too often he centers upon self, misusing and depriving other people to fulfill his own urges. His misusing and depriving other people can range all the way from minor deception to destroying life.

All this is what lies behind the present passage. Man has a weak and fallen nature that causes him to be imperfect and incomplete, corruptible and dying. Man's flesh is weak and failing; therefore, man must receive a new nature from God, a supernatural nature. He cannot trust in the arm of the flesh; he must trust in the arm of God. Man must receive a *God-given resurrected power* (nature) if he is to live a conquering and fulfilled life, a life that pleases God and makes him acceptable to God.

Peter and the disciples needed to learn this. They trusted their own flesh and their own strength. Therefore, they were destined to fail despite a determination that was as strong as it could be. Jesus needed to prepare them. They were to fail and fall away at His death because of the weakness of their flesh. But He was to arise. They would need to know they were not rejected because they had fallen away. And they would need to receive the power of the resurrection through the presence of the Holy Spirit so that they could conquer and not fail in the future.

1. Jesus showed tenderness in the face of weakness and failure (v.27).
2. Jesus encouraged returning to Him after failure (v.28).
3. Jesus tried to get men to face their failures (v.29-30).
4. Jesus provoked men to exaggerate their failure: Peter's flaming self-confidence (v.31).

**1. (14:27) Failure—Jesus Christ, Care; Tenderness—Weakness:** Jesus showed tenderness in the face of weakness and failure. Jesus knew what was coming. "All ye shall be offended [stumble, fall] because of me this night." He was referring to His death. Note three things.

1. The word "offend" (skandalizo) means to stumble, to fall. Jesus saw their *scattering* as a sin, a stumbling, a falling away from Him.
2. Jesus clearly stated that God was behind His death. The Scripture says, "I [God] will smite the shepherd" (Zech. 13:7). There was a Godly purpose for Jesus' dying, an eternal purpose.
3. Jesus said that the disciples would tragically forsake Him. Not a single one would stand up for Him. The threat of the world and the weakness of their flesh would be too much to overcome. They would fail.

Note that Jesus *predicted* their failure. In so doing, He helped them in several ways.

1. He taught them the weakness and failure of human flesh.
2. He laid the groundwork of the resurrection, the basis for receiving the new power (nature) of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit.
3. Their remembering His words would stir them to remember His tenderness and care, and it would draw them back to Him more quickly and easily.
4. Their remembering His words would stir faith in Him as the Son of God who is omniscient, knowing all things.
5. Their faith would be strengthened by understanding how the Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus and them: "I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered."

**2. (14:28) Forgiveness—Repentance—Jesus Christ, Care:** Jesus encouraged returning to Him after failure. Jesus had been blunt: they would fall. But now He was just as clear. He would go before them into Galilee. Their failure, even in so crucial an hour, would not cause Him to reject them. Despite their failure, they could return to Him, and there would be a glorious reunion.

Note: Jesus again predicted His resurrection. It was His resurrection that made both *repentance* and the glorious *reunion* possible.

**3. (14:29-30) Self-Confidence—Flesh, Weakness of:** Jesus tried to get men to face their weaknesses and failures. Only when man faces his weaknesses and failures will he work to correct them. This is the point of these two verses (and also the next three verses). Peter strongly declared his loyalty. So Jesus spelled out in detail that Peter would not only fall one time, but he would fall three times—and all three times would be in the same night. Note several points.

1. Peter was sincere and full of fervor for the Lord. He was thoroughly convinced he would not fall and fail his Lord.
2. Peter did not know the weakness of the flesh, not in great trial.
3. Peter looked at the weaknesses and failures of others, not at his own: “Although *all* shall be offended, yet will not I.” He could see how others could perhaps fall, but not himself. He loved and cared for the Lord too much.
4. Peter boasted confidence in self, in his own natural strength. *As with all men*, his natural strength failed. The need for the Lord’s strength, for the presence of the Holy Spirit to conquer self was the great lesson Peter had to learn. Very simply, he and the others had to learn to trust the strength of Jesus and not their own flesh, not if they wished to please God and be acceptable to Him.

**Thought 1.** The cock crowing was probably mentioned to trigger the warning about the weakness of the flesh in the mind of Peter and the others. For any who have the privilege of hearing the rooster crow, it is a good trigger to remind them of the weakness of their own flesh and the great need to walk with the Spirit of God.

**4. (14:31) Self-Confidence—Flesh, Weakness of:** Jesus provoked men to exaggerate their failure. The message about the weakness of human flesh provoked Peter. Jesus had to get the point across, so He stressed the fact (Mark 14:30). But note Peter’s refusal to accept the truth. In flaming self-confidence, he declared that he would not deny Jesus, even if he had to die for Him. Peter’s over-confidence was caused by three things.

1. Peter’s over-confidence was caused by being blind to the cross (Matthew 26:34). Peter just did not see the cross. It was the image of Jesus hanging upon the cross that was going to cause Peter to deny Him. Jesus had told Peter all about the cross, but he had refused to believe it. The fact that human flesh was so sinful, so depraved that God would have to crucify the flesh was just too much to grasp
2. Peter’s over-confidence was caused by not knowing himself, his own personal weaknesses, the weaknesses of his human flesh. Peter’s self-image was strong. He saw himself above *serious* sin and failure. He asserted with all the confidence in the world that he would die for Jesus before denying Him.

**Thought 1.** Note several things.

- 1) Peter was a strong believer, one of the strongest.
  - 2) Peter really failed to understand himself, his flesh. The one sin that a believer should not commit is to deny Jesus. To die for Jesus rather than to deny Him is the one thing a genuine believer would be expected to do.
  - 3) Peter believed strongly that he, his flesh, was above serious sin (cp. Romans 3:9f; Romans 7:8, 14-18; Galatians 5:19f).
  - 4) Peter failed not once, but three times, and all three times were in the same night with Christ right off to his side (Luke 22:61).
3. Peter’s over-confidence was caused by contradicting Jesus instead of listening to Him—caused by not listening to the Word of Jesus, to what Jesus was saying. Jesus was warning the disciples about the deceitfulness and weakness of the human heart. Peter and the rest just refused to accept the fact. They denied personal weaknesses; they rejected the Word of Jesus.

**Thought 1.** Note that all the disciples declared their loyalty, boasting confidence in their flesh. Peter was only the spokesman for the group.

**Thought 2.** We must listen and keep the Word of Jesus, do just what He said. It is when we fail to listen to the Words of Jesus, to the Holy Scriptures, that we fall.

- ⇒ Keeping the Words of Jesus assures eternal life.
- ⇒ Keeping the Words of Jesus assures the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- ⇒ Keeping the Words of Jesus assures fellowship with God and Christ.
- ⇒ Keeping the Words of Jesus assures our security, that we know Him.
- ⇒ Failure to keep the Words of Jesus dooms us to judgment.

On the way to the Garden of Gethsemane (“oil press”), Jesus warned the disciples that they would all forsake Him; but He then assured them that He would meet them again in Galilee after His resurrection. He even quoted Zechariah 13:7—“Smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered”—to back up His warning. Their minds and hearts were unable to receive and retain His words, for three days later, they did not believe the reports of His resurrection! And the angel had to give them a special reminder to meet Him in Galilee (Mark 16:6-7). Had they listened to His word and believed it, they would have saved themselves a great deal of anxiety; and Peter would not have denied the Lord.

The quotation from Zechariah told the disciples what to do when the Jews arrested Jesus: *scatter!* In fact, at the very time of His arrest, Jesus said, “Let these [disciples] go their way” (John 18:8). In other words, “Men, get out of here!” I have read eloquent sermons blaming Peter for “following afar off,” but they completely miss the point. He was not supposed to follow at all! Had he obeyed the Lord, he would not have attacked a man with his sword or denied the Lord three times.

Peter seemed to have a difficult time applying Jesus’ commands to himself. The other men might forsake Jesus, but Peter would stand true and, if necessary, go with Him to prison and to death. Of course, the other disciples echoed Peter’s boast; so he was not the only self-confident one in the group. In the end, all of them failed.

When about to experience great suffering, most people want to have someone with them, to help share the burden. Being perfectly human, Jesus wanted companionship as He faced the cross, and He selected Peter, James, and John, the same men who had accompanied Him to the home of Jairus (Mark 5:37) and to the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2). These three experiences parallel Philippians 3:10: “That I may know Him [Mount of Transfiguration], and the power of His resurrection [home of Jairus], and the fellowship of His sufferings [Garden of Gethsemane].”

Our Lord’s struggle in the Garden can be understood only in the light of what would happen to Him on the cross: He would be made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21) and bear the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13). It was not the physical suffering that almost overwhelmed Him with “anguish and sorrow,” but the contemplation of being forsaken by His Father (Mark 15:34). This was “the cup” that He would drink (John 18:11). According to Hebrews 5:7-9, He asked to be saved, not “from death” but *out of death*; that is, raised from the dead; and the Father granted His request.

*Abba* is an Aramaic word that means “papa” or “daddy.” It reveals the intimate relationship between our Lord and His Father. While believers today would probably not use that term in public, it does belong to us because we belong to Him (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Note that Jesus did not tell the Father what to do; He had perfect confidence in God’s will. Three times He prayed about the matter, and each time He yielded to the Father’s will in loving surrender.

What were the three disciples doing? Sleeping! And Peter had vowed that he would die with his Lord—yet he could not even watch with Him! How gently Jesus rebuked the disciples and warned them. “Watch and pray” is an admonition that is often repeated in Scripture (Neh. 4:9; Mark 13:33; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2). It means, “Be alert as you pray! Keep your spiritual eyes open, for the enemy is near!”

The third time our Lord returned to the sleeping men, He said, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come” (Mark 14:41, NASB). It was the hour of His sacrifice, when He

would die for the sins of the world. At that moment, Judas and the temple guards arrived to arrest Jesus, and Judas kissed Jesus repeatedly as the sign that He was the one to arrest. What hypocrisy!

The fact that Judas brought such a large group of armed men is evidence that neither he nor the religious leaders really understood Jesus. They thought that Jesus would try to escape, or that His followers would put up a fight, or that perhaps He might do a miracle. Our Lord's words in Mark 14:49 were proof that He was in control, for they could have arrested Him many times earlier, except that His hour had not yet come.

Peter did a foolish thing by attacking Malchus (John 18:10), for we do not fight spiritual battles with physical weapons (2 Cor. 10:3-5). He used the wrong weapon, at the wrong time, for the wrong purpose, with the wrong motive. Had Jesus not healed Malchus, Peter would have been arrested as well; and there might have been four crosses on Calvary.

At this point, the disciples forsook Jesus and fled, and so did an unknown young man who came into the Garden and witnessed the arrest. Was this John Mark? We do not know, but since the Gospel of Mark is the only one of the four Gospels that records this event, the author could well have been writing about himself. If the Upper Room was in the home of John Mark, then perhaps Judas led the soldiers there first. John Mark may have hastily put on an outer garment and followed the mob to the Garden. The soldiers may have even tried to arrest him, so he fled.

The disciples were scattered and the Servant was now alone, "and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me" (John 16:32). Soon, even the Father would forsake Him!

**(Mt 26:31-35; Mk 14:27-31; Lk 22:31-38; Jn 13:31-38)<sup>11-34</sup>**

*JN 13:31-36 -- <sup>[JN 13:31]</sup>When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.*

<sup>33</sup>*"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.*

<sup>34</sup>*"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

<sup>35</sup>*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

<sup>36</sup>*Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?"*

*Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."*

John picks up as Judas leaves the upper room. In response to Judas' departure, Jesus says, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." That includes lifting Jesus up not only in praise, but also in the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension (Jn 7:39; 12:16, 23). The world viewed the crucifixion as Jesus' demise, but Jesus views it as his defining deed. Now that Judas has left the room, this final "lifting up" can begin. The cross will be the beginning of Jesus' journey to "glorification."

God, himself, is glorified in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. For in these, Jesus' demonstrates obedience to the Father, and accomplishes the plans which the Father willed from the beginning.

Jesus addresses his band tenderly, "My children." John will later borrow that same language to address his own flock (1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). Jesus tries to prepare the Apostles for his imminent absence. This is not new information. Six months ago, at the Feast of Tabernacles, he warned the Jews of the same thing (Jn 7:33; 8:21; see also 12:35; 14:19; 16:16-20). But bad news is often hard to hear.

Jesus moves now to a new topic—a new command. There is nothing new in the command to love one another. It was imbedded in the old law (Lev 19:18). Furthermore, twice now Jesus has discussed the greatest command and verified this verse (§ 103 & 135). But the way in which Jesus loves is something entirely new. Paul puts it this way in Romans 5:7-8: "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in

this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And 1 John 3:16 (perhaps the greatest commentary on John 3:16) says: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” Indeed, Jesus declared that this is to be the definitive mark of believers, that they love others with selfless sacrifice.

Peter is still stuck back on the “going away” thing. He has been faithfully following Jesus now for three years. And they have come so close to the inauguration of the kingdom. He is not about to let it slip away now! “Where are you going, Lord?” he asks. How is Jesus going to answer that one?! It is too much for poor Peter to grasp. What will he say? “Well Pete, my first stop after crucifixion will be Hades where I’ll preach to disobedient departed souls for a couple of days (1 Pet 3:19-20). Then I’ll come back and hang out with you guys for another 40 days (Acts 1:3). After that, I’ll just kind of float up to the throne room of my Father (Mk 16:19), where I’ll sit at his right hand for an indeterminate period of time before returning to earth on a white stallion (Rev 19:11).”

There is no way Peter can understand. It is enough that Jesus says, “You cannot follow me now.” Peter will, however, follow Jesus to martyrdom. According to tradition he was crucified by Nero in A.D. 68. Peter did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord and so asked to be crucified upside down. His request was granted. Peter then followed Jesus to the throne room of God with the other martyrs (Rev 6:9-11).

*MT 26:31-33 -- <sup>31</sup>Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”<sup>NIV-11-9</sup> <sup>32</sup>But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” <sup>33</sup>Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.”*

Many Christians learn a wise distillation of Christian theology from the first line of a children's song: *Jesus loves me! this I know, For the Bible tells me so*

The Scriptures witness to the certainty of Jesus' love. What was it that persuaded the New Testament writers of his love so that they would write of it so clearly and passionately? Jesus' words, his interaction with people, his miracles, and his courage through his years of public ministry all demonstrated his love, but that love was experienced most profoundly by the disciples during the final days of Jesus' life, the time that Christians call Holy Week.

It is a tremendous thing about Jesus that there was nothing for which he was not prepared. The opposition, the misunderstanding, the enmity of the orthodox religious people, the betrayal by one of his own inner circle, the pain and the agony of the Cross—he was prepared for them all. But perhaps what hurt him most was the failure of his friends. It is when a man is up against it that he needs his friends most, and that was exactly when Jesus' friends left him all alone and let him down. There was nothing in the whole gamut of physical pain and mental torture that Jesus did not pass through.

*LK 22:31-33 -- <sup>31</sup>“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. <sup>32</sup>But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” <sup>33</sup>But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.”*

*MK 14:30-31 -- <sup>30</sup>“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice<sup>NIV-11-11</sup> you yourself will disown me three times.”*

*<sup>31</sup>But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.*

Jesus no doubt gets Peter's attention by using his old name and using it twice. It's a good thing too; Peter needs to hear what Jesus is about to say, not so much for the present moment, but for his future ministry. The word Luke uses for “asked” (v. 31) indicates that Satan had gotten what he asked for. In other words, Peter is in the hands of the enemy. This scene is intended to contrast that of Iscariot. While their

actions are not totally dissimilar, their love for Jesus is at opposite ends of the spectrum. Hence the nature of their repentance and the results thereof are polar opposites.

Satan has control of Peter only through God's permission. God will allow Peter to be sifted, but not destroyed (Jn 10:29). Like many of Satan's schemes in which he intends to harm the individual, God uses Peter's failure for purifying and perfecting him. Thus, God answers Jesus' prayer in behalf of Peter. Although Peter fails, his faith does not. His faith leads him to repentance, his repentance leads him to strength, his strength spreads throughout the Christian community and continues to this day. Peter models for most of us the hope of forgiveness, reconciliation, personal improvement through faith, love, and perseverance. We see in Peter our own pilgrimage.<sup>11-35</sup>

But Peter still objects. In essence, he says, "Jesus, you are wrong!" He claims that he will go to prison or even die for Jesus. Indeed, he is willing to. Who could deny the devotion and courage (albeit misplaced and reckless) of a man who challenges an entire Roman cohort with two swords (Lk 22:38, 50)? How could such a devoted disciple deny Jesus? It is simple really. He is willing to stake his life on a miracle working, power wielding Messiah. But when Jesus orders him to put away the sword (Mt 26:52), he took away the only resource that Peter really knew and trusted. Peter is willing to fight for his life; he is not willing to lay it down.

Jesus' prediction gets more pointed: You will deny me three times tonight, between 12 and 3 A.M. In Palestine the cocks crowed during what the Romans designated the 3rd watch (12-3 A.M.). In fact, they even nicknamed that watch "cock-crow." Peter doesn't believe it and denies Jesus' words as vehemently as he will deny his person in just a few hours. The other ten side with Peter against Jesus. They can't believe it either! But all too soon they will need no one to convince them just how accurate Jesus' prediction is. The rooster will literally crow a second time at the very instant that Peter denies Jesus for the third time, and the eyes of the two will meet at that decisive moment (Lk 22:60-61).

*LK 22:35-38 -- <sup>35</sup>Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered.*

*<sup>36</sup>He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. <sup>37</sup>It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors';<sup>NIV-11-12</sup> and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment."*

*<sup>38</sup>The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords." "That is enough," he replied.*

Jesus sent out the Twelve (Mt 10), as well as the seventy-two (Lk 10), without extra money, changes of clothes, or weapons of defense. But times have changed. We are no longer talking about local evangelistic tours with familiar neighbors. We are talking about global conquest in an atmosphere of opposition and often physical persecution. As predicted in Isaiah 53:12, Jesus will be considered an outlaw.<sup>11-36</sup> Thus his followers will also be considered renegades. These extra provisions will be essential under these new conditions.

The swords Jesus told them to bring have caused some concern. Are we talking about "holy" crusades here? No! Jesus makes it clear these swords are not to be used for aggression (cf. Jn 18:10-11). In fact, when Peter pulls his out and attacks Malchus, Jesus makes him put it away (Mt 26:52). Nor are these swords to be used to fight our way out of a pickle. The example in Acts is of non-retaliation (cf. Mt 5:39) and submission to governing authorities (cf. Rom 13:1-5). For example, Peter and John could have hailed the crowds to halt the temple guards, but they chose rather to go along quietly (cf. Acts 4:1-4 and 5:26-27). So what are these swords for? They are simply used to avert unnecessary persecution and dissuade would-be rabble rousers.

The disciples pick up on this "revolutionary" talk immediately. They inform Jesus that there are only two swords in their arsenal. Jesus quells their militant exuberance simply by saying "That's all you need."

## G. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: Bearing the Weight of Great Trial, 14:32-42

(14:32-42) **Introduction:** no man could ever understand the depth of sorrow and agony experienced by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. His experience is the picture of a terrifying struggle—a struggle against sin and the awful judgment which is to fall upon sin. It is a picture which should cause every man to bow in humble adoration and worship of the Lord Jesus, for Jesus bore the sorrow and agony of sin for every man. He bore the punishment of sin for all.

1. Picture 1: His great need for prayer and for friends to be at His side (v.32).
2. Picture 2: His heavy agony and pressure (v.33-34).
3. Picture 3: His desperate search for relief (v.35-36).
4. Picture 4: His disappointment in His friends (v.37).
5. Picture 5: His continuing ministry—even under trial (v.38).
6. Picture 6: His perseverance in prayer—despite no answer from God (v.39).
7. Picture 7: His continued disappointment in friends (v.40).
8. Picture 8: His relief of soul and spiritual strength (v.41-42).

1. (14:32) **Jesus Christ, Prayer Life—Prayer, Need for:** the first picture was the Lord's great need for prayer and for friends to be at His side. Gethsemane was apparently a beautiful garden just outside the city of Jerusalem. Gardens were not allowed behind the walls within the city because of the lack of space. Therefore, the wealthy secured beautiful spots right outside the walls and built their gardens. It was Jesus' habit to pray in Gethsemane. Judas knew exactly where to go (Mark 14:43). However, this time Jesus' need was much greater than before. He was facing the cross, unbelievable human suffering, and final separation from God. He needed not only prayer, He needed the very presence and strengthening of God, and He needed the presence and prayer of His closest companions. Note what He did.

1. He said to His disciples, "Sit ye here, while I shall pray." His words suggested that they too should begin to pray, for great trials were coming and the billows of temptation would roll in upon them ever so heavily.
2. He took Peter, James, and John and He walked farther into the garden to be more alone with these three. They were the closest to Him. And in His darkest hour, He especially needed their presence and prayer support. But note: His need was not to talk the problem over with them. He just needed their presence and prayer support *while* He talked and shared with God. He knew who had the true answer to His need. (Cp. Mark 14:34, Mark 14:37-38, Mark 14:40-41.)

**Thought 1.** Every believer should have his place for prayer, and it should be his habit to visit it, daily approaching the throne of God.

**Thought 2.** What a lesson! Too many talk their problems over with friends instead of with God. God is the One who holds the true answer to our problems. The proper order between friends and God is to seek God for the answer and friends for their prayer support.

2. (14:33-34) **Jesus Christ, Death—Gethsemane:** the second picture was the Lord's heavy agony and pressure. He "began" to experience extreme agony and pressure beyond imagination.

The words "sore amazed" (ekthambeisthai) are very strong words in the Greek. The words mean utter and extreme fright, horror, terror, bewilderment, amazement. Jesus was staggering under the "horror of great darkness," something like what fell upon Abraham, except Jesus' horror was much, much worse (Genesis 15:12).

The words "very heavy" (ademonein) are expressive, perhaps as expressive as words can be. The words mean to be heavy, troubled, distressed—extremely so. However, when looking at the root of the word (ademos), it means much more. It means *being not at home, homeless, out of one's usual surroundings*. The meaning is probably twofold.

1. Jesus suffered beyond all imagination. Imagine this: whatever suffering and whatever pain were involved in the *Perfect and Ideal Man* bearing all the sins of the world and the judgment for those sins—all of it fell upon Jesus. No one could bear any of the suffering with Jesus. He had to bear it all alone. Upon the cross He had to "*become sin for us*" (2 Cor. 5:21). In Gethsemane He was facing the loneliness

of bearing all for us. He was alone, and He experienced all the terrible emotions and distress of the solitary, the lonely, the *homeless*.

2. Jesus had to be separated from God for the first time in His eternal existence. His *home*, His place, His very being was with God throughout all eternity. In Gethsemane Jesus was facing the separation from God which He was shortly to experience upon the cross. He was to be *cut off from God*, left all alone to bear the sins and judgment of men. He again felt the terrible emotions and distress of being left all alone, cut off from God, of being left *homeless*.

The terror (amazement) and heaviness were so painful they almost killed Him. And He shared this fact with the disciples: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto *death*." The sorrow and weight were life-threatening. The pressure was swelling up in Him to such a degree it was about to explode. He began to sweat great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). God had to send an angel to save His life and to strengthen Him.

Note that Jesus told the three disciples to "watch," that is, to be praying. They knew a critical hour was at hand. They felt the pressure in the very atmosphere, and He had just shared His own great need. He needed and wanted their presence and prayer support.

**3. (14:35-36) Jesus Christ, Death:** the third picture was the Lord's desperate search for relief. In confronting the cross (death) Jesus did all He could: He turned to God. Five things are said in these two verses.

1. Jesus got all alone and prostrated Himself before God. Luke says He withdrew "about a stone's cast" from the three apostles. Two significant points. (a) He needed to be alone with God. He was desperate. (b) He fell on His face. The pressure and weight were unbearable.

2. Jesus' prayed that the hour of the cross "might pass from Him." The term "the hour" or "My hour" is a constant symbol of His death. He was definitely praying for God to choose another way to secure the redemption of the world.

3. Jesus prayed "Abba, Father." He addressed God as "Father." This was what a small child called his father from day to day. It was the address of a child's love and dependency. The child knew that His father would hear and turn to him when he called "Father." But note also the words, "O my Father." Jesus was broken, weighed down, fallen on His face, prostrated on the ground. In desperation He cried out "O my Father." Just like a child, He cried out to His Father in childlike brokenness and dependency, knowing that His Father would hear and turn to help Him.

4. Jesus said, "All things are possible unto thee [God]." Why then did God not choose another way? As simply stated as possible...

- God does only what He has willed to do; and He wills only what His love and righteousness tell Him to will. God's love and righteousness led Him to demonstrate His love and righteousness by giving His Son to die for the sins of men. The cross demonstrated in the very best way possible that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" to bear the judgment of sin for every man. Therefore, God's will was subject to His love and righteousness.

In Gethsemane Jesus knew this, but He struggled in His flesh, in His humanity, for God to choose another way. The pressure of it all, of being cut off from His Father, was just too heavy. He cried out in desperation for God to deliver Him from the terrible load. He knew that God would not, yet He cried for God to do it; He cried *expressing* His great dependence and love for God. He loved His Father so much, He did not want to be separated from Him. He wanted His Father to know that, so He pleaded for deliverance by another way, *expressing* His love and dependence, knowing that God had determined the path of the cross. He was willing to bear it, to subject Himself to God's eternal will and love and righteousness.

5. Jesus asked God to remove the cup from Him. The human nature and will of Jesus are clearly seen in this request. He was as much man as any man is. Therefore, He begged God to choose another way other than the cup if possible. The experience of being separated from God upon the cross was too much to bear.

6. The divine nature and will of Jesus are also clearly seen in this request. Note the Lord's words: "Let this cup pass from me: nevertheless..." The first act, the first impulse and struggle and movement of His will had come from His flesh: to escape the cup of separation from God. But immediately, the



second act, the second impulse and struggle and movement of His will came from His divine nature: to do not as He willed, but as God willed.

**Thought 1.** Christ's surrender to do God's perfect will in the Garden of Gethsemane was critical.

- ⇒ It was through His surrender that He was made perfect and stood before God as the Ideal, Perfect Man.
- ⇒ It was through His surrender to be the Ideal, Perfect Man that His righteousness was able to stand for every man.
- ⇒ It was through His surrender to be the Ideal, Perfect Man that He was able to bear the cup of God's wrath against sin *for every man*.
- ⇒ It was through His surrender to be the Ideal, Perfect Man that His sacrifice and sufferings were able to stand for every man.

**4. (14:37) Flesh, Weakness of—Dedication, Lack of—Prayer, Weakness in:** the fourth picture was the Lord's disappointment in His friends. The Lord returned to the three disciples and found them asleep.

1. Jesus spoke to all three, but He addressed Peter in particular. Peter was the one who had spoken up just an hour or two earlier declaring that he would stand with Jesus through anything. Yet he was unwilling to stand with Jesus in prayer. Jesus was speaking to Him very bluntly.
2. Jesus did not address Peter by his new name, Peter, but by his old name, Simon. The flesh had gotten the best of Peter, and Jesus was letting Peter know it.
3. Jesus had not asked Peter and the disciples to watch and pray all night. He had asked only for one hour of prayer. This is significant in seeing their failure and weakness.

**5. (14:38) Jesus Christ, Work—Ministry:** the fifth picture was the Lord's continuing ministry even under trial. He was pressured so heavily He was at the point of exploding. Yet He was concerned over the needs of the disciples. They were going to face great temptation and He knew it. He wanted them to know it. They must watch and pray, be prepared. Despite His own need in this hour, He ministered all He could to them, helping them and trying to awaken them to watch and pray as never before.

**6. (14:39) Prayer, Perseverance in:** the sixth picture was the Lord's perseverance in prayer, despite no answer from God. Note that Jesus had not yet found relief from God, yet He was not discouraged. He did not turn away from God; He went back, got alone, and sought God again. "And [He even] spoke the same words." He zeroed in on the same request: that the cup might pass from Him. He sought, wrestled, and agonized with God. He persevered, giving every indication that He was not going to quit praying until God heard and met His need.

**7. (14:40) Flesh, Weakness of—Dedication, Lack of:** the seventh picture was the Lord's continued disappointment in His friends. Some commentators excuse the disciples, saying their bodies and eyes were so heavy with the pressure of the hour, they just could not stay awake. But their failure to watch and pray was just inexcusable and greatly disappointing to the Lord. Even after a rebuke (Mark 14:37) they would not struggle to stand with the Lord. They were guilty; they knew not "what to answer Him."

**8. (14:41-42) Jesus Christ, Submission:** the eighth picture was the Lord's relief of soul and spiritual strength.

1. There were His words, the evidence of great release: "Sleep on now, and take your *rest*." Jesus' agony, His desperate need for friends to "watch" with Him was now gone (Mark 14:34, 38). God had given Him great relief of soul. The very tone of His words to His disciples revealed a calmness of spirit, a peace of mind, a relief of the physical and emotional strain that was about to kill Him. God had met His need in a most wonderful way.
2. There were His words, the evidence of great courage: "It is enough, the hour is come; behold, the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners." Note three things.
  - a. There was no shrinking now, no agony, no desperation. Jesus was relieved and strengthened, ready to face the sufferings necessary to secure the salvation of man.

- b. Jesus said He was being “betrayed into the hands of sinners.” All those taking part in His death were “sinners.” His death was the most heinous crime of history; for He, the Son of Man, the Ideal and Perfect Man, was killed by men. But there is more here: He died for the sins of the world. It was every man’s sins that caused Him to be crucified. Every sin is an act of rebellion, of simply saying *No* to God (Romans 3:23). Therefore every man is guilty of putting Christ to death. There is a sense in which every sin, every act of rebellion crucifies “the Son of God afresh, and put[s] Him to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:6).
- c. Jesus’ relief of soul and infusion of strength did not come from resigning Himself to death. Rather, He relinquished His will in favor of the Father’s will. He deliberately gave up His own will and actively pursued the Father’s will. This was the victory He fought to gain in Gethsemane. It should also be said that His submission was voluntary—not forced. He had a choice even up until His death upon the cross.

**Certain things are clear about Jesus in this passage.**

(i) He did not want to die. He was thirty-three and no one wants to die with life just opening on to the best of the years. He had done so little and there was a world waiting to be saved. He knew what crucifixion was like and he shuddered away from it. He had to compel himself to go on—just as we have so often to do.

(ii) He did not fully understand why this had to be. He only knew beyond a doubt that this was the will of God and that he must go on. Jesus, too, had to make the great venture of faith, he had to accept—as we so often have to do—what he could not understand.

(iii) He submitted to the will of God. *Abba* is the Aramaic for *my father*. It is that one word which made all the difference. Jesus was not submitting to a God who made a cynical sport of men. Hardy finishes his novel *Tess*, after telling of her tragic life, with the terrible sentence, “The President of the Immortals had finished his sport with Tess.” But Jesus was not submitting to a God who was an iron fate.

“But helpless pieces of the game he plays, Upon this chequer board of nights and days,  
Hither and thither moves and checks and slays— And one by one back in the closet lays.”

God was not like that. Even in this terrible hour, when he was making this terrible demand, God was *father*. When Richard Cameron, the covenanter, was killed, his head and hands were cut off by one Murray and taken to Edinburgh. “His father being in prison for the same cause, the enemy carried them to him, to add grief unto his former sorrow, and inquired if he knew them. Taking his son’s head and hands, which were very fair (being a man of a fair complexion like himself) he kissed them and said, ‘I know them—I know them. They are my son’s—my own dear son’s. It is the Lord. Good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me nor mine, but hath made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days.’” If we can call God *father* everything becomes bearable. Time and again we will not understand, but always we will be certain that “The Father’s hand will never cause his child a needless tear.” That is what Jesus knew. That is why he could go on—and it can be so with us.

We must note how the passage ends. The traitor and his gang had arrived. What was Jesus’ reaction? Not to run away, although even yet, in the night, it would have been easy to escape. His reaction was *to face them*. To the end he would neither turn aside nor turn back.

*MT 26:30 WITH JN 18:1; LK 22:39 --* <sup>30</sup>*When [he had finished praying [and]<sup>JN</sup>] they had sung a hymn, they went out [and crossed the Kidron Valley<sup>JN</sup>] to the Mount of Olives [as usual.<sup>LK</sup>]*

*MT 26:36-38 WITH JN 18:1; LK 22:40; MK 14:33 --* <sup>36</sup>*Then Jesus went with his disciples to [an olive grove,<sup>JN</sup>] a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray. [[You p]ray that you will not fall into temptation.<sup>LK</sup>”* <sup>37</sup>*He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee [James and John,<sup>MK</sup>] along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. <sup>38</sup>Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”*

This is a passage we almost fear to read, for it seems to intrude into the private agony of Jesus.

To have stayed in the upper room would have been dangerous. With the authorities on the watch for him, and with Judas bent on treachery, the upper room might have been raided at any time. But Jesus had another place to which to go. The fact that Judas knew to look for him in Gethsemane shows that Jesus was in the habit of going there. In Jerusalem itself there were no gardens. The city was too crowded, and there was a strange law that the city's sacred soil might not be polluted with manure for the gardens. But some of the rich people possessed private gardens out on the Mount of Olives where they took their rest. Jesus must have had some wealthy friend who gave him the privilege of using his garden at night.

When Jesus went to Gethsemane there were two things he sorely desired. He wanted *human fellowship* and he wanted *God's fellowship*. "It is not good that the man should be alone," God said in the beginning. (*Genesis 2:18*.) In time of trouble we want someone with us. We do not necessarily want him to do anything. We do not necessarily even want to talk to him or have him talk to us. We only want him there. Jesus was like that. It was strange that men who so short a time before had been protesting that they would die for him, could not stay awake for him one single hour. But none can blame them, for the excitement and the tension had drained their strength and their resistance.

This passage begins with the remembrance of a hymn. Jesus and his disciples had just celebrated the Passover meal, which traditionally ended with the singing of praises or *hallel* (from which we get the word hallelujah). This time, however, the hymn was a benediction to the end of an era. God himself had visited the planet in all his beauty and with all his love, but the visit was nearing its end.

The more I read the story of the Last Supper, the more poignant it becomes to me. What a tender and beautiful time it must have been--good friends sitting together, talking and praying, experiencing the common fellowship of that table, sharing memories and hopes of being together. A great deal happened in that room that night. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as they entered the room. He urged them to be humble in their service to one another. He stretched out his hand to his betrayer, seated at the table with him. He spoke those remarkable words, "This is my body This is my blood." Never before had Jesus offered himself in such an intimate and profound way

The Passover meal concludes with Jesus' "High Priestly" prayer and the traditional singing of one of the Hallel Psalms (likely Ps 136 or else Ps 115-118 after the third cup). The Jesus band makes their way through the streets of Jerusalem deep into the night. But there is still much activity in the city. Many homes send out couriers to gather needed supplies for the meal. Many go out to offer gifts to the poor. Some head to the temple, which is reopened at midnight to prepare for the massive number of sacrifices on the following holy day. Jesus leads his disciples out of the city through the eastern temple gate. They cross over the brook Kidron. As they ascend the Mt. of Olives they come upon an enclosed wooded area called Gethsemane (meaning "oil-press"). It was apparently a private olive grove that Jesus has permission to frequent.

He leaves eight of the Apostles at the gate of the garden.<sup>11-54</sup> He tells them to pray so they will not fall into temptation (Lk 22:40). Then he and the inner three (Peter, James and John) go to the interior of the grove. With his closest friends, and a keen awareness of his impending passion, Jesus is stricken with grief. The English translation hardly does justice to the seriousness of his suffering. Between Matthew and Mark there are three different words used to describe Jesus' inner turmoil.<sup>11-55</sup> His sorrow is so strong he feels like he's about to die. Jesus' suffering begins in Gethsemane, not Golgotha. Two days ago Jesus mentioned how grief-stricken he was (Jn 12:27-36). Yet it is here that he begins to realize the weight of guilt from the sins of the world and the imminent absence of his Father (2 Cor 5:21).

These are new feelings. From time eternal, Jesus has never felt guilt or abandonment. He asks his three best friends to keep watch. They are not a military sentry to warn Jesus when the enemy is coming. They

are to watch by praying, guarding themselves (Lk 22:40; Mt 26:40-41), and joining Jesus in spiritual warfare (Eph 6:17-18).

*Mk 14:35-36 WITH LK 22:41; MT 26:39 -- <sup>35</sup>Going a little farther [about a stone's throw beyond them,<sup>LK</sup>] he [knelt down and<sup>LK</sup>] fell [with his face<sup>MT</sup>] to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. <sup>36</sup>“Abba,<sup>NIV-11-23</sup> Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will.”*

*LK 23:43-44 -- <sup>43</sup>An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. <sup>44</sup>And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.<sup>NIV-11-24</sup>*

After Jesus exhorts the inner three to pray, he walks about a “stone’s throw away.” How far that is, exactly, depends on the size of the stone and one’s biceps. This much seems clear, it is out of earshot yet still within eyesight. There Jesus drops to his knees (Luke) and then falls on his face (Matthew) under the full moon of Passover. In his pain, Jesus addresses his Father with intimacy. The word “Abba” is an Aramaic term of endearment that the Jews generally felt too “familiar” to use in reference to God. He then prays these words: “Take this cup from me.” Look out! If Jesus doesn’t drink this cup of suffering, our eternal destinies are left hanging precariously in the balance. Woe to us had Jesus not finished the prayer: “Yet not what I will but what you will.” Jesus doesn’t have to die—there is no moral imperative calling for his execution. Furthermore, there was no earthly power forcing him to do it (Jn 10:18). He dies by choice.

Why does Jesus ask to avoid the cross? Does that not make him weaker than other martyrs who marched resiliently to their executions with never so much as a grimace? This question has led some to say that the cup which Jesus was speaking of was not the cross but a premature death in Gethsemane. He was, after all, “sorrowful unto death” (Mt 26:38). Furthermore, his suffering led to some kind of bloody sweat (Lk 22:44), which could have been life-threatening. So it is suggested that Jesus prays for God to spare his life for another fifteen hours or so.<sup>11-56</sup>

A better explanation seems to follow this line of reasoning: First, it is not cowardice to want to avoid death or to look for another way out. Bravery is defined by a person’s actions, not his emotions. Second, it is not fair to compare Jesus’ death with martyrdom. Martyrs die for a cause; Jesus died for the sins of the world. He *became* sin on the cross (2 Cor 5:21) and took in his own body the sins of the world (1 Pet 2:24). What troubled Jesus was not the physical torture of a martyr, but the spiritual torment of the God-man experiencing for the first time both the guilt of humanity and separation from the Father. There is no way that we can understand how far Jesus had to condescend in order to do that. Consequently we are unable to measure the depths of his spiritual torture. Carson (p. 543) says, “The pericope must be interpreted in light of Mt 1:21 and 20:28... Small wonder that the NT writers make much of Jesus’ unique and redemptive death (Rom 3:21-26; 4:25; 5:6, 9; 1 Cor 1:23; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:18; 4:15; 5:7-9; 1 Pet 2:24).”

Furthermore, the “cup” was not merely suffering. It was a common OT symbol of the wrath of God (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:22; Jer 25:15-16; Lam 4:21; Hab 2:16). Jesus is not merely looking back to Matthew 20:22-23, but looking forward to Matthew 27:46 when God’s anger against sin would fall full-force on him. Finally, had Jesus marched like a stoic through the passion we could have little hope of him understanding our human frailty. It is, paradoxically, his humanity that draws us to his divinity. The writer of Hebrews recalls the weight of this prayer to Jesus (Heb 5:7).

A second question arises from Jesus’ prayer: “Was there another way?” Jesus uses a first class conditional clause in Matthew “If it is possible...” This speaks of a real possibility, at least in Jesus’ mind (although cf. Mt 26:42). In Mark it is even more bold—“Everything is possible with you.” Theoretically there may have been another way to save humanity without a vicarious death. But that is mere speculation. God’s sovereign will had determined that his own Son would die for the sins of the world. Therefore, in reality, there was no other choice. Jesus was determined to carry out his Father’s will no matter how unpleasant or painful the consequences.

While it is not unnatural for Dr. Luke to mention either the angel or the physical condition of Jesus (bloody-sweat), the text of Luke 22:43-44 has weak textual support. In other words, it is not found in the oldest and best manuscripts. Since it is more likely that this information would be later added than purposefully dropped, we conclude that it was probably not penned by Luke but added later, based on a reliable oral tradition.<sup>11-57</sup> So we accept it as true, but not as a part of the original text. It tells us that in the midst of Jesus' suffering an angel came and ministered to him. That would be the first time since his wilderness temptation three years earlier (Mt 4:11). As a result of his suffering, Jesus experienced what Luke describes as "sweat like drops of blood." The most likely medical explanation for this is hematomidrosis. It is a condition where the capillaries of the forehead actually burst due to stress.<sup>11-58</sup> This certainly describes accurately Jesus' condition.

At the end of their time together, Jesus prayed what is perhaps the most remarkable prayer in the Bible (recorded in chapter 17 of John's gospel). Knowing that he could no longer protect his disciples, he commended them into the hands of God. It was an extraordinary evening, and as it ended, they sang a benediction and walked out into the darkness.

Continuing at verse 27, we read that Jesus told them what would happen in the hours ahead. As they walked, Jesus reminded them what the prophet Zechariah had said. He wanted them to know that a time was coming very soon when he would be destroyed and they would disperse in fear and confusion like sheep without a shepherd.

Peter's response is typical of Peter. He is ready to draw his sword to save Jesus from whatever terrible thing is about to happen. "The others may be a bunch of weak sheep, but not me, Lord. We will fight this together." Peter saw the other disciples as sheep ready to scatter, but he saw himself as a shepherd ready to defend the flock and even Jesus himself.

Shepherds in Israel were tough guys. We tend to think of them as serene pastoral types, playing harps and watching their fluffy sheep graze, but in fact, shepherds spent most of their time tending their animals in harsh wilderness and protecting them against predators and other threats. One of the best descriptions of this aspect of shepherding is found in 1 Samuel 17:34-36, where David tells Saul that he wants to fight Goliath. "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God."

We do well to consider context in the book of Zechariah from which this quote is taken. First, look at Jesus' words in verse 27: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." Zechariah 13:7 actually says, "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!" declares the LORD Almighty. 'Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.'" It sounds as if a mysterious sword will awaken to strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep. Jesus added his insight to show that it is God himself who says, "I, God, will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." The reason there is no defense for the shepherd is because the one who will destroy him is his own Father. The shepherd became the sin-bearer for our sakes and had to die. Justice requires a payment for sin, and the God of heaven calls for it to be paid.

Then, in verse 28, Jesus tells them that a time is coming when they will return to Galilee and he will go before them. Once again we see a picture of the shepherd before his sheep. Though Peter only hears the word of the coming tragedy and wants to fight it off, Jesus declares the end of the story is life, not death.

*MT 26:40-46 WITH LK 22:45-46; MK 14:40-41 -- <sup>40</sup>Then [[w]hen he rose from prayer<sup>LK</sup>] he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping, [exhausted from sorrow.<sup>LK</sup>] "[Why are you sleeping?<sup>LK</sup>] **Could***

**you men not keep watch with me for one hour?** he asked Peter. <sup>41</sup>“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

<sup>42</sup>He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

<sup>43</sup>When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. [They did not know what to say to him.<sup>MK</sup>] <sup>44</sup>So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

<sup>45</sup>Then he returned [the third time<sup>MK</sup>] to the disciples and said to them, **“Are you still sleeping and resting?”** [Enough!<sup>MK</sup>] Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

<sup>46</sup>Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

We must note how the passage ends. The traitor and his gang had arrived. What was Jesus' reaction? Not to run away, although even yet, in the night, it would have been easy to escape. His reaction was *to face them*. To the end he would neither turn aside nor turn back.

Now let's move on to verse 32. They arrived at Gethsemane, and the Lord told the disciples to sit together while he prayed. Moving away from the others, and accompanied by Peter, James, and John, Jesus "began to be deeply distressed and troubled." Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases it this way: "He plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony."(2) J.B. Phillips says, "He began to be horror stricken and desperately depressed."(3) Suffering terrible sorrow and anxiety, he asked the three to keep watch. There was no requirement of courage at this point. He did not ask them to defend him or do anything heroic. He merely asked them to wait, to stand and keep vigil with him. Peter had said, "I will be a hero for your sake." The Lord replied, "No, you won't, but could you just love me enough to keep vigil? What I must go through now will be very hard, and I need someone who cares enough to be there for me."

Jesus then moved away from the three and began to pray. When he returned and found them sleeping, he said, "Simon, are you asleep? Couldn't you stay awake for even an hour?" Twice again Jesus went away to pray, and twice again he returned to find his friends asleep. He had asked them to keep a vigil with him, and they had failed at even this simple assignment.

Jesus wanted his friends to stand watch. They heard him praying. They knew the difficulty he was in. They had never before seen him so burdened, so desperately in need, yet they fell asleep.

Consider verse 36. Only Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus addressed his Father as Papa. The Aramaic word, *Abba*, is a tender word of trust and nearness. There is formal language to indicate "father" as someone who is powerful and capable and demanding, but Jesus' use of *Abba* shows him drawing near to the one who could hold him in his arms and make everything okay. "You can do anything. You can take this cup from me. Will you?" This is the ancient struggle of believing people: "How can God be all-loving and all-powerful, yet allow me to suffer? He must not really love me after all. Maybe it is all a sham." This same struggle is at the heart of Jesus' prayer. Luke 22:43 tells us that an angel came to strengthen him, but we read nothing of a response from the Father. God the Father turned his back on the sin bearer. "Papa, you can do anything. Won't you please take this cup from me?" There is no answer. As he ends his prayer, Jesus says. "Not what I want, but what you want." Obediently, he chose to endure what was necessary in order that we might be saved.

I'd like to make a couple of points about the choice Jesus made. First, it may well have been the near and obvious weakness of his disciples, their desperate need for a Savior, that strengthened his resolve to go to the cross. He endured the cross because of his love for them. Therein lies the wisdom of the children's song: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." This is the heart of the biblical message. The Bible tells us of Jesus' great love because the gospel writers saw his great love for them that night. They wrote what they knew so that we could know the same thing. In their inadequacy and failure and selfish cowardice, Jesus loved them enough to die for them just as he loves us enough to die for us.

The other point is that Jesus wanted desperately to avoid the cross. This is important because it is easy to think that Jesus never sinned because he just never particularly wanted to. Jesus' struggle with obedience at Gethsemane helps us to better understand Hebrews 4:14-15, which says that Jesus is a faithful high priest because he knows what we are going through. There is no temptation unfamiliar to him. He personally experienced the profound desire to disobey God; yet he overcame that desire, and that is why he is able to come to our aid when we are tempted.

Finally, the struggle was over. Jesus had wrestled with God, and he had chosen to obey. The words in verse 41 are filled with love and sorrow: "Are you still sleeping?" The hour had come, the betrayer had arrived, and there was no hope for weak disciples aside from a savior who would provide new righteousness for them. Without Christ's sacrifice, they could never be different, and neither can we.

The disciples were eyewitnesses to the great love of Christ. Eventually they would understand much more about him--that he died not just for them but for the whole world, that the plan was far bigger than they could comprehend when they were in the Garden of Gethsemane, that this one, who had been in the garden with them was, in fact, the eternal, divine Son of God--and they would go on to tell the world of incarnation, Emmanuel, "God with us." John would write that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Some day he would write these things about the Jesus he followed, but he didn't know them on that night in the garden.

Peter would write in 1 Peter of salvation and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He would realize that this battle at Gethsemane and on the cross was an enormous victory over the terrible forces of wickedness and that, in the resurrection, Jesus would claim his place at the right hand of God. Some day Peter would know these things, but he didn't know them on that night in the garden. What he and John and the other disciples did know is that Jesus saw them at their worst and loved them anyway. However often they failed him, he would never fail them. And because they personally experienced Jesus' great love and wrote about it, we can read their words and say, "Jesus loves me! this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

*Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

## #17 Why Have You Forsaken Me? -- Mark 15:20-41

*MK 15:34-35 -- <sup>IMK 15:134</sup>And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

### PSALM 22

**SUBJECT**—This is beyond all others THE PSALM OF THE CROSS. It may have been actually repeated word by word by our Lord when hanging on the tree; it would be too bold to say that it was so, but even a casual reader may see that it might have been. It begins with, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and ends, according to some, in the original with "It is finished." For plaintive expressions uprising, from unutterable depths of woe we may say of this Psalm, "there is none like it." It is the photograph of our Lord's saddest hours, the record of his dying words, the lachrymatory of his last tears, the memorial of his expiring joys.

**Whole Psalm**—The volume entitled "Christ on the Cross," by Rev. J. Stevenson, has a sermon upon every verse. We give the headings, they are suggestive.

Verse 1. The Cry.

2. The Complaint.

3. The Acknowledgment.

4–6. The Contrast.

6. The Reproach.

7. The Mockery.

8. The Taunt.

9, 10. The Appeal.

11. The Entreaty.

12, 13. The Assault.

14. The Faintness.

15. The Exhaustion.

16. The Piercing.

17. The Emaciation.

17. The Insulting Gaze.

18. The Partition of the Garments and Casting Lots.

19–21. The Importunity.

21. The Deliverance.

22. The Gratitude.

23. The Invitation.

24. The Testimony.

25. The Vow.

26. The Satisfaction of the Meek; the Seekers of the Lord praising Him; the Eternal Life.

27. The Conversion of the World.

28. The Enthronement.

29. The Author of the Faith.

30. The Seed.

31. The Everlasting Theme and Occupation. The Finish of the Faith.

**Verse 1**—The Saviour's dying cry.

**Verse 2**—*Unanswered prayer.* Enquire the reasons for it; encourage our hope concerning it; urge to continuance in importunity.

**Verse 3**—Whatever God may do, we must settle it in our minds that he is holy and to be praised.

**Verse 4**—God's faithfulness in past ages a plea for the present.

**Verses 4, 5**—Ancient saints.

I. Their life. "*They trusted.*"

II. Their practice. "*They cried.*"

III. Their experience. "*Were not confounded.*"



IV. Their voice to us.

**Verses 6–18**—Full of striking sentences upon our Lord’s sufferings.

**Verse 11**—A saint’s troubles, his arguments in prayer.

**Verse 20**—“*My darling.*” A man’s soul to be very dear to him.

**Verse 21 (first clause)**—“*Lion’s mouth.*” Men of cruelty. The devil. Sin. Death. Hell.

**Verse 22**—Christ as a brother, a preacher, and a precentor.

**Verse 22**—A sweet subject, a glorious preacher, a loving relationship, a heavenly exercise.

**Verse 23**—A *threefold duty*, “praise him;.... glorify him;.... fear him;” *towards one object*, “the Lord;” *for three characters*, “ye that fear him, seed of o Jacob, seed of Israel,” *which are but one person.*

**Verse 23**—Glory to God the fruit of the tree on which Jesus died.

**Verse 24**—A consoling fact in history attested by universal experience.

**Verse 24 (first clause)**—A common fear dispelled.

**Verse 25**—Public praise.

I. A delightful exercise—“praise.”

II. A personal participation—“My praise.”

III. A fitting object—“of thee.”

IV. A special source—“from thee.”

V. An appropriate place—“in the great congregation.”

**Verse 25 (second clause)**—Vows. What vows to make, when and how to make them, and the importance of paying them.

**Verse 26**—*Spiritual feasting.* The guests, the food, the host, and the satisfaction.

**Verse 26 (second clause)**—*Seekers who shall be singers,* Who they are? What they shall do? When? and what is the reason for expecting that they shall?

**Verse 27 (last clause)**—*Life everlasting.* What lives? Source of life. Manner of life. Why for ever? What occupation? What comfort to be derived from it?

**Verse**—Nature of true conversion, and extent of it under the reign of the Messiah.—*Andrew Fuller.*

**Verse 27**—The universal triumph of Christianity certain.

**Verse 27**—The order of conversion. See the Exposition.

**Verse 28**—The empire of the Kings of kings as it is, and as it shall be.

**Verse 29**—Grace for the rich, grace for the poor, but all lost without it.

**Verse 29 (last clause)**—A weighty text upon the vanity of self-confidence.

**Verse 30**—The perpetuity of the church.

**Verse 30 (last clause)**—Church history, the marrow of all history.

**Verse 31**—Future prospects for the church.

I. Conversions certain.

II. Preachers promised.

III. Succeeding generations blest.

IV. Gospel published.

V. Christ exalted.

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**(Mt 27:45-50; Mk 15:33-37; Lk 23:44-46; Jn 19:28-30)**

*Mk 15:33 -- <sup>[MK 15:33]</sup>At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.*

*Lk 23:45 -- <sup>[LK 23:45]</sup>For the sun stopped shining.*

*Mk 15:34-35 -- <sup>[MK 15:34]</sup>And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>NIV-12-14</sup>*

<sup>35</sup>*When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.”*

At noon, a miraculous darkness came over the land, and all creation sympathized with the Creator as He suffered. This was indeed a miracle and not some natural phenomenon, such as a sand storm or an eclipse. It would not be possible to have an eclipse during full moon at Passover. By means of this darkness, God was saying something to the people.

For one thing, the Jews would certainly think about the first Passover. The ninth plague in Egypt was a three-day darkness, followed by the last plague, the death of the firstborn (Ex. 10:22-11:9). The darkness

at Calvary was an announcement that God's Firstborn and Beloved Son, the Lamb of God, was giving His life for the sins of the world. It was also an announcement that judgment was coming and men had better be prepared.

Our Lord made seven statements from the cross, three of them before the darkness came: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34); "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43); and "Woman, behold thy son! . . . Behold thy mother!" (John 19:26-27) When the darkness came, there was silence on His cross, for it was then that He was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

At the ninth hour, Jesus expressed the agony of His soul when He cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (see Ps. 22:1) The darkness symbolized the judgment Jesus experienced when the Father forsook Him. As was so often the case, the people did not understand His words; they thought He was calling for Elijah the prophet. There was not only darkness over the land, but there was darkness in the minds and hearts of the people (2 Cor. 4:3-6; John 3:16-21; 12:35-41).

Then Jesus said, "I thirst" (John 19:28), and the kind act of the soldier in giving Jesus a sip of vinegar (see Ps. 69:21) assisted Him in uttering two more wonderful statements: "It is finished!" (John 19:30) and "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46; and see Ps. 31:5). Jesus was not murdered; He willingly laid down His life for us (John 10:11, 15, 17-18). He was not a martyr; He was a willing sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Between noon and 3 P.M. darkness covers Judea. This is the first of three phenomena that accompany Jesus' death. It is a supernatural sign of judgment (cf. Amos 8:9-10) which cannot adequately be explained naturalistically. For example, an eclipse doesn't last for three hours nor does it occur during the full moon of Passover. A sirocco (a desert windstorm) would hardly cover the land in complete darkness as if "the sun stopped shining."<sup>12-65</sup> No, the hand of God shrouded the land.

After only six hours on the cross, Jesus dies. He cries out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi..." This fourth saying from the cross is perhaps the most theologically significant and perhaps too deep for us to fully appreciate. But it seems to point in at least two directions.

First, Jesus is calling us back to Psalm 22:1 by quoting it verbatim. This passage is an incredibly clear prediction of Jesus' crucifixion. It serves as a poignant reminder that this is God's plan and it is still under his control no matter what it looks like on the surface. What is most striking about this Psalm, however, is that it was written about 1000 B.C., a full 600 years before crucifixion was in vogue. We are also impressed that the Psalm of the Good Shepherd (Ps 23) is prefaced by the Psalm of God's Sacrificial Lamb (Ps 22).

Secondly, Jesus is not merely quoting Psalm 22:1; he is describing his present and insufferable separation from his Heavenly Father. From eternity past, Jesus has never known what it was like to be alienated from God's presence. While we want to studiously avoid the error of the Gnostics and docetics who believed that Jesus ceased to be God in this moment, we do affirm that the Father, at some level, turns his back on Jesus as he becomes the embodiment of sin (2 Cor 5:21; cf. Rom 3:26; Gal 3:13).

Jesus is forsaken by God, that is, he is abandoned, left without God's resources or intervention, to suffer and die alone. But this word pops up again in Acts 2:27, 31 to describe how God did NOT abandon Jesus in the grave. God's abandonment may be harsh, but it is only temporary. Even Psalm 22 ends with a note of victory. After all, behind the cross is an empty tomb.

Here comes the last scene of all, a scene so terrible that the sky was unnaturally darkened and it seemed that even nature could not bear to look upon what was happening. Let us look at the various people in this scene.

(i) There was Jesus. Two things Jesus said.

(a) He uttered the terrible cry, "My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?" There is a mystery behind that cry which we cannot penetrate. Maybe it was like this, Jesus had taken this life of ours upon him. He had done our work and faced our temptations and borne our trials. He had suffered all that life could bring. He had known the failure of friends, the hatred of foes, the malice of enemies. He had known the most searing pain that life could offer. Up to this moment Jesus had gone through every experience of life *except one—he had never known the consequence of sin*. Now if there is one thing sin does, it separates us from God. It puts between us and God a barrier like an unscalable wall. That was the one human experience through which Jesus had never passed, because he was without sin.

It may be that at this moment that experience came upon him—not because he had sinned, but because in order to be identified completely with our humanity he had to go through it. In this terrible, grim, bleak moment Jesus really and truly identified himself with the sin of man. Here we have the divine paradox—Jesus knew what it was to be a sinner. And this experience must have been doubly agonizing for Jesus, because he had never known what it was to be separated by this barrier from God.

That is why he can understand our situation so well. That is why we need never fear to go to him when sin cuts us off from God. Because he has gone through it, he can help others who are going through it. There is no depth of human experience which Christ has not plumbed.

(b) There was the great shout. Both *Matthew (27:50)* and *Luke (23:46)* tell of it. John does not mention the shout but he tells us that Jesus died having said, "It is finished." (*John 19:30*.) In the original that would be one word; and *that one word was the great shout*. "Finished!" Jesus died with the cry of triumph on his lips, his task accomplished, his work completed, his victory won. After the terrible dark there came the light again, and he went home to God a victor triumphant.

(ii) There was the bystander who wished to see if Elijah would come. He had a kind of morbid curiosity in the face of the Cross. The whole terrible scene did not move him to awe or reverence or even pity. He wanted to experiment while Jesus died.

(iii) There was the centurion. A hard-bitten Roman soldier, he was the equivalent of a regimental sergeant-major. He had fought in many a campaign and he had seen many a man die. But he had never seen a man die like this and he was sure that Jesus was the Son of God. If Jesus had lived on and taught and healed he might have attracted many, but it is the Cross which speaks straight to the hearts of men.

(iv) There were the women in the distance. They were bewildered, heart-broken, drenched in sorrow—but *they were there*. They loved so much that they could not leave him. Love clings to Christ even when the intellect cannot understand. It is only love which can give us a hold on Christ that even the most bewildering experiences can not break.

There is one other thing to note. "The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." This was the curtain which shut off the Holy of Holies, into which no man might go. Symbolically that tells us two things.

(a) The way to God was now wide open. Into the Holy of Holies only the High Priest could go, and he only once a year on the day of Atonement. But now, the curtain was torn and the way to God was wide open to every man.

(b) Within the Holy of Holies dwelt the very essence of God. Now with the death of Jesus the curtain which hid God was torn and men could see him face to face. No longer was God hidden. No longer need men guess and grope. Men could look at Jesus and say, "That is what God is like. God loves me like that."

(15:33) **Jesus Christ, Death—Darkness:** the eleventh event was the frightening darkness—a symbol of separation and loneliness. The darkness told man something.

1. Man was separated from the light.
2. Man stood all alone. He could not see in the dark, not well. He was, so to speak, standing in the world all alone, responsible for his own behavior. And because of what he has done, man must face God someday all alone to give an account for his behavior.

(15:34) **Jesus Christ, Death—Separation from God:** the twelfth event was the terrible cry of separation—a horrifying judgment. What did Jesus mean when He cried out that God had forsaken Him?

1. Jesus did not mean the suffering and ill treatment of the cross, the suffering at the hands of men which He was going through. All through His ministry He knew suffering and foretold of suffering for His followers, even martyrdom.
2. Scripture tells us what Jesus meant.
  - a. He was being made sin for us.

*“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).*
  - b. He was bearing our sins as the sacrificial Lamb of God.

*“For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God....So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” (Hebrews 9:13-14, 28).*
  - c. He was suffering for sins, the just for the unjust.

*“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:18).*
  - d. He was bearing the curse of the law.

*“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).*

Note a critical point: the only thing that could have caused God to separate Himself from Christ was sin. Sin is the only thing that causes God to withdraw from anyone. Since Christ was perfect and sinless, it was not His own sin that caused God to forsake Him—it was our sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; Hebrews 7:26; 1 Peter 1:10; 1 Peter 2:22).

(15:35-36) **Jesus Christ, Death—World, Confused:** the thirteenth event was the confused mob—a picture of the world’s people.

1. There was the picture of hardness. When Jesus called out to God, some thought He was calling out to Elijah. They mockingly wanted to see what would happen, ridiculing the fact that Jesus would call upon a prophet of old to save Him.
2. There was the picture of pity. Jesus had said, “I thirst” (John 19:28-29). One man sensed compassion for the Lord and offered to wet His lips. But the other men standing around—those with hard hearts—stopped Him.

Jesus was seen hanging and suffering on the cross, expressing the utmost pity for man. Yet, when one man tried to show compassion for Christ, the man was stopped.

(15:37) **Jesus Christ, Death—Finished:** the fourteenth event was the loud cry of death—a picture of glorious triumph. What Jesus cried out was one word in the Greek, *Tetelestai*, “It is finished” (John 19:30). It is a cry of purpose, a shout of triumph. He was dying for a specific purpose and that purpose was now fulfilled.

(15:38) **Jesus Christ, Death—Temple, Veil Torn:** the fifteenth event was the rent veil of the temple—a symbol of open access into God’s very presence. Note four facts.

1. The veil (curtain) that was torn was the inner veil (katapetasma), the curtain which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. There was another veil, an outer curtain (kalumma), which separated the Holy Place from the outer court of the temple.

The Holy of Holies was the most sacred part of the temple, the place where the very presence of God was symbolized as dwelling in a very special way. It was closed *forever* to everyone except the High Priest. But even he could enter the Holy of Holies only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Exodus 26:33).

2. At the very hour that Jesus died, the High Priest was rolling back the outer curtain in order to expose the Holy Place to the people, to those who had gathered to worship in the surrounding court. As he rolled back the outer curtain, exposing the Holy Place for worship, both he and the worshippers stood in amazement. They saw the inner veil rent from the top to the bottom. There they stood, seeing and experiencing for the very first time the Holy of Holies, the very special presence of God Himself.

3. The veil was torn from top to bottom. This symbolizes that it was torn by an act of God Himself. It symbolized God giving direct access into His presence (Hebrews 6:19; Hebrews 9:3-12, 24; Hebrews 10:19-23). Now through the body of Christ, any man can enter the presence of God anytime, anyplace.

4. The torn veil symbolized that all men could now draw near God by the blood of Christ.

(15:39) **Jesus Christ, Death—Centurion, Confession of:** the sixteenth event was the centurion’s confession—a picture of the great confession to be made by many.

1. The centurion was bound to be a thoughtful and honest man. He was in charge of the crucifixion. He was responsible for overseeing all that took place. As the events unfolded upon the cross, he was stricken more and more with the claim of Jesus and the way in which the events were happening. When Jesus shouted out that His purpose was finished, that His death was the climax of His purpose upon earth, the centurion was convinced. The very fact that Jesus’ death was purposeful sealed his conviction. God quickened the soldier’s heart to the glorious truth: “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

2. The centurion was a Gentile. He symbolized all who were to confess Jesus in coming generations.

(15:40-41) **Jesus Christ, Death—Women at Cross:** the seventeenth event is the women at the cross—a proof that Jesus lived and served well. Note that the women were at the cross despite the danger. They stood off some distance away, but they were there nonetheless. They still loved and cared, no matter what. They symbolized that Christ’s life was not in vain.

Two remarkable events occurred at His death: there was an earthquake (Matt. 27:51), and the veil in the temple was torn in two. The veil had separated man from God, but now, through His death, Jesus had opened for the whole world a “new and living way” (Heb. 10:12-22; also see John 14:6). There had been an earthquake at Sinai when the Law was given (Ex. 19:16-18), but now the Law was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and its curse removed (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:10-14). Through His sacrifice, Jesus had purchased not only freedom from the Law, but also freedom from the entire sacrificial system.

It is thrilling to read the witness of the Roman centurion, especially when you consider that his words could have gotten him into trouble with both the Jews and the Romans. That Jesus Christ is the Son of God is one of Mark’s important themes (Mark 1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 14:61-62). This makes His servanthood even more wonderful (Phil. 2:1-11).

It is touching to see how the women stood near the cross until the very end. John had also been there, but he had taken Mary, our Lord’s mother, to his own home where he could care for her (John 19:25-27). Faithful women were the last at the cross on Friday and the first at the tomb on Sunday. What a contrast to the disciples who had boasted that they would die for Him! The church of Jesus Christ owes much to the sacrifice and devotion of believing women.



## *Questions Jesus Asked (From the gospel of Mark)*

# **#18 Who Is It You Are Looking For?**

*"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"*

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We have finally come to the meat of the message—the resurrection. Throughout Acts and the Epistles, this event is proclaimed as the cornerstone of our faith.

*(Acts 2:22-36) "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. {23} This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. {24} But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. {25} David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. {26} Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, {27} because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. {28} You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence." {29} "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. {30} But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. {31} Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. {32} God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. {33} Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. {34} For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand {35} until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." {36} "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.""*

*(Acts 4:2) "They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead."*

*(Acts 4:33) "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all."*

*(Acts 23:6) "Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.""*

*(Acts 24:15) "and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."*

*(Romans 1:4) "and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."*

*(Romans 6:5) "If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."*

*(Ephesians 1:18) "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,"*

*(Ephesians 2:4-7) "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, {5} made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. {6} And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, {7} in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."*

*(Philippians 3:10-11) "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, {11} and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."*

*(1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. {14} We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. {15} According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. {16} For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. {17} After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. {18} Therefore encourage each other with these words."*

*(1 Peter 3:18-22) "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, {19} through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison {20} who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, {21} and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, {22} who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."*

*(1 Corinthians 15:19) "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."*

Paul goes so far as to say that if Jesus didn't actually, factually, bodily raise from the dead, then we Christians are a pitiable lot (1 Cor 15:19).

### **This event makes all the difference in the world.**

- It validates Jesus as God's Son.
- We can then believe him implicitly and follow him completely.
- It validates Jesus' work on the cross.
- If he didn't raise from the dead, then he was nothing more than a valiant martyr, and we are still in our sins (1 Cor 15:17).
- It assures our own victory over the tomb and grants us hope for our own resurrection (1 Cor 15:21-22, 42-44, 51-54).
- Humanity's only unconquered enemy has now been defeated! These are not just theological acrobatics. The evangelists record for us the most important message of life and death (and life again!).

However, not everyone is eager to accept the bodily resurrection of Jesus as a historic fact. Some deny it for philosophic, religious, or even "scientific" reasons. But the testimony of the Gospels has to be accounted for in some way, and there are essentially only five theories which have attempted to deny the historic reality of Jesus' bodily resurrection.<sup>13-1</sup>

**(1) A Stolen Body**—the disciples came and stole Jesus' body and then propagated the hoax of his resurrection. This was the original theory concocted by the Jews (Mt 28:11-15). However, we are immediately confronted with two problems: motive and ability. How could eleven cowering disciples sneak past an armed Roman guard, roll away the stone (without waking them), remove the body, and then propagate this hoax of a resurrection? Even if they could, why would they? None of the Eleven believed it even after someone claimed to see Jesus. And for a Jew to desecrate a burial site, especially one of such dignity, is unprecedented.<sup>13-2</sup> Furthermore, these would be colossally stupid thieves to rob the



grave of a crucified peasant, unwrap a decaying corpse on site (ostensibly for the spices and ointment), and then tidy up the place before they left by folding up the linen wraps!

**(2) The Swoon Theory** (especially promoted in *The Passover Plot*)—Jesus never really died, but only swooned and then resuscitated. But consider the facts. After the flogging, Jesus was handed over to trained executioners and crucified. When Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body, Pilate had the centurion double check his work. They made sure of Jesus' death by lancing his side with a spear. The copious flow of blood and water indicated either a punctured or ruptured heart. Afterward, he was wrapped with linens and 75 lbs. of spices. Even if he was barely alive, this surely would have suffocated him. After that he was placed in a cool tomb which was sealed with a huge stone. Surviving such physical shock and then escaping from the tomb would, indeed, be almost as miraculous as the resurrection itself.

**(3) The Wrong Tomb**—The women, then Peter and John, went to the wrong tomb and mistakenly thought Jesus was raised. However, this was a private tomb, not a public cemetery. There were no other tombs with which it could be confused. Besides, it is difficult to think that Mary, Jesus' mother, would forget so quickly where they laid her son, especially when the tomb was marked by a huge stone and an armed guard. But the weakest point of this theory is that it doesn't explain where the body of Jesus was and why the Sanhedrin could not produce it on the day of Pentecost.

**(4) Hallucination**—The disciples wanted so badly for Jesus to be raised that they hallucinated his appearances. The study of psychology effectively demolishes this theory. Groups of people don't simultaneously see the same hallucination (cf. 1 Cor 15:6). Furthermore, it takes a certain psychosis to hallucinate. Now, we might believe that two or three of the disciples might be in such a state at some point in their lives, but not all of them at the same time. A worse problem is the fact that none of the disciples expected a resurrection and therefore could not have hallucinated one. Again, this theory also leaves the body of Jesus unaccounted for.

A related theory is that Jesus' resurrection was spiritual and not physical. Thus, the disciples didn't actually see his body but a "Christophany" (a vision-type appearance). That's not what the Gospels say. They intend for us to believe that Jesus rose physically. Thus, any theory of a non-bodily resurrection can't be defended scripturally<sup>13-3</sup> or philosophically.<sup>13-4</sup>

**(5) Myth**—The Gospels are a literary "fiction" with little basis in historic reality. If this were a mere literary fabrication, however, we could almost certainly expect a number of differences from what we actually have in the Gospels. For example, the women would not likely have been the first witnesses.<sup>13-5</sup> And Peter & Company likely would have expected it and immediately believed. Surely somebody would have claimed to have seen the actual event.<sup>13-6</sup> The bottom line is that the evangelists write with "restrained sobriety of these accounts as compared with the later apocryphal Gospels (e.g., *Gospel of Peter*, 9:35-11:44)" (Carson, p. 588). What we are about to read is not literary fiction but a presentation of what the evangelists believed to be historic fact.<sup>13-7</sup>

The evidence in favor of the resurrection of Jesus is extremely compelling. There are a number of things that can only be accounted for by the literal, bodily resurrection of our Lord:

- (1) the conversion of 3,000 people on the day of Pentecost so close to the time and place of Jesus' death;
- (2) the transformation of Peter and Paul;
- (3) the martyrdom of the Apostles;
- (4) the continued sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper;
- (5) the day of worship changed from the Sabbath (Saturday) to Sunday (e.g., Acts 20:7);
- (6) the unswerving testimony of the early church that this event actually took place;
- (7) the changed lives of millions of Christians throughout history.

At the same time, no part of the Gospels is fraught with so much textual difficulty or variation between the accounts.<sup>13-8</sup> Perhaps it is due to the excited nature of the events, compression of the narratives, the deeply personal accounts of Jesus' appearances, and the particular theological emphasis of each evangelist as he closes out his book. While these variations almost defy harmonization, they are neither irreconcilable contradictions nor do they impugn the historical veracity of the accounts. So, while we are perplexed, there is no reason to doubt the central truth of the Gospel: Jesus is alive and well!

**The Women Find the Empty Tomb (Mt 28:1-8; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-10; Jn 20:1)**

*Mk 16:1* <sup>[MK 16:1]</sup> *When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, [Joanna,<sup>LK</sup>] and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.*

*Mt 28:1-4* <sup>[MT 28:1]</sup> *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

<sup>2</sup>*There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.* <sup>3</sup>*His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.* <sup>4</sup>*The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.*

On Friday afternoon (Lk 23:56) and Saturday evening (Mk 16:1) these pious women busied themselves purchasing and preparing a fragrant ointment for Jesus' burial. By Sunday morning it would be a little late to cover up the stench of decomposition, and somewhat unnecessary since Nicodemus had already provided some 75 lbs of ointment for the job. Nonetheless, anointing a dead body was an act of devotion and love of which these women will not be deprived. The following chart shows which women each evangelist identifies at the tomb. Likely, they all went to the tomb together, but not necessarily.<sup>13-9</sup>

Mt 28:1	Mk 16:1	Lk 24:10	Jn 20:1-2
Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene
Mary, mother of James	Mary, mother of James	Mary, mother of James	
	Salome		
		Joanna	
		Others	'we' (v. 2)

While it is still dark, they set out for the tomb (Jn 20:1). Along the way the sun starts to peek over the Mount of Olives to the east. Suddenly there is a terrific earthquake, perhaps a strong aftershock of Friday's supernatural quake. This shaken band of women is now even more unnerved. But they are not nearly as frightened as the guards. We don't know exactly what these guys saw. Matthew only says they reported "everything that had happened" to the chief priests (28:11). According to Matthew 28:3-4, they likely saw this radiant angel descend from heaven, roll back this huge stone single-handedly, and sit on it. And based on their report to the Sanhedrin, they also observed that the tomb was empty. These guards are the only potential witnesses to the resurrection itself. If Jesus left the tomb when the angel rolled away the stone, the guards could hardly have missed it. Then again, Jesus could have exited the tomb even while the stone was in place (cf. Jn 20:26).

*Mk 16:2-4 WITH JN 20:1* <sup>2</sup>*Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise [while it was still dark,<sup>JN</sup>] they were on their way to the tomb* <sup>3</sup>*and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"*

<sup>4</sup>*But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.*

*Lk 24:3-4 WITH MK 16:5* <sup>3</sup>*[B]ut when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.* <sup>4</sup>*While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men [a young man<sup>MK</sup>] in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them [sitting on the right side.<sup>MK</sup>]*

These poor women have just pulled themselves together from the earthquake when reality sets in. "Who is going to move that boulder for us so we can anoint Jesus' body?" About that time they arrive at the site to find that the stone has already been rolled away. They don't yet know how.

As they enter the tomb, they find they have an even greater problem, more vexing than the stone. The body is gone! Who took it? And where did they put it?! Before they can come up with a decent hypothesis, they are floored (literally) by another ominous sight. Inside the tomb stood two men in white garments that shone like lightning.<sup>13-10</sup> Instinctively, the women drop to their knees with their faces to the ground.

*LK 24:5-8 WITH MT 28:5-6; MK 16:6* <sup>5</sup>*In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men [angel<sup>MT</sup>] said to them, “[Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus<sup>MT</sup>] [the Nazarene, who was crucified.<sup>MK</sup>] Why do you look for the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup>He is not here; he has risen! [Come and see the place where he lay.<sup>MT</sup>] Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: <sup>7</sup>‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” <sup>8</sup>Then they remembered his words.*

*MT 28:7 WITH MK 16:7* <sup>7</sup>*Then go quickly and tell his disciples [and Peter<sup>MK</sup>]: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him [just as he told you.<sup>MK</sup>] Now I have told you.’”*

The angel comforts them saying, “Do not be afraid.” Typically, these are the first words out of an angel’s mouth (Mt 1:20; 28:5,10; Lk 1:13, 30; 2:10; Acts 18:9; 27:24).

*(Matthew 1:20) “But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”*

*(Matthew 28:5) “The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.”*

*(Matthew 28:10) “Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.””*

*(Luke 1:13) “But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.”*

*(Luke 1:30) “But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.”*

*(Luke 2:10) “But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”*

*(Acts 18:9) “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.”*

*(Acts 27:24) “and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’”*

This angel is very “matter-of-fact.” From the heavenly perspective this is all quite clear. Jesus predicted his resurrection several times (Mt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Lk 9:22, 43-45; 18:31-33). He is only doing what he promised and what his divine nature demanded. Why is that so hard to believe? The angel seems to be somewhat incredulous about the women’s unbelief.

The angel orders them to quickly inform the men (especially Peter), what has taken place. They are to meet Jesus in Galilee. This is appropriate since Galilee is where it all began and it is a more appropriate place for launching his Gentile mission. But this does not mean that Jesus will not appear to them in Jerusalem. Indeed, for the next week, during the Passover celebration, he will make several appearances. After the Passover, these men are to return to their homes in Galilee and there await further instructions

from the Lord. About a month later they would return to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Naturally, they will arrive early for the period of purification. It will be at that time that Jesus will ascend from the Mount of Olives, ten days before Pentecost.<sup>13-11</sup>

*Mk 16:8 WITH MT 28:8<sup>8</sup> Trembling and bewildered, [yet filled with joy<sup>MT</sup>] the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*

*Lk 24:9<sup>9</sup> When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others.*

*The women are frightened, confused, and dizzy with joy. They run as quickly as they can to tell the Eleven, without stopping to talk with anyone along the way.<sup>13-12</sup> Their report naturally is directed to Peter and John. The other nine are in a tight circle around them. Still other disciples are listening incredulously from the perimeter.*

### **Peter and John Investigate the Empty Tomb (Lk 24:9-12; Jn 20:2-10)**

*Jn 20:2<sup>[Jn 20:12]</sup> So she [Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them<sup>LK</sup>] came running [from the tomb<sup>LK</sup>] to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, [to the Eleven and to all the others,<sup>LK</sup>] and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” [But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.<sup>LK</sup>]*

There seems to be a discrepancy here between Luke and John. John focuses on Mary and her unbelief. She is convinced that Jesus’ body has been stolen, not that Jesus has been raised as the angels (in Luke) have announced (Jn 20:2, 11-15). Luke, however, speaks of the whole group of women. As a whole, they believe the angels and remember how Jesus predicted his resurrection (Lk 24:6-8). We can account for these differences in one of two ways.

First, Mary may have looked at the empty tomb and run away quickly before the angels appeared. Thus, she reports to Peter and John, who then run to the tomb only hearing that it was empty. The other women report to the nine remaining Apostles and only later to Peter and John. They deliver the whole “scoop” which is, of course, rejected by the Apostles. Mary follows Peter and John to the tomb where she weeps bitterly and sees the angels for the first time (Jn 20:12). Just then, Jesus appears to her. She, of course, believes. She then runs and reports to the Apostles what turns out to be the first actual resurrection appearance (Mk 16:9-11).

A second explanation is that all the women, including Mary, see the angels and together they report it to the Apostles (Lk 24:9-10). However, not all the women are at the same level of belief. That, of course, would be natural; not all the Apostles believe at the same time either (cf. Lk 24:12 & Jn 20:8). Perhaps Mary is not as convinced as the others that Jesus is actually alive. Once she gets away from the garden, the empty tomb is a more ominous reality to her than the angelic message.

The narrative is so compressed, it is impossible to see just exactly where each of the pieces fit. But we really don’t need to. We can be certain of the following: (1) Peter and John learn from Mary that the tomb is empty and they bolt for the door. (They may have stayed long enough to hear the report of the other women also). (2) At least nine Apostles hear the other women talk of an angelic announcement that Jesus has raised from the dead. (3) The women are growing in faith (Lk 24:8), but the men think their emotions have gotten the better of them.

*Jn 20:3-10 WITH Lk 24:12<sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup>Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there [by themselves,<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>7</sup>as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup>Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. [[But Peter] went away,*

wondering to himself what had happened.<sup>LK</sup>] <sup>9</sup>(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

<sup>10</sup>Then the disciples went back to their homes.

Both Peter and John head for the tomb *posthaste*. They run along side by side, but Peter just can't keep up and John is too excited to wait for him. Perhaps Peter is older than John or maybe just not quite as athletic. For whatever reasons, Peter is left behind. Poor Mary is further behind still. She apparently won't get to the tomb until these guys are already gone.

When John arrives at the site, sure enough, the stone is rolled away. He stops at the entrance and bends down to have a look inside. The body is gone! All that is left are the strips of linen which were lovingly wrapped around him. About that time, Peter, panting for breath, pushes past John, entering the tomb. He takes a closer look.<sup>13-13</sup> Peter sees both the linen wrappings and the head cloth lying separately. Furthermore, the head cloth is "folded." The word means "wrapped" (cf. Lk 23:53). "It implies that the cloth had been wound around the head into the shape of a sphere and not folded flat like a table napkin" (Tenney, p. 189). The text does not go so far as to say that the cloth is in the exact position it had been when on Jesus face, as if he had just vanished through it, but it does indicate the burial clothes were in order. In other words, this is not the work of grave-robbers. Anyone who would steal or move the body would take the wrappings with it. After all, who would unwrap a rotting corpse? And considering the guards outside the tomb, no robber would dare take the time to neatly fold the garments, even if they did remove them from the body. This simply does not make sense! Peter is puzzled.

John finally straggles into the tomb and sees this strange sight. Although he does not yet connect it with fulfilled prophecy (cf. Ps 16:10; Isa 53:10-11; Hos 6:1-2; Lk 24:26-27), he believes Jesus rose as he said he would (cf. Jn 2:22; 11:25; 16:22).<sup>13-14</sup> Peter, on the other hand, needs more time and more evidence. He walks away confused. What a debate these two must have had on the way home!

#### **Appearance to Mary Magdalene ([Mk 16:9-11];<sup>13-15</sup> Jn 20:11-18)**

*JN 20:11-14*<sup>11</sup> [B]ut Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb<sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

<sup>13</sup>They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."<sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

*MK 16:9*<sup>9</sup> When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.

Peter and John return home to give their report of the situation. They are wrapped up in conversation that appears to ignore Mary (which would be neither unusual nor rude in their culture). She is devastated as she stands in front of the tomb wailing [Lk 8:52; Jn 11:31, 33]. When she stoops to look in the tomb to see what struck Peter and John, she sees something they did not. Two angels, apparently the same ones who were there earlier (Mt 28:5; Mk 16:5; Lk 24:4), are seated on the ledge where Jesus' body had lain. Surely she knows they are angels; Luke describes their white clothes as "gleaming like lightning." That's pretty hard to miss. In John, this is the first time Mary has seen these angels. This leads us to believe that Mary ran off from the other women before the angels appeared to them. On the other hand, the synoptics seem to place Mary at the scene when the angels first appeared. Therefore, we can't know with certainty if this is Mary's first or second encounter with these angels.

They ask Mary, "Why are you crying?" This was a glorious occasion if she would just listen to them and believe. These poor angels must be flabbergasted at the obtuse humans who won't believe what Jesus clearly told them. Mary, though, can't get over the thought that someone stole his body.

Before the angels have time to respond, Jesus appears behind Mary. We can't know what made Mary turn around to look at him. Perhaps the angels looked over Mary's shoulder at him or even pointed. Or perhaps Mary heard him walking up behind her. Whatever the reason, she turns around and looks at him without recognizing him. (The angels must be ribbing each other in unbelief.) Perhaps Jesus' appearance was veiled as with the two on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:16, 31; Mk 16:12). Or perhaps her eyes were clouded with tears and an early morning mist. At any rate, she is not yet looking directly at him (Jn 20:16).

*JN 20:15-18 WITH MK 16:10*<sup>15</sup> "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).<sup>17</sup>Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

<sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went to the disciples [who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping<sup>MK</sup>] with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

*MK 16:11*<sup>11</sup> When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

Jesus asks Mary the same question the angels had, "Why are you crying?" She assumes he is the gardener. Who else would be out there that early in the morning? Hoping this "insider" would help her, she asks him where he put the body. She even offers to take it off his hands for him.

When Jesus calls her name, as only he could, she instantly recognizes him. His tenderness and intimacy are unmistakable. She cries out "Rabboni" (a title of extraordinary honor), and latches on to him. Jesus tells her to let go, but not because she would "defile" him in his present state, for he invites Thomas to touch him (Jn 20:27). No, she must not get too attached to him because (1) he is not staying indefinitely, and (2) there is work to do. She is the first to see Jesus and she must quickly go tell the Apostles.

Jesus calls them "brothers" for the first time (in John). Times are changing. Jesus elevates them to new levels as he passes the baton of leadership and as he has now redeemed them from their sins (cf. Heb 2:11). They are no longer merely friends (Jn 15:15), but brothers. We will never be peers of Jesus, but we are his brothers and share in his inheritance (Rom 8:17). Yet Jesus differentiates between "my Father and your Father, my God and your God." While there is only one God, our relation to him is radically different than Jesus'. He is a Son by nature, we by adoption.

Mary bursts into the room where the confused Apostles are weeping. Surely they have heard the report of Peter and John. Some may have been leaning toward John's interpretation, others to Peter's. Mary clearly sides with John saying, "I saw him!... I touched him!" Still, she is "just a woman." They refuse to believe her.

#### **Appearance to Other Women (Mt 28:9-10)**

<sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

<sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

We now return to Matthew's narrative. As the women leave the tomb to report to the Apostles, Jesus greets them with a cheery "Hello!" As they cling to his feet, he commands them to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee.

This little piece presents a problem when we compare it to John 20:11-18. There, Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene alone after she follows Peter and John back to the tomb. To harmonize Matthew and John we must do one of two things. First, we might say that Mary was not included in this group of women who saw Jesus. That would mean, of course, that she ran off quickly by herself to the Apostles.

When she returned with Peter and John, Jesus appeared to her alone outside the tomb. And all this would take place *before* Jesus appeared to these other women since Mark 16:9 says “He appeared first to Mary Magdalene.” Or we can chalk Mark 16:9 up to a textual variant or even interpret “first” as the first appearance to Mary, not the first appearance to anyone.

A second possibility is that Matthew 28:9-10 is speaking about Jesus’ appearance to Mary, and Mary alone. Since she was the main representative of the group, and since the other women would later see Jesus anyway, Matthew compresses the narrative and includes the whole group of women here. This option is strengthened by the parallels in Matthew 28:9-10 and John 20:11-18. Both contain “clinging,” “commissioning” and “brothers.”

Another peculiarity of Matthew’s rendition is his emphasis on Galilee. Reading verse 10 alone, we might get the impression that this appearance to the women was the only Jerusalem appearance. But this verse does not preclude other Jerusalem appearances. And from other parallels we know there were several more. But it would appear Matthew is emphasizing Jesus’ continued work in Galilee, to *all* Israel, and even as a light to the Gentiles (cf. Mt 4:14-16).

For nearly two thousand years, people have been uncertain about the significance of the empty tomb. Many who know the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ wonder, "What makes an empty tomb good news?"

**Consider Mark 16:14:**

*Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.*

Jesus rebuked his followers for their unbelief. The Greek word translated "rebuke" is a strong word that refers to an energetic confrontation. Early that morning, the news had come that Jesus' tomb was empty. His followers had heard about the witness of angels at the empty tomb. Peter and John had gone to investigate the tomb for themselves. Yet by the end of the day, as the Eleven gathered together, they still did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. Paul later wrote, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54), but on this Sunday, despite the evidence, the Eleven did not yet believe it.

Mary was the first to receive the resurrection evidence as good news. Even though she told the other disciples that she had seen and spoken with Jesus, it would take a while before their lives were changed by her story. This woman, first among disciples, believed that the empty tomb was significant in terms of hope for believers, in terms of our right standing with God, in terms of Jesus' rule in heaven and our future with him. Mary was the first to be changed by the resurrection.

What do we know about Mary Magdalene? Some think that she is the woman whose story is told in Luke 7, a woman of the streets, who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. However, the text never identifies that woman, so there is no reason to assume that she was Mary Magdalene. All we know about Mary is that she was from the town of Magdala and that seven demons had come out of her (Luke 8:2).

It is worth noting that Mary is always alone in the Bible. Other women are identified as the mother, sister, or wife of someone, but apparently the only family Mary Magdalene had were those who had befriended her in Christ. Before she met Jesus, her life was a hellish torment. She owed everything to Jesus, and her life revolved around him. She was near him when he died, and she was the first to go to his grave. She wanted nothing more than to honor the memory of her Master, and when she saw the empty tomb, she was distraught at the possibility that a grave robber had desecrated that memory.

First the angels asked Mary, "Woman, why are you crying?" Then Jesus himself asked, "Woman, why are you crying?" Mistaking him for a gardener, Mary hopefully inquired if he knew where the body had been taken. Then Jesus spoke her name, and immediately she knew who he was. Why is this important?

When Jesus spoke Mary's name, he was telling her that he knew her as an individual. She wasn't just some unknown mourner; she wasn't just part of the crowd. She mattered to him personally. He cared for the specific woman Mary, called Magdalene, and he had returned for her.

Now think again about that first Sunday night when the disciples met, when they still lacked understanding and felt defeated. They knew the tomb was empty. At least two of them had been there and seen it for themselves. They had heard about angels. They had been reminded of Jesus' words. They had been reminded of the prophecies about Messiah. Yet despite all the evidence, they were not changed people. Why?

Perhaps they believed that life and death are chaotic, that the world is senseless and incoherent. Perhaps they thought that the pagans were right, that heroes died and rose and died again in an endless cycle without purpose. Even if Jesus has left the grave, they will kill him again next time. They always do. This isn't good news. It isn't life transforming news.

Perhaps they thought, "He is alive, but because we failed him, he is going to find disciples who are more worthy. We couldn't even pray when he asked us to. We didn't love him enough." They saw the empty tomb, but they didn't know yet that it was good news.

What ultimately changed them is the same sort of personal encounter that Mary had. When Jesus spoke to Mary in the garden, he told her, "Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" His Father was their Father; his God was their God. He called them his brothers. He had not rejected them. He knew them by name. He loved them and he had a purpose for them. He had returned from the dead, and he would ascend to heaven to rule forever.

The tenderness and personal nature of Jesus' love for us makes the empty tomb more than merely a fact of evidence. When I realize that Jesus knows my name and that he came back for me, the empty tomb becomes a compelling, life-changing event. He knows every burden, every struggle, every humiliation I have ever had. He is committed to us. It is our destiny to become like him. The empty tomb means new life from the grave, and that is the best possible news.