Section 1 - Counsels of Perfection

After Jesus left Galilee for the last time, He found a new place to live and work for the brief remainder of His life. It was in the region to the east of the Jordan, at the lower end of the river. “He departed from Galilee, and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (Mt. 19:1). He ended His ministry where it began - healing the sick and teaching the prominent doctrines of the kingdom in the place where He was baptized into His sacred work. This is also the place where He called His first disciples (see Chapter 1).

Jesus’ visit to Perea near the end of His career is an interesting and significant fact in and of itself, even without considering the things that happened there. John evidently felt this way. He, like Matthew and Mark, carefully records the fact of His visit there. However, unlike the two evangelists, he does not provide any details. The terms he uses to describe this event are unique. He briefly explains how Jesus had provoked the Jews in Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication (Jn. 10:22-30). Then he goes on to say: “Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him; and He eluded their grasp. And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing...” (Jn. 10:39-40). The word again and the reference to John the Baptist let us know that John is reflecting and remembering - we are given a window to look into his heart. With emotion, he is thinking about his personal experiences when Jesus first visited those sacred regions. He is reflecting on the first time he met his beloved Master and on the mystical name that was given to Him by the Baptist – “the Lamb of God.” At that time none of His disciples understood the name. Now it was going to be explained by the things that were about to happen in Jesus’ life. As John was writing his Gospel (at the end of the first century), the name was as clear as day in the bright light of the cross.

It would have been impossible for the disciple whom Jesus loved to do anything other than remember His first visit when he was writing about the second. Even the multitudes, he records, mentally returned to the earlier occasion while following Jesus on His last visit there. They remembered what John, His forerunner, had said about Him. There was One among them whom they did not know, and who was far greater than he. They remarked that John’s statements had been proven true by the events that happened, and he himself proved to be a true prophet by
Christ's miracles - if not by his own. They said to each other, “John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true” (Jn. 10:41).

If John the disciple and the common people thought about Jesus’ first visit to Perea when He went there the second time, we can be sure that Jesus thought about it as well. Do not doubt for a moment that He had His own reasons for going back to that hallowed neighborhood. We believe His journey to the Jordan was a pilgrimage to holy ground on which He could not set His foot without feeling profound emotions. For there was His Bethel where He had made a solemn baptismal vow. It was not the same as Jacob's vow when he promised to give a tithe of all he had to God (Gen. 28:10-22). Jesus would give Himself, body and soul, as a sacrifice to His Father in life and in death. There the Spirit had descended on Him like a dove. There He had heard a celestial voice of approval and encouragement, the reward for His entire self-surrender to His Father's holy will. Every recollection He had of this place stirred His heart. He recalled the solemn obligations He had been given. He was inspired by holy hopes of that which was to come. Now these memories urged Him on to the grand consummation of His life's work. He had been charged by His baptism, His vows, the descent of the Spirit, and the voice from heaven to crown His labors of love by drinking from the cup of suffering and death for man's redemption. He willingly opened His ears to these voices from the past. He wanted to hear them, so that by their hallowed tone, His spirit might be braced and prepared for the coming agony.

So He retired to Perea for these private reasons, to reflect on the past and the future, and to link the sacred memories of the past with the solemn anticipations of things to come. But while He was there, Jesus did not, by any means, live a life of seclusion and solitary meditation. On the contrary, while He was in that region, He was unusually busy healing the sick and teaching the multitudes “according to His custom” (Mark tells us this, referring to His past ministry in Galilee; see Mk. 10:1). He was also answering questions, receiving visits, and granting favors. “Great multitudes followed Him” (Mt. 19:2) and were there for various reasons. Pharisees came to ask entangling questions about marriage and divorce. They were hoping to catch Him in a trap and draw from Him an opinion that would make Him unpopular with some faction or school, Hillel's or Shammai's - it didn't matter which one. A young ruler came to Him with a more honorable purpose. He asked how he could obtain eternal life. Mothers came with their little ones asking Him to bless their children. They thought it was worth receiving and did not fear rejection. And messengers came with sad news from friends, who looked to Him as their comfort in the time of trouble (Jn. 11:1-3).

**New Lessons for the Twelve**

Although Jesus was busy with the crowd of people, He made time to spend with His chosen disciples. He taught them some new lessons on the doctrine of the divine kingdom. The subject matter was sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom - a theme that was appropriate for the place, the
time, the situation, and the mood of the Teacher. What prompted this topic were the interviews Jesus had with the Pharisees and the young ruler. These interviews naturally led Him to speak to His disciples on the subject of self-sacrifice by using two topics - abstaining from marriage and renouncing property. He did not limit His conversation to these points, but went on to set forth the rewards of self-sacrifice in whatever form it took. He also spoke about the spirit in which all sacrifices must be performed in order to have value in God’s sight.

We read that the “Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?'” (Mt. 19:3). Jesus answered this question by laying down the ancient principle that divorce could only be justified by marital infidelity. He also explained that any behavior that was contrary to the law of Moses was simply because of the hardness of men's hearts. The disciples heard this response and then made their own comments about it. They said to Jesus: “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (Mt. 19:10). The view given by their Master did not allow for incompatibility of personalities, drifting apart, different habits, differences in religion, or fighting among relatives, as good reasons for separation. This seemed very strict to them. They thought it would be best for a man to weigh the matter carefully before he committed himself to a life-long relationship with these options before him. He ought to ask himself if it would not be better overall to steer clear of such a sea of troubles by abstaining from marriage altogether.

**Sympathy for Celibacy**
The *impromptu* remark of the disciples, when examined in connection with its probable motives, was not a very wise one. Yet it should be observed that Jesus did not absolutely disapprove of it. He spoke as if He sympathized with the feelings that favored celibacy - as if to abstain from marriage was the better and wiser way, and that the only reason it should not be required for the majority is because it was impracticable. “But He said to them, ‘Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given’” (Mt. 19:11). He then goes on to list the cases in which men remain unmarried. He apparently approved of some who voluntarily, and with high and holy motives, denied themselves the comfort of family relationships: “There are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:12). Jesus finally helped His disciples understand that these men were to be imitated by all those who felt called and able to do so. “He who is able to accept this (i.e., this high virtue),” He said, “let him accept it” (Mt. 19:12). He was hinting at the fact that, while many men could not receive it, it would be better for him who could make himself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven. He recognized that some men could more easily endure all the possible drawbacks of married life than preserve perfect chastity as a single person. The person who remained single would not only escape much trouble, but would be free from caring for the needs of a spouse and would be able to serve the kingdom without distractions.
Renouncing property is the other form of self-sacrifice Jesus mentioned. This was another topic of conversation between Jesus and His disciples. It happened after the interview with the young man who came to ask about eternal life. Jesus read the heart of this anxious inquirer and perceived that he loved this world’s possessions more than spiritual freedom and complete singleness of mind. He wrapped up His instructions to him by giving this counsel: “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Mt. 19:21). The young man turned away saddened because, though he wanted eternal life, he was unwilling to pay the price. So Jesus proceeded to make this man’s case the basis for the instruction of the Twelve. In His observations, He did not explicitly say that to give up property was necessary for salvation, but the disciples thought He almost implied it. First, He commented to His disciples: “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mk. 10:23). The disciples were shocked at this saying. So Jesus softened it somewhat by slightly altering the way He said it. “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” (vs. 24). He hinted that the thing to be forsaken in order to receive salvation was not money, but the inordinate love of money. Then He added a third comment on the subject. It was so severe that it more than canceled the softness of the second. He said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk. 10:25). That statement, if it is literally interpreted, means that it is impossible for a rich man to receive salvation. It seems to imply that the only way for a rich man to get into heaven is to stop being rich and become poor by voluntarily renouncing all property. This seems to have been the impression made on the minds of the disciples, because we read that they were even more astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” (Mk. 10:26).

What our Lord really meant to teach on the topics of marriage and money are questions of vital importance. It is not only a concern for the life to come but is related to the whole of our lives now. For if a man’s life on earth does not consist totally of possessions and family relations, at least these occupy a very prominent place. Family relationships are essential to the existence of society, and without wealth there could be no civilization. Did Jesus, then, frown or look down on these things as unfavorable to, if not incompatible with, the interests of the divine kingdom and the longings of its citizens?

**The Early Church’s Position on Celibacy and Voluntary Poverty**

Until the time of the Reformation, this question was, for the most part, answered by the church in the affirmative. From a very early period, the church entertained the idea that Jesus meant to teach the inherent superiority of a life of celibacy and voluntary poverty over that of a married man possessing property. Abstinence from marriage and the renunciation of earthly possessions came to be regarded as essential requirements for reaching high Christian goals. They were
steps on a ladder by which Christians climbed to higher levels of grace than were attained by men who were involved with their families and with the entanglements of worldly things. They were not necessary for salvation - that is, to obtain a simple admission to heaven - but they were necessary to obtain an abundant entrance. They were trials of virtue that were established for candidates who wanted honors in the city of God. They were indispensable conditions for the higher degrees of spiritual fruitfulness. A married or rich Christian might produce thirty-fold, but only those who denied themselves the enjoyments of wealth and marriage could bring sixty-fold or a hundred-fold. So, while these virtues of abstinence were not to be demanded of everyone, they were to be commended as counsels of perfection to those who were not content to be commonplace Christians, to those who wanted to rise with excellence to the heroic. Despising a simple admission into the divine kingdom, they desired to occupy first places there.

This thinking is now so outdated that it is hard to believe it ever prevailed. However, to prove that this is not conjecture, consider two extracts from a distinguished bishop and martyr (beheaded) who lived in the third century, Cyprian of Carthage (A.D. 200-258). These are samples of similar material that can be found in the writings of the early Fathers of the church. One quotationproclaims the superior virtue of voluntary virginity in these words: Straight and narrow is the way which leads to life, hard and arduous is the path which tends to glory. Along this path go the martyrs, go virgins, go all the just. For the first (degree of fruitfulness), the hundred-fold, is that of the martyrs; the second, the sixty-fold, is yours (ye virgins). The second extract is like the first in that it ascribes superior merit to virginity. However, it also indicates the optional character of that high-class virtue. Cyprian refers to the words of Christ: There be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. This the Lord commands not, but exhorts; He imposes not the yoke of necessity, that the free choice of the will might remain. But whereas he says (John 14:2), that there are many mansions with His Father, He here points out the lodging quarters of the better mansion. Seek ye, O virgins, those better mansions. Crucifying the desires of the flesh, obtain for yourselves the reward of greater grace in the celestial abodes.

Similar views were entertained in those early days of the Christian faith with respect to the meaning of Christ’s words to the young man. The results were inevitable. In due time, monastic institutions came into existence as did the position that the clergy should be celibate. There is a direct correlation between an ascetic interpretation of the counsel Jesus gave the rich man who asked about eternal life and the rise of monasticism. This is obvious in the history of Antony, the father of the monastic system. The story is told about him that on one occasion he went into the church where the gospel story about the rich young man was read to the congregation. Because he was young, he believed the words were being addressed by Heaven to him. He left the church that day and immediately began to give to the inhabitants of his native village his large, fertile, and beautiful estates from his inheritance. He only reserved a small portion of his property for his sister. Not too much later on, he gave that away, also, and placed his sister with a group of
spiritual virgins so she could be educated. Then, settling down near his father's mansion, he began a life of rigid asceticism.

The ascetic theory of Christian virtue soon began to prevail in the church. Now it has been fully tested over time and has proven to be a horrible mistake. The verdict of history is conclusive. So to return to an exposed error, as some wish to do, is utter foolishness. During this period in our history, the views of those who espouse the ideal Christian life in a monk's cell are hardly worth serious debate. It may, however, be useful to point out the leading errors in the morals that the monk's teach. While we are doing this, we will also be explaining the true meaning of our Lord's words to His disciples.

The First Error

First, this theory is based on an erroneous assumption, namely, that abstaining from things that are lawful is a higher sort of virtue than using them in moderation. Abstaining is the virtue of the weak, whereas moderation is the virtue of the strong. Abstinence is certainly the safer way for those who are prone to excessive love, but it purchases safety at the expense of moral culture. The reason is that it removes us from those temptations that are connected with family relationships and earthly possessions. And though character may be endangered by family and possessions, at the same time, it is developed and strengthened. Abstinence is also inferior to moderation in the health of one's attitude. Inevitably it leads to morbidity, perversion, and exaggeration. The ascetic virtues were typically called angelic by those who admired them. They are certainly angelic in the negative sense - they are unnatural and inhuman. Severe abstinence is the ghost of morality, while moderation is its soul. Moderation is incorporated into a genuine human life and is lived out in relationships, occupations, and pleasures. Abstinence is even inferior to moderation with respect to its seeming strong point: self-sacrifice. Without a doubt, there is something morally noble about a man who has wealth, a privileged background, high office, and a happy home who leaves his position, riches, office, wife, and children behind to go away into the deserts of Sinai and Egypt to spend his days as a monk or a hermit. The serious decision they make to try to gain mastery of the will over human desires is very impressive. Yet think about how inferior this person is when compared to Abraham, the father of the faithful. He was a model of moderation and singleness of mind. He could use the world (and he had a large portion of it) without abusing it. He kept his wealth and his position in the world, yet never became their slave. At God's command, he was ready to leave his friends and his native land. He was even willing to part with his only son! So the true Christian virtue is to live in such a way that we see ourselves as the heir of all things, while not hindering our spiritual freedom. We are to enjoy life and yet to be ready, at the drop of a hat, to sacrifice life's most precious pleasures. This is the higher Christian life for those who long to be mature. Let us have many Abrahams who live among men who are wealthy. Then there will be no fear of our church going back to the Middle Ages. Sometimes the rich, as a class, become extravagant, vain, selfish, and proud. When
they do, there is a danger that a certain belief could gain popularity with other serious-minded people - the belief that there is no possibility of living a truly Christian life except by giving up all property.

The Second Error
The ascetic theory is also based on an error in the interpretation of Christ's sayings. His words do not assert or necessarily imply that celibacy and voluntary poverty are superior to marriage and wealth. They only imply that, in certain circumstances, the one who is not married and the one who does not have many possessions are in a situation where they may give their whole attention, without distraction, to the interests of the divine kingdom. This is certainly true. Sometimes it is less easy to be single-minded in serving Christ as a married person than as an unmarried, as rich than poor. This is especially true in times of hardship and danger - times when people must either not be on Christ's side at all or be prepared to sacrifice everything for His sake. The less someone has to sacrifice in these situations, the easier it is for him to bear his cross and be a hero. It may be said of him during such a crisis, that he is blessed because he has no family to forsake and no worldly concerns to distract him. On the other hand, the personal character of this type of person may suffer from being isolated from others. He might lose his warmth, tenderness, and grace. He could develop a sternness that is almost inhuman. But the particular tasks that are demanded of him will be more likely to get done in a thorough manner. Because of this, it could be truthfully said that the forlorn hope (note: “forlorn hope” is an advanced body of troops) in battle, as well as in the cause of Christianity, must consist of men who have no domestic relations to divide their devotion, who will leave no wife nor children to mourn over their loss (Robertson of Brighton). But this statement cannot be taken without some qualification. It is not impossible for married and wealthy Christians to take their place out front in the battle. Many have done it, and those who do are the greatest heroes of all. Those who are not involved in other relationships do not necessarily and invariably have the advantage, even in time of war. And in times of peace, it totally favors the other side. It is frightening to think that the monks, like soldiers, are liable to become degenerate and corrupt when there are no great tasks for them to do. Sometimes men who are free from all domestic and secular ties are capable of rising to an almost superhuman level of self-denial. At other times, they may sink to a depth of laziness and sensuality which is rarely seen in those who enjoy the protecting influence of family ties and business associations.

We do not want to keep making this point. And we will be frank and concede all that can be said in favor of the unmarried and those who do not have many possessions with reference to service in the kingdom in certain circumstances. What we are concerned to maintain is that nowhere in the gospel do we find the doctrine taught that this kind of existence is, in and of itself, essentially virtuous. It is absurd to say, as Renan (Joseph Ernest Renan, 1823-1892) does, that the monk is, in a sense, the only true Christian. The natural type of Christian is not the monk, but the soldier.
Both of these are often placed in the same position with respect to marriage and property, but for different reasons. The keyword in Christian ethics is not *devoteism*, but *devotion*. Consuming devotion to the kingdom is the one main virtue that is required of all its citizens. Every stern word that encourages self-sacrifice is to be interpreted in relation to that devotion. “Allow the dead to bury their own dead” (Lk. 9:60). “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk. 9:62). “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother..., he cannot be My disciple” (Lk. 14:26-27). “No one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions” (Lk. 14:33). These and many other similar sayings all mean one thing: the kingdom first, everything else second. When the best interest of the holy kingdom is at stake, what is required is an immediate response as if one were in the military - leave everything and rally around the emblems of the kingdom. In essence, the same idea is the key to understanding the meaning of a difficult parable that was spoken to the Apostles. It is recorded in Luke's Gospel. We call it the parable of *extra service* (Lk. 17:7-10). What is intended is that service in the kingdom is very demanding. It not only involves hard labor in the field throughout the day but extra duties in the evening when the tired laborer would very much like to rest. There are no fixed hours of labor - eight, ten, or twelve. The kingdom claims the right to call anyone to work at any hour in the twenty-four available in a day. It is just like the case of soldiers in time of war or of farmers during the harvest. And the *extra service*, or overtime duty, is not the same thing as the asceticism of the monks. Rather, it is an extraordinary demand in an unusual emergency. It calls men, who are weary because of their age or because they have over-exerted themselves, to go the extra mile and to make additional sacrifices.

**The Third Error**

In the third place, the theory under consideration is guilty of making an error in logic. If we assume that abstinence is necessarily and intrinsically a higher virtue than moderation, it is illogical to speak about it as if it were optional. If that were the case, our Lord should not have given suggestions, but commands. No man is free to choose whether or not he will be a good Christian or an apathetic one. Neither is he excused from practicing certain virtues just because they are difficult. It is absolutely required of every believer to press on toward maturity. And if celibacy and poverty are necessary for maturity, then all who profess to be godly ought to renounce marriage and property.

**The Final Error**

The laws of nature and the requirements of any society, however, tell us it is impracticable. This brings us to the last objection to the ascetic theory, namely, that if it is consistently applied, it winds up being absurd. It involves the destruction of society and the human race. A theory that involves such consequences cannot be true. The kingdom of grace and the kingdom of nature are not mutually exclusive. One God is sovereign over both. And all things that belong to the
lower kingdom - every relationship, every ability, passion, and desire of our nature, all material possessions - are capable of being used in the higher kingdom. They can contribute to our growth in grace and holiness.

The biggest practical difficulty is to give the kingdom of God and His righteousness their rightful place of supremacy. All other things are to be kept in strict subordination. The purpose of the hard sayings that Jesus spoke in Perea was to bring these issues to the attention of the disciples and everyone else. He spoke so strongly that men who were surrounded by the cares of their families and the comforts provided by wealth might really take to heart their danger. Then, conscious of their own helplessness, they might seek grace from God to do that which, though difficult, is not impossible. To be specific, while they are married, they can live as though they are unmarried and care for the things of the Lord. And while they are rich, they can be humble, free in spirit, and devoted in their hearts to serving Christ.

The Little Children
One word should be said here on the beautiful incident when the little children were brought to Jesus to get His blessing. Who can really believe that it was His intention to teach a monkish theory of morals after reading that story? How timely when those mothers came to Him seeking a blessing for their little ones! They came just after He had spoken words that could have been interpreted as discouraging family relationships. Their visit gave Him the opportunity to protest. He had anticipated the misunderstanding. The Twelve had tried to interfere by keeping the mothers and their children away from their Master. So it made Jesus’ protest all the more emphatic. The disciples seem to have misunderstood the words Jesus had just spoken about abstaining from marriage for the sake of the kingdom. Out of this misunderstanding, monasticism sprang up. They thought, “Do you think He cares about you mothers and your children? All of His thoughts are on the kingdom of heaven. There they do not marry, nor are they given in marriage. Go away, and don’t bother Him right now.” The Lord did not thank His disciples for trying to guard Him from intrusion like a squad of over-zealous policemen. “But when Jesus saw this He was indignant and said to them, ‘Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these’” (Mk. 10:14).