The Training of the Twelve

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συν τῷ Ἰησοῦ ἦσαν

The Greek phrase (above) was used on the back side of the title page of A.B. Bruce’s *The Training of the Twelve*, probably from the first edition published in 1871. In my fourth edition copy (1888), it stands alone against the white background of the page, offering a soliloquy of unparalleled importance that reveals the key to Jesus’ ministry in the lives of the twelve Apostles.

Dr. Bruce excerpted the phrase from Acts 4:13 in the Greek New Testament: “Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as *having been with Jesus.*” Translated literally, it means “they were with Jesus.” The NIV reads, “These men had been with Jesus.” In four brief words, the Scriptures capture the essential means by which Jesus imparted His life and teachings to these men. He was simply with them. The disciples learned by listening to His words and by studying His life. Jesus imprinted His life upon these men by spending time with them.
John 1:29-51

John's record of this portion of the Gospel history captivates our interest because it reminds us of other small beginnings that have grown to greatness. On display before us is the infant church in its cradle, the small headwaters of the River of Life, the earliest blossoms of the Christian faith, the humble origin of the mighty empire of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All new things are more or less unknown. But in comparison, none were ever more obscure than the beginnings of Christianity. Imagine this first meeting of Jesus of Nazareth with five humble men - Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and another unnamed person. What an insignificant event in the history of the church, not to mention the world! It actually seems almost too trivial to be found in the Gospel narrative. For we do not have in this situation a formal, solemn call to the great office of apostleship. Nor do we see Jesus beginning to spend uninterrupted time with His disciples. The most we can say is that certain individuals were becoming acquainted with Jesus and were putting their faith in Him, and that they subsequently were giving their full attention to Him, ultimately becoming Apostles of His religion. It should not be surprising that there is no mention of these events in Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

Instead of being surprised by the silence of the first three Gospel writers, we ought to wonder why John (the author of the fourth Gospel) thought it was worthwhile to record these seemingly unimportant incidents after so many years had lapsed, especially since they stand so close to the majestic sentences with which his Gospel begins. We are prevented from such surprise by reflecting on the truth that insignificant facts may be very important to the feelings of those who are personally involved. What if John himself was one of the five who became acquainted with Jesus on this occasion? That would make a huge difference between him and the other evangelists. They would only know of these events second-hand (if they knew them at all). It would not be surprising that, until his last breath, John remembered with emotion the first time he saw the Incarnate Word and considered the smallest recollection of that time unspeakably precious. First meetings, as well as last ones, are sacred. This is especially true when they are followed by a profound history and are accompanied by signs foretelling the future. Such signs were not lacking in connection with the first meeting between Jesus and the five disciples. Did John the Baptist not first give to Jesus the name “Lamb of God,” which was an exact description of His earthly mission and
destiny? Was not Nathanael’s doubting question, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” a forewarning that the Messiah would face a conflict with unbelief? And did Jesus not give a wonderful sign that a new era of miracles would be performed by divine grace and power when he offered the promise to this godly, though at first doubting, Israelite: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”? (John 1:51).

So, John, the writer of the fourth Gospel, really was the fifth unnamed disciple. This is certain. His way, throughout his Gospel, is to use a periphrasis (a roundabout way of speaking) when alluding to himself. Sometimes he would even leave a blank where his name should be. One of the two disciples who heard the Baptist call Jesus “the Lamb of God” was John himself. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was the other.

The impressions we receive from these little anecdotes about the infancy of the Gospel are, in deed, meager when compared with the emotions which were awakened in the heart of the aged Apostle as he remembered these early events. However, it would be no credit to our intelligence nor to our piety if we could read this page of Gospel history unmoved, as if it were totally devoid of interest. We should study this simple story with the same kind of feeling that people have who make pilgrimages to sacred places; for indeed, the ground is holy.

**John the Baptist**
The scene where these events took place was in the region of Peraea, on the banks of the Jordan near the Dead Sea. The people who appear on the scene were all natives of Galilee, and their presence here is due to the fame of the remarkable man who had the distinct honor of being the forerunner of the Christ. John, surnamed the Baptist, had spent his youth in the desert as a hermit, living on locusts and wild honey, and clothed in a garment made of camel’s hair. He had come out of his solitude and appeared to the people as a prophet of God. The essence of his prophecy was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In a brief time, many were attracted from homes everywhere to see and hear him. Most of those who flocked to his preaching left without being changed. But many were also deeply impressed. These confessed their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River. Some of the people from this group became the disciples of John the Baptist. At least two of the five men mentioned by the evangelist (John) were a part of this group. Previous conversations with the Baptist had awakened in them a desire to see Jesus and prepared them for believing in Him. In his communication with the people around him, John made frequent allusions to the One who would come after him. He spoke of this coming One in language designed to awaken great expectations. When he referenced Him, he called himself a mere voice in the wilderness, crying, “Make ready the way of the Lord” (Matt. 3:3). At another time he said, “I baptize you in water for repentance; but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not even fit to remove His sandals” (Matt. 3:11). This great One was none other than the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel.
These messages were most likely to result in the disciples of the Baptist leaving him and going over to Jesus. John intended for this to happen. We see here the process of transition actually commencing. We do not maintain that the five men mentioned here left the Baptist at this time to become, from this time on, the regular followers of Jesus. But an acquaintance has now begun which will result in that. The bride (the disciples) is introduced to the Bridegroom (Christ), and the marriage will come in due time, not to the disappointment, but to the joy of the Bridegroom’s friend (John the Baptist).

How easily and naturally does the mysterious bride, represented by these five disciples, become acquainted with her heavenly Bridegroom! The account of their meeting is elegant in its simplicity and would only be spoiled by commentary. There is no need for a formal introduction. They all introduce each other. Even John and Andrew were not formally introduced to Jesus by the Baptist; rather, they introduced themselves. When the desert prophet saw Jesus, he exclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The next day, he repeated it in an abbreviated form (John 1:36). It was an involuntary statement from one who was absorbed in his own thoughts, rather than the conscious speech of one who was directing his disciples to leave him and go over to Jesus. The two disciples, on the other hand, in going away to the Person whose presence had been so impressively announced, were not obeying an order given by their old master. They were simply following their feelings which had been awakened by all they had heard him say about Jesus on both occasions. They did not need for someone to command them to seek the acquaintance of One in whom they felt so interested. All they needed was to know that this was He. They were as anxious to see the Messianic King as the world is to see the face of a prince.

The Character of the Five
It is natural for us to scan the Gospel narrative to discover the character of those who, in the way so notably described, met Jesus for the first time. Little is said of the five disciples, but there is enough to show that they were all religious men. What they found in their new friend indicates what they wanted to find. They evidently belonged to the select group of people who were waiting for the consolation of Israel and anxiously looked for Him who would fulfill God’s promises and satisfy the hopes of all devout souls. Besides this general indication about their character shown in their common confession of faith, a few other facts about these first believers in Jesus are given in order to help us become better acquainted with them. Certainly, two of them - probably all of them - had been disciples of the Baptist. This fact is decisive as it pertains to their moral earnestness. Only spiritually earnest men were likely to come from John’s influence. For if the followers of John were at all like him, they were men who hungered and thirsted after real righteousness, and who were sick of the righteousness then in vogue. They agreed in their hearts with John’s withering exposure of the hollowness of the people’s religious professions and of the worthlessness of trendy good works. These men longed for a purity other than the superstition and pretentiousness of the Pharisees. Each one’s conscience acknowledged the truth of the prophetic oracle, “All
of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Is. 64:6). And they prayed fervently for the revival of true religion, for the coming of the divine kingdom, for the advent of the Messianic King with a fan in His hand to separate the chaff from the wheat, and to put right all things which were wrong. Without a doubt, these were the feelings of those who had the honor to be the first disciples of Christ.

Simon Peter
Simon, the best known of all the Twelve and better remembered as Peter, is introduced to us here by the prophetic insight of Jesus. The good side of his character is emphasized when he is referred to as the man of rock. When this disciple was brought by his brother Andrew into the presence of his future Master, we are told that Jesus “looked at him, and said, ‘You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas’” (John 1:42). In Syriac, Cephas means the same thing that Petros signifies in Greek. The penetrating glance of Christ discerned that Peter had latent capacities of faith and devotion which were fundamental to ultimate strength and power.

Philip
The evangelist does not explicitly tell us what kind of man Philip was; only from where he came. From our current passage of Scripture, and from other texts in the Gospels, it can be concluded that he was a deliberate man, slow in arriving at a decision. For proof of this view, consider the way in which he described his first encounter with Jesus to Nathanael. But Philip’s words, and all that we read about him, rather suggests the idea that he was an earnest inquirer after truth who thoroughly searched the Scriptures and made himself acquainted with the Messiah of promise and prophecy. To him, knowing God was the sumnum bonum (the highest good). In Philip’s concern to win his friend Nathanael over to the same faith, we recognize a generous, sympathetic spirit which is characteristic of sincere inquirers. Later, this same spirit would be revealed in him when he brought the request from devout Greeks for permission to see Jesus.

Nathanael
The description of Nathanael, Philip’s acquaintance, is more detailed and more interesting than any of the other five. And it is quite surprising that we are told so much here about this one whom we otherwise know almost nothing. It is not even certain that he belonged to the circle of the Twelve. In all probability, however, he is to be identified with Bartholomew who is mentioned in all the Gospel accounts. His full name was Nathanael the son of Tolmai. In favor of this supposition is the fact that the name Bartholomew comes immediately after Philip in the lists of the Apostles. Nonetheless, we are confident that Nathanael was a man of great moral excellence. No sooner had Jesus seen him than He exclaimed, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47). These words suggest the idea that his heart was pure. There was no doublesmindedness, impure motive, pride, or unholy passion. He was gentle and meditative. His mind
mirrored heaven like the blue sky on a still lake on a calm summer day. He was a man who was addicted to habits of devotion. He had been engaged in spiritual exercises under a fig tree just before he met with Jesus. So we are justified in concluding these things about him from the deep impression made on his mind by the words of Jesus, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (John 1:48). Nathanael seems to have understood these words as meaning, “I saw into your heart and knew what you were thinking about; therefore, I pronounced you an Israelite indeed.” He accepted the statement made to him by Jesus as evidence that He had supernatural knowledge. Therefore, he immediately made the confession, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” - the King of that sacred commonwealth of which you say I am a citizen (John 1:49).

It is remarkable that this man, so highly endowed with the moral dispositions necessary for seeing God, should have been the only one of the five disciples who displayed any hesitancy about receiving Jesus as the Christ. When Philip told him that he had found the Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth, he skeptically asked, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). We usually do not expect such prejudice from one who is so meek and amiable. Yet, on reflection, we perceive it to be quite characteristic. Nathanael's prejudice against Nazareth sprung, not from pride (as in the case of the people of Judea who despised the Galileans in general), but from humility. He was a Galilean himself and as much an object of Jewish contempt as were the Nazarenes. His inward thought was, “Surely the Messiah can never come from among a poor, despised people such as we are - from Nazareth or any other Galilean town or village!” He timidly allowed his mind to be biased by current opinion, even though those thoughts originated in feelings with which he had no sympathy. This is a fault common to men whose piety, though pure and sincere, defers too much to human authority, and who, therefore, become the slaves of ideas totally unworthy of them.

While Nathanael was not free from prejudices, he showed his guilelessness in being willing to have them removed. He came and saw. This openness to conviction is the mark of moral integrity. The guileless man does not assert opinions without proof; he investigates, and therefore always comes to the right conclusions. The man who has a bad, dishonest heart, on the other hand, does not come and see. Believing it to be in his best interest to hold fast to his opinions, he diligently avoids looking at anything which does not tend to confirm his predetermined conclusions. He may profess a desire for inquiry, like certain Israelites mentioned in the same Gospel. Even though they may be different than Nathanael, they would share with him the prejudice against Galilee. “Search and see,” these Israelites said with guile. They were responding to the candid question from the honest, but timid Nicodemus: “Our Law does not judge a man, unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?” (John 7:51). “Search and see,” they said, appealing to observation and inviting inquiry. But they added: “no prophet arises out of Galilee” (John 7:52). This statement immediately prohibited inquiry, and suggested that it was
unnecessary. “Search and see; but we tell you beforehand that you cannot arrive at any other conclusion than ours. We warn you, you had better not.”

**The Belief of the Five**

Such were the characters of the men who first believed in Jesus. What was the amount and value of their belief? One's first impression is that the faith of the five disciples, except for the brief hesitation of Nathanael, seems unnaturally sudden and mature. They believe in Jesus on a moment's notice, and they express their faith in terms which seem appropriate only to advanced Christian intelligence. In this first chapter of John's Gospel, we find Jesus called not only the Christ, the Messiah, and the King of Israel, but also the Son of God and the Lamb of God. These names express to us the cardinal doctrines of Christianity: the Incarnation and the Atonement.

The haste and maturity which seem to characterize the faith of the five disciples are only superficial appearances. As to their haste: these men believed that Messiah was to come sometime; and they greatly wished that it might be then, for they felt He was greatly needed. They were men who waited for the consolation of Israel, and they were prepared at any moment to witness the advent of the Comforter. Then the Baptist had told them that the Christ had come, that He was to be found in the Person whom he had baptized, and that His baptism had been accompanied with remarkable signs from heaven. What the Baptist said, they implicitly believed. Finally, the impression they had of Jesus when they met Him tended to confirm John's testimony which was worthy of Christ.

The appearance of *maturity* in the faith of the five is equally superficial. As to the name “Lamb of God,” it was given to Jesus by John, not by them. It was, so to speak, the baptismal name which the preacher of repentance had learned by reflection, or by special revelation. He gave it to Christ. Even he did not comprehend what the name signified. The fact that he repeated it showed that he was only a learner working hard to get up his lesson. And we know that what John understood in part, the men he introduced to Jesus, now and for long after, did not understand at all.

The title, Son of God, was given to Jesus by one of the five disciples as well as by the Baptist. Years later, the Apostles still found the title sufficient to express their mature belief in the Person of their Lord. But it does not follow that the name was used by them at the beginning with the same fullness of meaning that it would have at the end. It was a name which could be used in a literary sense which fell far short of that which it is capable of conveying, and what it did convey in apostolic preaching - merely as one of the Old Testament titles of Messiah, a synonym for Christ. Without a doubt, it was in this rudimentary sense that Nathanael applied the title to Him, whom he also called the King of Israel.
The faith of these men was, therefore, just what we would expect from beginners. In substance, it amounted to this: they recognized in Jesus the Divine Prophet, King, Son of Old Testament prophecy. Its value did not lay in its maturity, or accuracy, but in this: that however imperfect, it brought them into contact and close fellowship with Him. In His company they would see greater things than when they first believed, one truth after another assuming its place in the firmament of their minds, like the stars appearing in the evening sky as daylight fades away.
The Twelve developed an intimate relationship with Jesus, but it was done gradually. There are three distinguishable stages in the history of their fellowship with Him. In the first stage, they were simply believers in Him as the Christ and occasionally accompanied Him when it was convenient and during times of celebration. During this stage in the interaction between the disciples and their Master (according to the first four chapters in John's Gospel), they became acquainted with Jesus and accompanied Him to a marriage in Cana (John 2:1-2), to the Passover in Jerusalem (John 2:13,17,22), while visiting the scene of the Baptist's ministry (John 3:22), and on the return journey through Samaria from the south to Galilee (John 4:1-27,31,43-45).

In the second stage, their fellowship with Christ assumed another form. They were present with Him most of the time. In order to do this, they had to frequently, if not completely (like Matthew), abandon their secular occupations. The passages we have just read allow us to see certain disciples entering this second stage of discipleship. Of the four persons named, we recognize three: Peter, Andrew, and John. They are old acquaintances who have already passed through the first stage of discipleship. We meet one of them, James the brother of John, for the first time. Some suppose that this means the first and second stages may have been blended together. This would mean that their professions of faith in Jesus as the Christ were immediately followed by their renouncing their secular occupations for the purpose of joining His company. These cases, however, were probably exceptional and few.

The Twelve entered into the last and highest stage of discipleship when they were chosen by their Master from the masses of His followers. He then formed them into a select band of men whom He would train to accomplish the great work of apostleship. This important event probably did not take place until all the members of the apostolic church had been around Jesus for some time.

It appears from the Gospel record that Jesus began at a very early period in His ministry to gather around Him a company of disciples for the purpose of preparing them to carry on the work of the divine kingdom. The two pairs of brothers received their call at the beginning of the first Galilean ministry. The first order of business was to select Capernaum by the sea as the
center of operations and their main living quarters (Matt. 4:13). And when we think what they were called to, we see that the call could not come prematurely. The Twelve were to be Christ's witnesses in the world after He had left it. Their specific duty was to give the world a faithful accounting of their Master's words and deeds, an accurate image of His character, a true reflection of His spirit. This work could only be accomplished by people who had been eye-witnesses and servants of the Incarnate Word from the beginning. Except in the cases of Peter, James, John, Andrew, and Matthew, we have no specific insights from the Gospels about the call of those who later became Apostles. We must assume that they all occurred in the first year of the Savior's public ministry.

The Apostleship
These calls were given with deliberate reference to an ulterior purpose: the apostleship. This is apparent from the remarkable words in which the earliest of them was expressed. “Follow Me,” Jesus said to the fisherman of Bethsaida, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). These words (whose originality stamps them as a genuine saying of Jesus) show that the great Founder of the faith desired not only to have disciples, but to have around Him men whom He might train to make disciples of others. He wanted to cast the net of divine truth into the sea of the world and to land a great multitude of believing souls on the shores of the divine kingdom. Both from His words and from His actions, we can see that He attached supreme importance to that part of His work which consisted in training the Twelve. In His intercessory prayer (John 17:6), He speaks about the training He had given these men as if it had been the most important aspect of His own earthly ministry. In one sense, it really was. The careful, painstaking, education of the disciples ensured that the Teacher's influence on the world would be permanent. His kingdom would be founded on the rock of deep and indestructible convictions in the minds of the few, not on the shifting sands of superficial, temporary impressions on the minds of the many. Our Lord Himself taught us in one of His parables (Mark 4:26), that the kingdom of God is like a seed cast upon the ground and left to grow according to natural laws. Therefore, had it not been for the Twelve, the doctrine, the works, and the image of Jesus might have perished from human history, with nothing remaining but a vague, mythical tradition. It would have had no historical value and little practical influence.

Since so much depended on these men, it was absolutely necessary that they possess extraordinary qualifications. The mirrors that are designed to reflect the image of Christ must be finely polished! The Apostles of the Christian religion must be men of rare spiritual endowment. It is a universal religion, intended for all nations. Therefore, its Apostles must be free from Jewish narrowness and have compassion that embraces the whole world. It is a spiritual religion, destined to abolish Jewish ceremonialism in short order. Therefore, its Apostles must have their consciences emancipated from the bondage of regulations. It is a religion which proclaims the
Cross, once an instrument of cruelty and a badge of wickedness, as the hope of the world's redemption. It is the symbol of all that is noble and heroic in conduct. Therefore, its messengers must be far superior to all traditional ideas about human and divine dignity. They must be capable of glorying in the cross of Christ and willing to bear a cross themselves. In short, the apostolic character must unite a free conscience, an enlarged heart, and an enlightened mind. And it must be done to the highest degree.

The humble fishermen of Galilee had much to learn before they could satisfy these high requirements. In fact, they had to learn so much that the time it took in their apprenticeship for their apostolic work seemed much too short, even considering that their training began from the commencement of Christ's ministry. They were indeed godly men who had already shown that their piety was sincere by forsaking all for their Master's sake. But at the time of their call, they were extremely ignorant, narrow-minded, superstitious, and full of Jewish prejudices, misconceptions, and animosities. They had much to unlearn of what was bad, as well as much to learn of what was good. And they were slow, both to learn and to unlearn. Old beliefs were already in possession of their minds. This made the communication of new ideas a difficult task. These men had good, honest hearts. The soil of their spiritual nature was prepared to produce an abundant harvest. But it was hard soil and needed a great deal of strenuous tillage before it would yield fruit. Then, to add to what has been said, they were poor men, of humble birth, inferior social status, and low-paying occupations who had never felt the stimulating influence of a liberal education or the social interaction with people who had cultivated minds.

**The Spiritual Condition of the Twelve**

As we proceed with this study, we will see abundant evidence that the spiritual condition of the Twelve was merely foundational, even long after the time when they were called to follow Jesus. Meanwhile, we may discover significant indications that at least one of the disciples was spiritually immature - Simon, son of Jonas. Note Luke's account of the incidents connected with his call. When Jesus was pressed by the multitude that had assembled on the shore of the sea to hear Him preach, He got into a ship (one of two lying nearby). It happened to be Simon's. Jesus, requesting him to push out a little from land, sat down and taught the people from the vessel. When He finished speaking, Jesus said to the owner of the boat, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch” (Luke 5:4). Their previous efforts to catch fish had been unsuccessful. But Simon and his brother did just as Jesus directed and were rewarded by an extraordinary take. To them and their fishing companions, James and John, it was nothing short of a miracle. Simon, the easiest to impress and the one of the four who showed his emotions most, expressed his feelings of astonishment with typical words and behavior. He fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8).
This exclamation opens a window into the inner man of Peter through which we can see his spiritual state. We can observe in Peter a mixture of good and evil, of grace and nature, which so frequently reappears in his character. Among the good qualities he possesses are reverential awe in the presence of Divine Power, an immediate reflection on his sin showing us his tender conscience, and a sincere self-humiliation brought about by the unmerited favor he received from the Lord. These are valuable features of character. But they did not exist in Peter without alloy. He also possessed a superstitious dread of the supernatural and a fear of God that resembled the hopeless submission of a slave. His superstitious nature is implied in the reassuring exhortation Jesus spoke to Peter, “Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men” (Luke 5:10). His slavish fear of God is even more apparent in his own words, “Depart from me, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Peter was powerfully impressed with the super-human knowledge revealed in connection with the great catch of fish. For the moment, he regards Jesus as a supernatural being, and as such, dreads Him as one whom it is not safe to be near, especially for a poor, sinful mortal like himself. His state of mind shows how totally unfit he is at this point to be an Apostle of a gospel which magnifies the grace of God, even to the chief of sinners. His godliness, even though it is sufficiently strong and certain, is not of a Christian type. It is legal (one might almost say pagan) in spirit.

One Grand Virtue

With all their imperfections, these humble fishermen of Galilee had one grand distinguishing virtue at the outset of their career. And though this virtue may possess many defects, it is the principal one of Christian ethics and the forerunner of the ultimate in high achievement. They were animated by a devotion to Jesus and to the divine kingdom which made them capable of any sacrifice. These men believed that the One who asked them to follow Him was the Christ, and that He had come to set up God's kingdom on earth. So they immediately left their nets and joined his company to be, from that time on, His constant companions wherever He traveled. The act was acknowledged by Jesus Himself to be commendable. And we cannot try to discredit it by accusing the disciples of being lazy, discontent, or ambitious. That would be unfair. The gospel story shows that these four disciples were not lazy, but rather hard-working, industrious men. Neither were they discontented; they had no cause for discontent. The family of James and John seems to have been very comfortable materially. Mark relates that when they were called by Jesus, they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants and followed Him. But what about ambition? Did it have a place in their motives? We must admit that the Twelve, especially James and John, were by no means free from ambition, as we learn later. But to whatever extent ambition may have influenced their actions at a later point in time, it was not the motive which caused them to leave their nets. Ambition needs a temptation. It does not join a cause which is obscure and struggling, and whose success is doubtful. It strikes when success is assured, and when the movement it associates with is about to be exalted. The cause of Jesus had not gotten to that stage yet.
Only one accusation can be brought against those men, and it can be brought with truth and without harming their reputations. They were **enthusiasts**. Their hearts were on fire and their heads were turned by a dream about a divine kingdom that would be set up in Israel, with Jesus of Nazareth as its king. That dream possessed them, controlled their minds, and shaped their destinies. It compelled them, like Abraham, to leave their kindred and their country and to go forward with what might appear to be the journey of a fool. How wonderful for the world that they were possessed by the idea of the kingdom! For it was not a fool's journey that they made, leaving their nets behind. The kingdom they sought turned out to be as real as the land of Canaan, though not exactly as they had imagined it. The fishermen of Galilee did become fishers of men on a grand scale. By God's grace, many people were saved and gathered into the church. In a sense, they are still casting their nets into the sea of the world. By their witness to Jesus in the Gospels and Epistles, they are bringing multitudes to become His disciples today. And they had the joy of being His first followers.

The Twelve left all and followed their Master. Did the “all” include their wives and children? It did in at least one situation - that of Peter. The Gospels tell how Peter’s mother-in-law was healed of a fever by the miraculous power of Christ (Matt. 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39). From a passage in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthian church, it appears that Peter was not the only one among the Apostles who was married (I Cor. 9:5). From the same passage we learn also that leaving wives for Christ’s sake did not mean literal desertion. Peter the Apostle had his wife join him as he traveled about; Peter the disciple may have done the same thing. It is likely that the married disciples were like married soldiers; they took their wives with them or left them at home as circumstances might require or allow. Women - even married women - sometimes followed Jesus. The wife of Simon, or of any other married disciple, may occasionally have been one of these women. At a much later time in the Gospel history, we find the mother of James and John in Christ’s company far from home. And where mothers were, wives might also be (if they so desired). The infant church, in its original nomadic or itinerant state, seems to have been a motley band of pilgrims composed of all sorts of people. They differed as to sex, social position, and moral character. Yet they were united. The bond of their union was their fervent attachment to the person of Jesus.

This itinerant church was not an organized community. It was not necessary to be a regular member in order to be involved in true discipleship. Except for the Twelve, following Jesus from place to place was optional, not compulsory. And in most cases, it was probably only occasional. Yet when the object of their faith - the center of the circle - was in motion, they wanted to be there. Believers would naturally want to see as many of Christ’s works and hear as many of His words as possible. When the object of their faith left the earth and His presence became spiritual, every reason for this nomadic discipleship was gone. To be present with Him then, men only needed to forsake their sins.
Chapter 3

Matthew the Publican


The call of Matthew clearly illustrates a very prominent feature in the actions Jesus performed in public. He had absolute disregard for precepts that were based on worldly wisdom. A publican (tax-collector) disciple, and how much more a publican Apostle, could not be other than a stumbling-block to Jewish prejudice. He would be, at least for the time being, a source of weakness rather than strength. Yet, while perfectly aware of this fact, Jesus invited this one who had pursued the occupation of a tax-collector to be a part of the intimate fellowship of His disciples. At a later time, He selected him to be one of the Twelve. His recruiting procedure is remarkable in this case. This is true especially when it is contrasted with the way He treated others who had attractive outward advantages and showed their readiness to follow Him by volunteering to become His disciples. We have an example in the Scribe who came and said, “Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go” (Matt. 8:18-20). This man's social position and professional accomplishments seemed to point him out as a very desirable addition to Jesus’ group of men. But the Teacher deliberately scared him away by giving him a gloomy picture of his own destitute condition. He said, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

Jesus’ eye was single as well as omniscient. He looked on the heart and only paid attention to spiritual fitness. He had no faith in any discipleship based on misunderstandings and secret purposes. On the other hand, He had no fear of the drawbacks which arose out of the external associations or past history of true believers. He was entirely indifferent to what had taken place in anyone's past. Because He was confident in the power of truth, He chose the humble things of the world rather than the things that were held in honor. Being assured that they would conquer in the end, He went calmly on His way, fully aware that both He and His disciples would be despised and rejected by people for a season. He chose for His companions and agents those whom He wanted and was undisturbed by the opposition from His generation. He knew that His work concerned all nations and all time.

The publican disciple bears two names in the Gospel history. In the first Gospel he is called Matthew; in the second and third Gospels he is called Levi. The same person is intended, and we may regard it as a matter of certainty. It is inconceivable that two tax-collectors would have
been called to be disciples at the same place and time and in the midst of circumstances which
are so remarkably similar. We do not need to be surprised that the Gospel writers did not note
the difference in the names. The first readers of the Gospels would have been so familiar with
the two names that it would have made the information superfluous.

In all probability, Levi was the name of this disciple before his call; and Matthew, his name as a
disciple. The new name became a symbol and commemoration of the more important change
in his heart and life. Similar symbolic changes in names occurred frequently at the beginning
of the Gospel. Simon, son of Jonas, was transformed into Peter; Saul of Tarsus became Paul; and
Joseph the Cypriot received from the Apostles the beautiful and well-deserved Christian name
of Barnabas (son of encouragement) because of his love, generosity, and spiritual wisdom.

Matthew seems to have been employed in Capernaum, Jesus' adopted city, as a collector of
revenue at the time he was called. For while Jesus was at home “in His own city,” as Capernaum
came to be called, a man afflicted with palsy was brought to Him to be healed. From all the
evangelists (Matt. 9:9; Mark 2:13; Luke 5:27) we learn that He saw Matthew when He was going out
of the house where the miracle was performed. He said to Matthew, “Follow Me.” The inference
from these facts is plain and important. It helps to explain the apparent suddenness of the call
and the speed with which he responded to it. Jesus and His new disciple were living in the same
town and had opportunities to see each other on previous occasions.

The time of Matthew’s call cannot be precisely determined, but there is good reason for placing
it before the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew’s Gospel contains the most complete report about
it. This, in itself, is strong evidence in favor of this chronological arrangement. Such a full
account of the sermon was not likely to come from one who did not hear it. And when the Gospel
of Luke is examined, probability almost becomes certainty. Luke has a prefix to his abbreviated
account of the sermon which contains a note about the members of the apostolic company. He
represents Jesus as descending from the mountain “with them” - the Twelve, whose names he
has just cited - to the place where the sermon was delivered (Luke 6:13-17). Of course the act
of appointing them as Apostles must have been preceded by the separate calls to each of the
men. This would have included Matthew’s call which is reported by Luke in an earlier part of
his Gospel (Luke 5:27). It is true that the position of his call in Luke’s narrative proves nothing
in itself, since Matthew relates his own call after the sermon. Moreover, neither one of them
systematically adheres to a chronological arrangement of his story. We base our conclusion on
the assumption that when any of the evangelists declares that he is giving a sequential order,
his statement may be relied on. In addition, Luke obviously commits himself to chronological
reporting by placing the ordination of the Twelve prior to the preaching of the Sermon on the
Mount. Further still, Matthew’s arrangement in the early part of his Gospel is obviously not
chronological. He reports in a topical fashion. In chapters 5-7, he shows Jesus as a great ethical
teacher; chapter 8-9, as a worker of miracles; chapter 10, as a Master - choosing, instructing, and sending the Twelve on an evangelistic mission; chapter 11, as a critic of His contemporaries and One who asserts His own prerogatives; chapter 12, as One who is exposed to the contradictions of unbelief; and chapter 13, as a teacher who uses parables to present the doctrines of the kingdom.

Matthew’s Call
Moving on from these minor points to the call itself, we observe that the narratives about the event are very brief and fragmentary. There is no indication of a previous meeting with Jesus which might prepare Matthew to comply with the invitation given to him. This does not necessarily mean that they had never met. We know from the case of the four fishermen that their call is reported in the Synoptic Gospels with the same kind of abruptness, while John tells us that at least three of them were previously acquainted with Jesus. The truth is that in regard to both calls, the evangelists were only concerned about the crisis. This is why they silently passed over all the stages of preparation and did not consider it necessary to inform intelligent readers that, of course, neither the tax-collector nor any other disciple blindly followed someone he did not know simply because asked or commanded to follow. We have already established the fact that Matthew, while a tax-collector, resided in Capernaum. This makes it absolutely certain that he knew of Jesus before he was called. No one could live in that town in those days without hearing about the mighty works done in and around it. Heaven had been opened right above Capernaum so everyone could see, and a multitude of angels surrounded the Son of Man. Lepers were cleansed and demoniacs delivered; blind men received their sight and lame men the use of their limbs; one woman was cured of a chronic illness and another, the daughter of Jairus, a distinguished citizen and the ruler of the synagogue, was brought back to life from the dead. These things were done publicly, caused a lot of uproar, and were talked about frequently. The evangelists report how the people “were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him” (Mark 1:27); how they glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this” (Mark 2:12); or, “We have seen remarkable things today” (Luke 5:26). Matthew himself concludes his account of the raising of Jairus’ daughter with the remark, “And this news went out into all that land” (Matt. 9:26).

We do not maintain that all these miracles were performed before the time of Matthew’s call, but some of them certainly were. When we compare one Gospel with another to determine the historical sequence, we conclude that the greatest of all these mighty works - the raising of Jairus’ daughter - occurred before the call. Think, then, what a powerful effect that wonderful work would have had in preparing the tax-collector for recognizing in the solemnly spoken
phrase, “Follow Me,” the command of One who was Lord both of the dead and of the living. It would have also prepared Matthew for yielding to His request in prompt, unhesitating obedience!

By acknowledging that Matthew had some previous knowledge of Christ, we make his conversion to discipleship appear reasonable without diminishing its moral value. It is not to be assumed that he would become a follower of Jesus just because he had heard or seen His wonderful works. Miracles, in and of themselves, could not make anyone a believer, otherwise all the people of Capernaum would have believed. The facts proved differently. Later, Jesus complained about the towns along the shore of the Sea of Galilee where most of His mighty works were done. He mentions Capernaum in particular. Of this city He bitterly said: “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day” (Matt. 11:23). Christ’s complaint against the residents of these favored cities was that they did not repent; that is, they did not make the kingdom of heaven their chief good and chief goal in life. They were amazed at His miracles, talked a lot about them, and followed Him so they could see even more of the same kind of works, all the while feeling a new sense of astonishment. But after a time, they relapsed into their old stupidity and apathy. Morally, they remained the same as they had been before He came among them. They were not children of the kingdom, but children of this world.

Matthew’s Repentance

But this was not true of the collector of taxes. He not only wondered and talked, but he repented. We cannot tell whether he had more to repent of than his neighbors. It is true that he belonged to a profession which, when seen through the prejudiced eyes of the people of that time, was all bad. Many tax-collectors really were guilty of fraud and extortion. But Matthew may have been an exception. His farewell feast shows that he possessed means, but we must not assume that he obtained them dishonestly. We can only say this: if this tax-collecting disciple was covetous, the spirit of greed was now exorcized. If he had ever been guilty of oppressing the poor, he now hated his past. Matthew had grown weary of collecting revenue from a reluctant population and was glad to follow One who had come to take burdens off instead of laying them on. He had come to cancel debts instead of rigorously collecting them. And so it came to pass that the voice of Jesus acted on his heart like a spell: “And he left everything behind, and rose up and began to follow Him” (Luke 5:28).

According to the accounts of all the evangelists, this great decision was followed shortly afterwards by a feast in Matthew’s house. Jesus was present (Matt. 9:10). From Luke we learn that this party had all the character of a great occasion, and that it was given in honor of Jesus.
Few people would have valued this honor, however, because of the kind of guests who were present. “There was a great crowd of tax-gatherers and other people who were reclining at table with them” (Luke 5:29). Among the others were some who were either sinners or were considered to be sinners to a high degree (Luke 5:30).

As far as we can tell, this feast was as rich in moral significance as the food that was placed on the table. For the host himself, it was a gala event which commemorated his emancipation from drudgery, incompatible relationships with others, and sin - at least the temptation to sin. He was now entering the free and blessed life of fellowship with Jesus. This moment was a kind of poem, expressing for Matthew what Doddridge's familiar lines express for many others, but perhaps not as well:

Oh happy day, that fixed my choice  
On Thee, my Savior, and my God!  
Well may this glowing heart rejoice,  
And tell its raptures all abroad!

'Tis done; the great transaction’s done:  
I am my Lord’s, and He is mine;  
He drew me, and I followed on,  
Charmed to confess the voice divine.

The feast was also an act of worship to Jesus. Matthew gave his splendid feast in honor of his new Master, just as Mary anointed Him with her precious ointment. It is the way of those to whom much grace is shown and given. They manifest their grateful love in deeds that bear the stamp of what Aristotle called magnificence. Scoundrels call it extravagance. But irrespective of those who might find fault with such acts of devotion, Jesus always accepted them with pleasure.

The ex-tax-collector’s feast, furthermore, seems to have had the character of a farewell party for his fellow publicans. From this time forth, he and they were to go their separate ways. He would part with his old comrades in peace.

We can believe that Matthew meant for his feast to be the means of introducing his friends and neighbors to Jesus. With the typical zeal of a young disciple, he sought to encourage others to take the step which he had resolved to take himself. At least he hoped that some sinners who were present might be drawn from their evil ways into the paths of righteousness. And who can really know if it was at this feast or at some other similar occasion, that gracious impressions were made whose final outcome was a loving display of gratitude that would not even be spoken
at the other feast in Simon's house (not Peter, but a Pharisee by that name; see the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and perfume in Luke 7:36). At this latter feast, neither tax-collectors nor sinners were admitted.

When looked at from within, Matthew's feast was a very joyful, innocent, and even edifying event. But take notice! Looked at from without, it was seen very differently, like stained-glass windows. In fact, it was nothing short of scandalous. Certain Pharisees watched the guests come and go. They observed the character of these people and, according to their habitual practice, made their wicked remarks. When the opportunity presented itself, they asked Jesus' disciples a question that was both complimentary and condemning: “Why do you eat and drink with the tax-gatherers and sinners?” (Luke 5:30). The ones asking the question were, for the most part, local members of the pharisaic sect, for Luke calls them “their scribes and Pharisees.” This implies that Capernaum was important enough to be honored with the presence of men who represented that religious party. However, it is by no means unlikely that among these unfriendly spectators were some Pharisees who had come all the way from Jerusalem. The seat of religious government was there, and they were already tracking the Prophet of Nazareth, watching His every move just like they had watched John the Baptist. The news of Christ's wonderful works soon spread all over the land and attracted spectators from everywhere - from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and Peraea, as well as Galilee (Matt. 4:25). We may be sure that the Scribes and Pharisees of the holy city were not the last to go and take a look. We must admit that they performed their duty of religious espionage with exemplary diligence.

**The Great Physician**

The presence of evil men belonging to the pharisaic order was almost a regular feature in Christ's public ministry. But it never disturbed Him. He went calmly on His way doing His work. And when His conduct was called into question, He was always ready with an irrefutable answer. Among the most stunning of His answers to those who questioned Him were those in which He vindicated Himself for spending time with publicans and sinners. There are three such situations. The first occurred at Matthew's feast; the second in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36); and the third on an occasion that is not given to us in detail, when certain Scribes and Pharisees brought against Him the serious charge, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). His defenses for loving the unloved and the morally unlovely are full of truth and grace, poetry and emotion. They are also not without a touch of quiet, charming ridicule directed against the holier-than-thou fault-finders. The first can be distinguished as the professional argument, and goes like this: “I go to the places where sinners go, because I am a physician. They are sick and need healing. Where should a physician be but among his patients? Where should I go most frequently? Shouldn't it be to those who are the most seriously afflicted?” The second one may be described as the political argument, and its premise is this:
“It is good policy to be the friend of sinners who have much to be forgiven. For when they are restored to the paths of virtue and godliness, how great is their love! See that penitent woman? She’s weeping for sorrow and for joy, bathing her Savior’s feet with her tears. Those tears are refreshing to My heart, like a spring of water in the arid desert of pharisaic coldness and formality.” The third may be called the argument from natural instinct: “I meet with sinners, and I eat with them. This way I can restore them. I do it for the same reason a shepherd goes after a lost sheep and leaves the flock in the wilderness. He does it because it is natural to seek the lost and to have more joy in finding things lost than in possessing things which never have been lost.

People who do not understand these feelings are alone in the universe. For angels in heaven, fathers, mothers, shepherds - all who have human hearts on earth - understand them well and act on these feelings every day.”

Using these reasons, Jesus argued with His accusers beginning with their own assumptions. He accepted their evaluation of themselves (that they were righteous) and of the class with whom they thought it was dishonorable to associate (that they were sinful). But He was careful, at the same time, to make certain that His judgment about these two groups of people did not coincide with that of His questioners. He did this at Matthew’s feast by challenging them to go study the text, “I desire compassion, and not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13). He meant to imply that while they were very religious, the Pharisees were also very cruel, full of pride, prejudice, harshness, and hatred. He was proclaiming the truth that this kind of person was far more detestable in God’s sight than those who were addicted to the crude vices of the multitudes, not to mention those who were “sinners” in the imaginations of the Pharisees.

Our Lord’s last words to the people who questioned His conduct provided a strong rebuttal to their arguments. But His words were also judicial. “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13). He was being clear that His purpose was to let the self-righteous alone and to call to repentance and to the joys of the kingdom those who were not too complacent to care about the benefits offered. To them, the gospel feast would be a real entertainment. His words contained a significant hint that a religious revolution was coming in which the last would become first and the first last. Jewish outcasts and Gentile dogs would be made partakers of the joys of the kingdom. The righteous, on the other hand, would be shut out. It was one of His pregnant sayings whereby Jesus revealed to those who could understand that His religion was a universal one. It was a religion for humanity, a gospel for mankind, because it was a gospel for sinners. This He declared by using words. But His conduct spoke louder than His words. It was a threatening thing to express loving sympathy for publicans and sinners. The instincts of the Pharisees discerned it to be true, and they rightly became alarmed. It meant death to the privileged monopolies of grace and to Jewish pride and exclusiveness. All people are equal in God’s sight and welcome to salvation on the same terms. In fact, it was a virtual announcement
of Paul’s teaching about a gospel that is universal. A certain school of theologians maintain that the Twelve stringently opposed this gospel in the same way the Pharisees did. Isn’t it strange that the men who had been with Jesus were so ignorant that they did not even understand - even to the very end - what was involved in their Master’s fellowship with the lowly and the lost?! Was Buddha more fortunate with his disciples than Jesus with His? Buddha said, “My law is a law of grace for all.” He was directing these words against the prejudice of the Brahmin caste (the Brahmins are the highest caste among the Hindus). And his followers understood what it meant: that Buddhism, a missionary religion, a religion even for Sudras (the lowest of the four great castes among the Hindus; Untouchables, or Dalits), and therefore one for all mankind!
Jesus’ selection of the Twelve from the group of disciples who had gradually gathered around Him is an important landmark in the gospel history. It divides the Lord’s ministry into two parts. Both parts are nearly equal in duration, but they are unequal as to the extent and the importance of the work done. In the first period, Jesus worked alone. His miraculous works were confined, for the most part, to a limited area. His teaching was elementary. But by the time the Twelve were chosen, the work of the kingdom had grown to such dimensions that it had to be organized and the labor divided among the disciples. Also, Jesus' teaching was beginning to be deeper and more complex, and His gracious activities were spreading to many other areas.

In all probability it had become necessary for Christ to select a limited number of men to be His close and constant companions because of His success in gaining disciples. We can only imagine that the number of His followers had mushroomed to the point where it was a hindrance for Him to move from place to place. This was especially true of His long journeys which were made in the latter part of His ministry. It was impossible for all those who believed in Him to continue to follow Him, in the literal sense of the word, wherever He chose to go. The greatest number of them now could only follow Him occasionally. But it was His desire that certain men whom He selected be with Him at all times and in all places. He wanted them to be His traveling companions on all His journeys, to see His work first-hand, and to minister to Him by providing for His daily needs. And so, in the remarkable words of Mark, “And He.....summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him...” (Mark 3:13-14).

These Twelve, however, were going to be more than traveling companions or lowly servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. But for now, they were to be students of Christian doctrine and occasional laborers in doing the work of the kingdom. Eventually, they would be Christ’s chosen agents, fully trained to spread the faith after He had left the earth. From the time they were chosen, the Twelve became apprentices under Jesus. He was preparing them for the great office of apostleship. In this course of training, they were to learn what they should do, believe, and teach as His witnesses and ambassadors to the world. This was to take place in the privacy of an intimate and daily fellowship with their Master. From this time on, the training of these men...
was to be a constant and prominent part of Christ's personal work. He was to make it His top priority to tell them in the darkness what they should later speak about in the daylight. He would whisper in their ears what they would later preach from the housetops (Matt. 10:27).

The Time of Jesus’ Selection

Although we cannot be absolutely certain as to the exact time when Jesus chose the Twelve, it can be somewhat determined because of its relationship to certain leading events that happened in the gospel history. John speaks of the Twelve as an organized group when Jesus fed the five thousand and gave the message on the bread of life in the synagogue of Capernaum shortly after the miracle. From this fact we learn that the Twelve were chosen at least one year before the crucifixion. We can be certain of this because the miracle of the feeding took place, according to John, shortly before a Passover season (John 6:4). Jesus asked the men He had chosen, “Did I Myself not choose you, the Twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70). He seemed to be expressing doubt about the disciples’ faithfulness after the multitude had deserted Him. So, from His question, we conclude that His choosing the Twelve was not a recent event. The Twelve had already been together long enough to give the false disciple the opportunity to show his real character.

The evangelists who wrote the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, & Luke) mark the selection of the Twelve with two other important events. By the time they commenced their mission in Galilee, Matthew indicates the Twelve were a distinct body. However, he does not say they were chosen immediately before the mission, nor does he explicitly relate the two. Rather, he refers to the apostolic fraternity as if it had already been in existence. His words were, “And having summoned His twelve disciples...” (Matt. 10:1). Luke, on the other hand, gives us a formal record of the selection. It is found in the preface to the Sermon on the Mount. He creates the impression that the choosing of the disciples preceded the Sermon (Luke 6:13,17). Finally, Mark’s narrative confirms the findings of Matthew and Luke, namely, that the Twelve were called just before the Sermon on the Mount was delivered and a good while before they were sent out on their preaching and healing mission. We read, “And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted” (Mark 3:13). Evidently, the ascent he referred to was that which Jesus made just before He preached His great message. Mark continues, “And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons” (Mark 3:14-15). He is alluding here to an intention that Jesus had to send His disciples on a mission. However, the intention is not presented as if the disciples immediately left for this mission. We cannot even say that Mark implies that the disciples immediately left to accomplish their mission. Several chapters later in his Gospel, Mark gives an account of the mission as it was actually carried out: “And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out...” (Mark 6:7).
It is almost certain, then, that the calling of the Twelve occurred before the preaching of the great sermon on the kingdom. Later, they would have a distinguished part in founding this kingdom. As to the precise time in the ministry of our Lord when the sermon was given, we cannot be absolutely sure. Our opinion, however, is that the Sermon on the Mount was delivered toward the close of Christ’s first lengthy ministry in Galilee. This would have taken place between the two visits to Jerusalem on the festive occasions mentioned in John 2 and 5.

**The Number of Apostles**
The number of Apostles chosen is significant. It was a matter of Jesus’ choice, just as the composition of the men was. A larger number of eligible men could have been easily found from the circle of disciples which later provided no fewer than seventy assistants for evangelistic work. A smaller number might have served all the present or future purposes of the apostleship. The number twelve was recommended for obvious symbolic reasons. It expressed what Jesus claimed to be and what He had come to do. The symbol supported the faith of His followers and stimulated their devotion to Him. It hinted at the fact that Jesus was the divine Messianic King of Israel who had come to set up His kingdom. His advent was foretold by prophets in glowing language spoken during the prosperous days in Israel’s history. Then, the theocratic community had integrity, and all the tribes of the chosen nation were united under the royal house of David. So the number twelve was designed to have a mystical meaning. We know this from Christ’s own words to the Apostles which He spoke on a later occasion. He was describing to them the rewards which would be waiting for them in the kingdom for their past services and sacrifices. He said, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28).

It is possible that the Apostles were very much aware of the mystical significance of their number. It probably gave them encouragement for their fond but deluded hope that the coming kingdom would not only be a spiritual realization of the promises, but a literal restoration of Israel to political integrity and independence. Risking this misunderstanding was one of the drawbacks connected with the particular number twelve. But Jesus did not consider that a good reason for selecting another number. His method of proceeding in this matter, as in all things, was to live by that which in itself was true and right. He would then correct misunderstandings as they arose.

**The Twelve Apostles**
We now leave the discussion about the number who were Apostles and consider the men themselves. Seven of the Twelve are people whom we already know, if we assume Bartholomew and Nathaniel are the same person. They are the first seven listed in Mark’s and Luke’s lists. As
we proceed in the gospel history, we will become better acquainted with two of the remaining five who are listed first and last. Thomas, who is called Didymus (the Twin), will come before us as a man who has a warm heart, but who is melancholy in his temperament. He is ready to die for his Lord but is slow to believe in His resurrection. Judas Iscariot is known to the world as the Traitor. He appears for the first time in these lists of the Apostles with the infamous title branded on his brow: “Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him” (Mark 3:19). The presence of a man who is capable of treachery among the elect disciples is a mystery which we will not attempt to penetrate right now. We simply make the following historical remark about Judas: he seems to have been the only one among the Twelve who was not a Galilean. His surname is apparently taken from the place where he was born: the man of Kerioth. From the book of Joshua, we learn that there was a town by that name in the southern part of the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:25).

**James the Son of Alphaeus & Thaddaeus**

Very little is known about the last three names. There have often been attempts by biblical scholars to identify James the son of Alphaeus with James the brother or relative of the Lord. Many people have speculated that the next one mentioned in the lists of Matthew and Mark - Thaddaeus - was a brother of this James, and therefore another brother of Jesus. This opinion is based on the fact that Luke uses the name “Judas the son of James” (Luke 6:16) instead of Lebbaeus or Thaddaeus as the first two Gospels do. The word which is missing in the text (“the son”) has been supplied for us. It is assumed that the James mentioned is James the son of Alphaeus. Yet, no matter how tempting it is to hold on to this opinion, we can not be certain about it. We must be content with stating that there was a second James who was one of the Twelve in addition to the brother of John and the son of Zebedee. There was also a second Judas, who appears again in the farewell conversation that took place between Jesus and His disciples on the night before His crucifixion (John 14:22). John carefully differentiates him from the traitor by the parenthetical remark, “not Iscariot.” This Judas is the same person as Lebbaeus and Thaddaeus, and has been called the three-named disciple.

**Simon the Zealot**

The last disciple mentioned, like the first, was a Simon. This second Simon is as unknown as the first one is renowned. He is not mentioned anywhere in the gospel history, except in the lists of the Apostles. Still, as little known as he is, the descriptive phrase attached to his name - “who was called the Zealot” (Luke 6:15) - carries with it a piece of information that is odd and interesting. He is called the Kananite (not Canaanite), which is a political, not a geographical designation. This is apparent from the Greek word which has been substituted here for the Hebrew word. He calls this disciple Simon Zelotes. In English, it is Simon the Zealot. Without a doubt, this descriptive word, Zelotes, connects him with the famous party which rebelled with
Judas in the days of the taxing (Acts 5:37) about twenty years before Christ’s ministry began. At this time, Judea and Samaria were brought directly under the government in Rome, and the census was taken for future taxation purposes. How unique a phenomenon is this ex-zealot among the disciples of Jesus! No two men could be more different in their spirits, goals, and strategies than Judas of Galilee and Jesus of Nazareth. One was certainly not content with the political situation. The other would have the people who were conquered bow to Caesar’s control and give him what was due. Judas was trying to restore the kingdom to Israel and adopted for his motto, “We have no Lord or Master but God.” Jesus was focused on founding a kingdom which would not be national, but universal; not “of this world,” but purely spiritual. The strategies used by the two were as different as their goals. Judas resorted to using the weapons of war - the sword and the dagger. Jesus relied totally on the gentle, yet all-powerful, force of truth.

We do not know what led Simon to leave Judas for Jesus. But he made a great exchange for himself. The party he left was destined to come to ruin in later years. They would also do damage to their own country because of their fanatical, reckless, and hopeless patriotism. The insurrection of Judas was crushed. But the fire of discontent still smoldered in the hearts of his followers. In time, it burst out into the blaze of a new rebellion. This brought about a life-and-death struggle with the gigantic power of Rome and ended with the destruction of the Jewish capital and the dispersion of the Jewish people.

By choosing this disciple to be an Apostle, Jesus gave another illustration of His disregard for playing it safe. An ex-zealot was not a safe man to make into an Apostle. He might put Jesus and His followers in an awkward position. They could become objects of political suspicion. But the Author of our faith was willing to take the risk. He expected to gain many disciples from the dangerous classes of people as well as from the despised. He also wanted them to be represented among the Twelve.

It gives one great joy to think about Simon the Zealot and Matthew the publican - men coming from such diverse backgrounds - being together in close fellowship in the little band of twelve men. Extremes meet in these two disciples - the tax-gatherer and the tax-hater; the unpatriotic Jew who degraded himself by becoming a servant of a foreign ruler, and the Jewish patriot who was furious about being under the foreign ruler, and longed for emancipation. It was not accidental that these two opposites were united. Rather, it was designed by Jesus as a prophecy of future things to come. He wanted the Twelve to be a miniature church. Therefore, He chose them to suggest that distinctions between publican and zealot should not exist. In the same way, in the church of the future, there would be neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, bond nor free, but only Christ - everyone would belong to each other, and each person would be a part of the whole body.
These are the names of the Twelve as they are given in the lists. As we closely examine the rolls, we observe that they contain three groups of four. The same names are found in each list, but the order of their appearance varies. The first group includes the best known; the second, the next best; and the third, those least known of all of them. In the case of the traitor, he is known only too well. Peter is the most prominent Apostle. He stands at the head of each list, whereas Judas is at the foot. There, as we have already noticed, he is carefully designated as the traitor. If we take the order that Matthew gives us and borrow the descriptive phrases from the gospel history at large, the apostolic roll is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Group</th>
<th>Second Group</th>
<th>Third Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon Peter</td>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>James (the son) of Alphaeus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The man of rock</td>
<td>The earnest inquirer</td>
<td>(James the Less? Mark 15:40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Bartholomew, or Nathaniel</td>
<td>Lebbaeus, Thaddaeus, Judas of James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter’s brother</td>
<td>The guileless Israelite</td>
<td>The three-named disciple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James and John</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Simon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sons of Zebedee, and</td>
<td>The melancholy</td>
<td>The Zealot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sons of Thunder</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Judas, the man of Kerioth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The publican (so called by</td>
<td>The Traitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>himself only)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Why Jesus Chose These Men**

These were the men whom Jesus chose to be with Him while He was on this earth and to carry on His work after He left it. These were the men whom the church celebrates as the “glorious company of the Apostles.” The praise is deserved. But the glory of the Twelve was not given by this world. From a worldly point of view, they were a very insignificant company - a group of poor, illiterate, Galilean rustics. They were totally devoid of social status and were not likely to be chosen by anyone who had the highest regard for these kinds of issues. Why did Jesus choose such men? Was He guided by feelings of antagonism toward those who possessed social
advantages? What about His being partial toward men who were from His own class? No. His choice was made in true wisdom. If He mainly chose Galileans, it was not because He was prejudiced against those from the provinces in the south. If, as some think, He chose two or even four from His own relatives, it was not from nepotism. If He chose common, uneducated, humble men, it was not because He was jealous of knowledge, culture, or good birth. If any rabbi, rich man, or ruler had been willing to surrender himself, without reservation, to serve the kingdom, there would have been no objection to him because of his accomplishments, possessions, or titles. The case of Saul of Tarsus, the pupil of Gamaliel, proves the truthfulness of this point. Even Gamaliel himself would not have been rejected had he been able to stoop to become a disciple of the unlearned Nazarene. But notice this! Neither he nor any from his rabbinical order would stoop this low. Therefore, the despised One did not get an opportunity to show His willingness to accept men like this as His disciples or choose them as His Apostles.

The truth is that Jesus was obligated to be content with fishermen, publicans, and former zealots for His Apostles. They were the best that could be had. Those who thought they were better than they, were too proud to become disciples. Therefore, they excluded themselves from the high honor of being chosen to be princes of the kingdom. The whole world can now see what an honor it was to be selected as one of His Apostles. The civil and religious leaders boasted about their unbelief (John 7:48). For a brief moment, the citizens of Jerusalem felt interested in this zealous Youth who had purged the temple with a whip of small cords. But their faith was superficial. Their attitude was patronizing. Therefore, Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew what was in them (John 2:23-25). There were a few people who sincerely identified with Him, but they were not committed enough to Him to be eligible to be Apostles. Nicodemus was barely able to speak a timid word to defend Christ. Joseph of Arimathea was a “secret disciple” because he feared the Jews. These were hardly the people to send out as missionaries of the cross. These were men who were bound by social ties and party connections. They were enslaved by the fear of man. The Apostles of Christianity had to be made of tougher stuff.

Jesus was obligated to fall back on the rustic, but simple, sincere, and energetic men of Galilee. And He was quite content with His choice. He devoutly thanked His Father for giving them to Him. He would not have despised learning, position, wealth, or refinement if they had been surrendered to His service. But He preferred devoted men who had none of these advantages over uncommitted men who had them all. And He did so with good reason. It did not matter very much to Him what the social position or the previous history of the Twelve had been. Those things only mattered to their contemporaries who were prejudiced anyway. Jesus was only concerned that they were spiritually qualified for the work to which they were called. What is ultimately revealed about a man is not what is on the outside, but what is within. John Bunyan was a man who was born in poverty. He had a humble occupation. And, until his
conversion, he had very bad habits. But he was born a genius and, by grace, he was a man of God. He would have been a most effective apostle. In fact, he was one.

**Objection to Jesus’ Choices**

Someone might object that all of the Twelve were by no means gifted like Bunyan. Some of them, in fact, were all but useless (to be blunt about it). They were - if they are judged by the fact that no one knows much about them except their names; and, if they are measured by the silence of the history about them. They did not make a name for themselves, either by being highly gifted or by having had great careers. Since this objection virtually undermines the wisdom of Christ's choice, it is necessary to examine it to determine whether it is true or not. We submit the following rebuttals of this view:

**Rebuttals**

1. It cannot be denied that some of the Apostles were relatively unknown and inferior men. But even the least known among them may have been the most useful as witnesses for Him. They had been in His company from the beginning. It does not take a great man to make a good witness. And to be witnesses of the truthfulness of Christianity was the main business of the Apostles. We do not need to doubt that the most humble among them offered important service in that capacity, even though nothing is said about them in the works of the Apostles. It was not to be expected that Luke's history, which was incomplete and brief, would mention any but the principal actors. This is true especially when we reflect on how few of the characters that appear on the stage during any particular crisis in human history are prominently noticed - even in histories that go into elaborate detail. The purpose of history is served by recording the words and deeds of the key people. Many who did outstanding things in their day are often allowed to drop into obscurity. The Apostles who are the least distinguished are entitled to the benefit of this perspective.

2. Three prominent men - even two (Peter and John) - out of twelve is a good ratio. There are few organizations in which superior excellence has such a high percentage to respectable mediocrity. Perhaps the number of “pillars” (Gal. 2:9) was as great a number as He desired. We ought to be thankful for the fact that everyone was not a Peter or a John. It means that there were different gifts among the first preachers of the Gospel. As a general rule, it is not good when all are leaders. Little people are needed as well as great ones. For human nature is one-sided. Little people have their special virtues and gifts and can do some things better than their more celebrated brothers and sisters.

3. We must remember how little we know about any of the Apostles. Biographers today write for a public that is either morbidly or idly curious. They go into the most trivial detail about a
particular event or personal issue concerning their heroes. There is no trace of this idolatrous triviality in the histories of the evangelists. The writers of the Gospels were not obsessed with biographic detail. In addition to this, the Apostles were not the theme of the Gospels. Christ was their hero. Their sole desire was to tell what they knew about Him. They gazed without waver ing at the Sun of Righteousness, and in His radiance they lost sight of the stars that attended Him. Whether they were stars of the first magnitude, or of the second, or of the third, made little difference.
As Jesus was equipping the Twelve for the work of the apostleship, it was necessary for them to hear and see His words and works. This was an important aspect of their training. Their eyes and ears needed to witness the facts of an unparalleled life - the life of Jesus. This was indispensable preparation for bearing witness of Him in the future. The Apostles could only get people to believe their wonderful story by being able to preface it with the assertion, "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you..." (I John 1:3). None would believe their report except those who were satisfied that it came from men who had been with Jesus. Therefore, the third evangelist (Luke) who was not an Apostle, but one of their companions, presents his Gospel with all confidence to his friend, Theophilus, as a genuine history. It was no mere collection of fables, because its contents were confirmed by those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word from the beginning.

During the early period of their discipleship, hearing and seeing seem to have been the main occupation of the Twelve. Then they were like children born into a new world. Their first (but by no means their least) important lesson was to use their senses to observe the wonderful things taking place all around them.

The things which the Twelve saw and heard were certainly wonderful. The great Actor in the astounding drama was careful to impress on His followers the magnitude of their privilege. On one occasion He said to them, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see, for I say to you, that many prophets and kings wished to see the things which you see, and did not see them, and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them" (Luke 10:23-24). Yet certain generations of people in Israel had seen very remarkable things. Some had seen the wonders of the Exodus and the grandeur connected with the lawgiving at Mount Sinai. Others had witnessed the miracles done by Elijah and Elisha. Later generations had been privileged to listen to the wonderful oracles spoken by David, Solomon, Isaiah, and the rest of the prophets. But the things witnessed by the Twelve far surpassed the wonders of all the past ages. For one greater than Moses, or Elijah, or David, or Solomon, or Isaiah was here. The promise to Nathanael was
being fulfilled. Heaven had been opened, and the angels of God - the spirits of wisdom, power, and love - were ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Now we may take a rapid survey of the *mirabilia* (Latin: wonders) which the Twelve had the unique privilege to see and hear. This happened, more or less, during the whole period of their discipleship, and especially right after they were chosen as Apostles. These may be considered under two headings: 1) the Doctrine of the Kingdom, and 2) the Philanthropic Work of the Kingdom.

**The Doctrine of the Kingdom**

Before Jesus' ministry began, His forerunner (John the Baptist) had appeared in the wilderness of Judea preaching and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). Some time after they were chosen, the Twelve were sent out into the towns and villages of Galilee to repeat the Baptist's message. But Jesus did something more than proclaim the coming of the kingdom. He explained the nature of the divine kingdom, described the character of its citizens, and differentiated between genuine and fake members of the holy body. He did this, in part, in the Sermon on the Mount, which was preached shortly after He chose the Apostles. He also did it through certain parables which He told within the same time frame. In the great sermon delivered on the mountain top, the qualifications for citizenship in the kingdom of heaven were laid out. He first spoke positively, then comparatively. The positive truth was summed up in seven golden sentences called the Beatitudes. Here the joy of the kingdom was represented as being altogether independent of the outward conditions. In contrast, worldly happiness was associated with externals. According to the Preacher, the blessed were the poor, the hungry, the mournful, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peaceable, the sufferers for righteousness' sake. These were blessed and were a source of blessing to the human race. They were the salt of the earth, the light of the world. They were raised above others in spirit and character in order to draw them upwards and lead them to glorify God.

Next, and with more detail, Jesus presented the *righteousness* of the kingdom and of its citizens. He compared it to the righteousness that dominated the people of that day. He spoke with a solemn emphasis, “…unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). Then He illustrated and enforced the general proposition by giving a detailed description of counterfeit righteousness in its moral and religious aspects. Specifically, he dealt with the way the moral law was interpreted and the manner in which spiritual disciplines were practiced, such as prayer, giving (alms), and fasting. In one aspect, He characterized the righteousness of the Pharisees as superficial and technical; in another way, it was showy, complacent, and critical of others. In contrast to this kind of righteousness, He described the *ethics* of the kingdom as a pure stream of life with love as its
fountainhead. It was a morality of the heart, not just of outward conduct. It was a morality that was also broad and universal. It jumped over all arbitrary barriers which had been arrogantly and selfishly erected by the interpreters of the law. He set forth the religion of the kingdom as humble, reserved, and devoted in singleness of heart to God and to things divine. Its root is faith in God as a kind, gracious Father. Its fruit is contentment, cheerfulness, and freedom from worldly cares. Finally, it refrains itself in dealing with those who profane the name of God and is opposed to severe judging. In fact, it is opposed to judging at all and leaves people to be judged by God.

The message (you have just been given a quick outline) made a powerful impression on the audience. We read, “...the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority (the authority of wisdom and truth), and not as their scribes” (who only had the authority of office) (Matt. 7:28-29). It is not likely that either the multitude or the Twelve understood the sermon, because it was both deep and lofty. Their minds were preoccupied with very different ideas about the coming kingdom. Yet the implication of all that had been said was clear and simple. The kingdom of which Jesus was both the King and the Lawgiver was not to be a kingdom of this world. It was not to be here on earth, nor out there in space. It was to be within the heart of man. It would not be the monopoly of any class or nation, but open to all who had the required spiritual attributes on equal terms. Nowhere in the sermon does Jesus say that keeping ritual ceremonies, like circumcision, was not necessary for admission into the kingdom. But circumcision is ignored here, as it was ignored throughout the teaching of Jesus. It is treated as something that is simply out of place. It cannot be dove-tailed into the pattern of doctrine which is presented. The very mention of it would have been incompatible with the rest of His message and would have seemed strange. How true this is. Anyone can put this issue to rest by just imagining for a moment that among the Beatitudes, one had been found that read like this: “Blessed are the circumcised, for no uncircumcised ones shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.” It was a significant silence concerning the seal of the national covenant which could not fail to have an effect on the minds of the disciples. It was a hint that circumcision would eventually pass into history.

Jesus taught these significant truths first by delivering an ethical sermon. At other times He would popularize the same truths by using parables. Over the course of His ministry, He uttered many parabolic sayings. It was one of His favorite types of instruction. Approximately thirty parables have been preserved for us in the Gospels. Most of them were spoken on specific occasions and are best understood when viewed together with the circumstances which gave rise to them. But there is a special group of eight which seem to have been spoken around the same period of time. They were designed to serve one purpose: to display in simple pictures the outstanding features of the kingdom of heaven. These parables would speak of the nature and
progress of the kingdom. They would mention how the kingdom related to the different classes of people. One of these, the **Parable of the Sower** (apparently the first one He told) tells about the different responses that various people have to the message of the kingdom. It also speaks of the various issues that they face in life. Two of them - the **Parable of the Tares** and the **Parable of the Net** which was cast into the sea - describe the mixture of good and evil that must exist in the kingdom until the end when the great and final separation would take place. Another pair of short parables - those of the **Treasure Hid in a Field** and of **The Precious Pearl** - presents the absolute importance of the kingdom and the importance of gaining citizenship there. Two others - **The Grain of Mustard Seed**, and **The Leaven** hid in three measures of meal - explain how the kingdom advances from small beginnings to a great ending. An eighth parable (found in Mark's Gospel only) teaches that growth in the divine kingdom occurs in stages. A comparison is made to the development of **Grain**: first, the blade, then the ear; then the full ear of corn (Mark 4:26ff).

These parables - at least most of them - were spoken to mixed audiences. It seemed as if they were intended mainly for the ignorant public. Support for this position comes from a reply that Jesus gave to a question the disciples asked. “...His followers, along with the Twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables” (Mark 4:10-11). This seems to imply that the Twelve did not need such elementary explanations of truth - mere children's sermons. Jesus only meant that the parables were not as important for them as they were for the public at large. For the Twelve, the parables were only one of several ways that Jesus brought His grace to them. Eventually, they were to become teachers who had been instructed in the things of the kingdom. They would be acquainted with all of its mysteries. They would be able, like a wise homeowner, to display from their treasures both new and old things (Matt. 13:52). On the other hand, the multitudes received the parables which were indispensable to them. These parables gave them their only opportunity to get a little glimpse into the mysteries of the kingdom.

But the Twelve were not *above* the parables. This is evident from the fact that they asked their Master about them in private. And He explained them - probably all of them (Mark 4:34). But the interpretations of only two are preserved for us in the Gospels - the **Parables of the Sower** and the **Tares**. The disciples were still only children, and the parables were pretty pictures to them. But they could not tell what the pictures meant. Even after they had received private explanations of their meaning, they were probably not much wiser than before. However, they claimed to be satisfied. Their profession was undoubtedly sincere. They expressed what they felt. But they spoke as children, understood as children, and thought as children. They still had much to learn about these divine mysteries.
After the children had grown to spiritual manhood and fully understood these mysteries, they greatly treasured the happiness they had enjoyed in these earlier years. They had been privileged to hear the parables of Jesus. We have an interesting passage of Scripture that captures the deep impression that these simple pictures produced in the minds of the Apostles. Matthew offers his reflections when he closes his account of Christ's parabolic teaching: “All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He was not talking to them without a parable, so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES; I WILL UTTER THINGS HIDDEN SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD” (Matt. 13:34-35). The quotation is taken from Psalm 78, and is significantly different from the original Hebrew and from the Septuagint version (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). Matthew has consciously adapted the words in order to express the absolute originality of the teaching in which he found their fulfillment. While the Psalmist uttered dark sayings from the ancient times of Israel's history, Jesus had spoken things in the parables that had been hidden from the time of creation. This was not an exaggeration on the part of Matthew. The use of the parable as a means of instruction was all but new. And so were the truths expressed in the parables. They were certainly the eternal truths of the divine kingdom, but until the days of Jesus, they had remained unannounced. Earthly things had always been appropriate to symbolize heavenly things. But, until the great Teacher appeared, no one had ever thought of linking the two together so that one would become a mirror of the other and reveal the deep things of God to ordinary eyes - just as no one before Isaac Newton had thought of connecting the fall of an apple with the revolution of the heavenly bodies, even though apples had fallen to the ground from the beginning of creation.

**The Philanthropic Work of the Kingdom**

What the disciples saw in Christ's presence was even more wonderful than what they heard. They were eyewitnesses of the events that Jesus told the messengers of John the Baptist to report to him when he was in prison. His works were unquestionable evidence that He was the Christ who would come (Matt. 11:2f). While the disciples watched, blind men received their sight, lame men walked, lepers were cleansed, the deaf recovered their hearing, and dead people were raised to life. For a time, doing these wonderful works was Christ's daily occupation. He went throughout Galilee and other districts “doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). The miracles recorded in detail in the Gospels give absolutely no hint of the extent to which these wonderful works were done. The leper was cleansed as Jesus was descending the mountain after the great sermon was preached; the palsied servant of the Roman centurion was restored to health and strength; Peter's mother-in-law was cured of a fever; demons were cast out of a man in the synagogue in Capernaum; the widow's son was brought back to life while he was being carried out to be buried. These, and others like them, are only a few samples
which have been selected from an innumerable multitude of good works. And it does not matter if they are regarded as miracles or as acts of kindness. The truth of this statement is apparent from paragraphs that frequently occur in the Gospels. They do not report individual miracles, but an indefinite number of them taken as a whole. Here is an example of one of the paragraphs which casually rehearses the works done by Jesus at the close of a busy day: “And when evening had come, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed. And the whole city had gathered at the door. And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons” (Mark 1:32-34). All of this happened on a single Sabbath evening in Capernaum shortly after the Sermon on the Mount was preached. Such scenes appear to have been common at this time. We read a little farther on in the same Gospel, “And He told His disciples that a boat should stand ready for Him because of the multitude, in order that they might not crowd Him; for He had healed many, with the result that all those who had afflictions pressed about Him in order to touch Him” (Mark 3:9-10). On another occasion, Mark reports that “He came home, and the multitude gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal” (Mark 3:20).

What is inferred by these passages is the vast extent of Christ’s labors among the suffering. This is supported by the impressions made on the minds of His friends and enemies. Those who were upset by His works were so overwhelmed by what they saw that they found it necessary to develop a theory to account for the mighty influence that Jesus exerted in curing physical and, especially, spiritual problems. They said, “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons” (Mark 3:22). It was a lame theory, as Jesus demonstrated. But at least it was conclusive proof that great numbers of demons were cast out.

Those who extolled Jesus’ works had various thoughts. Those which have been recorded support a testimony as to His vast activity and His extraordinary zeal. Some people, apparently relatives, thought He was mad. They believed His enthusiasm had disturbed His mind. So they compassionately tried to save Him from damaging His reputation, which they believed He would do by being overly concerned about doing good works for others (Mark 3:21). The feelings of the people who received the benefits were more devout. “...they were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (Matt. 9:8). It was natural for them not to criticize someone who was enthusiastic for humanity, for they were the recipients of His goodness.

The impressions of the Twelve were not recorded as the events took place. But we have an interesting sample of their subsequent reflections as Apostles. The first evangelist appends a statement to his account of the transactions that took place on that Sabbath evening in
Capernaum. The devout Matthew, according to his custom, saw Old Testament Scripture fulfilled in these wonderful works. He found the fulfillment of these works in a touching passage from Isaiah: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows” (Is. 53:4). Departing from the Septuagint, Matthew found a suitable way to fulfill his purpose by rendering the text in this way: “HE HIMSELF TOOK OUR INFIRMITIES, AND CARRIED AWAY OUR DISEASES” (Matt. 8:17). The Greek translators interpreted the text as referring to people's spiritual illnesses - their sins. Matthew, however, did not think it was a wrong application of the text nor degrading to the words to find in them a prophecy of the Messiah's deep sympathy with those who suffered from any disease, whether it was spiritual, mental, or physical. He did not know how to express the intense compassion of his Lord any better than by using prophetic language to represent Him as the One who took their sicknesses on Himself, nor did he misuse the prophet's thoughts by making this application. He only laid a foundation to infer that if He healed physical diseases, how much more sympathy would the Savior have for the spiritual ones. Surely He who cared for people's bodies would have even greater sympathy for their souls. It might be safely anticipated that He who was so conspicuous as a healer of bodily disease would become even more celebrated as a Savior from sin.

The works which the Twelve were privileged to see were certainly worth seeing. And they were most certainly worthy of the Messianic King. They demonstrated that the King and the kingdom were not only coming. It had come. And what could be a better indication of their presence than mercy dropping like the “gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath”? John the Baptist seems to have thought otherwise when he sent his messengers to inquire of Jesus if He were the Christ who was to come. We can only imagine that he wanted to see a work of judgment on those who remained unrepentant. To him, this would have been a more reliable proof of the Messiah's coming than these miracles of mercy. The prophetic tendency to complain and the prison air had affected his judgment and his heart. He was in the combative mood of Jonah who was displeased with God, not because He was too stern, but because He was too gracious - too ready to forgive.

The least in the kingdom of heaven were incapable of being offended with these works of our Lord, because they were **merciful** in nature. The offense in our day can be found elsewhere. People get tripped up over the miraculous things which were seen by the disciples and recorded by the evangelists. They say that mercy is God-like, but miracles are impossible. And they think they are doing well to be skeptical. To be sure, they accept some of the healing miracles because they do not think it is impossible for them to fall within the realm of nature. But they do not believe they belong to the category of the miraculous. “Moral therapeutics” might account for these kinds of miracles, a department of medical science that Mr. Matthew Arnold
thinks has not been sufficiently studied yet. All other miracles besides those which are done by moral therapeutics are thought to be unbelievable. But why not extend the dominion of the moral over the physical, and say without qualification, that mercy is God-like, and the kind of works that were done by Jesus were simply matters of course? This is the way it seemed to the Gospel writers. What they marveled at was not the fact that Christ's miracles were supernatural. Rather, they were amazed at the unfathomable depth of divine compassion. This is what they revealed. There is no trace of their loving the fantastic either in the Gospels or in the Epistles.

The disciples may have felt this way when the age of wonders first happened before their astonished eyes. But they had lost it all by the time the New Testament books began to be written. Throughout the New Testament, miracles are spoken of in a sober, almost matter-of-fact, tone. How is this to be explained? The explanation is that the Apostles had seen so many miracles while they were with Jesus that they were no longer excited about them. Their sense of wonder had been diminished because they were saturated with them. But though they stopped being amazed at the power of their Lord, they never ceased to wonder at His grace. The love of Christ remained for them throughout life a thing that surpassed knowledge. The longer they lived, the more they acknowledged the truth of their Master's words, “Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see” (Luke 10:23).
CHAPTER 6

Lessons on Prayer


It would have been surprising if prayer had not occupied a prominent place in the instruction Jesus gave to His disciples. Prayer is a necessity for spiritual life. And all who sincerely try to pray soon feel the need to be taught how to do it. What subject could have occupied the mind of the Master more than this one? He Himself was emphatically a man of prayer, occasionally spending whole nights in prayerful communion with His heavenly Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12; Matt. 14:23).

Jesus often spoke on the subject of prayer within the hearing of His disciples. For example, He devoted a paragraph to it in the Sermon on the Mount. He cautioned those who were listening to Him to avoid any outward behavior that was intended to bring praise to self (like the Pharisees did). He also warned them against vain repetition in prayer. Instead, Jesus gave them a model prayer that was simple, comprehensive, and brief (Matt. 6:5-13). At other times, He directed the people's attention to the necessity of persevering in prayer (Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-5), of agreement in prayer (Matt. 18:19), of strong faith in prayer (Matt. 21:22), and of expecting great things in prayer (John 16:23-24). This is the acceptable and prevailing kind of prayer.

Luke 11 gives an account of what may be regarded as the most complete and comprehensive of all the lessons Jesus communicated to His disciples on the important subject of prayer. The circumstances around which this lesson was given are interesting. The lesson on prayer was itself an answer to prayer. After hearing Jesus pray, one of the disciples - probably one of the Twelve - made this request, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). The request, together with the occasion on which it was made, convey to us in an unintentional way two pieces of information. We learn that on many occasions, Jesus prayed alone as well as with His disciples. He practiced family prayer as the head of a household in addition to secret prayer in personal fellowship with God His Father. From the request, we learn that the social prayers of Jesus were most impressive. When the disciples heard them, they were made painfully aware of their own inadequacies. After the “Amen,” they were instinctively ready to make the request, “Lord, teach us to pray.” It was as if they were ashamed to attempt the exercise any more in their own feeble, vague, stammering words.
We do not know when this lesson was given. Luke introduces his narrative of it in a very indefinite way. He does not record the time nor the place. His reference to John the Baptist in the past tense (“...just as John also taught his disciples”) might seem to indicate a date after his death. But Luke could have expressed himself in this way because the disciple had previously been a disciple of the Baptist (paraphrased: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught us when we were his disciples”). Nor can any certain inference be made from the contents of the lesson. As far as their spiritual needs were concerned, this is a lesson that could have been given to the Twelve at any time during their discipleship training. It is a lesson for children, for new believers, for Christians who are in the phase of their spiritual pilgrimage when they are rough around the edges - people who are confused in their thinking, who cannot seem to speak, who are dejected, who are unable to pray because they don't have any clear thoughts or appropriate words to say. They also lack the faith that knows how to wait while living with hope. So this model prayer meets the needs of these people by suggesting topics, supplying actual words that can be repeated, and furnishing their weak faith with the props of convincing arguments so they will persevere in prayer. Now this was the state of the Twelve during the whole time they were with Jesus. This lasted until He ascended into heaven, and power descended from heaven on them. When it came, they were able to speak, and they possessed an enlarged heart. During the whole period of their discipleship, they needed to be prompted to pray like a mother reminds her child. They needed encouragement to persevere in the habit of praying in the same way that the most humble followers of Christ do. The Twelve were far from being exempt from such weaknesses. In fact, they may have experienced them to a very high degree. The heights correspond to the depths in religious experience. As disciples, these men who were destined to become Apostles must know more than the average person about the confused, speechless condition that sometimes happens in prayer. They must also know about the great, irritating, but praiseworthy business of waiting on God for light, truth, and grace, which all sincerely desire but have withheld from them for long periods of time.

It was beneficial to the church that her first ministers received this lesson on prayer. For the time comes in most people’s lives, if not all, who genuinely try to live for Christ, when this teaching on prayer is most needed. In the spring of the Christian life, at the time when the beautiful blossoms of godliness emerge, believers may be able to pray freely so that the words flow with ease and passion. They are not embarrassed by a lack of words, thoughts, or certain kinds of feelings. But that wonderful stage soon passes. It is succeeded by one in which prayer often becomes a helpless struggle, an inarticulate groan, a silent, distressed, despondent waiting on God. This happens to people who are tempted to doubt whether God hears prayers. They wonder if it is entirely superficial and useless. There are three needs considered and addressed in this lesson: the need for 1) ideas, 2) words, and 3) faith. These are as common as they are tragic. Consider how long it takes most people to fill even the simple petitions of the Lord’s Prayer.
with definite meanings! For instance, the second petition, “Thy kingdom come,” can only be offered intelligently by those who have formed for themselves a clear conception about the ideal spiritual republic or commonwealth. How difficult, and therefore how rare, to find acceptable words to express such special thoughts that have been so slow in developing! There have been so many people who have never received anything that they had set their hearts on without asking for it often. How many of them have been tempted, when the answer was delayed, to give up in despair! And no wonder! For delay is hard to endure in any situation, especially as it pertains to spiritual blessings, which are, in fact, the major goal of a Christian person’s desires and are assumed by Christ to be as well. Spiritual people should not be totally confused by delay. They should not even be surprised by not receiving temporal things. For they know that things such as health, wealth, spouse, children, home, position, are not unconditionally good. They realize that it may be appropriate for them not to obtain them - at least not easily nor too soon. But it is extremely confusing to want the Holy Spirit with all your heart and yet seem to be denied the priceless favor; to pray for light, and to get in its place deeper darkness; to pray for faith, and to be tormented with doubts which shake cherished convictions to their foundations; to pray for personal holiness and to have the mud of corruption stirred up from the bottom of the well of eternal life in the heart by some temptation. Yet every bit of this is part of the discipline through which Christ’s disciples have to pass in order for the desires of their hearts to be fulfilled. Every experienced Christian knows this.

The lesson on prayer taught by Christ was in response to a request and consists of two parts. In one, the thoughts and words are put into the mouths of immature disciples. The other provides aids to faith in God as the One who answers prayer. First, there is a form of prayer. Then, there is an argument which enforces perseverance in prayer.

**The Form of Prayer**

The form of prayer that Christ gave us is commonly called the Lord’s Prayer. It appears in the Sermon on the Mount as a sample of the right kind of prayer. It contains a summary of the general headings under which all special petitions come. The form is called the *alphabet* of all possible prayer. It has the elements of all spiritual desire summed up in a few choice sentences and has been given for the benefit of all who may not be able to articulate their hopes and dreams. It contains six petitions. The first three refer to God’s glory; the last three to man’s good. First, we are taught to pray for the coming of the divine kingdom, which includes showing reverence for the divine name and universal obedience to the divine will. Secondly, we are taught to pray for daily bread, pardon, and protection from evil. The whole prayer is addressed to God as Father. It comes out of the mouths of those who realize they have fellowship with other members of the body of Christ, and therefore say, “Our Father.” The prayer does not end as ours today do, with “For Christ’s sake.” It could not. If it did, it would not be consistent with the assumption...
that the prayer came from Jesus. Before His death, no prayer given by Him to His disciples for their use could have this sort of ending. The request it makes could not have been understood by them prior to the event. The Twelve did not yet know what Christ's sake meant. They would not understand this until after their Lord had ascended and the Spirit had descended, revealing to them the true meaning of the facts of Christ's earthly history. Just before His passion, we find Jesus telling His disciples that until that time, they had asked nothing in His name. He told them that in the future they would be able to use His name as a plea that would be heard. It would be one of the privileges they would have. He said, “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full” (John 16:24). And in another part of His discourse: “And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13).

We do not know the extent to which the disciples used this beautifully simple, yet profoundly significant, model in later years. But it could be assumed that they habitually repeated it just as the disciples of the Baptist might repeat the forms taught them by their master. It had permanent value as a part of Christ's teaching. However, there is no reason to think that the “Lord's Prayer” was designed to be a standardized, compulsory method of addressing the Father in heaven. It was meant to be an aid to inexperienced disciples, not a rule that was imposed on the Apostles. Even after they had come to spiritual maturity, the Twelve could have used this form if they wanted to - and they possibly did. But Jesus expected that by the time they became teachers in the church, they would have outgrown the need for it as an aid to devotion. As they were filled with the Spirit, had their hearts enlarged, and became mature in their spiritual understanding, they should then be able to pray like their Lord had prayed when He was with them. The six petitions of the model prayer would still play a part in all their supplications before the throne of grace. But they would do so in the same way that the alphabet of a language forms the lengthy and eloquent messages of a speaker. He never thinks of the letters that form the words he speaks.

As it pertains to the Twelve, we are not concerned with the fact that the prayer does not end with the phrase, “for Christ's sake.” We maintain that, for these disciples, the character of the Lord's Prayer was temporary and for this specific time in their lives. This phrase could easily be added afterwards, either mentally or orally. So their not using it offers no reason for not using it today. To allow this model prayer to fall by the wayside and not be used today simply because this customary plea is missing at the end is a weak reason. On the other side of the coin, it ought not to be repeated too frequently. The Lord's Prayer is neither a piece of Deism (the belief that God exists and created the world, but thereafter assumed no control over it or the lives of people) unworthy of a Christian, nor is it a magic charm to be said in church without meaning. The most mature believer will often find relief and rest in his spirit when he meditates on the simple, yet majestic, sentences of the prayer. During these times, he realizes just how many aspects there
are to each of the particular requests. He also understands that he is only a beginner in the art of praying and, generally, in living the Christian life. His devotions consist mainly, or even exclusively, of repeating the words which Jesus put into the mouths of immature disciples.

The view which is now being advocated regarding the purpose of the Lord’s Prayer is in harmony with the spirit of all of Christ's teachings. In general, liturgical forms and the systematic methods that religions use were much more acceptable to the strict, ascetic school of John the Baptist than to the free school of Jesus. Our Lord evidently attached little importance to forms of prayer. The same could be said for His view of fixed, periodic fasts. If this were not true, He would not have waited until He was asked for a model prayer. Instead, He would have made systematic provision for the needs of His followers just like the Baptist did, by (so to speak) compiling a book of devotion or composing a liturgy. It is evident, even from the present instructions on the subject of praying, that Jesus considered the form He gave them to be of very little importance. It was only a temporary solution for a minor problem (their lack of words to say in prayer) that was to be used until the greater problem (their lack of faith) was resolved. For the larger portion of the lesson is devoted to the purpose of offering a remedy for their unbelief.

**Persevering in Prayer**

The second part of this lesson on prayer is intended to teach the same moral that the preface to the parable of the unjust judge does - “that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1). The reason for not persevering in prayer is also the same: God delays in answering our prayers. This is not as obvious in the earlier lesson as in the latter. The parable of the neighbor who would not get out of bed is not given to convey the idea that God delays for a long time before He answers prayer (see Luke 11:5ff.). For the favor which is requested, if it is granted at all, must be granted in a very few minutes. But the lapse of time between the presenting and the granting of our requests is implied and presupposed as a matter of course. By delaying, God seems to say to us what the neighbor said to his friend. So we are tempted to think that there is no reason to pray.

Both of the parables that Christ gave - and they were spoken to teach perseverance in prayer - seek to accomplish their purpose by showing the power of importunity (perseverance) in circumstances that seem to offer no hope of an answer. The characters that are appealed to are both bad - one is not generous and the other is unjust. And nothing is to be gained from either of them except by working on their selfishness. The point of the parable in either case is that perseverance has a power of annoyance that enables it to obtain what it wants.

It is important again to notice what is supposed to be the primary aspect of prayer that is being taught in connection with the argument that we will now consider. Christ assumes His disciples
have set their hearts on personal sanctification. This is apparent from the concluding sentence of the discourse: “how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13b). Jesus takes it for granted that the people He is speaking to here seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Therefore, though He inserted a petition for daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, He drops it in the latter part of the discourse. Why? Because it is not the main thing we ought to desire. And secondly, because for all who truly put God's kingdom first, food and clothing are thrown into the bargain.

To those who do not desire the Holy Spirit above everything else, Jesus has nothing to say. He does not encourage them to hope that they will receive anything from the Lord. Least of all, they should not expect the righteousness of the kingdom or personal sanctification. What does He think of the prayers of a double-minded man? Those prayers are a hollow mockery because that person has two primary purposes in mind. This person is speaking mere words which never reach Heaven's ear.

The supposed reason for losing heart is delay; and the supposed object of one's desires is the Holy Spirit. So the spiritual lesson that Jesus wants to teach in the argument is, without question, clear. The Teacher's goal is to help and encourage those who feel that the work of grace happens slowly with them. They wonder why and sadly let out a sigh because it does. We believe this was the condition of the Twelve when this lesson was given. They had been made painfully aware of their inability to do their devotional duties in the right way. They looked at this inability as a benchmark of their spiritual condition. As a result, they were depressed.

**Jesus Inspires His Disciples**
The argument Jesus used to inspire His discouraged disciples with hope and confidence that their desires would be fulfilled is characterized by boldness, warmth, wisdom, and logic. Its boldness is revealed by His choice of illustrations. Jesus has such confidence in the goodness of His cause that He states the case in an unfavorable light by selecting, as examples, men considered to be below the normal standard of human virtue. One is a man who is asked at any hour of the night to help a neighbor in a real emergency. This is the situation presented in the parable (Luke 11:5ff). The emergency could have been the one presented in the text, or it could have been sudden sickness. The man in bed puts him off with these words: “Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything” (vs. 7). This response would greatly upset his friends. It would become a proverb among them, representing all that is selfish and heartless. Jesus’ willingness to take an extreme case is also seen in a second argument. This one is taken from the way fathers act toward their children. “Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish...” (Luke 11:11). This is the way it begins. Jesus does not care what father is selected. He is willing to choose anyone they please.
will take the very worst just as readily as the best. We could even say he would choose the worse more readily, because the argument is not made on the basis of the goodness of the parent, but rather on his lack of goodness. Its purpose is to show that no special goodness is required to keep all parents from doing what is right. People would be outraged if a parent did not even have a natural love for the child. That would be revolting to everyone's feelings.

The warm, kind character of the argument is shown by the insight and sympathy displayed in it. Jesus knew what hard thoughts people have about God when their desires are not met. They doubt His goodness and think of Him as indifferent, heartless, and unjust. He shows His intimate knowledge of their secret complaints by the cases He discusses with them. The unkind friend and the unloving father, as well as the unjust judge, are illustrations to be sure. But they are not pictures of what God is like. They are not even pictures of who Jesus would have us believe God is. However, they are illustrations of who even spiritual people sometimes think Him to be (see the book of Job, Ps. 73 and 77). Jesus not only knows this by using His divine knowledge; He also sympathizes. He does not, like Job's friends, find fault with those who harbor thoughts full of doubt or thoughts that are even profane. Nor does He rebuke them for their impatience, lack of trust, and despondency. He deals with them as men who are surrounded with weakness and in need of sympathy, counsel, and help. And in supplying these, He comes down to their level of feeling, and tries to show that there is no reason for them to be in despair, even if things were as they seemed to be. He argues from their own thoughts about God and maintains that they should still put their hope in Him. In effect, He says to them, “Suppose God is who you think He is - indifferent and heartless. Still continue to pray! In the case that I presented, do you see what perseverance can do? Ask in the same way that the man who wanted fish asked, and you will also receive from Him who at the present time seems deaf to your requests. Things may seem unfavorable, but they cannot be more unfavorable than that of the man in the parable. Yet you observe this man's favorable outcome because he was not easily discouraged.”

Jesus displays His wisdom in dealing with the doubts of His disciples by avoiding all the elaborate explanations of the causes or reasons for delay in answering prayer. He uses only arguments which He adapted to the capacity of the people who were weak in faith and in spiritual understanding. He does not attempt to show why sanctification is a slow, tedious work rather than a momentary act - why the Spirit is given gradually and in a limited, rather than all at once and in an unlimited, way. He simply urges those who listen to Him to persever in seeking the Holy Spirit. He assures them that their desires will be fulfilled in the end, in spite of the delay which tries their patience. He does not teach them a philosophy of waiting on God but only tells them that they will not wait in vain.
Delays in Prayer

The Teacher followed this method, not out of necessity, but by choice. Although no attempt was made to explain God’s delays in providence and grace, it was not because an explanation was impossible. There were many things which Christ might have said to His disciples at this time if they could have handled them. Later on, they said some of the same things themselves. But it was only after the Spirit of Truth had come and guided them into all truth. He made them aware of the secret of God’s way. He might have pointed out to them: 1) that the delays about which they complained were also seen in nature where gradual growth is the universal law; 2) that time is needed for producing the ripe fruit of the Spirit in the same way that ripe fruit in the field or orchard needs time; 3) that there is a law of growth that the more complex the product, the slower the process by which it is produced (the principle: that we should not be amazed if spiritual fruit is particularly slow in ripening); 4) that instant sanctification, though not impossible, would be as much a miracle as was the transformation of water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana; 5) that if instantaneous sanctification were the rule instead of the rare exception, the kingdom of grace would become too much like the imaginary worlds of children’s dreams; in them, trees, fruit, and palaces spring into being as full-grown, ripe, and furnished. It happens in a moment as if by magic. It is too unlike the real world in which delay, growth, and fixed laws are unchanging characteristics.

Jesus could have further sought to help them understand delay by commenting on the virtue of patience. Much could be said on that topic. It could be shown that character cannot be mature where the virtue of patience does not have a place. The gradual method of sanctification is best suited for character development. It allows for the broadest scope for its exercise. It might be pointed out that the ultimate enjoyment of any good thing is enhanced by waiting for it. The triumph of faith is in proportion to the trial. Samuel Rutherford, in a sermon entitled Trial and Triumph of Faith, wrote from his own experience: “It is fit we see and feel the shaping and sewing of every piece of the wedding garment, and the framing and molding and fitting of the crown of glory for the head of the citizen of heaven; how the repeated sense and frequent experience of grace in the ups and downs in the way, the falls and risings again of the traveler, the revolutions and changes of the spiritual condition, the new moon, the darkened moon, the full moon in the Spirit’s ebbing and flowing, raiseth in the heart of saints on their way to the country a sweet smell of the fairest rose and lily of Sharon; how as travelers at night talk of their foul ways, and of the praises of their guide, and battle being ended, soldiers number their wounds, extol the valor, skill, and courage of their leader and captain, so it is meet that the glorified soldiers may take loads of experience of free grace to heaven with them, and there speak of their way and their country, and the praises of Him that hath redeemed them out of all nations, tongues, and languages.”
No matter how fair these considerations may have been, they would have been wasted on the disciples because of their current spiritual condition. Children have no sympathy for growth in any world, whether it is in nature or in grace. Nothing pleases them unless the acorn becomes an oak tree at once, or that immediately after the blossom, the ripe fruit comes. Therefore, it is useless to speak to those who are immature about the benefits of patience. For the moral value of the discipline that trials bring cannot be appreciated until the trial has passed. Therefore, as we stated before, Jesus restrained Himself from the kind of reflections we mentioned. Instead, He adopted a simple, popular style of reasoning which even a child could understand.

The Reasoning of Jesus
The reasoning of Jesus, while it is very simple, is very persuasive and decisive. The first argument - the one contained in the parable of the selfish neighbor - is intended to inspire hope in God, even in the darkest hour, when He appears indifferent to our cry, or positively unwilling to help, and so to encourage us to persevere in asking. “The man who wanted the loaves knocked louder and louder with persistence that knew no shame. He would not take no for an answer. Therefore, he got what he wanted. The selfish friend was glad (finally) to get up and serve him out of sheer regard for his own comfort. It was impossible to sleep with such noise, so (this is the drift of the argument)....so continue to knock at the door of heaven, and you will obtain your desire if only for the reason that heaven would finally be rid of you. This parable lets us know what a power persistence has - even at a most inconvenient time (midnight), and with a most unlikely person (one who prefers his own comfort to a neighbor's need). Ask persistently, therefore, and it will be given unto you also. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.”

At one point, this pitiful and sympathetic argument seems to be weak. The one who is making the request in the parable had the selfish person in his power by being able to annoy him and keep him from sleeping. Now, the disciple who is tired and despondent, whom Jesus would try to comfort, may respond, “What power do I have to annoy God? He dwells on high, far beyond my reach, in undisturbed bliss. If only I knew where to find Him; if only I could go to His dwelling! But if I go to the east, He is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find Him. When He is at work in the north, I do not see Him; when He turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of Him” (Job 23:3,8-9). The objection is one which can hardly fail to occur to the spirit of despondency. It must be admitted that this is not frivolous. There is really a failure of the analogy at this point. We can annoy a person like the selfish man in bed or the unjust judge, but we cannot annoy God. The parable does not suggest the true explanation for the divine delay, or of the ultimate success of perseverance. It simply proves, by a down-to-earth situation, that delay - apparent refusal - for whatever reason, is not necessarily final. Therefore, there is no good reason for giving up asking.
This is a real if not a great service rendered. But the doubting disciple discovers with keen insight what the parable fails to prove. So he may not be able to gain any comfort from what it does prove. What is he to do then? He is to fall back on the strong assertion with which Jesus follows up the parable: “And I say to you” (Luke 11:9). Here, doubter, is a very wise saying that comes from One who can speak with authority; One who has been in the bosom of the eternal God, and has come forth to reveal His innermost heart to people who are groping in the darkness of nature after Him, in hopes of finding Him. When He addresses you in such emphatic, solemn terms as these, “I say unto you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you” (Luke 11:9), you may take Him at His word. Even those who doubt the reasonableness of prayer, because of the laws of nature and the unchanging purposes of God, might take Christ’s word for it that prayer is not vain, even as it pertains to daily bread, not to speak of higher matters. In other words, they might believe Him in relation to food until they have more confidence in the subject than they currently have. If they choose, they may reject the parable as childish. Or, they may think it conveys crude ideas that attribute human passions to God. But they cannot reject the deliberate declarations of One whom even they regard as the wisest and best of men.

The second argument that was used by Jesus to encourage perseverance in prayer reduces the hypothesis to an absurdity (reductio ad absurdum). It ends with a conclusion that uses stronger reason (à fortiori). It is reasoned this way: “Suppose God refused to hear His children’s prayers. Or, worse still, suppose He mocked them by giving them something that was only a superficial resemblance to the thing they asked for. When the deception was discovered, it would only cause bitter disappointment. God would not only be as bad as, but far worse than, the most depraved of all mankind. Take fathers at random. Which of them, if a son were to ask for bread, would give him a stone? Or, if he asked for a fish, would he give him a snake? Or, if he asked for an egg, would he offer him a scorpion? The very thought is monstrous. Human nature is mostly corrupted by moral evil. In particular, there is an evil spirit of selfishness in the heart which comes into conflict with generous feelings and thoughts. Often, it leads people to do base and unnatural things. But, on the average, people are not devilish. And nothing short of a diabolic spirit of trouble could prompt a father to mock a child’s misery. Nor could he deliberately give him things that were potentially harmful. If, then, earthly parents, though evil in many of their traits, give good (and as far as they know, only good) gifts to their children, and would be filled with horror at the thought of any other treatment, is it to be thought that the Divine Being, that Providence, can do what only devils would think of doing? On the contrary, what is only barely possible for people is for God totally impossible. And things that everyone except monsters of sin will do, God will do much more. He will surely give good gifts, and only good gifts, to His asking children. He will especially give His best gift, which His true children desire above all things: the Holy Spirit, the enlightener and the sanctifier. Therefore, again I say to you, “Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you” (Luke 11:9).
Yet it is implied that God seems, at least sometimes, to treat His children in this way. Christ uses such illustrations as a stone given for bread, a snake for a fish, or a scorpion for an egg. The time came when the Twelve thought they had been treated this way. The situation had to do with the very subject about which they were most interested - their own personal sanctification. They were interested in the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. But their experience illustrates the general truth, that when the Hearer of prayer seems to deal unnaturally with His servants, it is because they have made a mistake about the nature of good and have not known what they asked for. They have asked for a stone, thinking it was bread. Hence, the true bread seems like a stone. They asked for a shadow, thinking it was a substance. Hence, the substance seems like a shadow. The kingdom for which the Twelve prayed was a shadow. This explains their disappointment and despair when Jesus was put to death. The egg of hope, which their imaginations had been hatching, brought forth the scorpion of the cross. And they felt that God had mocked and deceived them. But they lived to see that God was true and good. They saw that they had deceived themselves. And they saw that all that Christ had told them had been fulfilled. All who wait on God ultimately make a similar discovery. They unite in testifying that “the Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him” (Lam. 3:25).

For these reasons, all people should pray and not give up. Prayer is rational, even if the Divine Being were like the average person who is willing to do good when self-interest does not stand in the way. The creed of heathenism is self-centered. Prayer is still more manifestly rational if God is better than the best of people (Christ taught this, and Christians believe it). There is only one supremely good Being - the Father in heaven. There are only two cases where prayer would be irrational: 1) if God were not a living Being at all, which is the creed of atheists, and with whom Christ has no argument; or, 2) if He were a Being capable of doing things from which even bad people would step back in horror (for example, if He were a Being with a diabolic nature). Hopefully, this creed is not held by any human being.
Section 1 - Fasting

Matt. 9:14-17; Mark 2:16-22; Luke 5:33-39

We learned in the last chapter how Jesus taught His disciples to pray. In this chapter we will learn how He taught them to live.

Christ's ratio vivendi (reason for living) was characteristically simple. It had two main features: 1) a disregard for insignificant mechanical rules, and 2) a habit of falling back on the great principles of morality and piety in all things.

Carrying out these principles of life in a practical way led people away from the prevailing customs of the day. According to the Gospel records, our Lord and His disciples were actually charged with the offense of nonconformity to current practices in three categories. They departed from existing practice in the matters of: 1) fasting, 2) ceremonial purifications as prescribed by the elders, and 3) Sabbath-keeping. For the most part, they neglected fasting. The second issue they totally neglected. They did not neglect the third, but their way of observing the weekly rest was significantly different from that which was currently in vogue.

These departures from established custom are historically interesting. They are the small beginnings of a great moral and religious revolution. For in teaching His disciples these new habits, Jesus was inaugurating a process of spiritual emancipation. This would result in the complete deliverance of the Apostles, and through them the Christian church, from the bondage of the Mosaic ordinances. It would also deliver them from the aggravating bondage of an empty way of life that had been passed down as traditions from the Jewish fathers.

These departures in religious practice create a great deal of biographical interest as it pertains to the religious experiences of the Twelve. A serious crisis occurs in anyone's life when he first departs from the religious opinions and practices of his generation - even the smallest principle. The first steps in the process of change are generally the most difficult, the most dangerous, and the most decisive. In this respect, learning spiritual freedom is like learning to swim. Every expert in swimming remembers the difficulties he experienced when he first began to swim. He found it hard to stroke with his arms and legs. He floundered and tried his best. But he feared
that he would get in over his head and sink to the bottom of the pool. Now he smiles as he looks back on his fears. But those fears were not altogether unjustified. For the beginner does run some risk of drowning even though he is only swimming in a shallow pool.

It is helpful for young swimmers and for apprentices in religious freedom to be in the presence of experienced friends when they are making their first attempt. Then they can be rescued if they are in danger. The Twelve had this friend in Christ. His presence was not only a safeguard against all the spiritual risks they faced from within themselves, but a shield from all the assaults which might come to them from the outside world. These assaults were to be expected. Non-conformity generally gives offense to many. And, at the least, the offending party is questioned. Sometimes they are exposed to more serious consequences. Custom is a god to the multitudes. No one can withhold worship from that idol without consequences. Consequently, the Twelve incurred the usual penalties that were connected with their single-minded devotion to Christ. Their conduct was called into question and censured every time they departed from the religious customs of the day. If they had been on their own, they would not have been able to defend themselves for their actions. They just did not understand the principles on which this new practice was based. They simply did as they were told. But in Jesus they had a friend who understood those principles. And He was always ready to give good reasons for everything He did and for everything He taught His followers to do. The reasons He used in defending the Twelve against the prevailing customs were especially good and instructive. Taken together, they constitute a defense for nonconformity that is no less remarkable than the one He made for graciously receiving publicans and sinners. It consists of three lines of defense which corresponds to the charges that had to be addressed. We will consider this defense under three headings. The first heading takes up the subject of fasting.

**Fasting**

From Matthew’s Gospel, we learn that the conduct of Christ’s disciples in neglecting fasting was noticed by the disciples of John the Baptist. “Then the disciples of John came to Him” (that is, those who happened to be in the neighborhood) “saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?’” (Matt. 9:14). From this question we learn incidentally that in the matter of fasting, the school of the Baptist and the sect of the Pharisees were in agreement in their general practice. Jesus told the Pharisees at a later date that “John came to you in the way of (legal) righteousness” (Matt. 21:32). But it was a situation where two extremes met. For no two religious parties could be more different in some respects than these. But the difference was to be found in the motives rather than in their religious behavior. Both did the same things. They fasted, practiced ceremonial purification, and offered many prayers. But they did them from different motives. John and his disciples performed their religious duties in simplicity, godly sincerity, and moral earnestness. The Pharisees, as a whole, did all their works pretentiously, hypocritically, and routinely.
From the same question, we further learn that John’s disciples, as well as the Pharisees, were very zealous in the practice of fasting. They fasted often. We know that this statement is strictly true of the Pharisees who made great pretensions of being godly. Besides the annual fast on the great day of atonement as prescribed by Moses and the four fasts that had become customary in the time of the Prophet Zechariah (in the 4th, 5th, 7th, and 10th months of the Jewish year), the stricter Jews fasted twice every week (on Mondays and Thursdays). This bi-weekly fast is alluded to in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:12). Of course, it should not be assumed that the Baptist’s disciples practiced fasting in the same way that the strictest sect of the Pharisees did. Their system of fasting may have been organized according to an independent plan which involved different arrangements as to times and occasions. But this fact is known, and it is substantiated by their own testimony: the Pharisees and John’s disciples fasted often. They could have even fasted on the same days and for the same reasons.

It is not clear what feelings prompted the question asked by John’s disciples to Jesus. It is not impossible that the party spirit was working. Rivalry and jealousy had been detected, even in the community of the Baptist (John 3:26). If this was the case, then the reference to the pharisaic practice could be explained by a desire to overwhelm Jesus’ disciples with sheer numbers and put them in the position of being in the minority on the question. However, it is more likely that the primary feeling in the minds of those bringing the question was that of surprise. In the matter of fasting, they seemed more like the Pharisees who were stigmatized by their own master as a “brood of vipers,” than the followers of the One who was cherished and worshiped by John. If this is the case, the purpose for the question was to obtain information and instruction. It fits with this view that the question was addressed to Jesus. If they had only wanted an argument, the questioners would have addressed it to the disciples only.

If John’s followers came to Jesus seeking instruction, they were not disappointed. Jesus answered their question. His answer was remarkable for its originality, point, and pathos. He used parables to present the great principles by which the conduct of His disciples could be vindicated, and by which He desired the behavior of all who bore His name to be regulated. Now, His reply. First, it was purely defensive in nature. Jesus did not blame John’s disciples for fasting. But He did express His own contentment by defending His disciples for abstaining from fasting. He did not feel called to belittle one party in order to justify the other. But He took up this position: “To fast may be right for you, the followers of John; not to fast is equally right for my followers.” They must have been so grateful for Christ’s attitude here. He was tolerant on a question in which the name of John was involved! Jesus had a deep respect for the forerunner and his work and always spoke of him with the deepest appreciation. At one time, He called him a burning and shining lamp (John 5:35); at another time, He declared that he was not only a prophet, but something more (Matt. 11:7-15). We may remark in passing, that John had the same kind of
feelings toward Jesus and did not sympathize with his own disciples who were jealous. Both of these two great men were censured by their degenerate contemporaries (but for different reasons), and both spoke about the other to their disciples and to the public with loving respect. The lesser light confessed that he was inferior; the Greater magnified the worth of His humble fellow-servant. What a refreshing contrast that was presented instead of the base passions of envy, prejudice, and detraction that were seen so much in other places. Under the Pharisees’ ungodly influence, their followers spoke of John as a madman and of Jesus as immoral and profane! (Matt. 11:16,19).

We now leave the manner of His reply and address the matter of the reply. In order to vindicate His disciples, Jesus used a metaphor that was suggested by an unforgettable statement said about Him at an earlier time by the master (John) of those who now examined Him. Certain disciples had complained that men were leaving John and going to Jesus. John had said in effect, “Jesus is the Bridegroom; I am only the Bridegroom’s friend. Therefore, it is right that men should leave me and join Jesus” (John 3:29). Jesus then took the Baptist’s words and used them for His own advantage to defend the way of life that was being pursued by His disciples. His reply, paraphrased, went something like this: “I am the Bridegroom, as your master said; it is right that the children of the bride-chamber come to me; and it is also right that, when they have come, they should adapt their way of life to their changed circumstances. Therefore, they are doing well if they do not fast, for fasting is an expression of sadness, and why should they be sad when they are with Me? People might as well be sad at a marriage ceremony. The days will come when the children of the bride-chamber will be sad, for the Bridegroom will not always be with them; and at the dark hour of His departure, it will be natural and timely for them to fast, for then they will be in a fasting mood - weeping, lamenting, sorrowful, and heartbroken.”

The Principle Behind Fasting
Here is the principle which underlies this graphic representation: fasting should not be a fixed, mechanical rule. Fasting has to do with the state of mind a person is in. To be more specific, people ought to fast when they are sad or in a state of mind which resembles sadness - absorbed in thought, preoccupied. It could be done when there is some great, solemn crisis in a person’s life or a community, like that of Peter when he was troubled by the great question of admitting the Gentiles into the church. Or, it could be done in a situation similar to the one in the Christian community at Antioch, when they were about to ordain the first missionaries to go to the lost people in the world. Christ’s teaching is clear and distinct here. Fasting in any other circumstances is forced, unnatural, unreal. People can be made to do it out of duty, but they will not do it with their heart and soul. “You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?” (Luke 5:34). He asked the question, basically asserting that it was impossible.
By this rule, the disciples of our Lord were justified. Yet John's were not condemned. He admitted that it was natural for them to fast, because they were mourning, sad, and dissatisfied. They had not found Him who was the Desire of all nations, the Hope of the future, the Bridegroom of the soul. They only knew that everything was wrong. And in their questioning, despairing mood, they enjoyed fasting, wearing rugged clothes, and going to lonely, desolate regions, living as hermits - a practical protest against the ungodly age they were living in. The message that the kingdom was at hand had also been preached to them. But the way John proclaimed it, the announcement was *awful* news, not good news. It made them anxious and discouraged, not glad. People in this sort of mood could not do anything else but fast. Whether it was beneficial for them to *continue* in that mood after the Bridegroom had come, and had been told by John that He was such, is another matter. Their grief was by their own choice. It was useless and without cause. For Jesus had appeared to take away the sin of the world.

Jesus still had more to say in reply to the questions which were addressed to Him. Things that are new and unusual need many explanations. Therefore, to the beautiful story about the children of the bride-chamber, He added two other equally suggestive parables about: 1) the new patch on the old garment, and 2) the new wine in old skins. The purpose of these parables is much the same as that of the first part of His reply: to enforce the law of congruity in relation to fasting and similar matters. That is, He wanted to show that in all *voluntary* religious service where we are free to regulate our own conduct, the outward acts should be made to correspond with the inner motives of the heart. No attempt should be made to force particular behavior or habits on people without considering the relationship between the inner heart and the outer behavior. This is what Jesus meant: “We observe this law of congruity in nature. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth (Matt. 9:16) on an old garment. Neither do people put new wine into old skins, not just because it is improper, but to avoid bad consequences. For if the rule of congruity is neglected, the patched garment will be torn by the shrinking of the new cloth. And the old skin bottles will burst when the new liquor ferments, and the wine will be spilled and lost.”

The old cloth and the old bottles in these metaphors represent old ascetic ways in religion. The new cloth and the new wine represent the new joyful life in Christ. Those who tenaciously hold to the old ways do not possess this life. The parables were applied primarily to Christ's own generation, but they have application to all ages in transition. Surely, they find new illustration in almost every generation.

Jesus used these ordinary parables as arguments to justify His departure from the current religious customs. There are only two ways to escape the power of these parables. First, some people deny that they are even relevant. That is, they would deny that religious beliefs, by their
very nature, demand to find new ways to express themselves outwardly. They also deny that if these ways are not found, there will be negative consequences. This position is usually assumed by those who advocate rituals and customs. For the most part, conservative minds have a very inadequate conception of the powerful force of belief. Their own belief - their entire spiritual life - is often a fragile thing. So they imagine that the faith of other people must be tame and compliant. Nothing but some horrible experience will convince them that they are wrong. When the proof comes in the form of some kind of revolutionary outburst that cannot be suppressed, they are dumbfounded. These kinds of people learn nothing from the history of previous generations. They continue to think that their own situation will be an exception. Hence the vis inertiae (the power of inertia; dead resistance to force applied) of established custom continually insists on holding on to what is old until the new wine proves its power by producing an explosion that is unnecessarily wasteful. Then, the wine and bottles often perish together. Energies which might have quietly worked out a beneficial reformation are distorted into blind powers that cause indiscriminate destruction.

In the second place, even if the metaphors are accepted as relevant, other people may deny that a new wine has come into existence. Essentially, this was the attitude that the Pharisees assumed toward Christ. In effect, they asked Him, “What have you taught your disciples that they cannot live as others do? Why do they need to invent new religious habits for themselves? This new life about which you boast is either an empty claim, or an unlawful, counterfeit thing. It cannot be tolerated. No one would regret it if it were thrown away.” The opponents of the Reformation had a similar attitude toward Martin Luther. In effect they said to him, “If this new revelation of yours, that sinners are justified by faith alone, were true, we admit that it would involve a very serious modification in religious opinion. Many alterations would occur in religious practice. But we deny the truth of your doctrine. We think the peace and comfort you find in it is only a hallucination. Therefore, we insist that you return to the time-honored faith. Then you will have no difficulty in giving consent to our long-established customs.” The same thing happens to a greater or lesser degree in every generation. For new wine is always in the process of being produced by the eternal vine of truth. In some of the particular areas of belief and practice, it demands new bottles in order for it to be preserved. But instead, the answer comes back in the form of an order, “Be content with the old bottles.”

They do not seek to denounce or attempt to suppress the new. But those who stand by the old often oppose the new by the milder method of belittling. They eulogize the honorable past and contrast it with the present. This is a disadvantage for the present. They say, “The old wine is vastly superior to the new; how mellow, mild, fragrant, wholesome is the one! How harsh and excitable is the other!” Those who say these things are often not the worst people; they are often the best - people of taste and feeling, the gentle, the reverent, and the good. They themselves are
excellent examples of the old vintage. Their opposition forms by far the most difficult obstacle to
the public recognition and toleration of what is new in religious life. For when the saintly people
disapprove of it, a strong prejudice is naturally created against this, or any cause.

Observe, then how Christ answers the honest admirers of the old wine. He concedes the point. He
admits that their preference is natural. In the conclusion of His reply to John's disciples, Luke
represents Him as saying, “And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The
old is good enough’” (Luke 5:39). This striking viewpoint shows His rare frankness in stating
the case of opponents, and no less rare modesty and tact in stating the case of friends. It is as
if Jesus had said, “I am not amazed that you love the old wine of Jewish piety. It is the fruit of a
very ancient vineyard. I don't even mind that you dote upon the very bottles which contain it,
though they have been covered with the dust and cobwebs of centuries. But how are we to think
about this? Do people object to the existence of new wine, or refuse to have it in their posses-
sion, because the old is superior in flavor? No. They drink the old, but they carefully preserve
the new, knowing that the old will run out one day. The new, however, will get better with age
and may ultimately be superior even in flavor to that which is presently being used. You should
behave in the same way toward the new wine of my kingdom. You may not immediately want
it, because it is strange and novel. But surely you could deal more wisely with it than simply to
shun it, or spill and destroy it!”

The lovers of the old ways have seldom understood Christ's wisdom. But the church could surely
benefit from it. On the other hand, those who love the new ways have seldom sympathized with
His graciousness. Niebuhr, a celebrated theologian, has remarked, “It must make a man wretch-
ed, if, when on the threshold of old age, he looks on the rising generation with uneasiness, and
does not rather rejoice in beholding it; and yet this is very common with old men. Fabius would
rather have seen Hannibal unconquered than see his own fame obscured by Scipio.” There are
always too many Fabii in the world, who are annoyed because things will not remain stationary,
and because new ways and new people are always rising up to take the place of the old. On the
other hand, it is not less rare to see Christ's graciousness among those who advocate progress.
Those who love freedom despise the stricter sort as fanatics and extremists, and they push their
changes without regard for their misgivings. They do not seem to have any appreciation for
the excellent qualities of the “old wine.” When will young people and old people, liberals and
conservatives, broad Christians and narrow, learn to bear with one another? When will they
learn to affirm each other - that they are both necessary to complement the other in their own
one-sidedness?
Section 2 - Ritual Washings


The men with Jesus were happy and free, and celebrated while others fasted. And they were different in yet another way: they ate their meals without being concerned about existing forms of purification. They ate bread with defiled, or unwashed, hands. It is assumed that this was their custom from the beginning. The subject does not appear to have become the object of criticism until a later period in the ministry of our Lord, at least in a way that caused the situations that were worthy enough to be mentioned in the Gospels. At the marriage in Cana, there were six stone waterpots on hand for the purposes of purification. Christ and His disciples were different from the other guests in that they did not pay much attention to ritual obligations. We can infer this from the reasons Christ used to defend the disciples' position when they were challenged on it. In essence, these reasons take the position that the habit of purification was not only lawful, but necessary. It was a positive duty which could never be neglected by those who desired to please God rather than men. But, in fact, it needs no proof that Jesus, who had such a serious and earnest spirit, could never have paid any attention to the insignificant regulations about washing before eating that had been invented by the elders.

These regulations were no small matter in the eyes of the Pharisees. Therefore, we are not surprised to learn that when Jesus and the Twelve treated them with indifference, these zealous religious leaders were provoked to the point of censuring them. This happened on at least two occasions, and these incidents are mentioned in the Gospel narratives. On one of these occasions, certain Pharisees and scribes saw some of His disciples eat without going through the customary ceremonial washings. So they came to Him and asked, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?” In the other situation, Jesus Himself was the object of their censure. Luke tells the story: “...a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined at table. And when the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal” (Luke 11:37-38). It is not stated whether the host expressed his surprise with words or with a certain look. But it was noticed by his Guest. This provided the occasion for exposing the sins of the pharisaic character. In holy zeal and true purity, the Accused (Jesus) said, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness.
You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you” (Luke 11:39-41). So Jesus offended the Pharisee and charged His irritated host, and the whole religious party he belonged to, with sacrificing inward for outward purity. At the same time, He taught the important truth that to the pure all things are pure. He also showed the way people could attain real inward purity, namely, by practicing that sadly neglected virtue: humility, or love.

The Lord’s reply in the other encounter with His pharisaic adversaries on the subject of washings was similar in principle but different in form. Without beating around the bush, He told the zealots in favor of purifications that they were guilty of the serious offense of sacrificing the commandments of God for the commandments of men, which were the pet traditions of the elders. The statement was not untrue. It was a simple, sad fact, though the truthfulness of the statement is not readily apparent. We hope to clarify this in the following comments. But before we proceed to that work, we must force ourselves (even if we are reluctant) to acquire a little better understanding of the practices which had become so despised. At one time, neglecting these practices seemed to be a detestable sin to the people who thought of themselves as being holy.

Rabbinical Commands
The goal of the rabbinical commands about washings was not physical cleanliness, but something that was considered to be far higher and more sacred. Their goal was to obtain, not physical, but ceremonial purity. That is, they wanted to cleanse the person from any impurity that may have been contracted when he had contact with a Gentile, or with a Jew who was in a ceremonially unclean state, or with an unclean animal, or with a dead body or any part of one. To these regulations in the law of Moses about uncleanness, the rabbis added a vast number of additional rules. It was nothing more than a self-willed commitment for having themselves and others follow the observance of the Mosaic precepts with exact precision. They issued their commandments with the pretext that they were necessary as the means by which they could reach the great goal of strictly fulfilling the commandments of God.

The burdens these scribes laid on people’s shoulders because of their reasoning were, in every respect, really very heavy. They were not content with the purifications prescribed in the law for uncleanness that was actually contracted. They went further and made provision for possible cases. If a man left his home to go to the market, he must wash his hands when he returned because it was possible that he might have touched some person or thing that was ceremonially unclean. It appears that the people also had to be very careful about the water that was used for purification; it had to be perfectly pure. It was even necessary to apply the water to the hands in a particular way in order to fulfill the command of the scribes. We do not have to go beyond Scripture to demonstrate to what ridiculous lengths these washings were carried. Mark supplies
us with specific information about the prevailing Jewish customs of purification. He makes an interesting comment and adds a touch of quiet satire: “...and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots” (Mark 7:4). To be brief, everything that was used in the preparation of food - in cooking it, or in placing it on the table - had to be washed. These washings, however, were not similar to the way people wash today - to remove actual impurities. Theirs were prescribed to deliver the people from the more serious uncleanness which they might have contracted since the pots and pans were last used. They may have washed some person or thing that was not technically clean. However, this kind and degree of purity that they strived for was not compatible with life in this world. The very air of heaven was not clean enough for these men who went too far in advocating these traditions which had been handed down from their fathers. There were other more real sources of contamination. But for them, the breeze had blown over Gentile lands into the sacred land of Judaism. On the way, it had contracted defilement which made it unfit to pass into their ritualistic lungs until it had been sifted by a respirator that possessed the magic power to cleanse it.

The extravagant fanatical zeal of the Jews in these matters is illustrated in the Talmud. Although the stories in it are from a later period in history, they may be regarded as a faithful reflection of the spirit which motivated and moved the Pharisees in the time of our Lord. Here is a sample of one of the stories: “Rabbi Akiba was thrown into prison by the Christians. Every day Rabbi Joshua brought him as much water as was necessary for washing and drinking. But on one occasion, it just so happened that the keeper of the prison got the water to take in to him, and he spilled half of it. Akiba saw that there was not enough water. Nevertheless, he said, ‘Give me the water for my hands.’ His brother replied, ‘My master, you do not have enough to drink.’ But Akiba responded, ‘He who eats with unwashed hands commits a crime that ought to be punished with death. It is better for me to die of thirst than to transgress the traditions of my ancestors.’” Rabbi Akiba would rather break the sixth commandment (“Thou shalt not kill.”) and be guilty of murdering himself than depart from the most insignificant rule of this make-believe ceremonialism. This illustrates the truth of the comment Christ made in His reply to the Pharisees. We will now proceed to consider His response.

**Jesus’ Defense of His Disciples**

As Jesus defended His disciples over the frivolous charge of neglecting the washing of their hands, it was not to be expected that He would show much respect for their accusers. It is not surprising, then, that we observe a vast difference between the tones of His reply in this case and that in His answer to John’s disciples. Toward them, He displayed an attitude that was respectfully defensive and apologetic. Toward these religious leaders, He displayed an attitude that was offensive and condemning. Jesus had said to John’s disciples, “Fasting is right for you; not to fast
is equally right for my disciples.” To the Pharisees, He gives a response which both condemns their conduct and justifies the behavior which they had challenged. They asked, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?” In response, Jesus asked them, “And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” It was as if He was saying, “It is not appropriate for you to judge - you, who see the imaginary speck in the eye of a brother, have a beam in your own.”

This spirited answer was something more than a quick, sharp reply. Using a question, it proclaimed a great principle: the careful observance of human traditions leads, without fail, to a corresponding negligence and corruption in reference to the eternal laws of God. Therefore, Christ’s defense of His disciples was essentially this: “I and my followers despise and neglect those customs because we desire to keep the moral law. To you, those washings may not seem to seriously conflict with the great matters of the law. They may seem to be, at worst, only small things - things that are insignificant. But this is not the case. What you do is treat small things as serious matters - as matters of conscience. This is degrading and demoralizing. No person can do that without being or becoming a moral idiot or a hypocrite. The moral idiot is incapable of discerning between what is vital in morals and what is not. The hypocrite is interested in working to get small things (such as washing the hands, or paying a tithe of herbs) accepted as important matters and as the truly great things of the law - justice, mercy, and faith. Then this type of person tries to quietly push these weightier matters aside as if they were of absolutely no importance whatsoever.”

The whole history of religion proves the truth of these statements. A time that is filled with ceremonies and traditions is, without fail, a morally corrupt time. Hypocrites are almost always fanatics. In secret, they are atheists. They are depraved people who get their revenge by living a scandalous life because they were forced to conform - outwardly - to practices for which they have no respect. They are priests like the sons of Eli - gluttonous, covetous, wanton. These are the black omens of an age in which ceremonies are everything, and godliness and virtue are nothing. Ritualistic practices and artificial duties of all kinds are to be renounced. It does not matter whether they originated with Jewish rabbis or with scholars in the Christian church. They are recommended by fanatics who advocate such practices, often sincerely. These people believe that the practices actually promote the culture of morality and piety. However, in the long run, they always prove that they are fatal to both. They are appropriately called “dead works” in the Epistle to the Hebrews. They are not only dead, but death-producing. For, like all dead things, they tend to decay and breed a spiritual disease that sweeps thousands of souls into eternal damnation. If they have any life at all, it is life feeding on death, the life of fungi growing on dead trees. If they have any beauty, it is the beauty of decay - autumn leaves that are dried up and yellow, when the sap is flowing down to the earth, and the woods that are about to pass
into their winter state of nakedness and desolation. Ritualism is, at best, the short-lived period after the summer of the spiritual year! It may be very fascinating, but when it comes, you can be sure that winter is at the door. “We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Is. 64:6).

**The Fifth Commandment**

After Jesus brought a counter-charge against the Pharisees (that of sacrificing morality to ceremonies, the commandments of God to the traditions of men), He proceeded immediately to substantiate it by using a powerful example and a Scripture quotation. The example He selected had to do with avoiding the responsibilities which are contained in the fifth commandment. They tried to get out of the obligations by pretending to have a previous religious commitment. God said, “Honor your father and your mother.” He attached the penalty of death to those who would violate the command. The Jewish scribes said, “Call a thing Corban, and you will be exempt from all obligation to give it away, even for the purpose of assisting needy parents.” The word *Corban* in the Mosaic law signifies a gift or offering to God of any kind (bloody or bloodless) which is presented on any occasion, such as in the fulfillment of a vow (Numbers 6:13-14). In the language of the rabbis, it signified a thing that was devoted to sacred purposes. Therefore, it was not available for private or secular use. The traditional doctrine on the subject of Corban was dangerous in two ways. First, it encouraged people to make religion an excuse for neglecting morality. Secondly, it opened a wide door for fraud and hypocrisy. It taught that a person might not only make a vow to deny himself the use of things that were unlawful, but that he might, by devoting something to God, free himself from all obligation to give to others what would have been his responsibility to give to them if he had not made the vow. Then, according to the deadly system of the rabbis, it was not necessary to really give the thing to God in order to be free of the obligation to give it to another person. It was sufficient to *call* it Corban. Just pronounce that magic word over anything, and - presto! - it was pledged to God and, because it was sacred, others could not use it - nor could you. So this self-willed zeal for the honor of God led to the dishonoring of God by taking His name in vain. The practices which set the first table of the law (the first four commandments) against the second (commandments 5-10) eventually proved to be destructive to both tables. They made the whole law of God null and void by their traditions. They nullified the fifth commandment, and this was only a sample of the problems these zealots for the commandments of men had caused. This is implied in Christ’s concluding words, “...and you do many such things like that” (Mark 7:13).

The Scripture quotation used by our Lord in replying to the Pharisees was just as effective as the example He used in pointing out their characteristic sins: hypocrisy and superstition. They were near to God with their mouth; they honored Him with their lips; but they were far from Him in their hearts. Their religion was all on the outside. They scrupulously washed their hands and
their cups but made no effort to cleanse their polluted souls. In the second place, their fear of
God was taught by the precept of men. Human commandments and traditions were their guide
in religion. They followed these blindly and didn't seem to care how far these commandments
might lead them from the paths of righteousness and true godliness.

The prophetic word was quick, powerful, sharp, searching, and conclusive. Nothing more was
needed to confound the Pharisees, and nothing more was said to them at this time. The sacred
words of Jesus formed the appropriate conclusion for an argument against these keepers of tra-
dition. And the argument was unanswerable. But Jesus had compassion on the poor multitude
who were being misled to their ruin by their blind spiritual guides. Therefore, He took the op-
portunity to address those who stood around Him on the subject at hand. He used the short,
pointed form of a proverb to speak to them: “Hear, and understand. Not what enters into the
mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man” (Matt. 15:10-
11). This was a riddle that had to be solved, a secret of wisdom that needed to be searched out,
a lesson in religion that had to be learned. Its meaning was clear but was probably understood
by only a few people at the time. It was simply this: “Pay the most attention to the cleansing of
the heart. Do not be like the Pharisees who pay attention to the cleansing of the hands. When
the heart is pure, all is pure. When the heart is impure, all outward purification is worthless. The
defilement that needs to be dreaded is not that which comes from meat that is ceremonially un-
clean, but that which springs from a carnal mind, the defilement of evil thoughts, evil passions,
evil habits.”

The words spoken to the bystanders became the subject of a subsequent conversation between
Jesus and His disciples. He took the occasion to justify Himself for speaking those words and
explained their meaning to the people. The Pharisees had heard the remarks and were naturally
offended by them, because they tended to weaken their authority over the popular conscience.
The Twelve observed their displeasure; perhaps they overheard their comments. Fearing bad
consequences, they came and informed their Master, probably with a tone which implied a
secret regret that Jesus had not been less outspoken. But irrespective of that, Jesus helped them
understand that it was not a case for patience, compromise, or timid, time-serving, prudential
policy. The tendency to be ritualistic was an evil plant which had to be uprooted, no matter what
offense it caused its followers. In defending His straightforward manner of speaking, He pleaded
His concern for the souls of the ignorant people whose guides the Pharisees claimed to be. “Let
them alone? What would happen? Why, the blind leaders and those who are blindly led would
fall together into the ditch. Therefore, if the leaders are so hopelessly joined to their errors that
they cannot be turned away from them, let us at least try to save their comparatively ignorant
victims.”
True Defilement

Jesus gave His disciples the explanation of the proverbial word spoken to the people. Peter had requested it (Matt. 15:17-20; Mark 7:18-23). It is plain and specific, because it is addressed to ignorant hearers. In the strongest possible language, it says over again that eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person, because nothing entering the mouth can come near the soul. The defilement that should be dreaded - the only defilement worth speaking about - is that of an evil, unrenewed heart, out of which proceed thoughts, words, and acts, which are offenses against the holy, pure law of God. The concluding words, “into his stomach, and is eliminated” (Mark 7:19), have a peculiar significance if we adopt the reading approved by the critics: “Thus He declared all foods clean.” In that case, we have the evangelist giving his own opinion about the meaning of Christ’s words, namely, that they had the impact of nullifying the ceremonial distinction between clean and unclean. It is a remarkable comment. It came from the man (Mark) to whom we are indebted for this report about Peter’s preaching. In his disciple days, Peter had remembered the declaration. He had been the one who had the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven.

The evangelist gave us his comment. Now we may add ours. We observe that our Lord is silent here about the ceremonial law of Moses (the traditions of the elders were a supplement to it). He only speaks about the commandments of God, i.e., the precepts of the Ten Commandments. The fact is significant. It shows in what direction He had come to destroy, and in what to fulfill. Ceremonialism was to be abolished, and the eternal laws of morality were to become absolutely everything. People’s consciences were to be delivered from the burden of outward positive ordinances, so that they could be free to serve the living God by keeping His Ten Commandments, which are summed up in the royal law of love (Rom. 13:8-10). It is the duty of the church to stand firm in the liberty Christ designed and purchased for her, and to be jealous when any human tradition comes into the picture to the point where it threatens her holy passion for God’s divine will. God’s people are to avoid superstition, on the one hand, and the licentious freedom of those who promote a godless liberty on the other. But they are not to do as the Pharisees wish them to do. Rather, they are to do what God requires of them. When His people think this way, they reject all human authority in religion and separate themselves from those who are devoted to tradition. At the same time, as God’s servants, they reverence His word and His law, thereby putting a wide gulf between themselves and those who are lawless and disobedient, who side with movements of religious reform - not in order to get something better in the place of what is rejected, but to get rid of all restraint in matters human or divine.
Section 3 - Sabbath Observance


People found more fault with Jesus and His disciples about their way of keeping the Sabbath than with any other thing they did. There are six distinct instances recorded in Gospel history where they gave or took offense. In five of these, Jesus was the offender. In the remaining instance, His disciples were censured.

Jesus’ offenses were all alike. His crime? He performed works of healing on the Sabbath. He healed people afflicted with palsy, a withered hand, blindness, dropsy, and a poor woman who had suffered for eighteen years. On the other hand, the disciples caused offense by walking along a road through a cornfield and picking some ears of corn in order to satisfy their hunger. This was not theft. It was permitted by the law of Moses (Deut. 23:24-25). Nevertheless, in the judgment of the Pharisees, it was breaking the Sabbath. It was contrary to the command, “Thou shalt not work.” To pick some ears was reaping on a small scale, and to rub them was a type of threshing!

These offenses were considered quite serious when they were committed. From our vantage point, they seem very small. All of the transgressions of the Sabbath law that were charged against Jesus were works of mercy. And the one transgression the disciples committed was a work of necessity. Tolerating their work was a duty of mercy for others. So when the Pharisees condemned them, they had forgotten the divine word, “I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.” Truthfully, it is hard for us now to think that anyone could be serious who thought these actions were violations of the Sabbath, especially the harmless act of the Twelve. There is a slight degree of plausibility in the objection taken by the ruler of the synagogue to the miraculous cures performed on the seventh day: “There are six days in which work should be done; therefore come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day” (Luke 13:14). The remark was especially credible with respect to the case which had provoked the anger of the dignitary of the synagogue. A woman had suffered for eighteen years. Surely she could endure it one more day and be healed on the next! But why should the disciples be blamed as Sabbath-breakers just because they helped themselves to a few ears of corn? To call such an act “working” was ridicu-
lous. The men who felt they were breaking the Sabbath must have been anxious to catch Jesus’ disciples in a fault.

We have no doubt that the Pharisees were looking for faults. And yet, we must admit that when they condemned this act, they were acting faithfully in line with their theoretical views and habits. Their judgment on the behavior of the Twelve was in keeping with their other traditions - like ceremonial washings, tithing mint and other garden herbs, and straining gnats out of their wine cups. Their habit, in all things, was to degrade God’s law by making up endless petty rules to improve its observance. But instead of accomplishing that purpose, they made the law seem corrupt and contemptible. There was no situation where this miserable study of petty differences was carried to greater lengths than in connection with the Fourth Commandment. Deviating from what was considered right or acceptable, they used their ingenuity to bring the most insignificant actions against labor. Consider our Lord’s report on the case of the animal that had fallen into a pit. It was considered to be lawful to lift it out - at least those who have been educated in rabbinical lore tell us this - but only if leaving it there until the Sabbath was over would threaten its life. When delay was not dangerous, the rule was to give the beast food that was sufficient for the day. And if there was water in the bottom of the pit, they would place straw and supports in it, so that it might not drown.

The Jews may have been very strict about abstaining from everything that had the slightest resemblance to work, but it is interesting to note that they were lax in other areas. So while they very carefully observed the law which prohibited cooking food on the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23), they did not make the holy day, by any means, a day of fasting. In fact, they considered it their duty to make the Sabbath a day of feasting and celebration (Neh. 8:10). Consider this example: A leading man among the Pharisees gave a Sabbath feast. Jesus performed a miracle there and was criticized for it. Numerous guests were at this feast. Jesus was probably invited, not because they made friendly overtures toward Him, but because they hoped to find something against Him regarding the Sabbath law. We read in Luke, “And it came about that when He (Jesus) went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, that they were watching Him closely” (Luke 14:1). They set a trap and hoped to catch Him whom they hated for no reason. For their efforts, they got something they didn’t bargain for: insightful, humbling conversation that was different from any they had probably ever heard before (Luke 14:7-24).

By the time of Augustine (born in 354 A.D.), this habit of feasting was being abused. This is apparent from the description he gives of the way in which contemporary Jews celebrated their weekly holiday. He writes, “Today is the Sabbath, which the Jews at the present time keep in loose, luxurious ease, for they occupy their leisure in frivolity; and whereas God commanded a Sabbath, they spend it in those things which God forbids. Our rest is from
evil works, theirs is from good works; for it is better to plough than to dance. They rest from good work, they rest not from idle work” (Enarratio in Psalmum 92).

The Wisdom of Jesus
Let us leave the folly and precision of the scribes and Pharisees and turn to the wisdom of Jesus. It is revealed in the animated, deep, and yet majestic, simple replies that He made to the various charges of Sabbath-breaking that were brought against Him and His disciples. Before we consider these replies in detail, we will make this one general remark about them all. Jesus does not call into question the obligation to keep the Sabbath law in any of His defenses. He had no quarrel with His accusers on that point. His argument in this situation is entirely different from the one He used on the subjects of fasting and ceremonial washings. His position on fasting was this: Fasting is a voluntary matter, and people may fast or not as they are inclined. His position on purification was this: Ceremonial washings are, at best, of secondary importance. They are only outward signs of inward purity. As they are practiced now, they inevitably lead to ignoring spiritual purity altogether. Therefore, they must be neglected by all of those who are concerned for the great interests of morality. But with respect to the alleged violations of the Sabbath, Jesus took up this position: “If you could comprehend the truth, these acts which you condemn are not transgressions of the law in its spirit and principle.” The importance of the law was conceded, but the pharisaic interpretation of its meaning was rejected. An appeal was made from their meticulous code of regulations about Sabbath observance to the grand design and principle of the law. The right was maintained to examine all rules in the light of the principle and to reject or disregard those in which the principle had either been mistakenly applied, or lost sight of altogether (as in the case of the Pharisees).

The Key to Christ’s Teaching on the Sabbath
The key to all of Christ’s teaching on the Sabbath lies in His conception of the original design of that divine institution. We find this conception expressed with pointedness and conciseness, in contrast to the Pharisees’ idea of the Sabbath. Jesus spoke these words when He was defending His disciples: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). It was not a day taken from man by God with a demanding spirit, but a day given by God in mercy to man – God’s holiday to His subjects. All the legislation given to enforce its observance has as its purpose to insure that everyone really gets the benefit of the favor. No man should rob himself, and even less his fellow-creatures, of the gracious favor.

What is the difference between Christ’s way of regarding the Sabbath and the Pharisees’ way? It involves a difference in the spirit and the details of its observance. Take Christ’s view and your principle becomes: “The best way to observe the Sabbath is that which is most conducive to man’s physical and spiritual well-being - in other words, that which is best for his body and for
his soul. In the light of this principle, you will keep the holy day in a spirit of intelligent joy and thankfulness to God the Creator for His gracious consideration toward His creatures.” Take the pharisaic view and your principle of observance becomes: “The one who keeps the Sabbath best is the one who goes to the greatest lengths to abstain from anything that can be construed as labor. The effect that this abstinence has for his well-being or for others is irrelevant.” In brief, we land in the silly, senseless minutiae of rabbinical legislation which sees in various behaviors a heinous offense against the Fourth Commandment and its Author. The behaviors can involve the disciples picking and rubbing the ears of corn, or the healed man who carried his bed home on his shoulders (John 5:10), or anyone who walked further than three-fourths of a mile on a Sabbath.

**Two Great Uses of the Sabbath**

There are two great general uses of a Sabbath observance that are regulated by the principle that the institution was made for man's good: rest for the body, and worship for the comfort of the spirit. We should rest from labor on the divinely given holiday. And we should lift up our hearts in devout worship to Him who made all things in the beginning, and who continues to work, preserving the creation in being and well-being. We should worship Him whose tender compassion toward sinful people is great and surpasses our understanding. Both of these things are necessary for man's best interest. Therefore, both are necessary elements of a worthy Sabbath observance.

On the other hand, the Sabbath was made for man. Therefore, the two general requirements of rest and worship may not be so pressed that they become hostile to man's well-being. When this happens, it becomes self-destructive or mutually destructive. The rule, “Thou shalt rest,” must not be applied in such a way that it excludes all action and all work. Absolute inaction is not rest. Total abstinence from work of every kind would often be detrimental both to private and public well-being. Room must be made for acts of “necessity and mercy.” So, absolute and detailed legislation as to what are, and what are not, acts of necessity and mercy must be avoided. For these may vary for different people, times, and circumstances. People may honestly have a difference of opinion in the details but are perfectly loyal to the great broad principles of Sabbath sanctification. In a similar way, the rule, “Thou shalt worship,” must not be enforced in such a way that religious duties become irritating and burdensome - simply mechanical, legal service. Neither should man sacrifice the other great practical purpose of the Sabbath, namely, physical rest. People should not dictate to another what the means of worship should be any more than they should prescribe the amount of worship. For someone may find help to devotion in a means which would be a hindrance and a distraction to someone else.
Pharisaic legislation and practice over Sabbath observance were carried to superstitious and annoying excess only in the matter of cessation from work. The Sabbath mania was a monomania (an excessive interest in one thing). Those who were affected by it were consumed with one point: the strict enforcement of rest. This explains the unique character of all the charges that were brought against Christ and His disciples. It also explains His replies. The offenses committed were all works that were considered to be unlawful. All of Jesus’ defenses proved that the works done were not contrary to law when the law was interpreted in the light of the principle that the Sabbath was made for man. They were works of necessity or of mercy and, therefore, lawful on the Sabbath.

The Three Sources of Jesus’ Proofs

Jesus drew His proofs for this position from three sources: 1) Scripture history, 2) the everyday practice of the Pharisees, and 3) the providence of God. In defending His disciples, He referred to the case of David who ate the shewbread when he fled to the house of God from the court of King Saul (I Sam. 21:6). He also referenced the constant practice of the priests in doing work for the service of the temple on the Sabbath, such as offering double burnt offerings and removing stale shewbread from the holy place and replacing it with hot loaves. David’s case proved the general principle that necessity has no law. Hunger justified his act. It should have justified the act of the disciples, even in the eyes of the Pharisees. The practice of the priests demonstrated that work, in and of itself, is not contrary to the law of the Sabbath. Some works are not only lawful, but necessary on that day.

The argument Jesus used from common practice was well suited to silence fault-finding critics. It was also used to suggest the principle by which His own conduct could be defended. This was the essence of the argument: “You would lift an ox or an ass out of a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you? Why? To save a life? Why then should I not heal a sick person for the same reason? Is a beast’s life of more value than that of a human being?” Or, again: “Would you hesitate to untie your ox or your ass from the stall on the day of rest, and lead him away to give him water?” (Luke 13:14-15). If not, why do you object to Me when I release a poor human victim from a bondage of eighteen years on the Sabbath so she can draw water out of the wells of salvation?” The argument is irresistible. The conclusion is inevitable. It is lawful, dutiful, most suitable, to do well on the Sabbath. How blind they must have been! Did such an obvious proposition need to be proved to them? How oblivious they were to the fact that love is the foundation and fulfillment of all the law. Therefore, no particular precept could ever be intended to suspend the operation of that divine principle!

The argument from providence that was used by Jesus on another occasion was designed to serve the same purpose as the others: to show the lawfulness of certain kinds of work on the day
of rest. “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working” (John 5:17). The Son claimed the right to work because and as the Father worked on all the days of the week. The Father worked incessantly for beneficial, conservative purposes. He worked most holily, wisely, and powerfully preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions. He was keeping the planets in their orbits, causing the sun to rise and shine, the winds to circulate in their courses, and the tides to ebb and flow on the seventh day just as on all the other six. So Jesus Christ, the Son of God, claimed the right to work, and did work - saving, restoring, healing. He was bringing fallen nature back to its pristine state, when God the Creator pronounced all things good, and rested. He was satisfied with the world He had brought into existence. These works of goodness, by Christ’s teaching, may always be done on the Sabbath: works of humanity, like those performed by a physician, or the teacher of neglected children, or of the philanthropist making his rounds among the poor and needy, or the Christian minister preaching the gospel of peace. And there are many others. People who are filled with love will readily think of them. But too many whose hearts are cold do not so much as dream about them. There is no law against these works of mercy and love except custom - crass, unloving, pharisaic custom.

**Lord of the Sabbath**

Our Lord spoke one other word on this subject. It carries great weight for Christians. But it had no apologetic value in the opinion of the Pharisees. To them, it must have seemed like an aggravation of the offense it was meant to excuse. We are referring to these words of Jesus: “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28). He spoke these words when He was defending His disciples against the charge of Sabbath-breaking. This statement was remarkable. It was similar to the claim He made that He was greater than the temple. On the part of this meek and lowly One, it was an assertion of superhuman dignity. So it was not meant as an excuse to break the law of rest without cause or to do away with it altogether. This is evident from Mark’s account (Mark 2:27-28). Here, the words follow the proposition that the Sabbath was made for man. This proposition could not logically be used as a basis for repealing the Fourth Commandment. Rather, it is the most powerful argument for the continuation of the weekly rest. If the Sabbath had been just a burdensome restriction that had been imposed on people, we would have expected Him to do away with it, since He came to redeem mankind from all sorts of bondage. Was the Sabbath made for man - for man’s good? If so, then we should expect Christ’s function to be not that of a repealer, but that of a universal philanthropic legislator. What had previously been the peculiar privilege of Israel, He would make into a common blessing for all mankind. For the Father sent His Son into the world to deliver people - truly deliver them - from the yoke of ordinances. However, He did not send His Son to cancel any of His gifts, which are all “irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). Once given, they can never be withdrawn.
Then what does the lordship of Christ over the Sabbath signify? Simply this: An institution which is given as a favor to mankind rightly falls under the control of Him who is the King of grace and the administrator of divine mercy. He is the best judge as to how an institution should be observed. And He has the right to make certain that the favor is not turned into a burden, thereby contradicting the royal imperial law of love. The Son of Man has authority to cancel all man-made regulations that tend to go in this direction. He can even cancel all by-laws of the Mosaic code that show traces of legal rigidity and those which hide the good design of the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). As He exercises His prerogative as a Mediator, He may give the old institution a new name and alter the day of its celebration, so that it is invested with distinctively Christian associations compatible with the hearts of believers. In every detail of its observance, He also has the right to make it serve the great purposes of His incarnation.

This is why the Son of Man claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. Understood in this way, His claim was acknowledged by the church, which changed the weekly rest from the seventh day to the first. They had simply followed the way the Apostles had observed the Sabbath and were commemorating the joyful event of the resurrection of the Savior, which was nearer the heart of a believer than the old event of the creation. The early church called the first day by His name, the Lord's Day. All Christians acknowledge that claim and look at the day in the light of God's original design and of Christ's teaching, example, and work. They try to observe it so as to keep the golden balance between the two extremes: the strictness of the Pharisees and the permissiveness of the Sadducees. On the one hand, God's people recognize the good purposes that are served by the institution and do their best to make sure that these purposes are fully realized. On the other hand, they avoid the petty exactness that comes from an unhappy legalism. This causes many, especially the young, to stumble over the law as a rule that seems to them to be an unreasonable and arbitrary restriction. These same people also avoid the bad pharisaic habit of making over-confident judgments on difficult points of detail and on the conduct of those who do not think and act as they do.

We have been studying the lessons in free, yet holy, living that were given by our Lord to His disciples. We cannot end this chapter without adding a reflection that is applicable to all three of them. Through these lessons the Twelve were taught a virtue that was very necessary for the Apostles of a religion that was, in many respects, new. The virtue was this: the power to bear isolation and its consequences. When Peter and John appeared before the Sanhedrin, the rulers marveled at their boldness until they recognized that they had been the companions of Jesus the Nazarene. These religious leaders seem to have sensed that His followers were prepared for anything that required courage. They were right. The Apostles had strong nerves and were not easily discouraged. The lessons we have been considering help us to understand where they got
their rare moral courage. For years, they had been accustomed to standing alone, disregarding
the ways of the world until, finally, they could do what was right, ignoring human criticism,
without effort, almost without thinking.
First Attempts at Evangelism

Section 1 - The Mission
Matt. 10; Mark 6:7-13, 30-32; Luke 9:1-11
The Twelve are now presented to us as active participants in advancing the kingdom of God. They have been in Christ’s company for some time. They have witnessed His miraculous works, listened to His teaching concerning the kingdom, and learned how to pray and how to live. Now they were sent out to evangelize the towns and villages of their native province (Galilee) and to heal the sick in their Master’s name and by His power. Without a doubt, this mission was partly an educational experiment for their own benefit. They were still young evangelists and Apostles. But the primary design of the mission was to meet the spiritual needs of the people whose neglected condition was heavy on Christ’s heart. In His travels, the compassionate Son of Man had observed how the masses were like a shepherdless flock of sheep, scattered and torn (Matt. 9:36). It was His desire that everyone would know that a good Shepherd had come to care for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The multitudes were ready to receive the Good News; the difficulty was in meeting the pressing demand of enough workers to bring the Gospel to them. The harvest, which was ready for reaping, was plentiful, but the laborers were few (Matt. 9:37).

In connection with this mission, four things call for special attention: (1) the sphere assigned for the work; (2) the nature of the work; (3) the instructions for carrying it out; and (4) the results of the mission and the return of the missionaries. We will consider these points in order, except for Christ’s instructions to His disciples (point 3). That will be reserved for last and dealt with in another section.

The Sphere Assigned for the Work
The sphere of the mission, as described in general terms, was the whole land of Israel. “Go,” Jesus said to the Twelve, “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Later on in Matthew’s narrative, He speaks to them as if the plan of the mission involved a visit to all the cities of Israel (Matt. 10:6,23). Practically, however, the disciples’ work seems to have been restricted to Galilee. And even there, the mission seems to have been carried out among the villages and hamlets, rather than in the larger towns or cities like Tiberias. That the ministry was confined to Galilee is supported by the fact that the work of the disciples attracted the attention of Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee (Mk. 6:14; Lk. 9:7). They were working in his neighborhood. That the ministry took
place in the smaller villages is proved by the words of Luke who gives a summary of the mission: “And departing, they began going about among the villages, preaching the Gospel, and healing everywhere” (Lk 9:6).

While the amateur missionaries were permitted to go to any of the lost sheep of Israel, they were expressly forbidden to extend their labors beyond these limits. They were not to go to the Gentiles nor enter into any Samaritan city or town (Matt. 10:5). This prohibition arose in part out of the general plan which Christ had formed for founding the kingdom of God on the earth. His ultimate goal was the conquest of the world. In order to do that, He first found it necessary to secure a strong base of operations in the Holy Land among His chosen people. Therefore, Jesus always regarded Himself as a Messenger of God to the Jewish nation and seriously gave that as a reason why He should not work among the Gentiles (Matt. 15:24). Occasionally, He departed from this rule, but only in order to give prophetic hints of an approaching time when Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles would be united on equal terms in one divine commonwealth (John 4:7–24). But the primary reason of the prohibition lay in the present spiritual condition of the disciples themselves. The time would come when Jesus would say to His chosen ones, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mk. 16:15); but that time was not now. During their first trial mission, the Twelve were not fit to preach the gospel nor to do good works, either among Samaritans or Gentiles. Their hearts were too narrow, their prejudices too strong. There was too much of the Jew, too little of the Christian, in their character. For the universal work of the apostleship, they needed a new divine illumination and an abundant baptism with the gracious spirit of love. Suppose these raw evangelists had gone into a Samaritan village. What would have happened? In all probability, they would have been drawn into arguments on the religious differences between Samaritans and Jews. And, of course, they would have lost their tempers. Then, instead of seeking the salvation of the people among whom they had come, they would probably have wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume them (Lk. 9:54; they actually proposed this action at a later time).

The Nature of the Work
The work entrusted to the Twelve was very extensive in one department and very limited in the other. They were endowed with unlimited powers of healing, but they were very restricted as far as preaching was concerned. In regard to healing, their instructions were, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give.” In regard to preaching: “And as you go, preach saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand”” (Matt. 10:7–8). The commission in the first case seems too wide; in the latter, too narrow. But in both, the wisdom of Jesus is apparent in a deeper way. As far as miraculous works were concerned, there was no need for restriction, unless they became prideful and vain by having such wonderful power. This could have happened, but it could also be corrected when it became evident in any of them.
All the miracles performed by the Twelve were really done by Jesus Himself. The disciples' sole function consisted in making use of His name by faith. This seems to have been perfectly understood by everyone. For the works done by the Apostles did not lead the people of Galilee to wonder who they were, but only who and what He was in whose name all these things were done (Mk. 6:14). Therefore, since it was Christ's will for these miracles to be done through the disciples, it was just as easy for them to do the greatest works as to do the smaller (there is no reason to mention the degrees of difficulty in connection with miracles).

On the other hand, in regard to preaching, there was not only reason, but necessity, for restriction. The disciples could do no more than proclaim the fact that the kingdom was at hand and exhort the people to repent. This was all they really knew themselves. They did not yet understand, in the least degree, the doctrine of the cross. They did not even know the nature of the kingdom. They had, indeed, heard their Master give discourses on the kingdom, but they did not comprehend His words. Their ideas concerning the coming kingdom were nearly as crude and worldly as were those of other Jews who were looking for the restoration of Israel's political independence and temporal prosperity as in the glorious days of old. In one point only were they ahead of the current thinking. They had learned from John and from Jesus that repentance was necessary in order to have citizenship in heaven. In all other respects, they and those who heard them were pretty much on the same level. So we should not be surprised that the preaching of the disciples was limited; rather, we ought to wonder how Christ could trust them to open their mouths at all, even on the topic of the kingdom. Was there not a danger that men with such crude ideas might foster deluding hopes and cause political excitement? Yes. We can even discover actual traces of such excitement as we notice their actions in Herod's court and in the proposal that the multitude made shortly thereafter to take Jesus by force to make Him a king (John 6:15). So, doubtless, there was danger in this direction. But Jesus could not leave the poor, perishing people without care. Therefore, He took all possible precautions to avoid potential problems with their message by prohibiting them from going into detail on the subject of the kingdom and by telling them exactly what to say. They were to announce the kingdom as a kingdom of heaven. Some might consider this an admirable vision, but worldly people would consider it to be the opposite of what they wanted. A kingdom of heaven! That was only for those who had no earthly hope; a refuge from despair, a gloomy consolation in the absence of any better comfort. That's right, you worldlings! The message was only meant for those that you think are miserable. The kingdom was to be preached to the poor. The invitation, “Come to Me,” was addressed to the laboring and heavy laden, with the promise that they would receive rest; rest from ambition and discontent, and scheming, troublesome care. Their blessed hope would be in the divine and the eternal.
The Results of the Mission

The impression produced by the labors of the Twelve seems to have been significant. As we have already noted, the fame of their works reached the ears of Herod, and great crowds accompanied them as they moved from place to place. On their return from the mission, they rejoined the company of their Master and were surrounded by an eager, admiring multitude who had witnessed or experienced the benefits of their work. It then became necessary for them to withdraw to a desert place in order to get some quiet rest. Mark informs us that, “…there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves” (Mk. 6:31-32). But even in the solitude of the desert on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, they could not have their privacy. “And the people saw them going, and many recognized them, and they ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them” (Mark 6:33).

In quality, the results of the mission appear to have been much less satisfactory than in their extent. The religious impressions that were produced seem to have been, to a great degree, superficial and fleeting. There were many blossoms, so to speak, on the apple tree in the spring of this Galilean “revival.” But only a comparatively small number of them became fruit, while an even smaller number of these reached the stage of ripe fruit. We learn this from what took place shortly after, when Christ gave His discourse on the Bread of Life in the synagogue of Capernaum. The same people who wanted to make Christ a king after the miraculous feeding in the desert abandoned Him, being offended by His mysterious teaching. The ones who did this were, for the most part, the same people who had listened to the Twelve preach repentance (cf. Mk. 6:30-35 with John 6:22-25).

This must have been deeply disappointing to the heart of Jesus. It had been such a benevolent undertaking. So it is all the more remarkable that the comparative failure of the first evangelistic movement did not prevent Him from repeating the experiment on a broader scale later. Luke writes, “Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them two and two ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come” (Luke 10:1). The motive of this second mission was the same as the first. The instructions to the missionaries were also the same. Jesus still felt deep compassion for the perishing multitude and, hoping against hope, made a new attempt to save the lost sheep. He wanted all people at least called to the fellowship of the kingdom, even though few would be chosen for it. When the immediate results were promising, He was gratified, even though He knew from past experience and by divine insight, that the faith and repentance of many were likely to evaporate like the morning dew. When the Seventy returned from their mission and reported their great success, Jesus proclaimed it as an
omen of the downfall of Satan’s kingdom. Then, rejoicing in spirit, He gave thanks to the Supreme Ruler in heaven and earth, His Father, that while the things of the kingdom were hidden from the wise and prudent, the people of intelligence and discretion, they were revealed to babes, the unrefined, the poor, the ignorant (Lk. 10:17-21).

The reference in Jesus’ thanksgiving prayer to the “wise and prudent” suggests the thought that these evangelistic efforts were regarded with disfavor by the refined, hypercritical classes of Jewish religious society. This is probably true. There are always people in the church who are intelligent, wise, and good, to whom popular religious movements are distasteful. The noise, the excitement, the extravagance, the delusions, the misdirection of zeal, the coarseness of the agents, the instability of the converts - all these things offend them. These same minds would have taken offense at the evangelistic work of the Twelve and the Seventy, for it was undoubtedly accompanied with the same drawbacks. The agents were ignorant and had very few ideas. They understood very little of divine truth. Their sole qualification was that they were earnest and could preach repentance well. Doubtless, also, there was plenty of noise and excitement among the multitudes who heard them preach. And we certainly know that their zeal was both ill-informed and short-lived. These things, in fact, are regular features of all popular movements. Jonathan Edwards, speaking with reference to the revival of religion which took place in America in his day, said, “A great deal of noise and tumult, confusion and uproar, darkness mixed with light, and evil with good, is always to be expected in the beginning of something very glorious in the state of things in human society or the church of God. After nature has long been shut up in a cold, dead state, when the sun returns in the spring, there is, together with the increase of the light and heat of the sun, very tempestuous weather before all is settled, calm, and serene, and all nature rejoices in its bloom and beauty” (Thoughts on Revival, Part 1, sec. iii).

None of the “wise and prudent” knew half as well as Jesus what evil would be mixed with the good in the work of the kingdom. But He was not as easily offended as they were. The Friend of sinners was ever like Himself. He sympathized with the multitude and could not, like the Pharisees, contentedly give them over to a permanent condition of ignorance and depravity. He greatly rejoiced over even one lost sheep who was restored. And He was overjoyed when not just one, but a whole flock, even began to return to the fold. It pleased Him to see people repenting, even if only for a short while. And it pleased Him to see people pressing into the kingdom, even if it was rudely and violently. For His love was strong. And where strong love exists, even wisdom and refinement will not be particular (Matt. 11:12).

Before we go to another topic, let’s take note of the fact that there is another class of Christians. These are quite distinct from the wise and prudent. The evangelistic labors of the Twelve do not need to be vindicated in their eyes. On the contrary, their tendency is to regard these labors as
the whole work of the kingdom. Revival of religion among the neglected masses is for them the sum of all good works. They do not take into account the work of instruction going on in the church because it is less observable. In their way of thinking, when there is no obvious excitement, the church is dead and her ministry inefficient. These people need to be reminded that there were two religious movements going on in the days of the Lord Jesus. One consisted in awakening the masses out of the stupor of indifference. The other consisted in the careful, exact training of men already committed to the principles and truths of the divine kingdom. In the first movement, the disciples - both the Twelve and the Seventy - were agents. In the later movement, they were the subjects. This movement, even though it was less noticeable and much more limited in extent, was by far the more important of the two. It was destined to bring forth fruit that would remain. It would not only affect the immediate present, but the whole history of the world. The great Teacher was now quietly and unobservedly instilling deep truths into the minds of His selected men. Before long, these men would speak His confidential teaching in the broad daylight. And the sound of their voices would not stop until they had gone throughout the whole earth. If Christ had neglected this work and given Himself completely to the work of evangelism among the masses, there would have been very little hope for the kingdom of heaven.

**Jesus’ Instructions**

When the Twelve had finished their mission, they returned and told their Master all that they had done and taught. We do not have any details of their report or of His remarks. We do, however, find such details in connection with the later mission of the Seventy. “And the Seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name’” (Lk. 10:17). Luke also informs us that after Jesus congratulated the disciples on their success and expressed His own satisfaction with the reported facts, He spoke a word of warning, “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” (Lk. 10:20). It was a timely caution against pride and vanity. It is very probable that a similar word of caution was also addressed to the Twelve after their return. It certainly would have been appropriate. They had been involved in the same exciting work, had wielded the same miraculous powers, had been equally successful, and were equally immature in character; therefore, it was equally difficult for them to bear success. It is most likely that when Jesus said to them on their return, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while” (Mk. 6:31), He was not taking care of their bodies only, but was wisely seeking to provide rest for their heated minds as well as for their jaded frames of reference.

The advice to the Seventy ought to be heeded by everyone who is zealous for the work of evangelism, especially those who are young in knowledge and grace. It warns them that there is a possibility of their own spiritual health being injured when they are zealous in seeking the salva-
tion of others. This may happen in many ways. Success may make the evangelists vain, and they may begin to make sacrifices for the Gospel but fall into a trap of their own making. They may fall under the dominion of the devil when they begin to have joy over the fact that he is subject to them. They may despise those who have been less successful or denounce them as being deficient in zeal. Jonathan Edwards, once again, gives a sad account of the pride, presumption, arrogance, conceit, and censoriousness which characterized many of the more active promoters of religious revival in his day (Thoughts on Revival, Part iv). Some others may fall into a false security about their own spiritual state, thinking that it is impossible for anything to go wrong with those who are so committed and whom God has so greatly owned. This is an obvious, as well as a dangerous mistake. Doubtless, Judas took part in this Galilean mission, and for all we know, was as successful as his fellow-disciples in casting out devils. Graceless people may, for a period of time, be used as agents in promoting the work of grace in the hearts of others. Usefulness does not necessarily imply goodness, according to Christ’s teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” Notice the answer He says He will give to them. It is not, “I question the correctness of your statement.” That is implied. Rather, the answer is, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matt. 7:22).

These solemn words suggest the need for watchfulness and self-examination. But they are not designed to discourage or to hurt one’s zeal. We must not interpret them as if they meant, “Never mind doing good, only be good.” Nor should we read it, “Do not care for the salvation of others; look out for your own salvation.” Jesus Christ did not teach a listless or a selfish religion. He impressed on His disciples a large-hearted, generous concern for the spiritual well-being of people. And to foster such a spirit, He sent the Twelve on this trial mission, even when they were comparatively unprepared for the work and at risk of spiritual harm. Even with the risks involved, He wanted His Apostles to be filled with enthusiasm for the advancement of the kingdom. And when the disciples’ weaknesses began to appear, He made sure to check them by a word of warning and a timely retreat into solitude.
Section 2 - The Instructions
Matthew 10; Mark 6:7-13; 30-32; Luke 9:1-11

Jesus’ instructions to the Twelve before He sent them out on their first mission are obviously divided into two parts. The first, which is shorter, relates to the present. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain this narrative. The second part, which is much longer than the first, relates mainly to the distant future. Only Matthew reports this portion of the narrative. In the first part, Christ tells His disciples what to do as apprentices in their apostleship. In the latter, He tells them what they will have to do and endure after they become Apostles on a greater scale and preach the Gospel, not only to Jews, but to all the nations.

Some have doubted whether Jesus really delivered the second part of the message on this occasion. Those who hold this position stress the fact that only Matthew connects the message with the trial mission. They also maintain that the larger portion of the message was given by the other evangelists and connected it to other events. In support of this view, reference has also been made to the statement Jesus made to His disciples in His farewell speech before the crucifixion - that until then, He had not spoken to them about the coming persecutions because it was unnecessary while He was with them (John 16:4). Finally, they say, it is unlikely that Jesus would frighten His inexperienced disciples by alluding to dangers which were not really about to happen at the time of their mission in Galilee. These doubts are legitimate because of the way Matthew topically grouped his material. But they are not conclusive. It was natural for Jesus to highlight the first missionary work of the Twelve by giving a message similar to that which Matthew records. In it, He presented the responsibilities, dangers, encouragements, and rewards of being an Apostle. On solemn occasions, it was characteristic for Christ to speak as a prophet who lived in the present but saw into the future. From small beginnings, He looked forward to great, ultimate issues. This Galilean mission, though insignificant and limited compared with the great undertakings that would happen later on, was really an awe-inspiring event. It was the beginning of that vast work for which the Twelve had been chosen. Its scope was broad - it embraced the world. It aimed at setting up the kingdom of God on earth. The Sermon on the Mount was appropriately delivered when the Apostles were first chosen. This new message, which outlined the apostolic duties, was just as appropriate now that the Twelve were beginning the work to which they had been called. Even the references to future dangers contained in the
message seem to be natural and timely. They were intended to reassure, rather than frighten the disciples. Remember, the execution of John the Baptist had recently occurred, and the Twelve were about to begin their missionary work within the boundaries of the tyrant who commanded the brutal murder. Without a doubt, these humble men who were supposed to repeat the Baptist’s message, “Repent,” were not facing the same fate that John had met. But it was natural for them to be afraid. It was also natural for their Master to think of their future when such fears would be anything but imaginary. On both accounts, it was timely for Jesus to say something like this to them: “Dangers are coming, but do not fear.”

This is the essence of the second part of Christ’s instructions to the Twelve. On the other hand, the essential message of the first part is Care not. These two words - Care not, Fear not - are the heart and soul of all that was said at the beginning of the first missionary enterprise and for every evangelistic work that would follow. Here Jesus speaks to all ages and to all times. He tells the church about the kind of spirit that must be evident when she is beginning and sustaining her missionary enterprises. Then they may have His blessing.

Instructions for the Present

The responsibility of beginning their mission without being worried and relying on Providence for the necessities of life was imparted to the Twelve by their Master in very strong and passionate terms. They were instructed to buy nothing for their journey and go just as they were. They must not bring either gold or silver - not even as much as a brass coin could be in their pockets. Nor were they to bring any kind of small bag or knapsack in which to carry food. A change of clothes was not permitted. They were to take no sandals for their feet, nor staff for their hands. If they already had these last few items on the list, it was all right. If not, they could do without them. They might go on their errand of love barefooted and without the aid even of a staff to help them on their weary way. Their feet were shod only with the preparation of the gospel of peace, and they leaned on God’s words of promise, “And your strength will equal your days” (Deut. 33:25).

In these directions Jesus gave to the Twelve, the intrinsic and permanent value is in the spirit and not in the mere letter. The truth of this statement is evident from the various ways the evangelists reported Christ’s words. Mark, for example, records Him saying to His disciples, “If you have a staff in your hand and sandals on your feet and one coat on your back, let that be enough.” Another, Matthew, represents Jesus as saying, “Do not provide anything for this journey - not a coat, shoes, nor staff.” In spirit, the two versions are saying the same thing. But if we insist on the letter of the directives with legal strictness, there is an obvious contrast between them. What Jesus meant to say, in whichever way He said it, was this: “Go at once, and go as you are, and do not concern yourself with food or clothing or anything you need for your body. Trust God
for these.” His instructions were given on the principle of the division of labor. He assigned the servants of the kingdom military duty. God was the commissariat department.

Understood in this way, the words of our Lord have validity for all time. They are to be kept in mind by all who would serve Him in His kingdom. And though the circumstances of the church have greatly changed since these words were first spoken, they have not been forgotten. Many ministers and missionaries have obeyed those instructions almost to the letter, and many more have kept them in their spirit. Have there not been poor students who fulfilled these directives - students who left the humble homes of their parents to be trained for the gospel ministry? They departed without money in their pockets to buy food or to pay fees. They only had simple faith and youthful hope in their hearts. They knew as much about finding their way to the office of pastor as Abraham knew about how to find his way to the promised land when he left his homeland. But, like Abraham, they trusted that He who said to him, “Leave your father’s house,” would be their guide, their shield, and their provider. And if those who started out this way later on became wealthy - that is, they came to the place where their needs were abundantly supplied - what is that but an endorsement by Providence of the law enunciated by the Master, “The worker is worthy of his support” (Matt. 10:10).

The directions that were given to the Twelve about temporal issues before their first mission were meant to be educational for their future work. As they entered the responsibilities of being Apostles, they would have to live - literally - by faith. So Jesus mercifully tried to familiarize them with this habit while He was with them on the earth. Therefore, before He sent them out to preach in Galilee, He essentially said to them, “Go and learn to seek the kingdom of God with a single heart. Do not be concerned about food and clothing. Until you can do that, you are not ready to be my Apostles.” Truly, they had been learning to do that ever since they began following Him. Those who belonged to His company literally lived from day to day and did not worry about tomorrow. But there was a difference between their past situation and the one they were about to enter. In the past, Jesus had been with them. Now they were to be left for a while by themselves. In the past, they had been like young children in a family under the care of their parents, or like young birds in a nest sheltered by their mother’s wing, only needing to open their mouths wide in order to have them filled. Now they were to become like boys leaving their father’s house to serve an apprenticeship, or like fledglings leaving the warm nest in which they were nurtured. They would have to exercise their wings and seek food for themselves.

While Jesus was requiring His disciples to walk by faith, He gave their faith something to rest on. He encouraged them to believe that God would provide what they could not provide for themselves and that He would do it through His people. “And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there until you go away” (Matt. 10:11). Our observation is
that He took it for granted that they would find in every place they went at least one good man with a warm heart who would welcome the messengers of the kingdom to his house and table because of his pure love for God and for the truth. Surely no unreasonable assumption! It would be a pitiful village or town that did not have one single worthy person in it. Even wicked Sodom had a Lot within its walls who entertained angels without knowing it (see Heb. 13:2).

To make sure that His servants received good treatment in every generation wherever the gospel might be preached, Jesus made it known that He put a high premium on all acts of kindness done toward them. We find this notice at the close of the address He delivered to the Twelve at this time: “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward” (Matt. 10:40-41). And then, with increased passion and seriousness, He added, “And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42). How much easier to go into Galilee, even into all the world, serving such a sympathetic Master on such terms!

But while encouraging the young evangelists in this way, Jesus did not allow them to go away with the idea that all things would be pleasant in their experience. He helped them understand that they would be received harshly as well as with kindness. They would meet rude people who would refuse to offer them hospitality, and with obstinate, careless people who would reject their message. But even in these cases, He assured them that they would be consoled. If they greeted others with peace and their words were not reciprocated, they would at least get the benefit of their own spirit of good-will, namely that their peace would return to them. If their words were not welcomed by any to whom they preached, they would at least be free from blame. They might shake the dust off their feet and say, “Your blood be upon your own heads, we are clean; we leave you to your doom, and will go elsewhere” (Acts 18:6; see Matt. 10:13-14). These are solemn words and are not to be spoken (as they too often are) by young and inexperienced disciples with pride, impatience, or anger. Rather, they are to be spoken humbly, calmly, and deliberately as part of God’s message to the people. When they are uttered with any other spirit, it is a sign that the preacher has been as much to blame as the hearer for the rejection of his message. Few people have any right to speak these words at all. For it truly requires rare preaching to make unbelievers see how great their guilt is - so great that it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for them. Such preaching has occurred in the past. Christ’s own preaching was of this type. This is demonstrated by His pronouncing fearful doom on those who rejected His words. The Apostles were also to preach in this way. Therefore, to uphold their authority, Jesus solemnly declared that the penalty for despising their word would be no less than for neglecting His own (Matt. 10:14-15).
Instructions for the Future

The remaining instructions refer to the future rather than the present. There are more of these instructions than for the present, but they do not call for a long explanation. As we have said, the message of all of Jesus’ instructions is “Do not fear.” Like the refrain of a song, this exhortation is repeated again and again during Jesus’ address (Matt. 10:26,28,31). From this fact, the Twelve might have thought that their future situation was to be such that it would put fear in them. But Jesus did not presume that they would learn it by inference. He told them about it plainly. “Behold,” He said with the whole history of the church in mind. “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10:16). Then He went on to explain in graphic detail the various forms of danger which the messengers of truth would face. They would be turned over to councils, scourged in synagogues, brought before governors and kings (like Felix, Festus, Herod), and hated by all of them for His name’s sake (Matt. 10:16-18). At the same time He explained to them that this strange treatment was inevitable. It was by necessity the consequence of divine truth acting like a chemical solvent in the world. It separated people into parties according to the spirit that ruled in them. The truth would even divide members of the same family and make them bitterly hostile to each other (Matt. 10:21). And no matter how awful the result might be, it was one for which there was no remedy. Offenses must come: “Do not think,” He said to His disciples, horrified at the dark picture, and perhaps secretly hoping that their Master had painted it with too somber colors. “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt. 10:34-36).

Serpents and Doves

In the middle of such dangers, two virtues are especially needed - caution and faithfulness. Caution is needed so that God’s servants will not be cut off prematurely or unnecessarily. Faithfulness is needed so that while they live, they may really do God’s work and fight for the truth. In such times, Christ’s disciples must not be afraid. They must be brave and true. While being fearless, however, they must not be foolish. It is not easy to combine these qualities. Conscientious people are prone to be rash, and prudent people tend to be unfaithful. Yet the combination is not impossible. Otherwise, Jesus would not have required it as He did in this discourse. Jesus meant to teach the importance of cultivating the apparently incompatible virtues of caution and faithfulness with this remarkable proverb-precept: “Be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). The serpent is the symbol of cunning; the dove, of simplicity. No creatures can be more unlike each other. Yet Jesus requires His disciples to be - at the same time - serpents in cautiousness and doves in simplicity of purpose and purity of heart. Happy are those who can be both. But if we cannot, let us at least be doves. The dove must come before the serpent in our thinking and in the development of our character. This order can be observed in the
history of all true disciples. They begin with spotless sincerity. Then, after being betrayed by others who display generous enthusiasm at first but then act with rashness toward them, they learn the serpent’s virtues. If we reverse the order, as too many do, and begin by being wise and just to the point where others admire us, the result will be that the higher virtue - being innocent as doves - will not only be postponed, but sacrificed. The dove will be devoured by the serpent. The cause of truth and righteousness will be betrayed out of a human desire for self-preservation and worldly advantage.

When a general statement about morality is heard, one naturally wishes to know how it applies to particular situations. Christ dealt with this desire in the deep, pregnant maxim, “Be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves,” by giving examples of its application. The first scenario is this: The messengers of truth are brought up before the civil or ecclesiastical tribunals to answer for themselves. Here the wisdom Jesus passed on is, “Beware of men” (Matt. 10:17). “Do not be so simple-minded as to imagine that all people are good, honest, fair, and tolerant. Remember, there are wolves in the world - people full of malice and falsehood. They are unscrupulous and capable of inventing the most atrocious charges against you. And they support these charges with the most shameless lies. Keep out of their grasp, if you can. And when you fall into their hands, do not expect honesty, justice, nor generosity.” But how are these kinds of people to be answered? Must deceit be met with deceit, or lies with lies? No. Here is the place for the simplicity of the dove. Cunning and deceit are of no benefit at such a time. Safety lies in trusting Heaven’s guidance and telling the truth. “But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt. 10:19-20). The counsel that Jesus gave to the Apostles has been confirmed by experience. If the speeches given by those who confessed the truth under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit were collected, what a noble book they would make! It would be a sort of Martyr’s Bible.

Next, Jesus tells about situations where the messengers of His gospel are exposed to popular persecutions. Then He points out how the maxim applies to them. These persecutions - as distinct from judicial proceedings - were common in the experience of the Apostles. Without fail, they happen in all critical periods of history. The ignorant, superstitious people who are filled with prejudice and passion, and who are stirred up by scheming people, obstruct the cause of truth. They form mobs and mock and assault the messengers of God. How, then, are those who receive this bad treatment to act? On the one hand, they are to show the wisdom of the serpent by avoiding the storm of popular ill-will when it arises. And, on the other hand, they are to exhibit the simplicity of the dove by giving the utmost publicity to their message, even though they are conscious of the risk this presents. “But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next” (Matt. 10:23). On the other hand, though unshaken by commotion, misrepresentation,
and violence, “what I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops” (Matt. 10:27).

A reason is attached to each of these commands. Flight is justified by the remark, “For truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes” (Matt. 10:23). The coming that is alluded to is the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish nation. The meaning is this: The Apostles would barely have enough time before the catastrophe came to go all over the land to warn the people to save themselves from the destruction coming to a rebellious generation. Therefore, they could not afford to remain in any location after its inhabitants had heard and rejected the message. The souls of everyone were equally valuable. And if one city did not receive the Word, perhaps another would (Acts 13:46). The reason attached to the command to greatly publicize the truth was this: “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master” (Matt. 10:24). This is what He was saying: “To be treated in an evil way by the multitudes who are ignorant and violent is hard to take. But it is not harder for you than for Me. As you know, I have already experienced malice at the hands of the people at Nazareth. And I am destined - and you don’t know this yet - to have more bitter experiences in Jerusalem. Therefore, make sure that you do not hide your light under a bushel to escape the rage of those who have the qualities of wolves.”

Finally, the disciples are not only supposed to be in danger of being brought to trial, of being mocked, and of receiving violence. They are also in danger for their lives and are given instructions about how to act in that extreme situation. Once again the maxim, “Wise as serpents, innocent as doves,” comes into play in both of its parts. In this situation, the wisdom of the serpent lies in knowing what to fear. Jesus reminds His disciples that there are two kinds of deaths. One is caused by the sword and the other by being unfaithful to one’s responsibilities. He tells them in so many words that both are evils to be avoided, if possible. Yet, if a choice must be made, the latter death is the one most to be dreaded. He said, “And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). He is referring to the Tempter who, when one is in danger, whispers, “Save yourself even if you have to sacrifice your principles or your conscience.” The simplicity of the dove in the presence of extreme danger is this: childlike trust in our Father in heaven who watches over us in His providence. Jesus, using language that was charmingly simple and passionate, encouraged His disciples to cherish this kind of trust. He told them that God even cared for the sparrows. He also reminded them that even if they felt insignificant, they at least had a greater value than many sparrows. They were certainly more valuable than two sparrows whose money value was only one penny. If God did not neglect even a pair of sparrows, but provided them with a place in His world where they could build their nest and safely give birth to their young, would He not care for them as they went forth two by two preaching the doctrine of the
kingdom? Yes, He would! The very hairs of their heads were numbered. Therefore, they could go forth without fear, trusting their lives to His care. They would also remember that, in the worst possible case, death was no great evil. For the faithful, there was reserved a crown of life. And for those who confessed the Son of man, Jesus would grant the honor of being confessed by Him before His Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32-33).

These, then, were the instructions that Christ gave to the Twelve when He sent them out to preach and to heal. It was a rare, unprecedented message which seems strange to our modern ears. We can hardly imagine that such strict requirements could be made, much less that they would be exactly obeyed. Some readers of these pages may have stood and looked up at Mont Blanc [the highest mountain in the Italian/French Alps, 15,781 feet above sea level] from Courmayeur [a town at the foot of Mont Blanc, 4,016 feet above sea level] or Chamounix [also, Chamonix, on the north side of Mont Blanc, site of the first winter Olympics in 1924]. Such is our attitude toward this first missionary sermon. It is a mountain at which we gaze in wonder from a position far below. We can hardly dream of climbing to its summit. Some who are noble, however, have made the difficult ascent. Among these, the first place of honor must be assigned to the chosen companions of Jesus.
The Miracle in the Wilderness

The miracle occurred on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke gives the precise location: in the neighborhood of a city called Bethsaida (Lk. 9:10). This, of course, could not be the Bethsaida on the western shore, the home of Andrew and Peter. There seems to be another city by the same name on the north-eastern side of the sea. To distinguish it from the other city, it was called Bethsaida Julias [named after the daughter of Augustus]. An eye-witness (Stanley, Sinai and Palestine) informs us that the site of the city “is discernable on the lower slope of the hill which overhangs the rich plain at the mouth of the Jordan” (that is, at the place where the waters of the Upper Jordan flow into the Sea of Galilee). The same author proves the suitableness of the location for the miracle when he says, “The desert place was either the green tableland which lies halfway up the hill immediately above Bethsaida, or else in the parts of the plain not cultivated by the hand of man would be found the ‘much green grass,’ still fresh in the spring of the year when this event occurred, before it had faded away in the summer sun: the tall grass which, broken down by the feet of the thousands then gathered together, would make as it were, ‘couches’ for them to recline upon” (cf. Lk. 9:10; Mk. 6:39; John 6:10).
Jesus and the Twelve retired to this place after the latter had returned from their mission. Here they sought rest and privacy, but they did not find it. Their every move was being watched, and the people flocked along the shore toward the place where they had sailed. They ran all the way, as if they were afraid the disciples might escape, and arrived at the landing before the boat did (Mark 6:33). The crowd that gathered around Jesus was very large. All the Gospel writers agree in stating that there were five thousand present. And since the people were organized in groups of fifties and hundreds at the miraculous feeding, it was easy to count them (Mk. 6:40). So we do not have to accept this number as a rough estimate, but as a tolerably exact calculation.

Such a large multitude proves that the people who were living by the shore of the Sea of Galilee were extremely excited. These people possessed a passionate enthusiasm, a hero-worship, for Jesus. Jesus was the idol of the hour. They could not stand for Him to be absent; they could not see enough of His work, nor hear enough of His teaching. We may attribute this Galilean enthusiasm to the results of Christ’s own past work as well as to the evangelistic mission which we studied in the last chapter. This exuberance seems to have spread as far south as Tiberias, because John reports that boats came from that city “to the place where they ate the bread” (John 6:23). Those who were in these boats came too late to witness the miracle or take part in the feast. However, this does not prove that their desire was not the same as the rest of the people. They lived further away from the scene of the miracle, it would take longer for the news to reach them, and it would take them longer to travel there.

The great miracle that was performed in the neighborhood of Bethsaida Julias was this: A vast assembly of human beings were fed with the totally inadequate means of “five barley loaves, and two fish” (John 6:9). It was truly an astounding work. We cannot comprehend it. But no event in the Gospel history has more witnesses to state that it really happened. All the evangelists tell about the miracle with precision and with very little apparent discrepancy. There is so much graphic detail that only eye-witnesses could have provided it. Even John, who records only a few of Christ’s miracles, describes this one as carefully as any of his fellow evangelists. The only difference is that he introduces it into his narrative simply as a preface to the sermon on the Bread of Life, which is found only in his Gospel.

This wonderful miracle, exceptionally verified, seems open to objection on another front. It appears to be a miracle that was performed without sufficient reason. It cannot be demonstrated that it was urgently called for because of the needs of the multitude. Without a doubt, they were hungry and had not brought food with them. But the miracle was performed in the afternoon of the day on which they left their homes. Most of them could have returned within a few hours. It is true that it would have been somewhat difficult to have undertaken such a trip at the end of the day without food. But if it had been necessary, the hardship was far within the limits of
human endurance. It was just not necessary, for food could have been obtained on the way back in the neighboring towns and villages without their going very far. So if they had been dismissed just as they were, it would not have been a great inconvenience to them. This is apparent from the fact that the disciples made the suggestion that the multitude be sent away. We read: “And the day began to decline, and the Twelve came and said to Him, ‘Send the multitude away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat’” (Luke 9:12). There is an obvious difference between the first miraculous feeding and the second, which occurred at a later period on the south-eastern side of the Sea. On that occasion, the people who had assembled around Jesus had been in the wilderness for three days without anything to eat, and there was no place to get food. So this miracle was demanded out of consideration for humanity (Mark 8:3-4). As we would expect, we find that compassion is given as the motive for that miracle: “He (Jesus) summoned His disciples and said to them, ‘I feel compassion for the multitude because they have remained with Me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away fasting to their home, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance’” (Mark 8:1-3).

**A Critical Miracle**

Our purpose is not simply to get rid of the difficulty of assigning a sufficient motive for the first great miracle of feeding. If it was, we might be content to say that Jesus did not need an urgent situation to compel Him to use His power for the benefit of others. He would not use it for His own benefit, even in a case of extreme need, not even after a forty-day fast. But when the well-being of others was concerned, He passed out miraculous blessings with a liberal hand. He did not ask Himself, “Is this a serious enough occasion for Me to use My divine power? Is this man sick enough to justify a miracle and interfere with the laws of nature by healing him? Are the people who have assembled here hungry enough to be fed, like their fathers in the wilderness, with bread from heaven?” We believe that something higher than the satisfaction of their physical appetites was the goal of this miracle. It was a symbolic, didactic, critical miracle. It was meant to teach, yet also to test. It was meant to provide a text for the subsequent sermon and a standard by which the character of those who followed Jesus with such enthusiasm could be tested. The miraculous feast in the wilderness was intended to say to the multitude just what our sacramental feast says to us: “I, Jesus the Son of God Incarnate, am the bread of life. What this bread is to your bodies, I myself am to your souls.” And the communicants who partook in that feast were to be tested by what they thought of the transaction. Those who were spiritual would see in it a sign of Christ’s divine dignity and a seal of His saving grace. The carnal would be content with the fact that they had eaten the loaves and were filled. They would seize the opportunity, after what had just happened, to indulge in high hopes that they could have temporal gratification under the benevolent reign of the Prophet and King who had made His appearance among them.
Mercy and Judgment

From this perspective, the miracle in the desert was not simply an act of mercy, but an act of judgment. Jesus mercifully fed the hungry multitude in order that He might sift it and separate the true disciples from the false. There was a greater demand for this sifting than for their physical cravings to be satisfied with food. If those thousands of people were all genuine disciples - great! But if not - if the larger number of them were following Christ because they misunderstood Him - then the sooner they became aware of it, the better. If Christ had allowed this large multitude to follow Him any longer without sifting, He would have been encouraging false hopes. He would have also misled the people as to the nature of His kingdom and His earthly mission. Therefore, He could not have devised a better method of separating the chaff from the wheat in that large company of professing disciples. First, He performed a miracle which would bring to the surface the hidden carnality of the largest number of people. Then He preached a sermon which could not fail to be offensive to their carnal minds.

The miraculous method that Jesus chose for confronting the difficulty that had arisen was not just hinted at in the Gospel narratives. For example, consider John's note about the time: “Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand” (John 6:4). Is this simply a chronological statement? We do not think so. Then what further purpose could it serve? To explain how such a great crowd gathered around Jesus? There was no need for such an explanation, because the true reason for the great gathering was the enthusiasm that had been awakened in the people by the preaching and healing work of Jesus and the Twelve. It would seem, then, that the evangelist refers to the approaching Passover, not to explain the movement of the people, but rather to explain the acts and words of His Lord which were about to be communicated. Let us bring to the surface John's meaning: “The Passover was near, and Jesus was thinking about it, even though He did not go up to the feast that season. He thought about the paschal lamb, and how He, the true Paschal Lamb, would, before long, be killed for the life of the world. And He expressed the deep thoughts of His heart in the symbolic miracle I am about to relate, and in the mystical message which followed.”

The view we advocate about the motive behind the miracle in the wilderness seems to be supported also by the tone which Jesus adopted in the conversation which took place between Himself and the Twelve about how the needs of the crowd could be met. Fragments of that conversation have been preserved by the different evangelists. In the course of that conversation, two suggestions were made by the disciples. One was to dismiss the multitude so that they could get supplies for themselves. The other was that they (the disciples) should go to the nearest town (perhaps Bethsaida Julias, which was probably not too far away) and purchase as much bread as they could get for 200 denarii. At least it would alleviate their hunger, even if it was not sufficient to satisfy their appetites (Mk. 6:37; Jn. 6:7). Both of these proposals were possible. Oth-
erwise, they would not have been suggested. For the Twelve had not spoken without thinking, but only after considering the issues. This is apparent from the fact that one of them, Andrew, had already ascertained how much food would be immediately available. The question about provisions for the crowd had evidently been on the disciples’ minds. The two proposals were the result of their deliberations. What we wish to point out is that Jesus does not seem to have given any serious consideration to these proposals. He listened to them and was pleased to see the generous concern of His disciples for the hungry people. Yet, He listened with the demeanor of someone who intended from the very beginning to pursue a different course of action from any that they might suggest. He behaved like a general in a council of war whose own mind is made up, but who is willing to hear what his subordinates have to say. This is not simply our inference. For John actually explains that this was the way our Lord acted on the occasion. John tells us that Jesus asked Philip the question, “Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?” Then he adds the parenthetical remark: “And this He was saying to test him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do” (John 6:5-6).

The Results of the Miracle

This, then, was the purpose of the miracle. Now, what was the result? The swelling tide of enthusiasm rose to its full height and moved the multitude to form a foolish and dangerous plan. This crowd wanted to crown the wonder-working Jesus and make Him their king instead of the unrestrained despot, Herod. They said, “This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6:14). They were on the verge of coming and taking Jesus by force to make Him a king. So He found it necessary to escape them and went alone to a mountain (John 6:14-15). These are the explicit comments of the fourth Gospel. Matthew and Mark only imply these same ideas. They tell how Jesus immediately made the disciples get into a boat and go to the other side after the miracle in the desert (Matt. 14:22; Mark 1:45). Why was He in such a hurry? Why was this so urgent? Without a doubt, it was late, and there was no time to lose if they wanted to get home to Capernaum that night. But why go home at all, when at least some of the people were going to spend the night in the wilderness? Shouldn’t the disciples stay to look after them? No. Would it have been responsible for Jesus’ disciples to leave their Master alone in such a situation? Without a doubt, the reluctance of the Twelve to leave sprang from their asking themselves these very questions. Their feelings were noble. Yet the command by Jesus presupposes the fact that unusual circumstances existed, such as those recorded by John. In other words, the most natural explanation of the fact recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) is that Jesus wanted to remove both Himself and His disciples from the foolish enthusiasm of the crowd. It is beyond questioning; this was an enthusiasm with which the disciples were in sympathy. For that reason, He arranged for them to sail away at dusk across the Sea, while He retired into the solitude of the mountains (John 6:15-16).
What a sad ending that came from such a hopeful movement! The kingdom has been proclaimed, and the good news has been extensively welcomed. Jesus, the Messianic King, has become the object of fervent devotion to an enthusiastic population. But, watch out! Their ideas of the kingdom are radically mistaken. If put into practice, it would mean rebellion and ultimate ruin. Therefore, it was necessary for Jesus to save Himself from His own friends and hide Himself from His own followers. How Satan's tares get sown among God's wheat! How easily enthusiasm runs into foolishness and harm!

The result of the miracle did not take Jesus by surprise. It was what He expected. No, in a sense, it was what He had purposed to happen. It was time for the thoughts of many hearts to be revealed. And at least one of the reasons the miracle was performed was to help reveal people's hearts. Jesus provided a table for the people in the wilderness and gave them the grain of heaven and sent them food until they were full (Ps. 78:19,24-25). He did this in order to test them and to know what was in their hearts (Deut. 8:2). Did they love Him for His own sake, or only because they expected worldly advantage? He knew beforehand that many followed Him for secret purposes, but He desired to bring the fact home to their own consciences. The miracle gave Him the opportunity and enabled Him to say, without fear of contradiction, “You seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate the loaves, and were filled” (John 6:26). It was a searching word. It puts all of His followers who profess His name, not only then, but now, in a position where they have to examine their thoughts and ask themselves the question, “Why do I profess Christianity? Is it because I have a sincere faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world, or is it because I have thoughtlessly complied with tradition because I am worried about my reputation, or because I want worldly advantage?”
Section 2 - The Storm

Matthew 14:24-33; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21

“In dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea,” wrote Paul (II Cor. 11:26). He was describing the various hardships that he encountered as he went about doing his great work as an Apostle to the Gentiles. These dangers collide in this crisis in the life of Jesus. He has just saved Himself from the dangerous enthusiasm displayed by the unthinking crowd right after the miracle of the loaves and fishes was performed in the desert. Now, just a few hours later, there is a greater disaster that is about to happen to Him. He had hurriedly sent the Twelve away in a boat so they would not encourage the people in their foolish attempts to take Him and make Him king (John 6:15). As they were on the Sea of Galilee, they were caught in the middle of a storm while He was alone on the mountain praying. The disciples were in imminent danger of being drowned. His plan for escaping one evil created a worse situation for Him. It seemed as if, through a series of unfortunate circumstances, His followers – both true and false - were about to be taken from Him. He would be left alone, just as in the last great crisis. Like a general on the day of battle, the Messianic King was watching from the heights. He was in a tight spot and the battle was going against Him. But the Captain of salvation was equal to the emergency. No matter how perplexed He might be for a time, He would be victorious in the end.

The Sea of Galilee is a small body of water. It is about thirteen miles long and six miles wide. Violent, sudden squalls frequently visited this sea, probably because of its location. It lies in a deep valley which was formed by a volcano. On both sides there are steep mountain ranges which rise above the water level from 1,000 to 2,000 feet. There is a considerable difference in the temperature at the top and at the bottom of these hills. Up on the plateaus above the sea, the air is cool and the winds strong. Down by the shore, which lies 700 feet below sea level, the climate is tropical. The storms which are caused by this variation in temperature are very violent. They come sweeping down the ravines onto the water. In a moment, the sea, which had been as calm as glass, becomes white with foam from one end to the other. The waves rise into the air in columns of spray.

The Twelve encountered two such storms after they became Jesus’ disciples. They probably occurred in the same year. One of them happened earlier when they visited Gadara (Matt. 8:23f.;
The second is the one we are studying now. Both happened at night, and both were extremely violent. In the first storm, we are told that the ship was covered with waves and was filling so fast that it was beginning to sink. The disciples were afraid they would drown. The second storm was just as violent and lasted longer. Apparently, the Twelve were caught in it when they were about half-way across. The grayness of the dusk had turned into the darkness of night. From that time on, the wind blew with tremendous force until daybreak (the fourth watch: between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m.) without letting up at all. We have some idea of the fury of the blast from the recorded fact that, even then, they were still just a little more than half-way across the sea. In all, they had only rowed three or four miles (25 or 30 stadia, one stadia equivalent to 606¾ feet; John 6:19). The whole distance from the eastern to the western shore (measuring in a slanting direction) was probably only about six miles. During all those weary hours they were rowing with all of their might. Yet they had not done much more than hold their own against the wind and waves.

What was Jesus doing all this time? In the first storm, He had been with His disciples in the boat, sleeping after an exhausting day, “rocked in the cradle of the overbearing waves.” This time He was absent and not sleeping. Rather, He was in the mountains alone - praying. For He, also, had His own struggle on that stormy night. It was not with the howling winds but with painful thoughts. That night He rehearsed the agony of Gethsemane. With sincere prayer and focused meditation, He studied the passion sermon that He would preach the next day. He was so engrossed with His own sad thoughts that, for a time, His own disciples were almost forgotten. Finally, in the early dawn, He looked toward the sea (Mk. 6:48) and saw them rowing against the powerful wind. Without another moment's delay, He hurried to their rescue.

**The Storm as a Symbol**

This storm on the Sea of Galilee is important as an historical fact. But it is also significant as a symbol. When we consider the time at which it occurred, it is impossible not to connect it with the awkward events of the next day. For the literal storm on the water was followed by a spiritual storm on the land. Both were equally sudden and violent. The storm on the land was as dangerous to their souls as the other one had been to their bodies. The boat containing the precious freight of Christ’s true disciples was overtaken by a sudden gust of unpopularity which came down on it like a squall on a lake in the highlands and did all but turn it over. The day before, the fickle crowd would have made Jesus their king. Now they abruptly turned away from Him in disappointment and disgust. And, as we will see, the Twelve had to make a big effort to remain faithful. They had to row hard against the wind and waves so they would not be carried quickly to their destruction by the tornado of apostasy.
There can be little doubt that the two storms - the one on the sea and the one on the shore - happening so close to one another, would become linked in the minds of the Apostles. The literal storm would be fixed in their minds as a symbol of the spiritual one and of all similar trials of faith. There were many things that happened on that fearful night - the watching, getting wet, rowing without results, fatigue, terror, and despair. These would live forever in their memory. They would symbolically represent all of the dangers and tribulations through which believers must pass on their way to the kingdom of heaven, especially those that come upon them while they are still young in the faith. The significance of the symbol can be seen in three features: 1) the storm happened at night; 2) in the absence of Jesus; and 3) while it lasted, all progress was stopped. Storms at sea may happen at all hours of the day, but trials of faith always happen during the night. If there were no darkness, there could be no trial. If the Twelve had understood Christ's message in Capernaum, the apostasy of the multitude would not have been taken so seriously by them. But they did not understand it. Therefore, their Master was concerned lest they also forsake Him. In all such trials, it feels as if the Lord is absent. This is a constant and very painful aspect of the trial. Christ is not in the ship while the storm rages by night, and we work hard rowing without the help of His grace (so we think!), unconsolled by His spiritual presence. This was true even with the Twelve the next day on the shore. Though their Master was visible to them (physically), He had vanished from the sight of their understanding. They did not have the comfort of comprehending His meaning. Yet they clung to Him as the One who had the words of eternal life. The worst that we can encounter in these trials of faith is that in all our rowing, we make no progress. The most we can do is to hold our own, to keep off the rocky shore while we are on the sea. It is really something just to be able to do this; better still, it is everything. For it is not always true that if we are not going forward, we must be going backward. This is a saying for good weather only. When storms come, there is such a thing as standing still. To do even this much is quite an achievement. Is it really a small thing to weather the storm, to keep off the rocks, the sand, and the breakers? Do not provoke the person who is already agitated enough by the winds that beat against him. Do not share your wise sayings about progress and backsliding indiscriminately. Instead of playing the part of Job's friends, it would be better to remind him that the greatest thing he can do in his situation is to hold on, to be immovable, to keep his moral integrity and his profession of faith, and to keep off the dangerous coasts of immorality and unfaithfulness. Assure him that if he will only row a little longer - no matter how tired his arms get - God will come and calm the wind, and he will immediately reach the land.

**An Important Lesson of Faith**

Besides being an appropriate symbol for a trial of faith, the storm on the sea was, for the Twelve, an important lesson in faith. It helped prepare them for the future which was waiting for them. The temporary absence of their Master was preparation for His perpetual absence. Jesus’ miraculous intervention when they were in a dangerous crisis was suited to impress their minds.
with the conviction that even after He had ascended into heaven, He would still be with them in times of danger. This plan almost backfired. But the final results were positive, and from them the disciples also learned to have confidence in the leadership of their exalted Lord, even in the middle of the most difficult situations. When the storm came, they probably concluded that Jesus had made a mistake by telling them to sail across the sea while He stayed behind to dismiss the multitude. However, the situation itself silenced this hasty judgment. Everything ended on a positive note. Their experience in this situation was designed to teach a lesson for life. This was the lesson: Do not rashly accuse Christ of mismanagement or neglect when temporary problems arise. Have a firm faith in His wise and loving care for His cause and people. Anticipate a good outcome from all difficulties. In fact, glory in your tribulations, because of the great deliverance which will surely follow.

At the time of the storm, the disciples did not have this strong faith. They did not expect Him to come to their rescue. When He did come, they thought He was a spirit flitting over the water and cried out in the agony of superstitious terror. We note here in passing that there is an interesting relationship between the incidents of this crisis and those connected with the final one. Then, the disciples did not expect their Lord to return from the dead, just as they did not expect to see Him come to them over the sea. Therefore, His reappearance at first frightened rather than comforted them. “But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit” (Luke 24:37). Good, not looked for in either case, was turned into evil. What should have been a source of intense joy to them, if they only had faith, became a new cause of alarm because of their unbelief.

The fact is, He was not expected. This seems to have imposed on Jesus the necessity of using a strategy in approaching His storm-tossed disciples. Mark relates that “...He intended to pass by them” (Mark 6:48) out of sensitivity for their weakness. He knew what He would be taken for when they first saw Him. Therefore, He wanted to attract their attention at a safe distance. He was concerned that if He appeared to them all of a sudden, He might drive them into insanity. He decided it was necessary to be as cautious in announcing His coming as people are when communicating bad news. First, He appeared as a ghost as far away as He could be seen. Then He revealed Himself through His familiar voice. He spoke the words of comfort, “It is I; do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50). Finally, He was willingly received into the boat (John 6:21).

What happened after Jesus entered the boat exposed the Twelve. There was a new manifestation of the weakness of their faith. “The wind stopped; and they were greatly astonished” (Mark 6:51). They should not have been so amazed after what had happened once before on these same waters, especially after such a great miracle was done in the wilderness on the previous day. But the storm had destroyed all their thoughts about these things. It had driven them absolutely mad, “for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened” (Mark 6:52).
**Peter on the Water**

The most interesting revelation of the mental state of the disciples at the time when Jesus rescued them is found in the episode about Peter which is reported by Matthew. When he understood that the “ghost” was his beloved Master, he cried, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water” (Matt. 14:28). After he received permission, he immediately stepped out of the ship onto the sea. This was not faith, but simple rashness. Peter had an impetuous, reckless nature, and he was bouncing from one extreme of utter despair to the opposite extreme of extravagant, reckless joy. The other disciples tamely expressed a willingness to receive Jesus into the boat after they were convinced it was He who walked on the water (John 6:21). But, in the case of Peter, his actions took the form of a romantic, adventurous wish to go out to Jesus where He was, to welcome Him back among them again. His proposal was just like the man - generous, enthusiastic, and well-meaning, but inconsiderate.

Such a proposal, of course, could not meet with Christ’s approval. However, He did not deny Peter’s request. He thought it would be good to humor the impulsive disciple to a point. He would invite him to come and then allow him to feel his own weakness while he was still in the water. So, He would teach him more about himself and, if possible, save him from the consequences of his rash, self-confident temperament. But Peter would not be made wise by one lesson, nor even by several. He would go on blundering and making mistakes until finally he fell into a grievous sin, denying his Master whom he loved so much. The denial at the final crisis could be expected from someone who behaved this way during a minor crisis. The man who said, “Command me to come to You,” was the same man who would later say, “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!” (Luke 22:33). This was the one who was so courageous on deck yet so fearful on the waves. He was the one, out of all the disciples, who was most likely to talk boldly when there was no danger around. But then he played the coward when the hour of trial actually arrived. The scene on the sea was only a preview or rehearsal of Peter’s fall.

That scene, however, revealed something more than the weakness of Peter’s faith. It showed also what is possible to those who believe. If the tendency of weak faith is to sink, the triumph of strong faith is to walk on the waves. This means glorying in tribulation and considering it all joy when exposed to different temptations. Those who are weak in faith and aware of how frail they are, have the privilege and responsibility of praying, “Lead us not into temptation.” But when storms come and you did not invite them, and when your boat is turned over in the middle of the sea, then Christians may trust in the promise, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (Is. 43:2). If only you have faith, you will be able to walk on the rolling waves as if walking on firm land.
“He bids me come; His voice I know,
   And boldly on the waters go,
   And brave the tempest’s shock.
O’er rude temptations now I bound;
   The billows yield a solid ground,
   The wave is firm as rock.”
Section 3 - The Sermon

John 6:22-65

The task that lies before us now is to study the unforgettable address on the Bread of Life that Jesus delivered in the synagogue in Capernaum. At the time, it offended many people. And ever since, it has been a stumbling block, the subject of controversy, and a cause of division in the church. From all outward appearances, it will continue to be so until the end of the world. The meaning of this discourse raises troubling questions. Some people are afraid of entering into a discussion about its meaning. But the very confusion that surfaces here points to our responsibility to disregard the turmoil brought about by conflicting interpretations and to humbly pray that God would teach us. We ought to search for and set forth Christ’s own mind.

No matter how strange it may sound, the sermon on the Bread of Life was appropriate - both in its subject matter and manner in which it was given, and in the circumstances in which it was delivered. It was natural and timely that Jesus spoke to the people about the food that endures to everlasting life. He had just miraculously provided perishable food to satisfy their physical needs. It was natural and timely that He spoke on this significant topic in such a startling, apparently coarse, harsh style. The way He was thinking suited the situation. The Passover was approaching when the paschal lamb would be slain and eaten. Jesus wanted to say, “I am the true Paschal Lamb.” What better way could He have said it than this: “...the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6:51). The style He used was also adapted to the feelings He had at that moment. Jesus was in a sad, sober mood when He preached this sermon. The foolish enthusiasm of the crowd had saddened Him. Their desire to put a crown on His head by force made Him think of His cross. For He knew that the idolatrous devotion they had to a political Messiah meant death sooner or later for Him since He refused such carnal worship. Therefore, He spoke in the synagogue of Capernaum with Calvary in sight. He presented Himself as the life of the world in terms which were applicable to a sacrificial victim: Blood is shed and the flesh is eaten by those who present the offering. He did not mince His words. Everything was said in the strongest and most intense manner possible.

The theme of this memorable message was introduced in a natural way. Jesus had just finished speaking with the people who came from the other side of the Sea of Galilee. They were hoping...
to find Him in Capernaum, the place where He usually stayed (John 6:24). They warmly asked Him how He had gotten there. He responded with a chilling observation about the true motive for their zeal and an exhortation to set their hearts on a higher food than the kind which perishes (John 6:26-27). The people who heard Him understood the exhortation as counsel to cultivate godliness. So they asked Him what they should do so they might work the works of God (i.e., please God; John 6:28). Jesus replied by declaring that the great test at this time was to receive Him as the One whom God had sent (John 6:29). This led them to demand evidence in support of this high claim to be the Messiah on a divine mission. The miracle He had just performed on the other side of the sea was great, but not great enough to justify such high-minded claims. At least, this is the way they thought. In ancient times, a whole nation had been fed for many years with bread that was brought down from heaven by Moses. What was the recent miracle compared to that? He must show a sign on a far grander scale if He wanted them to believe that One greater than Moses was here (John 6:30-31). Jesus accepted the challenge. He boldly declared that the manna - wonderful as it was - was not the true heavenly bread. There was another bread. The manna was only a type (or, prefiguring) of this bread. It was like it in that both of them came down from heaven (John 6:33). But it was unlike the manna in this respect: It did not only give life to a nation, but to the whole world; and it gave life, not just for a few short years, but for all eternity. This announcement was similar to the one He gave to the woman of Samaria concerning the wonderful water of life. It stirred up desire in the hearts of those who heard. They exclaimed, “Lord, evermore give us this bread” (John 6:34). Then Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

In these words, Jesus briefly spelled out the doctrine of the true bread. He went into greater detail as He brought the teaching into His unforgettable message in Capernaum. The doctrine, as stated, sets forth what the true bread is, what it does, and how it is appropriated.

**What the True Bread Is**

The true bread is the One who speaks about it in this text - Jesus Christ. “I am the bread.” This assertion implies that the speaker is claiming He descended from heaven. This kind of descent is one of the characteristics by which the true bread is defined (John 6:33). Therefore, we find Jesus, in the sequel to His discourse, clearly asserting that He had come down from heaven (John 6:38,51,58,62). The people understood this statement in a supernatural sense but was the first thing in His message with which they disagreed. “The Jews therefore were grumbling about Him, because He said, ‘I am the bread that came down out of heaven.’ And they were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, ‘I have come down out of heaven?’” (John 6:41-42). It would have been natural for them to murmur if they did not know or believe that there was anything out of line with the way Jesus came
into the world. For the language that He uses here could not be used without blasphemy by a mere man who had been born like other men. It is the proper language to use - but only in the mouth of a Divine Being who assumed human nature for a purpose.

In presenting Himself as the bread who came down from heaven, Jesus virtually taught the doctrine of the incarnation. The solemn claim, “I am the bread of life,” is just as significant as the one made by the apostle John about the One who spoke these words: “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

However, it is not only in His incarnation that the Son of God is the bread of eternal life. Bread must be broken in order for it to be eaten. The Incarnate One must die as a sacrificial victim so that people may truly feed upon Him. The Word which became flesh and was crucified in the flesh is the life of the world. Jesus went on to declare this special truth after He had stated the general truth that the heavenly bread could only be found in Himself. He said, “...the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6:51). The language used here is modified to suit the new twist in thinking. “I am” becomes “I will give,” and “bread” is transformed into “flesh.”

It is evident that Jesus is referring to His death, but those who heard Him speak did not understand this. However, there is no doubt about what He meant. The verb “give,” which suggests a sacrificial act, and the future tense both point to His death. The words were dark and mysterious before He died - clear as day after. In them, Jesus declares the great truth that His death is to be the life of people. His broken body and shed blood are to be like food and drink to a perishing world. They bestow the gift of immortality on all who partake of them. He does not explain, at this time, how He is to die nor why His death possesses such virtue. The Capernaum message does not mention a cross. It does not contain a theory of the atonement. The time has not come for these details. It simply asserts in broad, strong terms that the flesh and blood of the incarnate Son of God, severed in death, are the source of eternal life.

When Jesus mentioned that His flesh was the bread from heaven, those who heard Him grumbled once again. “The Jews therefore began to argue with one another, saying, ‘How can this man give us His flesh to eat?’” (John 6:52). Jesus had not yet told them that His flesh must be eaten, but they took it for granted that this is what He meant. They were right. In response, He went on to say with the greatest seriousness and emphasis, that they must even eat His flesh and drink His blood. Unless they did that, they would have no life inside them. If they did, they would have life in all of its fullness - eternal life both in body and in soul. For His flesh was the true food, and His blood was the true drink. Those who received these would share in His own life. He would live in them, incorporated with their very being. And they would dwell in Him
as the foundation of their being. Because of Him, they would live securely in the face of death, just as He lived from everlasting to everlasting by the hand of the Father. Jesus concluded His message with the proposition with which He began: “This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate, and died; he who eats this bread shall live forever” (John 6:58).

The people made a third disapproving remark which led Jesus to finish His teaching on the high doctrine of the bread of life. He made a concluding comment that, at the time, must have been the most mysterious and unintelligible of all the ones He had ever said. It was this: The bread which descended from heaven must ascend there again, in order to be - to the full extent - the bread of everlasting life. Does this offend you? He asked His hearers. Does what I have been saying to you about your eating my flesh and drinking My blood offend you? What will you say “if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where He was before?” (John 6:62). The question, in effect, was an affirmation. It was also a prophetic hint: Only after He had left the world would He become a source of life to people on an extensive scale. It would be apparent to all. For then the manna of grace would not just begin to descend on the wilderness of Israel. It would descend on all the barren places of the earth. And the truth in Him - the doctrine of His life, death, and resurrection - would become the true food and drink for a multitude of people, not for murmuring hearers, but for devout, enlightened, thankful believers. No one would need to ask for a sign any longer when he could find in the Christian church - continuing steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in breaking bread, and in prayers - the best evidence that Jesus had spoken truth when He said, “I am the bread of life.”

**What the True Bread Does**

This, then, is the heavenly bread: the God-man who was incarnate, crucified, and glorified. Let us now consider with greater attention the marvelous virtue of this bread. It is the bread of life. It is the function of all bread to sustain life, but this divine bread is unique in that it gives eternal life. “....he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). He called the bread about which He spoke the *living bread* because of its life-giving power. It was, in truth, real food. This led Jesus to declare that the one who ate it would not die, but would live forever (John 6:50-51,54).

When Jesus was recommending this miraculous bread to His hearers, He especially stressed its power to give eternal life, even to the body of man. Four times He used specific terms to declare that everyone who ate this bread of life would be raised again on the last day (John 6:39,40,44,54). So Jesus gives a prominent place to the resurrection of the body. This is due, in part, to the fact that throughout His message He was contrasting the manna which fed the Israelites in the desert with the true bread. The manna was a type (foreshadowing) of the true bread. The contrast between the two was most striking at this point. The manna was only a substitute for
ordinary food. It had no power to ward off death. The generation that had been so miraculously fed passed away from the earth just like all the other generations of people. Therefore, Jesus argued, it could not be the true bread from heaven. For the true bread must be capable of destroying death and giving the recipients the power of an endless existence. Any person who eats of the true bread will not die (spiritually); or in dying (physically), he will rise again. “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die” (John 6:49-50).

The prominence which is given to the resurrection of the body is due primarily to its true importance. For if the dead do not rise, then our faith is vain, and the bread of life degenerates into a quack scheme which pretends to have virtues that it does not possess. True, it may still give spiritual life to those who eat it, but what is that without the hope of life for all eternity? Not much, according to Paul. He says, “If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied” (I Cor. 15:19). Many in our day do not agree with the Apostle’s judgment. They think the doctrine of everlasting life can be left out of the creed without loss to the Christian faith. They would even go so far as to say it could be left out of the creed altogether. To them, the life of a Christian seems so much nobler when every thought about a future reward or punishment is dismissed from the mind. How noble - to travel through the wilderness of this world feeding on the manna supplied in the high, pure teaching of Jesus without caring whether there is a land of Canaan on the other side of the Jordan River! A very lofty idea! But why, in this situation, come into the wilderness at all? Why not remain in Egypt, feeding on more substantial and tasty foods? The children of Israel would not have left the house of bondage unless they had hoped to reach the promised land. An immortal hope is equally necessary for the Christian. He must believe in a world to come in order to live above the present evil world. If Christ cannot redeem the body from the power of the grave, then it is vain for Him to promise to redeem us from guilt and sin. The bread of life is unworthy of the name unless it has the power to deal with physical as well as with moral corruption.

This is why Jesus gives such prominence in this discourse to the resurrection of the body. He knew that this was where the crucial experiment by which the value and virtue of the bread He offered to His hearers must be tested. “You call this bread the bread of life, in contrast to the manna of ancient times. Do You mean to say that it will give those who eat it the gift of a blessed immortality, like the tree of life in the garden of Eden?” “Yes, I do,” replied the Preacher (in response to this imaginary question). He continues: “This bread I offer you will not only take the soul to a higher, purer life, but will also revive your bodies, and make the corruptible put on incorruption, and the mortal put on immortality.”
How the True Bread is Appropriated

Then how is this wonderful bread to be appropriated so that one may experience its invigorating influences? Bread, of course, is eaten. But what does eating in this situation mean? It means, in one word, faith. “He who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood, as well as drinking the water (see John 4:10 for Jesus’ comment to the woman at the well), all signify believing in Him as He is offered to people in the gospel. He is the Son of God who is manifested in the flesh, crucified, raised from the dead, ascended into glory. He is the Prophet, Priest, King, and Mediator between God and man. Throughout this discourse in Capernaum, eating and believing are used interchangeably. So, in one sentence we find Jesus saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life” (John 6:47-48). Shortly afterward, He remarked, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he shall live forever” (John 6:51). If additional arguments were needed to justify the truth that eating and believing are one and the same thing, it might be found in the instruction given by the Preacher to His hearers before He began to speak about the bread of life: “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29). That sentence furnishes the key to the interpretation of the whole subsequent message. “Believe,” Jesus said. This was His answer to the question posed to Him: “What shall we do that we might work the works of God?” Jesus responds, “Believe, and you have done God’s work.” “Believe,” we may understand Him to say as He responds to the question, “How shall we eat this bread of life?” “Believe, and you have eaten.”

Believe, and you have eaten. This was the formula that Augustine used to express his view of Christ’s meaning in the Capernaum message. In our judgment, the saying is not only brief, but true. But it has not been accepted by all interpreters. Many hold that eating and faith are something distinct. They would express the relationship between them in this way: “Believe and you will eat.” Even Calvin objected to the Augustinian formula. He distinguishes his own views from those held by the followers of Zwingli by saying, “To them, to eat is simply to believe. I say that Christ’s flesh is eaten in believing because it is made ours by faith, and that eating is the fruit and effect of faith. Or more clearly: To them eating is faith; to me it seems rather to follow from faith.”

The distinction that Calvin makes between eating and believing seems to have been verbal rather than real. Other theologians feel differently about it. Those who hold to the magical doctrines of transubstantiation (literally: to change one substance into another; this view teaches that the bread and wine literally turn into the body and blood of Christ) and consubstantiation (the bread and wine exist after consecration, side by side with the substance of the body and blood of Christ but is not changed into them) fight for the literal interpretation of the Capernaum discourse even in its strongest statements. Eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood are, for
these people, acts of the mouth. Perhaps they are accompanied with acts of faith, but not only acts of faith. For the most part, it is assumed that the discourse which is recorded in John 6 has reference to the sacrament of the Supper. And only on the hypothesis of this kind of reference can one explain the unique phraseology of the discourse. Christ spoke then of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. We are told that the reason He did this was because He had in His mind the Lord's Table which would be instituted later. Here, the bread and wine would not only represent, but become, the elements of His crucified body.

While the sermon on the bread of life continues to be mixed up with sacramentarian controversies, agreement in its interpretation is almost hopeless. Meanwhile, till a better day dawns on a divided and distracted church, every person must try to be fully persuaded in his own mind. Three things are clear to us. First, it is incorrect to say that the sermon which was delivered in the Capernaum synagogue refers to the sacrament of the Supper. The truth is that both refer to a third thing, namely, the death of Christ. Both declare, in different ways, the same thing. The sermon says in symbolic words what the Supper says in a symbolic act: Christ crucified is the life of men, the world's hope of salvation. The sermon says more than this, because it speaks of Christ's ascension as well as of His death; but it says this for one thing.

A second point about which we are clear is that it is unnecessary to assume that Christ had the Holy Supper in mind when He gave the discourse in order to account for the uniqueness of His language. As we noted at the beginning, the whole discourse arose naturally out of the present situation. When the people mentioned the manna, it naturally led Jesus to speak on the bread of life. And from the bread, He went on to speak very naturally about the flesh and the blood. He could not fully be bread until He had become flesh and blood that had been torn apart (i.e., until He had endured death). All that we find in this passage could have been said if the sacrament of the Supper had never existed. The Supper is of use not so much for interpreting the sermon as for establishing its credibility as an authentic saying of Jesus. There is no reason to doubt that the One who instituted the symbolical feast could also have preached this symbolical sermon.

The third truth which shines as clear as a star to one's eye is this: Through faith alone we may attain all blessings of salvation. Sacraments are very useful, but they are not necessary. If it had pleased Christ not to institute them, we could have gotten to heaven anyway. Because He has instituted them, it is our duty to celebrate them, and we can expect benefits by celebrating the Supper. But the benefit we receive is simply an aid to faith and nothing which cannot be received by faith. Christians eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man at all times - not only at communion - simply by believing in Him. They eat His flesh and drink His blood at His table with the same meaning as at other times. Perhaps they do so with more enthusiasm, their hearts being stirred up to devotion by remembering His dying love. Their faith is aided by seeing, handling, and tasting the bread and the wine.
Section 4 - The Sifting  
*John 6:66-71*

The sermon on the bread of life produced decisive results. It changed the popular enthusiasm the people had for Jesus into disgust. Like a fan, it separated the true disciples from the false. And like a winnowing breeze, it blew the chaff away, leaving a small residue of wheat behind. “As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore. (John 6:66).

This response did not take Jesus by surprise. He expected it. In a sense, He desired it, though He was deeply grieved by it. For while His large, loving, human heart longed for the salvation of all and desired that all should come and receive life, He wanted no one to come to Him by mistake or to follow Him for the wrong reasons. He sought disciples who were God-given (John 6:37), God-drawn (John 6:44), and God-taught (John 6:45), knowing that these alone would continue to follow His word (John 8:31). He was aware that of the large mass of people who had recently followed Him, there were many disciples who did not measure up to these standards. And He was willing that the mixed multitude be sifted. Therefore, He preached a message containing mysteries of the kingdom. It was intended to be a fragrance of life or death, depending on the spiritual condition of the hearer. Therefore, when the people were offended by the doctrine He taught, He plainly declared the true reason (John 6:36-37) and expressed His assurance that only those whom His Father taught and drew would or could really come to Him (John 6:44). He did not say these things to cause irritation but knew it was necessary to speak them, even though they would be disturbing. He acknowledged that true believers would take it all in stride, while those who took offense would reveal their true character.

The disciples who left Him, without a doubt, thought they were fully justified in withdrawing from Jesus’ company. They turned their backs on Him - we can only imagine - with a self-righteous indignation. They probably said in their hearts and to one another: “Who ever heard the likes of this? How absurd! How revolting! The man who speaks this way is either a fool, or he is trying to make fools of those who listen to him.” And yet the hardness of His teaching was not the real reason which led so many to forsake Him. It was simply the excuse. It was the most believable and respectable reason they could give for their conduct, which was really springing
up from other motives. The grand offense of Jesus was this: He was not the man they thought He was. He was not going to be their servant to promote the goals they had in mind. Whatever He meant by the bread of life or by eating His flesh, it was plain that He was not going to be a bread-king. He would not make it His business to furnish them with supplies for their physical appetites in order to usher in a golden age of idleness and plenty. Once they understood that, it was all over with Him as far as they were concerned. He could offer His heavenly food to whomever He pleased. They did not want any of it.

Jesus was deeply affected by the depressing sight of so many human beings deliberately preferring material things to eternal life. He turned to the Twelve and said, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” (John 6:67). The question can be understood as an implied expression of confidence in the people to whom it was addressed. It was also an appeal for them to show sympathy during a discouraging crisis. And yet, while a negative answer was expected to the question, it was not automatically anticipated. Jesus was even concerned about the faithfulness of the Twelve. He questioned them, conscious that they had been placed in trying circumstances, and that if they did not actually forsake Him now (as they did during the great and final crisis, i.e., His crucifixion), they were at least tempted to be offended by Him.

Without a doubt, a little reflection is all we need to show us that the Twelve were placed in a position at this time which was calculated to severely try their faith. For one thing, it is a simple fact that their Master was being deserted wholesale by the crowd of former admirers and followers. This created a temptation for these men to leave Jesus also. How mighty is the power of sympathy! How ready are we all to follow the crowd, regardless of the way they are going! How much moral courage it takes to stand alone! How difficult it is to witness the spectacle of thousands, or even hundreds, being disloyal to Jesus, without feeling an impulse to imitate their bad example! How hard to keep one’s self from being carried along with the powerful tide of negative popular opinion! It must have been especially hard for the Twelve to resist the tendency to leave Jesus if they sympathized with the attempt the multitude made to make Him king when their enthusiasm for Him was running high. They probably did. It would have gratified them to have seen their beloved Master made king by popular demand. How their spirits must have sunk when the bubble burst, and the would-be subjects of the Messianic Prince were dispersed like an idle mob. The kingdom which had seemed so near vanished like an imaginary dream!

Another circumstance that tried the faith of the Twelve was the strange, mysterious character of their Master’s message in the synagogue at Capernaum. That discourse contained hard, repulsive, unintelligible sayings, for them as well as for the rest of the audience. There is no doubt about this when we consider how repugnant they felt some time later when they received the news that Jesus was destined to be put to death (Matt. 16:22). If they objected even to the fact of
His death, how could they understand its meaning? Both fact and meaning were spoken about in such a veiled and mystical style. He had spoken the same way in the sermon on the bread of life. Therefore, while they believed that their Master had the words of eternal life and understood that this last message was related to this noble theme, it is almost certain that the Twelve did not understand the words which He spoke any more than the multitude did - no matter how much they tried. They did not comprehend the relationship that existed between Christ's flesh and eternal life, how eating His flesh could bestow any benefit. They did not even know what eating it might mean. They had lost sight of the Speaker because His thoughts were soaring like an eagle. They must have looked on in distress as the people melted away. They were painfully aware of the fact that they could not totally blame them.

Still, no matter how great the temptation to forsake their Master, the Twelve remained faithfully by His side. They came safely through the spiritual storm. What was the secret of their steadfastness? What were the anchors that preserved them from shipwreck? These questions have a practical value for all who, like the Apostles during this crisis, are tempted to abandon Christ because of a bad example or because of religious doubt; or, because of the nature of the world they live in, whether it is scientific or illiterate, refined or rustic; or, because of the deep things of God, whether these are the mysteries of providence, the mysteries of revelation, or the mysteries of religious experience. We may say these things to all Christians, for what Christian has not been tempted in one way or another at some time in his spiritual journey?

The answer to the question about their steadfastness is given to us in Simon Peter's response to Jesus. As the spokesman for the whole group, he promptly said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

From these words, we infer that three anchors helped the Twelve ride out the storm: 1) religious earnestness or sincerity; 2) a clear perception of the alternatives before them; and 3) implicit confidence in the character and attachment to their Master.

The First Anchor
As a body, the Twelve were sincere and thoroughly serious about religion. Their supreme desire was to know "the words of eternal life" and actually to gain possession of that life. Their concern was not about food that perishes, but about the higher heavenly food of the soul which Christ had in vain exhorted the majority of His hearers to labor for. At this time, they did not clearly know the nature of this food. But according to the light they had, they sincerely prayed, "Lord, evermore give us this bread" (John 6:34). Therefore, it was not disappointing to them that Jesus declined to become a supplier of mere physical food. They had never expected or wished that He
do so. They had joined His company with entirely different expectations. A certain element of error might be mingled with truth in their conceptions about His mission, but the base, carnal hopes of the multitude had no place in their hearts. They did not become disciples to better their worldly circumstances. They became His disciples to obtain a portion which the world could neither give them nor take from them.

What we have just stated was true of all the Twelve except one. The crisis we are currently considering is memorable for several reasons, but especially because it was the first time that Jesus gave a hint that there was a false disciple among the men He had chosen. He defended Himself for asking a question which seemed to express His doubt about their faithfulness by replying to Peter’s protest: “Did I Myself not choose you, the Twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70). It was as if He were saying, “It is painful for Me to be suspicious, but I have a good reason: There is one among you who has had thoughts of desertion, and who is even capable of treachery.” What sadness there must have been in His spirit to have suggested this thought during such a crisis! It would have been a small thing to be forsaken by the fickle crowd comprised of followers who were shallow and thoughtless, if He could have considered all of the Twelve as good men and true friends. But to have an enemy in one’s own house, a *diabolus* (devil) capable of playing Satan’s part in one’s small circle of intimate companions - it was extremely hard!

But how could a man destined to be a traitor and deserving to be stigmatized as a devil, manage to pass through the current crisis with any credibility? Don’t the facts seem to indicate that it is possible to be steadfast without being single-minded? Not at all. The only legitimate inference that can be made is that the crisis was not deep enough to bring out the true character of Judas. Wait until you see the end. A little religion will carry a man through many trials, but there is an *experimentum crucis* (the trial or experiment of the cross - an experiment of a most searching nature) which nothing but sincerity can tolerate. If a person is double-minded, or his heart is divided, the time comes when he is compelled to act according to his deepest and strongest motives. This remark applies especially to creative, revolutionary, or transitional periods of time. In quiet times, a hypocrite may pass though this world being respected. He may never be detected until he gets to the next, where his sins will follow him to judgment. But in critical periods in history, the sins of those who are double-minded are found out in this life. Even then, it is true that some double-minded people can stand more temptation than others and cannot be bought very cheaply. But all of them have their price. Those who fall less easily than others, in the end, fall deeper and more tragically.

We will have an opportunity to speak about the character and fall of Judas at another time. Our present goal is simply to point out that Jesus did not expect Judas to be faithful. By referring to him as He did, He made His conviction clear: The love of God and truth had to be the deepest
principle of a person’s being, or else he would not continue to be faithful until the end. In effect, He taught that if a person wanted to remain steadfast in the faith, it would be necessary for him to have moral integrity and godly sincerity.

**The Second Anchor**
The second anchor by which the disciples were kept from shipwreck during this period was a clear perception of the alternatives before them. “To whom shall we go?” asked Peter. He could see that the people, who had the same goals that he and his companions had, had no alternative but to remain where they were. He had searched his mind rapidly for alternatives, and this was his conclusion: “To whom shall we go - those of us who seek eternal life? John, our former master, is dead. And even if he were alive, he would send us back to You. Should we go to the scribes and Pharisees? We have been with You too long to do that. For You have taught us that their religious system is essentially ungodly, superficial, hypocritical, and showy. Or, should we follow the fickle multitude there, and relapse into stupidity and indifference? It cannot even be considered. Or, finally, should we go to the Sadducees, the idolaters of the material and temporal world, who say there is no resurrection, no angels or spirits? God forbid! That would mean we would have to renounce a hope that is dearer to us than life. Without that hope, life for our sincere minds would have become a riddle, a contradiction, and an intolerable burden.”

We can understand how helpful this clear perception of the alternatives was to Peter and his brothers by reflecting on the help we ourselves might derive from the same source when we are tempted by dogmatic difficulties to renounce Christianity. It would make anyone pause if he understood that the alternatives open to him were: 1) to abide with Christ, or 2) to become an atheist, ignoring God and the world to come. When he leaves Christ, he must go to school to study the great masters of total unbelief. In J.F. Richter’s works, there is a reference to a dream. It portrays with appalling vividness the consequences that would happen throughout the universe if the Creator ceased to exist. The gifted writer tells us that the dream was invented for the purpose of frightening those who discussed the being of God as coolly as if the question was on equal footing with the question of the existence of Kraken (a legendary sea monster of northern seas) or the unicorn. He also wanted to hold in check all atheistic thoughts which might come into his own heart. He said, “If ever my heart should be so unhappy and deadened as to have all those feelings which affirm the being of a God destroyed, I would use this dream to frighten myself, and so heal my heart, and restore its lost feelings.” Richter expected this benefit from reviewing his own dream. But anyone tempted to renounce Christianity would gain a clear sense that if he ceased being a Christian, he must make up his mind to accept a creed which acknowledges no God, no soul, and no hereafter.
Unfortunately, it is not as easy for us as it was for Peter to see clearly what the alternatives are before us. There are very few men like the late Dr. Strauss who are so clear-sighted, so logical, or so frank. In his publication, *The Old and the New Flesh*, he plainly states that he is no longer a Christian. Hence, there are many in our day who call themselves Christians, but whose theory of the universe (or, *Weltanschauung*, as the Germans call it) does not allow them to believe in the miraculous in any shape or in any sphere. These people have an axiom that the continuity of nature’s course cannot be broken. Therefore, they cannot even go to the degree the Socinians do in their view of Christ, who, at least, declare Him to be, without qualification, the Holy One of God, the morally sinless One. Even men like Renan claim to be Christians, and, like Balaam, bless Him while their philosophy compels them to blame Him. Our modern Balaams all confess that Jesus is, at least, the holiest of men, if not the absolutely Holy One. They are constrained to bless the Man of Nazareth. They are spell-bound by the star of Bethlehem, just as the Eastern soothsayer was by the Star of Jacob. They are forced to say in effect: “How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?....I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot change it” (Numbers 23:8,20).

Others, who do not go as far as Renan and who do not entirely embrace naturalism, believe in a perfect Christ and consider Him to be a moral miracle. Yet they desire a Christianity that is independent of God’s law and one that has very little to do with miracles. They profess a Christianity that is purely ethical and which has to do primarily with admiring Christ’s character and moral teaching. As professors of this kind of Christianity, they regard themselves as exemplary disciples of Christ. The author of *Supernatural Religion* speaks about these men as people who are characterized by “a tendency to eliminate from Christianity, with thoughtless dexterity, every supernatural element which does not quite accord with current opinions.” He goes on to say of them, that they endeavor “to arrest for a moment the pursuing wolves of doubt and unbelief by practically throwing to them scrap by scrap the very doctrines which constitute the claims of Christianity to be regarded as a divine revelation at all.” It can hardly be said of these people that they have a consistent theory of the universe, for they hold opinions based on incompatible theories. Their tendency is to be naturalistic, yet they will not carry out naturalism to its logical conclusions. They are either not able, or they are unwilling, to realize the alternatives and to obey the voice of logic, which like a stern policeman tells them to “move on.” They would rather hold views which unite the alternatives in one particular creed, like Schleiermacher. Strauss considers him an excellent example of a class of people who have ground down Christianity and Pantheism to powder, and mixed them together so that it is hard to say where Pantheism ends and Christianity begins. The spirit of compromise is so widespread. It is recommended by many people who have ability and influence. So it requires some courage to have and hold a definite position, or to resist the temptation to yield to their positions. There is also the temptation to adopt the slogan: *Christianity without God’s law and miracle*. Perhaps it will be easier in time to realize the alternatives, when time has more clearly shown where the present tendencies lead.
Meanwhile, it is the evening twilight, and for the moment, it seems as if we could do without the sun. For though He is below the horizon, the air is still full of light. But wait awhile. The deepening of the twilight into the darkness of night will show how far Christ the Holy One of the Church's confession can be dispensed with as the Sun of the spiritual world.

**The Third Anchor**

The third anchor by which the Twelve were enabled to ride out the storm, was *confidence in the character of their Master*. They believed - they knew - that He was the Holy One of God. They had been with Jesus long enough to have come to very firm conclusions about Him. They had seen Him work many miracles. They had heard Him speak with wonderful wisdom, using parables and sermons on the divine kingdom. They had observed His wonderfully tender, gracious concern for those who were humble and those who were lost. They had been present during His various encounters with the Pharisees and had noted His holy abhorrence of their falsehood, pride, vanity, and tyranny. All of this blessed fellowship with Him had produced a confidence in, and a reverence for, their beloved Master. It was too strong to be shaken by a single message that contained some statements that were not understandable to them - not even if the message was couched in questionable or even offensive language. Their intellects might be perplexed, but their hearts remained true. So, while the others who did not know Jesus very well left in disgust, the Twelve continued by His side. They felt that this sort of Friend and Guide was not to be abandoned over something insignificant.

“We have believed and have come to know,” said Peter. He believed because he knew. This implicit confidence that the Twelve had in Jesus is possible only through intimate knowledge. For no one can trust a stranger this way. Everyone, therefore, who desires to have the benefit of this trust must be willing to spend time and take the trouble to get into the heart of the Gospel story and of its great Subject. One cannot have an anchor that really holds by simply reading the Gospel narratives in an apathetic, random way. He must pursue a close, careful, prayerful study of the texts year after year. Those who will not take the trouble are in immediate danger of the same fate that fell on the ignorant multitude. They are liable to be thrown into panic by every new book published by an unbeliever or to be upset by every strange word that the Object of faith (Jesus) speaks. For those, on the other hand, who do take the trouble, they will be rewarded for their efforts. They may be tossed by the storm for a time, but they will eventually reach the harbor of a creed which is not a compromise between infidelity and scriptural Christianity, but embraces all the cardinal facts and truths of the faith as taught by Jesus in the discourse at Capernaum. Later, these same truths were taught by the men who passed safely through the Capernaum crisis.

May God in His mercy guide all souls, who are now out in the tempestuous sea of doubt, into that haven of rest!
This new collision between Jesus and His opponents took place shortly after He performed the second miracle of feeding the multitudes, which was similar to the one performed in the neighborhood of Bethsaida Julias. It cannot be determined how much time elapsed between the two miracles, but it was long enough for our Lord and His disciples to make an extended journey to the coasts of Tyre and Sidon where Christ met the Syrophoenician woman. From there, they traveled through the region of the ten cities on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The journey was long enough to allow the cause and the fame of Jesus to recover from the low state to which they sank after the sifting sermon in the synagogue at Capernaum. The unpopular One had, once again, become popular. So, when He arrived at the southeastern shore of the sea, thousands were waiting for Him. They were so determined to hear Him preach and to experience His healing power that they remained with Him for three days. They had very little, if any, food. This created the necessity for the second feeding.

After Jesus performed this miracle on the southeastern shore, He sent the multitudes away. Then, traveling by boat, He came to the coast of Magadan, on the western side of the sea (Mt. 15:39). When He arrived, He encountered the Pharisees and Sadducees who came asking Him to give them a sign from heaven. These people had probably heard of the recent miracle, as well as many others that were performed by Him. But they were unwilling to accept the conclusion to which these wonderful works plainly led. They pretended these miracles were insufficient evidence of His Messiahship and demanded even more absolute proof before they would believe His claim. These religious leaders demanded, “Show us a sign from heaven.” What they wanted was something like the manna that was brought down from heaven by Moses, or the fire called down by Elijah, or the thunder and rain called down by Samuel. It was assumed that these kinds of signs could only be done by the power of God, while the signs that Jesus performed in His miracles of healing might possibly be done by the power of the devil! (Mt. 12:24ff.). It was the sort of demand that was often made to Jesus - in good faith or in bad (Jn. 2:18; 6:30; Mt. 12:38). The Jews sought after these signs. They wanted to see miracles that were unique and startling. These miracles had to gratify their superstitious curiosity and astonish the minds of those who loved wonders. The miracles they wanted to see were only signs and served no other purpose than to display divine power - like the rod of Moses that was changed into a serpent and then changed back into its original form.
Jesus refused to give in to the demands of these sign-seekers. He would not lower Himself to do miracles of any sort just to prove He was the Messiah. He would not provide food for a superstitious appetite or do any entertaining works for these skeptics. He knew that those who remained unbelievers after they had seen His ordinary miracles could not be brought to faith by any means. These works were not empty signs; they were works of kindness. In fact, the more evidence they got, the more hardened they became in their unbelief. Jesus thought of their demand for these signs as an indication that they were already determined not to believe in Him. They would do whatever was necessary to get rid of this disagreeable problem, even if it meant putting Him to death. Therefore, when He refused to perform the signs they sought, it was His usual practice to add a word of rebuke or a sad prophecy. For instance, during a very early period in His ministry, on His first visit to Jerusalem after His baptism, He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19).

On this current occasion, Jesus’ soul was disturbed by the continued demands from the sign-seekers. “He sighed deeply in His spirit” (Mk. 8:12), knowing full well what these demands meant, both to Himself and to those who made them. So, with excessively severe and harsh words, He addressed the men who came to tempt Him. He rebuked them for their spiritual blindness, calling them a wicked and adulterous generation. As He had done once before (Mt. 12:39-40), ironically, He pointed them to the sign of the prophet Jonah. He told them that even though they knew the signs of the weather and understood what a red sky in the morning or evening meant, they were blind to the obvious signs of the times. These signs immediately told them that the Sun of righteousness had arisen, and that a dreadful storm of judgment was coming like a dark night on Israel. For she had become apostate and was living in sin. He branded them, and the whole generation they represented, with the word wicked to describe their behavior toward Him. This behavior came from their lying hearts. It was evil and full of spite. And He used the term adulterous to describe them, in relation to God, as guilty of breaking their marriage covenant. They pretended to love Him greatly and to have a zeal for Him - with their lips. But in their hearts and lives, they turned away from the living God to idols - customs, ceremonies, and signs. He gave them the story of Jonah the prophet as a sign. It was a mystical reference to His death. He was saying that one of the most reliable evidences that He was truly God’s servant was the fact that He was rejected and treated in a disgraceful and uncivilized way by those to whom He was speaking. He was telling them that there could not be a worse sign for a man than to be well-received by them. The person who was received in this way could not be a true Christ.

**Watch Out!**

After He freely spoke His mind, Jesus left the sign-seekers. He entered the same boat He had taken from the other side and departed again for the same eastern shore. He was anxious to
get away from them. After He arrived at the shore, He used the confrontation that had just happened to instruct the disciples. “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6). The words were spoken abruptly, similar to the way someone would speak when he was waking up from a daydream. We can only imagine that Jesus had been thinking about what had occurred as His disciples rowed Him across the sea. He sadly reflected on the prevailing unbelief and the dark, declining signs of the weather. These signs were prophetic of the evil that was coming to Him and to all of the Jewish people. And now, remembering that He is in the presence of His disciples, He communicates His thoughts to them in the form of a warning. He cautions them against the deadly influence of the evil time in which they lived in the same way that a parent might tell his child to beware of a poisonous plant whose dazzling flowers caught his attention.

It should be noted in this warning that pharisaic and sadducaic tendencies are identified. Jesus does not mention two leavens, but only one that is common to both religious parties, as if they were two species of one genus or two branches from one stem. In truth, they were. On the surface the two parties were very different. One was excessively zealous while the other was moderate in religion. One was strict, the other lenient in morals. One was exclusively and intensely Jewish in their feelings, while the other was open to the influence of pagan civilizations. Each party had its own unique leaven. The leaven of the Pharisees, according to Christ, was hypocrisy (Lk. 12:1). The leaven of the Sadducees was being absorbed with material and temporal things. In some people it took on a political form, as in the case of the parties within the Herod family (they are called Herodians in the Gospels). Others held to a philosophy which denied the existence of spirit and the reality of the future life, and made that denial an excuse for their being totally committed to the things in the here and now. But it happened here as it happens in other situations: Extremes met. Phariseeism, Sadduceeism, and Herodianism, though they had minor differences, were radically the same. The religionists, the philosophers, and the politicians were all members of one great party which had been hostile to the divine kingdom for a long time. They were all the same: worldly-minded (the Pharisees are specifically noted for their covetousness in Lk. 16:14). All were opposed to Christ, basically for the same reason: He was not of this world. All of them united at this time in an attempt to annoy Him with unbelieving, unreasonable demands (see Mk. 8:15 where “the leaven of Herod” is mentioned). And, in the end, they all had a part in His death. So it was made crystal clear - once and for all: A Christian is not someone who is simply superficially different from either the Pharisees or Sadducees. Rather, he is someone who is radically different from both. This is a serious truth and not yet well understood. Many people imagine that right believing and right living means they should go to the opposite extremes of any evil tendency. To avoid the strictness and superstition of the Pharisees, which has become repulsive, people run into the skepticism and license of the Sadducees. Or, when they become frightened by the excesses of unfaithfulness and worldliness,
they try to find salvation in ritualism, in infallible churches, and in reviving the practices of the monks who lived in the Medieval Ages. Therefore, the two tendencies continue to multiply one another on the principle of action and reaction. One generation or school goes all out in one direction. The other makes it a point to be as unlike its predecessor or its neighbor as possible. Both are equally far from the truth.

**The Radical Vice**

Jesus did not think it was necessary to state what the common leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees was. He had already indicated what its nature was in His plain and severe reply to the sign-seekers. The radical vice of both parties was just ungodliness: blindness and deadness of heart to God. They did not know what was true and good when they saw it. And when they knew it, they did not love it. The evidences that the King and the kingdom of grace were among them were everywhere. Yet here they were asking for arbitrary, outward signs, external evidences in the worst sense. They wanted to prove that the One who spoke as no man had ever spoken before and worked wonders of mercy that had never been seen before was not an impostor, but, rather, a wise and good man, a prophet, and the Son of God. Truly, the natural man - religious or not religious - is blind and dead! What these people who sought for a sign needed was not a new sign, but a new heart. They did not need more evidence but a willing spirit to obey the truth.

Jesus described the spirit of unbelief that ruled in Jewish society as a leaven. There was a special reference to how widespread it was. This was most appropriate because it passes from parents to children, from rich to poor, from the educated to the uneducated, until a whole generation has been corrupted by its evil influence. This was the state of things in Israel as He saw it. Spiritual blindness and deadness met Him everywhere He went. It was accompanied with the outward symptoms of an inward problem - a constant craving for evidence. The common people, the leaders of society, the religious, the skeptics, the judges, and the people from the country were all blind. Yet, apparently, all of them were terribly anxious to see. They were forever renewing their demand, “What sign will you show us, that we may see and believe You? What will You do?”

**The Disciples Misunderstand**

Annoyed an hour ago by the evil movements of His enemies, Jesus was now irritated with the stupidity of friends. The disciples totally, even ludicrously, misunderstood the word of warning that was addressed to them. While their Master was away, they discussed the question. They wondered what the strange words, so abruptly and earnestly spoken, might mean. They came to the conclusion that the words were intended to caution them against buying bread from either of the religious parties. But it was an absurd mistake. And yet, taking all things into consideration, it was not so very unnatural. For, in the first place, as we have already remarked, Jesus had
introduced the subject very abruptly. And, secondly, some time had elapsed since the meeting with the sign-seekers. During that time, no reference seems to have been made to the issue. How were they to know that during all that time their Master’s thoughts had been occupied with what had taken place on the western shore of the sea? In any case, this was not likely to occur to them. Without a doubt, the demand for a sign had not seemed to them to be a significant thing. It was probably forgotten as soon as their backs were turned to the men who had made it. And then, finally, it happened just before Jesus began to speak, that they remembered they had forgotten to bring along provisions for the journey. They had departed suddenly and had forgotten. That was what they were thinking about when He said, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6). They were so concerned that they only had one loaf of bread with them that when they heard the caution against a particular kind of leaven, they immediately jumped to the conclusion: “It is because we took no bread” (Mt. 16:7).

The disciples’ misunderstanding was simple and natural in its origin. Yet it deserved a correcting reply from Jesus. They could not have fallen into this mistake if they had taken an interest in spiritual and temporal things according to their relative importance. They had treated the incident on the other side of the sea too lightly, and they had treated their neglect to bring along bread too seriously. They should have taken the evil demand for a sign more seriously, and the words that their Master had spoken in reply. And they should not have been troubled about the lack of loaves when they were in the presence of the One who had miraculously fed the hungry multitude in the desert on two occasions. Their lack of concern on the one hand, and their abundance of concern on the other, showed that food and clothing occupied a greater place in their minds than the kingdom of God and its interests. If they had possessed more faith and more spirituality, they would not have exposed themselves to the question of rebuke that their Master asked them, “How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:11).

And yet, Jesus can hardly have expected these crude disciples to appreciate, as He did, the significance of what had occurred on the other side of the lake. More than an ordinary insight would have been needed to discern the importance of that demand for a sign. And the disciples’ ability to read the signs of the times (as we will soon see, and as all we have learned about them already might lead us to expect) was very small indeed. One of the key lessons that needs to be learned from this chapter is this: With reference to the future, the thoughts of Christ were so different from the thoughts of His companions. We will have the opportunity to comment more on this later as we advance toward the final crisis. At this point, we are called to highlight the fact prominently for the first time.
From the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus traveled north along the banks of the Upper Jordan. Mark tells us He passed Bethsaida Julias where He restored the eyesight of a blind man. Then, continuing on His journey, He arrived at a town of some importance. It was beautifully situated near the springs of the Jordan at the southern base of Mount Hermon. This was Caesarea Philippi, formerly called Paneas from the heathen god, Pan. He was worshiped by the Syrian Greeks in the limestone cavern nearby where the headwaters of the Jordan bubble up into the light. Its current name was given by Philip, the tetrarch of Trachonitis, in honor of Caesar Augustus. His own name was appended (Caesarea Philippi, or Philip’s Caesarea) to distinguish it from the other town by the same name on the Mediterranean coast (Caesarea Maritima, or Caesarea by the Sea). This town was proud of its white temple that was built by Herod the Great for the first Roman Emperor. Philip, Herod’s son, constructed villas and palaces in this territory and gave the town its new name.

While He was away in that remote, secluded region, Jesus devoted Himself to secret prayer and to conversation with His disciples on topics of deep interest. In one of these conversations, He called attention to Himself. He introduced the subject by asking the Twelve the question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt. 16:13). He did not ask the question because He needed to be informed, or because He was overly sensitive like certain egotistical men feel when they listen to the opinions of others. He desired His disciples to recite the current opinions that were being expressed. This would serve as a preface to a profession of their own faith in the eternal truth about Him. He thought it would be good to draw a profession out of them at this time, because He was about to communicate with them on another subject - namely, His sufferings. He knew this would severely try their faith. He wanted them to be committed to the doctrine of His Messiahship before He spoke in plain terms on the unwelcome theme of His death.

From the response of the disciples, it seems that their Master was the subject of a lot of conversation among the masses. We should have expected this. Jesus was a very public and a very extraordinary person, and to be talked about by many people is one of the inevitable consequences of being a prominent person. The good works and the claims of the Son of Man were freely discussed in detail by many people in those days. He was talked about, either with
seriousness or with levity, with prejudice or with sincerity, with decision or with indecision, intelligently or ignorantly. This is the way people respond in every period in history. As the Twelve mingled with the people, they heard many opinions about their Lord which never reached His ear. Sometimes they heard things that were kind and favorable, and it made them happy. At other times, they heard unkind and unfavorable things, making them sad.

The Opinions About Jesus

Most of the opinions held by the majority of the people seem to have been favorable. For Jesus referred to them when He questioned His disciples (Lk. 9:18). Everyone agreed that He was a prophet of the highest rank. They only disagreed as to which of the great prophets of Israel that He resembled most. Some said He was John the Baptist who had come back to life. Others said Elijah, while still others identified Him with another of the great prophets such as Jeremiah. These opinions are partially explained by an expectation people had in those days, that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by the return of one of the prophets by whom God had spoken to their fathers. And they are partially explained by the perception that there were real or supposed resemblances between Jesus and one of the prophets. His tenderness would remind one hearer of the author of the book of Lamentations. His sternness in denouncing hypocrisy and tyranny would remind someone else of the prophet of fire, Elijah. Perhaps His parables led others to think of Ezekiel or Daniel.

When we reflect on the veneration in which the ancient prophets were held, we cannot fail to see that these differing opinions held by the Jewish people about Jesus imply a very high sense of His greatness and excellence. To those of us who regard Him as the Sun and the prophets as lamps (at best) who differed in brightness, these comparisons may not only seem inadequate, but dishonoring. Yet we must not be offended by them. They are the testimonies of open-minded, but imperfect contemporaries as to the worth of Him whom we worship as the Lord. If we take their comments separately, they show that in the judgment of candid observers, Jesus was a man of surpassing greatness. When taken together, they show many aspects of His character and His superiority to any of the prophets. For those who witnessed His works and heard Him preach could not have compared Him to all of the prophets, unless He had manifested them all in His one person. Therefore, the very diversity of opinion about Him showed that One greater than Elijah, or Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, or Daniel, had appeared.

These opinions are valuable as testimonials to the excellence of Christ. We must admit that they also indicate that the people who cherished and expressed them had good dispositions. This was a time when those who thought of themselves as superior to the multitudes found no better names for the Son of Man than “Samaritan,” “devil,” “blasphemer,” “glutton and drunkard,” and “companion of publicans and sinners.” So it was significant that these people believed that Jesus,
the One falsely accused, was as worthy of honor as any of the prophets whose sepulchers were being carefully cared for by those who professed to be godly. These same religious leaders were removing honor from - even putting to death - the prophets’ living successors. The multitudes who held their opinions of Jesus might fall short of true discipleship. But at least they were far more advanced in their views than the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to tempt Him and to ask for a sign from heaven. Yet no sign, either in heaven or on earth, could win them over or convince them.

**The Report of the Twelve**

How, then, did Jesus receive the report of His disciples? Was He satisfied with these favorable and, under the circumstances, really gratifying opinions that were held by the people? He was not. He was not content to be put on the level with even the greatest of the prophets. To be sure, He did not express any displeasure against those who assigned Him this position. He may have even been pleased to hear that public opinion had advanced so far on the way to the true faith. Nevertheless, He declined to accept the position that they granted Him. The meek and humble Son of Man claimed to be something more than a great prophet. Therefore, He turned to His chosen disciples from whom He expected a more satisfactory statement of the truth. Pointedly, He asked what they thought of Him. “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15).

In this case, as in many others, Simon Peter answered for the Twelve. His prompt, definite, memorable reply to his Master’s question was this: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16).

Jesus was satisfied with this view of Himself. He did not accuse Peter of extravagance by going this far beyond the opinion of the people. On the contrary, He wholeheartedly approved of what the eager disciple had said and did not express His satisfaction in cold or calculated terms. Perhaps He never spoke with more animated language or with a greater sense of deep emotion. He solemnly pronounced Peter “blessed” because of his faith. For the first time He mentioned a church that would be founded and profess Peter’s faith as its creed. He promised Peter great power in that church. It almost seemed as if He was grateful to him for being the first to put this very important truth into words and for speaking so boldly in the midst of prevailing unbelief, and crude, defective belief. And He expressed, in the strongest possible terms, His confidence that the church that was yet to be founded would stand in all ages against the assaults of the powers of darkness.

**Peter’s Confession**

Peter’s confession, when it is properly interpreted, seems to contain these two propositions: (1) that Jesus was the Messiah, and (2) that He was divine. First he said, “Thou art the Christ.”
He said this while conscious of the reported opinions of the people. “Thou art the Christ,” and not merely a prophet that has come to prepare Christ’s way. Then he added “the Son of God,” to explain what he understood by the term Christ. The Messiah that was looked for by the Jews was simply a man, although a very superior one. He would be the ideal man who was endowed with extraordinary gifts. The Christ of Peter’s creed was more than a man; He was superhuman, a divine being. He tried to express this truth in the second part of his confession. He called Jesus the Son of God, obviously referring to the name His Master had just given Himself - Son of Man. He meant to say, “You are not only what You have now called Yourself, and what, in humility of mind, You are prone to call Yourself - the Son of Man. You are also the Son of God, partaking of the divine nature as well as the human.” Finally, he prefixed the word “living” to the divine name to express his consciousness that he was making a very important declaration and to give that declaration a solemn, deliberate character. It was as if he said, “I know it is no light matter to call anyone, even You, the Son of God, the One who came from the living eternal Jehovah. But I will not shrink from the assertion, no matter how bold it is, no matter how startling it is, or even if it seems blasphemous. I cannot make any other comment that would do justice to all that I know and feel about You, or convey the impression that has been left on my mind by what I have witnessed during the time I have followed You as a disciple.” This is the way Peter was urged on, in spite of his Jewish monotheism, to recognize his Lord’s divinity.

**Jesus’ Response to Peter**

The famous confession was spoken in the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi. It really contains in *seed form*, the doctrine of Christ’s divinity. This might be inferred by the simple fact that Jesus was satisfied with it. He certainly claimed to be the Son of God in a sense that cannot be proclaimed by a mere man. Note the synoptical accounts of His teaching (cf. Mt. 11:27). But when we consider the unique words by which He expressed Himself concerning Peter’s faith, we are even further convinced of this conclusion. He said to Peter, “Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). These words evidently imply that the person addressed (Peter) had said something very extraordinary. He must have said something that he could not have learned from the traditional established belief that his generation had about the Messiah. It was something new even for himself and for his fellow-disciples, maybe not in words, but at least in meaning (compare John 1:49). He could not have attained these words by the unaided effort of his own mind. The confession is virtually represented as an inspiration, a revelation, a flash of light from heaven. It was not the utterance of a crude fisherman, but of the divine Spirit speaking a truth through his mouth that had been, until now, hidden. It was only dimly comprehended by Peter, the one to whom it had been revealed. All this agrees well with the supposition that the confession contains an acknowledgment of Jesus’ Messiahship. But it also is a proclamation of the true doctrine concerning the Messiah’s person, namely, that He was a divine being who had been manifested in the flesh.
The rest of our Lord’s address to Peter shows that He assigned the doctrine he confessed to a fundamental place of importance in the Christian faith. The purpose of these remarkable statements (Mt. 16:18-19) is not to assert the supremacy of Peter but to declare the supremely important nature of the truth he confessed. In spite of all the difficulties in interpreting this text, this remains clear and certain to us. Who or what the “rock” is, we believe, remains open to question. It might be Peter, or it may be his confession. It is a point on which scholars, who are sound in the faith, differ in opinion. It would not be wise to be dogmatic about it. We are confident of this: Peter’s faith, and not his person, is the fundamental matter in Christ’s mind. When He says to that disciple, “You are Peter,” He means, “You are a man of rock, worthy of the name I gave you by anticipation the first time I met you, because you have finally gotten your foot planted on the rock of the eternal truth.” He speaks about the church that will come into existence for the first time in connection with Peter’s confession, because that church is to be comprised of people who adopt that confession as their own and acknowledge Him to be the Christ, the Son of God (Note: this was the usual formula by which converts confessed their faith in the apostolic age). He alludes to the keys of the kingdom of heaven in the same connection, because no one shall be admitted within its gates but those who agree with the doctrine that was first solemnly spoken by Peter. He promises Peter the power of the keys, not because it is to belong to him alone or to him more than to others. But Jesus is giving him honor to compensate him for the joy he has given His Lord through his superior energy and decision of his faith. He is grateful to Peter, because he has most emphatically believed that He came forth from the Father (Jn. 16:27). And so He shows His gratitude by promising first to him, individually, a power which He later conferred on all His chosen disciples (Mt. 18:18; Jn. 20:23). Finally, if it is true that Peter is called the rock on which the church will be built, this is to be understood in the same way as the promise of the keys. Peter is called the foundation of the church only in the same sense as all the Apostles are called the foundation by the Apostle Paul (Eph. 2:20). They are the first preachers of the true faith concerning Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. And if the man who first professed that faith is honored by being called individually the “rock,” that only shows that the faith, and not the man, is the true foundation after all. That which makes Simon Peter a Petros, a rock-like man, fit to build on, is the real Petra on which the Ecclesia (the church) is to be built.

After all of these remarks, we do not think it is necessary to question what the term “rock” refers to in the sentence, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church.” At the same time, we must say that it is by no means clear to us that the rock must be Peter and can be nothing else. Some modern commentators seem to assert this position. To the words, “You are Peter, a man of rock, and on you, as on a rock, I will build My church,” it is possible to assign an intelligible scriptural meaning. But we confess our preference for the interpretation by which our Lord’s words to His disciple would be paraphrased in this way: “You, Simon Barjonas, are Petros, a
man of rock, worthy of your name Peter, because you have made that bold, good confession; and on the truth you have now confessed, as on a rock, will I build My church; and as long as it abides on that foundation, it will stand firm and unassailable against all the powers of hell.” Read in this way, we make Jesus say not only what He really thought, but what was most worthy to be said. For divine truth is the sure foundation. Believers, even people like Peter, may fail and prove to be anything but stable. But truth is eternal and never fails. In saying this, we have not forgotten the counterpart of this truth, that “the truth” is dead and provides no source of stability unless it is confessed by living souls. Sincere personal conviction, along with a life that corresponds to it, is needed to make faith, in the objective sense of the word, a virtue.

We cannot leave these memorable words of Christ without referring to the strange fate which has come to them in the history of the church. We do this with a solemn reverence. In this text, the church’s Lord declares that the powers of darkness shall not prevail against her. And yet, the passage has been used by these powers as an instrument of assault, and with too much success. What a gigantic system of spiritual oppression and blasphemous assumption has been built on these two sentences about the rock and the keys! With their help, the kingdom of God has nearly been turned into a kingdom of Satan! One is tempted to wish that Jesus, who knew beforehand what would happen, had so framed His words in such a way that it would have prevented the wrong interpretation. But the wish is vain. There are no forms of expression, no matter how carefully chosen, that could prevent human ignorance from falling into misunderstanding. Neither could it stop people, who were serving a specific purpose, from finding in the Scripture what suited that purpose. No Christian, who really thinks about it, believes it would have been desirable for the Author of our faith to have adopted a prepared, discreet style of speech. His words were not intended to avoid causing people to stumble over their honest stupidity or to be an excuse for moving into dishonesty. If they had been, the spoken word would have no longer been a true reflection of the Word incarnate. He intended to give a faithful expression to the actual thoughts of His mind and feelings of His heart. All the poetry and passion and genuine human feeling which make up the charm of Christ’s sayings would have been lost. Nothing would have remained except dull platitudes like those of the scribes and theological intellectuals. No. Let us receive the precious words of our Master, with all of their characteristic intensity, and vehemently assert them without qualification. And if ordinary or insincere people try to manufacture unbelievable doctrines from them, let them answer for it. Why should the children be deprived of their bread and only the dogs cared for?

Before we leave this subject, let us consider one more remark. We find Peter playing a part in this incident at Caesarea Philippi. This prepares us for being able to believe the historical account of him in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. There are some profound scenes, such as that which is recorded in chapter 10. The Tübingen school of critics tells us that Acts is a composition that
is full of situations that have been made up and adapted to defend the faith. And they maintain that the book has been written to make Peter act like Paul as much as possible in the first part, and for Paul to act as much like Peter as possible in the second. They regard the conversion of the Roman centurion through Peter as a prime example of Peter being made to look like Paul - as a universalist in his views of Christianity. The following is all we have to say on the subject here: The conduct which is ascribed to the Apostle Peter in Acts 10 is believable in the light of the narrative we have been studying. In both, we find the same man who is the recipient of a revelation. In both, we find him to be the first to receive, speak, and act on a great Christian truth. Is it incredible that the man who received one revelation as a disciple should receive another as an Apostle? Isn’t it psychologically probable that the same man, who now appears so original and bold in connection with one great truth, will again demonstrate the same attributes of originality and boldness in connection with some other truth? For our part, we are far from being skeptical about the historic truth of the narrative in Acts. We would have been very surprised if Peter had been found playing a part that was totally devoid of originality and boldness in the history of the early church. In that case, he would have been very different from his former self.
Section 1 - First Announcement of Christ’s Death

Matt. 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-38; Luke 9:22-27

Jesus did not speak about His death in plain, unmistakable terms until the later part of His public ministry. In fact, His work was drawing to a close when He began to speak clearly about it. From the very beginning He had known about this solemn event and revealed His thoughts about what was coming for Him by making occasional references to it. When He mentioned it earlier in His ministry, however, it was always couched in mystical language. He spoke in riddles, and their meaning did not become clear until after the event. But before the crucifixion took place, none could understand or, at least, no one did understand. At one time, Jesus spoke about a temple. He said if it was destroyed, He would raise it again in three days (Jn. 2:19). At another time, He mentioned a lifting up of the Son of man and compared it to the lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness (Jn. 3:14). And on yet other occasions, He spoke about a sad separation of the bridegroom from the children of the bride-chamber (Mt. 9:15), about the giving of His flesh for the life of the world (Jn. 6), and about a sign like that of the prophet Jonah, which would be given by His very life to an evil and adulterous generation (Mt. 16:4).

After the conversation in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus changed His style of speaking about His sufferings. Instead of using dark, hidden allusions, He substituted literal, matter-of-fact statements (Mk. 8:32). This change was naturally adapted to the altered circumstances in which He was placed. The signs of the times were growing darker. Storm clouds were gathering in the air. All things were beginning to point toward Calvary. His work in Galilee and the provinces was nearly done. Only one thing was left to be done: to bear witness to the truth in and around the Holy City. There was a certain mood that the ecclesiastical authorities and the leaders of religious society had. It was manifested by the questions they asked (which were simply designed to find fault) and by their unreasonable demands (Mt. 15:1ff; 16:1ff). They were spying on Him, watching His every move. So it was not difficult to foresee that it would not take many more offenses, nor a much longer time, before their dislike and jealousy were ripened into murderous hatred. Therefore, this kind of plain speaking about what was going to happen soon was natural and appropriate. Jesus was now entering into the valley of the shadow of death. So, by speaking this way, He was only adapting His talk to the situation.
This plain speaking was not only natural for Christ; it was necessary and safe for His disciples. It was necessary so that they might be prepared for the coming event - prepared as far as was possible for these men. Until the very end, they had persisted in hoping that the issue would be different from what their Master had anticipated. It was safe. For now, the subject could be spoken about plainly without causing serious risk to their faith. If the disciples had not been established in the doctrine of the person of Christ, the doctrine of the cross might have scared them away. Premature preaching about a Christ who was to be crucified could have caused them not to believe in the fundamental truth that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ. Therefore, Jesus took their weakness into consideration and remained quiet about His sufferings until their faith in Him, as the Christ, was sufficiently rooted. Their faith needed to be able to withstand the storm that would soon arise. It would come by a very unexpected, unwelcome, and incomprehensible announcement. It was only after Jesus heard Peter’s confession that He was satisfied that the strength necessary for enduring the trial had been attained.

Therefore, “from that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (Mt. 16:21). Every clause in this solemn announcement demands that we look at it carefully with reverence.

Jesus showed His disciples:

1. **That He must go to Jerusalem.** Yes! It is there that the tragedy must be carried out. That was the appropriate place for the incredible events that were about to take place. It was dramatically proper that the Son of Man die in that “holy,” unholy city. It had earned a reputation as a city that murdered her prophets and stoned those whom God sent to her. “It cannot be” – it was incongruous - “that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem” (Lk. 13:33). He would suffer there also due to the dignity of Jesus and to the design of His death. He must not die in an obscure place or in an obscure way. It had to happen in the most public place and in a formal, judicial manner. He must be lifted up in full view of the whole Jewish nation, so that everyone could see Him whom they had pierced, and by whose stripes also they might yet be healed. The Lamb of God must be slain in the place where all the legal sacrifices were offered.

2. **And suffer many things.** There are too many sufferings to mention, and they are too painful to speak about in detail. It is better to pass over them in silence for right now. The plain fact was that their beloved Master was to be executed without His having committed any crime - this would be terribly difficult for the disciples. So Jesus mercifully hid most of His thoughts from them. In a later conversation on the same, sad subject - when His passion was near - He opened up with them and told them about some of the “many things.” But even then, He was restrained in what He shared. In a passing word, He only hinted that He would be mocked,
scourged, and spit upon (Mk. 10:34; Lk. 18:32). He took no pleasure in elaborating on such agonizing scenes. He was willing to bear those indignities, but He did not care to speak about them any more than was absolutely necessary.

3. *From the elders and chief priests and scribes.* However, they were not the only ones who had a hand in mistreating the Son of Man. The Gentile rulers and the people of Israel were involved along with the Jewish religious leaders. But the parties named in this passage of Scripture were the prime movers and the most responsible agents in the criminal actions taken against Him. The same men who should have taught the people to recognize that Jesus was the Lord's Anointed would urge them on to cry out, “Crucify Him, crucify Him.” By pleading and making threats, they urged ungodly authorities to perpetrate a crime for which they had no heart. Gray-haired elders who were sitting in council would solemnly decide that He was worthy of death. High priests would utter oracles, that one man must die for the people so that the whole nation would not perish. Scribes who were educated in the law would use their legal knowledge to invent believable grounds for an accusation involving capital punishment. Jesus had already suffered many petty annoyances from these people. But the time was approaching when nothing would satisfy them but getting Jesus - the object of their hatred - cast out of the world. Pity Israel, when her wise men, her holy men, and her educated men knew of no better use to make of the precious stone chosen by God than to contemptuously and blatantly throw it away!

4. *And be killed.* Yes, and for the blessed purposes that were pre-ordained by God. But Jesus does not speak about these now. In this first lesson on the doctrine of the cross, He simply states, in general terms, the fact of His death. Anything more at this point would have been wasted words. Why speak about the theology of the cross, about God’s great design in the death which was to be brought about by the hands of guilty men, to disciples who were even unwilling to receive the facts? First, they had to get over the shock of the unwelcome announcement. Then they could talk about the meaning of the cross. Therefore, Jesus does not mention a syllable here about salvation by the death of the Son of Man, nor about Christ being crucified for man's guilt as well as by man's guilt. Only the hard, plain fact is stated. Theology is reserved for another time, when the hearers would be in a better frame of mind for receiving instruction.

5. *Be raised up on the third day.* This was the final thing Jesus told His disciples. Such an explicit reference to the resurrection at this early date has seemed improbable to some people. To us, on the contrary, it seems to be especially timely. When would Jesus most likely tell His disciples that He would rise again shortly after His death than on the occasion when He first told them plainly that He would die? He knew how difficult one announcement would be for His faithful ones. So it was natural for Him to add the other. He hoped that when it was understood that His death was to be succeeded by the resurrection - after a brief interval of three days - the news would be
much less hard to bear. Therefore, after He spoke the sad words, with characteristic tenderness He quickly said, “and be raised on the third day” - that having been torn, He might be healed, and having received blows, He might be restored.

These serious words spoken by Jesus were far from being well-received by His disciples. Neither now, nor at any time after this, did they listen to the warnings of their Lord with approval. And there was certainly no cheerful acceptance nor spiritual joy. They never heard Him speak of His death without feeling pain. In fact, their only comfort with these kinds of announcements seems to have been the hope that He was taking too pessimistic a view of the situation, and that His fears would be groundless. As far as they were concerned, they could not see any grounds for such dark feelings, and their Messianic ideas did not allow them to be on the lookout for these. They did not have the slightest notion that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer. On the contrary, a crucified Christ was a scandal and a contradiction to them. It was the same for the majority of the Jewish people after the Lord had ascended into glory. Therefore, the more firmly they believed that Jesus was the Christ, the more confusing it was to be told that He must be put to death. They asked themselves, “How can these things be? How can the Son of God be subjected to such humiliation? How can our Master be the Christ - as we strongly believe - who has come to set up the divine kingdom and to be crowned its King with glory and honor and yet, at the same time, be doomed to undergo the awful fate of a criminal execution?” The Twelve could not answer these questions now, nor until after the Resurrection. This should not be surprising. For if flesh and blood could not reveal the doctrine of the person of Christ, it certainly could not reveal the doctrine of His cross. They could not understand the simplest elements of that doctrine without special illumination from Heaven. Nor could they see that nothing was more worthy of the Son of God than for Him to humble Himself and subject Himself to death - even death on the cross. The glory of God consists not merely in His being the highest. Rather it is this: that being high, He stoops in lowly love to bear the burden of His own sinful creatures. Nothing could more directly and certainly lead to the establishment of the divine kingdom than the gracious self-humiliation of the King. Only by ascending the cross could the Messiah ascend the throne of His mediatorial glory. It is the only way He could subdue human hearts and become the Lord of people’s affections as well as of their destinies. Many in the church do not understand these blessed truths, even at this late date in history. It should not surprise us, then, if these truths were hidden from the eyes of the first disciples for a while! Let us not rebuke them for the veil that was over their faces. Rather, let us make sure the same veil is not over our own.

Peter’s Rebuke

On this occasion, as at Caesarea Philippi, the Twelve found Peter to be an eloquent and energetic interpreter of their feelings. His actions and speech at this time were absolutely characteristic of him. He took Jesus (we are told) - perhaps he laid hold of Him by grabbing His
hand or His clothing - and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (Mt. 16:22). What a strange mixture of good and evil is this man! His language is controlled by his intense love; he cannot stand the thought of any harm coming to his Lord. Yet he is so irreverent and disrespectful toward Him whom he has just acknowledged to be the Christ, the Son of the living God! He is so pushy; he contradicts Jesus and dominates Him. In essence, he tries to bully his Master into getting rid of His thoughts about gloomy warnings of some evil that is coming! Truly, he needs to be chastised to put him in his place and to rip out of his character three bad elements: (1) presumption, (2) being too free and intimate in his counsel with Him, and (3) self-will.

It was a good thing for Peter that he had a Master who, in His faithful love, did not spare the rod when it was needed. Jesus determined that it was needed now. Therefore, He administered a severe rebuke, no less remarkable than the warm, approving praise He offered at Caesarea Philippi. He turned around to His offending disciple and sternly said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's” (Mt. 16:23). This same disciple spoke by the inspiration of Heaven on the previous occasion; now he is represented as speaking by the inspiration of mere flesh and blood - of mere natural affection for his Lord. This is the animal instinct of self-preservation. He was thinking of self-interest only, not of duty. The same man that Christ had called a Rock - strong in faith, and suitable to be a cornerstone in the spiritual building - is here called an offense, a stumbling-block lying in his Master's path. Peter, who nobly confessed that fundamental truth by the faith whereby the church would be able to defy the gates of hell, appears here in the same league with the powers of darkness. He is the unconscious mouthpiece of Satan the tempter. “Get behind Me, Satan!” What a letdown for Peter! Just yesterday he had received the promise of the power of the keys! How suddenly has the beginner church dignitary fallen into the condemnation of the devil! He was probably filled with pride or vanity.

This unforgettable rebuke seems to be mercilessly severe. Yet, when we think about it, we feel that it was well-deserved. Christ's language on this occasion needs no apology. Maybe it would have if He had just become excited and over-reacted. Or, maybe so if He was thinking in His heart the same thing Peter was saying. Even the harsh word - Satan - which is the most stinging part of the rebuke, was used appropriately. It describes exactly the character of the advice that was given by Simon. That advice was essentially this: “Do whatever it takes to save yourself. Sacrifice duty to self-interest, the cause of God to personal convenience.” This is advice that is truly Satanic in principle and tendency! For the whole goal of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man. Satan's temptations aim at nothing worse than this. Satan is called the Prince of this world, because self-interest rules the world. He is called the accuser of the brethren, because he does not believe that even the sons of God have any higher motive.
He is a skeptic. And his skepticism is made up of bold, scornful unbelief in the reality of any ultimate goals except personal advantage. “Does Job, or even Jesus, serve God for nothing? Self-sacrifice, suffering for righteousness’ sake, faithfulness to the truth until death - it is all romance and youthful sentimentalism, or hypocrisy and hollow jargon. There is absolutely no such thing as surrendering the lower life for the higher. All people are selfish at heart and have their price. Some may hold out longer than others but, when pushed to the limit, every person will prefer his own things to the things of God. A man will give all that he has for his life. His moral integrity and his piety are not exempt.” This is Satan’s creed.

The suggestion that was made by Peter is identical in principle with that made by Satan himself to Jesus in the temptations in the wilderness. In this case, Peter was Satan’s unconscious tool. In essence, the tempter had said to Jesus: “If You are the Son of God, use Your power for Your own benefit. You are hungry. Make bread for Yourself out of the stones. If You are the Son of God, be presumptuous about Your privilege as the favorite of Heaven. Cast Yourself down from this high place. You can confidently count on being protected from all harm, even where other people would be allowed to suffer the consequences of their foolishness. What better use can You make of Your divine powers and privileges than to promote Your own advantage and glory?” Peter’s feelings at the present time seem to have been much the same: “If You are the Son of God, why should You suffer a horrible, violent death? You have the power to save Yourself from this kind of fate. Surely You will not hesitate to use it!” Peter was, in fact, an unconscious instrument employed by Satan to subject Jesus to a second temptation - very similar to the earlier one in the desert of Judea. It was the god of this world that was at work in both cases. Satan is accustomed to finding people who prefer safety to righteousness. Therefore, he could not believe that he would not find any of this spirit in the Son of God. So he came again and again seeking an opening in His armor through which he might shoot his fiery darts. Satan would not renounce hope until his intended victim hung on the cross, apparently conquered by the world. In reality, Jesus was the conqueror of both the world and its lord.

Remember that Jesus was addressing a beloved disciple. The severe language spoken by Jesus on this occasion shows in a pointed way that He literally had a holy hatred for everything that smacked of self-seeking. “Save Yourself,” counsels Simon Peter. “Get behind Me, Satan,” replies Simon’s Lord. Truly Christ was not one who pleased Himself. Though He was a Son, He would learn obedience by the things which He had to suffer (cf. Hebrews 5:8). And by thinking in this way, He proved Himself to be the Son and won from His Father the approving voice: “Thou art my beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased.” It was Heaven’s reply to the voice from hell counseling Him to pursue a course of self-pleasing. Persevering with this thinking pattern, Jesus was eventually lifted up on the cross and so became the Author of eternal salvation for all of those who obey Him. Blessed be His name - now and forevermore - who so humbled Himself, and became obedient as far as death!
Section 2 - Cross-Bearing the Law of Discipleship

Matt. 16:24-28; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-27

After one hard announcement, another one was made that was just as hard. The Lord Jesus told His disciples that He must be put to death one day. Now He tells them that it will happen to them in the same way that it will happen to Him. This second announcement came about naturally because of the way in which the first one had been received. Peter had said, “This shall never happen to You” (Mt. 16:22), and all of the disciples felt the same way. The essence of Jesus’ reply was, “You really believe this? I am telling you that not only will I, your Master, be crucified - for this will be the way in which I die - but you who faithfully follow Me will most certainly have your crosses to bear. ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’” (Mt. 16:24).

The first announcement was made only to the Twelve; the second was not. We can assume this from the general words used in the announcement. But even more convincing is the fact that we have been informed by Mark and Luke that before making it, Jesus called the people and His disciples to Him and spoke so all could hear (Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23). Therefore, the doctrine taught here is for all Christians in all ages. It is not only for Apostles, but for the most humble disciples; not only for priests or preachers, but for the laity as well; not only for monks living in cloisters, but for people living and working in the secular world. By this announcement, the King and Head of the church proclaims a universal law which is binding on all His subjects: all who are in fellowship with Him are required to bear a cross.

We are not told how the second announcement was received by those who heard it, not even by the Twelve. However, we can assume that to Peter and his fellow disciples, it did not sound as harsh as the first. Theoretically, it seemed more acceptable. Experience might teach them that no matter how unpleasant crosses are to flesh and blood, they could be expected by virtually every person. But what did Christ the Son of God have to do with crosses? Shouldn’t He be exempt from the sufferings and insults of ordinary mortals? If not, what advantage did His divine Sonship give Him? In short, the difficulty this announcement had for the Twelve was this: not that the servant was no better than the Master, but that the Master was no better than the servant.
Our confusion, on the other hand, is likely to be just the opposite. Because we are familiar with the doctrine that Jesus died on the cross in our place, we are inclined to wonder why we should bear a cross. If He suffered for us vicariously, why do we need to suffer also? We need to be reminded that Christ’s sufferings, while in some ways unique, are in other ways common to all those in whom His Spirit abides. While His death alone remains redemptive, His suffering for righteousness’ sake is the highest example of a universal law. This law maintains that all who truly live a godly life must suffer hardship in a false, evil world. It can be clearly observed that Jesus used a very effective method of keeping this truth prominently before the minds of His followers in all ages. He emphasized it the first time He announced He was going to die. In fact, he gave it as the first lesson on the doctrine of His death, the first of four which are found in the Gospels (see also Mt. 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Lk. 18:31-34). By stating this truth, in effect He was declaring that only those who were willing to be crucified with Him would be saved by His death. Furthermore, a person’s willingness to bear a cross was indispensable to the right understanding of the doctrine of salvation through Him. It is as if there were a door to a school where the mystery of redemption was being taught, and above that door He had inscribed these words: Let no man enter here who is unwilling to deny himself and take up his cross.

The Meaning of the Cross

In this great law of discipleship, the cross signifies not only the external penalty of death but all troubles that come to those who earnestly try to live like Jesus lived in this world and who receive the consequences for living like He did. The afflictions of the righteous are many and varied. They differ in kind and in degree, according to times and circumstances, and the callings and positions of each individual. Jesus, the Righteous One, died not only at the hands of unjust people; He died for them. The appointed cup was filled with all the possible ingredients of shame and pain, mingled together with the highest degree of bitterness. Many of His most honored servants have come very close to their Master in the manner and measure of their afflictions for His sake. They have certainly drunk of His cup and have been baptized with His bloody baptism. But for most Christians, the hardships they endure are ordinarily less severe. The cross they have to bear is less heavy. For one, the cross may be the libel of lying lips, which speak horrible things against the righteous and do it with pride and contempt. Another may not reach the much-worshiped idol of success in life, which is so often reached by ungodly means. A third person may experience isolation and loneliness in the middle of unfriendly, unsympathetic neighbors who do not live soberly, righteously, and godly and are not loving to those who do live that way.

The cross, therefore, is not the same for all. But there is a cross of some shape for all true disciples. This is implied in the words, “If any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross” (Mt. 16:24). The plain meaning of these words is this: no one can follow Jesus
on any other terms. And no matter how clearly this doctrine is taught in the Gospel, spurious Christians are unwilling to believe it and are determined to deny it. They take the edge off their Lord’s statement by explaining that it applies only to certain critical times. They are glad these times are different from their own. Or, they say, if it has some reference to every age in history, it only applies to those who play a prominent role in leadership, those who are pioneers in progress, or prophets who denounce the sins of the age and who speak messages that are not welcomed. The latter (being a prophet) was a proverbially dangerous occupation, as is shown by the Greek poet, Euripides, who said, “Apollo alone should prophesy, for he fears nobody.” True Christians maintain that all who decide to live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer. But the counterfeit Christian believes his view of the wickedness of the world is too gloomy and somber. Or, he believes it presents too high and harsh a view of the Christian life. In his view, the righteousness which involves a cross is foolishness and fanaticism. He believes those who hold these views are speaking when they really should be silent; that they are meddling in things that are of no concern to anyone. In a word, he thinks these believers are overly righteous. These kinds of thoughts, whether expressed or unexpressed, are sure to be widespread when making a profession of faith is the popular thing to do. It is a well-understood fact that faith involves a cross. It is also a fact that Christ was crucified just because He was righteous. These truths are understood by a minority of Christians who are suffering, like those who lived during the early years of the Christian faith. But in peaceful and prosperous times, people lose sight of them. During those times, it is common to find many who hold sound views of the cross that Christ died on for them. But these same people are sadly ignorant concerning the cross they have to bear because they are in fellowship with Him. They are determined to know nothing about this cross. They cannot even comprehend what it means, or from whence it can come. If they only had the true spirit of self-denial that was required by Christ of the disciples, they might find their crosses in their daily lives, in their businesses, in their homes - perhaps even in their own hearts. Then they would have no need to seek for them all over the world or to manufacture crosses out of their own strict self-denial.

**Three Reasons for the Law of the Cross**

Jesus added three reasons to the law of the cross. They were designed to make obeying it easier by showing the disciples that when they obey this stern requirement, they are, in fact, looking after their own interests. Each reason is introduced by the word, “for.”

The first reason: “For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Mt. 16:25). In this startling paradox, the word “life” has a double meaning. In the first part of each sentence, it means natural life, with all the additional things that make it pleasant and enjoyable. In the second part of both sentences, it means the spiritual life of a renewed soul. This deep, rich saying may therefore be expanded and paraphrased as follows:
Whoever will save (make it his top priority to save or preserve) his natural life and his worldly well-being will lose the higher life - the real life. And whoever is willing to lose his natural life for My sake will find the true eternal life. According to this statement, we must lose something. It is not possible to live without sacrifice of some kind. The only question is what will be sacrificed - the lower or the higher life, animal happiness or spiritual blessedness. If we choose the higher, we must be prepared to deny ourselves and take up our cross, even though the actual amount of the loss we are called to bear may be small. “Godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (I Tim. 4:8b). If, on the other hand, we choose the lower and risk everything to have it, we must inevitably lose the higher. The soul’s life and all the imperishable qualities of the soul - righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness (I Tim. 6:11) - are the price we pay for loving the world and what it has to offer.

This price is too great. This is the next thing that Jesus told those who were listening to Him and was the second persuasive argument for cross-bearing. “For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mt. 16:26). These two questions set forth the incomparable value of the soul. Look at both sides like you would a commercial transaction. The soul, or life, in the true sense of the word, is too costly a price to pay for the whole world, not to mention the cost for even a small portion of it which comes to any one individual. The one who gains the world at such a cost has lost the bargain. On the other hand, the whole world is too small a price - utterly inadequate - to pay for the ransom of the soul once it is lost. What will a man give in exchange for the priceless soul he has foolishly bartered away? “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Mi. 6:6-7). No! O man; not any of these things, nor anything else you may have to give. Not any of your merchandise. Not a million dollars. You cannot buy back your soul which you have traded for the world, even with all that you have of the world. For sure, the redemption of the soul is precious. It cannot be delivered from the bondage of sin by things that are corruptible, like silver and gold. Trying to purchase pardon and peace and life in this way can only make your case more hopeless and add to your condemnation.

The appeal which is contained in these solemn questions comes home with irresistible force to all who are in their right mind. They feel there is nothing that can be compared in value to having a “saved soul.” However, everyone does not think this way. Masses of people consider their souls to be of little value. Judas sold his soul for thirty pieces of silver. And there are probably many who think of themselves better than he, yet would part with their souls for the most meager worldly advantage. The great ambition of millions of people is to be happy rather than to be
blessed by being saved, noble-minded, and sanctified. “Who will show us any good?” is what
the masses say. “Give us health, wealth, houses, lands, honors; we do not care about righteous-
ness (either imputed or personal), a clear conscience filled with peace, or joy in the Holy Spirit.
These may be good to have in their own way and, if we could have them along with the other
things without trouble or sacrifice, it would be good. But we cannot agree to deny ourselves any
pleasure, nor will we voluntarily endure any hardship.”

The third argument in favor of cross-bearing is drawn from the second coming of Christ.
“For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then
recompense every man according to his deeds” (Mt. 16:27). These words suggest a contrast
between the present and the future state of the speaker (Jesus). They also imply a promise of
a corresponding contrast between the present and the future for His faithful followers. Now
Jesus is the Son of Man, destined before long to be crucified in Jerusalem. At the end of time,
He will appear having the obvious glory of Messiah, attended with a mighty host of angels - His
reward for enduring the cross and despising the shame. Then He will reward every man accord-
ing to the way he has lived his life. To the cross-bearers, He will give a crown of righteousness.
To those who avoided the cross, He will assign shame and everlasting contempt. This is stern
doctrine. It is distasteful to the modern mind for various reasons, especially two: (1) because
it gives us alternatives for where we will go after death; and (2) because its intent is to spread
heroic virtue in people by offering them the hope of reward in heaven, rather than have them
believe that virtue alone is its own reward. Consider the first one. The alternatives presented for
life after the grave is certainly a great mystery as well as a burden to the human spirit. But isn’t
it true that an alternative is involved in any sincere doctrine of morality or of human freedom
and responsibility? As to the second reason, Christians do not need to be afraid that they are
using Christ for their own ends if they seek to become virtuous. There is no offensiveness or
impurity in the virtue which is sustained by a person having the hope of eternal life. That hope
is not selfishness, but rather self-consistency. It is simply believing in the reality of the kingdom
for which you labor and suffer. Of course, this involves the reality of each Christian’s personal
relationship with Jesus Christ, including your own. Such faith is necessary to heroism. For who
would fight and suffer for a dream? What patriot would risk his life for his country’s cause who
did not hope for the restoration of her independence? And who but an intellectual would say
that the purity of his patriotism was tarnished because he had hope for himself as an individual
citizen as well as hope for the whole nation. It is equally necessary that a Christian believe in the
kingdom of glory, and equally natural and proper that he should cherish the hope of a personal
share in its honors and joys. Where such faith and hope are lacking, very little Christian heroism
will be found. One of the Church Fathers, Tertullian, said, “There is no certain work where there
is an uncertain reward.” People cannot be heroes if they are in doubt or despair. They cannot
struggle for perfection and a divine kingdom if they are skeptical about whether these things are
anything more than devout imaginations or unrealized ideals. In such a mood, they will take things easy. They will make personal happiness their main concern.
The Transfiguration


The transfiguration is one of those events in the Savior’s earthly history which students of the Word would rather pass over in reverent silence. The argument for such silence might be made in the same way the Gospel narrative kindly deals with Peter’s foolish speech concerning the three tabernacles: “For he did not know what to answer” (Mk. 9:6a). Who knows what to say any more than Peter? Who is fully capable of speaking about that wonderful night on the mountain? For a brief few minutes, heaven came down to earth. The mortal body of Jesus, being transfigured, shone with celestial brightness. The spirits of two men, Elijah and Moses, who were now perfect, appeared and had conversation with Him about His approaching death. A voice came forth from the excellent glory pronouncing Him to be God’s well-beloved Son. This majestic spectacle is too high for us; it is too lofty for us to attain. Its grandeur overwhelms and astonishes us. Its mystery surpasses our comprehension. Its glory is inexpressible. Therefore, we need to avoid all speculation, curious questioning, theological inquiry, and ambitious attempts to make word-pictures about the remarkable occurrence that is recorded here. We will confine ourselves in this chapter to the humble task of briefly explaining its significance for Jesus Himself and its lesson for His disciples.

To be understood, the “transfiguration” must be viewed in relation to the announcement Jesus made shortly before it happened. It was about His death. This is evident because all three evangelists who carefully tell the story take notice of the time of its occurrence. In all three accounts, they attach the event to the announcement and to the conversation that accompanied it. All tell how Jesus took three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, within six or eight days of His announcement, and brought them alone to a high mountain. There, He was transfigured before them. Usually the Gospel historians are not accustomed to being so careful about matters of time. Their detailed accuracy tells us, in effect: “While the previous communications and sermons about the cross were fresh in the thoughts of all the people, the wonderful events we are now writing about took place.” In fact, the relative date is a sign pointing back to the conversation on the passion, and says, “If you want to understand what is coming, remember what happened before.”
Jesus, Moses, and Elijah

Luke makes a statement that further substantiates the inference about the time of the transfiguration. It has to do with the conversation that took place between Jesus and the celestial visitors. “And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lk. 9:30-31). That departure, so different from their own in its circumstances and consequences, was the theme of their talk. They had appeared to Jesus to talk with Him about His death. And when they had finished speaking about it, they left for their heavenly home. We do not know how long the conference lasted. However, the subject matter was sufficiently interesting. There was the surprising contrast between the death of Moses and that of Jesus. Moses’ death was immediate and painless. His eyes were not even weak nor his strength gone (Deut. 34:7). Jesus’ death was painful and disgraceful. Then, there was another remarkable contrast between the way Elijah departed this life. He was translated to heaven without tasting death at all, making a triumphant exit out the world in a chariot of fire. Jesus, on the other hand, would enter into glory by the via dolorosa of the cross. Why did the representatives of the law and the prophets have the privilege of being exempt from death, or from the bitterness of death, when it was denied Him who was the fulfillment of the law and prophecy? On these points and others like them, the two celestial messengers, who were enlightened by the clear light of heaven, may have had intelligent and sympathetic conversation with the Son of Man. And it refreshed His weary, saddened, solitary soul.

Luke further records that Jesus had been spending time in prayer prior to His transfiguration. We can see the Father’s answer to His Son’s supplications by the way He bestowed honor and glory on Him. From the nature of the answer, we can infer that Christ had been in prayer. It was the same after He had prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. The cup of death was present to His mind now, as it was then. The cross was visible to His spiritual eye. He prayed for the nerve to drink it, for the courage to endure. The presence of the three confidential disciples, Peter, James, and John, offers a significant hint to the similarity of the two occasions. The Master took these disciples with Him to the mountain, as He later took them into the garden. This was so He might not be totally without company and warm sympathy as He walked through the valley of the shadow of death and felt the horror and the loneliness of the situation.

Why the Transfiguration?

It is now clear how we must view the transfiguration scene in relation to Jesus. It was an aid to faith and patience. It was especially given to the meek and lowly Son of Man in answer to His prayers. Its purpose was to encourage Him on His sorrowful path toward Jerusalem and Calvary. Three distinct aids were supplied to His faith in the experiences of that wonderful night. The first was a foretaste of the glory with which He would be rewarded after His passion because
of His voluntary humiliation and obedience unto death. For the moment, he was absorbed with heaven, where He had been before He came into the world. His face shone like the sun, and His clothing was as white as the pure snow that has not been walked on in the high alpine summits of Hermon. The sudden flood of celestial light said, “Be of good cheer; the suffering will soon be over, and You will enter into Your eternal joy!”

A second source of comfort to Jesus in the experiences on the mount was the assurance that the mystery of the cross was understood and appreciated by the saints in heaven - even if not by the darkened minds of sinful people on earth. He greatly needed this comfort. Except for His chosen disciples, there was not one person He could speak with on this theme who would give an intelligent and sympathetic response. Only a few days ago, He had determined in a painful way that the Twelve were utterly incapable of comprehending the mystery of His passion - even the brightest and most compassionate among them. Could they even believe in it as a certain fact? Truly, the Son of Man was most lonely as He passed through the dark valley! The very presence of ignorant, unsympathetic companions served to enhance the sense of solitariness. When He wanted company who could understand His thoughts about His passion, He was obligated to have conversation with the spirits of righteous men who had been made perfect. As far as mortal men were concerned, He had to be content to finish His great work without the comfort of being understood until after it had been accomplished.

The conversation with the great lawgiver and the great prophet on the subject of His death was, without a doubt, a real comfort to the spirit of Jesus. We know how He comforted Himself at other times: He would think about being understood in heaven, if not on earth. When the heartless Pharisees questioned His practice of associating with sinners, He sought His defense and His consolation in the blessed fact that at least there was joy in heaven over one sinner who repented - more than over ninety-nine who needed no repentance. It didn't matter what they thought. When He thought how “little ones” - the weak and helpless - were despised and run over by others in this proud inhuman world, He reflected with unspeakable satisfaction that in heaven their angels always beheld the face of His Father. He was saying that in heaven, there were angels who made taking care of little ones their special business. Therefore, these weak ones were fully able to appreciate the doctrine of humility and kindness, which He was trying to impart to the ambitious and quarrelsome disciples. Surely, then, we can believe that when He looked forward to the time of His own death - the crowning evidence of His love for sinners - it was a comfort to His heart to think this way: “In heaven they know I am supposed to suffer. They comprehend why and eagerly watch to see how I move on without faltering, with my face set to go up to Jerusalem without wavering.” Wouldn't it be especially comforting to have tangible evidence for this by having an actual visit from two citizens from the upper world who were commissioned and sent to express the general thinking of the whole community of glorified
saints? These two would understand that their presence in heaven was due to the sacrifice which He was about to make by offering Himself on the hill of Calvary.

A third, and the main source of comfort to the heart of Jesus was the approving voice of His heavenly Father: “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; hear Him!” (Mt. 17:5). The words He spoke meant: “Go on Your present journey, devoted to death. Do not avoid the cross. I am pleased with You at all times. I am most emphatically delighted with You when You display Your fixed purpose to save others rather than Yourself. You recently did this when You made the announcement to Your disciples.”

**The Voice from Heaven**
The divine Father spoke from glory on three occasions in the hearing of His Son during His life on earth. The first occurred by the Jordan after the baptism of Jesus. It was the same as this one except that it was spoken to Him, and not about Him. The last was uttered at Jerusalem shortly before the crucifixion. This one was similar to the other two, but different in form. Jesus’ soul was troubled with the nearness of His death, so He prayed, “Father, save Me from this hour; but for this reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name.” Then we read that a voice came from heaven saying, “I have both glorified it (by Your life), and will glorify it again (more by Your death).” All three utterances served one purpose. They came during these crises in Christ’s history when He manifested unusual intensity in His devotion to the work for which He had come into the world. He was determined to finish it, no matter how annoying the task might be to flesh and blood. These words were for His encouragement and strengthening, and expressed the Father’s quiet satisfaction over His humiliation and obedience unto death. At His baptism, He (so to speak) confessed the sins of the whole world. By submitting to the rite, He expressed His purpose to fulfill all righteousness as the Redeemer from sin. Therefore, for the first time, the Father pronounced Him His beloved Son. Shortly before the transfiguration, He had energetically repelled the suggestion of one of His loving disciples that He should save Himself from His anticipated doom. He considered it a temptation from the devil. Therefore, the Father renewed the declaration. This time, however, He changed the second person (“You”) into the third (“Him”) for the sake of those disciples who were present, especially Peter, who had listened to the voice of his own heart rather than to his Master’s words. A few days before His death, Jesus overcame a temptation similar to that to which Peter had subjected Him. This time it came out of the sinless infirmity of His own human nature. Beginning His prayer with the expression of His wish to be saved from this dark hour, He ended it with the petition, “Glorify Your name.” Therefore the Father repeated once more the expression of His approval. In effect, He declared His satisfaction with the way in which His Son had glorified His name until now. He also was expressing His confidence that He would not fail to crown His career of obedience by a God-glorifying death.
The Lesson for Christians

This is the meaning of the vision on the mountain for Jesus. Now we have to consider what lesson it taught the disciples who were present and, through them, their brothers and all Christians.

The main point is the command attached to the end of the heavenly voice: “Hear Him.” This refers especially to the doctrine of the cross which was preached by Jesus to the Twelve, but which was not well received. It was meant to be a solemn, deliberate endorsement of all that He had said concerning His own sufferings and concerning their obligation to bear their crosses. Peter, James, and John were invited to recall all that had come from their Master’s lips about this unwelcome topic. They were assured that it was totally true and in accordance with the divine mind. As these disciples had received the doctrine with whispers of disapproval, the voice from heaven addressed them with a stern word of rebuke, which said, “Do not grumble, but devoutly and obediently listen.”

This rebuke was all the more necessary in that the disciples had just demonstrated that their thinking was the same as it had been six days earlier. Peter was still in no position to consider bearing a cross. He had been overcome with drowsiness (Lk. 9:32) and was now waking up and able to think more clearly. He observed the two strangers who were leaving and exclaimed, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Mt. 17:4). He had it in his mind, we think, to enjoy the privileges of heaven without going through the process of cross-bearing. He thought to himself: “How much better to live up here with the saints than down below in the middle of unbelieving, fault-finding Pharisees and miserable human beings. Rather this, than enduring the arguments of sinners and battling with all the ills with which the earth is cursed! Stay here, my Master, and you can say goodbye to all those dark warnings about sufferings that are coming. You will be beyond the reach of evil priests, elders, and scribes. Stay here, on this sun-lit, heaven-kissed hill. Do not go down into the depressing, somber valley of humiliation any more. Farewell, earth and the cross; welcome, heaven and the crown!”

We should not forget, while we are paraphrasing Peter’s foolish speech, that when he spoke these words he was just waking up from his sleep and was overwhelmed by the midnight scene. Yet, when consideration has been given for this, it still remains true that the superficial suggestion was an indication of the disciple’s present state of mind. Peter was drunk, though not with wine. But what people say, even when they are drunk, is revealing. There was a serious meaning in his senseless speech about the tabernacle. He really meant that the celestial visitors ought to stay, and not go away, as they were in the process of doing when he spoke (see Lk. 9:33). This is apparent from the conversation which took place between Jesus and the three disciples while they were descending the mountain (Mt. 17:9-13; Mk. 9:9-13). Peter and his two companions, James...
and John, asked their Master: “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” We think that the question referred, not to the command Jesus had just given the disciples - “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead” - but rather to the vanishing scene that had just occurred on the mountain. The three disciples were not only disappointed, but perplexed that Moses and Elijah were so much like angels in that they had such a short stay and departed so suddenly. They had accepted the current thinking about the coming of Elias, that he would return before the restoration of the kingdom – and then actually accomplish the restoration. They fondly hoped that this was he who at last had come with Moses. He would be heralding the approaching glory in a similar way that swallows coming from tropical climates are a sign that summer is near and that winter, with its storms and hardships, is over and gone. In truth, while their Master was preaching the cross, they had been dreaming of crowns. We will find them continuing to do this until the very end.

“Hear Him.” This voice was not meant for the three disciples alone, or even for the Twelve, but for all who consider themselves followers of Christ. It says to every Christian: “Listen to Jesus, and strive to understand Him while He speaks about the mystery of His sufferings and the glory that will follow - those themes into which even the angels desire to look. Listen to Him when He proclaims cross-bearing as a duty required of all disciples. Do not give in to selfish suggestions made by your flesh, nor to the temptations of Satan who counsels you to put self-interest or self-preservation as your highest goal. Listen to Him, once again, and do not grow weary of having to constantly confront the things the world offers. Do not seek to lay down your burden before it is time. Do not dream of tabernacles where you may live securely, like a hermit in the wild who has removed himself from everyday life. Do your part like a man and, at the proper time, you will not have a tent, but a temple to live in - a house that is not made with hands, but one that is eternal in the heavens.”

It is true, indeed, that we who are in this tabernacle of the body living in this world of sorrow cannot help but agonize every now and then, because we are burdened. This is our infirmity. In itself, it is not sinful. Neither is it wrong to let out a great sigh and make a passing wish that your cross-bearing could be over. At times, even the holy Jesus felt this weariness of life. An expression of something like impatience escaped His lips during this time. When He came down from the mountain and learned what was going on at the base, He spoke about the unbelief of the scribes who were present, about the weak faith of the disciples, and about the miseries that all mankind experienced because of the consequences of the curse. He said, “O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?” Even the loving Redeemer of mankind felt tempted to be weary in well-doing, weary of encountering the opposition from sinners and of putting up with the spiritual weakness of the disciples. This weariness, therefore, as a momentary feeling, is not necessarily sinful. Rather, it may be a part of
our cross. However, you must not give in to it, nor yield to it. Jesus did not give Himself up to the feeling. Though He complained about the generation of people among whom He lived, He did not stop His labors of love to benefit them. Having thoroughly rebuked those who were intent on hindering His work, He commanded that the poor epileptic boy be brought to Him so He could heal him. Then, after He had performed this new miracle of mercy, He patiently explained to His own disciples the cause of their inability to deal successfully with the people’s illnesses. He taught them how they could obtain the power for casting out all sorts of devils, even those who had the most obstinate hold on their victims. They would come out by faith and prayer (Mt. 17:19-21; Mk. 9:28-29). So He continued laboring to help the unfortunate and to instruct the ignorant. Jesus did this until the time came when He could truly say, “It is finished.”
Section 1 - As This Little Child!


From the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus and the Twelve traveled through Galilee until they arrived in Capernaum. As they were traveling, the Master and His disciples were thinking about different things. Jesus was sadly reflecting on His cross. The disciples were being vain, dreaming about the positions they would have in the coming kingdom. The differences in their spirits were revealed by the differences in their behavior. As they were going along, Jesus, for the second time, began to speak about His coming sufferings. He told His followers how the Son of Man would be betrayed and turned over to men who would kill Him. He told them how He would be raised again on the third day (Mt. 17:22-23; Mk. 9:30-32; Lk. 9:44-45). The Twelve, on the other hand, were arguing with one another as they walked along. They were fighting over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Mk. 9:33). This strange and humiliating contrast between Jesus and His disciples was revealed over and over again in the Gospel history. The disciples had jealous and angry words with one another over their positions and status in the kingdom. Surprisingly, this came right after Jesus had given them new information about His passion, much like the comic follows the tragic in a dramatic presentation.

This ugly arguing was totally uncalled for and clearly demonstrated the need for the command that came from the voice from heaven: “Hear Him.” The disciples were not even close to obeying these words! They listened to Jesus, but only when He spoke about things with which they agreed. They were happy and listened when He assured them they would see the Son of Man come in His kingdom before long. But they were deaf to all He said about the suffering that had to precede the glory. After a brief moment of sorrow, they forgot the cross. Instead, they started dreaming about the crown. This might be compared to a child who forgets the death of a parent and returns to his play. The Twelve thought, “How great will we all be when the kingdom comes!” Then they made an easy transition. They moved from these empty dreams about the glory they would all share together to arguing over who would have the greatest position in heaven. Pride and jealousy are very close to each other. “Will we all have equal positions in the kingdom, or will one of us be higher than the others? Does the fact that You selected Peter, James, and John to see the transfiguration mean they will have a higher position in the kingdom?” The three disciples probably hoped it did. The other disciples hoped not.
And so the argument began. It meant nothing to them that they would all be great together. The question of all questions was: “Who would be the greatest?” This is a difficult question to resolve when pride and presumption fight on one side, and jealousy and envy on the other.

After they arrived at Capernaum, Jesus quickly alluded to this argument. He used it as an opportunity to deliver a memorable message on humility and other similar topics. His purpose was to shape their temperaments and their wills. This task that He was now undertaking was the most difficult and the most important that He had yet tackled in connection with the training of the Twelve. It was the most difficult because nothing is harder than to train the human will to be loyal and to subject itself to universal principles; to bring people to recognize the demands of the law of love in interpersonal relationships; to remove pride, ambition, self-righteousness, jealousy, and envy from the hearts of people - even from those who are good. People may have made great progress in the art of prayer, in Christian liberty, in Christian service, may have proved themselves faithful in times of temptation, and capable scholars in Christian doctrine, but were still defective in their temperaments: self-willed, self-seeking, focusing on their own glory, even when they are seeking to glorify God. It was the most important task Jesus had to address with the Twelve, for what good could these men do as ministers in the kingdom as long as their main concern was about their own place in it? Men who were full of ambition and who were jealous of one another could only fight among themselves. They would bring the cause they sought to represent into contempt and breed confusion and all kinds of evil works around them. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus, from this time on, wholeheartedly devoted Himself to the task of casting the devil of self-will out of His disciples. In its place, He imparted to them His own spirit of meekness, humility, and love. He knew how critical this was. He had to be successful in this effort to “salt” (this was Jesus’ strong way of putting it; Mk. 9:49; cf. Lev. 2:13) the future Apostles. The whole tone and substance of His words before us reveal the depth of His concern. There is something that is especially significant in the opening part of His message: He uses a child, who is present in the house, as an object lesson to instruct them. So, out of the mouth of an infant and nursing baby comes the praise of a humble mind. Jesus is sitting in the middle of these ambitious disciples with the little one in His arms. This child becomes His text. This One who is the greatest in the kingdom (namely, Jesus) proceeds to talk about truths that destroy the spirit of pride. These same truths are sweeter than honey for all renewed souls.

The First Lesson He Taught
This is the first lesson He taught: To be great in the kingdom - to gain admission into it at all - it is necessary to become like a little child. “Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 18:3-4). The character trait of the child which the Lord used as a special point of comparison is its unpretentiousness. Early childhood does not
know anything about distinctions in rank and position. These are the offspring of human pride, the prizes that are coveted by human ambition. A king's child will play with the child of a beggar and not think anything about it. This same child unconsciously affirms how insignificant things are which adults argue over, compared with the things they all agree on. What children are naturally, Jesus requires His disciples to be voluntarily and deliberately. They are not to be pretentious and ambitious, like the grown children of the world. Rather, they are to be meek and humble. They are to disregard rank and all distinctions among people. They are not to think about their place in the kingdom. Instead, they are to yield themselves in all simplicity to the service of the King. In this sense, the greatest One in the kingdom, the King Himself, was the humblest of men. Jesus did not know anything of humility in the form of self-deprecation or self-humiliation that comes as a result of sin, because there was no defect or fault in His character. But He was the perfect example of the humility which consists in forgetting self. We cannot say that He thought little of Himself, but we can say that He did not think of Himself at all. He thought only of the Father's glory and of man's good. Personal exaltation had no place in His motives. He pulled away with holy abhorrence from all who were influenced by such motives.

There was no character that was more detestable in His eyes than that of the Pharisees. Their religion was a theatrical extravaganza, always assuming there would be spectators watching them. They loved the most important rooms at feasts and the primary seats in the synagogues. And they loved to be called “Rabbi, Rabbi” by the people. Contrast this with Jesus. He did not desire, nor did He receive, honor from men. He did not come to be served, but to serve. He, the greatest, humbled Himself in order to become the least - to be a child born in a stable and laid in a manger; to be a man of sorrows, not held in high esteem by the world; yes, and to be nailed to a cross. With this most wonderful self-humiliation, He showed His divine greatness.

The higher we rise in the kingdom, the more we will be like Jesus in His humbling of Himself. Being childlike, as He demonstrated, is an inevitable characteristic of those who are growing spiritually. The absence of this trait is the mark of moral immaturity. The little person, even when he has good intentions, is always thinking about consequences, always scheming. He is forever thinking about himself, his honor, dignity, reputation - even when he says he is doing good. He is always planning to glorify God in a way that will glorify himself at the same time. Though he is frequently above the love of personal gain, he is never without the feeling of self-importance. The great ones in the kingdom, however, throw themselves with abandon into the work to which they are called. They do not have the time, nor the inclination, to ask about the place they will obtain in this world or the next. They leave consequences to the great Governor and Lord. Forgetting about their own interest, they give their whole hearts to the work they have been called to do and are content to do a small job or a large one - whatever God tells them to do. They only want Him to be glorified.
This is the true road to a high place in the eternal kingdom. It should be observed that Jesus did not totally dismiss the question about who would be the greatest in the kingdom by negating the existence of distinctions there. He did not say on this occasion, nor on any other: “It is useless to ask who is the greatest in the kingdom; there is no such thing as a distinction between the greatest and the least there.” On the contrary, it is implied here. And Jesus asserts at other times that there is such a thing. According to the teaching of Christ, the eternal commonwealth has no place for jealous radicalism which demands that all be equal. There are levels of distinction there as well as in the kingdoms of this world. The difference between the divine kingdom and all others lies in the principles about how promotions are granted. Here, the proud and ambitious attain the positions of honor. There, the honors are given to the humble and to the ones who forget themselves. The ones on earth who were willing to be the least in humble love will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The Second Lesson He Taught

The next lesson Jesus taught His disciples was the responsibility that they had to receive the little ones. He did not mean children only, in the literal sense. He meant all that a child represents - the weak, the insignificant, the helpless. First, the child whom He held in His arms served as a type of those who are humble in spirit. Next, he represented those who have humble positions and very little influence or importance. So Jesus presented the child to the disciples, in the literal sense, as an object for them to imitate. This little one, then, was commended to them as an object that needed to be treated well. They were to receive the little ones graciously and lovingly. They were to be careful not to offend them by being harsh, heartless, or demeaning. Jesus would receive every kindness done to them, as if it had been done to Him.

This transition of thought - from being like a child to receiving childhood and all that it represents, including its weaknesses - was perfectly natural. There is a close relationship between the selfish struggle to be great and actively treating the little ones well. Harshness and contemptuousness are vices that cannot be separated from an ambitious spirit. An ambitious man is not necessarily cruel in his disposition nor capable of entertaining heartless plans. When the demon that possesses him is quiet, the idea of hurting a child, or anything that a child represents, may seem to be revolting. He might resent being accused of any such plan. It would even be an insult to him if you suggested that he harbored it in his heart. “Is your servant a dog?” an indignant Hazael asked Elisha. His question came after the prophet described to him what he would do in the future. He told him he would set the strongholds of Israel on fire, kill their young men with the sword, dash their children to the ground, and rip up their pregnant women. When Elisha said these things, Hazael expressed sincere horror over these crimes. Yet, he was guilty of them all. The prophet had correctly sized up his character. And in the light of what he could see, he predicted his future career of ghastly wickedness. He saw that he was ambitious. The rest fol-
allowed as a matter of course. Hazael would first put the king of Syria, his master, to death after inquiring about his recovery. Then, once he was on the throne, the same ambition that made him a murderer would move him to plan other conquests. In doing so, he would perpetrate all kinds of torture.

Crimes of ambition, and the sorrows that have filled the earth because of them, are common. Aware of this fact, Jesus, who could see the trouble that had already happened and the trouble still to come from those who crave positions and power, said, “Woe to the world because of offenses!” Woe indeed! But not only to those who suffer wrongs. The greater woe is reserved for those who commit the wrongs. So Jesus taught His disciples, adding, “But woe to that man by whom the offense comes!” He did not leave the people who heard Him in the dark as to the kind of doom the offender would face. In words that came from His lips like a flame of righteous indignation at the very thought of the wrongs that were inflicted on the weak and helpless, He said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt. 18:6). “It would be better for him” - or, it suits him; it is what he deserves. It is implied (not explicitly stated) that it is what he will get when divine revenge prevails. The millstone is not just a figure of speech. It is an appropriate symbol for the ultimate destruction of the proud. The one who rises to the highest position, regardless of the injuries he may inflict on little ones, will be cast down. He will not just sink to the earth, but to the lowest depths of the ocean, to the very abyss of hell. A heavy weight of curses hanging on his neck will cause him to sink, and they will keep him down. He will rise no more. “They sank like lead in the mighty waters!” (Ex. 15:10, ESV).

This is the awful doom of selfish ambition. It would be wise for the proud to be afraid and to anticipate God’s judgment by judging themselves. Jesus counseled His disciples to do this. He repeated a stern warning He had spoken once before in the Sermon on the Mount. It had to do with cutting off a member of the body that had offended the whole (Mt. 18:8-9; see also Mt. 5:29-30). At first, that saying seems irrelevant to what is happening here, because the subject matter at hand is about offenses against others, not offenses against one’s self. But its relevancy becomes evident when we consider that all offenses committed against a brother are offenses against ourselves. This is the very point Christ wants to impress on His disciples. He wants them to understand that it is in their best interest that everything be done to avoid offending the little ones. The great Teacher says in effect, “Rather than harm one of these, by using your hand, foot, eye, or tongue, you had better consider self-mutilation instead. For the one who sins against even the least in the kingdom, sins also against his own soul.”
A Third Lesson

Jesus taught the disciples one more thing while He held the child in His arms: Those who injured or despised little ones were entirely out of harmony with the mind of heaven. He said, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones.” Then He proceeded to enforce the warning by lifting the curtain and showing them a brief glimpse of the very celestial kingdom in which they were all longing to have prominence. “Look, there! See those angels standing before the throne of God? These are ministering spirits to the little ones! And look, here I am, the Son of God. I have come all the way from heaven to save them! And look - look how the face of the Father in heaven smiles on the angels and on Me because we take such loving interest in them!” (Mt. 18:10-14). What an eloquent argument! What a powerful appeal! The general drift is this: “The inhabitants of heaven are loving and humble. You are selfish and proud. What hope can you muster for gaining admission into heaven, where the spirit is so different from the one that moves you? Are you not ashamed of yourselves when you witness this glaring contrast between the humility of the angelic beings and the pride and pretensions of mere men? From now until the day you die, get rid of empty, ambitious thoughts. Let the meek and gentle spirit of heaven have possession of your hearts.”

In this beautiful picture of heaven, one thing is especially worth mentioning: Jesus makes reference to His work as the Savior of the lost. He turns it into an argument which was designed to enforce care for the little ones (Mt. 18:11). The argument is not irrelevant. It is an argument à fortiori (“used to express a conclusion for which there is stronger evidence than for one previously accepted; with stronger reason, even more conclusively, even more so;” *Oxford English Dictionary*). If the Son of Man provided care for the lost, the humble, and for those who were morally bankrupt, how much more will He care for those who are simply little! It takes a greater effort for love to seek the salvation of the wicked than to give it to the weak. He, who did one, will certainly not fail to do the other. By referring to His love as the Savior of those who are sinful, as presented in the parable of the good shepherd going after the straying sheep, Jesus further helped his disciples focus on the greatest example of humility. His love demonstrates not only that there was no pride of greatness in the Son of Man, but also no pride of holiness. He could not only lower Himself for people who were humble but could even become the brother of those who were vile. He was one with them in sympathy and situation in life, that they might become one with Him in privilege and character. Once more, by making reference to His own love as the Savior, Jesus pointed out to His disciples the real source of His love which cared for the weak and did not hate the little. No one who appreciated His love, in the right way, could deliberately offend or heartlessly condemn any brother who had a place in the heart of the Savior - no matter how insignificant the person was. The love of the Son of Man, in the eyes of all true disciples, surrounds the meanest and the vilest in the human race with a halo of sacredness.
Section 2 - Church Discipline

Matt. 18:15-20

Jesus had issued an appropriate warning to those listening to Him about offending the little ones. Then He proceeded to tell them how to act when they were not the ones who were offending others, but the ones who were being offended. In this part of His message, He was looking to the future rather than the present. Jesus was reflecting about the coming time when the kingdom - that is, the church - would be in actual existence as an organized community. The Twelve would be exercising authority as Apostles. So He gave directions for exercising discipline for the purity and well-being of the Christian community (Mt. 18:15-17). He granted to the Twelve as a group what He had already granted to Peter alone - the power to bind and loose. This meant they had the power to impose and remove church censures (vs. 18). He also encouraged them by making a promise - the promise of His own spiritual presence. In addition, He reassured them that they would prevail with His heavenly Father in prayer when they came together in His name and agreed on the things they were asking Him (vss. 19-20). His ultimate goal was to insure beforehand that the community to be called by His name would truly be a holy, loving, and united fellowship.

The rules that He laid down were to guide the Apostles in dealing with offenders. They were simple and plain. However, they have been greatly debated among religious leaders who are more interested in advocating the different theories of church government. Nothing will be said about these ecclesiastical arguments here. Nor do we think it is necessary to comment on our Lord’s words, except for a sentence to explain the phrase used by Him to describe excommunication: “Let him” (that is, the unrepentant brother who is about to be cast out of the church) “be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.” Without a doubt, these words were quite clear at the time they were spoken. But they are not so clear now. Yet their meaning, for the most part, is sufficiently plain. Here is the idea: The offender who remains unrepentant is not to have religious fellowship with the one he offended, nor with anyone in the church. In addition, he is to have as little social fellowship as possible. The religious aspect of excommunication is stated in the expression “as a Gentile,” and the social side of it is expressed in the second clause of the sentence, “and a tax-gatherer.” Gentiles were excluded from the temple and had no part in Jewish religious ceremonies. Tax-gatherers were not excluded from the temple, as far as we
know, but they were regarded as social outcasts by all Jews concerned with patriotism and religious strictness. Their dislike of the whole class of people could not be justified, nor do we approve of it here. Jesus simply refers to it as a matter of fact. He conveniently and clearly conveyed what He meant. In essence, He was saying to them, “Treat the unrepentant offender in the same way that the Jews, by law, treat the non-Jews, as people with whom you are not to have religious fellowship. And treat this unrepentant offender in the same way that the tax-gatherers are treated by the Pharisees, who have such deep-seated prejudice against them, as people who are to be excluded from all but the unavoidable socializing.”

We may not understand all of the details that are to be attached to the rules about managing discipline. But there can be no doubt at all about the fact that the loving Holy Spirit permeates the rules.

The spirit of love appears in Jesus’ conception of the church and is foundational to these rules about discipline. The church is viewed as a body of people in which the concern of one is the concern of all, and *vice versa*. Therefore, Jesus is not specific about the type of offenses He has in mind. They could be private and personal ones, or ones that are scandalous. The latter are those which are committed against the church as a whole. It was not necessary for Him to explain the various types of offenses, because the distinction between personal and scandalous sins, for the most part, has ceased to exist. An offense against the conscience of the whole community is an offense against each individual member, because he is jealous for the honor of the whole body of believers. On the other hand, an offense, which at first is private and personal, becomes one in which all are concerned when the offended party fails to bring his brother to confession and reconciliation. When two Christians remain estranged, it will be regarded, in a church that has the mind of Christ, as a scandal which cannot be tolerated. This kind of situation threatens to cause deadly harm to the spiritual life of everyone involved.

**The Order For Proceeding**

The *order* for proceeding in discipline cases is compatible with the spirit of love. This is clear from the directions given by Jesus. First, the offended party is directed to deal with the offending brother in strict privacy. Then, after this has been tried and has failed, third parties are to be brought in as witnesses. They are to assist in the work of reconciliation. Finally, and only as a last resort, the problem is to be made public and brought before the whole church. This procedure obviously shows consideration for the offender: (1) It makes confession as easy as possible for him; (2) it spares him the shame of exposure; (3) it is a method which cannot be worked out without pure and holy motives on the part of the one who is seeking to rectify the situation; (4) it does not leave any room for reckless conversations among those who love scandals. These are people who love to divulge bad news and speak to everyone about a fellow-believer’s faults.
rather than speaking directly to him; (5) it puts a bridle on resentment by forcing the offended party to be patient in dealing with his brother or sister before it gets to the point where they are totally estranged. When that happens, anger immediately surfaces; (6) the procedure also gives no encouragement to those who are nosy and over-zealous - those who are like busybodies, always trying to dig up offenses. Their way is not to start with the offender and then go to the church. Rather, they go directly to the church with serious charges, usually based on hearsay. More than likely, they obtained the information in a devious way.

It was characteristic of the loving spirit of Jesus, the Head of the church, that He was horrified at the possibility that anyone who was a believer could become like a Gentile or tax-collector to other believers. He wanted His disciples to meditate on this. This was apparent from Christ's insistence that everything should be done to avoid a catastrophe. In this respect, His mind was so unlike that of the world. With perfect composure, the world could allow vast multitudes of people to be what Gentiles were to Jews and what tax-gatherers were to Pharisees - people who were excluded from communion! Can't we say that there are many in the church today who do not have the mind of Jesus in this matter? They treat Christians who are together in the same fellowship with total indifference and have practiced this evil so long that they consider it to be natural and right - and they have no regrets about it!

Such heartless indifference demonstrates a different standard for the church than that which was cherished by its Founder. There are people who do not think that fellowship in a church imposes any obligation to love their Christian brothers and sisters. Consciously or unconsciously, they think of the church as if it were a hotel, where all kinds of people meet for a brief time, sit down together at the same table, and then leave, not knowing nor caring anything about each other. In truth, the church is a family, whose members are all believers who are constrained to passionately love one another with a pure heart. Of course, this hotel theory leads to the logical conclusion that discipline must not be practiced. For, strange as the idea may seem to many, the law of love is the basis of church discipline. It is because I am obligated to receive every member of the church as a fellow believer that I not only have the privilege, but also the responsibility, of being genuinely concerned about his behavior. If a Christian friend says to me, “You must love me with all of your heart,” I am obligated to reply, “I acknowledge the obligation theoretically, but I demand that you be the kind of person that I can love as a Christian, however weak and imperfect you may be. I feel that it is both a privilege and a responsibility to do all I can to make you worthy of this kind of love. I will seek to do this by dealing with you in a straightforward manner concerning your offenses. I am willing to love you, but I cannot, I dare not, condone your sins. If you refuse to repent of them and virtually require me to commit the same sins by having me pretend they don't exist, then our fellowship must come to an end, and I am free from my obligations.” The people who hold to the hotel theory of church fellowship are absolute
strangers to such language and thinking. They deny the obligation to love their brothers and sisters and, at the same time, renounce the right to insist that it is absolutely necessary that fellow believers have Christian virtue as the basis of having church membership. These people refuse to be bothered about the behavior of any member, unless it somehow affects them personally. They allow everyone to think and act as they please - whether they are atheists or believers, sons of God or sons of Satan; it is all the same to them.

**Strictness and Love**

In these instructions by our Lord, there is a place for holy strictness as well as for tender, considerate love. Jesus solemnly gives approval to excommunicate an offender who is not repentant. With the tone of a judge who is pronouncing a sentence of death, Jesus says, “...let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (Mt. 18:17). Then, in order to ensure that the church censures are righteously carried out and invested with all seriousness and authority, He declares that they carry eternal consequences with them. He adds in His most emphatic way the awful words (awful both to the sinner who is cast out and to those who are responsible for his ejection), “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Mt. 18:18). On the one hand, these words may be considered as a caution to church leaders so they will be careful how they use such tremendous power. But they also clearly demonstrate that Christ desired His church on earth to resemble, as closely as possible, the church in heaven. Her membership should be holy, rather than a mixed congregation of righteous and unrighteous people, believers and atheists, Christians and non-Christians. So, in order to achieve these purposes for His church, He committed the power of the keys to those who bear office in His house. He authorized them to deliver the proud, stubborn sinner, who refuses to be corrected, over to Satan’s bondage and to appease the injured consciences of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Such sternness seems to be void of compassion, at least from all outward appearances. However, it really is merciful to all parties. It is merciful to the faithful members of the church, because it removes a diseased limb whose presence threatens the life of the whole body. Scandalous, open sin cannot be tolerated in any organization without the people becoming demoralized, especially in the church, which is an organization whose very reason for existence is the cultivation of Christian virtue. The seemingly uncompassionate sternness is also merciful toward the unfaithful who are the originators of the sin. To keep scandalous offenders inside the communion of the church is to do your best to damn their souls and to exclude them ultimately from heaven. On the other hand, it could be that by delivering them over to Satan, they would receive a foretaste of hell now so that they might not go to hell forever. This should be our hope. It was out of this hope that Paul insisted on the excommunication of the person who committed incest in the Corinthian church. By admonishing him for committing such a sin, “his spirit may be saved in
the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Cor. 5:5). It is this hope that comforts those who have the unpleasant task of enforcing church censures. It is a painful responsibility to carry out. But they can cast out evil-doers from the communion of Christians with less hesitation if they know that the ones who are excommunicated - the tax-gatherers and sinners - are nearer the kingdom of God than they were as church members. They will also be comforted by the fact that they are still allowed to pursue the very best for the ungodly, just as Christ sought what was good for all the outcasts in His day. It is in their power to pray for them and to preach to them as they stand in the outer court of the Gentiles. Yet, as the ungodly stand there, they may not put into their unholy hands the symbols of the Savior’s body and blood.

These considerations should help those who are sincerely concerned for the spiritual character of the church and for the well-being of individual souls. How? By encouraging them to remove many from the rolls of the church. There is no doubt that if church discipline were used efficiently and with strictness as Christ instructed us, reductions in the church rolls would take place on an extensive scale. It is true that the purging process could be taken to excess, thereby hurting people. Tares might be mistaken for wheat; and wheat, for tares. The church might be turned into a society of Pharisees, thanking God that they were not as other men, or as poor tax-gatherers who stood on the outside listening and praying, but not as members. Those who do not partake of communion might be unworthy. But there might also be many timid people who do not dare come to the table. Like the tax-gatherer in the parable, they could only stand off in the distance crying out, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” These are the ones who are justified; not the others. A system which tends to bring about these pharisaical results is one extreme to be avoided. But there is another extreme which is even more deadly and which also needs to be avoided. It is being carelessly lax. It allows sheep and goats to be gathered together into one fold. The goats are being encouraged to think of themselves as sheep and are deprived of being spoken to plainly as “unconverted sinners.”

**Multiplying Members**

This unnatural mixture of the godly with the godless is too common a practice in these days. We do not have to look very far to find the reason. It is not that the leadership is indifferent to morality, for that is not generally a characteristic of the church in our time. *It is the desire to multiply members.* The various religious bodies value members more than morality or high Christian virtue. They fear that if discipline is used, one or two names may be lost from their church rolls. There is some basis for this fear. Fugitives who run from discipline can always be sure that someone will open a door of welcome to them. This is one of the many curses that has fallen upon us by that greatest scandal of all time: religious divisions. Someone who has become, or is in danger of becoming, as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer to one church body, has a good chance of becoming a saint or an angel in another. Churches that compete with one another do not support each other.
One looses and another binds. In doing this, they make all spiritual sentences null and void, both in earth and heaven. They rob religion of all dignity and authority. Those who are morally unrestrained pray that the divisions of the church may last. While they continue, these people do well! However, it was different for them in the days when the church was universal and one. Those were the days when sinners who repented worked their way, slowly over the years, from the locus lugentium (outer portico; the place of the mourners or “weepers” until their heavy penance was over) outside the sanctuary through the locus audientium (inner portico; for all the unbaptized; for hearers, Jews, and pagans who could hear preaching and the reading of the Scriptures; they had to withdraw before the administration of the Holy Supper) and the locus substratorum (the upper place of the narthex for the kneelers who might participate in the prayers after the sermon) to the locus fidelium (the place of the faithful). It was a painful way to learn what an evil and bitter thing it is to depart from the living God.

The promise that is made to those who agree in prayer (Mt. 18:19-20) comes at an appropriate time. It is given in a message delivered to disciples who had been arguing over who would be the greatest. In this regard, the promise means, “As long as you remain divided by conflict and jealousy, you will be powerless with people and with God; you will also be unable as church leaders to carry out discipline and to bring your requests before the throne of grace in prayer. But if you will be united in your minds and in your hearts, you will have power with God and will succeed. My Father will grant your requests, and I myself will be in your midst.”

It is not necessary to assume that there is a close relationship between this promise and the subject that Jesus had just been addressing. In this familiar message, a transition is made from one topic to another in an easy conversational manner. He is careful to make sure that all that is said is relevant to the subject being discussed. The meeting is supposed to be convened in Christ’s name. Therefore, it does not need to consist of church officers assembling for the purpose of conducting church business. It can be a meeting held in a church or in a home solely for the purpose of worship. The promise holds for all people, all topics of prayer, all places, and all times. It is for all truly Christian gatherings, great and small.

The promise holds for the smallest number that can make it to the meeting - even for two or three. What is stressed here, with this small number, is the importance of Christians agreeing with one another. Jesus tells us that two who agree are better and stronger than twelve or a thousand who are divided by hatred and ambition. Cyprianus said, “The Lord, when He would commend unanimity and peace to His disciples, said, ‘If two of you shall agree on earth,’ etc., to show that most is granted not to the multitude, but to the concord of the suppliants.” An obvious inference is made, that if even two agree and are therefore strong, then a large group of people who are really united in their minds would be proportionately stronger. For we must
not think that God has any *partiality* for a little meeting, or that there is any virtue in a small number. Little, narrow sects are prone to fall into this trap. They imagine that Christ was thinking about them when He said two or three. They believe the kind of agreement Jesus desired was fanciful and whimsical. Ridiculous caricature of the Lord’s meaning! The agreement He requires of His disciples is not that everyone’s opinions are unanimous. Rather, He wants their minds and hearts to agree on the goals they are striving to reach. He also desires that all parties be unselfish in their commitment to these purposes. When He spoke of two or three, He did not contemplate that it would be desirable for the body of His church to be split into innumerable fragments because people who were so opinionated. Each fragment tends to believe that they will receive His presence and blessing in proportion to its smallness. He did not want His church to consist of a collection of clubs which do not have communion with each other, any more than He desired it to be a monster hotel which receives and boards all those who come without any questions being asked. He did not make the promise we are now considering to stimulate sectarianism. Rather, He wanted to encourage people to cultivate virtues which have always been too rare on earth - brotherly kindness, meekness, and love. The thing He values, in a word, is not the shortage of numbers, due to the lack of love. He values, instead, the union of hearts in humble love among the greatest number possible.
A lesson on forgiveness appropriately ended the solemn message on humility. It had been delivered in the presence of Jesus’ disciples who seemed to be fond of arguing. The connection between the beginning and the ending of His sermon is very real, but it is not seen at first glance. The thing that is condemned here is a vindictive spirit. It is one of the sins that is nurtured by an ambitious spirit. An ambitious person is sure to receive many offenses, either real or imaginary. He is easily offended and slow to forgive or forget a wrong that is done to him. Forgiving injuries is not part of his way of life. He is far more comfortable when he seizes his debtor by the throat and demands payment with the fierceness of thug.

The concluding part of Jesus’ message came about because Peter, usually the spokesman for the Twelve, had asked Him a question: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Mt. 18:21). We do not know what ideas Peter had in his mind when he asked the question. Perhaps he did not even know himself. The thoughts of the mind are often mysterious and, in impulsive, unpredictable personalities, they are also prone to be sudden. Thoughts shoot into consciousness like meteors into the upper atmosphere. They are suddenly conceived and abruptly spoken with physical gestures accompanying them. This gives some indication of the force with which they have taken possession of the soul. Let us leave it this way: Peter’s question, no matter how it came to his mind, was relevant to the subject at hand. It was closely related, in a spiritual way, to all that Jesus had said concerning humility and giving and receiving offenses. It showed, on Peter’s part, an intelligent attention to the words of his Master. It also demonstrated that he was conscientious about making his behavior conform to the heavenly precepts by which, for the moment, he felt subdued and softened.

Furthermore, the question asked by Peter revealed a strange mixture of childlikeness and childishness. He was adamant about the obligation he had to forgive others. For him to think about practicing the duty as often as seven times toward the same offender revealed that he was a true child of the kingdom. Only those who have minds full of grace are disposed to do that. It is very easy to understand how he thought that pardon, if it was granted just so many times, would exhaust his obligation and amount to something that was big-hearted and divine. Poor Peter. In
his genuine attempt to be so generous, he was like a child, standing on tiptoe to make himself as
tall as his father or climbing to the top of a hill in order to get near the sky.

Jesus’ reply to His honest but unrefined disciple was commendable. It was intended to deal with
Peter’s pride and to make him feel that the breadth of his charity was puny and insignificant.
Echoing the thought of the prophet Isaiah (Is. 55:7), Jesus’ response tells those who desire to be
like God that they must multiply their pardons: “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up
to seventy times seven” (Mt. 18:22). It is unfortunate that this kind of love is so rare! Christ’s
thoughts are not man’s thoughts, neither are His ways common among mankind. As the heav-
ens are higher than the earth, so are His thoughts and ways higher than those currently in vogue
in this world (Is. 55:8-9). Many are reluctant to forgive a brother an unlimited number of times
when he confesses his faults. They will not even forgive one time. Instead, they act in such a way
that we can recognize them in the picture created for us in the parable of the unmerciful servant.

In this parable, where the smallest detail is full of instruction, three things are especially note-
worthy: (1) the contrast between the two debts; (2) the contrast between the two creditors; and
(3) the doom pronounced on those who refuse to forgive the small debt owed to them after they
were forgiven the large debt owed by them.

The Two Debts
The two debts amount to 10,000 talents and 100 denarii. The proportion is approximately a mil-
lion to one. The enormous disparity is intended to represent the difference between the short-
comings of all people toward God and those which may be charged to a fellow human being.
This representation is acknowledged to be correct by all those who know human nature and
their own hearts. Those who recognize the truth of this parable are helped greatly to be gentle
and patient toward those who offend them. Yet the parable seems to be in error in this respect:
It makes the unmerciful servant accountable for a huge debt that seems impossible for anyone
to run up. Who has ever heard of an individual debt amounting to millions of dollars or British
pounds? The difficulty is answered by suggesting that the debtor is a person of high rank, like
one of the princes whom Darius set over the kingdom of Persia, or a provincial governor of the
Roman Empire. Such an official could make himself liable very quickly for the huge sum men-
tioned here simply by keeping the revenues of his province as they passed through his hands
instead of placing them in the royal treasury.

Jesus had in mind some such unscrupulous minister of state who was guilty of the crime of
embezzlement. This seems to be certain when we remember what the occasion was for His
message at the end of this parable. The disciples had argued among themselves about who would
be greatest in the kingdom. Each one of them was ambitious and wanted to obtain a place of
distinction. So, their Master allows them to look at the conduct of someone who is great. Yet this man is not concerned about faithfully doing his job. Rather, he is only interested in his own personal benefit. This is a paraphrase of what Jesus said to them: “Look what men do who long to be great! They rob their king of his revenue, abuse the opportunities that are theirs because of their position, and make themselves rich. And while they create scandals by neglecting their own obligations, it is in their character to demand an exact payment from any poor soul who may have innocently become their debtor - not by fraud, but by misfortune.”

Understood in this way, the parable faithfully represents the guilt and criminality of those who are motivated by the spirit of pride. They deliberately make self-advancement their primary goal. This class of people is by no means small. These kinds of people are great sinners. They do not only come short of the glory of God, which is the true chief end of man, but they deliberately rob the Lord of that which is owed Him. Thereby, they call into question His sovereignty and deny their accountability to Him for their actions. By the spirit which motivates them, they say every moment of their lives, “Who is Lord over us?” It is impossible to over-estimate the magnitude of their guilt.

The Two Creditors
The contrast between the two creditors is no less striking than the one between the two debts. The king forgives the enormous debt of his governor who has no principles. He does so by receiving a simple promise to pay. The forgiven governor relentlessly demands that the poor, unfortunate subject pay the petty debt of a hundred denarii [one six-hundred thousandth (1/600,000) part of the cancelled sum]. He closes his ears to his petition to delay the payment, though he himself had successfully presented the same petition to his sovereign lord. Here, also, the parable seems to be presented in too strong of a way. The great creditor seems lenient to excess. For surely the kind of crime the governor had been guilty of ought not to go unpunished. And surely it would have been wise for him not to take his promise of future payment too seriously, since it was made by a man who had already squandered such a large sum. He had no boundaries, was extravagant and, therefore, had nothing with which to pay! This great debtor, who was also a small creditor, seems incredibly inhuman. For even the meanest and most greedy scoundrel would be ashamed to be involved in collecting such a small amount of money. It is difficult to believe that he would seize the poor fellow by the throat, drag him into prison, and force him to lie there until he paid up.

The illustration is, without a doubt, extreme. Yet in both parts of the parable, it aligns with truth. God does deal with His debtors, as the king dealt with the governor. He is slow to anger, displays great kindness, and turns from the severe justice He has threatened. He gives people time to repent. In His providence, He delays in bringing judgment by accepting promises to change,
although He knows full well that they will be broken, and that those who made them will keep on sinning as before. This is the way He dealt with Pharaoh, with Israel, and with Nineveh. He deals the same way with all whom He calls to account by causing them to feel remorse in their consciences, by visiting them with sickness, or by having them be apprehensive about death. When they are passing through a repentant mood, they may exclaim, “Lord, have patience with me, and I will repay You all.” He grants their petition, knowing that when the danger or the repentant mood is over, the promise they made that they would change would be totally forgotten. Truly it was written in the ancient past, “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (Ps. 103:10).

The part played by the unmerciful servant is not entirely without precedent, no matter how infamous and inhuman he may be. However, its comparative rarity is implied in that part of the parable which represents the fellow-servants as shocked and grieved at his behavior. They reported him to their Master. It would not be hard to find originals of this dark picture, even among those who profess the Christian religion. They believe in the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus and hope to experience all the benefits of divine mercy for His sake. In fact, these are precisely the people who, according to the parable, are supposed to commit the crime of unmercifulness. The demanding creditor meets his debtor just as he comes out of the presence of the king after craving and receiving forgiveness for his own debt. This feature in the story immediately can be applied specially to believers in the gospel. It points out the enormity of their guilt. All such people, if not really forgiven, at least consciously live under a reign of grace in which God is assuming the attitude of one who desires all to be reconciled to Himself. And for that purpose, He proclaims a gracious pardon to all who will receive it. In people who are in this sort of situation, their spirit of unmercifulness is peculiarly offensive. It is even shameful in an unbeliever, because the light of nature teaches that it is the responsibility of everyone to be merciful. So this inhuman harshness, as portrayed here in a Christian, is absolutely abominable. Think about it! He goes out from the presence of the King of grace. He rises up after examining the blessed gospel which tells of One who received publicans and sinners, even the chief of sinners. Then, he walks out of the house of prayer where the precious gospel is proclaimed - even from the communion table which commemorates the love that moved the Son of God to pay the debt for sinners. He meets another person who had done some small wrong to him, seizes him by the throat, and aggressively demands payment. If he does not pay, he will be thrown in prison or worse. May the most gracious Lord not righteously say to this person, “O you wicked servant! I forgave you for all of that debt, because you came to me. Should you not also have compassion on your fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on you?” What can this scoundrel expect since he showed no mercy? Judgment - to be delivered over to the tormentors in order to be imprisoned and tortured without hope of release until he has paid his debt in full.
Judgment Pronounced

In the closing sentences of His discourse, Jesus solemnly assured His disciples that this very doom awaited all who harbor an unforgiving spirit, even if they themselves were the guilty parties. “So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (Mt. 18:35). These are stern words which lay down a rule that is applicable to everyone - no one is exempt, not even people who are favored. If partiality were allowed, people like the Twelve would certainly receive the benefit of it. But the law is spelled out with direct, emphatic reference to them, as if to say that in this matter there is no partiality. As harsh as the law might seem, Jesus is careful to indicate His gracious approval of its being enforced with rigorous justice. For that purpose, He calls God the Judge by the endearing name, “My heavenly Father.” It is as if He is saying, “The great God and King does not seem to Me to be overly stern in decreeing such penalties against the unforgiving. I, the merciful, tender-hearted Son of Man thoroughly sympathize with such judicial severity. I should solemnly say “Amen” to that doom pronounced, even against you if you behaved in a way that deserved it. Do not think that because you are my chosen companions that violations of the law of love by you will be overlooked. On the contrary, because you are great ones in the kingdom, as far as privilege goes, you will be expected to comply with its fundamental laws. Non-compliance will be most severely punished. To whom much is given, much will be required. See to it, then, that you forgive every person of their trespasses - really forgive, not just pretend to forgive. Forgive from your very hearts.” Jesus educated His disciples with severe plainness in His speech so they could truly be great in His kingdom - great, not in pride, pretension, and presumption, but in loyal obedience to the commands of their King, especially to this law of forgiveness. He insisted on forgiveness earnestly and frequently (Mt. 6:14-15). We cannot help but say here, at the close of our exposition of the discourse on humility, that if the Apostles did not rise above their small passions in the days to come, it was not the fault of their Master in neglecting their training. “With holy earnestness” - to quote the language of a German scholar (Theodor Keim, 1825-1878) - “springing equally out of concern for the new community, zeal for the cause of God and of people; more precisely, for the essential truths of the new religion of divine grace and of the brotherhood of mankind, Jesus sought to ward off the dark shadow of petty, ungodly feelings which He saw creeping stealthily into the circle of His disciples, and under whose still more extensive and harmful influence, after His departure, He could not but be apprehensive.” We cannot believe that all this earnestness had been manifested in vain. In the end, the disciples were finally thoroughly seasoned with salt (Mk. 9:49-50).
Section 4 - The Temple Tax: An Illustration of the Sermon
Matt. 17:24-27
This story is a nut with a dry, hard shell, but with a very sweet kernel. Readers who only skim the surface of the account may not see anything more than an interesting anecdote about a fish with a piece of money in its mouth which shows up at just the right time in order for a tax to be paid. They may think the story was preserved by Matthew (the only Gospel writer to do so), not because of its genuine importance, but simply because, as a former tax-collector, he found the story personally intriguing. Devout readers might be secretly shocked by the miracle, though they would probably be unwilling to admit it. To them it may seem like a departure from the rule which Jesus observed: that He would not use His divine power to help Himself. Their shock has to do with the outward appearance of the miracle, with it seeming like a game on His part. Others might sense a lighter side to the miracle - that it is humorous because it doesn't seem right for Jesus to be put in this position; it seems incongruous. It reminds us of the bizarre figures in the old cathedrals. As the builders carved these strange sculptures, they took pleasure in showing off their skill and entertaining themselves - another incongruity.

As we crack the shell of the story, we discover the kernel within. It is a very moving demonstration of Jesus being humiliated and of the Son of Man humbling Himself. He is exposed to the insult of being pressed to pay His temple dues but is so oppressed with poverty that He cannot pay the amount that was demanded, even though it was only two drachmas (equivalent to two days' wages). Nonetheless, He neither pleads poverty nor does He insist on an exemption because He believes it is His privilege. Rather, He quietly fulfills the claims of the collectors in a manner which was uniquely meek and peaceable, even if it seems to us to be an unusual way of doing so.

Truthfully, this incident provides an admirable illustration of the doctrine which Jesus taught in His discourse on humility. As the greatest in the kingdom, He is an example of the humility that He imparted to His disciples. He shows them, by His own example, their need to express holy and loving concern to avoid giving offense, not only to Christians, but even to those who are unbelievers. He does not stand on His dignity as the Son of God, even though the voice from heaven which was heard on the holy mountain still rings in His ears. Instead, He consents to be treated as a subject or a stranger. He desires to live peacefully with men whose ways He does not
love, and who do not bring Him goodwill. He does this by complying with their wishes in all things that are lawful. In brief, we regard this interesting situation with the fish at Capernaum (with the Mount of Transfiguration in the distant background) as a real-life introduction to the sermon we have been studying. We think we are justified in taking this view of it for this reason: Even though the fish was caught before the sermon was delivered, it happened after the disciples argued about which one of them was the greatest. This provided Jesus with a text. The disciples had been arguing on their way home from the Mount of Transfiguration. The visit from the tax-collectors took place after they arrived in Capernaum. Of course, Jesus knew about the arguing at the time of the visit, though He had not yet openly acknowledged it. Is it assuming too much that His knowledge of what had been going on as they traveled influenced His actions in the situation with the taxes? Could it have led Him to make it the occasion for teaching by example the same lesson which He intended to give with words?

Jesus and the Law

This assumption is not unreasonable. In fact, we believe it is quite necessary in order to understand Christ’s conduct on this occasion. Those who leave out the part about the disciples arguing do not have the right perspective about the incident in Capernaum. Inevitably, they misunderstand what really happened. As a result, they are forced to think of Jesus as arguing seriously against paying the temple tax; that legally, they are not obligated to pay it; or, that this situation was outside the normal course of His humiliation as the Son of Man. But it was none of these things. The law of Moses ordained that every man above twenty years of age would pay one-half of a shekel as an atonement for his soul and to meet the expenses connected with the service of the tabernacle, which was rendered to God for the common benefit of all the Israelites. And Jesus, as a Jew, was just as much under the obligation to comply with this particular law as with any other. Neither was there any unusual insult - any kind or to any degree - involved in obeying the law. Without a doubt, it was a great affront and humiliation to the Son of God to be paying taxes for maintaining His own Father’s house! Everything that He said to Peter, as He pointed out the incongruity of the situation, was undistorted truth. But the discrepancy does not only confront us here. It runs through the totality of our Lord’s experience while He was on earth. His life was not at all like the analogy of kings’ sons. Even though he was a Son, He learned obedience; even though He was a Son, He did not come to be ministered to, but to minister; even though He was a Son, He became subject to the law - not only the moral law, but also the ceremonial. He was circumcised, took part in the temple worship, and attended the sacred feasts and offered sacrifices, even though these were only shadows of good things. However, He Himself was the substance. In Christ’s life, there were many indignities and incongruities. In fact, it was one great insult from the beginning to the end. So it was a small thing for Him to pay the insignificant, annual sum of two drachmas for the benefit of the temple! With wonderful patience, our Lord endured everything, so He could not possibly intend to stumble over so
small a matter. He did nothing to destroy the temple and put an end to legal worship before it was time. So He could not take part in the harsh policy of starving its officials, nor could He harbor resentment for having to pay the funds necessary to keep the sacred building in good repair. He might say openly what He thought about existing ecclesiastical abuses, but He would do no more than that.

The truth is that the words spoken by Jesus to Simon Peter were not intended to be an argument against paying the tax. Rather, they were meant to be an explanation of what was meant by His paying it and of the motive which guided Him in paying it. They were a lesson for Peter, and through him for the Twelve, on a subject in which they needed instruction. It was not a legal defense against the demands of the tax-collector. If it had not been for the argument the disciples had on the road, Jesus would probably have taken the quietest way for getting the tax paid. He would have done it as a matter of course and would not have made any remarks on the subject. He had already acted similarly on previous occasions, as Peter’s prompt, affirmative reply to the question from the collectors seems to imply. The disciple said “yes,” knowing full well what His Master had done in past years. Peter assumed that Jesus’ behavior would be the same now, as had been His habit. But in the present circumstances, Jesus did not think it would be appropriate to let His disciples regard His action concerning the tax simply as an everyday occurrence. He wanted them to understand and reflect on the moral meaning and the motive for His action for their own instruction and guidance.

He wanted them to understand: (1) that for Him to pay the temple dues was humiliating and incongruous. It could be compared to a king’s son paying a tax for the support of the palace and the royal household; (2) that it was not to be expected that He should pay, any more than it should be expected that He would become a man by leaving His royal position behind and assuming the rank of a peasant; (3) that this was an act of voluntary humiliation and consisted of one aspect of His whole life of humiliation to which He voluntarily submitted. It began with His birth and ended with His death and burial. He wanted His disciples to think about these things, hoping they would meditate on them so they could deal with their pride, pretension, and self-assertion. These attributes had risen to the surface in that insignificant argument over positions of importance. In effect, He said to them, “If I were like you, longing to receive honors and determined to assert my importance, I would stand on My dignity and arrogantly reply to these tax-collectors: ‘Why do you bother Me about temple dues? Do you not know who I am? I am the Christ, the Son of the living God. The temple is My Father’s house. And I, His Son, am free from all the obligations that servants have.’ But, carefully note, I do nothing of the kind. The honors heaped upon Me on the Mount of Transfiguration are fresh in my mind. I am conscious of who I am; I know from whence I have come; I know where I am going. With all of this abiding deep in My soul, I submit to be treated as a mere common Jew. I will allow My honors to
be postponed. I will not make any demands for recognition that is not voluntarily granted. The world does not know Me. And while it does not know Me, I am content that it does with Me, as it did with John, whatever it desires. If the rulers knew who I was, they would be ashamed to ask Me to give temple dues. But since they do not, I accept and bear all the wrongs that are the result of their ignorance.”

Jesus said all of this to His disciples by referring, first of all, to the basis by which a refusal to pay the tax might reasonably be defended. Then, after all was said and done, He would pay it. The way in which He would pay was also planned by Him in order to reinforce the lesson. He did not simply say to Simon, “Go and catch fish so we can sell them and pay off our creditors.” Jesus gave Peter directions as the Lord over nature to whom every creature on the land and in the sea were subject. All their movements were familiar to Him. Now He had been so humbled that He needed the services of a small fish. He drew on His omniscience to give these instructions to His disciple. In doing so, He did what He never had done before or would do again, namely, to perform a miracle for His own advantage. The exception, however, contained the same reason as the rule and, therefore, proved the rule. Jesus abstained from using His divine faculties for His own benefit, because He did not want to harm the integrity of His humiliation. His human life must be a real bona fide life of hardship, not made easier by the presence of the divine aspect of His personality. So what was the effect of His giving such lightning-fast directions to Peter from His divine knowledge? To harm the integrity of His humiliation? No. Rather, He wanted to make it glaringly noticeable. He was saying to Simon, and to us (if he and we had ears to hear), “Take note of who it is that pays this tax, and who it is that is reduced to such difficulties in or order to pay it! It is He who knows all the birds of the mountain and whatever passes through the paths of the sea!”

**Giving and Receiving Offenses**

Jesus also wanted to have His disciples fix their attention on another point, namely, the reason that led Him to adopt the policy of submission to what was in itself an affront. That reason was in order to avoid giving offense: “But, lest we give them offense” (Mt. 17:27a) Of course, this was not the only reason for His conduct in this case. There were other comprehensive reasons which were applicable to His whole experience of humiliation and, in particular, to this small incident. The sum of all the reasons would be the answer to the great question posed by Anselm: “Why did God become man?” We will not attempt to answer that question here. We will only confine ourselves to this remark: The reason Jesus gave to Peter for paying the temple dues was by no means the only one, or even the main one. But for the disciples’ sake, it was the reason He thought important to highlight at that moment. He was about to speak to them primarily on the subject of giving and receiving offenses. And He wanted them, especially Peter, to observe how very careful He Himself was not to offend. Jesus’ desire to avoid giving offense occupied a prominent place among His motives.
Christ’s declared reason for paying the tax tells us volumes about His humility and His love. The sign of His humility was that nothing was said about His being offended. He could have easily, and with good reason, taken the position that He had a right to be angry! “I am the Christ, the Son of God,” He could have said. “I have proven My claims with a thousand miracles in word and deed, yet they still willfully refuse to recognize Me. I am a poor, homeless wanderer and, even though they know this, they still demand the tax. It seems as if they would rather annoy and insult Me than get the money. And why do they collect these dues? They do it to support the religious establishment which is thoroughly corrupt, to repair a building which is doomed to destruction, to maintain a priesthood which is scandalously deficient in the essential virtues of integrity and truth, and whose very existence is a curse to the land. I cannot in good conscience pay this amount - not even a penny.”

The humble One did not have this attitude. Instead, He gave what was asked without complaining, holding a grudge, or striking out. His conduct offers a lesson for Christians of all ages, especially in our own. It teaches the children of the kingdom not to complain because the world does not recognize their status and dignity. The world did not know when He came, even God’s eternal Son. Is it surprising, then, if it does not recognize His younger brothers? The kingdom of heaven itself is not believed in, and its citizens should not be surprised when they do not get the respect they feel they deserve. The manifestation of the sons of God is one of the things for which Christians wait with hope. For the time being, they are not the children but the strangers. Instead of being exempt from burdens, they should expect oppression. They should be thankful when they are put on a level with other people and receive the benefit of a law of toleration.

The humility of Jesus was shown by His not taking offense. His love was manifested by His concern to avoid giving offense. He desired, if possible, to conciliate people who, for the most part, had treated Him all along as a heathen and a sinner. Before long, they would treat Him as a criminal - and He knew that all too well. How much the Son of Man acted like Himself! How thoroughly were His actions here in line with His whole conduct while He was on the earth! For what was His purpose in coming into the world? What was His constant work after He came, but to cancel offenses and to put an end to enmities - to reconcile sinful men to God and to each other? For these reasons He became flesh. For these reasons He was crucified. His earthly life was one great plan - a life of humble love.

“Lest we give them offense,” Jesus said. He used the plural to hint that He meant for His conduct to be imitated by the Twelve and by all of His followers. How happy the world would be if this were done! How many offenses could be prevented if the conciliatory spirit of the Lord controlled those who are called by His name! How many offenses could be healed if this spirit
were abundantly poured out on Christians of all denominations now! If this motive – “But, lest we give them offense” - loomed in everyone’s mind, what rifts could be healed, what unions might come! A national church - morally, if not legally - established in unity and peace, might be realized in Scotland (Note: Scotland was A.B. Bruce's homeland) in the present generation. Surely this is desirable! Let us wish for it; let us have a spirit which would tend to make it happen, if possible. Let us continue in hope, in spite of the increasing tendencies on all sides to give in to an opposite spirit.
Section 5 - The Interdicted Exorcist

Mark 9:38-41; Luke 9:49-50

The messages delivered by our Lord were not the kind we are used to hearing in a sermon today. He did not resort to one-way communication, nor did He speak on topics that were formally announced. For the most part, He used something that was similar to the Socratic dialogues in which He was the principal speaker. The disciples, then, contributed their part by asking Him questions, making remarks, or expressing their conscience on a matter. In the discourse on humility, two of the disciples - Peter and John - took part in the dialogue. Toward the end of the message, these two disciples asked a question about forgiving offenses. When this was done, the other disciple, John, shared an anecdote that came to his mind while his Master was teaching. Jesus had been talking about receiving little children in His name, and the truth He expressed in this teaching seemed to have some bearing on John’s story. So the facts that John brought to Jesus’ attention led Him to make some comments. These remarks give us an interesting illustration of how the doctrine He taught related to specific cases or questions. These comments, along with the incident they relate to, now call for our attention.

The story told by John went like this: On one occasion, he and his fellow-disciples found a man, whom they did not know, who was engaged in the work of casting out demons. They told him to stop. The reason? That though he used the name of Jesus in practicing exorcism, he did not follow or identify himself with them, the Twelve. We are not told when this happened. However, there is a high probability that the incident was similar to what happened on the Galilean mission. During that time, the disciples were separated from their Master and were busy healing the sick, casting out evil spirits, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom.

It should be noted that John does not remove himself from responsibility for the arrogant way they dealt with the man. Rather, he speaks as if the Twelve had acted unanimously in the situation. It may surprise some to find him, the Apostle of love, consenting to such an unloving act. But the surprise is based on superficial views of his character as well as ignorance of the laws of spiritual growth. John is not now what he will be. He differs from his future self as much as an orange tree in its second year of growth differs from the same orange tree in its third year of growth. The fruit of the Spirit will ultimately ripen in this disciple, producing something
very sweet and beautiful. In the meantime, it is green, bitter, and fit only to cause one's mouth to pucker. At present, he is committed to Jesus with his mind and is tender and intense in his attachment to Him. But he is also bigoted, intolerant, and ambitious. He has already played the part of a very important leader in the church by suppressing the exorcist who would not conform to his way of doing things. Before long, we will see him playing the role of a persecutor by proposing, with his brother, to call down fire from heaven to destroy the enemies of the Lord. And, at still another time, we will find him, his brother, and their mother engaged in an ambitious plot to make their place of distinction secure in the kingdom. This took place immediately after the Twelve had been arguing about it.

An External Test Only

By refusing to recognize the fellow-worker who performed the exorcism as a brother, however humble, the disciples were proceeding on very narrow and shaky grounds. The test they used was totally external. They did not even ask about what sort of man it was who was stopped from performing the exorcism. For them, it was sufficient that he was not one of them, as if all inside that charmed circle - Judas, for example - were good; and all outside, even Nicodemus, were utterly Christless! Two good things, on their own merits, could be said of the man they silenced. First, he was doing a good work; and, second, he seemed to have a very high regard for Jesus, for he cast out demons and did it in Jesus' name. Truthfully, these were not decisive marks of discipleship. It was possible that a man could practice exorcism for personal profit and use the name of Christ because it had proved to be a good name by which to practice exorcism. But the two good things about this man ought to have been taken into consideration before they stopped him. If one looks at the facts, it is probable that the exorcist who had been silenced was an honest and sincere man. His heart had probably been impressed by the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. In all likelihood, he desired to imitate their zeal in doing good. It was even possible that he was more than this. He could have been a man who possessed a higher spiritual endowment than the disciples who censored him. He might have been some local prophet who had not yet become well-known. How absurd, then, was that narrow-minded, outward test: “Because he was not following us!”

Here is an illustration of what this kind of judging does. It is about one little fact from the celebrated history of Sir Matthew Hale, who wrote Contemplations. Richard Baxter tells of this distinguished judge who retired from the judicial bench and lived in a certain part of the country (Great Britain). The good people who lived there did not have a favorable opinion of his religious character. They believed him to be a very moral man, but not converted. It was a serious conclusion to come to about another human being. It makes one curious about the basis for this kind of judgment. But we are told that the religious people around Acton believed the judge to be unconverted because he did not attend their private, weekly prayer meetings! It was the
old story of the Twelve and the exorcist retold in a Puritan setting. Baxter did not sympathize
with the harsh and unloving opinion of his less enlightened brothers. His thoughts breathed the
gentle, gracious, humble, loving spirit of Christian maturity. He wrote: “I that have heard and
read his serious expressions of the concerns of eternity, and seen his love to all good men,
and the blamelessness of his life, thought better of his piety than of mine own.”

**Mixed Motives**

In silencing the exorcist, the Twelve probably had mixed motives. One part of them was jealous;
the other part found them with sincere doubts and hesitations. We can only imagine that they
disliked the idea of anyone using Christ’s name but themselves. They desired a monopoly on the
power that was used in His name to cast out evil spirits. And they probably thought that it was
unlikely, if not impossible, that anyone who kept aloof from them could be sincerely devoted to
their Master.

As it pertains to their jealousy, their conduct toward the exorcist was based on the same moral
issue as their recent dispute about who should be the greatest. The same spirit of pride revealed
itself on both occasions. When they silenced the exorcist, they displayed the same kind of ar-
rogance as those who claim their church is the only true church of Christ. In the dispute that
the disciples had among themselves, they displayed false humility and played the game of be-
ing ambitious, self-seeking, church leaders who were fighting for seats of honor and power. In
the case of the exorcist, the Twelve said in effect, “We alone are the commissioned, authorized
agents of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In the later case, they said to each other, “We are all members
of the kingdom and servants of the King; but I deserve to have a higher place than you, even to
be a prince sitting on a throne.”

Let’s suppose, for a moment, that the intolerance of the Twelve was really caused by their honest
doubts about the exorcist. If so, it would be deserving of more respectful consideration. When
anyone *honestly* tells us something is a matter of personal conscience, they must always be seri-
ously listened to, even when the conscience is mistaken. We say “honestly” with emphasis. We
cannot forget that there is much that is considered right and proper that is not honest. Con-
science is often used as a disguise by proud, quarrelsome, self-willed men to promote their own
personal goals. Thomas Fuller said, “Pride is the greatest enemy of moderation. This makes men
fight for their own opinions so they can make them essential for everyone else. Proud men who
have deeply studied some additional point in theology will strive to make their findings neces-
sary for salvation. They do it to enhance the value of their own personal worth and their efforts.
And it must be essential in religion, because it is essential for their reputation.” These shrewd
remarks are true for more than doctrine. Opinionated, pragmatic people would love to make
everything in religion essential on which they have dogmatic positions. And if they could get
their own way, they would exclude from the church everyone who did not agree with them on
every minor point of belief and practice. But there is also such a thing as a person holding to right and proper convictions with honesty. It is more common than many imagine. There is a certain tendency that seems to be prevalent in the life of every sincere person who is young in the Lord. It is the tendency to demand that others hold their views (and not tolerate anything less) and to be severe in judging others. The conscience of a young disciple is like a fire made with green logs. It smokes first; then it burns with a clear blaze. A Christian whose conscience is in this state must be treated as we treat a dull fire: He must be tolerated until his conscience is cleared of the bitter, cloudy smoke, and it becomes a pure, pleasant, warm flame of zeal that has been tempered with love.

We believe the consciences of the Twelve were of the honest kind, because they were willing to be instructed. They told their Master what they had done so they could learn from Him - whether it was right or wrong. People whose conscience is a sham do not behave in this way.

**Jesus’ Counsel**

Jesus promptly communicated with the disciples who honestly wanted instruction. He presented a clear, definite judgment on the case and gave a reason for it. He said to John, “Do not hinder him...for he who is not against us is for us” (Mk. 9:39-40).

The reason that is given for Jesus’ counsel for the Twelve to be tolerant reminds us of another saying spoken by Him. It occurred when the Pharisees made the blasphemous charge against Him, accusing Him of casting out demons with the help of Beelzebub (“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters” - Mt. 12:30). On the surface, the two sayings seem to be contradictory. One seems to say, “This great thing that has happened - you are not to be against it.” The other says, “This great thing that has happened - you are to be for it.” They are harmonized by a truth that underlies both, that the most important matter in spiritual character is the bias of the heart. Here Jesus says, “If the heart of a man is with Me, he is really for me - even though he seems to be against me because he doesn’t know any better, or because he made an honest mistake, or because he is not a part of the group of those who have declared they are My friends.” In the second case, He was saying, “If a man is not with Me in his heart (the case of the Pharisees), then he is really against Me - even though he seems to be on God’s side (and therefore on Mine) because of his orthodoxy and his zeal.”

Mark adds the following words that Jesus spoke at this time: “There is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me” (Mk. 9:39b). One can hear the united voice of wisdom and love here. The emphasis is on the Greek word which is translated “soon afterward.” In the first place, this word causes us to admit that the case cited could actually happen. In fact, such cases did actually occur later on. Luke tells us about certain Jews who were drifters and took it upon themselves to mention the name of the Lord Jesus to
people who were possessed by demons. They had no personal faith in Him. Rather, they were making a living by performing exorcisms. Even the demons expressed contempt for these vile traders, exclaiming, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” (Acts 19:15). So our Lord knew beforehand that these types of cases would happen. And since He knew the depths of human depravity, He could only admit the possibility that the exorcist mentioned by John was motivated by unworthy motives. But at the same time, He was careful to say that, in His judgment, it was not likely. In fact, it was unlikely that someone who did a miracle in His name would speak evil of Him. He desired that His disciples be on guard against being too quick to believe that any man could be guilty of such a sin. Until there were strong reasons for thinking otherwise, He wanted them to graciously think about the outward action as the measure of the person’s sincere faith and love. They might more easily do this now, when there was nothing to be gained by using or professing Christ’s name, except upsetting the Twelve who had the characters and lives of others in their power.

**Applications for the Church**

These were the wise, gracious words spoken by Jesus concerning the case brought for judgment by John. From His teaching, is it possible for us to make any applications to the church in our own time? We must be somewhat reserved when we attempt to answer this question. For while we all bow to Jesus’ judgment on the behavior of His disciples, as recorded in the Gospels, Christians disagree over the inferences to be made from it. However, we may dare to make the following reflections:

1. We can learn from the wise and loving words of our great Teacher to beware of hasty conclusions about the spiritual condition of others when those conclusions are based only on outward appearances. Do not say with the Church of Rome, “If you are not in our church, there is no possibility of salvation or of goodness.” Instead, admit that even in a church where there is corruption, there may be many who are building on the true foundation even though, for the most part, they are doing so with highly combustible materials. In all probability, Christ has many friends who are outside the bounds of all the churches. Do not ask with Nathanael, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (Jn. 1:46). Rather, remember that the best things may come out of the most unexpected places. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some have entertained angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2). Keep in mind that, by agreeing with the words of the disciples - “Because he was not following us” - in insignificant and unimportant matters, you may be tempting God to withdraw His influences from you for your pride, exclusiveness, and self-will, while giving His Holy Spirit to those whom you think are not in His family. In addition, He may turn your uncompromising beliefs into a prison in which you will be shut out from the fellowship of God’s people. Then you would be doomed to experience the humiliation of looking through the bars of your cell at God’s people walking around, while you lie locked up in a jail.
2. In light of His verdict, “Do not hinder him,” we must read with a sad, sorrowful heart, many pages of church history in which the primary spirit is that of the Twelve instead of that of their Master. One may confidently say that many things in this history would have been different if Christ’s mind had dwelt more in those who were called by His name. Separatism, censorship, intolerance of those who would not conform, and persecution would not have been so common. Conventicle Acts and Five-mile Acts would not have disgraced the book of statutes of the English Parliament. Bedford jail would not have had the honor of holding the illustrious dreamer of the Pilgrim’s Progress as a prisoner. Baxter, and Livingstone of Ancrum, and thousands more who were like-minded and who stirred multitudes to a new spiritual life by their words, would not have been driven from their churches and their native lands. They would not have been forbidden, with the threats of heavy penalties, to preach that Gospel they understood and loved so well. Rather, they would have enjoyed the benefits of the law of toleration which they purchased, with a high cost, for us, their children.

3. The divided state of the church has always caused grief for good people. Attempts have been made to correct this evil by trying to form unions. All honest attempts have as their goal the healing of divisions. Since the Reformation, these divisions have multiplied so much that Protestantism has been disgraced. All efforts at reconciliation deserve our warmest sympathies and our earnest prayers. But we cannot be blind to the fact that because humans are sinners, these projects are likely to miscarry. It is extremely difficult to get a whole community of people who have different temperaments and who are in different stages of Christian growth to come to the same conclusions about the terms of the fellowship. What, then, is the duty of Christians in the meantime? We may learn from our Lord’s judgment in the case of the exorcist. If those who are not a part of our group cannot be brought into our ecclesiastical organization, let us still recognize them from the heart as fellow-disciples and fellow-laborers. Let’s use all the appropriate ways of showing them that we care infinitely more about those who truly love Christ, in whatever church they are in, than those who may be in the same church, but in spirit and life are not with Christ but against Him. Then we will have comfort in the fact that, even though we are separated from the people we love, we are not trying to be divisive. We will also be able to speak about the church being divided as something we do not desire but must endure, because we cannot help it.

Many religious people are at fault here. There are many Christians who do not believe in these two articles of the Apostles’ Creed: “the holy catholic church” and “the communion of the saints.” They have little or no concern for those who are outside the boundaries of their own fellowship. They practice kindness but have no love. Their church is their club where they enjoy associating with a certain number of people who agree with their own opinions, whims, hobbies, and church politics. Everything else in the vast world in which they live is regarded with cold indifference. Sometimes they even have a passionate hatred or abhorrence toward those things. It is one of
the many ways in which the spirit of religious legalism, which is so prevalent among us, reveals itself. The spirit of adoption is a universal spirit, whereas the spirit of legalism is a dividing, sectarian spirit. It adds to the essential, foundational doctrines. It transforms uncertain beliefs into principles. And, so, more and more new religious sects or organizations are manufactured. Now an organization, religious or otherwise, is a wonderful thing, but it is a luxury. It ought to be remembered that besides the organization - even all the organizations combined - there is the entire Body of Christ (the Church Universal). This fact will have to be more recognized than it has been if individual churches continue to see themselves as more than mere outposts for the gospel and become ineffective and weak in their isolation from other parts of the Body. To save us from this outcome, one of two things must take place. First, religious people must overcome their doting fondness for the fellowship of denominationalism, which involves absolute uniformity from people in their opinions and practices. Second, a kind of Amphictyonic council (note: an amphictyonic council was an assembly in ancient Greece which was composed of delegates from the states associated in a confederation of states which were centered around a religious shrine or center, as at Delphi) must be set up as a counter measure to individual religious groups. Here, all the groups can find a common meeting place for discussing the great, universal questions which bear on morals, missions, education, and the defense of cardinal truths. Such a council (it will be thought of as being utopian) would have many open questions in its constitution. In the ancient Amphictyonic council, men were not known as Athenians or Spartans, but as Greeks. In our modern utopian one, people would only be known as Christians and not as members of a particular denomination. It would not be an amateur, self-constituted entity, patronized by people who are alienated from all existing ecclesiastical organizations and who lean toward substituting it for a new church. Rather, it would consist of representatives who belong to the different sections of the church. They would be elected and empowered by these different groups.

There is one more remark we will make on this theory of church fellowship. When it is worked out, it will accomplish at least one goal. It will break Christians up into small groups and insure that they will meet in twos and threes. Unfortunately, it does not, at the same time, guarantee the blessing which is promised to the two or three. The spirit of Jesus does not dwell in groups comprised of self-willed, opinionated people. He dwells in the great commonwealth of believers, especially in the hearts of those who love the whole body more than any part, even the one they belong to. To these, the Lord and Head of the church fulfills His promise. He enriches them with enormous, heroic graces, and causes them to rise like cedars above the general level of the character of the current generation. And He endows them with a moral power which exercises an expanding influence that lasts well beyond the debates of their lifetimes - long after the people who loved this strife have sunk into oblivion.
Luke 9:51-56
The last message that Jesus gave in Galilee appears to have been on the subject of humility. For immediately after Matthew and Mark record their accounts of the discourse, they proceed to write about His final departure from His native province (Galilee) to journey south. Matthew says, “And it came about that when Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee, and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (Mt. 19:1-2; Mk. 10:1). However, neither of the authors give any details about this journey. They do not even mention Christ’s visit to Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication which occurred in the winter. John records this feast (Jn. 10:22-23), from which we know that the farewell to Galilee took place at least four months before the crucifixion. Nonetheless, the journey was not without interesting incidents. Luke preserved several of them in his Gospel.

One of the incidents is recorded in the text before us (Luke 9:51-56). The words used by the evangelist to introduce his narrative obviously allude to the same journey from Galilee to the south. Matthew and Mark speak about this in passages we have already mentioned. The journey through Samaria, which Luke refers to here, occurred “when the days were approaching for His ascension,” that is, near the end of His life. The unique expression, “He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem,” is a clear hint that Christ’s work is being transferred from the north to the south. However, it does not only refer to the geographical direction He was going, but also, and primarily, to the frame of mind He was in when He traveled. He went toward Jerusalem and felt that His responsibility was in and near that city from this time on. He would be a victim who consecrated Himself to death. His countenance was solemn, earnest, and dignified. It expressed the great and noble purpose which animated His soul.

It was natural for Luke, the companion of Paul and the evangelist to the Gentiles, to carefully preserve this anecdote from the last journey Jesus made to Judea through Samaria. It admirably served the purpose that he kept in mind throughout the time he was compiling his Gospel. Specifically, it illustrated the all-inclusive nature of the Christian faith. Therefore, he gathered it into his basket that it might not be lost. He placed it in his Gospel in a very appropriate place - right after the anecdote about the exorcist. We do not even have to speak about the fact that in the case of the exorcist, John is the narrator and, in this situation, he is one of two disciples
actually involved in it. This current incident, like the one just before it, shows a striking contrast between the harsh spirit of the disciples and the gentle, gracious spirit of their Master. It is this contrast that creates the moral interest of the story.

The main fact in the story is this: Jesus and His traveling companions arrived at a certain Samaritan village at the end of a day’s journey. The inhabitants of this village were asked to give them a place to stay for the night. But they declined. So James and John came to their Master and proposed that the offending villagers should be destroyed by fire from heaven.

A Closer Look at John
It was a strange proposal for them to make. These men had been Jesus’ disciples for years. It seems especially strange that John would say such a thing. For he had been with Jesus when He met the woman by the well. There he had heard the delightful words Jesus used to speak about the glorious new era that was dawning (John 4). They demonstrate how slow the best are to learn the heavenly teachings and how to practice love. How shocking, once again, to think that this same John would go down from Jerusalem a year or two after this savage suggestion and preach the gospel of Jesus, the crucified, in “many villages of the Samaritans” (Acts 8:14,25). It is possible that he was preaching in this very village which he desired to see destroyed!

These are the contrasts which growth in grace brings. When John was in the green, crude stage of his spiritual life, he was opinionated, judgmental, demanding, intolerant, and full of blind, passionate zeal. He would try to imitate someone like Elijah. But when he was spiritually mature, after the summer sun of Pentecost had done its work in his soul and sweetened all its acid juices, he became a fervent apostle of salvation and demonstrated in his character the soft, luscious fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). No matter how surprising these contrasts are in the same person at different periods in their lives, they are perfectly natural. In the midst of all changes, the elements of one’s moral being remain the same. The juice of the ripe apple is the same that was in the green fruit, plus the light and heat from the sun. The zeal of the Son of Thunder did not disappear from John’s nature after he became an apostle. It only became tempered by the light of wisdom and softened by the heat of love. He did not even stop hating. Nor did he become an indiscriminately friendly person whose love made no distinction between good and evil. To the very end, John was what he was at the first - an intense hater as well as an intense lover. But in his later years he knew better what to hate. He abhorred hypocrisy, apostasy, and Laodicean insincerity (Rev. 3:14ff.), and not just ignorant rudeness and clownish impoliteness as he had in the past. He could distinguish between wickedness and weakness, malice and prejudice. And while he held on to strong feelings of revulsion toward some, he felt only compassion toward the others.
To some it may seem unbelievable that a man who was capable of entertaining such a revolting idea, as is here ascribed to James and John, could ever be the disciple whom Jesus loved. In order to understand this, it must be remembered that Jesus, unlike most men, could love a disciple not merely for what he was, but for what he would become. He could be content with even sour grapes in their season for the sake of the wonderful fruit into which they would ripen. Furthermore, we must not forget that John, even when he was possessed by the devil of resentment, was animated by a purer and holier spirit. Along with the smoke of fleshly passion, there was some divine fire in his heart. He loved Jesus as intensely as he hated the Samaritans. It was his devoted attachment to his Master that made him resent their rudeness so much. He had a tender love for the Bridegroom of his soul. And so he was as beautiful as a mother who overflows with affection for her family. However, in his hatred, he was as terrible as the same mother can be in her enmity against her family’s foes. In fact, John’s nature was passionate both in its virtues and in its faults. Like all people, he could be both exquisitely loving and exquisitely bitter.

**The Cruel Proposal**

Let us now leave our personal remarks about John and look at the cruel proposal that was made by him and his brother. We must be careful not to regard it simply as an extravagant, sudden, and violent outburst of anger because the hospitality was not offered. No doubt, the two brothers and all their fellow-disciples were annoyed by the unexpected rudeness. No one should be surprised that it put them in a bad frame of mind. Weary men are easily irritated. And it was not a pleasant thought that they would have to trudge on to another village after they were so fatigued from the day’s journey. But we should not have too high of an opinion of the Twelve. The fact is, they were capable of taking revenge for that rudeness by committing murder.

The savage mood of James and John is not even thoroughly explained by our recalling that the unfeeling villagers were Samaritans, and that they were Jews. The constant ill-will between the two races had, without a doubt, its own influence in producing hard feelings on both sides. The nationality of the travelers was one (if not the sole) reason the villagers refused them hospitality. They were Galilean Jews going south to Jerusalem, and that was enough. On the other hand, the Twelve, as Jews, were just as ready to take offense as the Samaritan villagers were to give it. The powder of national hatred was stored up in their hearts. And a spark - one rude word or discourteous gesture - was enough to cause an explosion. Though they had been with Jesus for years, there was still much more of the old Jewish man in them than the new Christian man. If they had been allowed to make their own choices, they would have probably avoided the Samaritan territory altogether. Like the rest of their compatriots, they would have taken an alternative route to Jerusalem by crossing over to the east side of the Jordan. When people have such strong feelings toward each other, offenses are certain to happen. When Guelph (members of a political party in medieval Italy that supported the authority of the Pope) and Ghibeline (the aristocratic party who opposed the authority of the Pope), Orangemen (members of a secret society
instituted in northern Ireland in 1795 to uphold the Protestant religion and ascendancy) and Ribbonmen (an Irish secret society organized about 1808 to oppose the Orange organization; they were named from the badge which was a simple green ribbon, and was worn by all the members of the society), Cavalier (a partisan of Charles I of England in his struggles with Parliament (1641-1649) who were opposed to the Roundheads) and Roundhead (a member or supporter of the Parliamentary, or Puritan, party in England during the English civil war (1642-1652); originally a derisive term, with reference to the Puritans’ close-cropped hair, in contrast to the Cavaliers’ long hair) meet, it does not take much to make a quarrel.

But there was something more at work in the minds of the two disciples than party passion. There was conscience in their argument as well as anger and race-related hatred. This is evident, both from the deliberate way in which they made their proposal to Jesus and from the reason by which they tried to justify it. They came to their Master and said, “Do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Apparently they had no doubt they would gain His approval and immediately obtain the desired fire from heaven for the execution of their appalling intent. Then they referenced Elijah, who refused to have any dealings with the idolatrous king of Samaria and called down fire from heaven to consume his messengers as a clear indication of divine displeasure. The conscious motive by which they were energized was evidently sincere jealousy for the honor of their Lord. But, nonetheless, it was ill-advised. The prophet of fire (Elijah) was outraged at the conduct of King Ahaziah because he sent messengers to Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to inquire whether he would recover from the disease he had (II Kings 1). So the Sons of Thunder were outraged because the inhabitants of the same godless territory over which Ahaziah ruled had presumed to insult their respected Master by refusing a favor which they should have been proud to have the opportunity of granting.

The Samaritans
The two brothers thought they were doing the right thing by being angry. And if they had tried to defend their conduct after it was condemned by Jesus, they might have had a plausible argument. But they did not do this. Now consider who the Samaritans were. They belonged to a mixed race, the heathen Assyrians, whose presence in the land was humiliating, and from base, degenerate Israelites who were unworthy of the name. Their forefathers had been the bitter enemies of Judah in the days of Nehemiah. With spite, they obstructed the building of Zion’s walls rather than helping the exiles in their hour of need, as neighbors should have done. So, if it was unfair to hold the present generation responsible for the sins of past generations, what was the character of the Samaritans who were living then? Weren’t they blasphemous heretics who rejected all the Old Testament Scriptures except the five books of Moses? Didn’t they worship at the site of the rival temple on Gerizim? Their fathers, with ungodly boldness, erected this temple in contempt of the true temple of God in the holy city. And finally, didn’t these villagers sympathize with all the sins of their own people and repeat them all in this one act by
showing dishonor to Jesus, who was greater than even the true temple? Was He not worthy, not only to receive common politeness, but also divine worship?

Ruthless persecutors and angry zealots who have such believable arguments have always been confident, like James and John, that they were serving God. The very nature of zealotry is to make the man who is a zealot believe that the Almighty not only approves, but shares his fierce passions. He believes he has been entrusted with unlimited power to launch the thunders of the Most High against all in whom his small, peering, inhuman eye can find anything that has not been approved by his tyrannical conscience. What a world this would be if they were entrusted with this power!

Every pelting officer
Would use God’s heaven for thunder; nothing but thunder.

Thank God this is not so! The Almighty does thunder sometimes, but not in the way His petty officers would like.

Merciful Heaven!
Thou rather, with Thy sharp and sulphurous bolt,
Splitt’st the unwedgeable and gnarled oak
Than the soft myrtle.

Even Jesus, as gentle as He was, had His thunderbolts. But He reserved them for different targets than poor, unenlightened, prejudiced Samaritans. His zeal was directed against great sins and powerful, privileged, presumptuous sinners. But He did not strike out against poor, obscure, common sinners. He burst into rage at the sight of His Father’s house that had been turned into a den of thieves by those who should have known, and did know, better. He only felt compassion for those who did not know what they worshiped and groped for God in semi-heathen darkness. His spirit was kindled within Him when He saw the ostentatious orthodoxy and piety that was connected to the grossest worldliness. He did not, like the Pharisee, blaze up in self-righteous wrath against sinners who were not at all religious, and who might not worship at all. Nor would He be angry with people like the Samaritans who did not worship in the right place. If only the zeal like Jesus had were more common! This kind of zeal would aim its bolts at the proud oak and spare the humble shrub. But such zeal is dangerous. Therefore, it will always be rare.

Jesus’ Response
The two disciples wanted to call down heaven’s fire to vindicate their Master. But Jesus lost no time in making known His total lack of sympathy with the monstrous proposal. He turned and
rebuked them. According to later manuscripts, He said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of” (Luke 9:55). It is a doubtful reading and is therefore omitted from the most reliable manuscripts. Nonetheless, it is a true saying.

The saying was true in more than one sense. In the first place, the spirit of James and John was not as they thought it was. They thought they were motivated by zeal for the glory of their Lord, and to some degree, they were. But the flame of their zeal was not pure. It was mixed with the bitter smoke of fleshly passions: anger, pride, and self-will. Their spirit was not appropriate for those who were the apostles of the gospel, the messengers of a new era of grace. They were chosen to preach a message of mercy to every creature, even to the chief of sinners. They were to tell of a love that did not allow itself to be overcome with evil but sought to overcome evil with good. They were to found a kingdom that was composed of citizens from every nation, where there would be neither Jew nor Samaritan, but where Christ is all and in all. What a work to be accomplished by men who were filled with the fire-breathing spirit of the “Sons of Thunder”!

Obviously a great change had to occur within them to prepare them for the high calling they had been called to. Once again, the spirit of James and John was, of course, not like that of their Master. He “did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (later manuscripts contain this phrase also after verse 55). In order to see the difference between the disciples’ thinking and that of Jesus, put this present scene beside the one that happened on Samaritan soil - the meeting by the well. We know what we have seen here. But, what do we see at the well? The Son of Man, as a Jew, is speaking and dealing with a Samaritan. He is seeking to abolish chronic and deep seated enmities between man and man. As the Friend of sinners, He is seeking to restore a poor, erring, guilty creature to God and holiness. As the Christ, He is announcing the close of an old era in which even the worship of the true God was ritualistic, exclusive, and tied to particular locations. The beginning of a new religious era would be characterized by the attributes of spirituality and universality. We see Jesus rejoicing, enthusiastic in His work. His very food and drink was to reveal to men one God and Father, one Savior, one life, all without distinction; to regenerate individual character, society, and religion; to break down all barriers that separated man from God and from his fellow-men, and to become the great Reconciler and Peacemaker. He has already demonstrated this in His conversation with the woman at the well. Now, as He is thinking about the work He has come to do, He speaks to His surprised and unsympathetic disciples as one who sees on the eastern horizon the first faint streaks of light which proclaims the advent of a new and glorious day. And all around, in the field of the world, yellow crops of grain are ripe for the sickle. In essence He says, “The blessed, long-expected era, after a long night of spiritual darkness, is coming very quickly. The new world is about to begin. Lift up your eyes and look on the fields of Gentile lands and notice how they are white and ready for the harvest!”

At the time of the meeting by the well, the disciples with Jesus neither understood nor sympathized with His high thoughts and hopes. The bright hope on which His eyes were riveted was not within their horizon. For them, as it is for children, the world was still small - a
narrow valley enclosed by hills on each side. In contrast, their Master, up on the mountain top, saw many valleys beyond in which He was interested. He believed many people would find their way out of these valleys into the eternal kingdom. The disciples still believed that God was the God of the Jews only. Salvation was for the Jews as well as of them. They only knew one channel of grace - Jewish ordinances; only one way to heaven - the road which lay through Jerusalem.

Luke’s scene before us comes near the end of the training of the disciples. Instead of progressing, the disciples seem to have regressed. Old, bad feelings seem to have intensified instead of being replaced by new and better ones. Not only are they not in sync with their Lord’s mind; they are antagonistic to it. They are not merely apathetic or skeptical about the salvation of Samaritans but bent on their destruction. Hostility and prejudice have grown into an outburst of enmity.

So it did. Things must get worse before they begin to mend. There will be no improvement until the Lamb is slain to take away sin, to abolish hatred, and to make one new man out of two. It is this knowledge which makes Jesus turn His face so steadfastly toward Jerusalem. He is eager to drink the cup of suffering and to be baptized with the baptism of blood. He knows that only in this way can He finish the work that He spoke to His disciples about in such glowing language on the earlier occasion. The very wrath of His devoted followers against the Samaritan villagers makes Him pick up the pace on His journey. As He moves on, He says to Himself, “Let Me hurry on, for these things cannot end until I am lifted up.”
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 Shammasi’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 *imromptu* 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.
Personal Property

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 quotation proclaims 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).
Section 2 - The Rewards of Self-Sacrifice


Jesus’ remarks about the temptations that come from riches seemed extremely discouraging to all the disciples except Peter. The words had a different impact on him. They caused him to feel a measure of personal satisfaction. For he compared his and the other disciples’ conduct to that of the young man who came to ask about eternal life. He thought to himself, “We have done what the young man could not do. According to the statement just made by the Master, we have done what rich men find very hard to do. We have left everything to follow Jesus. Surely there must be some reward for doing something so difficult and so rare.” With his characteristic frankness, he spoke what he thought. With a touch of pride in his tone and manner, he said, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” (Mt. 19:27).

Jesus gave a full reply to Peter’s question. It is full of encouragement and also issues a warning for the Twelve and for all who profess to be servants of God. First, noting the subject matter of Peter’s question, Jesus used glowing language to set forth the great rewards that would be in store for him and his fellow-disciples; and not for them only, but for everyone who made sacrifices for the kingdom. Next, He referred to the complacent or calculating spirit which, in part, had prompted the inquiry and added a moral reflection. Then, He added a parable to illustrate it and to convey the idea that rewards in the kingdom of God were not determined simply because someone made a sacrifice or because of the amount of the sacrifice. Many who were first in these respects might be last when it came to real merit. They may have lacked another element which formed an essential ingredient in the equation, namely, the right motive. Others who were last in these respects might be first in receiving rewards because of the spirit which moved them to act. We will consider these two parts of the reply in order. Our present topic is the rewards of self-sacrifice in the divine kingdom.

The first thing that strikes us about these rewards is that there is a stark difference between them and the sacrifices that are made. The Twelve had forsaken fishing boats and nets, and they were to be rewarded with thrones. Everyone who forsakes anything for the kingdom, no matter what it may be, is promised a hundred-fold in return. In this present life, his return will be on the very thing he has renounced. And in the world to come, he will also obtain everlasting life.
These promises illustrate in a striking way the generosity of the Master whom Christians serve. How easy it would have been for Jesus to devalue the sacrifices of His followers and turn their glory into ridicule! “You have forsaken all! Please tell me, what was your ‘all’ worth? If the rich young man had sold his possessions as I counseled him to do, he might have had something to boast about. But as for you poor fishermen, any sacrifices you have made are hardly worth mentioning.” But these words could not have been spoken by Christ’s lips. It was never His way to despise small things or to belittle any service that was done for Him as if He were trying to diminish His own obligations. Rather, He loved to make Himself a debtor to His servants by generously exaggerating the value of their good deeds. He also promised them their proper recompense - rewards that exceeded (beyond measure) their claims. This is the way He acted in the present situation. Though the “everything” of the disciples (Matt. 19:27) was a very little one, He still remembered that it was their all. Having an earnestness that was full of passion and speaking a word that was full of tender, grateful feeling - the word truly - He promised them thrones as if they had been fairly earned!

If we believed them, these great and precious promises would make sacrificing easy. Who would not part with a fishing boat for a throne? And what businessman would not stay committed to an investment which would bring a return - not a 5% return, or a 100%, but the investment times the factor of 100 (a hundred-fold)?

The promises made by Jesus have one other major impact when they are carefully considered. They tend to humble the ones who hear them. The very magnitude of the promises has a sobering effect on the mind. Even the most vain person in the world cannot pretend that their good works deserve to be rewarded with thrones, and their sacrifices ought to be recompensed by a factor of one hundred. So, with this rate of return, everyone must be content to be debtors to God’s grace. All talk about our deserving anything must be out of the question. That is one reason why the rewards of the kingdom of heaven are so great. God bestows His gifts so that, at the same time, the Giver is glorified and the receiver is humbled.

These remarks have all been about rewards in general. Now let us look at the ones specifically made to the Twelve. On the surface, Jesus’ words seem calculated to awaken or foster false expectations. No matter what they were intended to mean in reality, there is little doubt as to the meaning the disciples put on them at the time. The “regeneration” and the “thrones” that their Master spoke about (Matt. 19:28) would bring to their imaginations the picture of a restored kingdom of Israel (“regeneration” understood in the same way that people spoke about a regenerated Italy) where the yoke of Roman domination would be thrown off, alienated tribes reconciled and reunited under the rule of Jesus, proclaimed by popular enthusiasm as their hero King, and themselves, the men who had first believed in His royal
claims and shared His early fortunes, rewarded for their faithfulness by being made provincial governors, each ruling over a separate tribe. These romantic ideas were never to be realized. And we naturally ask why Jesus, who knew that, expressed Himself in language that could encourage such baseless dreams. The answer is this: He could not accomplish the purpose He designed, which was to inspire His disciples with hope, without expressing His promise in terms which involved the risk of misunderstanding. Any language which is chosen in order to prevent all possibilities for misunderstanding would have had no inspiring influence at all. To have any charm, the promise must be like a rainbow. It must have bright colors and be solid and substantial in its appearance. This remark does not only apply to the particular promise we are now considering but, more or less, to all of God's promises in Scripture and in nature. In order for them to stimulate us they must, to a certain extent, deceive us, by promising that which, as we conceive it, and cannot at the time help conceiving it, will never be realized. The rainbow is painted with a variety of colors as to draw us (children that we are!) irresistibly on. Then, having served that purpose, it fades away. When this happens, we are ready to exclaim, “O Lord, You have deceived me!” Ultimately, however, we find that we are not cheated out of the blessing. It comes in a different form from what we expected. God's promises never lead to delusion, though they may be illusive. This was the experience of the Twelve and the dazzling promise of thrones. They did not get what they expected. But they got something comparable, something that their mature spiritual judgment told them was far greater and more satisfying than that on which they had first set their hearts.

What, then, was this something? It was a real glory, honor, and power in the kingdom of God. It was conferred on the Twelve as the reward for their self-sacrifice, partially in this life, perfectly in the life to come. Note the promise as it pertains to this present life. This situation signified the judicial legislative influence that the companions of Jesus had as Apostles and founders of the Christian church. The Twelve, the first preachers of the gospel who were trained by the Lord for that purpose, occupied a position in the church which could not be filled by anyone who came after them. The keys of the kingdom of heaven were put into their hands. They were the foundation stones on which the walls of the church were built. They sat, so to speak, on episcopal thrones, judging, guiding, ruling the twelve tribes of the true Israel of God, the holy commonwealth which embraces all who profess faith in Christ. This was the sovereign influence the twelve Apostles exerted in their lifetime and continue to exert today. Their word was, and still is, law. Their example has always been binding in every age. From their letters, as the inspired expositions of their Master's sayings, the church has derived the system of doctrine that is embraced in her creed. All that remains of their writings forms part of the sacred canon; their recorded words are accepted by believers as “words of God.” Surely here is power and authority that is nothing short of regal! The reality of sovereignty is here. But the trappings of royalty, which the natural eye looks for, are lacking. The Apostles of Jesus were, in fact, princes. But they
wore no princely robes. And they were destined to exercise a more extensive influence than any
king of Israel ever had, not to mention governors who ruled over individual tribes.

Without a doubt, the promise Jesus made to the Twelve referred to their position in the church
in heaven as well as in the church on earth. We do not know what they will be in the eternal
kingdom any more than we know what we will be. Our understanding of heaven is very hazy.
We believe, however, on the basis of clear Scripture statements, that people will not be on an
equal level in heaven any more than on earth. Political liberalism is not the law of the heavenly
commonwealth, just as it is not the law in any well-ordered society in this world. The kingdom
of glory will be nothing more than the kingdom of grace which has been perfected. The
regeneration that was begun here will be brought to its final and complete development. But the
regeneration, in its imperfect state, is an attempt to organize people into a society which is based
on the possession of spiritual life. All are included in the kingdom who are new creatures in
Christ Jesus. The highest place is assigned to those who have attained the highest stature spiritu-
ally. This ideal has never been more than somewhat realized. The “visible” church is the product
of the attempt to realize it. But it is, and always has been, a very disappointing representation
of the ideal city of God. Ambition, selfishness, worldly wisdom, and refined arts have too often
secured thrones for false apostles who never forsook anything for Christ. Therefore, we still look
forward and upward with longing eyes for the true city of God. It will exceed our greatest dreams
as much as the visible church comes short of them. Perfect moral order will prevail in that ideal
commonwealth. Every person will be in the place where he ought to be. No vile people will
occupy high positions. No noble people will be held back or doomed to obscurity and neglect.
On the other hand, the most noble will be the highest and first, even though now they are the
lowest and last. “There shall be true glory, where no one shall be praised by mistake or in flattery;
true honor, which shall be denied to no one worthy, granted to no one unworthy; nor shall any
unworthy one ambitiously seek it, where none but the worthy are permitted to be” (Augustine,
de Civitate Dei, xxii.30.)

Among the noblest in the supernatural kingdom will be the twelve men who cast in their lot
with the Son of Man and were His companions in His wanderings and temptations. There will
probably be many in heaven who are greater than they in intellect and otherwise. The greatest,
however, will readily concede to them the place of honor as the first to believe in Jesus, the
personal friends of the Man of Sorrow and the chosen vessels who carried His name to the
nations and, in a sense, opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe (see Revelation 21:14).

We believe this is the main point of the promise that Jesus made to the Apostles, who were lead-
ers of the white-robed band of martyrs and confessors who suffered for Christ's sake. The next
thing we notice is the general promise that was randomly made to all the faithful. Mark tells
us, “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or
farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the world to come, eternal life” (10:29-30).

This promise, like the special one to the Twelve, has a two-fold reference. Godliness is presented as being profitable for both worlds. In the world to come, believers who make sacrifices for Christ will receive eternal life; in the present, they will receive, along with persecutions, a hundred times more than the very things which have been sacrificed. Eternal life is to be understood as the minimum reward in the great Hereafter. All the faithful will get that, at the least. What a maximum is that minimum! How blessed we are to be assured by Christ's own words that there is such a thing as eternal life which is given as a free gift, irrespective of the sacrifices made. We may conduct ourselves in truth and maintain a clear conscience, and fight the good fight of faith, when, by doing this, it is possible for us to gain such a prize. “A hope so great and so divine may trials well endure.” To win the crown of an imperishable life of bliss, we should not think that our Lord has made an unreasonable demand that we be faithful even if it costs us our lives. Any life which is sacrificed on these terms is nothing more than a river which empties itself into the ocean or the morning star losing itself in the perfect light of day. If only we could lay a firm hold on the blessed hope that is set before us here, and through its magic influence become transformed into moral heroes! In these days, we only have a feeble belief in the life to come. Our eyes are dim, and we cannot see the land that is far off. Some of us have become so philosophical that we imagine we can do without the future reward that was promised by Jesus. We think we can act the part of a hero by adhering to the principles of the atheists. That remains to be seen. The ancient books about the martyrs tell us what people have been able to achieve who earnestly believed in the life everlasting. Up to this time, we have not heard of any great acts of heroism or sacrifices that have been made by unbelievers. The list of the martyrs of skepticism has not yet been written.

The part of Christ's promise that concerns the hereafter must be accepted by faith. But the other part, which concerns the present life, can be tested by observation. The question, therefore, may be stated this way: Is it true - is it a fact - that sacrifices are rewarded by a factor of a hundred (a hundred-fold)? Is there a manifold (many times; Luke 18:30) return in kind in this world? To answer this question, we first suggest that the promise will be found to be as good as any law if we do not limit our understanding to the individual life but include successive generations. When providence has had time to work out its results, the meek inherit the earth and delight themselves in the abundance of peace. If they don't personally, at least their heirs and representatives do. Those who are persecuted finally conquer the honor of the world and receive from it the rewards that it can grant. Then the words of the prophet are fulfilled: “The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing, ‘This place is too small for us; give us more space to live in’” (Is. 49:20). In another reference, Isaiah says, “Lift up your eyes and look about
you: all assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on
the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth
on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. You will drink the
milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your
Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. Instead of bronze I will bring you gold, and
silver in place of iron. Instead of wood I will bring you bronze, and iron in place of stones” (Is.
60:4-5,16-17). These prophetic promises, even though they seem to be extravagant, have been
fulfilled again and again in the history of the church. They were fulfilled in the time of Constan-
tine. The fires of persecution were kindled by the zeal that unbelievers had for superstitions and
idolatries. Then they died out. The promises were again fulfilled in Protestant Britain. It was
once popular for men to be prepared to lose all. In fact, they did actually lose much for the sake
of Christ. Britain became the mistress of the seas and heiress of the wealth of all the world. The
promises, once more, were fulfilled in the new world across the Atlantic with its great, power-
ful, populous nation rivaling England in wealth and strength. It was built from a small band of
Puritan exiles who loved religious liberty better than their own country. They sought refuge
from despotism in the savage wilderness of an unexplored continent.

Still, it must be confessed that if one takes the promise of Christ strictly and literally, it does not
hold good in every situation. Multitudes of God’s servants have had what the world would say
were miserable lives. Does the promise, then, simply and absolutely fail in their case? No. For,
secondly, there are more ways than one in which it can be fulfilled. For example, blessings can
be multiplied by a factor of a hundred without their external size being altered. This can hap-
pen very simply by the act of renouncing something. Whatever is sacrificed for truth, whatever
we are willing to part with for Christ’s sake, becomes immeasurably increased in value from
that moment on. Fathers and mothers, and all earthly friends, become unspeakably dear to our
hearts when we have learned to say: “Christ is first, and everyone else must be second.” Isaac was
worth a hundred sons to Abraham when he received him back from the dead. Or, think of John
Bunyan in jail grieving over his poor blind daughter whom he left behind at home. “Poor child,
thought I,” as he describes his feelings in that inimitable book, Grace Abounding, “what sorrow
art thou like to have for thy portion in this world! Thou must be beaten (down), must beg, suf-
f er hunger, cold, nakedness, and a thousand calamities, though I cannot now endure the wind
should blow upon thee. But yet, thought I, I must venture you all with (turn you over to) God,
though it goeth to the quick (to the heart of my feelings) to leave you. Oh! I saw I was as a man
who was pulling down his house upon the heads of his wife and children; yet I thought on those
two milch kine (milk cows) that were to carry the ark of God into another country, and to leave
their calves behind them” (I Sam. 6:7). If the power of enjoyment is the measure of real posses-
sions, here was a case in which forsaking his wife and child had the effect of multiplying them
a hundred-fold. He found rich consolation for his sacrifice and persecutions in the multiplied
value of the things which he had to renounce. The Bedford prisoner’s (Bunyan’s) words are the
very poetry of natural affection. What passion is in that allusion to the milk cows! What a depth of tender feeling it reveals! The power to feel this way is the reward of self-sacrifice. The power to love this way is the reward of “hating” our loved ones for Christ’s sake. You will find no such love among those who make natural affection an excuse for moral unfaithfulness. They think they have an adequate defense for their disloyalty to the divine kingdom by saying, “I have a wife and family to care for.”

Without over-spiritualizing the matter, then, we see that we can assign a valid meaning to the strong expression – “a hundred-fold.” And from the remarks just made, we see further why “persecutions” are thrown into the account (Mark 10:30). It is as if they were not disadvantages, but a part of the gain. The truth is, the hundred-fold is realized, to a great extent, because of the persecutions - not in spite of them. Persecutions are the salt with which things sacrificed are salted, the condiments which enhance their flavor. Or, to put the matter arithmetically, persecutions are the factor by which earthly blessings given up to God are multiplied a hundred-fold. If they are not multiplied in quantity, at least they are in virtue.

Such are the rewards that are provided for those who make sacrifices for Christ’s sake. Their sacrifices are only seeds that are sown in tears. Afterwards they reap an abundant harvest in joy. But what about those who have made no sacrifices, who have received no wounds in battle? If this has happened because they didn’t get the opportunity to sacrifice, they will get a share of the rewards. David’s law has its place in the divine kingdom: “The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike” (I Sam. 30:24). But everyone must make sure that they are not staying with the “supplies” because they are cowards or lazy and self-indulgent. The ones who act this way - the ones who refuse to put themselves out, to run any risk, or even so much as to part with a sinful lust for the kingdom of God - cannot expect to find a place in heaven in the end.
Section 3 - The First Last, and the Last First

Matthew 19:30; 20:1-20; Mark 10:31

After Jesus spoke about the rewards of self-sacrifice, He proceeded to note that people could risk losing their rewards - partially or totally. The loss of reward would come because they had inappropriate thoughts and feelings. They may have had wrong motives for their self-denying deeds or prideful thoughts about deeds they had already done. “But,” He said warning them, as if His finger was in the air, “many who are first, will be last; and the last, first.” Then, to explain His profound comment, He spoke the parable which is preserved only in the 20th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel.

The explanation in some respects is more difficult than the thing that needs to be explained. It has led to many different interpretations. And yet the main point of this parable seems to be very clear. Some people believe it is designed to teach that everyone will receive the same share in the eternal kingdom. This is not only irrelevant to the logic of the parable; it is not true. Neither is the purpose of the parable to proclaim the great evangelistic truth that salvation is by grace and not by works (even though it would be very appropriate for a minister, on any occasion, to speak about that essential truth). It seems to us that the great outstanding truth that is set forth in this parable is this: The divine Lord, whom everyone serves, estimates the value of the work we perform. He takes into account, not only the quantity, but the quality, of the work that we do.

It is obvious that this is the correct view when we take a comprehensive survey of all of Jesus’ teachings on the important subject of work and wages in the divine kingdom. It appears that the relationship between the two things is fixed by righteous law and not by whimsical thinking. So, if the one who is first in work is last in wages, in any situation, it is for very good reasons.

There are a total of three parables in the Gospels on this subject. Each one of them sets forth a distinct teaching. If our interpretation of the parable before us now is correct, the combined parables present an exhaustive view of the topic we are studying. They are: (1) the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30); (2) the Parable of the Money (Lk. 19:12-28); and the one before us that is called (3) the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.
If you want to understand how these parables are different, yet complementary, it is necessary for you to remember the principles by which the value of the work is to be measured. Three things have to be taken into account in order to form a fair evaluation of each person’s works: (1) the quantity of the work done; (2) the ability of the worker; and (3) the motive. Forget the motive for a moment. When the ability is equal, the quantity determines the relative reward. When the ability varies, then the reward is not determined by the absolute amount of the work performed. Instead, it is the relationship between the amount of work and the ability that ought to measure the value.

**The Parable of the Money**

The parables of the Money and Talents are designed to illustrate these two propositions. In the parable of the Money, everyone has the same ability - each servant receives a mina (a mina is equal to about 100 days’ wages; Lk. 19:13). However, the quantity of the work performed varies. The first servant who has one mina increases his to ten. Another who has the same amount to start with gains only five. By the rule we mentioned above, the second man should not be rewarded the same as the first. He has not done what he could have done. Therefore, two distinctions are made in the parable. One is in the rewards that are given to the two servants, and the other is in the manner in which they are addressed by their employer. The first gets ten cities to govern. He also receives these words of commendation: “Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities” (Lk. 19:17). On the other hand, the second one only gets five cities. What is even more noticeable is the fact that he gets no praise. His master, in a matter-of-fact way, says to him, “And you are to be over five cities” (vs. 19). He had done something; and compared with other lazy people, it was significant. But he does not receive the pronouncement that he is a good and faithful servant. The praise is withheld simply because it was not deserved. For he had not done what he could have. He had only done half of what was possible, when measured by the first servant’s work.

**The Parable of the Talents**

In the parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30), the conditions are different. The amount of work that is done varies just as in the parable of the Money. But the ability varies in the same proportion, so that the ratio (between the amount of work and the ability to perform the work) between the two is the same in the case of both servants who put their talents to use. One receives five and gains five. The other receives two and gains two. According to our rule, these two should receive the same reward. And this is the way they are presented in the parable. The same reward is assigned to each of them, and both are commended with the very same terms. The Master’s words in both cases are: “Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master” (Mt. 25:21, 23).
This is the way the situation plays out when we only take into consideration two elements: (1) the ability to work, and (2) the amount of work done. Or, we can combine both of these into one point - the element of zeal. But something more than zeal has to be considered, at least in the kingdom of God. In this world, people are often commended for their diligence irrespective of their motives. It is not always necessary to be zealous in order to receive the praises of the masses. If someone does something big and extravagant, people will praise him without asking whether it had meaning for him, whether it involved self-sacrifice, or whether it was only a respectable act done without any passion or devotion. But in God’s sight, many large things are very little, and many small things are very great. The reason is that He sees the heart and the hidden springs that produce the actions. He judges the stream by the source - the spring. Quantity is nothing to Him unless there is zeal. And even zeal is nothing to Him, unless it is purged from all pride and self-seeking. It must be a pure spring of good desires. The smoke of all fleshly passions must be cleared. There must be a pure flame of heaven-born devotion. A worthless motive corrupts it all. This parable, spoken by Jesus in Perea, was designed to emphasize this truth and to insist on the necessity of having right motives and emotions in the work we do and in the sacrifices we make. It teaches that a small quantity of work that is done with the right motive has a greater value than a large amount of work that is done with the wrong motive, no matter how much enthusiasm is present when it is performed. An hour’s work that is done by people whose hearts are right is of greater value than twelve hours’ work that is done by people who have been outside in the heat of the day, but who are full of pride about their work. When we use the literary form of a precept, the lesson of the parable is this: “Do not work for pay and wrongly calculate the wages you think you deserve. Do not work as the Pharisees who arrogantly demand wages they think they deserve. Work humbly. Think of yourselves as unprofitable servants, at best. Work generously, without doing it for selfish advantage. Work trustfully, as people who have confidence in the generosity of the great Employer. Regard Him as someone from whom you do not need to protect yourselves by signing a contract.”

In this interpretation, we assume that the motive of the first and the last one to enter the vineyard was just as we have indicated. The assumption is justified because of the way in which both parties are described. The motives of the last ones can be inferred because they did not try to make a deal. And the motives of the first ones are evident from the words they spoke at the end of the day: “These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day” (Mt. 20:12). This is the language of envy, jealousy, and pride. Their attitudes line up with their conduct at the beginning of the day’s work. They entered the vineyard for pay, made a deal, and agreed to work for a certain amount of wages.

The first and the last, then, represent two classes of those who claim to be the servants of God. The first are shrewd and full of pride. The last are humble, generous, and full of trust. They
neglect themselves for others. The first are like Jacob - they work hard, are conscientious, and are able to say for themselves, “This was my situation: ‘the heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes’” (Gen. 31:40). Yet always thinking about their own interest, even in their religion, they make deals for themselves. They trust very little to the free grace and unchained generosity of the great Lord. The last are like Abraham, not because they serve the master at a late hour, but because of the greatness of their faith. They enter the vineyard without making a deal, like Abraham left his father’s house, not knowing where he was going. He only knew that God had said, “Go to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). The first are the Simon Peters - righteous, respectable, and exemplary. But they are also hard, dull, and cold. The last are the women with the alabaster boxes who, for a long time, have been lazy, aimless, vicious, and have wasted their lives. But finally, they shed bitter tears of sorrow because of their past, begin to live life in the right way, and try to redeem the time that was lost by passionately devoting themselves to serving their Lord and Savior. Finally, the first are the elder brothers who stay at home in their father’s house and never violate any of his commandments, yet have no mercy on those who do. The last are the prodigals who leave their father’s house and waste their inheritance on riotous living. But finally they come to their senses and say, “I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men’” (Lk. 15:18-19).

The two classes of people who differ in character are dealt with in the parable precisely as they ought to be. The last are made first, and the first are made last. The last are paid first. This signifies the pleasure which the master has in rewarding them. They are also paid at a much higher rate. Since they are paid at the same rate for one hour’s work that the others receive for twelve, they are paid at the rate of 18 cents per dieum (a denarius was worth 18 cents in silver, equivalent to one day’s wage). In fact, they are treated just like the prodigal. His father made a feast for him. The first are treated as the elder brother whose service was acknowledged, but who complained that his father had never given him a young goat to celebrate with his friends. Those who think of themselves as being unworthy to be anything other than hired servants - they even think they are unworthy in that capacity - are dealt with as sons. And those who think of themselves as deserving rewards are treated coldly and distantly - as hired servants.

We go now from the parable to the truth it was designed to illustrate. Our observation is that those who are first in ability, zeal, and length of service are demoted to the last place as it pertains to rewards, and that it is presented as something that is likely to happen often. “Many who are first, will be last” (Mk. 10:31). This statement implies that pride is a sin which is easily committed by men who are in the position of the Twelve, i.e., men who have made sacrifices for the kingdom of God. Observation proves this is a fact. Furthermore, it teaches us that there are certain circumstances in which those who work hard and deny self are especially prone to
fall into the sin of self-righteousness. What are those circumstances? We will make that clear by illustrating the deep and, to most people who see this for the first time, obscure saying of Jesus.

**The Sin of Self-Righteousness**

1. Those who make sacrifices for Christ’s sake are in danger of falling into a self-righteous thinking pattern when they only practice self-denial on rare occasions (rather than sacrificing as a way of life). In such cases, Christians attend to emergencies with their emotions elevated far above the usual level of their moral feelings. Therefore, though they may perform heroically at the time the sacrifice is made, afterwards they return with pride to their routines like an old soldier who recounts his battles. They are like Peter who, with pride because of the fact that he had forsaken all, asks: “What then will there be for us?” (Mt. 19:27). Truly, this is a state of mind that is to be greatly feared. A society in which spiritual pride and satisfaction with self prevails is in a bad state. Anyone who possesses prophetic insight into the moral laws of the universe can predict what will happen. The religious community that thinks of itself first will gradually fall behind in gifts and graces, and some other religious community that it despises will gradually advance onward until the two finally come to the place where they have changed places. And everyone will see it.

2. Those who make sacrifices for the kingdom of God are in greater danger of falling when there is some work of service that is held in higher esteem than another. As an example, take those who endured physical tortures and death during times of persecution. It is well known that there was an uproar of admiration for martyrs and confessors as they suffered in the early centuries of the church. Those who suffered martyrdom were almost deified by the enthusiastic masses. The anniversaries of their deaths - they called them their birthdays (natalitia) into the eternal world - were observed with religious solemnity. Their works and sufferings in this world were recounted with great admiration as they were eulogized far too much. Even the confessors who had suffered, but had not died for Christ, were looked up to as a superior order of beings who were set apart from common, untested Christians by a wide chasm. It was believed that they were saints with a halo of glory around their heads; that they had power with God and could bind or loose with even more authority than the regular ecclesiastical authorities. Absolution was eagerly sought from them by those who had fallen into some sin. Admission to their communion was regarded as an open door by which sinners might return to the fellowship of the church. All the confessors had to do was to say to those who erred, “Go in peace,” and even bishops had to receive them. Bishops joined with the common people in this idolatrous worship of the men who suffered for Christ’s sake. They pampered and flattered the confessors, partly because they admired them, but also partly because of policy. These bishops wanted to inspire others to imitate the confessors’ example and to foster the virtue of bravery which was so needed in times of suffering.
These attitudes in the church placed the souls of those who endured hardship for the truth in great danger. Their thinking tempted them to fanaticism, vanity, spiritual pride, and presumption. And by no means were they all temptation-proof. Many took all the praise they received as if they deserved it. They thought of themselves as very important people. The soldiers were flattered by their generals to make them brave. They began to act as if they were the masters. For example, a letter to one of the bishops who had been extravagant in his eulogies states: *All the confessors to Cyprian the bishop: Know that we have granted peace to all those of whom you have had an account what they have done: how they have behaved since the commission of their crimes; and we would that these presents should be by you imparted to the rest of the bishops. We wish you to maintain peace with the holy martyrs.* So this saying, “Many that are first shall be last,” was fulfilled in these confessors. Though they were first in suffering for the truth and for having a godly reputation, they became last in the judgment of the great Searcher of hearts. They gave their bodies to be scourged, maimed, and burned. Yet it profited them little or nothing.

3. The first are in danger of becoming last when self-denial is reduced to a system. This happens when it is practiced ascetically, not for Christ's sake, but for one's own sake. Nobody will deny that the deprived ascetic is entitled to rank, first because of the amount of self-denial he practiced. But his right to rank, first in genuine spiritual worth, and therefore in the divine kingdom, is more open to debate. Even with respect to the essential matter of getting rid of self, he may be last - not first. The self-denial of the ascetic is, in a very subtle way, no more than intense self-assertion. True Christian self-sacrifice takes place during hardship and losses that are suffered when truth cannot be maintained without sacrifice. This must be done for Christ's sake, not for one's own sake. But the self-sacrifice of the ascetic is not about this kind of sacrifice. He endures it for his own sake, for his own spiritual benefit and credit. He practices self-denial in the same way the miser does. The miser abstains from all luxuries and even denies himself the necessities of life, because he has a passion for hoarding. Like the miser, the ascetic thinks of himself as being rich. But he and the miser are both poor. The miser is poor because he cannot part with his wealth to buy commodities that he could enjoy. The ascetic is poor because his coins - his good works and painful acts of abstinence - are counterfeit and will not be considered genuine in the kingdom of heaven. All his work to save his soul will turn out to be rubbish that will burn up. If he is saved at all, it will be “as by fire” (I Cor. 3:15).

*Three Classes of Cases*
Recall now, for a moment, the three classes of cases in which the first are in danger of becoming last. We believe that the word *many* is not an exaggeration. Consider how much of the work that is done by professing Christians belongs to one of these categories: (1) occasional efforts; (2) good works of generosity and philanthropy, which are popular and highly esteemed in the religious world; and (3) good works done, not so much because there is interest in the work, but because the work reflects on the doer’s own religious interests. Many are called to work in God’s
vineyard, and many are actually at work. But few are chosen; few are choice workers. Few work for God in the spirit of the precepts that are taught by Jesus.

Even though there are only a few such workers, there are some. Jesus does not say all who are first shall be last, and all who are last will be first. His word is many. There are numerous exceptions to the rule in both of its parts. Everyone who bears the heat and burden of the day are not mercenary and self-righteous. No. The Lord has always had a noble band of workers in His spiritual vineyard. If these people boasted at all, it might have been because of the length, the difficulty, and the efficiency of their service. But they did not harbor prideful thoughts, nor did they give in to making calculations about how much more they should receive than others. Think about devoted missionaries who go to foreign lands. Think about heroic reformers like Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Latimer. Think about eminent people in our own day who have recently died. Can you imagine these people talking like the early laborers in the vineyard? No way! All through life, their thoughts about themselves and their service were very humble. At the close of life's day, their day's work seemed to them to be a very sorry matter, totally undeserving of the great reward of eternal life. Such first ones will not be last.

If there are some who are first that will not be last, then without a doubt, there will be some who are last that will not be first. If it were otherwise - if to be last in the length of service, in zeal, and devotion gave anyone an advantage, it would ruin the interests of the kingdom of God. In fact, it would encourage laziness, and people would stand around all day long in idleness, serving the devil until the eleventh hour. Then they would enter the vineyard in their old age and give the Lord a poor hour's work when their limbs were stiff and their bodies were feeble and unsteady. No such demoralizing law exists in the divine kingdom. All other things being equal, the sooner a person begins, the longer and the more earnestly a person is able to serve God; the harder he works, the better for him in the hereafter. If those who begin late in the day are graciously treated, it is in spite of their tardiness, not because of it. The fact that they have been idle so long is not to be commended - it is a sin. They should not congratulate themselves. Rather, they ought to feel deep humiliation. If it is wrong for those who greatly served the Lord to glory in their wonderful service, it is surely still more out of line - it is ridiculous - for anyone to take pride in the smallness of his own. If the first does not have a reason for boasting and self-righteousness, the last has even less.

The incident that is recorded in these sections of Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels happened while Jesus and His disciples were going up to Jerusalem for the last time. They had retired to Ephraim after Lazarus was raised from the dead (Jn. 11:54). Now they were leaving Ephraim, which is in the wilderness, and going to Jerusalem by way of Jericho. So the request that came to Jesus from the two sons of Zebedee (James and John) - an ambitious request for the highest places of honor in the kingdom - was made a little more than a week before their Lord was crucified. How little they must have expected concerning events about to happen! But it was not because they weren’t warned. Just before they presented their request, Jesus had explicitly announced His approaching death for the third time. He indicated to them that His death would take place in connection with this present visit to Jerusalem. He also added other details about His last sufferings that He had not previously mentioned. They were designed to attract their full attention. Specifically, He mentioned that His death would be centered around a judicial process, that He would be delivered up by the Jewish authorities to the Gentiles, and that He would be mocked, scourged, and crucified (Mt. 20:17-19; Mark adds spitting to his list of insults in 10:34).

After Luke records Christ’s third announcement of His death, he adds: “And they (the disciples) understood none of these things, and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said” (18:34). Two things are evident from the events that transpired next. First, the truth of Luke’s comment is apparent. Second, the cause of their lack of comprehension is made clear. We believe that the disciples were thinking about other things while Jesus spoke to them about His approaching sufferings. They were dreaming about the thrones they had been promised in Perea. Consequently, they were unable to join their Master in His thoughts, because His were totally different from their own. Their minds were completely possessed by romantic expectations and were dizzy with the sparkling wine of empty hope. As they came closer and closer to the holy city, their firm conviction was “that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Lk. 19:11).

The Plot of James and John

While all of the disciples were looking forward to their thrones, James and John were coveting the most distinguished ones. They even devised a plan for getting these thrones. As a result,
they started an argument over who would be the greatest. These were the same two disciples who made a name for themselves by resenting the rudeness of the Samaritans who refused them lodging for the night. The most zealous of the Twelve were also the most ambitious. This insight will not be surprising to students of human nature. In the case of the Samaritans, the disciples asked that fire be sent from heaven to consume them. In the present situation, they ask for a favor from Heaven that will elevate them above their friends. The two requests are not that dissimilar.

While these two brothers were scheming and carrying out their little plot, they had help from their mother. Her presence is not explained in the text, but it may have been due to her having become an attendant for Jesus after she was widowed (cf. Mk. 15:41). Or, she could have accidentally met Him and His disciples at the intersection of the roads that converged on Jerusalem. All of them were going there to keep the feast. Salome, James’ and John’s mother, was the main actor in this scene, and it must be admitted that she acted her part well. Kneeling before Jesus, as if she were paying homage to a king, she humbly asked Jesus for a favor in order to make her more specific request known to Him. She was gently asked, “What do you wish?” (Mt. 20:21). And she responded, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left” (vs. 21).

This prayer certainly did not originate from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And the plan behind the request is certainly not one that we would have expected from the companions of Jesus. Yet, the picture before us is so much in line with human nature that we cannot help but feel this is not a myth. Rather, it is a genuine piece of history. We know that a large portion of the world’s spirit can be found at all times in religious circles where the leadership has a reputation for zeal, devotion, and holiness. We have no right to throw up our hands in amazement when we see it appearing again - even with Jesus’ disciples. The Twelve were still only baby Christians. We must allow them time to become sanctified. Therefore, we need to avoid two extremes: We should not be offended by their conduct, nor should we try to hide their true character in order to save their reputations. We are not surprised at the behavior of the two sons of Zebedee, and yet we can say very clearly that their request was foolish and offensive. It indicates they were bold in presuming the positions for themselves, exercised gross stupidity, and were totally selfish.

It was an irreverent and presumptuous request. They virtually asked Jesus their Lord to become the tool of their ambition and vanity. Maybe they thought He would give in to simple solicitation. Perhaps they reasoned He would not have the heart to deny a request that came from a female, especially one who, as a widow, was an object of compassion, and who had some claim to His gratitude since she contributed to His support. Whatever the reason, they begged a favor which Jesus could not grant without His being untrue to His own character and teaching (for example, the discourse on humility that He gave in the house at Capernaum). By doing this,
they were guilty of a disrespectful, unwise aggressiveness that was characteristic of an ambitious spirit. They had absolutely no sensitivity. Their spirits pressed on to achieve the goal, irrespective of any hurt it might cause. They had no concern about how it could wound the feelings of others.

The request was as ignorant as it was presumptuous. Their concept of the kingdom completely missed the mark of truth and reality. James and John not only thought the coming kingdom was to be a kingdom of this world, but they also had a low view of the kingdom. When the highest positions - even in a secular state - can be obtained through solicitation and favor, corruption and unhealthy conditions exist. The only reason a position should ever be held is because the person holding it is the most qualified. When family influence or manipulation are the pathways to power, every patriot has a reason to mourn. How preposterous, then, that anyone could think promotion is possible in the divine, ideally-perfect kingdom through means that are not even allowed in any well-regulated secular kingdom! To favor this idea is, in effect, to degrade and dishonor the Divine King. It makes Him look like a despot who does not have any principles, and who has more favors for flatterers than for honest men. It also caricatures the divine kingdom by comparing it to the most misgoverned countries on earth, such as those ruled by a Bomba (Ferdinand II, 1810-1859, King of the Two Sicilies), or Nero (Roman Emperor from A.D. 54-68).

The request by these two brothers was also selfish. They were not thinking about their fellow disciples. Rather, they were attempting to surpass them. And, like all such attempts, it produced conflict, disturbed the peace of the family circle, and created bitter feelings between them. “And hearing this, the ten became indignant at the two brothers” (Mt. 20:24). No wonder. If James and John did not anticipate this response, it just demonstrated that they were only consumed with their own selfish thoughts. And if they did anticipate it and would not stop themselves from taking a course of action that was sure to cause offense, it only made their selfishness more heartless and inexcusable.

But the petition of the two disciples was selfish in a broader sense. It was selfish in relation to the public interests of the divine kingdom. It virtually meant this: “Grant us the places of honor and power, no matter what happens. We want these positions even though everyone associated with us will become unhappy and disloyal, and what follows will be disorder, disaster, and chaotic confusion.” These consequences are certain to follow any promotion that is granted as a favor rather than by merit, both in the church and state. Many a nation has discovered this truth the hard way when trials have come their way. It is true, James and John never dreamed about the disaster that would come by having their petition granted. Self-seekers and position-hunters never anticipate evil consequences that come from their promotions. But that does not make them less selfish. It only shows that, besides being selfish, they are vain.
Jesus’ Response

Jesus’ reply to this ambitious request was mild when compared with its character. The presumption, aggressiveness, selfishness, and pride of James and John must have been offensive to Jesus’ meek, holy, and humble spirit. But He did not directly rebuke them. He dealt with them as a father might deal with a child who made a ridiculous request. He abstained from criticizing their serious faults which were brought to light by their petition. He noticed only the least of their faults - their ignorance. He said to them quietly, “You do not know what you are asking for” (Mt. 20:22). Even this comment was made with compassion rather than with blame. He felt compassion for people who offered prayers which, if answered, would lead to painful consequences that they could not foresee. It was in this spirit that He asked the question: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mk. 10:38).

There was more than compassion or correction in this question. There was even more than instruction about the true way for obtaining promotion in the kingdom of God. By His question, Jesus taught His disciples that promotions in His kingdom were not granted as favors. The way to thrones was the via dolorosa (“the way of sadness”) of the cross. The palm-bearers in the realms of glory would be those who had passed through great tribulation. The princes of the kingdom would be those who had drunk most deeply from His cup of sorrow. For those who refused to drink of the cup - those who were selfish, self-indulgent, ambitious, and vain - there would be no place at all in the kingdom, much less places of honor on His right or left hand.

The startling question asked by Jesus did not surprise James or John. They replied quickly and firmly, “We are able.” Had they really thought about the cup and the baptism of suffering and deliberately made up their minds to pay the costly price for the coveted prize? Had the sacred fire of the martyr spirit already been kindled in their hearts? We would love to believe that. But we are afraid there is nothing to justify this favorable opinion. It is much more probable that the two brothers, who were eager to obtain their reward, were ready to promise anything. They did not know, nor did they care, what they were promising. Their confident response resembles the bravado spoken by Peter a few days later: “Even though all may fall away, yet I will not” (Mk. 14:29).

Jesus did not choose to question the heroism that was so outwardly professed. Rather, He assumed that they were not only able, but willing - even eager - to participate in His sufferings. With the air of a king who is granting to his special friends the privilege of drinking out of the royal wine-cup and bathing from the royal pitcher, He replied: “The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (Mk. 10:39). It was a strange favor that the King granted! If they had known the meaning of His words, the two brothers might have thought that their Master was indulging in a stroke of irony at their expense. Yet this was not the case. Jesus was not mocking His disciples. He was not offering them a stone instead of bread. He was speaking seriously and promising what He intended to grant
them. When the time came for them to receive what Christ had promised - and it did come - they regarded it as a real privilege. For all the Apostles agreed with Peter that those who were reproached for the name of Christ were to be considered blessed and had the spirit of glory and of God resting on them. We believe this was the thinking of James when Herod had him executed with the sword (Acts 12:2). This was the thinking of John when he was on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9).

Jesus first promised the two disciples a favor they did not want. Then He explained that the favor they did want was not His to give unconditionally: “But to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father” (Mt. 20:23). The King James Version suggests the idea that the granting of rewards in the kingdom is not in Christ’s hands at all. That, however, is not what Jesus meant to say. Rather, He was saying that it was not in His power to grant places of honor out of partiality and favor. But it is His prerogative to assign citizens their rightful places in His kingdom. They will be assigned in accordance with the principles of justice and the sovereign will of His Father. When the words are paraphrased, they read: “I can say to anyone, ‘Come, drink of My cup,’ for there is no risk of any harm coming from favoritism with this offer. But that is all I can offer. I cannot say to anyone that I please, ‘Come, sit beside Me on a throne.’ For each person must get the place that is prepared for him and the one for which he is prepared.”

This solemn saying of our Lord does not infer that one may taste the cup and yet lose the crown. At first, His words seem not only to suggest this thought but to make the inference necessary. He was not teaching that there is no relationship between how much a disciple may have had fellowship with Christ in His cross and the place that will be assigned to him in the eternal kingdom. Jesus had no intention of teaching this doctrine. This is evident from the question He had asked just before He made the statement we are now considering. His comments imply a natural relationship between the cup and the throne, the suffering and the glory. The sacrifice and the great reward that were so closely joined in the promise made to the Twelve in Perea are separated here. The purpose is to let everyone know the effort that is made to exclude all corrupt influences from the kingdom of heaven. There is no doubt that those who receive the honored favor of suffering with Jesus in tribulation will be rewarded with high promotion in the eternal kingdom. Jesus’ words also do not compromise the sovereignty of the Father and Lord of all. On the contrary, they establish it. There is no better argument to support the doctrine of election than the simple truth that affliction is the education for heaven. For in what does the sovereign hand of God appear more memorably than in the appointment of crosses? If crosses would let us alone, we would let them alone. We do not choose the bitter cup and the bloody baptism. We are chosen for them, and in them. God presses people into the warfare of the cross. And if any come to glory in this way, as many a drafted soldier has done, it will be to a glory to which they did not aspire (at least at the beginning).
Suffering and Glory
The connection between suffering and glory serves to defend as well as to establish the doctrine of election. When viewed in relation to the world to come, that doctrine seems to lay God open to the charge of partiality and is certainly very mysterious. But look at election as it bears on the present life. From that point of view, it is a privilege for which the elect are not likely to be envied. The elect are not those who are happy and prosperous but are workers and sufferers (Euripides said, “I have never heard it said that sons born to mortals of divine paternity were happy”). In fact, they are not elected for their own sakes but for the world’s sake. They are God’s pioneers involved in the rough, dreaded work of turning the wilderness into a fruitful field. They are to be the world’s salt, leaven, and light. For the most part, they will receive little thanks for the service they render. They often get what the destitute, the afflicted, and the tormented get for their reward. So election is a favor to the non-elect. It is God’s method of benefiting people at large. And whatever unique benefit is in store for the elect, it is well-earned. There should be no complaining about it. Does anyone envy what is going to come to them in the future? That person could also have the same future joy - if he is willing to become a friend of such miserable beings and share their tribulations now.

It is not necessary to explain that Jesus did not mean to deny the means of prayer by saying, “You may ask for a place in the divine kingdom and not get it. It all depends on what God has ordained.” He only wanted for the two disciples and everyone else to understand something important. To obtain their requests, they must know what they are asking for and accept all that is implied, in the present as well as in the future, in the answers to their prayers. This condition is too often overlooked. Many bold, ambitious prayers - even the ones for spiritual blessings - are offered up by petitioners who have no idea what the answer would involve. If they did, they would not want their prayers answered. Young Christians ask, for instance, to be made holy. But do they know the doubts, temptations, and difficult trials that go into making a great saint? Others long for a full assurance of God’s love and desire to be perfectly persuaded of their salvation. Are they willing to be deprived of the sunshine of prosperity, that in the dark night of sorrow they may see heaven’s stars? Wait just a minute! How few really do know what they are asking for! People need to be taught so much about praying for right things with an intelligent mind and a right spirit!

Humility
After Jesus said what had to be said to James and John, He spoke a timely and appropriate word to their fellow-disciples about humility. For even though the Ten were the ones who were offended, the same ambitious spirit was in them. Otherwise, they would not have felt such resentment toward James and John. Pride and selfishness may provoke and grieve those who are humble and selfless, but they cause resentment to arise only in those who are proud and selfish.
The best way to guard against the attacks that come from other people's feelings is to get rid of similar feelings in one's own heart. “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Then you will do nothing in strife or pride.

“And hearing this, the ten became indignant at the two brothers” (Mt. 20:24). Without a doubt, a very stressful situation occurred. It is extremely disappointing to witness these kinds of situations. A godly picture of brothers living together in unity could have been seen. But the men around Jesus were real people, not the imaginary creations of a romance writer. In all real human relationships - in happy homes, in the most elite fraternities (scientific, literary, or artistic), in Christian churches - storms will arise every now and then. Let us be thankful that the Twelve, even in their foolishness, gave their Master an occasion for speaking the noble words that are recorded here. They shine down on us from the serene sky of the gospel story like stars that appear through the tempestuous clouds of human passion. Obviously, they are the words of a Divine Being, even though they are spoken out of the depths of an amazing self-humiliation.

Jesus was very compassionate and low-key as He addressed His angry disciples. He gathered the Two and the Ten, the offenders and the offended, around Him as a father might meet together with his children when they need to be corrected. He spoke to them with the calmness and solemnity of someone who is about to face death. Throughout this whole situation, death's sobering influence plays heavily on the Savior's spirit. Doesn't He speak about His approaching sufferings by using language that reminds us of the night of His betrayal? Doesn't He describe His passion by using the poetic, sacramental name “My cup”? Doesn't He reveal, for the first time, the secret of His life on earth - the grand purpose for which He is about to die?

As to its moral significance, Jesus' doctrine at this time was a repetition of His teaching in Capernaum when He chose the little child for His text. He said at that time, “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 18:4). And now He says here, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant” (Mk. 10:43). In the first discourse, His model and His text was an infant. Now it is a servant, another representative of those that are poor and desppicable. As before, He quotes His own example to enforce His teaching. He stimulates His disciples to seek honor by taking the path of humble love by representing the Son of Man as the one who did not come to be served, but to serve, even to the point of giving His life a ransom for many. Then He reminded them that the Son of Man came like a shepherd, to seek and to save the lost sheep.

**Two Kingdoms**
The new feature in the lesson which Jesus gave His disciples at this time is the contrast between His kingdom and the kingdoms of this world. The difference lay in the way power was acquired. He said, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them;
and their great men (provincial governors, often more tyrannical than their superiors) exercise authority over them; but it is not so among you” (Mk. 10:42-43a). There is a hint here at another contrast besides the one that is primarily intended. That contrast is between the harsh despotic rule of worldly leaders and the gentle dominion of love which is the only kind of rule that is allowed in the divine kingdom. But the main goal of the words He spoke is to point out the difference in the way power is acquired rather than in the way it is used. The idea is this: “Earthly kingdoms are ruled by a class of people who possess their rank because of heredity - the aristocracy, nobles, or princes. The governing class are those who rule by birthright. They pride themselves on the fact that they have never been in the position of a servant but have always been served. In My kingdom, on the other hand, a person becomes great and a ruler by first being the servant of those over whom he is to rule. In worldly kingdoms, the ones who rule are those who have the privilege of being served; in the divine commonwealth, the ones who rule are those who consider it a privilege to serve.”

In making this contrast, of course Jesus had no intention of teaching politics. Neither did He intend to recognize or to call into question the divine right that the princes had to rule over their fellow creatures. He spoke about things as they were and as His hearers knew them to be in secular states, especially in the Roman Empire. If any political inference could be drawn from His words, it would not be in favor of absolute or hereditary privilege. Rather, He would be in favor of power being in the hands of those who earned it through faithful service, irrespective of whether they belonged to the governing class by birth. For what is beneficial in the divine kingdom cannot cause harm to secular commonwealths. The true interests of an earthly kingdom would be promoted if it was governed as closely as possible with the laws of the kingdom - laws which cannot be changed. Thrones and crowns may use hereditary succession, regardless of personal merit, in order to settle disputes. But the reality of power should always be in the hands of the one who is most capable, wise, and the most devoted to the public good.

**Jesus’ Own Example**

After Jesus had used contrast to explain the great principle of the spiritual commonwealth, that the one who would rule in it must first serve, He proceeded to strengthen the doctrine by using Himself as an example. He said to the Twelve, “Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mk. 10:44). Then he added the memorable words, “For even the son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (vs. 45).

These words were spoken by Jesus as one who claimed to be a King and aspired to be the first in a great and mighty kingdom. At the end of the sentence we must mentally supply the clause “if he seeks to obtain a kingdom.” The words were not expressed simply because it was so obviously implied in the logic of His thought. Our Lord uses His own life as an example of humility and as one whose case illustrates the truth that the way to power in the spiritual world is service. In
stating that He did not come to be served, but to serve, He does not express the whole truth. It is only the present fact. The whole truth was this: He came to serve in the first place, in order that He might be served in turn by a willing, devoted people who acknowledge Him as their Sovereign. He wants His disciples to focus on the peculiar path He takes to get His crown. What He says, in effect, is this: “I am a King, and I expect to have a kingdom. James and John were not mistaken about that. But I will obtain My kingdom in another way, different from the way secular princes get theirs. They get their thrones by succession. I get Mine by personal merit. They secure their kingdom by the right of birth. I will secure Mine by the right of service. They inherit their subjects. I buy Mine. The money used to purchase them is My own life.”

We do not know what the Twelve thought about this novel plan of getting dominion and a kingdom, especially what ideas the concluding word of their Master suggested to their minds. However, we are sure that they did not comprehend that word. It is not surprising, because Jesus’ thought was very deep. Even now, who can fully understand it? Here, we emphatically see through a glass, in mysteries (see I Cor. 13:12).

**Theological Debate**

This memorable saying has been the subject of much debate among theologians. And we certainly cannot hope to terminate the controversy by anything that we can say. His message is a deep well which has never, even until now, been comprehended. It probably never will be. It was brought in so quietly as an illustration to strengthen a moral precept. Yet it opens up an area of thought which takes us far beyond the immediate occasion when it was spoken. It raises questions in our minds which it does not solve. And yet there is little in the New Testament on the subject of Christ’s death that can be comprehended within the boundaries of its possible significance.

First of all, let us say that we do not agree with that school of critical theologians who call into question the authenticity of this word. It is strange to observe how unwilling some are to recognize Christ as the original source of the great thoughts which have become essential elements in the faith of the church. The idea of Christ’s death as a ransom is right in front of us now. With whom did it originate? Was the mind of Jesus not original enough to conceive it, that it had to be fathered by someone else? Another thing has to be considered in connection with this saying and the similar one spoken at the institution of the Supper. Jesus was deep in thought and emotions over the fact that He must die. It was inevitable that His mind would add poetic, mystical meanings to this harsh, straightforward fact. For the moment, we speak of Jesus as a man of wonderful spiritual genius, whose mind was able to cope with death. He was able to rob it of its character of being simply fate and invest it with beauty. He clothed the skeleton with the flesh and blood of an attractive system of spiritual meanings.
What Did Christ Mean?

Since we regard this precious saying as unquestionably authentic, what did Christ mean to teach by it? First, in general, and at the very least, He was indicating that there was a causal connection between His act of laying down His life and the intended result - spiritual sovereignty. And even without having any thought about the term ransom, we can see for ourselves that there is such a connection (even if we pretended for a moment that the word was absent from the text). No matter how original the method was that Jesus used for getting a kingdom, its originality is beyond dispute. This is especially true when His ways are compared with other methods of getting kingdoms - by inheritance (the most respectable way), by the sword, or by paying a sum of money as in the last days of the Roman Empire (the lowest way). And no matter how original the method of Jesus is, it has proved strangely successful. The event has proved that there must be a connection between the two things - the death on the cross and the sovereignty of souls.

Thousands of human beings - no, millions - in every age have said “Amen” with all of their hearts to John’s doxology in the book of Revelation: “To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 1:5-6). Without a doubt, Jesus was thinking about this outcome of His devotion when He spoke the words before us. In speaking them, He meant, for one thing, to emphasize the power of divine love in self-sacrifice. He also intended to assert its influence over human hearts and to win for the King of the sacred kingdom a kind of sovereignty that could not have been attained except by humbling Himself by taking the form of a bondservant. Some assert that the sole purpose of the Incarnation was to gain this power. We do not agree with this view. But we do not have any hesitation about regarding the attainment of such moral power by self-sacrifice as one result of the Incarnation. The Son of God desired to charm us away from satisfying the desires of the flesh and worshiping self. He longed to emancipate us from sin’s bondage by the power of His love, so that we might acknowledge that we are His and devote ourselves with gratitude to His services.

But there is still more in this text. Jesus not only says He is to lay down His life for the many, but that He is to lay down His life in the form of a ransom. The question is, what are we to understand by this form in which the fact of His death is expressed? Now it may be assumed that the word ransom was used by Jesus in a similar way that the Old Testament used the word. The Greek word for ransom is used in the Septuagint as the equivalent for the Hebrew word copher. There has been much discussion about the meaning of this word. But the general sense of the word is a covering. How the idea of covering is to be taken has been debated and must remain doubtful. Some say it has to do with the sense of shielding; others, in the sense of covering the same surface exactly (like one penny covers another, as an equivalent). The theological interest in the question is this: If we accept the word in the general sense of protection, then the ransom is not offered or accepted as a legal equivalent for the persons or things redeemed. Rather, the ransom would simply be offered as something which has a certain value and is received as a
favor. But let’s leave this point for the moment. What we are concerned with in connection with this text is the broader thought that Christ’s life is given and accepted for the lives of many—whether as an exact equivalent or otherwise being left indefinite. Jesus represents His death as something He voluntarily endured so that He could deliver from death the souls of the many. How or why is not clearly stated. A German theologian, who energetically fights against the Anselmian theory of satisfaction, finds in the word _ransom_ three thoughts. First, the ransom is offered as a gift to God, not to the devil. Jesus undoubtedly has in His mind the thoughts contained in Psalm 49, and speaks of devoting His life to God as He pursues His vocation. He does not subject Himself to the power of sin or to the devil. Second, Jesus presupposes that no man can offer a valuable gift that is capable of warding off death before God, either for himself or for others. In addition, He asserts that in this view, He Himself performs a service in place of many which none of them could provide for himself or for another. Third, Jesus probably had in mind also the words of Elihu in the Book of Job concerning an angel, one of a thousand, who may help ransom a man from death. So He distinguishes Himself from all other people who will certainly die. He thinks of Himself as someone who is excepted from the natural sentence of death and conceives His death as a voluntary act by which He surrenders His life to God, as in the text in Jn. 10:17-18. In extracting so much from the text, we are not stretching it too far. It seems reasonable to assume there is a mental reference to the Old Testament texts in Psalm 49 and Job 33. There also seems to be a reference to the redemption of the males among the children of Israel by paying a half of a shekel. In the light of these passages, it does not seem like we are going too far to extract these three ideas from our Lord’s words: (1) the ransom is given to God (Ps. 49:7—“Or give to God a ransom for him”); (2) it is given for the lives of people who are sentenced to die; and (3) it is available for such a purpose because the thing given is the life of an exceptional being, one among a thousand. He is not a fellow mortal doomed to die, but the Angel of Jehovah (Christ) who took on flesh in order that He may freely die. Thus, the text contains the general truth that by dying in self-sacrificing love, the Son of Man awakens in many a sense of grateful devotion that carries Him to a throne. But it also contains a more special truth. By His death He puts the many who are sentenced to death as the penalty for sin somehow in a different relation to God. They are no longer criminals but sons of God, heirs of eternal life, members of the holy commonwealth, enjoying all its privileges, redeemed by the life of the King Himself, as the half-shekel offered as the price of redemption.

These few hints must be sufficient to give us an indication of the probable meaning of the autobiographical saying in which Jesus conveyed to His disciples _their second lesson on the doctrine of the cross_. Now with two additional thoughts, we end this chapter. When He said that He did not come to be served, but to serve, Jesus did not only allude to His death, but to His whole life. The statement is a summary, in a single sentence, of His entire earthly history. The reference to His death has the force of a superlative. He came to minister, even to the extent of giving His life a ransom. While He breathes the spirit of utter humility, this saying betrays the consciousness of
superhuman dignity. If Jesus had only been a man, His language would not have been humble, but presumptuous. Why should the son of a carpenter say about Himself, “I did not come to be served?” The position and occupation of a servant was to be expected for someone of that background. The statement before us is rational and humble. It comes from one who, being in the form of God, freely assumed the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death for our salvation.
The story of Mary anointing Jesus at Bethany is a touching one. It forms part of the preface to the history of the passion as it is recorded in the synoptical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The preface is given most fully by Matthew and includes four points: first, a statement Jesus made to His disciples two days before the Passover about His betrayal; second, a meeting of the priests in Jerusalem to discuss when and how Jesus should be put to death; third, the anointing by Mary; fourth, the secret conversations between Judas and the priests. In Mark's preface, the first of these four points is omitted. Luke omits the first and third.

The four points mentioned by Matthew had one thing in common. They were all signs that the end, so often predicted, was near. At this time, Jesus does not say, “the Son of Man will be betrayed,” but “the Son of Man is betrayed to be crucified.” The ecclesiastical authorities of Israel are assembled in a solemn conference. They are not discussing the question about what should be done with the Object of their dislike. That has already been determined. No, they are planning how to do the deed of darkness in secrecy without getting caught. The Victim has been anointed by a friendly hand for the coming sacrifice. And, finally, they found someone to solve the priests' problem and pave the way, in a manner that was not expected, for accomplishing their wicked purpose.

The way the events in the introduction to the tragic history of the crucifixion are grouped together is very dramatic. First, the Sanhedrin is involved in plotting against the life of the Just One. Then Mary, out of her unspeakable love for Jesus, breaks her alabaster box in Bethany and pours its contents on the head and feet of her beloved Lord. Finally, Judas comes, offering to sell his Master for less than Mary wasted on a useless act of affection! Hatred and vileness were displayed on both sides; and true love, in the middle.

Mary's behavior with her alabaster box is a memorable event that belongs to the history of the passion because of the interpretation Jesus gave to it. His comments gave it the character of a lyric prelude to the great tragedy that was enacted on Calvary. It belongs to the history of the twelve disciples because of the negative way they viewed it. It seems that all of the disciples disapproved of her action. The only difference between Judas and the rest was that he did not...
like the situation because he was a hypocrite, while his fellow-disciples were honest in their judgment and in their motives. By their finding fault with Mary, they actually performed a good service for her. They actually retained Jesus for her as her defender. In the future, they themselves would praise and honor her. Their rebuke to her moved the Lord to make the extraordinary statement that wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, Mary’s act would be mentioned in memory of her. When the fault-finding disciples became Apostles, they helped to fulfill this prophecy. They felt obligated by the commandment of their Master, as well as by the kind reaction of their own hearts, to make amends to Mary for the wrong they had done. So they told the story of her true love for Jesus wherever they told the story of His true love for people. Then, at the right time, the touching narrative found its way from their lips into the Gospel records. It will be read with great delight by true Christians until the end of time. It is true that almost anyone could be content to be criticized for a little while if he knew Jesus would courageously defend his cause and that the Apostles would deeply repent!

When we consider who it was that defended Mary, we must be satisfied that it was not simply a loving act, but a just one. It is certainly a defense that has a most surprising character! It seems as if the disciples went to one extreme and passed blame, while their Lord went to the other extreme and offered praise. It was as if by praising the woman of Bethany He was only repeating her extravagance in another form. One feels tempted to ask: “Was her action so supremely deserving of being associated with the gospel throughout all time?” Further questions arise when we consider the explanation of the action taken by Jesus: Did Mary have any thoughts about His death and burial while she was performing this act of love? Does Jesus transfer to her His own feelings and add to her act a poetic significance which was not a part of it but, rather, something that was in His own thoughts? If so, can we endorse the judgment He pronounced? Or, must we vote like the Twelve (against their Master) on the question of the intrinsic worth of Mary’s act?

**Two Admissions About Mary’s Act**

As for us, we take Christ’s side of the question. In doing so, we can admit two things. First, we admit that Mary had no thoughts about embalming the dead body of Jesus. It is possible that she was not thinking of His death at all when she anointed Him with the precious ointment. Her action was simply a festive honor that she did to someone she loved with all of her heart. She may have done the same thing at another time. We admit, secondly, that it would certainly have been extravagant to talk about Mary’s deed, no matter how noble, as being connected with the gospel everywhere and throughout all time, unless it were appropriate for it to be mentioned for the gospel’s sake and not merely for her sake. What we are saying is this: It had to be capable of expounding the nature of the gospel. In other words, the breaking of the alabaster box must be worthy to be used as a symbol for the deed of love that was performed by Jesus in dying on the cross.
The Alabaster Box as a Symbol

We believe this is the case. Wherever the gospel is truly preached, the story of the anointing is sure to be prized as the best possible illustration of the spirit which moved Jesus to lay down His life. It also represents the spirit of Christianity as it manifests itself in the lives of sincere believers. The breaking of the alabaster box is a beautiful symbol of Christ's love for us and of the love we owe Him. As Mary broke her box of ointment and poured out its precious contents, so Christ broke His body and shed His precious blood. Also, Christians pour out their hearts before their Lord and do not consider their lives dear to themselves (cf. Acts 20:24), for His sake. Christ's death was a breaking of an alabaster box for us. Our lives should be a breaking of an alabaster box for Him.

This spiritual relationship between Mary's act and His own deed of dying is the true key to all that is perplexing in the language of Jesus when He spoke about Mary. For example, it explains the amazing way in which He referred to the gospel in connection with it. “This gospel,” He said, as if the gospel had already been spoken about, or as if the act of anointing were the gospel. And so it was a figure, a symbol. Mary’s act which had already been done suggested to Jesus the other act about to be done by Himself. “There,” He thought to Himself, “in that broken vessel and outpoured oil, My death is foretold. In the hidden motive that produced that deed is the eternal spirit in which I offer Myself a sacrifice.” This is the thought He was expressing when He used the phrase “this gospel.” And as He was adding meaning to Mary’s deed, He was, in effect, giving His disciples their third lesson on the doctrine of the cross.

In the light of this spiritual relationship, we clearly see the true meaning of the statement that Jesus made about Mary’s act: “For when she poured this perfume upon My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial” (Mt. 26:12). It was a mystical, poetic explanation of a very poetic deed. It was not only beautiful; it was true. The anointing in Bethany has helped to preserve (to embalm, so to speak), the true meaning of the Savior's death. It has given us a symbolic act by which to understand His death. It has distributed around the cross an imperishable fragrance of self-forgetful love. It has decked the Savior's grave with flowers that will never wither. These flowers are raised for Jesus, as well as for Mary, and are a memorial stone that will endure throughout all generations. Could it not be appropriately said about such a deed, “She did it for My burial?” Wasn't it improper to suggest that her deed was wasteful and useless when it offered such an important service to the gospel?

These questions will be answered in the affirmative by all those who are convinced that the spiritual relationship we spoke about really did exist. Therefore, what we have to do now is show that our assertion is well-founded. So we will look into some details.
Three Ways Their Works Resemble One Another

There are three outstanding ways in which Mary’s “good work” in anointing Jesus resembles the good work that Jesus did by dying on the cross.

First Resemblance

First, there was a resemblance in motive. Mary did her good deed out of pure love. She loved Jesus with her whole heart. She loved Him for who He was, for what He had done for her family, and for the words of instruction she had heard from His lips when He came to their house for a visit. There was such a love in her heart for her friend, the One who had done so much for her, that some expression of that love was necessary. Yet words were inadequate for that expression. She must do something to relieve her pent-up emotions. She must get an alabaster box, break it, and pour it on Jesus. Otherwise, her heart would break.

Mary’s act closely resembles that of Jesus dying on the cross and in coming to this world that He might die. It was the same kind of love that Mary had - only deeper and stronger - that moved Him to sacrifice Himself for us. The simple reason that Christ became a man and endured what is recorded about Him is this: He loved sinners. After educated theologians wear themselves out studying the philosophy of redemption, they come back to this as the most satisfactory explanation that can be given. Jesus loved sinners so much that He lay down His life for them. We might say, “He loved them so much that He had to come and die for them.” Like Nehemiah, the Jewish patriot in the court of the Persian king, He could not stay in heaven’s court while His brothers far away on the earth were in a bad situation. He must ask and receive leave to go down to assist them (see Nehemiah 1 and 2). Or, like Mary, He must get an alabaster box (a human body), fill it with the fine essence of a human soul, and pour out His soul until He died on the cross for our salvation. The spirit of Jesus, yes, the spirit of the Eternal God, is the spirit of Mary and Nehemiah, and of everyone who thinks the same way that they think. With reverence, we should rather say the spirit of these people is the spirit of Jesus and of God. And yet it is important at times to put the matter in the other way. For somehow we are slow to believe that love is a reality for God. We almost shy away from believing that the Divine Being has attributes that we confess to be the noblest and most heroic in the human character. Perhaps we think it would be irreverent to believe it. So there is a practical value to the blessing that Jesus gave as He connected the anointing in Bethany with the crucifixion on Calvary. In effect, He says to us: “Do not be afraid to regard My death as an act that is similar to Mary’s. It is an act of pure, devoted love. Let the fragrance of her perfume circulate around the neighborhood of My cross and help you discern the sweet aroma of My sacrifice. In the midst of all your speculations and theories on the grand theme of redemption, pay attention so that you do not fail to see in My death My loving heart, and the loving heart of My Father, revealed.”
Second Resemblance

Mary’s “good work” resembled Christ’s in another way - in its self-sacrificing character. It took effort and sacrifice for that devoted woman to perform her famous act of worship. All the evangelists particularly mention how expensive the perfume was. Mark and John tell us that the complaining disciples estimated the value to be around three hundred pence (this was equal to a year’s wages for a laboring man at the then current rate of a denarius per day). This was a large sum in and of itself. But what should be more especially noted is that it was a very large sum for Mary. We learn this from Christ’s own words as recorded by the second evangelist. “She has done what she could,” He kindly remarked about her as He defended her conduct in the midst of the harsh rebukes His disciples gave. It was the same kind of comment that He made a day or two later in Jerusalem concerning the poor widow that He saw putting her two mites into the temple treasury. It implied that Mary had spent all her resources on that one gift of honor for Him whom her soul loved. All of her earnings, all of her little savings, had been given in exchange for that box. She then poured the precious contents on the Savior. Hers was no ordinary love: It was noble, heroic, self-sacrificing devotion, which made her do her best for Jesus.

In this way, the woman of Bethany resembled the Son of Man. He, too, did what He could. He willingly went through whatever was possible for a holy being to endure - humiliation, temptation, sorrow, suffering, and even becoming “sin” and “a curse.” All through His life on earth He scrupulously abstained from doing anything that might tend to make His cup of affliction fall short of absolute fullness. He denied Himself all the advantages of divine power and privilege. He emptied Himself. He made Himself poor. He became like His sinful brothers in every possible respect, yet remained sinless, so that He might qualify Himself for being a merciful and trustworthy High Priest to them in the things that pertain to God. His love imposed these kinds of sacrifices in His life and death.

While love imposes sacrifices, it compensates for the sacrifices by making them easy. It is not only love’s destiny, but it is love’s delight to endure hardships, to bear burdens for the one loved. It is not satisfied until it has found an opportunity to engage in a service that involves cost, labor, and pain. The things that selfishness avoids, love eagerly longs for. We believe these reflections are applicable to Mary. Because of the way she loved Jesus, it was easier for her to do what she did than to refrain from doing it. But love’s readiness and eagerness to sacrifice herself are most clearly exemplified in the case of Jesus Himself. It was, indeed, His pleasure to suffer for our redemption. Far from seeking to avoid the cross, He looked forward to it with sincere desire. And when the time for His passion approached, He spoke about it as the hour of His glorification. He did not have any thoughts about achieving our salvation at the smallest possible cost to Himself. Rather, His feeling was along this line: “The more I suffer, the better - the more thoroughly I will realize My identity with My brothers. The sympathetic, burden-bearing, help-bringing instincts and longings of My love will be more completely satisfied as I suffer.” Yes. Jesus had more to do
than to purchase sinners for as small a price as would be accepted for their ransom. He had to do justice to His own heart. He had to adequately express its deep compassion. And no act that was limited or measurable in its dimensions would suffice in exhausting the contents of His heart, which were immeasurable. Any suffering that was limited might satisfy divine justice (especially when endured by such a majestic person), but it could not satisfy divine love.

**Third Resemblance**

There is a third feature which made it appropriate for Mary’s “good work” to be a symbol of the Savior’s - its magnificence. This appeared in the expense she incurred with the act of anointing. Her act not only involved a sacrifice for a person of her income level but was very liberal with respect to the purpose at hand. The quantity of oil used in the service was not less than a pound (according to Jn. 12:3). This was much more than was necessary. So, she appeared to be wasteful and extravagant, even though the anointing itself was right and proper. We are not certain if the disciples would have objected to the ceremony or not. But it was evidently the extravagant amount of perfume used that displeased them. We think of them as saying something like this: “Couldn’t you have used less than you did? Most, if not all of this perfume, could have been saved for other purposes. This is simply not a wise, frugal expenditure.”

The narrow-hearted disciples thought she was extravagant. Instead, it was the princely magnificence of love. Even an unbelieving philosopher could see this. This kind of love does not consider the price by which this or that can be done. It only considers how it can be done most gracefully and generously. What seemed to them to be purposeless waste served, at least, one good purpose. It symbolized a similar characteristic of Christ’s good work as the Savior of sinners. He did His work magnificently and in no small, economical way. He accomplished the redemption for “many” by means that were adequate to redeem everyone. “With Him is plenteous redemption.” He did not measure His blood in proportion to the number to be saved. Nor did He limit His sympathies as the sinner’s friend to the elect. He shed bitter tears for doomed souls. He shed His blood without measure and without regard to numbers. He offered an atonement which was sufficient for the sins of the world. This attribute of universal sufficiency, which was attached to His atoning work, was not one He was indifferent about. On the contrary, it appears to have been in His thoughts at the very moment He uttered the words authorizing anyone to associate Mary’s deed of love with the gospel. For He speaks about that gospel as a gospel for the whole world. The essence of that gospel consisted in His work of love in dying for sinners. Evidently, He desired the aroma of His sacrifice to be diffused among all the nations just like Mary’s perfume filled the room where the guests were assembled.

We may say, therefore, that when Jesus was defending Mary against the charge of waste, at the same time, He was defending Himself. He was replying to questions that He was anticipating, questions like these: “Why weep over Jerusalem when it is doomed anyway? Why grieve for
souls that will perish anyway? Why bother with people who are not elected to salvation? Why command His gospel to be preached to every creature, with an emphasis that seems to say that He wishes everyone to be saved, when He knows only a definite number will believe the report? Why not limit His compassion and His concern to those who will be effectually benefited by them? Why not restrict His love to the channel of the covenant? Why allow it to overflow the embankments like a river that is flooded?”

These kinds of questions reveal misunderstandings about the conditions under which even the elect are saved. Christ could not save anyone unless He had the heart to save everyone. His willingness is a part of the perfect righteousness which He had to fulfill. The whole duty of the law is, “love God supremely, and your neighbor as yourself.” “Neighbor” means, for Christ as for us, everyone who needs help, and whom He can help. But not to belabor this point, we remark that such questions reveal ignorance about the nature of love. Magnificence, which is misnamed extravagance and waste by those who do not know any better, is an invariable characteristic of all true love. David recognized this truth when he was looking for a proper word-picture of brotherly love. He chose the story of Aaron when he was being installed into the office of high priest. An extravagant amount of the oil of consecration was used in his anointing (Psalm 133). There was “waste” in that anointing, too, as well as in the one which took place in Bethany. For the oil was not sprinkled on the head of Aaron, though that might have been sufficient for a simple ceremony. The vessel was emptied on the high priest, so that the oil flowed down from his head onto his beard and even to the skirts of the sacred robes. In this very waste lay the point of comparison for David. It was something that was likely to make an impression on him. For he, too, was a wasteful man in his own way. He had loved God in a manner which exposed him to being charged with extravagance. For example, he had danced before the Lord when the ark was brought up from the house of Obed-edom to Jerusalem. He forgot his dignity and exceeded the bounds of good taste. And yet he seemed to make no apology for his behavior. A much less lively demonstration of his feelings would have accomplished the purpose of a religious event (II Sam. 6).

David, Mary, and Jesus, along with all loving, devoted people, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and confessors, belong to one group of people who are all guilty of one crime. They must all plead guilty to “wasting” their affection, sorrow, labor, and tears. All lived in such a way that they earned for themselves the label of extravagance. But this is the highest praise they could receive. David dances, and Michal sneers. Prophets have their hearts broken over their people’s sins and miseries, and the people make fun of their grief. Marys break their alabaster boxes, and cold disciples object to the waste. Men of God sacrifice their all for their religious convictions, and the world calls them fools for enduring such pain. Philosophers warn them not to be martyrs and make big mistakes. Jesus weeps over sinners that will not come to Him to be saved, and thankless people ask, “Why shed tears over vessels of wrath that are prepared for destruction?”
Three Aspects of Mary’s Character
So we have seen that Mary’s good deed was a proper and worthy symbol of the good deed that Jesus did when He died on the cross. We will now show that Mary herself is, in some important respects, worthy to be lifted up as a model Christian. Three aspects of her character entitle her to this honorable name.

First
First is her enthusiastic attachment to Christ. The most prominent feature in Mary’s character was her power of loving, her capacity to devote herself to others. It was this virtue, as she demonstrated by this one act, that elicited the admiration of Jesus. He was so delighted with the generous act of love, that He, so to speak, canonized her (raised her to the highest rank of honor and glory) on the spot, like a king might confer knighthood on the battlefield on a soldier who had performed some noble feat with his weapons. “Behold,” He said in effect, “here is what I understand Christianity to be. It is an unselfish and uncalculating devotion to Me as the Savior of sinners and as the Sovereign of the kingdom of truth and righteousness. Therefore, wherever the gospel is preached, let this act that this woman has done be told, not merely so she can be remembered, but to indicate what I expect of everyone who believes in Me.”

By commending Mary in this way, Jesus helps us understand that devotion is the main Christian virtue. Later on, the same doctrine was taught by someone who, though he was the last one to become an Apostle, was first in comprehending the mind of Christ - the Apostle Paul. In his eloquent writing on love, which is so well-known to all who read his epistles, he makes eloquence, knowledge, faith, the gift of tongues, and the gift of prophecy bow down in reverence to it. Love is the sovereign virtue and is nothing more than the faithful interpretation, in general terms, of the praise Jesus spoke to the woman of Bethany. The story of the anointing and I Corinthians 13 may be read together for one’s benefit.

By making love the test and measure of excellence, Jesus and Paul, and the rest of the Apostles (later on, they all had the Master’s mind), differ greatly from the world - both the religious world and the irreligious world. Those who practice religion conscientiously, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, and those who are not conscientious or religious at all, agree in their dislike of dedicated, enthusiastic, courageous devotion, even for the most noble cause. They are wise and prudent, and their philosophy might be summed up in these brief sayings: “Do not be too accepting of your feelings, too warm in your compassion, too committed to your sense of duty. Never allow your heart to rule your head or your principles to interfere with your interest.” Dedication and devotion are disliked by many, especially dedication to something good. All the nations of the world have their own proverbs against enthusiasm. The Greeks had their saying, “Do not get carried away,” and the Romans theirs, “Nothing in excess” (a Roman expression advocating
the middle ground in all things). Those who create these proverbs and those who quote them express skepticism as to whether it is wise to be enthusiastic about anything. The world is ordinary in temperament, not poetic. It exercises prudence, not impulsiveness. It abhors that which is unconventional, whether it is good or evil. It prefers that people rise to a level of mediocrity, moderation, and self-restraint. Its model person is one who never forgets who he is. He neither lowers himself to the point of getting involved in foolish things or any wickedness, nor does he rise above himself by trying to get rid of the meanness, pride, selfishness, cowardice, and vanity in devotion to a noble cause.

The Twelve thought like the world at the time Jesus was anointed. They seem to have regarded Mary as a romantic, impractical, crazy person and believed that what she had done was absurd and indefensible. Of course, they did not object to her love for Jesus. But they thought the way she expressed that love was foolish, since the money spent on the ointment could have been used for a better purpose, like providing aid to the destitute. Jesus Himself loved nothing more than this. According to His own teaching, all actions of love toward the poor were deeds of kindness to Him. At first, one is partly inclined to say that they had reason on their side and were far wiser, though not less devoted, to Jesus than Mary. But look at their behavior on the day of their Lord's crucifixion. Look at the difference between them and her. Mary loved so deeply that she did not measure the consequences or the cost of her love. They loved so coldly that there was room for fear in their hearts. While Mary spent everything she had on the ointment, they all abandoned their Master and fled to save their own lives. So we can see that the person who does not consider what something costs is the wisest as well as the noblest. This is true even when he engages in occasional extravagances, whether apparent or real. His kind of thinking will guard him from temptations. One rash, blundering, but heroic [Martin] Luther is worth a thousand men like Erasmus, an unbelievably wise, but cold, passionless, and timid man who acted in conformity with the patterns of behavior that were prevailing during his day. Scholarship is great, but action is greater. And the power to do noble deeds comes from love.

How great is the devoted Mary compared with the cold-hearted disciples! She does wonderful deeds, and they criticize her. Criticism and fault-finding is poor work for a human being. Love does not care for it. It is too small for her generous mind. If there is room for praise, she will give that in unlimited measure. But rather than complain and blame, she prefers to be silent. Notice also how Mary's love becomes a substitute for foreknowledge. She does not know that Jesus is about to die, but she acts as if she did. Those who are like Mary can know beforehand; the instincts of love, the inspiration of the God of love, teach them to do the right thing at the right time. This is the highest attainment of true wisdom. On the other hand, we see in the case of the disciples how coldness of heart consumes knowledge and makes people ignorant. They had received far more information than Mary about the future. If they did not know that Jesus was about to be put to death, they should have known. Many hints and plain clues had been given
to them. Nonetheless, they had forgotten all of these. Why? For the same reason that makes everyone forget about the things that concern their neighbors. The Twelve were too concerned with their own affairs. Their heads were filled with empty dreams of worldly ambition. So their Master’s words were forgotten almost as soon as they were spoken. It became necessary for Him to tell them with pity and a word of rebuke: “For the poor you have with you always; but you do not always have Me” (Mt. 26:11). Men who think like these men did never understand the times. Consequently, they never know what Israel ought to do, nor do they approve the conduct of those who do know.

Second
A second feature we admire in Mary’s character was the freedom in her spirit. She was not tied down to methods and rules for doing good deeds. The disciples, judging from their language, seem to have loved methods. They were slaves to certain stereotyped modes of behavior. They said, “This perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor” (Mt. 26:9). They do understand that love shown to the poor is a very important duty. They know that their Master often referred to it; yet they make it everything. Love, in the sense of giving, is their hobby. When Judas went out to betray his Lord, they thought he had gone to distribute the leftovers from their supper to some poor people that he knew. Their ideas of doing good deeds seem to be driven by their methods. For them, good works do not seem to include all kinds of noble deeds. The phrase is technical and limited in its application to a confined circle of behaviors that are expressly and obviously religious and benevolent.

This was not true of Mary. She knows more than one way to do good. She can invent ways of her own. She is original, creative, and does not have to imitate others. She is as fearless as she is original. She not only has the capacity to think of new ways of doing good deeds, but she has the courage to put her plan to work. She is not afraid of the public and does not ask ahead of time, “What will the Twelve think about this?” With a free mind, she forms her plan, and with a prompt, free hand she immediately executes it.

The reason Mary was so free was because she had such a large heart. Love made her original in her thoughts and behavior. People without heart cannot be as original as she was. They may be motivated to do good works, but they go about them in very mechanical ways as if they were forced to do them. They have to be told what to do, either by a close friend or by following some custom or tradition. Therefore, they never do anything good unless it is popular to do. But Mary did not need a counselor. She listened to the counsel of her own heart. Love told her, without fail, what to do in that moment. Her concern was not to give alms but to anoint the great High Priest.

What we may learn from Mary’s example is that love is the mother of invention (no less than necessity is the mother of invention). A great heart has just as much to do with spiritual
originality as a clever mind. What we need, in order to fill the church with original preachers, original givers, original workers in every line of Christian ministry, is not more brains, more training, or more opportunities, but above all, more heart. When there is only a small amount of love in the Christian community, it resembles a river in dry weather. The river keeps within its banks but does not even occupy the whole channel. It leaves large beds of gravel or sand lying high and dry on both sides of the current. But when the love of God is shed abroad in the hearts of her members, the church becomes like the same river when it rains. The stream begins to rise, all the gravel beds gradually disappear and, finally, the swollen river not only fills its channel but overflows its banks and spreads itself over the meadows. Then, new methods of doing good deeds are attempted, and new levels of doing good deeds are achieved. New songs are composed. New forms of expression for old truths are devised, not for the sake of novelty, but in the creative might of a new spiritual life.

It was love that made Mary free from all fear as well as from the bondage of traditions. Someone who knew love's power said it well, "Perfect love casts out fear" (I Jn. 4:18). Love can make fearful, sensitive people bold. It can teach us to disregard that thing called "public opinion," which makes all people afraid. It was love that made Peter and John so bold when they stood before the Sanhedrin. They had been with Jesus long enough to love Him more than their own life. Therefore, they did not lose heart when they were brought before those who were powerful. It was love that made Jesus Himself so indifferent to criticism. He disregarded conventional restraints as He went about His work. His heart was so devoted to His benevolent mission that He defied the world's disapproval. He probably did not even think about it, except when it forced itself upon Him. What love did for Mary, for Jesus, and for the Apostles later on, it does for everyone. Wherever it exists in abundance, it eradicates timidity and shyness, and the foolishness that accompanies them. Love brings along with it the power of character and a sound mind. And to crown our praise for love, we might add that, while it makes us bold, it does not make us unwise. Some people are bold because they are too selfish to care for other people's feelings. Those who are bold because of love may attempt to do things which others will criticize. But they are always interested in pleasing their neighbor and avoiding offence.

Let us make one more remark about this feature in Mary’s character – the freedom in her spirit. The liberty which springs from love can never be dangerous. In these days, many people are greatly alarmed by the growth of bad theology. And we should be jealous for the Christian truth. But, on the other hand, we cannot have too much freedom if it comes from our consuming love for Christ and all the great interests we have in His kingdom. The spirit of love may seemingly treat matters too lightly, especially regarding things which clever people think are vitally important. That same spirit may be disposed to do things that people who are more concerned about order, use, and custom than freedom may consider to be liberties born out of license. But the harm done will be imaginary rather than real. Even if it were otherwise, there are never that
many impulsive Marys in the church. So only a few will have to be safely tolerated. There are always a sufficient number of common, order-loving disciples to keep their impractical brothers and sisters in check.

**Third**

Finally, the nobility of Mary’s spirit was not less remarkable than its freedom. There was no trace of popular utilitarianism (stresses the importance of *usefulness* over beauty or other considerations) in her character. She had made it a habit of thinking about those things which were honorable, lovely, and morally beautiful as opposed to that which was immediately, obviously, and materially useful. Hard, practical men might have called her a romantic, sentimental, and dreamy mystic. But a more fair and appreciative critique would represent her as a woman whose virtues were heroic and chivalrous rather than commercial. Jesus noted this important point about Mary’s character by the words which He used to describe her deed. He did not call it a useful work, but a good, or, better still, a *noble* work.

And yet, while Mary’s deed was noble, it does not imply it was not useful. All good deeds are useful in some way and at some time. All noble and beautiful things - thoughts, words, deeds - ultimately contribute to the benefit of the world. However, the usefulness of certain deeds like Mary’s - some of the best and noblest deeds - are not always apparent or appreciated. If we tested what is right by looking at its immediate, obvious, and common use, we would exclude, not only the anointing at Bethany, but all fine poems, works of art, and all sacrifices where people give up their material things in exchange for truth and duty. In fact, we would exclude everything that has not directly increased our material wealth and comfort. Included in that list would be things that have helped redeem the world from its crudeness, things that have given us glimpses of the far-off land of beauty and goodness (about which we dream every now and then), things which have brought us into contact with the divine and the eternal, things which made the earth classic ground where heroes fought and where their bones are buried, and where the moss-grown stone stands to commemorate their valor.

In this nobility of spirit, Mary was pre-eminently *the Christian*. For the genius of Christianity is certainly not utilitarian. Its counsel is: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (Phil. 4:8). All these things are emphatically useful. But it is not because of their utility but because of what they are, in and of themselves, that we are asked to think about them. And there is a very good reason for doing so. In order to be useful, we must aim at something higher than usefulness. It is the same with happiness. In order to be happy, we must aim at something higher than happiness. We must make doing what is right our duty. It has to be revealed to us by an enlightened conscience and a loving, pure heart. Then we can be sure that all kinds of uses will be served by our behavior,
whether we see them or not. On the other hand, if we focus on utility and make it our guide in making decisions, we will not accomplish the things which are the noblest and best. As a rule, the uses of these things are not as obvious, and they take longer to see. The heroic devotion of the martyr is abundantly useful to the world. But it takes centuries for the benefits of martyrdom to develop. If everyone had followed the principles of utilitarian philosophy and made usefulness their motive for doing good deeds, there would never have been any martyrs at all. Utilitarianism tends to produce defeat and people who keep track of time. It causes the death of heroism and self-sacrifice. It walks by sight and not by faith. It only looks at the present and forgets the future. It places prudence on the throne of conscience. It does not produce great characters. At best, it produces busybodies. Having considered these things, it should not surprise us that the term “usefulness,” which is used so frequently today, does not have a place in the New Testament.

Four Concluding Observations
Four further observations may be the appropriate close to these meditations on the memorable events in Bethany.

1. Mary was an example of genuine Christian piety in all of the attributes of character that have been previously mentioned. The evangelic spirit is a spirit of noble love and fearless liberty. The evangelicalism that is a slave to the past, to tradition, and to fixed customs and methods in religion is a counterfeit. The true name for this disposition and tendency is legalism.

2. From the way Christ defended Mary, we learn that being criticized is not infallible evidence of being wrong. Often, a person who is blamed is thought to have done something wrong. Those who blame believe this is the only possible reason for his being censured. But, in truth, he may have only done something unusual. For all unusual things are criticized - the unusually good as well as (rather, more than) the unusually bad. Therefore, Paul makes the apparently unnecessary comment that there is no law against love and its similar graces. In fact, these virtues are treated as if they are illegal and criminal whenever they exceed the usual, miserly limits. Wasn’t Jesus, who perfectly possessed all the heavenly graces, flung out of existence by the world because He could not be tolerated any longer? Fortunately, the world ultimately comes around to a more just opinion, although it is often too late for those who have suffered the wrong. The natives on the island of Malta who saw the snake fastened onto Paul’s hand thought he had to be a murderer. But they changed their minds when he shook the reptile off and remained unharmed. They exclaimed, “He is a god” (Acts 28:6). Therefore, we should learn this principle of wisdom: We should not be too hasty in criticizing if we want to be known as people who have insight and consistency. Rather, we should discipline ourselves to be slow to judge and think, instead, about more important matters. We ought to have respect for the character and for the personality of all intelligent, responsible people. We also ought to constantly be afraid of making the mistake
of calling good evil, and evil good. Plato said it this way: “We ought always to be very careful when about to blame or praise a man, lest we speak not rightly. For this purpose it is necessary to learn to discriminate between good and bad men. For God is displeased when one blames a person like Himself, or praises one unlike Himself. Do not imagine that stones and sticks, and birds and serpents, are holy, and that men are not. For of all things the holiest is a good man, and the most detestable a bad.”

3. If we cannot be Christians like Mary, let us at least not be disciples like Judas. Some people may think that it would not be desirable that everyone be like the woman at Bethany. They maintain that, considering the weakness of human nature, it is necessary that the romantic, impulsive, mystic school of Christians be held in check by another school of more ordinary, conservative, and common character. Perhaps they will admit that a few Christians like Mary in the church will help preserve religion from degenerating into coarseness, vulgarity, and formalism. No matter what, the church certainly does not have a need for Judases. Judas and Mary! These two represent the two extremes of human character. The one exemplifies Plato’s “the most hateful of all things,” and the other his “the most holy of all things.” Characters that are so different compel us to believe in a heaven and a hell. Each one goes to his or her own place: Mary to the “land of the leal” (a Scottish saying where the word leal means loyal, true, faithful; so the “land of the leal” is heaven), and Judas to the land of the false, who sell their consciences and their God for gold.

4. It is worthy to note how naturally and appropriately Jesus, in His magnanimous defense of Mary’s generous, large-hearted deed, rises to the full height of prophetic foreknowledge and anticipates for His gospel a world-wide diffusion: “Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her” (Mt. 26:13). Such a gospel could be nothing else than world-wide in compassion. No one who understood it and its Author could fail to have a burning desire to go into all the world and preach it to every creature. This universalistic touch in Christ’s words at this time does not take us by surprise. Rather, it seems natural. Even critics from the naturalistic school allow it genuineness. One of the ablest writers on the gospel history who belongs to this school (Keim), says, “This word in Bethany is the solitary quite reliable word of the last period of Christ’s life concerning the world-wide career which Jesus saw opening up for Himself and His cause.” Therefore, if the Twelve remained narrow Judaists to the end, it was not because the universalistic element in their Master’s teaching was missing, but because they were unable to appreciate Mary’s act and the gospel of which it was a symbol. We do not believe, however, that they continued in this way. And the best evidence of this is that the story of Mary of Bethany has attained a place in the Gospel records.
John 12:20-33
This story contains interesting points that are similar to the ones recorded in John 4 - the story of the woman by the well. In both situations, Jesus comes into contact with people who are not a part of the Jewish church. In both, He takes the opportunity to speak in vivid terms about a time that is coming (no, about a time which has come) which will usher in a glorious new era for the kingdom of God. In both, He uses the most intense, emphatic terms to express His devotion to His Father’s will, His faith in the future spread of the gospel, and His great hope of gaining a personal reward in glory (Jn. 6:34-36). Finally, in both stories, He uses agricultural metaphors to express His thoughts. With the woman at the well, He borrows His figure of speech from the process of reaping. In the narrative before us, He uses the metaphor of sowing.

But even though there are similarities, there are also marked differences in these two passages from the life of the Lord Jesus. The most notable one is this: With the woman at the well, Jesus felt nothing but enthusiasm, joy, and hope. Now these feelings are blended with deep sadness. His soul is not only elated about His hope for the glory that is coming, but it is troubled as He anticipates the impending disaster. The reason is because His death is about to take place. Within three days He must be lifted up on the cross, and every human being tries to avoid the bitter cup of suffering.

While we observe the presence of a new emotion, we also see that its presence does not stop the old emotions that Jesus manifested when he interviewed the woman of Samaria. On the contrary, the nearness of His death allows the Savior the opportunity to give greater intensity to the expression of His devotion, faith, and hope. In the past, He said that doing His Father’s will was more important than food. Now He says, in essence, that it is more important than life (Jn. 12:28). At the beginning, He had seen, with the eye of faith, a vast number of fields that were already white for the harvest. They were in the wilderness of the Gentiles. Now, He not only continues to see these fields in the face of His approaching passion, but He sees them as the fruit of it. He sees a whole world of golden grain growing out of one seed of wheat that is thrown to the ground. It produces fruit by its own death (vs. 24). At the well of Sychar (Jn. 4:5-6), He had spoken with a living hope about the rewards that were in store for Him, and for all fellow-laborers in the kingdom of God, whether they were sowers or reapers. Here, death is swallowed.
up in victory by the power of His hope. To suffer is to enter into glory. To be lifted up on the cross is to be exalted to heaven and seated on the throne of a world-wide dominion (12:23,32).

**About the Greek Men**
The men who wanted to see Jesus while He stood in one of the courts of the temple were Greeks (Jn. 12:20). We do not know where they came from - whether from east or west, from north or south. But they were evidently determined to enter into the kingdom of God. They had already come a long distance on their way to the kingdom. The assumption, at least, is that they had left paganism behind and had embraced the faith of one living, true God, as the Jews taught. At this time, they had come up to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover as Jewish proselytes. But it seems that they did not have rest in their souls. There was something more to be known about God that was still hidden from them. They hoped to learn about this from Jesus. Somehow they had become acquainted with His name and fame. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself to them to communicate with one of the men who belonged to His company, they respectfully told him about their desire to meet his Master. They said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (Jn. 12:21). By themselves, the words might be nothing more than a curious desire to get a momentary glimpse of someone who had the reputation of being a remarkable man. However, this interpretation must be rejected on the grounds that their request awakened deep emotions in Jesus’ heart. Idle curiosity would not have moved His soul in this way. Also, the idea that these Greeks were simply curious strangers is completely inconsistent with the manner in which the story is introduced. John inserts the present narrative immediately after quoting a statement that was made by the Pharisees about the popularity that was growing for Jesus because He had raised Lazarus from the dead. They said, “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him” (vs. 19). In essence, John answers, “Yes, indeed, and to an extent that you cannot imagine. The One you hate is beginning to be sought after, even by Gentiles that have come a long way. The history that is coming will demonstrate that what I am saying is true.”

We are thinking correctly, then, to regard the Greek strangers as sincere inquirers. They were true seekers after God. They were genuine spiritual descendants of their illustrious countrymen, Socrates and Plato, whose written or unwritten sayings were one long prayer for light and truth, one deep, unconscious longing for a look at Jesus. They wanted to see the Savior, not only with the body, but, above everything else, with the eye of the spirit.

**Philip and Andrew**
The part that was played by Philip and Andrew needs to be mentioned briefly. They had the honor of being the means of communication between the representatives of the Gentile world and the One who had come to fulfill the desire of all the nations and be their Savior. The devout Greeks introduced themselves to Philip, and he, in turn, counseled with Andrew about
the matter. We do not know how Philip was selected to receive the request from these Gentile inquirers. Some have noted that the name Philip is Greek, implying a probability that he had Greek connections. There is even the possibility that he had previous contact with these men. There may be something to these conjectures, but it is more important to note that the Greeks were happy with their choice of an intercessor. Philip himself was an inquirer. So he had compassion on all those who thought the same way he did. The first time he is mentioned in the Gospel history, he is introduced as someone who is sharing his faith in Jesus with others. He had carefully sought the truth, and once he found what he was looking for, he tried to have others share in the blessing. “Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, ‘We have found Him, of whom Moses in the Law, and the Prophets, wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (Jn. 1:45). The exactness and fullness of this confession tells us much about his careful and conscientious search. Philip still has an inquirer’s temperament. A day or two after this meeting with the Greeks, we find him making another important request: “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (Jn. 14:8).

Why doesn’t this compassionate disciple take the Greeks’ request directly to Jesus? Why does he take Andrew with him? Is he afraid to go alone on such an errand, just because the ones asking are Greeks and Gentiles? It is one thing to introduce a devout Jew like Nathanael to Jesus. It is quite another thing to introduce Gentiles, no matter how devout they are. Philip is pleased that they are inquiring about his Master, but he is not sure how appropriate it would be to act on his first impulse. He hesitates. He is very excited about what he perceives to be a new thing, a significant event, the beginning of a religious revolution. His tendency is to become an intercessor for the Greeks. But he distrusts his own judgment. So, before he acts on it, he presents the case to his fellow-disciple and fellow-townsman, Andrew. He wants to know how the matter strikes him. The result of this consultation was that the two disciples went to tell their Master. They felt perfectly safe in mentioning the matter to Him and then in allowing Him to do as He pleased.

Jesus’ Response to the Seekers
From John’s narrative, we learn that the communication from the two disciples powerfully stirred the soul of Jesus. When people who were strangers to the commonwealth of Israel (non-Jews) showed an openness to spiritual matters, Jesus’ heart was always moved. The following people, for instance, touched Him deeply: the people of Sychar who were so open-minded; the Roman centurion who had such simple faith; the Syro-Phoenician woman who had a quick-witted faith; and the Samaritan leper who was so grateful. These expressions of spiritual life that were manifested from different areas of the country, came upon His spirit like breezes on an Æolian harp (a simple stringed instrument that is made to sound by the currents of air. It is usually placed at or near an open window and consists of a box of thin wood in which are stretched numerous strings of equal length, tuned in unison) and produced the sweetest tones of faith, hope, joy, and love. On the other hand, these winds sometimes produced sad, mournful tones
of disappointment and sorrow, like the sighing of the autumn wind among Scottish pines. This occurred when He thought about the unbelief and spiritual deadness of the chosen people for whom He had done so much (Jn. 12:37-43). His heart had never been more deeply affected than at this time. It should not surprise us! What sight is more moving than that of a human being seeking after God who is the fountain of light and of life! The spontaneity of these Greek inquirers is also beautiful. In this unspiritual, unbelieving world, it is something to be thankful for when people here and there respond to God's call and receive His Word which has been spoken to them. But here we have the rare occurrence of men coming who have not been called. They were not sought after by Christ. They did not accept Him because He offered Himself to them as a Savior and Lord. They sought after Him and begged for a great favor. They wanted to be admitted into His presence so they could offer Him their sincere worship and hear Him speak the words of eternal life. They have come from an unusual place. It is even more worthy to take note of the fact that they came at a very critical time. Jesus is just about to be conclusively rejected by His own people, just before He is crucified by them. Some have shut their eyes, stopped up their ears, and hardened their hearts against Him and His teaching. Others, who could plainly see His good points, have mealy and heartlessly hidden their convictions. They were afraid of the consequences of making a public confession. The saying of Isaiah has been fulfilled in His bitter experience, “Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Is. 53:1). Pharisaism, Sadduceeism, ignorance, indifference, fickleness, and cowardice have confronted Him on every side. These people who contradicted themselves were ignorant and so spiritually dead that they could not be moved from their position. And in the midst of all of this, Jesus experienced the refreshing words that were brought to Him at the eleventh hour: “Here are certain Greeks who are interested in You and want to see you!” The words fall on His ears like a chorus of sweet music. The news revives His burdened spirit like the sight of a spring to a weary traveler in a sandy desert. In the fullness of His joy, He exclaims: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn. 12:23). Rejected by His own people, He is consoled by the inspiring assurance that He will be believed on in the world. He will be accepted by all the nations for all of their salvation and all of their desire.

Death and Fruitfulness

The thoughts of Jesus at this time were as deep as His emotions were intense. It is remarkable that the first thought He expressed was: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12:24). He speaks in a solemn way indicating He is aware of the fact that He is announcing a new and strange truth to His hearers. His goal is to make it believable and understandable to His disciples that death and fruitfulness go together. He points out to them that this is the way it is in the case of grain. He also wanted them to understand that the law of fruitfulness will be equally as true in His own situation. This law will be true not only in spite of death but also by virtue of His death. “A grain of wheat becomes fruitful when it dies. So I must die in order to become, on a large
scale, an object of faith and source of life. During my lifetime, I have had little success. Few have believed; many have not believed. And they are about to finalize their unbelief by putting me to death. But my death - even though they think it will be my defeat and destruction - will only be the beginning of my glorification. After I have been crucified, people will begin to believe in Me extensively as the Lord and Savior of mankind.”

Jesus uses the analogy of the grain of wheat to set forth death as the condition for fruitfulness. Now, in a word that He spoke on another occasion, He proclaimed His approaching crucifixion as the secret of His future power. He said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (Jn. 12:32). He used the expression “lifted up” in a double sense. First, He alludes to the way He will die. And secondly, He is referring to His ascension into heaven. He was saying that after He had been taken up into glory, He would turn the eyes and hearts of people to Himself through the cross. This statement might sound strange before the event actually happened. But the fact corresponded to the Savior’s expectation. The cross - a symbol of shame! - did become a source of glory. The sign of weakness became an instrument of moral power. Christ crucified, which to unbelieving Jews was a stumbling block and to philosophic Greeks was foolishness, became to many believers the power of God and the wisdom of God. By His voluntary humiliation and meek endurance of suffering, the Son of God drew men to Him in the sincerest faith and devoted themselves to Him with reverential love.

The greatness of Christ’s desires and expectations is very noteworthy. He speaks about “much fruit,” and about drawing “all men” to Himself. Of course, we should not look here for an exact definition of the extent of redemption. Jesus is speaking out of the fullness of His heart about His high and holy hope. We may not be able to learn about the theological extent of the atonement, but we are able to learn from His impassioned words about the extensiveness of the Atoner’s good wishes. He desired for all people to believe in Him and be saved. With great sadness, He spoke about the small number of believers among the Jews. He turned with unspeakable longing to the Gentiles, hoping to get a better reception from them. The greater number of believers at any time and in any place, the more He is pleased. And He is certainly not indifferent about the vast amount of unbelief which still prevails in all parts of the world. His heart is set on removing the prince of this world from his usurped dominion in order that He Himself might reign over all the kingdoms of the earth.

An Application
The story contains an application for Jesus’ disciples. It comes from the law of fruitfulness by death. In essence, Jesus tells them that the law applied to them as well as to Himself (Jn. 12:25-26). At first, this seems surprising. We are tempted to think that the sayings recorded here by the evangelist are mentioned because of their true historical connection. But when we reconsider the issue, we begin to think differently. We notice that in every situation, wherever possible,
Christ’s teaching brings His disciples into partnership with Himself. He does not insist on those aspects of truth that are unique to Him, but rather on those which are common to Him and His followers. When there is any point of contact, any sense in which what He says about Himself is true of those who believe in Him, He seizes the moment and makes it a prominent part of His message. This is what He did when He met the woman at the well. This is what He did when He first plainly announced to His disciples that He was to be put to death. And this is what He does here. He asserts that there is a fellowship between Himself and His followers with respect to the necessity of death as a condition of fruitfulness. And the fellowship that He asserts is not some dreamy notion. It is a great, practical reality. This is the principle He teaches: In proportion to the depths that a man partakes in Christ’s suffering in His state of humiliation, he will be a partaker of the glory, honor, and power which belongs to His state of exaltation. This principle holds true even in this life. Bearing the cross - experiencing death - is the condition of fruit-bearing, both in the sense of personal sanctification and in the sense of effective service in the kingdom of God. In the long-run, the measure of a man’s power is the extent to which he is baptized into Christ’s death. We must fill up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions in our flesh for His body’s sake, which is the church, if we want to be honored instruments who are advancing that great work in the world for which He was willing, like a grain of wheat, to fall into the ground and die (Col. 1:24).

As much as this statement stands out, it is not to be included with other sayings that contain a distinct contribution to the doctrine of the cross. No new principle is contained in this one. Old views are restated - the views taught in the first and second lessons are combined. This is what they teach: death is a condition for life (Mt. 16:25; Jn. 12:25) and for power (Mt. 20:28; Jn. 12:24). Even the original statement about the grain of wheat shows us no new aspect of Christ’s death. It only helps us by giving a familiar analogy so we can understand how death can be a means to fruitfulness. The primary reason for the preceding chapter is to show us how far the gospel would travel. Jesus anticipated this when He spoke about Mary’s act of anointing. It also serves as a contrast to the next chapter about the doom of Jerusalem.

Jesus made daily visits to Jerusalem during the few days between the anointing and the Passover. He went with His disciples and returned to Bethany in the evenings. During these times, He did a lot of speaking in public and in private. His topics included issues that were in line with His feelings and situation, like the sin of the Jewish nation (especially its religious leaders), the destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of the world. The record of His sayings during these last days fills five chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. This is proof that they made deep impressions on the minds of the Twelve.

These sayings form the dying testimony of the “Prophet of Nazareth.” One of the most prominent ones is the great discourse that He delivered against the scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem. This powerful message had been preceded by various encounters between Jesus and His enemies. These were preliminary skirmishes that formed the prelude to a great conflict. Jesus had always been victorious in these petty fights and had overwhelmed His opponents with confusion. They had asked Him about His authority for taking on Himself the role of a reformer when He cleared the temple precincts of merchants. He had silenced them by asking their opinion of John’s mission and by giving, within their hearing, the parables of The Two Sons, The Vine-growers, and The Rejected Stone (Mt. 21:23-46). In these parables, their hypocrisy, unrighteousness, and ultimate damnation were vividly depicted. They had tried to catch Him in a trap by asking Him a question about the tax paid to the Roman government. He had easily freed Himself by simply asking for a penny. He pointed to the emperor’s head on it and demanded of His assailants, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” After they replied, “Caesar’s,” He gave His judgment in these terms: “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt. 22:15-22). Now they had been foiled twice. So the Pharisees, along with their friends, the Herodians, let the Sadducees have a shot at Him. Usually the Sadducees were the enemies of the Pharisees, but now they were allies against Christ. So they tried to entrap Jesus on the subject of the resurrection, only to be disgracefully defeated. After that, the Pharisaic brigade returned to the charge and through the mouth of an attorney, who was not yet totally corrupted, asked, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Mt. 22:34-40). Jesus gave a direct and solemn reply to this question. He summed up the whole law by teaching love to God and love to mankind. His questioner was entirely satisfied. Then, growing impatient about
answering more of their petty questions, He sounded an alarm and gave the signal for a grand offensive attack by asking the question, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” (Mt. 22:42). After their reply, He took the opportunity to quote the opening verse of David’s martial psalm and asked them to reconcile it with their answer (vss. 43-45). It appeared that He was fighting the Pharisees with their own weapons and spinning a theological puzzle for them. But in reality, He was reminding them of who He was and letting them know about the destruction that was predicted for those who set themselves against the Lord’s anointed.

Then David’s Son and David’s Lord proceeded to fulfill the prophetic word (Ps. 110) and to make a footstool of the men who sat in Moses’ seat (vs. 1) by delivering His discourse. In it, the Pharisees are placed in a moral dilemma. After all these years, they are still mocked and ridiculed about it. Jesus pronounces a severe and unrelenting sentence on the pharisaic character. It is justified by the facts of the situation and is approved by the conscience of all true Christians (Mt. 23). This anti-pharisaic speech may be regarded as the final, decisive, comprehensive, dying testimony of Jesus against the most deadly and damning form of evil that prevailed in His age, or that can prevail in any age - religious hypocrisy. It forms a part of the Righteous One’s witness-bearing on behalf of the truth. His disciples are expected to say “Amen” without wavering. For the spirit of moral resentment is as essential in Christian ethics as the spirit of mercy. If anyone regards Jesus’ anti-pharisaic defense of the gospel history as something to be ashamed of, or as a blemish to be apologized for, or as something that political correctness requires him to avoid (a practice too common in the religious world), he cannot be cleared of the suspicion of having more sympathy in his heart with the men who were responsible for the Lord’s crucifixion than with the Lord Himself. Blessed is the one who is not ashamed of Christ’s most severe words. This person is far from being bothered by those bold, prophetic words. In fact, he has found them to be an aid to his faith when he has faced a crisis in his own spiritual journey. He has demonstrated that there is an identity between the moral standards of the Founder of the faith and his own. Jesus’ words help him to see that what he may have mistakenly thought was Christianity (or what he claimed to be Christianity) was not that at all. Rather, it was only a modern reproduction of a religious system which the Lord Jesus Christ could not tolerate, nor could He be on civil terms with it. Blessed is the church that sympathizes with and applies Christ’s words of warning in the opening of this discourse against the ambition of priests and pastors. This is the source of the spiritual tyrannies and hypocrisies that He denounced. Every church needs to be on its guard against this evil spirit. The government of the Jewish church, which was theoretically theocratic, degenerated finally into Rabbinism. And it is quite possible for a church which has for its motto, “One is your Master, even Christ,” to fall into a state of abject subjection to the power of ambitious church leaders.
The Critics’ Views

We do not admit, for a moment, that there is anything in these rebukes against hypocrisy that demand an apology. Nevertheless, we must refer to the view that some critics (e.g., Renan) have taken of them. We are told that these speeches are the rash, unqualified utterances of a young man whose spirit had not been mellowed by age and the experience of the world; that he was poetic, and therefore irritable, impatient, and unpractical; that his temperament was that of a Jew - gloomy, and prone to bitterness when controversy arose. These critics also maintain that as Jesus was provoked by persevering opposition, He lost self-control and abandoned Himself to anger. His bad mood had reached such a state that He was guilty of actions that seemed absurd, such as that of cursing the fig tree. In fact, He became reckless about the consequences of His actions and even seemed to court those that were disastrous. Then, weary of conflict, He used violent language to foster a crisis and provoke His enemies to put Him to death.

In Defense of Jesus

These blasphemies against the Son of Man are as unfounded as they are harmful. The last days of Jesus’ life were certainly full of intense excitement. But to anyone who is honest in his thinking, there are no traces of passion that can be discerned in His conduct. All of His recorded words that He spoke during those days are in a high key. They are a perfect “fit” for someone whose soul was animated by majestic feelings. Every sentence is eloquent; every word speaks. Everything spoken throughout this time is natural and appropriate to the situation. Even when the terrible attack on the religious leaders of Israel begins, we are awestruck as we listen. But we are not shocked. We feel that the speaker has a right to use this type of language, that what He says is true, and that all is said with commanding authority and dignity. All of this was appropriate for the Messianic King. By the time Jesus finishes, we can breathe a little easier. We sense that a delicate though necessary task has been performed with wisdom and faithfulness. Deep and undisguised abhorrence is expressed in every sentence. It would be difficult for any ordinary man (even for an extraordinary one) to have these feelings without also having anger - and anger that does not work the righteousness of God. But in the dislikes of the Divine Being, the weakness of passion cannot find a place. His abhorrence may be deep, but it is also always calm. We challenge unbelievers to point out a single feature in this discourse that is inconsistent with the hypothesis that the Speaker is divine. Even if His divinity is left out of the picture, and one criticized His words with a freedom that was not restrained by reverence, we can see no traces in them of a man that is carried along by a storm of anger. After we have conducted a strict search, we do not find any loose expressions or passionate exaggerations. Instead, we find a style that is remarkable for artistic precision and accuracy. We see the pictures of the following: the ostentatious, position-seeking, title-loving rabbi; the hypocrite, who makes long prayers and devours widows’ houses; the zealot, who goes to extraordinary trouble to make converts, but makes those converts worse instead of better men; the Jesuitical scribe, who teaches that the gold
of the temple is a more sacred, binding thing to swear by than the temple itself; the Pharisee, whose conscience is strict or lax, depending on how convenient it is to him; the white-washed sepulchers that look good from the outside but are filled with dead men's bones; the men whose piety manifests itself by murdering living prophets and robbing the sepulchers of dead ones. All of these are moral pictures which will stand the minutest inspection of criticism. They are not drawn by an irritated, defeated man, who feels and resents the evil deeds of His adversaries, but by One who has gained such a complete victory that He can make sport of His foes. Whatever else may be said, He runs no risk of losing self-control.

**The Purpose of Jesus' Discourse**

The purpose of the discourse is an adequate defense against the charge that Jesus was bitter. Jesus' main purpose was not to expose the blind guides of Israel but to save the people from delusion. These people were being led to ruin. The audience consisted of the disciples and the multitude who gladly listened to Him. Many of the blind guides were probably present. But it would not make any difference to Jesus whether they were or not, because He did not speak in two different ways about mankind - one right to their face, and the other behind their backs. It is said of Demosthenes, the great Athenian orator, and the determined opponent of Philip of Macedon, that he completely broke down in Philip's presence when he first appeared before him as an ambassador from his native city. But one greater than Demosthenes is here. Jesus' sincerity and courage are as marvelous as His wisdom and eloquence. He says what He thinks about the religious rulers of the people where they can hear it plainly. Still, in this situation, the parties He addresses were not the leaders of the people, but the people themselves. And it should be noted that Jesus used discretion in the counsel which He gave them. He told them that what He objected to was not so much the teaching of their guides, as their lives. They could follow all their precepts with little risk. But it would be fatal to follow their example. How many reformers in similar circumstances would have combined doctrine and practice together in one single denunciation! This kind of moderation is not characteristic of a man who is in a rage.

But the best clue of all concerning the spirit of Jesus is the manner in which His discourse ends: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!” (Mt. 23:37). This would be a strange ending for someone who is filled with angry passion! O Jesus, Jesus! How You have risen above the petty thoughts and feelings of ordinary people! Who is able to fathom the depths of Your heart? What mighty waves of righteousness, truth, compassion, and sorrow roll through Your heart!

After Jesus uttered that piercing cry of grief, He left the temple and, as far as we know, never returned. His last words to the people of Jerusalem were: “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate. For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Mt. 23:38,39). On the way from the city to Bethany, by the Mount of Olives, the rejected Savior once again alluded to its coming destruction. The light-
hearted disciples had pointed out the strength and beauty of the temple buildings to Jesus. They could see them clearly. But Jesus was too sad and serious to admire mere architecture. He replied in the spirit of a prophet: “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (Mt. 24:2).

When they arrived at the Mount of Olives, the disciples sat down to take a leisurely view of the majestic buildings they had been talking about. Their thoughts and feelings were vastly different from Jesus’! The Twelve could only see with the physical eye. Their Master saw with the inward eye of prophecy. They can see nothing in front of them but the beautiful stones. Jesus sees the people profaning the temple on the inside. Greedy traders were within the sacred precincts. Religion was corrupted by showiness. This made the poor widow, giving her two mites into the treasury in godly sincerity, a rare and pleasing exception. The disciples are only thinking about the present. Jesus looks forward to an approaching destruction. It is horrible to think about. Without a doubt, He looks backwards too. He sees the long and diverse history through which the house of God had passed. Once it had been revered; now it was polluted. The disciples are elated with pride as they gaze on the national structure. It is the glory of their country. So they are happy - just like unthinking people are prone to be. Jesus’ heart is heavy with the sadness that comes with wisdom and foreknowledge, and with a love that would have saved. Now, He can do nothing but weep - and proclaim the awful words of destruction.

The End of Jerusalem, The End of the World

Yet, with all their thoughtlessness, the Twelve could not quite forget those dark predictions of their Master. The strange words haunted their minds and made them curious to know more. Therefore, they came to Jesus (at least some of them did) - Mark mentions Peter, James, John, and Andrew (Mk. 13:3-4) - and asked two questions: (1) “When will Jerusalem be destroyed?” and (2) “What will be the signs of His coming, and of the end of the world?” The men thought that the two events referred to in the questions - the end of Jerusalem, and the end of the world - would happen at the same time. It was natural for them to think this way and was not a unique mistake. Specific and partial judgments tend to get mixed up with the universal ones in peoples’ imaginations. Therefore, almost every great disaster that shocks people leads to expectations that the last days have come. When his mind was clouded by the dark shadow of the present tribulation, Luther remarked: “The world cannot stand long, perhaps a hundred years at the outside. At the last will be great alterations and commotions, and already there are great commotions among men. Never had the men of law so much occupation as now. There are vehement dissensions in our families, and discord in the church” (Luther’s Table Talk, p.325). In apostolic times, Christians expected the immediate coming of Christ with confidence and passion. Some even neglected their secular businesses. This also happened near the end of the tenth century when people allowed churches to fall into disrepair, because everyone thought the end of the world was near.
In reality, the judgment of Jerusalem and that of the world were to be separated by a long interval. Therefore, Jesus treated the two things as distinct in His prophetic discourse. He gave separate answers to the two questions which the disciples had combined into one. The question about the end of the world was answered first (Mt. 24:4-14).

**Six Precursors to the End of the World**

The answer He gave to this question was general and negative. He did not give a specific time, but in essence He said, “The end will not come until certain things have taken place.” He specifies six things that must happen, the first being the appearance of false Christs (Mt. 24:5). He assured His disciples that there would be many of these; and they would deceive many. In fact, several quack Messiahs did appear, even before the destruction of Jerusalem. They preyed on the people’s desire for deliverance just like quack doctors do sick patients. They deceived many people. Unfortunately, in times like the ones described, it is very easy to do. But none of those who had been previously instructed by Christ were among those who were deceived. Christ had taught them to regard the appearance of pseudo-Christs merely as one of the signs of an evil time. These deceivers would be a preservative against delusion.

The second sign is “wars and rumors of wars” (vs. 6). Nation must rise against nation. There must be times of upheaval and termination, declines and falls of empires. New kingdoms would rise on top of the ruins of the old. This second sign would be accompanied by a third. Turmoil would occur in the physical world and would be symbolic of those in the political. Famines, earthquakes, diseases, etc. would occur in different places (vs. 6,7).

And yet no matter how dreadful these things are, it is only the beginning of sorrows. Nor would the end come until those signs repeated themselves over and over again. No one would be able to tell from these phenomena that the end would be now. He could only infer that it was not yet (vs. 8).

Next in the list come persecutions, with all the moral and social phenomena that happen during times of persecution (vs. 9). Christians must undergo a discipline of hatred among the nations because of the Name they bear. They are the ones blamed for all the disasters which happen to the people among whom they live. The times must come when, if the Tiber floods Rome, if the Nile does not water its fields, if drought, earthquakes, famines, or plagues visit the earth, the cry of the people will be, “The Christians to the lions!”

Along with persecutions, as the fifth precursor to the end, there would come a sifting of the church (Mt. 24:10). Many would break down or turn traitors. Many animosities, divisions, and heresies would spring up, and each one would be named by its own false prophet. These evils
would be so prevalent in the church that they would cause much spiritual declension. “And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Mt. 24:12).

The last thing that must happen before the end comes is the evangelization of the world (vs. 14). Once this is achieved, the end will finally arrive. From this sign, we can guess that the world will still be here for a long time. According to the law of historical probability, it will take a long time before the Gospel is preached to all people. Diligent Christians or enthusiastic students of prophecy who think otherwise must remember that sending a few missionaries to an unevangelized country does not satisfy the prescribed condition. It cannot be said that the Gospel has been preached to a nation (so that a basis for moral judgment is formed) until it has been preached to all of the people. This has never been done for all the nations. At the present rate of progress, it is not likely to be accomplished for centuries to come.

The End of Jerusalem

After Jesus quickly sketched an outline of the events that had to precede the end of the world, He addressed the more special question about the destruction of Jerusalem. He could now speak on that subject with more freedom. He had guarded against the idea that the destruction of the holy city was a sign of His own immediate final coming. “Therefore when,” He began. These were the introductory words that were used to answer their first question. “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Mt. 24:15,16). The abomination of desolation was the Roman army with its eagles - abominable to the Jew. It was desolating to the land. When the eagle appeared, all would have to flee for their lives. Resistance would be futile. Obstinacy and bravery would do absolutely nothing. The calamity would be so sudden that there would be no time to save anything. It would be the same as when a house catches fire. People are happy to escape with their lives (Mt. 24:17,18). It would be a terrible time of tribulation unparalleled before or after (vs. 21). Woe to poor nursing mothers in those horrible days, and to those who were pregnant! What horrible and inhumane things awaited them! The calamities that were coming would not spare anyone, not even Christians. They would only find safety by fleeing. They would have good reason to be thankful that they escaped at all. But their flight, even though it was unavoidable, might be more or less difficult according to their circumstances. They should pray for what might seem to be small mercies, even if they could be relieved from fleeing to the mountains in the winter time, when it is cold and comfortless, or on the Sabbath, the day of rest and peace (vss. 19-20).

These awful days that were approaching would be intolerable by mortal people if they were not shortened for the “sake of the elect” (vs. 22). After Jesus gave this brief but graphic sketch of these days, He repeated His warning against deception. It was almost as if He was concerned that His disciples would be distracted by these calamities and think: “Surely this is the end.”
told them that violence would be followed by apostasy and falsehood. It would be as great a trial in one way as the destruction of Jerusalem would be in another. False teachers would arise. They would be believable and almost deceive even the elect. The devil would appear as an angel of light. He would be in the desert as a monk or in the shrine as an object of superstitious worship. But whatever people might pretend to be, the Christ would not be there. His appearance would not take place then either. He would not come at any fixed, predictable time. Rather, He would come suddenly, unexpectedly, like the lightening flashing in the heavens. When moral corruption had attained its full development, then judgment would come (vss. 23-28).

In the remaining part of the discourse, the end of the world seems to be tied in to the destruction of the holy city (vs. 29). If a long period of time was to pass first, the perspective that the prophetic picture gives seems to be faulty. The mountains of the eternal world that are located in the far distance are visible above and beyond the near hills of time in the foreground. These mountains lack the dim-blue haze that helps the eye realize how far off they are. This omission in Matthew’s narrative, which we have been using for our text, is furnished by Luke. He interprets the tribulation in such a way that he includes the subsequent, long-lasting dispersion of Israel among the nations (21:24). The phrase he uses to describe this period is significant. He implies that it will be a long period of time. It is “the times of the Gentiles.” The expression means the time when the Gentiles would have their opportunity to enjoy divine grace. It would correspond to the time the Jews enjoyed the gracious visitation by God. Jesus referred to this in His lament over Jerusalem (Lk. 19:44). There is no reason to believe that Luke coined these phrases. They bear the stamp of genuineness on them. But if we assume that Jesus Himself spoke about a time of merciful visitation on the Gentiles, then it follows that in His eschatological discourse He gave clear hints about a lengthened period during which His gospel was to be preached in the world. He did this on other occasions, such as in the parable of the wicked vine-growers, in which He declared that the vineyard should be taken from its current occupants and given to others who would bring forth fruit (Mt. 21:41). It is incredible that Jesus would speak of a time of the Gentiles that was similar to the time of merciful visitation that was enjoyed by the Jews, and imagine that the time of the Gentiles was only to last approximately thirty years. The Jewish “time” lasted thousands of years. It would only be mocking the poor Gentiles to dignify the period of a single generation with the name: “a season of gracious visitation.”

The Parable of the Fig Tree
The parable of the fig tree was used by Jesus to indicate the certain connection between the signs and the great event that was to follow. At first, it seems to exclude the idea of a protracted length of time. But on second thought, we will find out that it does not. The point of the parable lies in the comparison of the signs of the times with the first buds of the fig tree. The comparison implies that the last judgment is not the thing which is at the door. The last day is the harvest season, but from the first buds of early summer to the harvest, there is a long interval. Furthermore,
the parable suggests the right way to understand the statement: “This generation will not pass away until all things take place” (Lk. 21:32). Christ did not mean that the generation that was living then was to witness the end, but in that generation all the things which form the incipient stage in the development would appear. It was the age of beginnings - shoots and blossoms, not fruit and harvest. In that generation, the beginnings of Christianity started. And with it came the new world that it would create. Also, the end of the Jewish world would come. The symbol of it was a fig tree covered with leaves, but without any blossom or fruit, like the one Jesus Himself had cursed. It was a prophecy of Israel's coming destruction. The buds of most things in the church's history appeared in that age: gospel preaching, anti-Christian tendencies, persecutions, heresies, divisions, and apostasies. However, all of these had to grow until they were full blown; then the end would come. No person could tell how long the development would take, not even the Son of Man (Mk. 13:32). It was a state secret of the Almighty. And no one should wish to pry into it.

The time when the end comes is known only to God. Therefore, the idea that the time can be predicted must be dismissed. No data is given in Scripture for that purpose. If such data were given, then the secret would be virtually disclosed. Therefore, we regard the calculations of students of prophecy concerning the times and seasons as random guesses that are unworthy of serious attention. The day when the death of the world comes needs to be hidden for the purposes of providence as much as the day that individuals die. And we have no doubt that God has kept His secret. Some continue to believe that they can determine the end of the world from prophetic numbers, in the same way that astrologers try to determine the course of individual lives from the position of the stars.

Even though the prophetic discourse that Jesus gave did not reveal anything about the times, it does not follow that it was therefore valueless. It effectively taught two lessons: (1) one was especially for the benefit of the Twelve, and (2) the other was for all Christians and all ages. The lesson for the Twelve was so they could dismiss from their minds any hope that there would be a restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Israel's depressing doom was not reconstruction. It was destruction and dispersion.

Here is the general lesson for everyone in this discourse: “Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is” (Mk. 13:33). The call for us to be watchful is based on our ignorance about the time when the end will come. However long the end is in coming, it will finally come suddenly as a thief in the night. Jesus illustrated the importance of watching and waiting in two parables: The Faithful and Unfaithful Servants and The Wise and Foolish Virgins (Mt. 24:45-51; 25:1-13). Both parables depict the different conduct of the servants who professed to know God during the period of delay. We are taught that the effect on some is to make them negligent. They are men-pleasers and irregular workers who need oversight and
the stimulus provided by extraordinary events. Others are steady, regular, and habitually faithful. They work as well when the Master is absent as when He watches over them. The treatment that both of them receive when the Master returns corresponds to their behavior. One group is rewarded; the other is punished. This is the essence of the parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants. Luke provides an important footnote that tells us about the conduct of people who are in authority in the house of the absent Lord (Lk. 12:41-48). While the common servants are, for the most part, negligent, the higher servants are tyrants to their fellow-servants. This is exactly what church dignitaries did in later periods of church history. Jesus contemplated this kind of thing going on. But it required the lapse of centuries to bring it about. This is another proof that in this discourse, His prophetic eye swept over a vast tract of time. Another remark is suggested by the great reward that is promised to those who would not abuse their authority: “He will put him in charge of all his possessions” (Lk. 12:44). The greatness of the reward indicates an expectation that faithfulness will be rare among the stewards of the house. Certainly, the Head of the church seems to have understood the prevalence of a negligent spirit among all of His servants, both high and low. For He speaks of the lord of the household as one who is so thankful for the conduct of the faithful that he prepares himself to serve them while they sit to eat (Lk. 12:37). Hasn’t the Lord’s understanding been well confirmed by the things that happened?

**The Parable of the Ten Virgins**

The parable of the Ten Virgins, which is familiar to everyone and full of instruction, teaches us this peculiar lesson: “Watching” does not imply sleepless worry and constant thought about the future. Rather, it suggests quiet, steady attention to present duties. While the bridegroom waited to return, all the virgins (wise and foolish alike) slept. The wise ones were different from their sisters because they had everything ready in case of a sudden call. This is a sober and reasonable representation of the duty of waiting by someone who understands what could happen. For, in a certain sense, sleep of the mind with reference to eternity is as necessary as physical sleep is to the body. Constantly thinking about the great realities of the future would only result in weakness, distraction, and madness, or disorder, idleness, and restlessness. This happened in Thessalonica, where the conduct of many (who watched in the wrong way) made it necessary for Paul to give them the wise counsel to be quiet, and work, and eat bread that was earned by working with their own hands (II Thes. 3:12).

The great prophetic discourse ended well with a solemn representation of the final judgment of the world. All mankind will be assembled to be judged either by the historical gospel that was preached to them as a witness, or by its great ethical principle, the law of love, that was written on their hearts. And those who have loved Christ and served Him in person, or His representatives - the poor, the destitute, the suffering - will be welcomed to the realms of the blessed. Those who have acted otherwise will be sent away to keep company with the devil and his angels.
Section 1 - The Washing

John 13:1-11

Up to this point, John has not said very much about the special relationship between Jesus and the Twelve. Now, however, he more than makes up for this deficiency. Except for two chapters telling of Jesus’ passion, the third part of his Gospel, which begins in chapter 13, is completely dedicated to the tender, intimate relationship between the Lord Jesus and “His own.” This part of his Gospel begins with the evening before His death and continues until the time when He left this world, leaving them behind. Chapters 13-17 tell about situations and conversations that took place in the last hours that the Savior spent with His disciples. This all happened prior to His betrayal into the hands of His enemies. He has spoken His final words to the outside world. Now He has withdrawn Himself to the fellowship of His own family, and we have the privilege of seeing Him among His spiritual children and hearing His farewell words to them in the light of His impending death. It is important that we enter the supper chamber with deep reverence. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

As we enter the room, the first thing we see is Jesus washing His disciples’ feet. Amazing sight! As John narrates the incident, he has been careful to enhance its impressiveness by the way in which he introduces it. He has put this beautiful picture in the best light so it would stand out. The preface to the story is a little puzzling to expositors. That is because of the way the sentences are presented, and because the sense of the passage is somewhat obscure. Many thoughts and feelings crowd into the Apostle’s mind as he proceeds to tell about the memorabilia (things worth remembering) of that eventful night. They seem to compete with one another as they all try to be spoken. However, it is not very difficult to unravel the meaning of these opening sentences. First, John refers to the unique compassion that Jesus felt toward His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion as He contemplated His departure from the earth to heaven: “Now before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world” (Jn. 13:1). At such a time as this, how did He feel toward the men who had been His companions throughout the years of His public ministry, and whom He was soon to leave behind? “He loved them to the end” (vs. 1). Jesus was not selfishly consumed with His own sorrows or with the joys that would come to Him later. Instead, He found room in His heart for His followers. His love was a flame that burned toward them with unusual passion. His whole
concern was that He prepare them for future responsibilities and trials through His teaching and example and by using words of comfort, warning, and instruction. The narrative John has written abundantly demonstrates this.

The second verse of the preface alludes (parenthetically) to a fact which highlighted the faithfulness of Jesus: “the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him.” John was saying: “Jesus loved His disciples to the end, even though they did not all love Him. At this very moment, one of them entertained the diabolic thought of betraying his Lord. Even so, that same Lord loved him. He humbled Himself to wash Judas’ feet. By doing this, He was endeavoring, if possible, to overcome his evil with good.”

In the last sentence of his preface, John’s goal is to show what wonderful humility the Savior had to wash the feet of any of the disciples. Jesus knew these things that were true about Him: (1) “that the Father had given all things into His hands” (sovereign power over all creation); (2) “that He had come forth from God” (a divine being by nature and entitled to divine honors); and (3) that He “was going back to God” (to enter into the enjoyment of these honors). So, He did just as John records in this text. The Majestic Being who had such intrinsic dignity, such a consciousness, such a future, “rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, girded Himself about” (vs. 4). After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet. Then He wiped them with the towel with which He was girded (vs. 5).

It seems that all of this took place just before they were about to eat the evening meal. John’s words may be translated “supper having begun,” or better still, “supper-time having arrived.” From the sequel of the narrative, it is evident that his words must be understood in this way. The supper was still going on when Jesus introduced the subject of the traitor. He did not introduce it until after He had washed the feet of His disciples. Then He resumed His seat at the table and gave an explanation about what He had just done (Jn. 13:12ff.).

We will consider that explanation later. For now, it seems that the reason Jesus washed their feet was because the disciples had done something wrong. We believe Jesus had to humble Himself because His disciples would not humble themselves. This impression is confirmed by a statement in Luke’s Gospel. He tells us that on the same evening, the Twelve got into an argument about which of them was the greatest. We do not know why this new strife arose among them. It is possible that the old argument about their positions was revived by the words Jesus spoke as they were about to sit down to supper: “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 22:15-16). His allusion to the kingdom was certainly adequate to set their imaginations on fire and re-awaken old dreams about thrones. Old fights and jealousies would come from old dreams. These would come naturally and easily. And so, even before the supper began, we can
understand how the conversation between them became loud and heated. On the other hand, the point they might have fought over could have been about where they should sit at the table, or who should serve for this occasion and wash the feet of the company. Any one of these theories might account for the situation recorded by Luke. It does not require much to make children fight.

The method Jesus used to divert the minds of His disciples from unedifying topics and to remove ambitious passions from their hearts was a very effective one. Even His preliminary actions at the beginning of the feet-washing must have gone a long way to change their ruffled emotions. How the spectators must have stared and wondered as the Master of the feast rose from His seat, laid aside His outer garment, girded Himself with a towel, and poured water into a basin. He did all of this with self-control, composure, and deliberation.

We are not told which disciple Jesus approached first. But we do know (we might have guessed without being told) who was the first to speak his mind about what was going on. When Peter’s turn came, he had recovered enough from the shock of what he was witnessing to be able to think about how wrong all of it was. He considered it to be a role-reversal between the Master and His servants. The first disciple whose feet Jesus washed may have yielded passively to his Lord’s will. But when Jesus came to Peter, the outspoken disciple asked in amazement, “Lord, do You wash my feet?” (Jn. 13:6). His spirit rebelled at the offer. He felt it would do damage to the dignity of his beloved Lord. It outraged his own sense of reverence. Peter is not to be discredited because he was repulsed by the thought of the suggestion, and his Master did not disapprove of the statement either. Jesus’ reply to his objection is very respectful: “What I do you do not realize now; but you shall understand hereafter” (vs. 7). He virtually admits that what He is doing needs explanation, and that Peter’s opposition is perfectly natural. “I acknowledge,” He essentially said to Peter, “that my present action is an offence to the feelings of reverence which you rightly have toward Me. Nevertheless, allow it. I am doing this for reasons which you do not comprehend now, but which you will understand before long.”

If Peter had been satisfied with this reply, no one could have blamed him for his conduct. But he was not content. He continued to oppose Jesus after He had distinctly made His will known. So Peter vehemently and stubbornly exclaimed: “Never shall You wash my feet!” The tone totally changes here. Peter’s first comment was the expression of sincere reverence. His second is simply the language of unmitigated irreverence and downright disobedience. He rudely contradicts His Master. At the same time, we might add that he flatly contradicts himself. His behavior on this occasion presents an odd mixture of moral opposites: self-humiliation and self-will, humility and pride, respect and disrespect for Jesus. One moment he speaks to Jesus as one whose shoe he is not worthy to untie. Before you know it, he speaks to Him like he could order Him around. What a strange man! But, indeed, how strange we all are!
When Peter changed his tone, Jesus found it necessary to alter His as well. He changed from being mild in His first reply to being stern like a judge. “If I do not wash you,” He said with all seriousness, “you have no part with Me” (vs. 8). What He means is this: “You have taken a very serious position, Simon Peter. The question at hand is simply this: ‘Are you, or are you not, to be admitted into My kingdom - to be a true disciple, and to have a true disciple’s reward?’”

On the surface, it is difficult to see how this could be the thrust of the question. One is tempted to think that Jesus was using exaggeration for the purpose of intimidating a stubborn disciple into compliance with His will. If we reject this method of interpretation as incompatible with the character of the Speaker and the seriousness of the occasion, we must look at the question again: What does “washing” mean in this statement? Evidently it signifies more than meets the ear. It is more than a literal washing of the feet. It is to be regarded as a symbol of the washing of the soul from sin. To state it more comprehensively and, in our opinion, more correctly, it represents all of Christ’s teaching and work which would be compromised if Peter’s opposition to Jesus washing his feet were carried out by others. In either case, the statement made by Jesus was true. In the first case, it is obvious. In the last, it is not as obvious but no less a fact, as we will proceed to demonstrate.

Look at what was involved in Peter’s attitude. He virtually took his stand on these two positions: (1) He would not allow any behavior that seemed inconsistent with the personal dignity of his Lord; and (2) He would adopt as his rule of conduct his own judgment and would prefer that over Christ’s will. One position is seen in the question, “Do You wash my feet?” The other can be found in the resolution, “Never shall You wash my feet!” In other words, the convictions held by Peter compromised the whole sum and substance of Christianity. The first principle sweeps away Christ’s whole condition and experience of humiliation. The last one erodes the foundation of Christ’s lordship.

This is no exaggeration on our part. A moment’s reflection will demonstrate that. First, look at Peter’s objection to the feet-washing with respect to the issue of reverence. If Jesus would not wash the feet of His disciples because it was beneath His dignity, then it might be argued that any act involving self-humiliation would be objectionable. Anyone who says, “You will not wash my feet, because doing that is not worthy of You,” might also say, “You will not wash my soul or do anything toward fulfilling that purpose, because it involves humiliating experiences.” Why be concerned over such a small matter of detail? Go to the heart of the matter at once and ask, “Will the Eternal Son of God become flesh and live among us? Will He who was in the form of God lay aside His royal robes and gird Himself with the towel of humanity in order to perform menial tasks for His own creatures? Will the ever-blessed One become a curse by enduring crucifixion? Will the Holy One degrade Himself by coming into close companionship with the
depraved sons of Adam? Will the Righteous One pour His life-blood into a basin, that there may be a fountain wherein the unrighteous may be cleansed from their guilt and iniquity?” In short, the incarnation, atonement, and Christ’s whole earthly experience of temptation, hardship, indignity, and sorrow must go if Jesus is not allowed to wash a disciple’s feet.

It is also clear that Christ’s lordship comes to a complete stop if a disciple can give Him orders and say, “You will never wash my feet.” If Peter meant anything more by his words than their just being a display of his frame of mind and his impulsiveness, he meant this: He would not submit to the proposed act because his moral feelings and his judgment told him it was wrong. He made his own reason and conscience the supreme rule of conduct. It was wrong, in the first place, because Peter’s position compromised the principle of obedience. This principle requires that the Lord’s will, once it is known, will rule, whether we understand its reason or perceive its goodness or not. There are other things much more important than the washing of the feet to which one might object on the basis of reason or conscience. For example, Christ tells us that those who want to be His disciples and gain entrance into His kingdom must be willing to give up their earthly possessions, even their closest and dearest friends. To many people, this seems unreasonable.

Using Peter’s principle, they would say in a straightforward way, “I will never do any such thing.” Or, consider another example. Christ tells us that we must be born again, and that we must eat His flesh and drink His blood. To me, these doctrines may seem incomprehensible, or even absurd. And, therefore, using Peter’s principle, I may turn my back on the great Teacher and say, “I will not have for a Master this Person who speaks dark, mysterious sayings.” One final example: Christ tells us that we must give the kingdom of God first place in our thoughts and dismiss troublesome concerns about tomorrow from our hearts. In my current frame of mind, this seems to be simply impossible. Therefore, using Peter’s principle, I may set aside this moral requirement as utopian, no matter how beautiful, without even seriously attempting to comply with it.

Now that we know where Peter’s refusal leads, we can see that Jesus spoke the simple truth when He said, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (Jn. 13:8). Look at that refusal as an objection to Christ’s humbling Himself. If Christ is not able to humble Himself, then, first of all, He can have no part with us. The Holy Son of God is prohibited from becoming anything like His brothers because of His dignity. He cannot even acknowledge them as His brothers. The great paternal law, by which the Sanctifier is identified with those who are to be sanctified, is revoked, and all of its consequences are made void. A great impassable gulf separates the Divine Being from His creatures. He may stand on the distant shore and eagerly contemplate their miserable condition. But He cannot, He dares not - His majesty forbids it - come near them and reach out with a helping hand.
Secondly, if the Son of God has no part with us, then we can have no part with Him. We cannot share His fellowship with the Father, if He does not come forth to declare Him. We cannot receive any acts of brotherly kindness from Him. He cannot deliver us from the curse of the law or from the fear of death. He cannot help us when we are tempted. He cannot wash our feet. And what is an even more serious matter, He cannot wash our souls. If there is not going to be a fountain that is opened for sin in the human nature of Immanuel, sinners must remain impure. A God who is far away is not able, even if He were willing, to purify the human soul. A God whose majesty kept Him aloof from sinners could not even effectively forgive them. Still less could He sanctify them. Love alone has sanctifying virtue. Is there room for love in a Being who cannot humble Himself to be a servant?

Consider Peter’s refusal as resistance to Christ’s will. With this perspective, Jesus’ saying was justified, “You have no part with Me” (Jn. 13:8). Salvation was not available for Peter on his own terms. For if Jesus is not Lord of a person’s life, He will not be Savior (Peter the Apostle understood this well. Four times in his second epistle he joins the words Lord and Savior when he names Christ - 1:11; 2:20; 3:2,18). Neither would fellowship be available to him. For Jesus will not have communion with self-will. His own attitude toward His Father was, “Not My will, but Thine.” And He demands this attitude toward Himself from all of His disciples. He will be the Author of eternal salvation but only to them that obey Him. Not that He would want us to always be servants, blindly obeying a Lord whose will we do not understand. His goal is to advance us, ultimately, to the status of friends (John 15:15), doing His will intelligently and freely - not complying mechanically because of an outward commandment, but doing His will because we want to. We can reach this high position only by beginning to obey as a servant would. So, we must do what we do not now understand. And we must allow things to be done to us that we do not now understand. The reason? That we may know, from this moment on, what our obligations are to our Lord, and how our Lord deals with us. Mature obedience lies in doing that which unenlightened reverence finds peculiarly hard, namely, in letting the Lord change places with us, and if He thinks it is good, humble Himself to be our servant.

It was a serious thing, therefore, for Peter to say, “Never shall you wash my feet!” (Jn. 13:8). But he was not aware of how serious it was. He did not understand what he said, or what he did. He had quickly held to a position without considering its consequences. His heart was right, but his frame of mind was not. Therefore, the stern declaration from Jesus brought him immediately to his senses, or rather, to a position that was in the opposite direction. The notion that he would be cut off from his dear Master’s sympathy or favor because of his straying drove him, out of sheer fear, to the opposite extreme of compliance (he went overboard). He said, in essence, “If my interest in You depends on my feet being washed, then Lord, wash my whole body - hands, head, feet, and every part.” How characteristic of him! He is so much like a child whose heart contains so much foolishness but also much affection, and who can always be managed by love! At this
point in Peter’s life, there is still a sad lack of balance in his character. Swinging like a pendulum, he goes from one extreme to another. It will take some time before he settles down and gets some balance in all aspects of his being - his intellect, will, heart, and conscience. But the root of the matter is in him. He is sound at the core. And after his share of mistakes, he will become a wise man. He is clean and does not need more than to have his feet washed. Jesus Himself conveys this to him and to all of his fellow disciples, except one. And this one is unclean all over.
Section 2 - The Explanation

John 13:12-20

When Peter's resistance was overcome, the washing proceeded without further interruption. Then, when Jesus finished washing the feet of all His disciples, He put on His outer garment, resumed His seat, and briefly explained the purpose behind His actions. “Do you know what I have done to you?” (Jn. 13:12). Then, answering His own question, He continued by saying, “You call me Teacher, and Lord; and you are right; for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.” (vss. 13-15).

It was another lesson in humility that Jesus was giving His disciples. It was a lesson that was very similar to the earlier ones recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's Christ, as we see here, teaches the same doctrine as the Christ of the first three evangelists. The Twelve are depicted by John in the same way we have found them in the first three Gospels. They really need to be taught meekness and brotherly kindness. Jesus teaches them these virtues in much the same way here as He does in other places. He uses precept and example (a symbolic action), and adds a word of interpretation. At one time in His life, He had held up a little child to shame them out of their ambitions. Here He rebukes their pride by becoming the servant of the household. At another time, He stopped their arguing by referring to His own self-humiliation in coming from heaven to minister to people's needs in life and death. In this instance, He accomplishes the same purpose by expressing the spirit and goal of His whole earthly ministry. He humbles Himself in an act that was representative and symbolic.

Jesus gave this lesson like all of the others, with the authority of someone who could lay down the law. In the very act of becoming a servant, He asserts His sovereignty. When He finished serving them, He reminds His disciples about the titles they were prone to give Him. In a striking, emphatic way, He accepts them as titles that rightly belong to Him. He tells them distinctly that He is truly their Teacher - it is their business to learn His doctrine. He is their Lord, and it is their duty to obey Him. His humility, therefore, is clearly not a display of ignorance about who and what He is. He knows full well who He is, from where He has come, and where He is going.
His humility is that of a king - yes, a Divine Being. He becomes a model of meekness to His followers and demands that they pay attention to His behavior and try to copy it.

In making this demand, Jesus is obviously not joking. Just as He insisted that He should wash their feet, He is serious about requiring the disciples to wash one another’s feet. He said to Peter in clear terms, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (Jn. 13:8).

**The Rarity and Difficulty of Humility**

This is a hard saying. If it is difficult to believe in the humiliation of Christ, how much harder it is to humble ourselves. Frequently and urgently, Christ declares that we must have the same spirit that was manifested in His humiliation for us. Yet even sincere disciples are constantly (though it may be unconsciously) inventing excuses for treating the example of their Lord as if it cannot be imitated. Therefore, in reality, He becomes no example at all. Even when Jesus uses an unanswerable argument to enforce imitation, He does not escape secret criticism. He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither one who is sent greater than the one who sent him” (Jn. 13:16). We say, “It may be more necessary for the servant to humble himself than for the Master to do so, but, in some respects, it is also more difficult. The Master can afford to humble Himself. His actions will not be misunderstood. They will be accepted for what they are. But the servant cannot afford to be humble. He must assert himself and assume certain attitudes in order to make himself important.”

The great Master knew all too well how slow people would be to learn the lesson He had just been teaching His disciples. Therefore, He added this note to His explanation of the feet-washing: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (vs. 17). He was hinting at how rare and how difficult such a high morality - the kind He had been teaching - is. He was also declaring the blessedness of the few who actually attained it. Surely His thoughts are right! Isn’t the morality that He is espousing here rare? Aren’t the virtues that rise to the surface by doing acts of humility and love very high and difficult? Who would ever dream of calling them easy? How totally contrary they are to the natural tendencies of the human heart! How foreign to the spirit of today’s culture! Are people generally content to be in the humblest place and to seek the happiness of others by serving them? Isn’t the spirit within us envious? Isn’t it ambitious to the point of striving for positions of influence? Doesn’t it think that the greatest happiness is to be served? Doesn’t this spirit seek to be exempt from the drudgery of tasks that belong to servants? The world does not argue about the difficulty of practicing this Christ-like virtue. Instead, it exaggerates its difficulty, and says it is utopian and impracticable - simply a beautiful, unattainable ideal.

No proof is needed to convince the sincere disciple of Jesus that the task given to him by his Lord is difficult. He knows from experience how far his conduct lags behind his knowledge. He knows how hard it is to move from admiring a goodness that is not of this world to imitating
it in practice. With his mind, he is able to talk about the teachings and the life of the Savior. He has read and re-read the gospel story and fondly lingers over its smallest details. His heart has burned as he followed the footsteps of the Blessed One walking about on this earth, always intent on doing good. There are stories that are sweeter to his ears than the finest lyric poems - the woman by the well, the sinner in the house of Simon, and Zaccheus the publican. There are the touching incidents like the one where the little child is used to illustrate the principle of humility, or the one where the Master washed the feet of the arguing disciples. There are the extraordinary parables of the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan. But when he has to close his New Testament and go away into the rude, ungodly, matter-of-fact world, and be a Christ-like person there, and do the things that he knows so well (he even considers himself blessed because he knows them), behold, what a descent! It is like a fall from Eden into a state of sin and misery. And the longer the disciple lives, and the more he gets mixed up with life's relationships and situations, the further he seems to fall away from the gospel pattern. Then, at some point, he is almost ashamed to think or speak about the beauty of holiness that is taught in the Word. He is tempted to adopt a lower and more worldly attitude because he wants to be sincere. He is afraid of becoming a sentimental hypocrite like Judas, who kissed his Master at the very moment he was betraying Him.

A Three-Fold Blessedness
The happiness of those who are enabled to practice this virtue is in direct proportion to its difficulty and rarity. They have a three-fold blessedness. First, they have the joy that is connected to the achievement of doing a difficult task. Things that are easy to do bring small pains with them, but they also bring small pleasures. Unbelievable delight is reserved for those who attempt and accomplish that which seems impossible. And what joys can be purer, holier, and more intense than those of the person who has finally succeeded in getting to the place where he has the mind of the meek and humble One - Jesus Christ. After a long climb, he reaches the alpine summit of self-emptying, self-humbling love! Secondly, those who practice the things that are taught here also win for themselves the approval of their Lord. A teacher is pleased when a pupil understands his lesson, but a master is pleased only when his servants do what he wants them to do. Christ, being Teacher and Master, demands that we do as well as know. And the Lord of Christians is satisfied - in proportion to the difficulty of the demand - with all sincere efforts to obey His will and to follow His example. To all who make such efforts, there is great joy in knowing that Jesus, the One they serve, gives them His approval. This thought sustains the mind with peace, even when one does not have the joy of winning the approval of his friends: “I am guided in what I am currently doing by the Spirit of Jesus, and He approves of what I am doing.” This is not an unimportant remark. For it is often true that we will please other people the least when we are pleasing the Lord the most. You will please many people by being carefully selfish much more readily than by having an absolute commitment to doing what is right. “People will praise you when you serve yourself.” And it will not bother them at all when a believer deviates from pure
Christian morality and pursues self-interest - as long as he is successful. Even religious people will often trouble and grieve you by giving you advice that has the flavor of worldly wisdom rather than Christian simplicity and godly sincerity. But if Christ approves of us, we may very well have to do without the sympathy and approval of other people. Their approval is, at best, a comfort. His is a matter of life and death.

The third element in the happiness of the person who is not merely a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the perfect law of Christ, is that he escapes the guilt that comes to others because they do not have enough knowledge. It is a very common religious belief that to sin against light is worse than to sin in ignorance. “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17). And, of course, the clearer the light, the greater the responsibility. Now, there is no department of Christian truth that is clearer than that of Christian ethics. There are some doctrines which the church as a whole can hardly know. These doctrines are so mysterious, or so disputed. But Jesus’ ethical teaching is simple and full in all of its main points. It is universally understood and just as universally admired. Protestants and Roman Catholics, Trinitarians, Socinians, and Deists, all agree here. People of all sects and denominations are truly blessed when they do the things which everyone knows and admires. A heavy penalty lies on those who do not do them. The woe is not explicitly expressed, but it is implied in Christ’s words. The common Lord of all believers virtually addresses all Christendom here, saying, “You can see the sunlight of a perfect example; you have been made aware of a high and lovely ideal in life. Unbelieving moralists have never dreamed of anything like it. What are you doing with your light? Are you simply looking at it, and writing books about it, and bragging about it, and talking about it? Meanwhile, are you allowing people outside the church to surpass you in their compassion and philanthropy? If this is all you are doing with your knowledge, it will be more tolerable for unbelievers at the judgment than for you.”

One Who Knows, But Will Not Do

After Jesus reflected on this theme with His disciples, He followed it up with a word of apology for the suspicious tone with which it was given. No doubt, the disciples had felt it. He said, “I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.’” The remark may be paraphrased like this: “I have been hinting at the possibility that one can know what is right and yet not do anything about it. But I have not been implying this is true of everyone. I do not think so badly of you all that I imagine you are capable of deliberate and habitual neglect of what you know to be your duties. But there is one among you who is capable of this kind of conduct. I have chosen you Twelve. I know the character of every one of you. I said a year ago, after asking a question that hurt your feelings, that one of you had a devil (Jn. 6:66-70). Now, after giving you my suspicious thoughts, I say there is one among you whose character negatively illustrates its meaning. There is one who knows but will not do. He puts sentiment in the place of action and admiration
in the place of imitation. This is one who, after he eats bread with Me as a familiar friend, will repay Me for all my kindness. He will not offer loving obedience but will lift up his heel against Me.” Jesus could put up with the weaknesses of sincere disciples but not with the Judas-character. In him, correct thinking and fine sentiment are combined with a false heart and practical laxity. Promise is offered in the place of performance. Speaking the right words is substituted for doing the appropriate deed. Jesus’ soul utterly abhorred this kind of character.

Is there any doubt that it was not in vain that these sincere disciples spent so much time with the One who was so exacting in His ideas? In later years, they really did strive to fulfill their Master’s will and to serve one another in love.
In Memoriam; Or, Fourth Lesson On The Doctrine Of The Cross

Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; I Cor. 11:23-26

The Lord’s Supper is a memorial that is sacred to the memory of Jesus Christ. “Do this in remembrance of Me” (I Cor. 11:24). When He was in Bethany, Jesus had indicated that He wanted Mary to be remembered when the gospel was preached. Now in the room where the Supper would be taken, He expressed His desire that He Himself be remembered. He made sure Mary’s loving deed would be commemorated by having her story rehearsed over and over again. He would have His own loving deed commemorated by a symbolic action. It would be repeated often throughout the ages to the end of the world.

The rite of the Supper is not only used to commemorate but, also, to interpret the Lord’s death. It throws important light on the meaning of that solemn event. During His personal ministry, the institution of this symbolic feast was, in fact, the most important contribution Jesus made to the doctrine of the atonement which came by His sacrificing Himself. The Twelve learned from the Supper, more clearly than from any other act or word He performed or spoke, that their Master’s death possessed a redemptive character. By introducing the Supper, Jesus, in essence, said to His disciples: “My approaching passion is not to be thought of simply as a calamity or dark disaster which is happening contrary to the divine purpose or My expectation. It is not a fatal blow which has been inflicted by ungodly men on Me and you, or on the cause which is dear to all of us. It is not even an evil that is overruled for good. Rather, it is an event that fulfills, not frustrates, the purpose of My mission. It will provide blessings to the world. What men mean for evil, God means for good, in order to save many people. On the one hand, the shedding of My blood is the crime of wicked Jews. On the other, it is My own voluntary act. I pour out My blood for a gracious purpose - for the remission of sins. My death will initiate a new dispensation and seal a new testament. It will fulfill the purpose that the Mosaic rituals had, especially the ritual involving the paschal lamb, which is being eaten right now. Not only that, it will take the place of these rituals. I will be the Paschal Lamb of the Israel of God from this time on. At the same time, I will protect my people from death and feed their souls with my crucified humanity as the bread of eternal life.”

These truths are very familiar to us, no matter how new and strange they may have seemed to the disciples. We are used to explaining the Supper by His death, rather than the death by the
Supper. It may be profitable here, however, to reverse the process. Imagine being in the position the Twelve were in. They were witnesses to the institution of a new religious symbol. Try to re-discover, from this symbol, the meaning of the event with which it is now associated. The Supper is intended to foreshadow the significance of His death. Let us, then, take our stand beside this ancient monument and try to read the mysterious inscription on its weather-worn surface.

**In Memory of His Death**

1. First, we immediately perceive that the monument refers to the death of Jesus. It is not simply erected to His memory in general. It is erected especially in memory of His death. All things point forward to what was about to take place on Calvary. The sacramental acts of breaking the bread and pouring out the wine obviously look in that direction. Also, all the words Jesus spoke when He instituted the Supper allude to His death. Both the fact of His death and the way He would die are hinted at when He makes a distinction between His body and His blood: “This is my body...this is My blood.” Body and blood are one in life. They become separate things only in death - and not by every kind of death. He would die in a manner that would involve blood-shedding, such as happens in the case of sacrificial victims. The comments made about the body and the blood point at death even more clearly. Jesus speaks about His body as “given” - as if He would be slain or “broken” (I Cor. 11:24) in sacrifice. He spoke of His blood as “shed.” Finally, the Savior made it clear what He was alluding to when He described the blood that He was about to shed as the blood of a new testament. Where a testament exists, there must also be the death of the testator. And though an ordinary testator may die an ordinary death, the Testator of the new testament must die a sacrificial death. The word *new* implies a reference to the old Jewish covenant which was ratified by the sacrifice of burnt offerings and peace-offerings of oxen. Their blood was sprinkled on the altar and on the people. Moses called it “the blood of the covenant.”

**Jesus’ Greatest Event**

2. The simple fact that the Lord’s Supper commemorates especially the Lord’s death implies that His death must have been an event of utmost importance. By instituting a symbolic rite for this purpose, Jesus, in essence, said to His disciples and to us: “Fix your eyes on Calvary. Watch what happens there. That is the greatest event in My earthly history. Other people have had monuments erected to them because they have lived lives that are considered memorable. I want you to erect a monument to Me because I have died. It’s not that I want you to forget My life, but I especially want you to remember My death. Commemorate it for its own sake. Don’t do it just because My life has been terminated. Other people are remembered when their birthdays are celebrated. But in My case, it is better to celebrate the day of My death than the day of My birth. My birth into this world was marvelous and momentous. But My exit out of the world by crucifixion is even more marvelous and momentous. No joyful commemoration is needed for My birth. But keep the memory of My death alive through the Holy Supper until I come again.
When you remember it well, you remember all of My earthly history. Out of all the days I have lived on earth, My death is the secret, the consummation, and the crown.”

But why, in a history that was remarkable at every turn, should His death be singled out for remembrance? Did its tragic character win this distinction? Did the Crucified One mean for the Supper named for Him to simply be a dramatic representation of His passion in order to excite our feelings? Was it to elicit a sympathetic tear by renewing the memory of His dying sorrows? If we were to think about His death in this way, we would degrade our Christian feast to the level of the pagan festival of Adonis,

*Whose annual wound in Lebanon allured
The Syrian damsels to lament his fate
In amorous ditties all a summer’s day.*

Or, did Jesus want His people to remember the awful wrong and shameful indignity that was done to the Son of God by the wicked men who crucified Him? Was the Holy Supper instituted in order to brand the world with eternal infamy - a world that knew no better use to make of the Holy One than to nail Him to a tree, a world that felt more kindness even for a robber than for Him? Certainly, the world deserved to be censured. But the Son of Man did not come to condemn sinners but to save them. It was not within His loving nature to erect an enduring monument to His own resentment. He would not dishonor His murderers. The blood of Jesus “speaks better than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:24).

Or, did Jesus instruct His followers to always keep it in mind because His death on the cross was, in spite of its indignity and shame, *glorious*? Was it to be a testimony to His invincible faithfulness to the cause of truth and righteousness? Is the festival of the Supper to be regarded as a solemn occasion in the same way that the early church remembered the death of the martyrs? Is the *Coenâ Domini* (“On the Lord’s Supper”) simply the birth of the great Protomartyr (First Martyr)? The Socinians would have us believe this [Note: Socinianism, a forerunner of Unitarianism, was a rationalist movement that was begun by Lelio Sozzini (1525-62). He taught that Jesus was the revelation of God, but was only a man. He also believed that the soul died with the body, except in certain cases of those who persevered in obeying Jesus’ commandments.] The Racovian Catechism replies to the question as to why the Lord wished the memory of His crucifixion to be especially celebrated in His church: “Because of all of Christ's actions, it was the greatest and most proper to Him. For although the resurrection and exaltation of Christ were far greater, these were acts of God the Father rather than of Christ” (*De Coenâ Domini*, Question 4) [Note: The Racovian Catechism, published in 1605 in Racov, Poland, was the most famous expression of Socinianism.] In other words, His death, above everything else, deserves to be remembered because it was the most important and awe-inspiring act of witness-bearing.
on Christ’s part to the truth. It was the glorious climax of a noble life of self-sacrificing devotion to the high and dangerous vocation of a prophet.

It is, of course, true that Christ’s death was all of this. It is also true that it is worthy to be remembered as an act of martyrdom. But whether Jesus instituted the Holy Supper for the purpose of commemorating His death exclusively, primarily, or even at all, as a martyrdom, is a different question. For this point, we must learn the truth from Christ’s own lips. Let’s return, then, to the history of the institution to learn *His thinking* about this matter.

**The Benefits of His Death**

3. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus was particularly clear when He explained which aspect of His death that He wanted to be celebrated. When He distributed the sacramental bread to His disciples, He said, “This is My body, given, or broken, for you” (Luke and Paul). By saying this, He intimated that His death was to be commemorated because of a benefit it provided for the communicant. When He handed the disciples the sacramental cup, He said, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of (you and) many for forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:27–28). With these words, He indicated the nature of the benefit He purchased by His death. Therefore, because of this particular benefit, it was worthy to be remembered.

In this creative word about the new dispensation, Jesus represents His death as a sin-offering. He atones for guilt and purchases forgiveness for our moral debt. His blood was to be shed for the remission of sins. In light of this purpose, the blood is called the blood of the new testament. Apparently, it alludes to the prophecy of Jeremiah which contains a promise of a new covenant to be made by God with the house of Israel. This covenant’s primary blessing would be the forgiveness of iniquity. It is called new because, unlike the old, it would be a covenant of pure grace. It would be a covenant of promises that is unclogged of legal stipulations. By mentioning His blood and the new covenant together, Jesus teaches that, even though He would annul the old, He would, at the same time, fulfill the old in introducing the new. The new covenant would be ratified by sacrifice like the old one was at Sinai. The remission of sin would be granted after blood-shedding. But in offering the cup to His disciples, the Lord intimates that after His death, there would be no more need for sacrifices. The sin-offering of blood will be converted into a thank-offering of wine, a cup of salvation to be drunk with grateful, joyful hearts by all who through faith in His sacrifice have received the pardon for their sins. Finally, Jesus suggests that the new covenant concerns the many, not the few - not Israel alone, but all nations. It is a gospel which He offers to all sinners.

The cup is a seal of this new covenant. We may drink of this cup with thankfulness and joy because the “new covenant” (new, yet far older than the old) is, in every way, *well-ordered and certain*. It is *well-ordered* because surely it is something good and worthy of God that connects the
blessing of pardon with the sacrificial death of Him through whom it comes to us. It is good in the interests of righteousness, because it stipulates that sin will not be pardoned until it has been adequately atoned for by the sacrifice of the sinner's Friend. And it is just and right that there should not be any remission for the unrighteous without the shedding of the Righteous One's blood. Therefore, God's ways serve the interest of divine love. It gives that love a worthy career. It has free reign to display its magnanimous nature by its bearing the burden of the sinful and the miserable. And one more thing. The constitution of the new covenant is admirably adapted to the great practical purpose that is targeted by the plan of redemption - namely, the elevation of a fallen, degraded race out of a state of corruption into a state of holiness. The gospel of forgiveness through Christ's death is the moral power of God to raise all those who believe out of the world's selfishness, hatred, and moral baseness into a heavenly life of devotion, self-sacrifice, patience, and humility. No one should think that what is meant by faith in Christ is simply belief in the opus operatum (effective work) of a vicarious death. The power of this kind of faith to elevate is more than questionable. But when faith is taken in its true scriptural sense, then its purifying and ennobling power is beyond all question. True faith does not only imply a belief in a certain transaction (i.e., the death of Christ), or that One endured death for others, but a hearty appreciation for the spirit of the act and for the Doer. “The love of Christ controls us” (II Cor. 5:14); and "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20) as a result of such faith.

The Socinian way of salvation is so inferior to this new covenant! In their way, pardon is not dependent on the blood of Jesus. To them, He died as a martyr for righteousness, not as a Redeemer for the unrighteous. They believe when we simply repent, God forgives us by a simple word. Forgiveness did not cost the Forgiver any trouble or sacrifice - only a word, or stroke of the pen in signing a document with these words: “Thus says the Lord.” What an ice-cold transaction! What a cold relationship that is implied between the Deity and His creatures! It is vastly preferable to receive forgiveness that had as its foundation, sacrifice. It costs the Forgiver sorrow, sweat, pain, blood, wounds, and death. It is a forgiveness that comes from a God who, in essence, says: “To save sinners, I will not repeal the law which connects sin with death as its penalty; but I am willing to become the law's victim for that purpose.” This forgiveness is both an act of righteousness and an act of marvelous love. Even though it appears both rational and generous at first, forgiveness without satisfaction manifests neither God's righteousness nor His love. A Socinian God who pardons without atonement is destitute of a passionate hatred of sin and of a passionate love for sinners.

Jesus said, “Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much, but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Lk. 7:47). It is a deep truth, but there is another that is just as deep: We must feel that our forgiveness has cost the Forgiver much in order to love Him much. True Christians display that passionate devotion to Christ which forms such a contrast to the cold intellectual homage that is given by the Deist to his God. When a Christian thinks about the
tears, agony, bloody sweat, shame, and pain that was endured by the Redeemer, as well as His marred vision, broken heart, pierced side, and His lacerated hands and feet, his heart burns with devoted love. The story of the passion opens all the fountains of his feelings. The *via dolorosa* (“the road of sadness,” the road Jesus followed on His way to the crucifixion) was the only way Jesus could have ascended the throne of His people’s hearts.

The new covenant that was inaugurated by Christ’s death is certain as well as orderly. It is reliably sealed by the blood of the Testator. What better guarantee can we have of the good-will of God? “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us” (I Jn. 3:16). Looking at the matter in the light of justice, this covenant is equally certain. God is not unrighteous so that He forgets His Son’s labor of love. This is the only way it can be under the moral administration of Jehovah. Can the God of truth break His word? Can the Judge of all the earth allow someone - especially His own Son - to give Himself up out of the purest love, and endure sorrow, pain, and shame for His brothers without receiving the results He desired and were promised to Him - namely, many souls, many lives, many sinners that are saved? Think about it. Imagine holiness suffering for righteousness’ sake and not having the satisfaction of doing something to destroy unrighteousness and to turn people from disobedience to obedience? Imagine love, moved by its very nature and by the obligations of the covenant, laboring for those who are lost and, yet, this love goes unrewarded because of the stubbornness, apathy, or faithlessness of the Governor of the universe. Love’s labor would be lost - no one becomes better for it; things remain as they were before: Sinners are not pardoned. They are not delivered from the pit and restored to holiness. No chosen people are brought out of darkness into marvelous light! These kinds of things cannot exist in God’s dominions. The work of God is carried on in the interest of Holy Love. It gives love the freedom to bear others’ burdens. It makes sure that if she will do so, love will feel the full weight of the burden she takes upon her. But this same love also makes sure that, by an eternal covenant of truth and fairness, that when the burden has been borne, the Burden-bearer will receive His reward in the form He likes best - in souls that have been cleansed, pardoned, sanctified, and led to everlasting glory by Himself as His ransomed brothers or children.

The principle of vicarious merit that teaches we are pardoned simply because Christ died for our sins makes sense in the mind as well as in the heart. Practically, it means there is a reward that is held out to encourage righteousness and love. Jesus carried this reward through His heavy task. Relying on His Father’s promise, He endured the cross because He saw the certain joy of saving many people. It is the same principle (in a limited application of it) that stimulates Christians to fill up that which is lacking in the sufferings of their Lord. They know that if they are faithful, they will not live for themselves but will benefit Christ’s body, the church, and also the whole world. If this were not true, there would be very little moral faithfulness or love in the world. If the moral government of the universe made it impossible for one person to benefit another
through prayer or loving acts; if it made it impossible for ten good men to be a shield to Sodom in order for the elect to be salt to the earth, people would give up trying to do it. Concern over the well-being of the public would cease, and universal selfishness would become the order of the day. Or, if this state of affairs did not take place, we would only have darkness in a worse form. We would find it impossible to understand how Righteousness crucified could provide no benefit to any living creature. This would be a scandal and a reproach to the work and the character of God. Therefore, if we are going to hold on to our faith in the divine holiness, justice, goodness, and truth, we must believe that the blood of Jesus, without a doubt, secures for us the remission of sins. Likewise, we must believe that the blood of His children is precious in God’s sight and makes the people, among whom it is shed, precious. This is true even though their blood is unable to obtain for sinners the blessing of pardon before the divine tribunal (Christ’s blood alone is capable of providing that service for us, and He rendered it effectually once for all). By God’s appointment, and in many ways, their blood is a source of blessing to a world which is unworthy to count among its inhabitants these people whom it does not know to use except as lambs for the slaughter.

**Jesus, the Bread of God**

4. The sacrament of the Supper shows that Christ is not simply a Lamb to be slain for a sin-offering, but as a Paschal Lamb to be eaten for spiritual nourishment. “Take, eat; this is My body” (Mt. 26:26). With this command, Jesus taught the Twelve, and through them all Christians, to think of His crucified humanity as the bread of God for the life of their souls. We must eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man spiritually by faith, as we literally eat the bread and drink the wine with our mouths.

By believing Christ is the Bread of Life, we are not to restrict ourselves to the one benefit that is mentioned by Him when He instituted the feast - the remission of sins. We are to think about all of His benefits that cause our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. Christ is the Bread of Life in all of His offices. As a Prophet, He supplies the bread of divine truth to feed our minds. As a Priest, He furnishes the bread of righteousness to satisfy our troubled consciences. As a King, He presents Himself to us as an object of devotion that will fill our hearts, and whom we may worship without fear of idolatry.

As often as the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, we are invited to contemplate Christ as the food for our souls (in the comprehensive sense). As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we declare that Christ has been, and is now, our soul’s food in all of these ways. And as often as we take this Supper with sincerity, we are helped to appropriate Christ as our spiritual food more and more abundantly. The Holy Supper aids our faith even as a symbol or picture (excluding mysticism and magic). Through the eyes, it affects the heart, like poetry and music do through the ears. The mysticism and superstition that have grown around the sacraments over the years are
a witness to their powerful influence over the imagination. People's thoughts and feelings were so deeply moved that they could not believe such power lay in mere symbols. And by the confusion of ideas that naturally came to excited imaginations, they imputed to the sign all the virtues of the things signified. By this means, faith was transferred from Christ the Redeemer, and the Spirit the Sanctifier, to the rite of baptism and the service of the mass. This result demonstrates the need for knowledge and spiritual discernment in order to keep the imagination in check and to prevent the eyes of the understanding from being put out by the dazzling glare of illusion. Considering how thoroughly the eyes of the understanding have been put out by theories about sacramental grace, some people have been tempted to deny that sacraments are even means of grace. They are also prone to think that institutions which have been so terribly abused ought to be allowed to fall into disuse. This is a natural reaction, but an extreme opinion. The sober, true view of the matter is this: The sacraments are means of grace. There is no magic virtue in them or in the priest administering them. But they help faith by the senses and, still more, by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit as the reward of an intelligent, sincere, believing use of them.

This, then, is what we have learned from the monumental stone. The Lord's Supper commemorates the Lord's death. It points out that death is an event of transcendent importance. It sets it forth, truly, as the basis of our hope for the pardon of sin. Finally, it presents Christ the Lord, who died on the Cross, as everything our spirits need for health and salvation - our mystic bread and wine. This rite was instituted by Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed. And He meant for it to be repeated, not only by the Apostles, but by all Christians in all ages until He comes again. We learn this from Paul. And we might have inferred it without any explicit information. An act so original, so impressive, so pregnant with meaning, so helpful to faith, once performed, was virtually an enactment. In performing it, Jesus, in essence, said, “Let this become a great institution, a standing observance in the community to be called by My Name.”

**How to Observe the Supper**

The meaning of the ordinance determines the spirit in which it should be observed. Christians should sit down at the table in a spirit of humility, thankfulness, and brotherly love. They ought to confess their sins, devoutly thanking God for His covenant of grace and His mercy to them in Christ. They should love Him who loved them, washed them from their sins in His own blood, and who daily feeds their souls with heavenly food. They should give Him all glory and dominion. And they ought to love one another - loving all redeemed people and believers in Jesus as brothers and taking the Supper together as a family meal. While they are doing so, they ought to pray that an increasing number of people may experience the saving efficacy of Christ's death. This is the way the Apostles and the apostolic church celebrated the Supper at Pentecost after Jesus had ascended into glory. “And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and
sincerity of heart” (Acts 2:46). Would that we could now keep the feast as they kept it then! But how much has to be done before that is possible! The moss of Time must be cleared away from the monumental stone, so that its inscription may once more become distinctly legible. The accumulated debris of a millennium and a half of theological controversies about sacraments must be carted out of sight and mind. The truth as it is in Jesus must be separated from the alloy of human error. The simple rite of the Supper must be divested of the state robes of elaborate ceremonies by which it has been all but stifled. It must be allowed to return to primitive simplicity. These things are devoutly longed for. They will ultimately come - if not on earth, then in that day when the Lord Jesus will drink new wine with His people in the kingdom of His Father.
Something else happened on the night before the Lord’s death besides the washing of the disciples’ feet and the institution of the Supper. It helped make the evening forever memorable. On the same night, during the evening meal, Jesus exposed and expelled the false disciple who had planned to deliver his Master into the hands of those who wanted Him dead. He had already alluded to the fact that there was a traitor among the Twelve. He did this while He was washing their feet. He had hinted that they were not all clean and insinuated that there was one of them who knew but would not do. After He finished and explained why He had served them with humble love, He proceeded to the dreaded task of exposing the disciple He had alluded to. His spirit was troubled at the thought of the painful task. As He shuddered in the presence of such satanic wickedness, He introduced the subject by making this general announcement: “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me” (Mt. 26:21). Afterwards, as He answered their questions, Jesus mentioned the particular individual and explained that the traitor was the one to whom He would give the dipped morsel.

This announcement was new to the disciples, but it was not new to their Master. Jesus had known all along that there was a traitor in the camp. He had even hinted at it as much as a full year earlier. Except for that one occasion, He had not talked about the subject. He had patiently carried the secret burden in His own heart. Now, however, the secret could not be hidden any longer. The hour had come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Judas had made up his mind to be the instrument for betraying his Lord to death. Such awful work, once the decision has been made to carry it out, should, by all means, be done without delay. Then Jesus wanted to be rid of the false disciple’s company. He wanted to spend the last few hours of His life in loving, confidential fellowship with His faithful ones, free from the irritation and distraction that was caused by the presence of an undeclared, but deadly, enemy. Therefore, He does not wait until Judas is ready to leave. He invites him to leave and asserts His authority over him even after he has renounced his allegiance and given himself over to the devil’s service. Reaching for the morsel, Jesus, in essence, says to him: “I know you, Judas. You are the man. You have resolved to betray Me. Leave, then, and do it.” Then He explicitly says: “What you do, do quickly” (Jn. 13:27). It was an order to leave - immediately.
Judas took the hint. “He went out immediately” (Jn. 13:30). So, he finally quit the company of which he had been an unworthy member. One has to wonder how such a man ever got in. How was he ever admitted into such a holy fellowship? How did it happen that he was chosen to be one of the Twelve? Didn’t Jesus know the real character of this man when He chose Him? The words our Lord spoke just before this event do not allow us to question this. “I know the ones I have chosen,” He said, while expounding on the washing of their feet (John 13:18). Evidently, He was claiming that He knew all of them, including Judas, at the time He chose them. Then, did He choose Judas, knowing what he was, in order that He might have among the Twelve one by whom He could be betrayed, so the Scriptures could be fulfilled? It certainly seems that He was hinting at it in the declaration to which He has just alluded. Jesus goes on to say: “But it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me’” (Jn. 13:18). It is not conceivable that Iscariot was chosen simply to be a traitor like an actor might be chosen by a theater manager to play the part of Iago. The purpose mentioned in the Scripture just quoted might ultimately be served by his being chosen. But that purpose was not the motive behind the choice. These two points are certain: (1) On the one hand, Judas did not become a follower of Jesus with treacherous intentions; and (2) Jesus did not chose Judas to be one of the Twelve because He foreknew that he would eventually become a traitor.

**Why Did Jesus Choose Judas?**

If the choice of the false disciple was not due to ignorance or foreknowledge, then how can it be explained? The only explanation that can be given is that, apart from some secret insight, Judas was eligible for the position as far as outward appearance was concerned. He could not be overlooked on the basis of what others saw on the surface. He must have had qualities that would have made others speak about him like Samuel did about Eliab: “Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord” (I Sam. 16:6). Only someone possessing the eye of omniscience could have detected him. So, Jesus’ choice of him is perfectly intelligible. The Head of the church simply did what the church has to do in similar situations. The church chooses men to fill sacred offices on the basis of qualifications that have been observed in their lives, such as knowledge, zeal, apparent godliness, and behavior. Yet sometimes she makes wrong decisions and confers dignity on people like Judas who dishonor the positions they fill. The resulting consequences are great. But Christ has taught us, by His example in choosing Judas (and also by the Parable of the Tares), that we must submit to the evil and leave the remedy in higher hands. Out of evil God ultimately brings good, as He did in the case of the traitor.

We suppose Judas was chosen to the apostleship on the basis that he was apparently qualified. So what kind of man would that be? An offensive, conscious hypocrite, seeking some personal benefit, while verbally shooting for something higher? Not necessarily; not probably. Rather, it would have been someone like Jesus described Judas to be when He made the comment: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (Jn. 13:17). The false disciple was a
sentimental, believable, self-deceived pietist who knew what was good and approved of it. But he did not consciously practice it. He leaned toward those things which were noble and holy in his feelings, imaginations, and intellect. However, in his will and conduct, he was the slave of worthless, selfish passions. He would always put himself first, yet he could zealously devote himself to doing good deeds when his personal interests were not compromised. This is what the Apostle James called “a double-minded man” (Jas. 1:8). In describing Judas in this way, we are not drawing the picture of a single monster. People like Judas are by no means as rare as some might think. Sacred and secular history offer numerous examples of them. They play an important role in human affairs. Balaam, who had the vision of a prophet and the soul of a miser, was this kind of a man. Robespierre, the evil genius of the French Revolution, was another. This man who sent thousands to the guillotine had, in his earlier days, resigned his office as a provincial judge because it was against his conscience to pronounce the death sentence on a criminal who was found guilty of a capital offence. A third example, and one more remarkable than the other two, may be found in the famous Greek Alcibiades (c. 450-404 B.C.). He became close friends with the greatest and best of the Greeks. But he had unlimited ambition, was unscrupulous and licentious. This man betrayed his native city and joined the side of her enemies. However, in his youth, he had been an enthusiastic admirer and disciple of Socrates. We know how he felt toward the Athenian sage because of the words that were put into his mouth by Plato in one of his dialogues. These words involuntarily suggest a parallel between the speaker and the unworthy follower of Someone greater than Socrates: “I experience toward this man alone (Socrates) what no one would believe me capable of, a sense of shame. For I am conscious of an inability to contradict him and decline to do what bids me; and when I go away I feel myself overcome by the desire of popular esteem. Therefore, I flee from him and avoid him. But when I see him, I am ashamed of my admissions and, often times, I would be glad if he ceased to exist among the living; and yet I know well, that were that to happen, I should be still more grieved” (Plato's Symposium).

Since the character of Judas is as we have described, we can almost comprehend the possibility of his turning a traitor. Anyone who loves himself more than any other person, no matter how good, or any cause, no matter how holy, is always capable of bad faith. He is a traitor in the heart from the beginning. All that is needed is a series of circumstances intended to bring out the evil aspects of his nature. Therefore, the question arises, “What were the circumstances that converted Judas from a possible into an actual traitor?”

**Why Did Judas Turn Traitor?**

This is a question that is very hard to answer. The crime committed by Iscariot continues to remain mysterious and unexplainable, even though there has been so much discussion about it. By it, he earned for himself a terrible reputation. Many attempts have been made to assign probable motives for the vile deed. Some tend to excuse Judas, while others multiply his guilt. All
attempts have been, more or less, conjectural. None are perfectly satisfactory. As for the Gospel narratives, they do not explain Judas’ wickedness; they only record it. The synoptical evangelists (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do mention that the traitor made a bargain with the priests and received from them a sum of money for the service he rendered. And John, in his narrative of the anointing at Bethany, states that the fault-finding disciple was a thief, using money from the common treasury for himself (Jn. 12:6). These facts, of course, show him to have been a covetous man. No one but a greedy person with a covetous spirit could have taken that money for himself. A vindictive person whose pride has been wounded, or who imagined himself in some way to be wronged, might play the role of a traitor for the love of revenge. But he would not want to be paid for his work. The minor pilfering from the bag was also a sure sign that he was a disgraceful, corrupt soul. Perhaps the very fact that he kept the money bag for the company of Jesus can be regarded as an indication that his heart was greedy. We can only imagine that he got the bag to carry because the other disciples were all extremely careless about money matters, while he had natural inclinations toward finance and demonstrated a desire to be in charge of the funds. The others would be very glad to find a brother willing to take the trouble. And since they had absorbed the spirit of their Master’s precept, “Do not be anxious for tomorrow” (Mt. 6:34), they would not think of running for the office against him.

The Gospel writers definitely represent Judas as a covetous man. But they do not present his covetousness as the only, or even as the main, motive behind his crime. It can hardly have been the only one. In the first place, would it not have been better for him to have continued as the treasurer, with ready access to the funds, than to sell his Master for the small sum of thirty pieces of silver (Mt. 27:3). Also, what could motivate a man, whose primary and overruling passion was to amass money, to become a disciple of Jesus at all? Surely following One who had no place to lay His head was not a likely way to make money! Finally, how do we account for Judas’ repentance if the hypothesis is true that his sole objective was to gain a few pieces of silver? It was so intense, though extremely unholy in its nature. Greed can make a man, possessing wonderful talents, thoroughly mercenary and unscrupulous. This was true in the case of the famous Duke of Marlborough. But it is extremely rare for a man who is filled with greed to feel any remorse over the crimes he committed because of greed. It is the nature of greed to destroy the conscience and to make all things, no matter how sacred, corrupt. Then where did that mighty volcanic upheaval in the heart of Judas come from? Surely more passions, other than the cold and hardening love of profit, were at work in his soul when he sold his Lord!

Wrestling with this difficulty, some have suggested that, in betraying Jesus, Judas was motivated by feelings of jealousy or spite which arose from arguments with the other disciples or imagined injuries. This suggestion, in and of itself, is not improbable. Offenses could have very easily come from various sources. The simple fact that Judas was not a Galilean, but a native of another province, might cause a misunderstanding. Human likes and dislikes ride on very little things.
Family relationships, common names, or common birthplaces have far more power than the great bonds which connect us with all of the human race. In religion, the same idea holds true. The ties to a common Lord, a common hope, and a common spiritual life are weak when compared to the bonds created by being a part of a common sect and similar religious customs and opinions. So who knows what offenses arose from those arguments among the disciples about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. What if the man of Kerioth had been made to feel that, no matter who was going to be the greatest, he had no chance because he was not a Galilean? The miserly, covetous habits of Judas as treasurer would be a third cause for bad feelings in the apostolic company. Let’s suppose that his dishonesty escaped notice. Even so, his tendency to have more interest in the money itself than in the objects for which the money was planned and to reluctantly give the money to the Apostles or to the poor would surely be noticed. In such an outspoken group of men, they would not only notice - they would not be able to keep quiet about it.

These comments show how bad feelings could have started between Judas and his fellow-disciples. But what we still have to understand is the hatred that the false disciple had for his Master. Had Jesus done anything to offend the man by whom He was betrayed? Yes! He had seen through him. That was offense enough! Of course Judas knew that he was seen through. People cannot live together in close fellowship for very long without knowing what the others think about them. If I do not trust a brother, he will find out about it even if I attempt to conceal it. But the guileless and faithful One would not make any attempt to hide it. It is true, He would not bring the matter of His distrust of Judas to his attention; neither would He carefully try to hide it just so things would go smoothly between them. Jesus, who so faithfully corrected the faults of the other disciples, would also fulfill His duty to this one. He would make him aware that He disapproved of his spirit and evil habits in order to bring him to repentance. It is not difficult to imagine what the effect of His dealing with him would be. With Peter, correction had a very positive effect. It immediately brought him to the right perspective. In the case of Judas, the result would be very different. If he were conscious of the fact that Jesus did not think well of him, or if Jesus openly rebuked him, it would breed an obstinate resentment in his heart. There would also be an ever-deepening alienation from Christ. Finally, love turned to hatred, and the unrepentant disciple began to harbor vindictive feelings.

The way in which Judas carried out the betrayal supports the idea that he was motivated by malicious, revengeful feelings. He was not content to give the proper information to the Jewish authorities so they could seize their Victim. Judas led the band of men that was sent to apprehend his Master and even pointed Him out to them by an affectionate greeting. For someone in a vindictive mood, that kiss might be sweet. But to a man in any other mood, even though he were a traitor, how abhorrent and abominable! The salutation was entirely unnecessary. It was not necessary for the plot to be successful. The military detachment was furnished with torches,
and Judas could have pointed Jesus out to them while he stayed in the background. But that way would not satisfy a close friend who turned to become a mortal enemy.

Along with malice and greed, the instinct of self-preservation may have also had a place among the motives of Judas. His violation of trust could have been caused by his selfish caution. The traitor was a shrewd man and believed that catastrophe was near. He understood the state of affairs better than his single-minded brothers. For the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. The other disciples, so enthusiastic and hopeful, were blinded to the signs of the times. But the false disciple, because he was less noble, was more discerning. Disaster was imminent. What was to be done? Why, turn things around and set himself up. Make Christ’s loss his gain. If this corruptness could be carried out under the pretense that Jesus provoked him, then that is even better!

These observations help bring the crime of Judas Iscariot within the range of human experience. Therefore, it was worth our while to present them. For it is not in our best interest to think of the traitor as an absolutely unique character, as the solitary, perfect incarnation of satanic wickedness. It would be better for us to think of his crime in a way that our minds make us ask, like the disciples, “Is it I?” “Who can discern his errors?....Keep your servant also from willful sins” (Ps. 19:12a,13a). There have been many traitors besides Judas who, because of malice or for profit, have deceived noble men and noble causes. Some of them perhaps were even worse than he. It was his unenviable distinction to betray the Most Exalted of all victims. But many who have been guilty of sin have not let it affect them as much as he did. They have been able to live happily after their crime.

So it is important for us to be warned that Judas is not an isolated sinner. But it is also significant that we think about his crime as an incomprehensible mystery of iniquity. John would want us to look at it in this light. He could have told us a lot about the relationship between Jesus and Judas in order to explain Judas’ act. But he has not chosen to do that. The only explanation that he gives for the traitor’s crime is that Satan had taken possession of him. He mentions this two times in one chapter, as if to express his own horror and to awaken similar horror in his readers (John 13:2,27). And to deepen the impression, after he tells about Judas’ leaving, he adds the interesting note that it took place at night: “And so after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night” (John 13:30). An appropriate time for such a deed!

Judas betrayed his Lord to death. Then he went away and took his own life. What a tragic accompaniment to the crucifixion was that suicide! What a powerful illustration of the evil produced by a double mind! In order for Judas to have been happy to some degree, he should have either been a better man or a worse one. If he had been better, he would have been saved from committing his crime. If he had been worse, he would have postponed his torment. As it turned out, he
was bad enough to do his infamous deed and good enough to be unable to bear the burden of its guilt. Woe to such a man! Better for him, indeed, that he had never been born!

What a sad ending Judas had when compared with his favorable beginning! Here was a man who was chosen to be a companion of the Son of Man, an eyewitness of His work, and who at one time had engaged in preaching the gospel and casting out demons. Now he was possessed by the devil himself and was driven by him to do damnable deeds. Finally, he was employed by a righteous Providence to take revenge and commit a crime. In light of this history, how shallow the theory that tries to resolve all moral differences between people by blaming their circumstances! Who ever lived in better circumstances where he could have become good than Judas? Yet the very influences which ought to have fostered goodness only brought out the latent evil within him.

What a bitter cross the pure, loving heart of Jesus had to bear by being in the constant presence of such a man as Judas! Yet how patiently He bore it for years! In doing so, He is an example and a comfort to His true followers. For this purpose, among others, He had this cross to bear. The Redeemer of His people had a companion who lifted up his heel against Him, in order that He might identify with His children and be able to deliver them from their distresses - in this and in all other respects. Does any faithful servant of Christ have any reason to complain that his love has been repaid with hatred, his truth with bad faith? Has anyone ever felt obligated to treat another person like a real Christian when he suspects he is a hypocrite? It is a hard trial, but let him look unto Jesus and be patient!
Chapter 38

The Dying Parent And The Little Ones

Section I - Words of Comfort and Counsel to the Sorrowing Children
John 13:31-35; 14:1-4, 15-21

When Judas went out into the darkness of the night on his even darker errand, Jesus began to prepare for His death. Yet He was thankful that the traitor had left. It took a burden off His heart and allowed Him room to breathe and to speak freely. And since it brought Him closer to His final sufferings, it also brought Him nearer the future joy of His resurrection and exaltation to glory. Therefore, after Judas left, His first words were an outburst of genuine gladness. When the false disciple was gone, and the sound of his footsteps had died away, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately” (Jn. 13:31-32).

Jesus had a faith which substantiated things that were hoped for, and made evident things which were not visible (cf. Heb. 11:1). So He was able to see through His impending death to His coming glory. But He also remembered that He had disciples all around Him to whom, in their weakness, His decease and departure would mean nothing less than bereavement and devastation. Therefore, He immediately turned His thoughts to them and began to say things that were appropriate to their inward condition and their outward situation.

In His last words to His men, the Savior used two different styles of speech. First, He spoke to them as a dying parent addressing his children. Then He assumed a higher plain and spoke to them as a dying Lord addressing His servants, friends, and representatives. The words of comfort and counsel that Jesus spoke as a parent are found in the 13th and 14th chapters of John’s Gospel. The directions the departing Lord gave to His future Apostles are recorded in the two chapters that follow. In this chapter, we will consider the dying Parent’s last words to His sorrowing children.

Notice that these words were not spoken in one continuous address. While the dying Parent spoke, the children kept asking Him children’s questions. First one, then another, then a third, and then a fourth asked Him a question based on what He had been saying. Jesus listened to these questions patiently and then answered them one after another. The answers He gave, and the things He said without opening the door for possible interrogations, are all blended together...
in the narrative. For our purposes, it will be best to separate the various elements of the narrative and to consider, first, the words of comfort Jesus spoke to His disciples. Then we will address the questions they asked Him. And, finally, we will look at Jesus’ answers. This method will make these words stand out in all of their exquisite simplicity and appropriateness. To show how simple and suitable they were, we present them here in the fewest possible words. They were: (1) I am going away; in My absence find comfort in one another’s love (13:31-35); (2) I am going away; but it is to My Father’s house and, in due time, I will come back and take you there (14:1-49); (3) I am going away; but even when I am away, I will be with you in the person of My alter ego, the Comforter (14:15-21).

As Jesus thinks about the men He is speaking with, He uses the nursery dialect. He addresses His disciples not only as children, but as “little children.” By using these endearing words, He expresses His loving affection toward them and His compassion for their weakness. Then, He alludes to His death in a sensitive, roundabout way that was adapted to their childish capacity and feelings. He tells them He is going on a road on which they cannot follow Him. They will miss Him as children miss their father when he goes away and never returns. “Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You shall seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come;’ now I say to you also” (Jn. 13:33).

**Jesus’ First Dying Counsel**

After this brief, simple preface, Jesus continued to give His little ones His first dying counsel - namely, that they should love one another in His absence. This counsel was certainly worthy of coming first! For what comfort can be greater for orphaned children than that they experience love for one another? Even if the world is dark and depressing, children will have an unfailing spring of joy in the desert of sorrow if, in their affliction, they become true brothers and sisters to one another by being sympathetic and helpful. On the other hand, if alienation, distrust, and antagonism are added to all the other problems of life, those who are grieving become despondent. Their night of sorrow does not even have a single star by which to alleviate its gloom.

Jesus was anxious to draw attention to a precept that was needed at this time. It even needed reinforcement among the disciples. So He conferred on it all of the dignity and importance of a new commandment and made the love that was required in it to be the distinctive mark of Christian discipleship. He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (Jn. 13:34-35). Thus, on that memorable night, Jesus added a third “new thing” to the two already introduced: the new sacrament and the new covenant. The commandment and the covenant were new in the same sense. It was not that they had never been heard before. But for the first time, they were proclaimed with the proper emphasis, and assumed their rightful place of supremacy above the details of the Mosaic moral legislation and the ceremonies of the legal religious system that prefigured Christ. Now love was to be the outstanding royal law. Free grace
was to make the ordinances that came from Mount Sinai obsolete. Why now? In both cases, because Jesus was about to die. His death would be the seal of the New Testament, and it would be an example of the new commandment. It would also ratify the New Testament. So after He presents that new law, He goes on to say, “As I have loved you” (Jn. 13:34). The past tense is not to be interpreted strictly here. The perfect tense must be taken as a future perfect, so it includes the crowning act of the Savior’s love - His death. Jesus was saying, “Love one another as I have loved you, and as you will know that I have loved you when you come to the place where you need the comfort of loving each other in this way.” Understanding His words in this way, we see clearly why He calls the law of love “new.” By giving His life for His people, His own love was a new thing on earth. And when His followers expressed love to one another, and had the same spirit that Jesus had, and were ready to do the same things He did, the world would stare - because it was new. They would be amazed and ask where it came from. The world would perceive that the men who loved in this way had been with Jesus.

**Jesus’ Second Word of Comfort**

The second word of comfort that Jesus spoke to the little ones He was about to leave was, in general, an exhortation to faith: “Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn. 14:1). More specifically, it is a promise that He would return to take them to be with Him forever. The exhortation is concerned about all the interests of the disciples, secular and spiritual, temporal and eternal. Their dying Master recommends, first, that they exercise faith in God, primarily when they experience the worries of this world. In essence, He says to them: “I am going to leave you, My children; but do not be afraid. You will not be like orphans in the world - defenseless and not provided for. God My Father will take care of you. Trust in Divine Providence and let peace rule in your hearts.” After Jesus exhorts His little ones to exercise faith in God the Provider, He then exhorts them to believe in Him, emphasizing those spiritual and eternal interests for which they had left all and followed Him. “You believe in God for food and clothes. Believe in Me too. And be assured that all I said to you about the kingdom and its joys and rewards is true. Soon you will find it very hard to believe this. It will seem to you as if the promises I made were deceptive, and the kingdom, a dream and an hallucination. But do not allow such dark thoughts to possess your minds. Reflect on the things you know about Me. Ask yourselves whether the One who has been with you during these years would deceive you with romantic promises that would never be fulfilled.”

The kingdom and its rewards - these were the things that Jesus had encouraged His followers to expect. Therefore, He proceeded to speak about them next. He used the style that was suited to the character He had assumed, namely, that of a dying Parent addressing His children. He said, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (Jn. 14:2-3). So more specifically, this
was the second word of comfort. What a wonderful promise for the disciples! In their hour of
despacency, the little ones would think of themselves as orphans, without a home on earth or
in heaven. But their Friend assures them that they should not only have a home, but a splendid
one; not simply a humble shack to shelter them from the storm, but a glorious palace to live in.
It would be in a region where storms were unknown. The house would have a great many rooms
in it, providing abundant accommodations for them all. It would be far more roomy than the
temple which had been the earthly dwelling place of God. His own death would seem to be a
great tragedy for them. But it would really mean He was going on before them to prepare a place
for them in that splendid mansion. And in due time, His leaving them would be followed by His
return to take them with Him. He did not explain what He had to do in order to prepare a place
for them. He only added, as if trying to coax them to be more cheerful about the situation, “And
you know the way where I am going” (Jn. 14:4). This is what He meant: Think about where I am
going - to the Father - and think about My death as simply the way to get there. And so, do not
let My absence from the world make you sad. Do not allow My death to be something that you
dread.

Students of New Testament theology who are interested in tracing the resemblances and con-
trasts between different types of doctrine take special interest in this second word of comfort
that was spoken by Christ to His disciples. The reason they find it fascinating is because it sig-
nificantly contains the idea of a Forerunner, which is one of the main thoughts of the Epistle to
the Hebrews. The author tells his Hebrew readers that Jesus has gone into heaven, not only as
a High Priest, but also as a Forerunner (Heb. 6:20). This is one of the new aspects and glories
of the new dispensation. For none of Israel's high priests went into the Most Holy Place as a
forerunner. They only went as a substitute - going for the people into a place where they could
not follow him. Jesus, on the other hand, goes into the heavenly sanctuary, not only for us, but
before us. And He goes into a place where we may follow Him, where no part of it is screened off,
barred, or locked to us. The fourth evangelist, John, pens a similar thought as he records Jesus
speaking as the great High Priest of humanity.

These child-like yet profound sayings of the Lord Jesus are comforting. They also stimulate the
imagination. The “many mansions” raise many questions and thoughts. We are filled with joy at
the thought that the many-mansioned house is capable of containing vast numbers of people.
We may also think of the lodgings in our Father’s house as not only having many rooms but also
as being very different (earlier Christians believed this to be true, like Cyprian, Irenaeus, etc.).
These rooms correspond to the classes or ranks of the residents. But to some, the most wonder-
ful thought of all that is suggested by this expressive, poetic word is the certainty of eternal life.
For those who have doubted life after death, their great desire has not been for detailed informa-
tion about the place, the size, and the architecture of the celestial city. They just want to know for
certain that there is such a city - that there is such a house that is not made with hands, eternal in
the heavens. This desire is provided by these words from Christ. Whatever the “many mansions” means, it at least implies that there is a state of blissful existence that can be reached by believers, just like Jesus reached it - through death. Without a doubt, everlasting life is taught here. And it is taught with authority. Jesus speaks like someone who knows and not (like Socrates) as one who simply has an opinion on the subject. At his farewell meeting with his friends before he drank the hemlock cup, the Athenian sage discussed the question of the immortality of the soul. He strongly believed in it. But he did so as one who looked on it as an intriguing subject for discussion. He knew there was a good deal to be said about it on both sides. But Jesus does more than maintain the reality of the life to come. He speaks about it with absolute confidence. He does not offer us the frail raft of a probable opinion upon which we must dangerously sail down the stream of life toward death. Rather, He offers us the strong ship of a divine word upon which we may sail securely. Socrates and his companions longed for this (Phaedo, chapter 35). Jesus speaks with a full sense of the responsibility that He takes upon Himself. He remarked to His disciples, “If it were not so, I would have told you” (Jn. 14:2b). No one should encourage these kinds of expectations unless he is certain of his position. It was not enough to have an opinion about the world to come. Anyone who took on himself the responsibility of asking people to give up this present world for the sake of the world to come ought to be quite certain that it was a reality, and not a dream. How Jesus sees the weakness of His disciples and ministers to them on their level with these words! What a help, also, it is to our faith in the reality of future bliss! Someone like Jesus Christ would not have spoken in this way unless He had possessed authentic information about the world beyond.

Jesus’ Third Word of Comfort

In the third word of consolation, the key thought is the promise of another Comforter who would take Jesus’ place after He went away. He would make the bereaved feel as if He were still with them. In the second word of comfort, Jesus had said that He was going to provide a home for the little ones. Then He would return and take them to that home. In this third and final word, He virtually promises to be present with them by a substitute - even when He is absent. He said, “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (not for a season; Jn. 14:16). Then He tells them who this wonderful Comforter is: His name is “the Spirit of Truth” (Jn. 14:17). Then, finally, He helps them understand that this Spirit of Truth will be a Comforter to them by restoring, as it were, the consciousness of His own presence, so that the coming of this other Comforter will just be, in a sense, His own spiritual return. He assures them with these words: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). He does not promise a different thing, but the same thing He had promised earlier. Now it is expressed in different terms. He does not clearly explain here how the other Comforter would make Himself an alter ego of the departed one. At a later stage in His discourse, He did inform His disciples how the wonder would be achieved. The Spirit would make the absent Jesus present to them again by bringing to their remembrance all His words (vs. 26), by
bearing witness of Him (John 15:26), and by guiding them into an intelligent apprehension of all Christian truth (Jn. 16:13-14). All of this, though it is not said here, is sufficiently hinted at by the name given to the new Paraclete (from the Greek word paracletos, meaning Helper, or the Holy Spirit). He is called the Spirit of Truth, not the Holy Spirit, as in other places, because He was to comfort by enlightening the minds of the disciples in the knowledge of Christ. This would enable them to see Him clearly with their spiritual eyes when they could no longer see Him with their physical eyes.

This spiritual vision, when it came, was to be the true and effective comfort for the Eleven (who had known Him in the flesh) after Jesus was absent from them. It would be like the dawn of a new day, which banishes the fears and discomforts of the night. While the night lasts, all comforts are only partial alleviations of discomfort. A father’s hand and voice have a reassuring effect on the fearful heart of his child as they walk together at night. But while the darkness lasts, the little one is likely to be scared by things that cannot be clearly seen. His fear distorts these things, thus creating horrible images in his little mind. “In the night, men (and children, much more) think that every bush is a thief.” Everyone can sympathize with the feelings of Rousseau: “It is my nature to be afraid of darkness.” Light is welcome, even when it only reveals to us the precise nature and extent of our miseries. If it does not drive sorrow away, it at least helps to make it calm and sober. This kind of cold comfort, however, was not what Jesus promised His followers. The Spirit of Truth would not come just to show them their desolation in all of its nakedness. Nor was He to come just to help them accept it by teaching them to regard their early hopes as romantic dreams - that the kingdom of God was simply an ideal, and the death of Jesus was the fate that is waiting for every sincere attempt to realize that ideal. This would be terrible comfort! To be told that all sincere religion must end in unfaithfulness, and all enthusiasm in despair!

The third word of comfort was introduced by a command Jesus laid on His disciples. He said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn. 14:15). Jesus was establishing the true way to show love in contrast to an unprofitable, useless one, which His hearers were in danger of accepting, namely, grieving over losing Him. We may paraphrase the words in this way: “If you love Me, do not show your love by being sorrowful but by keeping My commandments. By doing this, you will provide Me with a real service. Let the precepts that I have taught you from time to time be your concern and do not be troubled about yourselves. Leave your future in My hands. I will look after it. For I will pray to the Father, and He will send you another Comforter.”

But this paraphrase, though it is true as far as it goes, does not exhaust the meaning of this important message. Jesus enjoins the disciples to keep His commandments before the promise of the Comforter because He wants these disciples to understand that the fulfillment of the promise and the keeping of the commandments go together. This truth is hinted at by the word “and,” which forms the connection between the precept and the promise. It is repeated in the
passage we are now considering using various forms of expressions. It is necessary for a person to have moral faithfulness before he can have spiritual illumination. This is clearly taught when the promised Comforter is described as a Spirit “whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him” (Jn. 14:17). It is even more plainly taught in the last verse of this section: “He who has My commandments, and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him” (Jn. 14:21). In His first great sermon (the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus had said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). In His farewell address to His disciples, He says in essence: “Be pure in heart, and through the indwelling Spirit of Truth you will see Me, even when I have become invisible to the world” (Jn. 14:19).

Life and light go together. This is the teaching of the Lord Jesus, as well as all of Scripture. As we keep in mind this great truth, we are able to comprehend the diverse issues of religious difficulties. While one person moves away from true faith, the enlightened person expresses unwavering faith. Personal and intellectual enlightenment, which involves the extinction of the heavenly lights of faith and hope, is the penalty for not faithfully keeping Christ’s commandments. That which involves the restoration of spiritual lights, after a temporary darkening by the clouds of doubt, is the reward for holding fast one’s moral integrity when faith is eclipsed and for fearing God while walking in darkness. Consider the man who, for a while, believed in the divinity of Christ and the life to come. At the end of his life, he believes that Jesus was only a deluded enthusiast and that the divine kingdom is just a beautiful dream. It will be noted that this man did not make any great effort to realize his own ideals. Most certainly, he will not be found guilty of the folly of suffering for it. To many people, the creeds which reduce all religion into impracticable ideals is very convenient. It saves the world from trouble and pain. It allows them to think positive thoughts but does not require them to do noble actions. And it substitutes romancing about heroism for real heroism.
Section II - The Children’s Questions, and the Farewell

John 13:36-38; 14:5-7,8-14,22-31

We now turn to the questions that four of the little ones asked their dying Parent.

The first one was asked by the disciple who, more than the others, was prone to speak his mind - Simon Peter. Jesus had intimated that He was going away. Now Peter had a question about it. He was disturbed by Jesus’ words. They seemed to hint at danger and clearly indicated separation. So he was tormented with uncertainty, terrified by the vague allusion to a hidden danger, and grieved at the thought of being separated from his beloved Master. He could not rest until he had penetrated the mystery. Therefore, when Jesus paused for a moment during His discourse, Peter abruptly asked, “Lord, where are You going?” (Jn. 13:36). He was thinking, “Where You go, I will go.” But he did not say it.

Jesus responded to this unexpressed thought. He did not say where He was going. The answer to that question was to be inferred from His reserved countenance and from the tone in which He spoke. He simply told Peter: “Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you shall follow later” (Jn. 13:36). With this answer, He demonstrated He had not forgotten that He was dealing with children. He does not expect heroic behavior from Peter and his fellow disciples as the crisis approaches. He does expect that they will ultimately play the hero. They will follow Him on the martyr’s path bearing the cross. Jesus had already given them the law of discipleship when He made the first announcement of His own death. But for now, He expects them to behave like little children, running away in terror when the moment of danger arrives.

These were Jesus’ thoughts about Peter. However, they were not the thoughts Peter had about himself. He did not think of himself as a child. He was all man. Vaguely comprehending what following his Master meant, he thought he was perfectly suited for the task now. He almost felt hurt by the low opinion of his courage. Therefore, he asked in a tone betraying his hurt: “Why can I not follow You right now?” Is it because there is danger, imprisonment, and death along the path? If that is all, it is not a good reason, because ‘I will lay down my life for You’” (vs. 37). Ah, that “why”; how like a child. That self-confidence! What an unfailing indication of spiritual weakness!
If Jesus’ answer to Peter’s first question was indirect and evasive, the one He gave to his second was too plain to be misunderstood. “Will you?” He said, using the disciple’s own words. “Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a cock shall not crow, until you deny Me three times” (vs. 38). It would have been better for Peter if he had been content with the first reply! But not really - not better, only more pleasant for the moment. It was good for Peter to be told this bluntly what his Lord thought of him and to be shown, once for all, who he really was by Someone who did not make mistakes. It was just what was needed to lead Peter to an understanding of himself and to bring about a beneficial crisis in his spiritual history. On more than one occasion he had been dealt with for faults springing from his characteristic vices of being too pushy and too self-confident. But such specific correction had not produced any deep impressions, no decisive effect on his mind. He still did not know himself; he was still just as pushy, self-confident, and self-willed as ever. This was clear from the statement he just made. Therefore, there was an urgent need for him to be taught a lesson that he would never forget. It would be a word of correction that would be indelibly imprinted in the erring disciple’s memory. It would bear fruit throughout his whole life from that point on. Here it is, finally; it is a good time to do it. The Lord tells His brave disciple that he will be a coward. He tells His attached disciple, to whom separation from his Master seems more dreadful than death, that before too long, Peter will deny that he is connected in any way with Him whom he loves so fondly. He tells him all this at a time when the prophecy must be followed by its fulfillment almost as fast as a flash of lightning is followed by thunder. The prediction by Jesus is perfectly precise, and the denial of Peter exactly fulfills it. By themselves, both are remarkable. And since they come so close together, they will surely complement one another. It will be very strange if the two together do not, by the blessing of God and in answer to the Master’s intercessory prayer, make the fallen disciple into a much different man. The result will, without a doubt, prove the truth of another prophetic word reported by Luke that was spoken by the Lord to His disciple on the same occasion (Lk. 22:31). The chaff will be separated from the wheat in Peter’s character. He will undergo a great change of spirit. And, being converted from self-confidence and self-will to meekness and modesty, he will finally be prepared to strengthen others, to be a shepherd to the weak, and, if necessary, to bear his cross and follow his Master through death to glory.

The Second Question
The second question came from Thomas, the melancholy disciple. He was slow to believe and was prone to have a negative perspective on things. The mind of this disciple fastened on the statement that Jesus made to conclude His second word of consolation: “You know the way where I am going” (Jn. 14:4). That statement seemed to Thomas to be not only untrue, but unreasonable. For he was totally unaware that he possessed the knowledge that the Speaker said he had. Furthermore, he did not see how it was possible for any of them to possess it. For, before now, Jesus had not distinctly told them where He was going. And not knowing that destination,
how could anyone know the road which led to it? Therefore, in a dry, matter-of-fact, almost
cynical way, Thomas remarked: “Lord, we do not know where You are going; how do we know
the way?” (Jn. 14:5).

This question was thoroughly characteristic for Thomas. We know him through John's portrait
of him in his Gospel (Jn. 11:16; 20:24-29). Peter, the one who is extremely practical, asks Jesus
where He is going and is determined, if possible, to follow Him. Thomas, however, does not
think it is worth his time to make this kind of inquiry. Not that he is unconcerned about the
matter. He would very much like to know where his Lord is going. If it were possible, he would
be just as ready as Peter to keep Him company. Danger would not stop him. He had said once
before, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him” (Jn. 11:16). He could say the same thing
honestly again. He may be pessimistic, but he is not selfish or cowardly. This situation is similar
to an earlier one. Then, Jesus disregarded the warnings of the disciples and determined to go
from Perea to Judea to visit the afflicted family of Bethany (Lazarus’ family). Thomas had the
most negative perspective of the situation and believed that death was the certain fate await-
ing them all. Like then, he resigns himself to a hopeless, despondent mood. The thought of the
Master’s departure makes him so sad that he does not have the heart to ask the why questions
or questions asking for directions. He doesn’t mind being ignorant on these matters. Doom is
you talked about - where in the universe can it be? Is there really such a place at all?”

Even the question asked by Thomas, “How do we know the way?” (Jn. 14:5) is not as much a
question as it is an apology for not asking questions. It is not a demand for information. Rather,
it is a gentle complaint against Jesus for expecting His disciples to be informed. It is not an ex-
pression of a desire for knowledge. It is an excuse for ignorance. At this moment, the melancholy
disciple has no hope that he can know the ultimate destination or the way to it. Therefore, he is
not curious; he is apathetic. He is far from seeking the light; he is in the mood to exaggerate the
darkness. He is like Jonah who, in his angry mood, indulged in asking a lot of questions. In his
sadness, Thomas delights in gloom. He does not eagerly wait for the dawn of day. Instead, he
takes pleasure in the night. This matches his current frame of mind. Good people who have a
melancholic temperament are, at best, like people walking in the midst of the solemn gloom of
a forest. Sadness is the prevailing feeling in their souls. They are content to have occasional and
partial glimpses of heaven, like peeps of the sky through the leafy roof of the forest. But Thomas
is so burdened that he hardly cares even for a glimpse of the celestial world. He does not look up.
He only walks through the dark forest at a slow pace with his eyes fixed on the ground.

The argumentative tendencies of this disciple appear in his words as well as in his proneness to
despondency. Another person who was in a despairing mood may have said: “We do not know
the ultimate destination nor the way there. We are totally in the dark as to where you are going
and as to the road by which you are going to get there.” But Thomas needs a reason. His mental habits lead him to represent one aspect of ignorance as if it necessarily follows another. He would think, “We do not know Your destination. Therefore, it is impossible to know the way.” This man is afflicted with the malady of thinking too much. He gives reasons for everything. Here he maintains the impossibility of having a certain kind of knowledge. At another crisis we will find him insisting on a believable demonstration that his Lord is, in fact, risen from the dead.

How does Jesus reply to the hopeless words of Thomas? Most compassionately and sympathetically. It is no different now from any other time. To the curious question that Peter asked, He gave an evasive answer. On the other hand, to the broken-hearted Thomas, He offers information that he had not asked about. And the information He gives is complete - almost redundant. The disciple had complained of ignorance about the ultimate destination and, especially, about the way to get there. It would have been a sufficient reply to have said, “The Father is the ultimate destination, and I am the way.” But the Master, out of the fullness of His heart, said more than this. He was firm and emphatic in His response. It was not only meant for Thomas but for the whole world: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (Jn. 14:6).

When we compare this momentous declaration with the preceding word of consolation, we observe a change in the way He presented the truth. The Father Himself takes the place of the Father’s house with its many mansions. This is the ultimate destination. And Jesus is more than the guide who will one day lead His children to the common home. He Himself becomes the way. The kind Master alters His language in order to graciously accommodate the childish capacities of the disciples. According to the Apostle Paul, Christians see the heavenly and the eternal, but it is only a poor reflection (I Cor. 13:12). But the disciples, during this crisis in their history, were not even able to do this much. Jesus had held up before their eyes the brightly polished mirror of a beautiful story about a house with many mansions, and they had not seen anything there. They saw no image, only an opaque surface. The future remained dark and hidden as before. What, then, was to be done? Just what Jesus did. People had to be substituted for places. Disciples who are weak in their faith must be addressed in this way: “Can you not comprehend where I am going? Then think to whom I am going. If you do not know anything about the place called heaven, at least know that you have a Father there. And as for the way to heaven, let that be Me. If you know Me, you do not need any additional knowledge. If you believe in Me, you can look forward to the future - even to death itself - without fear or concern.”

As we look more closely at the response Jesus gave to Thomas, we do not find it easy to know just how precisely it should be explained. The very fullness of this saying perplexes us. Though it is dark, it gives off an excess of light. Interpreters differ as to how the Way, the Truth, and the Life
are to be distinguished, and how they are related to each other. One person offers this interpretation: “I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of the ladder which leads to heaven.” Another interpretation: “I am the example, the teacher, the giver of eternal life.” A third person subordinates the last two attributes to the first and reads: “I am the true way of life.” Each view is true in itself. But one hesitates to accept any of them as exhausting the meaning of the Savior’s words.

Whatever is the preferable method for interpreting these words of our Lord, at least two things are clear. Jesus presents Himself here as all that anyone needs for eternal salvation and as the only Savior. He is the way, truth, life - everything. And He alone can bring people to the Father. In essence, He says this to all people: “What is it you want? Is it light? I am the light of the world, the revealer of the Father. I came for this purpose, that I might declare Him. Or, is it reconciliation you want? By the very death I am about to endure, I am the Reconciler. My very purpose in dying is to bring you, who are far off, near to God, who is a forgiving, gracious Father. Or, is it life - spiritual, never-ending life - that you seek? Believe in Me, and you will never die. Or, though you die, I will raise you again to enter into an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and that will not fade away. It is eternal in the heavens (see I Peter 1:4). Let everyone who seeks these things look to Me. Look to Me for light. Do not look to rabbis or philosophers - not even to nature and providence. They may reveal God, but they do so dimly. The light of creation is only the starlight of theology. The light of providence is only its moonlight. But I am the sunlight. My Father’s Name is written in hieroglyphics in the works of creation. In providence and history, it is written in plain letters. But they are so far apart that it takes a lot of study to put them together in order that the divine Name may be spelled out. In Me the divine Name is written so that whoever is running the race may read it. (“The Word was made flesh, that Thy wisdom, by which Thou createdst all things, might provide milk for our infancy” [Augustine, Confessions, 7:18]). Look to Me also for reconciliation - not to legal sacrifices. That way of approaching God is outdated now. I am the new, the living, the eternal way into the holy of holies, through which everyone may draw near to the divine presence with a true heart, in full assurance of faith. Finally, look to Me for eternal blessedness. I am the One who, having died, will rise again and live forevermore, and will hold in My hands the keys of Hades and of death. I will open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.”

In Christ is the fullness of grace and truth. This doctrine is very comforting to those who know Him. But what about those who do not know Him? What about those who only possess an implicit, unconscious knowledge which hardly merits the word knowledge? Does the statement we have been considering exclude these from the possibility of salvation? It does not. It declares that no man comes to the Father but by Christ, but it does not say how much knowledge is required for salvation. It is possible that some may be saved by Christ, and for His sake, who know very little about Him, indeed. We may infer this when we look at the disciples themselves. What did they know about the way of salvation at this time? Jesus addresses them as people who are
still ignorant about Him. He says: “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also” (Jn. 14:7). Nevertheless, He does not hesitate to speak to them as people who would be with Him in the Father’s house. And what will we say about Job, and the Syro-Phoenician woman, and the Ethiopian eunuch, and Cornelius; and we may add, like Calvin, the Syrian courtier, Naaman. We cannot say more than the great theologian of Geneva has said himself about such cases. He writes: “I confess that in a certain respect their faith was implicit, not only as to the person of Christ, but as to His virtue and grace, and the office assigned Him by the Father. Meanwhile it is certain that they were imbued with principles which gave some taste of Christ, however slight” (Institutes, 3.2.32). It is doubtful that even this much can be said about Naaman. However, Calvin, without evidence, and simply to face the exigencies of a theory, argues that it would have been too absurd for Elisha to have been silent on the most important subject while speaking about more unimportant matters. Or, if we grant to Naaman the slight taste mentioned, shouldn’t we also grant it to Socrates and Plato and others on the principle that all true knowledge of God, no matter who possesses it and no matter how it is obtained, whether it be the sunlight, moonlight, or starlight, is virtually a Christian? Justin Martyr and Zwingli thought this way. In other words, is Christ, who is the only light, the light of every person who has any light in him?

This principle, while it has its truth, can very easily be perverted into an argument against a supernatural revelation. Therefore, in its very first chapter, Of the Holy Scripture, the Westminster Confession broadly asserts that the light of nature and the works of creation and providence are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary for salvation. While strongly maintaining this truth, however, we must be careful not to be drawn into speaking negatively about what can be learned from God from those lower sources. While we walk in the sunlight, we must not despise the dimmer luminaries of the night. We must not forget their existence like we do the moon and the stars in the daytime. By doing this we would be virtually disparaging the Scriptures themselves. For much of what is in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, is a record of what inspired people had learned from observing God’s works in creation and of His ways in providence. Everyone cannot see as much there as they saw. On the contrary, revelation was needed, not only to make known the truths that went beyond the teachings of natural religion but even to direct people’s dim eyes to truths which, though visible in nature, were, in fact, for the most part not seen. Using the clear language of Calvin, the Bible is a pair of glasses through which our weak eyes see the glory of God in the world (The Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.6.1). Yet what is seen through the glasses with weak eyes is, in many passages, just what might be seen by strong eyes without their aid - nothing being placed there which is not visible in the creation (Institutes, 1.10.2).

These observations may help us to have hope for those whose opportunities for knowing Him who is “the way, the truth, and the life” are small. However, they do not justify those who are
content with a minimum amount of knowledge when they have an abundant capacity for knowing Christ. There is more hope for the unreached peoples than for these people. No true Christian can belong to their group. A genuine disciple may not know much to begin with (this was the case with the Apostles). But he will not be satisfied to be in the dark. He will desire to be enlightened with the knowledge of Christ and will pray, “Lord, show us the Father (Jn. 14:8).”

**Philip’s Request**

This was the prayer of Philip, the third disciple who took part in the dialogue at the dinner-table. Philip’s request, like Thomas’ question, was a virtual denial of a statement previously made by Jesus. Jesus had said to Thomas: “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also” (Jn. 14:7a). Then He added: “From now on you know Him, and have seen Him” (vs. 7b). Philip felt he was unable to agree with this last statement. “Seen the Father! I wish this were so! Nothing would gratify us more. ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us’” (vs. 8).

In and of itself, Philip’s prayer was very devout and worthy of praise. There can be no higher aspiration than seeking to know God the Father. There is no better indicator of a spiritual mind than to think of such knowledge as the *summum bonum* (the highest good). And there is no better indication that one has ultimately arrived at the goal than the frankness which honestly confesses he doesn't know the answer. In these respects, the feelings expressed by Philip would have pleased his Master. In other respects, however, they were not as satisfactory. The wise inquirer evidently had a very crude notion about what seeing the Father was all about. He dreamed it was possible to see the Father just like he saw Jesus - with his physical eyes. And it seems he wanted to do this. Suppose that had been his desire. Then his thinking is foolish: “...and that will be enough for us.” What good would it do anyone to simply see the Father with one's eyes? That same thought painfully demonstrated how little the disciples had gained from all their past conversations with Jesus. They had been with Him for years, yet they had not found rest and satisfaction in Him. They still craved something beyond Him. Without knowing it, they had been getting what they craved from Him all along.

Such ignorance and lack of spiritual capacity so late in their training was very disappointing. And Jesus was disappointed. But with His characteristic patience, He was not irritated. He was not offended with Philip’s stupidity or with his contradiction of His statement (Jesus would rather be contradicted than have His disciples pretend to know when they didn’t). Rather, He aimed at enlightening the little ones to some degree so they could know the Father. To accomplish this purpose, He gave great prominence to the truth that knowing the Father and the Son was the same thing. He that has seen the Son has seen the Father. So He could implant this great principle in the minds of His men in a better way, He spoke in the strongest possible terms. He treated their ignorance of the Father as if they were virtually ignorant of Himself. He asked, “Don’t you know *Me*, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?” Then He continued to
reason with him. To be ignorant of the Father was to be so ignorant of Himself that, in essence, it would be a denial of His divinity. He asked again, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? (vs. 10a). Then Jesus followed up the question with a reference to those things which proved His identity that He was asserting - His words and His works (Jn. 14:10-11). But He did not stop here. He went on to use even more convincing proofs for His identity with the Father. They would come through the wonderful works which would later be done by the Apostles themselves in His Name and through powers He gave them in answer to their prayers (vs. 12-14).

The first question Jesus asked Philip (“Don't you know Me?”) was more than a logical strategy to make ignorant disciples reflect on the contents of the knowledge they already possessed. It hinted at a real fact. The disciples had not really seen Jesus yet, even though they had been with Him for so long. They knew Him, and they did not know Him. They did not know that they knew, nor what they knew. They were like children who recite a catechism without understanding what it means, or who possess a treasure without being able to estimate its value. They were like men looking at an object through a telescope without adjusting the focus, or like an uneducated person who gazes up at the sky on a winter night, sees the stars which compose a constellation (such as the Bear or Orion), yet does not recognize the constellation. The disciples were familiar with the words, parables, discourses, etc. that were spoken by their Master and accompanied with His miraculous works. But they only knew these things as isolated events. The separate rays of light flowing from the fountain of divine wisdom, power, and love in Jesus had never been gathered into one focus so they could form a clear image of the One who came in the flesh to reveal the invisible God. They had seen many stars shine in the spiritual heavens while they were in Christ's company. But the stars had not yet become a constellation to them. They did not have a clear, full, consistent, spiritual conception of the mind, heart, and character of the man Christ Jesus, in whom all the fullness of deity dwelt (Col. 1:19). They would not understand these concepts until the Spirit of Truth, the promised Comforter, came. The very thing He would do for them was to show them Christ. He would not just help them remember the details of His life. He would show them the one mind and spirit which dwelt in the midst of the details, as the soul dwells in the body and makes them an organic whole. Once they understood the big picture, it would help them recall all the isolated events which, at this time, were lying dormant in their consciousness. When the Apostles finally understood, they would truly know Christ - the same Christ whom they had known before - yet different, a new Christ, because He was a Christ they comprehended. They would see Him with the eye of the spirit just like the former Christ had been seen with the eye of the flesh. And when they had seen Christ in this way, they would sense that they had also seen the Father. Knowing Christ would satisfy them, because in Him they would see with unveiled face the glory of the Lord (see II Cor. 3:18).
The disciples were offered a vision of God being a future good that they would obtain after the Comforter had been sent. This satisfied their souls. It could not have been Jesus’ intention to assure the disciples that they possessed it already. Still less did He force it on them by using reason. When He said, “From now on you know Him, and have seen Him” (Jn. 14:7b), He evidently meant: “Now you know how to see Him. You do it by reflecting on your relationship with Me.” And the only reason for the statements made to Philip concerning the close relationship between the Father and the Son, evidently, was to impress upon the disciples the great truth that the solution to all religious difficulties and the fulfillment of all longings was to be found in knowing Christ. Jesus was saying, “Know Me, trust Me, pray to Me, and all will be well with you. Your mind will be filled with light and your heart will be at rest. You will have everything you want. Your joy will be full.”

This is a very important lesson, but it is one that everyone is slow to learn, like Philip and the other disciples. How few see in Him the true and perfect Revealer of God, even those who confess Christ’s divinity! To many, Jesus is one Being and God is another, and quite a different Being. They hold to this view while honestly acknowledging that Jesus is divine. This great truth lies in the mind like a dormant seed buried deep in the soil. We can say about this truth what has been said about the doctrine of the soul’s immortality: “One may believe it for twenty years, and only in the twenty-first, in some great moment, discover with astonishment the rich contents of this belief, the warmth of this naphtha [a combustible liquid] spring” (Jean Paul Richter). People get impressions of God from one place and impressions of Christ from another. Then the two sets of impressions lie side by side in the mind. They are incompatible, yet both have room to co-exist. Therefore, when a Christian begins to consistently carry out the principle that to know Jesus (who is God) is to know God, he is probably going to experience a painful conflict between a new and an old class of ideas about the Divine Being. Two Gods - a Christianized God and a sort of pagan divinity - struggle for the place of sovereignty. And finally, when the conflict ends, when the God whom Jesus revealed is enthroned in the mind and the heart, the dawn of a new spiritual life has arrived.

A key idea about God, as He is revealed by Jesus Christ, is expressed by the name Father. According to the teaching of our Lord and Savior, God is not truly known until He is thought of, and heartily believed in, as a Father. Any God who is not regarded as a Father cannot satisfy the human heart. So His own way of speaking about God was in total agreement with this teaching. He did not speak to people about the Deity or the Almighty. These titles which philosophers are so fond of applying to the Divine Being - the Infinite, the Absolute, etc. - never crossed His lips. He never spoke any words that suggested the idea of a gloomy, arbitrary tyrant before whom the guilty conscience of superstitious paganism cowers. He always spoke in His sermons, parables, model prayer [The Lord’s Prayer], and private conversations of a Father. Expressions such as “the Father,” “My Father,” and “your Father,” were constantly on His tongue. All He taught about God harmonized perfectly with the feelings these expressions were intended to bring out.
With all Jesus’ efforts and all the beauty of His words about the Being whom no man has seen, it seems that many have not grasped what it means to worship the Father. Because of ignorance or preference, people still extensively worship God under other names and categories. Some think the name Father is too domestic and prefer a name that expresses more distance and ceremonialism. The Deity or the Almighty satisfies them. Philosophers do not like the name Father because it makes the personality of God too prominent. They prefer to think of the one who is Uncreated as an Infinite, Eternal Abstraction. They want Him to be an object of speculation rather than of faith and love. Legal-minded professors of religion are afraid of the word Father. They are not sure they have a right to use it. They think it is safer to speak about God in general terms which take nothing for granted, such as the Judge, the Taskmaster, or the Lawgiver. Those who are worldly, educated, and religious agree with them by not using the Name into which they have been baptized (Father). However, their motives for doing so differ. Only a small minority worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Those who read the gospel superficially may love the idea that the name Father, which was applied to God by Jesus, is simply or mainly a sentimental poetic expression. For them, the loss of this name would not be regrettable. But there could be no greater mistake. The name that came from Christ’s lips always represents a definite thought and teaches a great truth. When He uses the term to express the relationship between the Invisible One and Himself, He gives us a glimpse into the mystery of the Divine Being. He is telling us that God is not an abstract Being. Followers of Plato and Arius thought of Him in this way. Yet, He is not the Absolute, incapable of relationships. He is not a passionless Being, without feelings. Rather, He is one who eternally loves, and is loved. In His infinite nature, the family feelings find room for ceaseless interaction - One in three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one divine substance. Then, again, when He calls God Father (when He is addressing mankind in general, as He does over and over again), He proclaims to people who are sunk in ignorance and sin this blessed truth: “God, My Father, is your Father also. He has a paternal feeling toward you even though you are so spiritually blinded that He might not know you. You might be so degenerate that He might be ashamed to own you. And I, His Son, have come - your Elder Brother - to bring you back to your Father’s house. You are not worthy to be called His sons, because you have stopped bearing His image, and you have not obeyed Him nor reverenced Him. Nevertheless, He is willing to be a Father to you and receive you graciously in His arms. Believe this and become sons of God in your heart and behavior. Then you will enjoy the full, the spiritual, and eternal benefit of God’s paternal love.” When He finally calls God, Father, with special reference to His own disciples, He assures them that they are the objects of God’s constant, tender, and effective care. All of His power, wisdom, and love are engaged for their protection, preservation, guidance, and final eternal salvation. Their Father in heaven will see to it that they lack nothing good and will make all things minister to their interests. In the end, He will give them their inheritance in the everlasting kingdom. Fear not, is His comforting message to His little chosen flock, “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”
We now come to the fourth and final question asked by the children. It came from Judas, *not Iscariot* (he is occupied with something else). He is the other disciple who has that name and is also called Thaddaeus.

In His third word of consolation, Jesus had spoken about a reappearance (after His departure) that would be especially and exclusively to *His own*. He had said, “The world will see Me no more, but you will see Me.” That is, they will see after a little while. Now two questions might naturally be asked about this exclusive manifestation. First, how was it possible? And second, what was the reason for it? How could Jesus make Himself visible to His disciples and yet remain invisible to everyone else? And granting the possibility, why not show Himself to the world at large? It is not easy to decide which of these two difficulties Judas had in mind. The question could be interpreted either way. When translated literally, essentially it says this: “Lord, what has happened that You are about to manifest Yourself to us and not to the world?” The disciple might have intended to ask, like Nicodemus, “How can these things be?” Or, he might have thought about asking: “We have been hoping for the coming of Your kingdom in power and glory, visible to the eyes of all people. What has led You to change Your plans?”

In both cases, Judas’ question was based on a misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus’ promised manifestation. He imagined that He was to reappear bodily after His departure to the Father. He thought He would be visible to the physical eye, but not just to one person here and another one there. He would appear to everyone, unless He made the effort to hide Himself from some while revealing Himself to others. Neither Judas nor any of his brothers were yet capable of thinking about a spiritual manifestation. And they certainly did not expect to receive a full compensation for the loss of His bodily presence. If they had grasped the thought of a spiritual presence, they would have had no difficulty in reconciling Jesus’ making Himself visible to one while remaining invisible to another. For they would have understood that the vision could be enjoyed only by those who could see with spiritual eyes.

This was a question that was asked by someone who did not have the capacity to understand the subject about which he was asking. How was such a question to be answered? Just like you would explain to a child how a telegraph works. If your child asked you, “Father, how can you send a message by telegraph to my uncle or aunt in America which is so far away?” You would not think of trying to explain to him the mysteries of electricity. You would take him to a telegraph office and tell him to look at the man who is actually sending a message. You would tell him that as the man moved the handle, a needle in America pointed at letters of the alphabet. When the letters are put together, they made up words which said just what you wanted to say.
This is the way Jesus answered Judas’ question. He did not attempt to explain the difference between a spiritual and a bodily manifestation. In essence, He said: “You do so and so, and what I have promised will come true.” “If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn. 14:23). These words just repeat what He had already said, but they are slightly altered and are more pointed. Nothing new is said, because nothing new can be said intelligibly. The old promise is stated in such a way that, if the condition is met, the fulfillment will occur. “If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching. My children, pay attention to that, and the rest will follow. The divine Trinity - Father, Son, and Spirit - will truly dwell with the faithful disciple who is very concerned about making every effort to observe My commandments. For those who do not love Me, do not keep My sayings, and do not believe in Me, it is simply impossible for them to enjoy such majestic company. Only the pure in heart will see God.”

**Jesus’ Farewell**

Jesus had now spoken all He meant to say to His disciples as a dying Parent addressing His grieving children. All that was left was for Him to wind up the discourse and tell the little ones “goodbye.”

As Jesus brings His words to a close, He does not believe that He has removed all difficulties and erased all gloom from the disciples’ minds. On the contrary, He is conscious of the fact that everything He has said has made only a slight impression. Nevertheless, He will not say anything else to bring them comfort. In the first place, there is no time left. Judas and his band of men are under the influence of the prince of this world, and they are serving him. They can be expected at any moment, and He must be ready to go and meet the enemy (Jn. 14:30-31). Secondly, it would be useless to add anything further. It is impossible to use any amount of words to make things any clearer to the disciples in their present condition. Therefore, He does not attempt to do so. Instead, He refers them to the promised Comforter for all other explanations (Jn. 14:25-26). Then He proceeds to offer His farewell: “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you” (vs. 27). These words always move people deeply. It is hard to put into words how they affected both the Speaker and His hearers at that time. We don’t know if perhaps they did more to comfort the dejected little ones than all that had been said before. There is a pathos and music in the very sound of them, apart from their meaning, which are wonderfully soothing. Truly, we can imagine that as they were spoken, the poor disciples were overcome with deep feelings and burst into tears. That, however, would be good for them. Sorrow is healed by weeping. The feelings which melt the heart, at the same time, comfort it.

This touching, sympathetic farewell is more than a good wish. It is a promise - a promise made by One who knows that the blessing that is promised is within reach. It is like the cheerful words David spoke to brothers in affliction: “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for
the Lord” (Ps. 27:14). David spoke these words from experience, just like Jesus does here. The peace He offers His disciples is His own peace - *My peace*. It is not a peace that He has to get somewhere; it is a peace He has experienced. He has had peace in the world in spite of sorrow and temptation. He has had perfect peace by faith. Therefore, He can assure them that this kind of peace is possible. They, also, can have peace of mind and heart in the midst of difficult trials. The world does not understand this kind of peace, and neither can they impart it. The only peace it knows is that which is connected to prosperity. But trouble can destroy it as easily as the wind agitates the calm surface of the sea. But there is a peace which is independent of outward circumstances. Its sovereign virtue and blessed function is to keep the heart when fears and worries come. Jesus had enjoyed this kind of peace. Now He helps His disciples understand that through faith and singleness of mind they may enjoy it also.

These final words are not only a promise made by One who knows what He is talking about. It is a promise from One who can give the blessing that is promised. Jesus does not simply say: “Be happy. You can have peace in spite of trials, just like I have had.” But He says specifically, “The peace I have had I give to you as a dying legacy. I bestow it on you as a parting gift.” The inheritance of peace is granted to the little ones by a last will and testament. But since they are minors, they do not actually receive it now. When they come of age, they will inherit the promise and delight themselves in the abundance of peace. Later on, the disciples’ experiences proved that their Lord’s promise had not been false and empty. The Apostles, as Jesus foretold, found much tribulation in the world. But in the midst of it all, they enjoyed perfect peace. They trusted in the Lord and did good, and they lived without fear and worry. In everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, they made their requests known unto God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, truly guarded their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7).

Jesus had not yet said His last word to the little ones. He saw grief on their faces and, in spite of everything He had spoken to comfort them, He abruptly threw out an additional remark. This gave the whole subject of His departure a new twist. All through His farewell address, He had been telling them that though He was going away, He would come again to them, either personally or by a representative. He would one day come in the body but, in the meantime, He would come in the Spirit. Now He told them that apart from His return, His departure itself should be an occasion for joy rather than of sorrow because of what it signified for Him. “You have heard how I said to you, I go away and come again to you.” By all means, receive comfort from that promise. But “if you loved Me (as you should), you would rejoice because I said, I go to the Father (Jn. 14:28). You would forget about yourselves and think what a happy change it would be for Me.” Then He added, “For My Father is greater than I.” The connection between this clause and the first part of the sentence is somewhat obscure. This is true also of its theological import. Our understanding is that when Jesus spoke these words, He was thinking about His death and
was answering an objection that arose at the thought of their rejoicing in His departure. “You are going to the Father,” one of them may have said - “yes, but what a way to go!” Jesus replies, “The way is rough, and flesh and blood abhor it. But it is the way My Father has appointed, and that is enough for Me. For My Father is greater than I.” When we interpret the words in this way, we only make Jesus hint at a thought which we find Him clearly expressing immediately after His concluding sentence. There, He makes it plain that His voluntary endurance of death is a manifestation to the world of His love for His Father and as an act of obedience to His commandment.

And now, finally, by word and deed, Jesus tries to impress on His little children the solemn reality of their situation. First, He tells them to note what He has told them about His departure, so that when the separation takes place, they may not be taken by surprise. “I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe” (vs. 29). Then He helps them understand that the time for His departure is near. After this point, He will not talk much with them. There will not be an opportunity to do so. For the prince of the world has come. Then He adds words to this effect: “Let him come. I am ready for him. He has no part with Me. He has no claim upon Me. He has no power over Me. He cannot charge Me with any fault. Nevertheless, I yield Myself into his hands so that all people may see that I love the Father and am loyal to His will. They will see that I am ready to die for truth, for righteousness, for the unrighteous” (Jn. 14:30-31). Then, lastly, with a firm, resolute voice, He commands everyone to rise from the couches on which they had been reclining, “Come now; let us leave” (vs. 31).

We can surmise that the men did not leave the supper chamber at this point. First, John records a continuation of the discourse. And secondly, we know this is the case because of the statement he makes at the beginning of the 18th chapter of his Gospel (“When Jesus had spoken these words, He went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron” (vs. 1). They simply got into a new frame of mind and stood up as if they were getting ready to leave. In this situation, their movement was natural. It aptly expressed the frame of mind Jesus was in and corresponded to the changed tone in which He continued to address His disciples. In fact, their getting up from their reclining position became the transition between the first part of His discourse to the second. This action did what words could not have done. It changed their moods and prepared them for listening to language that was not soft, tender, and familiar. Now His words were stern, dignified, and impassioned. It struck the keynote - the basic thought in His discourse - by which Jesus passed from the lyric to the heroic style. In effect, He said: “Let us do away with the nursery talk. If this kind of talk continued, it would only weaken you. Let Me briefly speak to you now as men who must play an important part in the world. Stand up! Shake off your lethargy and listen while I speak words that are intended to fire you with enthusiasm, to inspire you with courage, and to impress you with a sense of the responsibilities and honors connected with your future position.”
When we understand their rising from the table in this way, we will be prepared to listen, along with the disciples, and begin the study of the remaining portion of Christ’s farewell discourse. And we will not feel there is a sudden transition between the first part of the discourse and the second.
Dying Charge to the Future Apostles

Section I - The Vine and Its Branches
John 15:1-17
The subject matter in these three sections is the future work of the Apostles - its nature, honors, hardships, and joys. Much of what is said can be applied to Christians in general, but the reference is undoubtedly to the Eleven who were present. Only by keeping this in mind can we gain a clear idea of the importance of the whole discourse.

The first part of Jesus’ charge to the future Apostles is intended to impress upon them the idea that they have a great work ahead of them (Jn. 15:1-17). The main point in the passage can be found in these words: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (vs. 16). Jesus wanted the men He selected to understand that He expected more of them than just not being discouraged when He left the earth. They must be great leaders in the world and permanently leave their mark on its history. In fact, they must take His place, act in His stead, and carry on the work He had begun. They would do it in His name and by His power.

In order to help the disciples clearly understand their responsibilities, Jesus used the beautiful illustration of a vine. He introduced it at the very beginning of His discourse. “I am the true vine.” That is the theme. In the words that follow, its meaning is worked out in considerable detail. The illustration and its interpretation are freely blended together in the exposition. The question has often been asked, “What led Jesus to adopt this particular symbol to convey His thoughts?” Many conjectural answers have been given. However, since the narrative itself does not provide us with that information, we must be content to live without an answer on this point. And we must not attempt to invent one. This is no great hardship. After all, what difference does it make why a particular metaphor is used (sometimes the person using it doesn’t even know), provided it appropriately accomplishes the intended purpose? What about the appropriateness of the metaphor that is used here? There can be no doubt in anyone’s mind who carefully considers the wise use which the Speaker made of it.

Let’s turn our attention, then, to Jesus’ explanation of the text He chose. We cannot avoid noticing the way in which Jesus quickly speaks about fruit. As He introduces the illustration of the
vine, we probably should have expected that He would first make it clear what the symbol represented. After hearing the words, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser,” we expect to hear these words: “and you, My disciples, are the branches through which the vine brings forth fruit.” However, that is not said here. Instead, the Speaker immediately tells His hearers how the branches (they have not been mentioned yet) are dealt with by the divine Husbandman. He indicates that the fruitless branches, on the one hand, are lopped off, while the fruitful ones are pruned so they may become even more productive (vs. 2). This shows us the primary thought Jesus has in His mind. His heart’s desire is that His disciples be spiritually fruitful. “My disciples - fruit, fruit!!” In essence, this is what He is saying. “You are useless unless you bear fruit. My Father desires fruit, and I do as well. The way He deals with you will be regulated by His objective to increase your fruitfulness.”

**Personal Holiness and Fruit-Bearing**

Even though Jesus is urgent in His demand for fruit, we see that He does not reveal what kind of fruit He wants to see. It is nowhere to be found in this discourse on the vine. However, when we think about the people to whom He is speaking, we do not have any doubts about what He primarily intends. The fruit He is looking for is the spread of the Gospel and bringing souls into the kingdom of God. The disciples were to do this as they faithfully performed their apostolic duties. Personal holiness is not overlooked. But it is required as a means by which fruit is produced; it is not the fruit itself. The pruning of the branch leads to increased fertility.

The next sentence is, “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you” (vs. 3). It seems best to regard this as a parenthesis in which, for a moment, the symbol of the vine has been lost. When He mentions that the unproductive branches are cut off, it reminds us of the Lord’s thoughts about one who had already been cut off - the false disciple, Judas. This leads Him naturally to reassure the Eleven that He has higher hopes for them. The process of excision had already been applied among them in this one instance. Therefore, they should not be arrogant; they should fear. On the other hand, He had told them during the feet-washing that they were clean, with one exception. Now He was saying they were all clean, without exception, through the word He had spoken to them. As branches, they might need pruning, but they would not be cut off.

Jesus had strongly declared the indispensableness of bearing fruit in order for them to stay connected to the vine. Next, He proceeded to set forth the conditions of fruitfulness and the relationship that existed between Him and His disciples (we might have expected this at the very beginning of the discourse). “I am the vine,” He said (to take the latter first), “you are the branches” (vs. 5). In this statement, He explains why He insists that His disciples be fruitful. The reason is that they are the means through which He Himself brings forth fruit. They serve the same purpose to Him that the branches serve to the vine. His own personal work had been to choose and train
them - to fill them, so to speak, with the sap of divine truth. Their work was now to turn that sap into grapes. By sending His Son into the world, the Father had planted Him in the earth. He was a new, mystic, spiritual vine, and had produced the Eleven as His branches. His personal ministry was coming to an end. Now the branches were to carry on their work. They were to bring forth a crop of fruit in the shape of a church of saved people who believed in His name. If they failed to do this, all of His labor would be in vain.

The Conditions for Fruitfulness

Now let’s look at the conditions Jesus indicated were necessary for a life of fruitfulness. He expresses them with these words: “Abide in Me, and I in you” (Jn. 15:4). These words point to a dependence that the disciples had on their Lord. There are two concepts that He wants them to understand about this dependence. The analogy of a tree and its branches makes it easy to tell them apart. The branch abides in the vine structurally; and the vine abides in the branch through its sap, vitally. Both of these abidings are necessary for fruit-bearing. Unless the branch is organically connected to the vine, the sap which makes the fruit cannot flow through it. On the other hand, the branch may be organically connected to the vine, yet if the sap from the vine does not ascend into it (this is possible and common in the natural world), it will be as fruitless as if it were broken off and lying on the ground.

All this is clear. But when we consider the question, “What do the two abidings signify with reference to the mystic vine?” the answer is not quite as easy. The tendency here is to make the two into one and to make the distinction between them only nominal. The best way to get at the truth is to stick as closely as possible to the natural analogy. What, then, would you say most closely corresponds to the structural abiding of the branch in the vine? Our response: it is abiding in the teachings of Christ, in the doctrine He taught. It is also acknowledging Him as the source from whom it is learned. In other words, “Abide in Me” means to “hold on to, and profess the truth I have spoken to you, and simply be My witnesses.” The other abiding signifies the indwelling of the Spirit of Jesus in the hearts of those who believe. Jesus helps His disciples understand that while they are abiding in His teachings, they must also have His Spirit abiding in them. They must not only hold on to the truth. They must also be filled with the Spirit of truth.

The two abidings are not only different in conception, but separable in fact. On the one hand, a person may strictly embrace Christian orthodoxy, but have little or no spiritual life. On the other hand, another person may have a certain amount of spiritual vitality, great morals, and in some respects, desires that are similar to a Christian, but has seriously departed from the faith. This first one can be compared to a dead branch on a living tree - bleached, without bark, covered with moss, and in the summer, leafless. It stretches out like a withered arm from the trunk to which it is attached, and with which it still maintains an organic structural connection. The other is a branch that is cut off by pride or self-will from the tree. It is full of the tree’s sap and
clothed with greenness at the moment of excision and foolishly imagines that, because it does not wither immediately, it can live, grow, and blossom independently of the tree. Haven't these two conditions existed since the beginning of Christianity? Yes, but we wish that were not the case! In the grand primeval forest of the Church, too many dead orthodoxies have been obvious. And as for branches that have departed from the faith, their name is legion.

The two abidings, then, can be separated - and often have been. But they cannot be separated without fatal consequences. The results always show up in the end and illustrate the truth of Christ's words, "Without, or severed from, Me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). Dead orthodoxy is notoriously impotent. Feeble, timid, powerless, opposed to anything strenuous or heroic - at best, this orthodoxy moves one's thoughts or conduct. In the end, however, it becomes insincere and demoralizing: salt without flavor, fit only to be tossed out; worthless vine-wood, good for nothing except for fuel, and not worth much even for that purpose. On the other hand, heresies - not abiding in the teachings of Christ - are equally helpless. At first they possess a false, short-lived, vitality and make a little noise in the world. But after a time, their leaf begins to wither, and they bring forth no abiding fruit.

Applying the idea of a dead branch to individuals (as opposed to churches or the religious world viewed collectively) is not without difficulty. A dead branch on a tree was not always dead. It was produced by the vital force of the tree and had some of the tree's life in it. Does the analogy between the natural and spiritual branches hold at this point? We would say not in any way that would compromise the doctrine of perseverance in grace, nowhere taught more clearly than in the words of our Lord. At the same time, it cannot be denied that there is such a thing as abortive religious experience. There are blossoms on the tree of life that are blasted by spring frosts, green fruit which fall off before they ripen, branches that become sick and die. Jonathan Edwards remarks: "I cannot say that the greater part of supposed converts give reason by their conversation (lifestyle) to suppose they are true converts. The proportion may perhaps be more truly represented by the proportion of the blossoms on a tree which abide and come to mature fruit, to the whole number of blossoms in spring." In other words, many blossoms are not permanent. But by saying they are not permanent, there is an admission that they were blossoms at one time.

It is a great mystery that some branches become unfruitful, and even die, while others flourish and bring forth fruit. Yet we must insist that man is responsible for his own spiritual character. Though the Father, as the husbandman, wields the pruning knife, the process of purging cannot be carried on without our consent and cooperation. For, practically speaking, the process includes removing the moral hindrances to life and growth - the worries of life, the insidious influence of wealth, the lusts of the flesh, and the passions of the soul. These evils cannot be overcome unless our will and all our moral powers are brought to bear against them. Therefore, Jesus tells His disciples that it is their duty to abide in Him and have Him abiding in them. He finally
resolves the whole issue in plain language - they must keep His commandments (Jn. 15:10). If they diligently and faithfully do their part, the divine Husbandman assures them that He will not fail to liberally give them everything that is necessary for the most abundant fruitfulness. “Ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you” (vs.7).

Jesus made it clear that any branches that fall short in either of the two ways mentioned are doomed. A branch may be in Him structurally but not bear fruit, either because it is absolutely dead and dry, or because it is afflicted with a vice that makes it barren. This branch is to be taken away - judicially severed from the tree (vs. 2). The branch that will not abide in the vine is not to be cut off - for it does that itself. Rather, it is to be thrown out of the vineyard where it is to lie until it withers. After some time has passed, and when it is convenient, it is to be gathered with all of its self-willed, erratic brothers into a heap. Then they will be burned in a bonfire like the dry rubbish of a garden (vs. 6).

Quantity and Quality
In the latter part of the discourse on the vine (vss. 8-17), Jesus makes it known that He has high expectations for His Apostles. He expects them to bear fruit. So He suggests several things for them to think about. These concepts, after they penetrate the minds of the disciples, might lead to the fulfillment of His hopes. In terms of fruitfulness, He made it clear to the disciples that He expected them to bear, not only fruit, but much fruit (vs. 8). This fruit would not just be abundant in quantity, but good in quality (vs. 16). This fruit should “remain.” It would consist of grapes whose juice would be worthy of preserving as wine in bottles. The fruit would be a church that would endure until the end of the world.

These two requirements, when taken together, are highly demanding. It is very hard to produce fruit that is both abundant and enduring. The two requirements, to a certain extent, limit each other. When high quality is the goal, it leads to an unnecessary thinning of the clusters. When high quantity is the goal, it can easily lead to the deterioration of the whole. The issue to be studied is how to secure as large an amount of fruit as possible, a fruit that has permanence; and, on the other hand, how to cultivate excellence with a crop that, at the same time, will repay labor and expenses. This is, so to speak, the ideal theory of vine culture. But in practice, we must be content with something short of perfection. For example, we cannot demand that all of the fruit will be able to endure. Many fruits that are produced by Christian labor are only temporary means to gain fruit that is more permanent in nature. And if we satisfy the law of Christ by producing much fruit, but only some of it remains, we do well. The permanent portion of a man's work must always be small in proportion to the whole. At best, it can only bear such a proportion to the whole as the grape juice bears to the grapes from which it is pressed. A small cask of wine represents a much larger bulk of grapes. In a similar way, the results of a Christian life are very small in volume compared with the mass of thoughts, words, and deeds that come
from that life. One little book, for instance, may preserve for all generations the soul and essence of the thoughts of a very gifted mind and of the graces of a noble heart. A case in point is that wonderful book, the Pilgrim’s Progress, which contains more wine in it than can be found in the massive volumes of some wordy authors whose works are only huge wine-casks with very little wine in them. Sometimes there is hardly a scent of wine.

To meet these two requirements, two character traits are needed above everything else: diligence and patience. One guarantees quantity; the other guarantees superior quality. One must know how to labor and how to wait - never idle, yet never hurrying. Diligence by itself will not be sufficient. Bustling activity does many things badly, but nothing well. On the other hand, patience that is unaccompanied by diligence degenerates into laziness which does not bring forth any fruit at all, either good or bad. The two virtues must go together. When they do, they never fail to produce fruit (in greater or lesser abundance) that remains in a holy and exemplary life whose memory is cherished for generations. The fruit may be in an apostolic church, books, a philanthropic institution, or in the character of descendants, scholars, or hearers.

When these two requirements are applied to every believer in Christ, the term much must be understood relatively. It is not expected that everyone will produce an absolutely large quantity of fruit. But it is expected of those who, like the Apostles, have been chosen and endowed to occupy distinguished positions. The one to whom little is given, little will be required. People who have few talents ought not to attempt much but try to do well in the areas where they have abilities. Having high aspirations is good in theory. But to aspire to exceed our limits is to furnish a new illustration of the old fable of The Frog and the Ox [Note: Aesop’s Fable]. The person who seeks to be and do more than he is capable of is worse than useless. He does not produce the sweet, wholesome fruits of the Spirit. Rather, he brings forth the inflated fruits of vanity which, like the apples of Sodom, are pleasing and delicious to look at and soft to touch, but are full of hot air. When they are squeezed, they explode like a puff-ball (Note: round, white, mushroom-like fungi that burst at the touch and discharge a brown powder).

The demand for much fruit was very exacting for the Apostles to whom Jesus’ words were first addressed. Yet it also has a gracious aspect for the world. The fruit which Jesus expected from His chosen ones was the conversion of people to the faith of the gospel, the ingathering of souls into the kingdom of God. A demand for much fruit in this sense is an expression of goodwill to mankind. It is a revelation of the Savior’s loving compassion for a world lying in sin, error, and darkness. In making this demand, Jesus, in essence, is saying to His Apostles, “Go into the world focused on evangelizing all the nations. Be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it. You cannot bring too many to the obedience of faith. The greater the number of those who believe on Me through your word, the more I will be pleased.” What we have here, briefly, is simply an echo of the passionate words spoken on that earlier occasion when Jesus mentioned
death as the prerequisite for abundant fruitfulness and the cross as a power by whose irresistible attraction He would draw all people unto Him (Jn. 12:24,33).

**The First Pair of Motives for Fruitfulness**

From these high requirements of the Lord, we move along to the arguments by which He sought to impress on the disciples the duty of bringing forth much and abiding fruit. There are no less than six arguments which are grouped in pairs. The first pair is indicated by the words, “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (Jn. 15:8). In other words, Jesus wanted the ones He had chosen to remember that the fruit for the divine Husbandman and for Himself, the vine, depended largely on their behavior. The world would judge by results. If the Apostles brought forth much fruit, they would say that God had not sent Christ into the world in vain. Their success would be credited to Jesus whose disciples they had been. If they failed, people would say, “God planted a vine, but it didn't make it. The vine produced branches, but there is no fruit.” Or, in plain language, “Christ chose men who have not done anything.”

The force behind these arguments for fruitfulness is more obvious in the case of these Apostles, the founders of the church, than in reference to the present condition of the church, when the honor of Christ and of God the Father seems to depend very little on the conduct of individuals. But then, the whole emphasis lay on eleven men. At this time in history, it is distributed to millions. Nevertheless, there is a great need, even today, for the church to be spiritually fruitful in order that the honor of Christ's name may be upheld. There is a tendency, currently, for people to look at Christianity as depleted. The old vine is considered by many to be barren, past its ability to produce fruit, and a new plant is sought. This idea can be effectually discarded in only one way - by raising up a generation of Christians whose lives demonstrate that the “true vine” is not something that grows old and disappears. Rather, it has eternal vitality and is capable, not only of producing new branches and new clusters, but of getting rid of dead branches and the moss which has covered them over the years.

**A Second Pair of Motives for Fruitfulness**

A second pair of motives for fruitfulness is hinted at in the words: “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (vs. 11). What Jesus is saying is that the continuation of His joy in the disciples and the completion of their own joy as believers in Him depended on their being fruitful. The emphasis in the first phrase lies in the words “may be in you.” Jesus has joy in His disciples even now, even though they are spiritually immature, in the same way that a gardener has joy in the clusters of grapes when they are green, sour, and inedible. He rejoices in them now, not because of what they are, but because of what they will become - ripe fruit. If that promise is not fulfilled, He would feel like the gardener feels
when the blossom is nipped by frost or the green fruit destroyed by mildew. He would feel like a parent feels when a son does not live up to the potential he demonstrated in his youth. He can endure delay but not failure. He can wait patiently until the growth process is completed. He can put up with all the immaturity, because He knows they will ripen. But if they never ripen - if the children never become men, if the pupils never become teachers - then He will exclaim in bitter disappointment: “Woe is Me! My soul desired ripe fruit. Is this what I find after waiting so long?”

In the second phrase, the emphasis lies on the words “may be made full.” Jesus does not say or imply that a Christian cannot have joy until his character has matured and his work accomplished. His language is compatible with the assertion that even at the beginning of one's spiritual life, there may be a great, even passionate, outburst of joy. But, on the other hand, His words plainly imply that the joy of an immature disciple is necessarily unstable, while the joy that is stable and full comes only with spiritual maturity. This is a great practical truth. All disciples need to keep it in mind. Joy, in the highest sense of the word, is one of the ripe fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is the reward of perseverance and faithfulness. To rejoice at the beginning is good, as far as it goes. But everything depends on the sequel. If we stop short and do not grow, look out. For failure in anything, especially religion, is misery. If we are relatively unfruitful, we may not be absolutely unhappy. However, we can never know the fullness of joy. The following words are spoken only to the faithful servant: “Enter into the joy of your Lord.” Full joy is reserved for the soldier who has won the victory, for the farmer celebrating the harvest, for the athlete who has been awarded the prize for his strength, skill, and quickness.

**A Third Pair of Motives for Fruitfulness**

The last two considerations by which Jesus tried to impress on His disciples the duty of being fruitful were: (1) the honor that accompanied their apostolic calling, and (2) the debt of gratitude they owed the One who had called them and who was about to die for them. Jesus described the dignity of the apostleship (in contrast to the menial position of the disciple) in these terms: “No longer do I call you slaves; for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (vs. 15). In other words, the disciples had been apprentices. The Apostles would be partners. The disciples had been like government clerks. The Apostles would be confidential ministers of the King. The disciples had been pupils in the school of Jesus. The Apostles would be the custodians of Christian truth, the reporters and expositors of their Master’s doctrine, the sole reliable sources of information about the letter and spirit of His teaching. What office could possibly be more important than theirs? How important it was that they understand their responsibilities in that office!

While trying to walk in a manner that was worthy of such a noble vocation, it would also be appropriate for the Apostles to bear in mind what their obligations were to Him who had called
them to the apostolic office. Giving proper attention to these duties would be an additional stimulus for them to be diligent and faithful. Therefore, Jesus is careful to impress on His disciples that they owe all they are and will be to Him. “You did not choose Me, but I chose you,” He tells them (vs. 16). He wants them to understand that they had not provided Him with any benefit by becoming His disciples. They were the ones who received all the benefit. He had raised them from obscurity to be the lights of the world, to be His companions now, and His friends and representatives in the future. Having done so much for them, He was justified in asking them to sincerely try to realize the purpose for which He had chosen them and to fulfill the ministry to which they were ordained.

**Love One Another**

One more thing is worthy of note in this discourse on the true vine: Jesus repeated the commandment to love one another. At the beginning of His farewell address, Jesus encouraged the disciples to express brotherly love so they could be consoled when they were bereaved. Here, He encourages this kind of love again as one of the conditions for fruitfulness (Jn. 15:12,17). Though He does not explicitly say it, He evidently intends for the disciples to understand that abiding in each other by love is just as necessary to their success as their common abiding in Him by faith. Division, party strife, or jealousy will simply be fatal to their influence and to the cause they represent. They must be such good friends that they will even be willing to die for each other. Had Christians always remembered the commandment to love one another - a command on which Christ insisted - what a different history the Church would have had! How much more fruitful she would have been in accomplishing greater works - works for which she was instituted!
Section II - Apostolic Tribulations and Encouragements


After Jesus spoke to the Twelve about the responsibilities they would have as Apostles, He moved on to talk with them about the tribulations they would have to face. The transition was natural. Why? Because all great people who are involved in God’s work, and whose fruit has staying power, will certainly experience sorrow to a greater or lesser degree. One of the penalties of moral greatness and spiritual power is to be hated and treated in an evil manner. Or, to put it in a different way, it is one of the privileges Christ confers on His friends.

Hatred is very hard to accept. The desire to escape it is one main cause of unfaithfulness and unfruitfulness. Good people tend to live their lives in such a way that they stay out of trouble. But when they go overboard and use too much (cowardly) caution, they degenerate to the point where they cannot and do not make a spiritual impact for Christ. It was so very important that the Apostles of the Christian faith not become powerless just because they were hated. Therefore, Jesus introduced the subject of tribulation to them. He wanted to strengthen His men and prepare them to endure suffering before it came into their lives. In the middle of His comments on this unpleasant topic, as if apologizing for introducing it, He said, “These things I have spoken to you, that you may be kept from stumbling” (Jn. 16:1; see also vs. 4). They were not to be surprised when the trouble came.

Resources for Facing Trouble

To give courage to the young soldiers of the cross, the Captain of salvation offered them various resources. First, He told them, without beating around the bush, what they could expect. By introducing them to the dark possibilities, He could make it less frightening for them. Jesus spoke about the world’s hatred as an absolute certainty. It was not necessary for Him to assert its certainty. He just assumed it. “If the world hates you” (Jn. 15:18) - as, of course, it will. Later on, without softening His language or talking around the issue, He described the kind of treatment they would receive from the world. “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God” (Jn. 16:2). [Note: The idea is that the murderers will believe they are offering an acceptable religious service or sacrifice to God]. These were harsh and shocking words. But since it was certain these things were going to take place, it was best that they know the worst.
Secondly, Jesus tells His disciples that whatever they may have to suffer, they will not be worse off than He. “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you” (Jn. 15:18). “Some comfort!” one might be inclined to say. Yet, it really is not so bad when you consider the positions of the two parties. The One who has already been hated is the Lord. The ones who will be hated are only the servants. Jesus reminded His disciples of this point. He repeated something He had already said to them earlier that evening (Jn. 15:20; see also Jn. 13:16 and 12:26). If they would just think about this truth, it would stop any grumbling. And, if they would truly take it to heart, it might even become a source of heroic inspiration. The servants should be ashamed to complain about difficult circumstances when their Master was not exempt from them (nor did He wish to be). The disciples should be proud to share in tribulations with the One who is their Superior. They should regard their experiences in the cross not as fate, but as a privilege.

Jesus uses a third resource to help the Apostles accept the world’s hatred: He let them know that it went along with their being elected (Jn. 15:19). This thought, when fully comprehended, has great power. Ordinarily, love is based on similarity of interest. People love those who hold the same opinions, occupy the same positions, follow the same fashions, and pursue the same goals. They tend to regard everyone who differs from them with indifference, dislike, or animosity, depending on the degree to which they are aware of the differences. Consequently, a dilemma arose for the chosen ones. Either they must forfeit the honor, privileges, and hope of their election and descend into the dark world which is without God and without hope, or they must be content to accept the drawbacks that come with the position they received when they were called out of darkness and be hated by those who love the darkness rather than the light because their lives are evil. What true child of light will hesitate with this choice?

Jesus Explains the World’s Hatred

The disciples had no alternative but to patiently submit to their circumstances. The reason? They were chosen. To demonstrate this, Jesus went deeper into the philosophy of the world’s hatred. He explained that when they were hated, He would also be hated. But it would also mean, in a radical way, ignorance of and hostility to God, His Father (Jn. 15:21). When He presented this truth, He took the opportunity to make some serious comments on the unbelieving world of Judea where He had labored. He interpreted their unbelief in the worst way, declaring it to be totally without excuse. He accused those who had been guilty of unbelief of hating Him without cause - that is, of hating Someone whose whole character and conduct, words and works should have won their faith and love. By hating Him, they revealed a hatred they had for that very God for whose glory they professed to be so zealous (Jn. 15:22-25).

How painful is the perspective that is given here of the world’s hatred of truth and those who witness to it! We would like to see that the harsh way the messengers of truth were received (including Jesus) was only the result of a misunderstanding that could be forgiven. No doubt,
this has been the origin of many religious animosities. There have been many sins committed against the Son of Man. To a much lesser degree, sins have also been committed against those who follow Him. For who has not persecuted the Son of Man or His interest, harboring bad feelings and speaking bitter words against His people, if not against Him personally, while under the influence of prejudice? Some have even gone so far as to inflict bodily injury on those who proclaimed these unfamiliar, unwelcomed truths. They simply obeyed the blind impulses of panic, fear, or selfish passion.

There are few people who have never, in one way or another, persecuted other Christians. And most people who have been persecuted focus on the guilt of their persecutors. Those who suffer for their convictions are greatly tempted to think of their opponents as the opponents of God. The wrongs they endure provoke them to think and speak of the wrong-doers as children of the devil. This gives importance to their cause and dignity to their sufferings. They think of their cause as God's cause and their sufferings as something they must endure for God's sake. One further point: Stating the issue before us as one between God's friends and God's foes broadly satisfies both the intellect and the conscience. The intellect demands an answer to the question that is simple and easily understood. The conscience puts you obviously in the right and your adversaries obviously in the wrong.

All this shows that much honesty, humility, and patience is needed before one can safely say, “The one who hates me, hates God.” Nevertheless, it is still true that a person's real attitude toward God is revealed by the way he treats God's present work and His living servants. It was on this principle that Jesus judged His enemies, even though He did not resent them and was always ready to allow for their ignorance. In spite of His love, He believed and said that the hostility He had encountered sprang from an evil will and a wicked, godless heart. He primarily had in mind the leaders of the opposition who had turned a mob of ignorant and prejudiced people into a hostile army. These were the men whom He denounced, without hesitating, as haters of God, truth, and righteousness. He pointed to the way they treated Him as conclusive evidence of this fact. His presence and ministry among them had ripped off their masks and exposed them for who they really were - hypocrites who pretended to be holy but, inside, were full of corruption and ungodliness. They hated genuine goodness and could not rest until they had thrown it out of the world and nailed it to a cross. With the history and sayings of Christ right in front of us, we must be careful not to be too sympathetic toward those who live in unbelief.

*Hope for a Brighter Future*

After Jesus digressed to speak about His difficult experiences in the past, He very naturally moved on to express hope for a brighter future. He enjoyed this. Before now, He had been despised and rejected by the people, but He believed it would not always be like this. Before long, the Jewish and Gentile world would begin to change its mind, and the Crucified One would become an
object of faith and reverence. He built this hope on a strong and solid foundation, the combined testimony of the Spirit of truth and of His own Apostles. With His face brightening, He said, “When the Helper comes (He had spoken to His little ones about Him. Now He mentioned Him as His own Comforter, no less than theirs), whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me” (Jn. 15:26). He did not mention here what results the Spirit would produce by His witness. He will speak to that issue a little later when He learns that those listening to Him have not comprehended what He meant - or, at least, they have not been able to find any personal comfort in His words. In the meantime, He quickly suggested that the disciples as well as the Spirit of truth would have a part in the honorable work of redeeming their Master’s name and character from disgrace. They would also bear witness because they were well qualified to do so. They had been with Him from the beginning of His ministry (Jn. 15:27) and knew everything about His doctrine and the way He had lived His life.

Jesus sought comfort for His own heart, as He faced the depressing weight of looking back over the difficult things that had happened in His life, and looked ahead to the immediate reality of His crucifixion. He sought this comfort by thinking about the future when the Spirit and the Apostles would bear witness of Him. But He also intended for the disciples to find their strength from the same Source when they encountered their tribulations. Truthfully, no thoughts could be more effective in helping these men face a hard life than those implied by the words Jesus had just spoken. In essence, He told them they would suffer for a cause that was favored by Heaven and for honoring the One they loved more than life. Who would not choose to be on the side for which the Divine Spirit fights, even when there were risks of being wounded? Who would not be happy to be rebuked and treated badly for a Name which is worthy to be above every name, especially if he was assured that the sufferings he endured directly contributed to the exaltation of that blessed Name to its proper place of sovereignty? It was this type of thinking, more than anything else, that supported the Apostles when they encountered their great and many trials. They learned to say, “For Christ’s sake we are killed all day long; we are counted as sheep ready to be slaughtered. But who cares? The Church is spreading; believers are multiplying on every front. They are springing up a hundred-fold from the seed of the martyr’s blood; the name of our Lord is being magnified. Therefore, we will gladly suffer for bearing witness to the truth.”

The Primary Source of Tribulations
Jesus began His message by giving these words to the disciples so they could persevere when difficulties came. He got more explicit about what the Apostles would have to endure (Jn. 16:2). We will only make one additional comment about what He told them: The disciples would learn from Jesus’ words, not only the nature of their future tribulations, but their source. In this part of His discourse, their Master warned them about the world’s hatred. But the world was not the non-religious, skeptical, easy-going, gross-living world of those who did not claim to know God.
Rather, the world was Judaism - anti-Christian Judaism. It was made up of those who regularly attended the synagogue, those who distinguished themselves from “the world.” They claimed to be the people of God, very zealous in their own way for God's glory, and were fanatical about their religious opinions and practices. They were totally intolerant of any who disagreed with them, relentlessly excommunicated anyone who slightly violated their established beliefs, and believed that when they put someone to death for violating God's law, it was not murder, but a religious service, an acceptable sacrifice to the Almighty. This Jewish world was assigned the distinction of representing the entire \textit{cosmos} (world) of people who were alienated from God and truth. And if hatred for that which is good is the central characteristic of worldliness, then the distinction was well earned, for the power of hating reached its greatest intensity among the Jews. No one could hate like a religious Jew who lived in the apostolic age. He was known for his diabolic capacity for hating. Even the Roman historian Tacitus commemorates the \textit{hostile odium} (hatred) of the Jewish race against all mankind. And the experiences of the Christian Apostles had fully justified the way Jesus singled out the Jew when He spoke about the world's hatred. These men learned what the world's hatred meant from the unbelieving Jews. The pagan world despised them but did not hate them. The Greek laughed, and the Roman went on his way with contemptuous indifference. At best, he would modestly oppose them. But the persevering, unrelenting, evil hostility of the religious Jew! It was bloodthirsty, without mercy, and worthy of Satan himself. So Jesus could truly say to the Jews, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (Jn. 8:44).

What a strange fruit, this wicked spirit of hatred that grew on the good vine which God had planted in the Holy Land! Israel was chosen to be the means of blessing for the whole world yet ended up being the enemy of the world, “contrary to all men,” provoking even decent people to regard and treat her as a nuisance whose destruction from the face of the earth would be a common cause for celebration. Look at the results of election when it is abused! Unusual favors feed man's pride rather than motivating those who are favored to devote themselves to the noble task of serving mankind. A divine commonwealth (Israel) was turned into a synagogue of Satan, and God's most deadly foes were those in His own house. Take note! The same phenomenon has reappeared in the Christian Church. The world that is the most opposed to Christ, Antichrist itself, is not to be found in the world of the unbelievers but in the church; not among those who are non-religious and skeptical but among those who claim to be God's people.

\textbf{Jesus Helps the Apostles Cope}

As could be expected, the announcement Jesus made about the disciples' future tribulations caused a big reaction. The dark probability of suffering that was revealed when Jesus briefly lifted the veil appalled them. Their faces revealed their concern, and sorrow filled their hearts. It was bad enough that their Master was going to leave them. But in their minds, to be left to this fate was even worse. Jesus noticed the response He had evoked and did what He could to remove it and help the hurting disciples recover their composure.
First, He apologized (in a way of speaking) for talking about such painful matters. In essence He said, “I would gladly have been silent about the troubles that are going to come on you. I have actually been silent as long as possible. But I could not think about leaving you without letting you know what you are going to face. I have done it now because the time for my departure is here” (Jn. 16:4). The kind feeling behind His comment, as I have paraphrased it, is evident. But the statement seems to be inconsistent with the other Gospels. From Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we learn that Jesus and the Twelve frequently talked about the hardships that accompany discipleship in general, and the apostleship in particular. Commentators have dealt with the difficulty in various ways. Some will admit there is a contradiction and assume that earlier conversations about persecutions (such as in Matthew 10) are introduced by the evangelist but not in chronological order. Others insist that there is a difference between the earlier words and the current ones, especially with respect to clarity. They maintain the earlier ones are vague and general, like the earlier allusions Jesus made about His own death. The latter ones, they say, are specific, definite, and clear, like the announcements Jesus made about His death near the end of His public ministry. A third group of expositors say the newness of this discourse on the world’s hatred can be found in the explanation that is given about its cause and origin. Still, a fourth group insists that the great distinction between this discourse and the previous ones is to be found in the fact that this one is a farewell discourse. Therefore, because of this situation, it made quite a unique impression on the Twelve.

Since so many differing opinions have been offered, it would not be right to be dogmatic. Our own opinion, however, is that the uniqueness of Jesus’ words about apostolic tribulations lies in the manner or style He uses, rather than in the substance of what He said. On earlier occasions, especially when the Twelve went on their trial mission, Jesus had basically said the same things. He had spoken about scourgings in the synagogues, if not excommunication from them. He had alluded to the possibility that the Apostles of the kingdom could experience violent deaths. But He had said all these things in a different way. At that time, He preached about persecution. Now He makes a very candid announcement. There is a vast difference between the previous discourse and the current announcement, similar to the difference between a sermon on the text, “It is appointed for men to die once” (Heb. 9:27), and a special hint to an individual, “This year you will die.” The sermon may say more about death than the hint, but what a difference in the way He said it, and what a different result!

The next means Jesus used in order to cure their grief was a friendly rebuke. He gently reproved the disciples for their silence, which He took as an indication of their hopeless, despairing sorrow. “But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart” (Jn. 16:5-6). Jesus is saying, “Why are you totally in despair? Don’t you have any questions to ask Me about My departure? You were full of questions at first. You were curious and wanted to know where
I was going. I would be grateful if you asked that question again, or if you asked any question, whether it is a wise or foolish one. The most childish questions would be better than the gloom of despair which is evident by your silence.

The question, “Where are you going?” had already been sufficiently answered. So it might have been superfluous to ask it again. However, based on the words spoken to them about their future sufferings, the disciples could have asked Him other questions which were neither superfluous nor irrelevant. They probably would have asked those questions if they had not been so depressed. They could have said, “If it is going to be so bad for us after You go, why don’t You stay? While You have been with us, You have sheltered us from the world’s hatred. Now You tell us that when You, our Leader and Head, are gone, that hatred will be directed against us, Your followers. If this is true, how can we possibly think about your leaving us as anything but a disaster?”

Jesus proceeds to answer these unspoken questions next. He boldly asserts that whatever they may think, it is for their good that He goes away (Jn. 16:7). His comments are made with special reference to their work as Apostles, though true in other respects also. In the earlier part of Jesus’ farewell address, He had explained to His disciples how His leaving would affect them as individual believers. He had assured them that when the Comforter came, He would make them feel as if their departed Master had returned to them again. In fact, it would seem as if He were more present with them than He had ever been. Here, His goal is to show them the impact His departure would have on their work as Apostles and to make them understand that His going away would be good for them as they performed their work for the public.

The proof of this assertion follows. He said, in essence, “When I leave you and go to My Father (Jn. 16:7-15), two essential needs that are important for the success of your work as Apostles will be met. When that time comes, you will have receptive hearers, and you will be competent to preach. Neither of these needs even exist now. The world has rejected Me and My words. And you, though you are very sincere, are very ignorant and do not understand what I have taught you. After My ascension, there will be a great change in two respects. First, the world will be more open to hear the truth. Secondly, you will be able to declare it intelligently. The change cannot come until then. For it will be brought about by the work of the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, and He cannot come until I go.”

**The Holy Spirit’s Ministry**

We have given the general meaning of this part of His discourse. In this same text, Jesus quickly outlined the Spirit’s converting work in the world (Jn. 16:8-11) and then His work of enlightening the minds of the Apostles (Jn. 16:12-15). He described the first aspect of the Spirit’s ministry in this way: “And He, when He comes, will convict (produce serious thought and conviction in) the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment.” Then He explained the special
ways the Spirit would bring these great moral realities to the minds of the people. Here, He only expounded what He had already said about the Spirit’s testimony regarding Him (Jn. 15:26). He told His disciples that the Comforter would witness for Him in the hearts and consciences of people and would convince them of sin, especially those who are unbelievers. He would convince them of righteousness in connection with His departure to the Father. And He would convince them of judgment (the one to come), because the prince of this world had already been judged (that is, he would have been judged before the Comforter began His work).

The second and third explanatory remarks are baffling. Instead of throwing light on the subject, they seem to make it more obscure. His comments have caused so much argumentation and difference of opinion, that to elaborate on them would be a waste of time, and to be dogmatic would presume too much. One great point in the dispute has been: “What righteousness did Jesus allude to - His own, or that of sinners? Did He mean to say that the Spirit would convince the world, after He had left the earth, that He was a righteous man? Or, did He mean that the Spirit would teach people to see in the Crucified One, the Lord who is their righteousness? Our own opinion is that He did not mean either one. He meant both. Righteousness is to be taken generally without defining it. The idea is that the Spirit would use the exaltation of Christ to make people sincerely think about the whole subject of righteousness; to show them the absolute rotten character of their own righteousness, whose crowning accomplishment was to crucify Jesus; to bring home to their hearts the solemn truth that the Crucified One was the Just One. Ultimately, the Spirit would put them on a path for finding in Jesus their true righteousness by raising this question in their minds: “Why did the Just One suffer?”

We believe the meaning of the third explanatory remark is this: “When I am crucified, the god of this world will have been judged, both this world and its god. The latter will be judged finally and irreversibly. The world, though it currently follows Satan, is capable of being converted. When I have ascended, the Spirit will use the judgment of Satan to convince people that there is a judgment coming. He will help them see the prophecy about a final separation that will occur between Me and all those who obstinately persist in their unbelief. By speaking about the horrors of perdition (hell), they will be brought to repentance and faith.”

What Jesus said about the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit and its impact on the minds of His disciples amounted to this: “I will equip you (the Twelve) to be intelligent and trustworthy witnesses of Me and to be leaders for the Church in doctrine and practice.” For these two great purposes, two things would be necessary. First, they must understand Christian truth. Secondly, they should possess the gift of prophecy so they can foretell the future (in a general way) in order that they might warn and encourage believers. Jesus promised them both of these advantages which would come from the Spirit’s enlightening influence. He assured them that when the Comforter came, He would guide them into all the truth that He had personally taught
them. He would remind them of the things that had been forgotten, explain things that were not understood, and develop basic principles into a system of doctrine which was above their current ability to comprehend (Jn. 16:12). He went on to inform them that this same Spirit would show them things to come such as the increasing number of heresies and apostasies, the coming of Antichrist, the conflict between light and darkness, and their final outcome as described in the Book of Revelation.

Delayed Changes
These were the changes that would be brought about in the world and in the disciples' lives by the coming of the Comforter. Truly, they are great and profitable changes. But why can’t they take place before Jesus leaves the world? Jesus hinted at the answer to this question when He said the following things about the Spirit: “He will not speak on His own initiative” (Jn. 16:13), and “He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you” (vs. 14). It was necessary for the personal ministry of Jesus to come to an end before the ministry of the Spirit began, because the latter is merely an application of the former. The Spirit does not speak on His own. He simply takes the things that relate to Christ and shows them to unbelievers so they can be brought to conviction and conversion. He shows them to believers so they can be enlightened and sanctified. But until Jesus had died, risen, and ascended, the essentials about Him would remain incomplete. The materials for the gospel would not be ready. There could be no apostolic preaching nor any demonstration of the power of the Spirit to accompany the preaching. It must be possible for the Apostles and the Spirit to bear witness of One who, though perfectly holy, had been crucified in order to show the world the atrociousness of its sin. They must have the power to declare that God made the same Jesus whom they crucified to be both Lord and Christ, who was exalted to heavenly glory before their hearers could have their hearts convicted and exclaim in terror, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). It was only after Jesus had ascended into glory and become invisible to mortal eyes (Jn. 16:10) that people could understand that He was not only a righteous man personally, but He was the Lord, their righteousness. When this happened, the following question would enter their minds: “What could be the meaning of the Lord of glory becoming a man and dying on a cross?” By the Spirit’s teaching, they would learn to reply in a different way, than in the days when they were ignorant, when they said, “He suffers for His own offences.” Now they would say, “Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...He was pierced for our transgressions” (Is. 53:4-5).

Finally, not until the Apostles were in a position to say that their Lord had gone to heaven could they fully impact unbelievers with the doctrine of a judgment. Then they could say, “Christ is seated on the heavenly throne as a Prince and a Savior to everyone who believes but also as a Judge to those who continue in rebellion and unbelief. “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:12).
The disciples did not understand all of this. They had no conception of the Spirit’s work on the conscience of the world or on their own minds. Nor did they have any understanding about the relationship between the Third Person of the Trinity and the Second. Therefore, Jesus did not elaborate on these topics. Rather, He restricted Himself to the bare essentials to provide the truth they needed. The time did come when the disciples understood these matters. When it did, they fully appreciated the words the Lord spoke about the dispensation of the Comforter. Then they acknowledged that the assertion was really true that it was best for them that He go away. They rejoiced when they remembered they had once thought otherwise. They perceived the word “advantage” (Jn. 16:7), far from being too strong, was a rather weak expression chosen to graciously accommodate their feeble spiritual capacities. The stronger word would have been “indispensable.” When the Twelve understood these things, they had the same feelings about death as we imagine redeemed people feel about it when they get to heaven. On this side of the grave,

Timorous mortals start and shrink
To cross the narrow sea;
And linger, shivering, on the brink,
And fear to launch away.

But to those on the other side, how insignificant a matter must death seem! How strange must it seem to their purged vision, that it was ever necessary to prove to them that it was better to depart to heaven than to remain in a world of sin and sorrow!
Section III - The Little While, and the End of the Discourse
John 16:16-33

Jesus’ discourse about the coming age of the Comforter concludes with a paradox. He had been telling His disciples that His departure would be beneficial to them in many ways. To be specific, after He returned to His Father, they would comprehend Christian truth clearly and fully. In essence, this is what He said to them: “It is good for you that I go away. I cannot become visible to you spiritually until I become invisible physically. I have to be taken away from your physical eyes before I can be seen by the eyes of your minds.” So, He appropriately ended His discourse on the Comforter by repeating a riddle which He had given in a less direct way in His first farewell address. He said, “A little while, and you will not behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me...because I go to the Father” (Jn. 16:16-17).

Like all riddles, this one is very simple to unlock once we have the key. In Jesus’ paradoxical saying about losing and saving life (Mt. 16:25), the primary words (save and lose) are used in two ways. Likewise, in the text before us (Jn. 16:16), the primary word see is used in two ways. First, it is used in a physical sense. Then, in the second clause, it is used in a spiritual sense (“...you will no longer behold Me (physically); and again a little while, and you will see Me” (spiritually). Consequently, we have the possibility of the same event, namely, the departure of Christ to the Father, becoming a reason for not seeing (physically) and for seeing (spiritually). When Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples never saw Him again like they had seen Him in the room where they were having supper that night. But immediately after that time, they began to see Him in another way. A new understanding of His life sweetly crept into the eyes of their souls. The sight was so satisfying. It justified the glowing language their Master had used to talk about His departure prior to His leaving them. Though they did not see Him any more in His humanity, they believed in Him and, to use the words of the Apostle Peter, they “greatly rejoiced with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (I Pt. 1:8).

Before the ascension, however, the disciples did not have any idea of the vision and joy which awaited them. Their Lord’s words had no meaning for them. They were truly a riddle, even a contradiction to them. As the men stood around the inspired Speaker, they must have whispered to each other about the strange, baffling words He had just uttered about “a little while,” about “seeing” and “not seeing,” and about “going to the Father.” Evidently, the riddle served at least one purpose - it brought the disciples out of the numbness of their grief and, for a brief moment, awakened their curiosity. Nevertheless, that was just about all it did for them. It
surprised them but did not convey any meaning. Those who heard Him were forced to confess, “We do not know what He is talking about” (Jn. 16:18b). It must be noted, however, that they did not ask Jesus any questions. They wanted to do it at this point, but they did not feel the freedom. We believe they were restrained from speaking out of their respect for the noble and sustained way their Master had been addressing them during the second part of His farewell discourse. Jesus, however, detected a question by the look on their faces and kindly gave them a word of explanation (vss. 19-21).

**Sorrow Now, Joy Later**
His words, strictly speaking, did not explain the riddle. Jesus did not tell the disciples what the “little while” meant. Nor did He distinguish between the two different kinds of “seeing.” He allowed the puzzle to be solved through experience. That was the only way it could be solved. All He attempted to do was help them understand how His leaving, though at first causing sorrow, could bring joy afterwards. For this reason, He compared the crisis the disciples were about to experience, not to death (the time when a Christian makes his exit out of this world into a better one), but to birth (the event with which human life begins, vss. 20-22).

The comparison was appropriate for the intended purpose, but we cannot be absolutely certain about the meaning of every detail. Interpreters who aspire to understand all mysteries and all knowledge have raised many questions about the text, such as: “Who is represented by the mother in the parable - Christ, or the disciples? When does the sorrow begin, and when and how does it end?” The answers given to these questions vary. According to one interpretation, Jesus Himself is the new man, and the sorrow He alluded to was His own death which is to be understood as the redemption of sinful humanity. A second interpretation holds that Jesus was speaking about His own disciples as men who were with child, where the child represented a spiritual Christ who would be born when the Comforter came. Most people agree that the time of sorrow began with Christ's passion (death). But there are many different opinions about when it ends. One view places the “joy date” after the resurrection. After a little while of painful separation, this event restored Jesus to His sorrowing disciples. Another puts the “little while” at Pentecost, when the Church was anointed by the Holy Spirit with power. Still a third makes the “little while” a “long while” by making the words “I will see you again” (vs. 22) refer to Christ's second coming. This would be the blessed time when the new heavens and the new earth would finally come into existence, and righteousness, for which the whole creation groans, would dwell there (Rom. 8:19).

**Spiritual Illumination**
We do not think it is necessary to take a side on these disputed points. Neither do we think it necessary to give the analogy a doctrinal twist and find in it a reference to regeneration. What Jesus had in mind throughout this part of His discourse was not the new birth, either of the
disciples or of the Church. Rather, He was thinking about the spiritual illumination of the Apostles. He had in mind their transition from the chrysalis (cocoon) to the time when their wings were fully developed, from an ignorant implicit faith to a faith that was developed and intelligent. He was alluding to their initiation into the highest level of the Christian mysteries when they would clearly see things that had been unintelligible before. They would be Epopts in the kingdom of heaven [Note: Those who had been introduced into the highest (third) level of the Eleusinian mysteries (developed at Eleusis near Athens, Greece and associated with Demeter and the story of carrying off her daughter to the underworld by Pluto) were called Epopts]. For them, as for most Christians (there is a sense in which the experience of the Apostles repeats itself in the spiritual history of many believers), this crisis was just as important as the one in which people pass from spiritual death into life. It is a great thing to be regenerated, but it is equally important to be illuminated. It is a great and unforgettable moment when Christ first enters the heart as an object of faith and love. But it is an equally important moment when Christ departs, perhaps for a time, and leaves the mind clouded with doubt and the heart overcome with sorrow...until He returns, never to depart again, and drives away the wintry frost and darkness. In their place, He brings light, gladness, summer warmth, and spiritual fruitfulness to the soul. Truly, any person would be content for Christ, as he first knew Him, to depart, if he knew his sorrow would be turned into such joy after a little while!

Three Aspects of Spiritual Illumination

When Jesus used the familiar analogy of a mother giving birth, it aroused compassion. It demonstrated the possibility that the disciples' sorrow would be changed into great joy. Then, in the next two verses, He proceeded to describe the characteristics of the state of mind the Apostles would possess before long (Jn. 16:23-24). First, He mentions a greater comprehension of truth. He referred to this when He said, “In that day you will ask Me no question” (vs. 23). He meant that they would not ask Him any questions like they had been asking all along, especially that night. Those were a child's questions and were asked with a child's curiosity and inability to understand the answers. The questioning spirit that children have would be replaced by the understanding spirit of adulthood. The truths of the kingdom would no longer be incomprehensible mysteries to them. The men would have an unction (anointing) from the Holy One and would know all things.

Some people think this would be too much to say about any Christian, even the Apostles, while they still lived on the earth. They argue that the day alluded to here is that of Christ's second coming or of His happy reunion with His own children in the kingdom of His Father. Without a doubt, it is true that in that Final Day, only Christians will know as they are known (I Cor. 13:12) and will have absolutely no need to ask any questions. At that time,

'Midst power that knows no limit,
   And wisdom free from bound,
The beatific (blissful) vision
   Shall glad the saints around.
(Editorial interpretation: In the presence of God's unlimited power and infinite wisdom, Christians who have gathered around the throne will have a blissful view of heaven that will give them eternal joy).

Nothing here on earth can ever make them that glad. Still, the statement we are considering presents a truth that is relevant to this present life. Compared to what we will be like in heaven, the clearest vision that any Christian can have is like looking in a mirror and seeing a poor reflection (I Cor. 13:12). In contrast to their ignorance as disciples, the degree of illumination that the Apostles received might be described, without exaggerating, as that of men who did not need to ask questions any longer. Jesus promised them that they would, before long, attain this high degree of illumination. In essence, He was saying that as Apostles, they would be teachers, not scholars - doctors of divinity, with titles conferred by Heaven itself. They would be capable of answering the questions of young disciples that were similar to the ones they once asked themselves.

The second aspect of the apostolic illumination that Jesus mentioned was unlimited influence with God through prayer. He spoke about this with great emphasis: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name” (vs. 23). This teaches that the Apostles were to have at their command the whole power of God, the power to perform miracles and heal diseases; to prophesy, that is, to foretell things that would impact the Church and things that the believers needed to know; the power of providence, that is, to make all situations subservient to their well-being and to the cause for which they labored. The substance of the promise - though not its miraculous elements - was made to all who aspire to Christian maturity and is fulfilled to all who reach it.

In the next sentence, Jesus (if we are not mistaken) spoke of a third feature of spiritual maturity to which He wanted His disciples to aspire: a heart that is enlarged to desire, ask, and expect great things for themselves, the Church, and the world. “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name” (vs. 24). There was a reason for this, and it was separate from the spiritual condition of the Twelve. The time had not yet come to ask anything in Christ's name. They could not appropriately nor naturally make “Christ's name” their plea until Christ's work was completed and He was glorified. But Jesus meant more than this when He made His remark. He said what was absolutely true, that, before now, His disciples had asked for very little in any name. Their desires had been petty. Their ideas of what to ask for were unclear and crude. Any grand wishes they did have tended to be worldly. Therefore, God could not grant them. They had been like children. To a child, a penny seems greater to him than a thousand dollars seems to a wealthy man. Jesus hinted, but did not plainly say, that it would be different for the Apostles after the Comforter came. When He appeared they would be like poor boys who had grown into rich merchants whose ideas about enjoyment had grown larger as their outward fortunes increased.
When He appeared, they would be able to pray such prayers as the one by Paul in his Roman prison on behalf of the Ephesian Church and for the Church in every age. They would be able to pray the Lord’s Prayer, especially “Thy kingdom come,” with full meaning, great desire, and an assurance of faith. Currently, they simply did not have any of these thoughts. In the past, they had been like children asking their Father to give them trifles, toys, pennies. Later, they would make large demands on the riches of God’s grace for themselves, the Church, and the world.

Along with the enlargement of their hearts, Jesus promised they would have fullness of joy. What they requested, the Father would grant. And their answers to prayer would fill the cup of joy to the brim. Hope may be delayed for a time but, in the end, they would have unspeakable joy because of the hope that was fulfilled. “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full” (Jn. 16:24). This is what the Apostles actually experienced. They had the fullness of joy in the Holy Spirit, in His work in their own hearts, and in the world. This principle is still sound today. So why, then, is the cause of Christianity not progressing but, rather, one might almost say, declining? We must answer this question by asking others: How many people have enlarged hearts with great visions? How many long for sanctification and illumination, above everything else, with their whole heart? How many earnestly and passionately desire the conversion of those who are lost, long for the unity, peace, and purity of the Church, and the growth of righteousness in society at large? We are limited by our own hearts, not by God.

Near the End of the Discourse
The farewell discourse is now near the end. Jesus had talked with His disciples in the time allotted and told them what they were capable of hearing. He did not think He had provided much instruction for them, or that He had given them very much comfort. He had a very humble opinion about the impact of His words. Thinking back over all of His words, while especially alluding to what had just been said, He remarked, “These things I have spoken to you in figurative language” (Jn. 16:25). From Jesus’ perspective, He had given them a few parables or figurative sayings about the house of many mansions, about the Divine Trinity coming to live with the faithful, about the vine and its branches, and about the maternal sorrows and joys. This completes His discourse.

Jesus was conscious that his disciples could not fully comprehend this discourse, nor any of His past teaching. So, for the third time, He repeated the promise about a time in the future when they would have spiritual illumination. This time He spoke about Himself being the Illuminator and told them that the doctrine of the Father would be the great subject for illumination. “An hour is coming, when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father” (Jn. 16:25b). The hour referred to was the time immediately following the ascension. Shortly afterwards, the disciples would begin to experience the fulfillment of Philip’s prayer, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (Jn. 14:8). They would understand
what their Lord meant about His going to the Father and realize what blessed rewards they would receive. At that time, their exalted Lord would speak to them clearly by the Spirit of truth. He would speak to them about these and all other matters. It would be clear in comparison to His present mystical, hidden style. But it would not be too clear. In other words, it would not contradict statements in other places in the Scriptures that teach all the spiritual knowledge that one gains while on earth is only partial and dim.

**God Hears Prayer**

Jesus still had something else to say about the wonderful time that was coming. It was not something new; it was an old thing said in a new, incredibly kind, and sympathetic way. It had to do with God hearing prayer. In essence He was saying, “When the day comes that you are enlightened, you will not pray less than you have so far; you will pray far more, and you will use My name when you want to be heard. I have already given you hints about this. Once more, let Me assure you that you will be heard. To support what I am saying, I am reminding you that I will be in heaven with the Father and will always be ready to speak a word on your behalf, saying, ‘Father, hear them for My sake, whose name they plead in their petitions.’ But I do not insist on this. For I do not believe you need to be assured of my continued interest in your well-being. Another reason is that My intercession will not be necessary. My Father will not need to be begged to hear you, the men who have been with Me through all of My trials (Lk. 22:28), who have loved Me with all of your hearts, who have believed that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God, while the world at large has regarded Me as an impostor and a blasphemer. Because of the things you have done for His Son, My Father loves you, is grateful to you and, in a sense, considers Himself a debtor to you (Jn. 16:26-27). What heart, what humanity, what poetry is in all of this! Poetry, and also truth - truth that is unbelievably comforting, not only to the Eleven faithful companions of Jesus but to all sincere believers in Him.

**True Faith**

Jesus alluded to the faith of His disciples. He praised it because it was so rare. As He brought His discourse to an end, He used the occasion to declare how true their faith really was. “I came forth from the Father, and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again, and going to the Father” (Jn. 16:28). The disciples only believed the first part of this statement. They didn't understand the second part yet. But Jesus put both parts together like two halves of one whole truth. Either one, by necessity, implies the other. The declaration is most significant for it sums up the history of Christ. It is the substance of the Christian faith. It asserts doctrines that are totally incompatible with a humanistic view of Christ's person and makes His divinity the fundamental article of the creed.

These last words of Jesus burst on the disciples like a star suddenly shining out through a break in the clouds on a dark night. At last! One bright utterance had pierced through the haze of their
Master’s mysterious discourse, and they believed they understood its significance. Jesus had just told them that He came forth from the Father into the world. Now they understood that and, because they believed it, they had become disciples. They were delighted that they had heard something to which they could give a positive response. So, they made the most of it and informed their Master that His understandable, plain speaking, and their intelligent comprehension (which He had told them would not come until sometime in the future) already existed. “Lo,” they said, with an emphasis on the temporal particle, “now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech. Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God” (Jn. 16:29-30).

How impossible it is for children to speak in any other way than as children! Just when the disciples claimed to have knowledge, they betrayed the fact that they were ignorant. The statement that begins with the second “now” (vs. 30) reveals an almost ridiculous misunderstanding about what Jesus had said about their asking Him no questions after their enlightenment. He meant they would not need to ask questions as learners. They thought He meant He had no need to be asked questions as to who He was and from where He came. They had already admitted that Jesus’ claim that He had come down from heaven was true. And as to the inference the disciples made from that statement (“by this we believe” - vs. 30), we admit we cannot make anything of it. After many attempts to understand the logic of the disciples, we must confess that we are totally baffled. The only way we can make sense of these words is to regard the phrase translated by “this” (vs. 30b) as an adverb of time and to have it mean “at this present moment.” The rest of the sentence would then have this meaning: “Meanwhile, whatever additional light may be in store for us in the future, we believe, even now, that You came forth from God.” This translation, however, is not favored, or even suggested, by any of the critics.

The disciples honestly believed what they professed to believe. This was a fact. Jesus had just acknowledged this. But they did not understand what was involved in their belief. They did not comprehend that Jesus’ coming from the Father implied He would go there again. They had not understood that truth at the beginning of the discourse, nor did they understand it when the discourse was finished. They would not understand it until their Lord had left and the Spirit had come. He would make all things clear. As a result of their ignorance, their faith would not carry them through the evil hour that was now very close. The death of their Master, the first step in the process of His departure, would take them by surprise and make them flee panic-stricken like sheep attacked by wolves. Jesus plainly told them this. “Do you now believe?” (Jn. 16:31). He said, “Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me” (Jn. 16:32).
Jesus’ Consolation as He Faces Death

It was a sobering announcement. But no matter how difficult it was, Jesus was not afraid to look death in the face. His heart was at perfect peace because He had two great things to console Him. First, He had a good conscience. He could say, “I have overcome the world” (vs. 33). He had kept His moral integrity as He was confronted by endless trials. The prince of this world could not find any of his spirit in Him and, for that very reason, determined to crucify Him. But by moving in that direction, Satan would not nullify but would, instead, seal Christ’s victory. Defeating Jesus outwardly by using worldly power would become the index and measure of His spiritual conquest. The world knew very well that putting Him to death was only the second best way to defeat Him. His enemies would have felt better if they had succeeded in intimidating or bribing Him to compromise. The ungodly powers of the world always prefer corruption to persecution as a means of getting rid of truth and righteousness. It is only after they fail in their attempts to ruin the conscience and make people sin that they turn to violence.

The second source of consolation for Christ, as He faces death, is the approval of His Father: “I am not alone, because the Father is with Me” (Jn. 16:32b). The Father had been with Him all along. On three critical occasions - at His baptism, on the Mount of Transfiguration, and in the temple a few days before - the Father had encouraged Him with His approving voice. So Jesus still believed that the Father was with Him. He fully expected that He would be with Him when He was deserted by the ones He had chosen and when He went through the awful crisis that was to come soon. He knew He would be with Him when He entered that darkest, bitterest moment, when He could no longer feel His Father’s presence and cried out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Mt. 27:46). He expected His Father to be with Him then, not to save Him from the feeling of desertion (He would not want to be saved from that, for He had to experience the most painful of all sorrows so that He could be like His brothers and be able to minister to them when they were in despair), but to sustain Him under the agonizing affliction and enable Him with the faith of a son to cry out, “My God” even when lamenting about being forsaken.

You, Too, Have Overcome the World

Since Jesus was free from all worry for Himself, He was able to tell His disciples to be encouraged. He was able to do this for the same reason He was without fear - because He had overcome the world. He wanted them to understand that His victory was also theirs. In essence He told them, “Take courage, I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33). Therefore, so have you.” This is His meaning. Socinians would interpret the words differently. They would understand them this way: “I have overcome the world. Therefore, you will be able to as well. Follow My example and courageously fight the battle of righteousness, in spite of your tribulations.” This meaning is good, as far as it goes. It does give courage to people for the battle of life to know that the Lord of glory has been through it before them. It is an inspiring thought to know that He has even been a soldier. For who would not follow the divine Captain of salvation when He leads them through
suffering to glory? So, when we think that this great Soldier has been completely victorious in
the fight, His example becomes even more encouraging. His victory demonstrates that the god
of this world is not all-powerful. Therefore, it proves that anyone has the power to overcome
Satan simply by being willing to bear the cross. As Jesus’ followers look at Him enduring His
sufferings at the hands of sinners until He dies and despising the shame of the crucifixion, they
get more courage to fight the good fight of faith.

Jesus Christ, Our Representative
However, while this is true, it is the smallest part of the truth. The greater fact is that Christ’s
victory is the victory of His followers and insures that they will also conquer. Jesus fought His
battle, not as a private person but as a public figure, as a representative for every person. And
everyone is welcome to claim the benefits of His victory, such as the pardon of sin, the power to
resist the evil one, and admission into the everlasting kingdom. Because Christ has overcome,
we may say to all people, “Take courage.” The victory of the Son of God in His human nature is
an available source of consolation for all who partake of that nature. It is the privilege of every
person (it is also a duty) to acknowledge Christ as his representative in this great battle. “The
Head of every man is Christ.” Everyone who sincerely recognizes this relationship will receive
the benefits of it. If you truly claim to be related to the High Priest, you will receive from Him
mercy and grace to help you in your hour of need. Take heart. We are not isolated units, fighting
our own battles without help or encouragement. We are members of one another and, above all,
Christ is our elder brother. We at least have a human relationship to Him, if we do not have a
regenerate one. Therefore, we ought to look to Him as our Head in all things. As our King, we
ought to lay down the weapons of our rebellion. As our Priest, we ought to receive from Him the
pardon of our sins. As our Lord, we ought to be ruled by His will, defended by His might, and
guided by His grace. If we do this, the accuser of the brothers will have no chance of prevailing
against us. The words of St. John in the Apocalypse will be fulfilled in our own personal history:
“And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their
testimony; and they did not love their life even to death (Rev. 12:11).”
The prayer Jesus offered to His Father at the end of His farewell address to His disciples is unparalleled in its majesty. Whether we consider its contents or the circumstances surrounding this prayer, our determined purpose for years was to read it in solemn, reverent silence without comment. Reluctantly, we now depart from that position. We feel compelled for three reasons: (1) it is our belief that the prayer was not offered up mentally by Jesus but audibly and for the instruction of the eleven men who were present; (2) it was recorded by John for the benefit of the Church in all ages; and (3) when it pleases God to preserve something for our use, we must try to understand it and may attempt to interpret it.

The prayer may be naturally divided into three parts. In the first part, Jesus prays for Himself. In the second, He prays for His disciples. And in the third, He prays for the Church which was to be brought into existence by their preaching.

Jesus Prays for Himself
The prayer Jesus made for Himself (vss. 1-5) contains just one petition with two reasons added. The petition is, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son” (vs. 1). Note the way He makes this petition. It is simple, ordinary, and confidential. “Father!” This is the first word and it occurs six times throughout the prayer, sometimes with, and sometimes without, any descriptive words that give further expression to His character (such as holy Father, vs. 11). This is the name Jesus gives to the One to whom this prayer is addressed. He speaks to God as if He were already in heaven. In fact, He specifically says He is a little farther on: “And I am no more in the world” (vs. 11).

“The hour has come” is a significant phrase. Note how much it expresses! The obedience of the Son, the intimacy between a Father and His Son, and the hope and joy that the Son has. The hour! It is the hour for which He has patiently waited. He has looked forward to it with eager expectation but has never tried to hurry it on. It is the hour that has been determined by His Father. He and His Son have always had an understanding about it. And, besides Them, no one else knows anything about it. That hour has come. Its arrival is suggested by His plea which supports the petition: “You know, Father, how patiently I have waited for what I am now asking for. I have not been weary in well-doing, nor have I avoided the hardships of My earthly existence. Now that My work is finished, grant Me the desire of My heart and glorify Me.”
“Glorify Me.” In other words, “take Me to be with You.” Jesus’ prayer is that His Father would now be pleased to take Him from this world of sin and sorrow to the place of glory He had left behind when He became a man. This is the way He explains what He means when He repeats His request in a more expanded way, as given in the fifth verse: “And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I ever had with Thee before the world was,” i.e., with the glory He enjoyed in the bosom of the Father before His incarnation as God’s eternal Son.

It is obvious that in this prayer for Himself, Jesus does not mention His approaching sufferings. Not long afterwards in Gethsemane He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me!” (Mt. 26:39). But at this time, He does not mention the cup of sorrow. He only speaks about the crown of glory. For now, heaven is in full view. The glories He longs for make Him oblivious to everything else. The ominous clouds which darken the sky and shut out the celestial world do not begin to gather until He has gone out into the night. Yet, even though the coming passion is not mentioned, it is virtually included in the prayer. Jesus knows that He must pass through suffering to glory, and that He must act with dignity throughout the last trial in order to reach His goal. Therefore, the spoken prayer includes this unspoken one: “Carry Me well through the approaching struggle; let Me pass through the dark valley to the realms of light without flinching or fear.”

The first reason attached to the prayer is “that the Son may glorify Thee.” Jesus seeks His own glorification simply as a means to reach a higher objective, namely, the glorification of God the Father. As He connects the two glorifyings as a means and an end, He is only repeating to the Father what He has said to His disciples in His farewell address. He had told them that it was good for them that He should go. No deep impression would be made on the world’s conscience about Jesus or His doctrine until His departure. In essence, He now tells His Father, “It is good for Your glory that I leave the earth and go to heaven. When that time comes, I can promote Your glory in the world better there than by staying here longer.” To strengthen His reason, Jesus then declares that what He desires is to glorify the Father in His office as the Savior of sinners: “even as Thou gavest Him authority over all mankind, that to all whom Thou hast given Him, He may give eternal life” (vs. 2). When we interpret the text in the light of this sentence, the prayer means: “You sent Me into the world to save sinners. Until now, I have constantly been using My time to seek the lost and give eternal life to those who wanted to receive it. But the time has come when this work can best be carried on by My being lifted up. Therefore, exalt Me to Your throne, that from there, as a Prince and a Savior, I may dispense the blessings of salvation.”

It is important to notice how Jesus defines His commission as the Savior. On the one hand, He represents it as one that involves all mankind, while on the other, as one that is especially concerned about a specific group of people. Therefore, He gives His work a general and a specific meaning. According to the teaching of the whole New Testament, Christ is presented as the
Savior of all people. In other texts, He is presented as the Savior of His people, of the elect, of His sheep, of those who believe. We have the responsibility and privilege of imitating this way of speaking about the redeeming work of our Savior. We are to avoid extremes, which means we are not to deny or ignore the universal aspects of Christ’s mission, nor are we to maintain that He is everyone’s Savior, that He will and must eventually save everyone. Jesus avoids both extremes by carefully selecting His words in His intercessory prayer. On the one hand, He speaks about all people as belonging to His jurisdiction as the Savior of all humanity. These are the people into which the leaven will be deposited so that the whole lump may be leavened. On the other hand, there is an obvious restriction that is placed on the universality that is mentioned in the first clause. It is found in the second clause. Those who maintain there will be a universal restoration do not have any support for their position here. They may ask, “If Jesus has power over all mankind, is it possible for Him not to use it to the fullest?” We will not try to evade the question by turning the power they mention into some kind of sovereignty that a mediator has over the whole solely for the sake of a part. We know that the elect are chosen not simply for their own sake, but also for the sake of the whole. They are to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and the leaven to leaven the corruption of the masses. We simply observe that the power of the Savior is not compulsory. People are not saved by force, as if they were machines, but by love and grace as free beings. And there are many people whom Christ would gather under His wings out of His love for them, but they prefer to resist to their own destruction.

The essence of eternal life is defined in the next sentence of the prayer (vs. 3). It is knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ His messenger. This knowledge must be understood comprehensively. It includes faith, love, and worship, with the emphasis lying on the objects of this knowledge (i.e., God and Christ). In this passage the Christian religion is described as being opposed to paganism with its many gods and to Judaism which believed in the one true God but rejected the claims of Jesus to be the Christ. It is also described in such a way that excludes Arian and Socinian views of the person of Christ (Editor’s note: Arianism, a fourth-century heresy, taught that Jesus was not eternally begotten of the Father. Arius, the instigator of this false teaching, maintained that the Son was created by God the Father and, therefore, had a beginning. Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) maintained that Jesus was a mere man who was sent into the world by a gracious God, and only through him could salvation be secured). In John 17:3, the names of God and of Jesus are put on the same level as objects of religious worship. An importance is assigned to Jesus that is incompatible with any teaching that says Jesus was just a mere man. For eternal life cannot depend on knowing any man, no matter how good or wise he is. The most that can be said about the benefit that is derived from this kind of knowledge is that knowing Jesus as a man would be helpful for knowing God better. But the same thing could be said about Moses, Paul, John, and all of the Apostles. If one knows them better, he can know God better.
It might seem strange that Jesus, as He addressed His Father, thought it was necessary to explain eternal life. Some people, to get rid of this difficulty, have maintained that the sentence is an explanatory reflection that has been interwoven into the prayer by John. However, the words were perfectly appropriate for Jesus to speak. The first clause (“that they may know Thee the only true God”) is a confession by the man Jesus of His own faith in God His Father as the supreme object of knowledge. And the whole sentence is really an argument that supports the prayer: “Glorify Thy Son.” The power of the declaration lies in what it implies about how much people do not know about the Father and His Son. It is as if Jesus said, “Father, You know that eternal life consists in knowing You and Me. Look around. Notice how few possess such knowledge. The pagan world does not know You; it worships idols. The Jewish world is equally ignorant of You in spirit and in truth. For, while boasting that they know You, they reject Me. The whole world is covered with a dark veil of ignorance and superstition. Take Me out of it - not because I am weary of its sin and darkness, but that I can become a sun to it. Before now, My efforts to illuminate the darkness have had some small success. Grant Me a position from which I can send forth light over all the earth.”

But why does the Savior call Himself Jesus Christ? In the whole Gospel history, this is the only time He does it. Some people see in this compound name, which was common during the Apostolic period, another proof that this verse is an addition to His original prayer. Again, however, there is no reason for holding this view. The style Jesus uses to refer to Himself, perfectly fits the purpose He wants to accomplish. He is pleading with the Father to take Him to glory so that He may more effectively propagate the true religion. What would be more appropriate, then, than to speak about Himself objectively by using the very name by which He would be known among those who profess the true religion?

The second reason Jesus offers in support of His prayer is this: The service for which He was chosen had been faithfully accomplished. Now He claims its reward: “I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished (finished) the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, glorify Thou Me…” (vss. 4-5a). The great Servant of God is not only referring to the past but to His coming death which has already been endured in His intent to go through with it. So, the “I have finished” clause of the prayer means the same thing as “It is finished” which was spoken from the cross (Jn. 19:30). And what He says about Himself is true. No one else could make that declaration without bringing dishonor on himself. His words are not exaggerated or boastful but are sober and humble, indicating that He had a blameless conscience both before God and before men (see Acts 24:16). Nor can we say that the statement, though true, was spontaneous and uncalled for. It was necessary for Jesus to make that declaration. Though what He said was well-known to God, it was important to proclaim it in the hearing of the Eleven, and to the whole Church through their record, so their faith could be strengthened. The basis on which His claim to be rewarded with glory rested on this. For just as our faith and hope in God are based on
the fact that Jesus Christ was able to make this declaration, so they are confirmed by His actually making it. He notes that He has kept His covenant of works. To us, it is a seal of the covenant of grace and serves the same purpose as the Lord’s Supper.

**Jesus Prays for His Disciples**

After Jesus offered this brief petition for Himself, He proceeded to pray for His disciples for a much longer period of time. The rest of His prayer is concerned mostly with them. From the 6th to the 20th verse, they are His only concern. He makes the transition with a special declaration. He applies the general statement of the previous sentence (“I have finished the work”) to that specific aspect of Christ’s personal work that had to do with the training of these men. “I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world” (vs. 6). After this introductory statement, there is a short description of the men He is about to pray for. Jesus indicates His disciples had good character. First, He acknowledges that they were good when He got them and was extremely careful not to exaggerate the importance of the work He did in training them to be Apostles: “Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me” (vs. 6b). They were godly, devout men, God-taught, God-drawn, and God-given. Then He affirms that since they had been with Him, they had maintained the same character they had when they joined Him: “They have kept Thy word” (vs. 6c). Finally, He confirms that the men whom His Father had given Him had been true believers in Him. They had received all of His words as the very truth of God and had received Him as the One who had been sent into the world by God (vss. 7-8; see Lk. 22:28-29). Here, truly, are generous words about His disciples who, though sincere and devoted to their Master, made many mistakes (as we know) and learned very slowly.

After Jesus generously praises His humble companions, He indicates His intention to pray for them: “I ask on their behalf” (vs. 9a). But He does not pray for them right away. He must preface His prayer with some other words to give it more emphasis. First, the men He prays for are singled out for the moment and are the only ones on whom He focuses His attention. “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world” (vs. 9). The reason Jesus makes this statement is not, of course, to suggest that He is excluding the world from His concern. His purpose is not exclusion but concentration in order to eventually include the world. He wanted His Father to bestow His special honor on this small group of men, for the prosperity of Christianity is tied up with them. He prays for them as a dying mother might pray exclusively for her children. It is not that she is indifferent to everyone else. It is simply natural that her all-consuming concern would be for her family. Jesus prays for them as the precious fruit of His life’s labor, the hope for the future, the founders of the Church, the Noah’s ark of the Christian faith, the missionaries who will carry the truth to the whole world; praying for them alone, but for the world’s sake. The best thing He can do for the world right now is to ask the Father to take care of them.
We can now guess what Jesus intends to ask for the men He has singled out. He wants His Father to care for them now that He is about to leave them. But before He makes His request, He offers two reasons why it should be granted. The first is expressed in these words: "They are Thine; and all things that are Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine; and I have been glorified in them" (vss. 9-10). In essence, this means: "It is Your business and Your interest to take care of these men. They are Yours; You gave them to Me. Take care of Your own. It is true that since they became My disciples, they have been Mine. But that makes no difference. They are still Yours. For between Me and You, there is no distinction between meum and tuum (Mine and Thine). Then I will be glorified in them. From now on, My cause, My name, and My teachings are to be identified with them. If they fail, My interest will be shipwrecked. Therefore, since You value the honor of Your Son, take care of these men." The other reason why the request He is about to offer should be granted is this: "And I am no more in the world" (vs. 11). The Master, about to leave the earth, commends to His Father’s care those whom He is leaving behind without a leader.

Now comes the prayer for the Eleven. It is offered with the appropriate seriousness when He emphatically addresses the Hearer of prayer: “Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are” (vs. 11). The word holy suits the purpose of the prayer, which is that the disciples may be kept pure in faith and practice, separate from all existing errors and sin, so that they may eventually be salt to the corrupt world in which their Lord is about to leave them. The prayer itself presents two truths. The first is that the disciples may be kept in the name of the Father which Jesus has manifested to them. This means He is praying that they may continue to believe what He had taught them about God and become His instruments for spreading the knowledge about the true God and the true religion throughout the earth. The second is, that they may be one. By this He means that they may continue to love one another and be kept in the faith of the divine name. They must be separate from the world but not alienated from one another (vs. 11). Jesus asks for these two things, truth and love. These are vitally important. Truth is the badge which separates His Church from the world. Love is the bond which unites believers of the truth into a holy fellowship which bears witness to the truth. The Church should always consider these two things as of equal importance. Love is not to be sacrificed for truth, thereby dividing those who ought to be one, by insisting on a testimony that is too exact and detailed. Nor is truth to be sacrificed for love, thereby making the Church a very broad, all-inclusive body without a purpose or raison d'être (reason for existence) and having no truth to guard and teach, or testimony to bear.

Having commended His disciples to His Father’s care, Jesus then gives an account of His own stewardship as their Master and maintains that He has faithfully kept them in divine truth (vs. 12). He claims that He has fulfilled His responsibilities to them, even to Judas. In his case, He acknowledges that Judas would perish but, at the same time, does not blame Himself. His mentioning the false disciple shows how conscientious He is about giving an account of His work.
It is almost as if He had been asked the question: “What have You to say about this man?” In essence, He replies: “The Scripture had to be fulfilled. The son of perdition is not lost through any failing on My part” (vs. 12). We know all too well how much Jesus was entitled to make this declaration.

In the next part of the prayer (vss. 14-20), Jesus defines what He means when He asks that His disciples may be kept. In doing this, He virtually offers new reasons why the petition should be heard. He commends them to His Father's care because they are the guardians of truth and are worth keeping if for no other reason. And they need to be kept because the world dislikes the truth so much (vs. 14). By the word *keeping* He does not mean they ought to be removed from the world but preserved from the moral evil in the world. Their presence there as salt is necessary. And their purity is needed just as much so that the salt might not exist without flavor and virtue. He did not intend for this explanation to be heard by His Father alone. It was also for the ears of His disciples. He wanted them to understand that there were two things that were to be equally avoided - conformity to the world and weariness of the world. They must abide in the truth, and they must abide in the world for the truth’s sake. They must remember, for their consolation, that when they felt the world’s hatred the most, they were doing the most good, and that the weight of their cross was the measure of their influence.

The “keeping” Jesus requested of His Father for His own men (vs. 11) is just the continuation and growth of an existing moral condition. He does not need to ask His Father now to separate His disciples from the world. They are already separate. This was true when they first joined His company. And it is still true of them. In fairness to them, their Master is careful to state this twice in this portion of His prayer. He maintained, “...they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (vs. 14,16). With these words, He put them on the same level with Himself with His characteristic praise, and not without truth. For the people He was describing, though they had many faults, were not worldly. They did not care for the three things the world considers important - riches, honors, and pleasures. The words of eternal life were all they were concerned about.

Yet, even though they were sincere, the Eleven still needed not only “keeping” but *refining*. Therefore, their Master went on to pray for their sanctification in the truth. He had in mind, not only their perseverance, growth, and maturity in grace as private Christians but especially their spiritual preparation for the office of the apostleship. Consequently, He continues in the next breath to mention their apostolic work, thereby demonstrating what was most important to Him: “As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (vs. 18). His intense desire is for them to be equipped for their mission. Therefore, He proceeds to speak about His own sanctification as a means to their sanctification as if His own ministry was subordinate to theirs. “And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth” (vs. 19). Remarkable words! Their meaning is obscure and has been debated by
many, but in them we may at least discover with confidence a clear demonstration of humility and love. Jesus speaks here like a parent who lives for the sake of His children. He is personally committed to their moral training, denies Himself pleasure for their benefits, and makes it His primary purpose and concern to form their characters, complete their education, and equip them for the duties of the position which they are destined to fill.

Jesus Prays for the Church
The rest of the prayer (with the exception of the two closing sentences) concerns the Church at large (vss. 20-24), that is, those who would believe in Christ through the Apostles’ words, which were either spoken by their own lips or contained in their writings. What Jesus desires for believers is partly to be inferred. For when He says, “I do not ask in behalf of these alone” (vs. 20), He suggests that He wants the people whom He will pray for next to receive the same things He has already asked for His disciples: that they be preserved in the truth, kept from the evil in the world, and sanctified by the truth. The one blessing He specifically requests for the Church is unity. His heart’s desire for those who believe in Him is “that they may all be one” (vs. 21). His goal for the Church’s unity is very high. The divine example for it is the unity that exists between the Father and the Son. And the basis for it is the same divine unity: “one as we are one, and in us who are one,” bound together as closely and harmoniously by the common name into which they are baptized and by which they are called” (vs. 21).

This unity is desirable for its own sake. Jesus especially desires this because of the moral power which it will give the Church as an institution for propagating the Christian faith: “that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me” (vss. 21,23). Now this purpose cannot be accomplished unless the unity of the believers is, in some way, observable. A unity which is not observable can have no effect on the world. It would be like a candle under a bushel that gives no light. Isn’t that true? Not really. It actually ceases to be a light and goes out. There can be no doubt, therefore, that our Lord had a visible unity in mind. The only question is how it is to be attained. The first and most obvious way is by uniting in one church organization with the appropriate means for representing the whole body. This body would then express its united mind, such as the ecumenical councils did in the earlier centuries. This was the most complete manifestation of unity and was observable in the primitive Church.

In our day, the Church is divided by doctrine and incompatible forms of church government. Consequently, union on a large scale is not possible. We must resort to other methods by which we may express unity. One of the methods that might be tried is that of confederation, where independent church organizations are united like the United States of America, or like the Greek republics which found unity in the legislative and judicial assembly called the Amphictyonic Council. But whatever you think about that, one thing is certain: The unity of believers in Christ must become more apparent if the Church is to fulfill her responsibility as a holy nation that has
been called out of darkness to embody the virtues of Him whose name she bears and win for Him the world’s praise and faith. It is certainly true that the unity of the Church does find expression in its Creed. We do not mean the creeds of this or that denomination but the Creed within the creeds that expresses the universal orthodoxy of Christendom and embraces the fundamentals (and only the fundamentals) of the Christian faith. There is a Church within all the churches which holds this Creed as its main value. Everything else in the hearts of its members is only the husk containing the precious kernel. But the existence of that Church is a fact that can only be known by faith, not by sight. The world does not feel its influence very much. And no matter how thankful we may be for the presence of this holy commonwealth in the midst of ecclesiastical organizations, we cannot accept this as the fulfillment of the ideal which the Savior had in mind when He spoke these words, “That they may all be one” (Jn. 17:21).

In the next two sentences (vss. 22-23), Jesus enjoys lingering over this prayer - repeating, expanding, reinforcing the petition using language that is too deep for us to fully understand. However, He clearly communicates the truth that without unity the Church can neither glorify Christ, commend Christianity as divine, nor have the glory of Christ abiding on Her. Upon reflection, this is a truth which is reasonable. Arguing is not a spiritual thing, and it does not need any divine influence to cause it. Anybody can argue. And the world (who understands that) has little respect for a quarreling Church. But the world opens its eyes in wonder at a community in which peace and harmony prevail, saying, “Here is something out of the ordinary - selfishness and self-will have been rooted out of human nature. Nothing but God’s influence could overcome the centrifugal forces which tend to separate people from each other.”

The endearing name Father, the first word of the next sentence, marks the beginning of a new, final paragraph in the prayer of the great High Priest (vs. 24). At this point, Jesus looks forward to the end of things and prays for the final consummation of God’s purpose for the Church - that the Church militant may become the Church triumphant; that the body of Christ, though imperfectly sanctified on earth, may become perfectly sanctified and glorified in heaven. They will be with Him (for that is where He will be), and they will behold His glory and be changed into the same image by the Spirit of God.

Jesus’ Final Comments
Then comes the conclusion. Jesus returns from the distant future to the present and begins to reflect on the company assembled in the room where they were having supper - He and His disciples - rather than on the Church at large. These two closing sentences serve the same purpose in Christ’s prayer that the phrase for Christ’s sake serves in ours. They contain two requests: (1) the service of the people He is praying for, and (2) the righteousness of the Being that is prayed to. The last one comes first and is found in the title O righteous Father. The services, merits, and claims of Jesus and His disciples are specifically mentioned as matters that
the righteous Father considers important. The world's ignorance of God is alluded to in order to enhance the value of the acknowledgment which He has received from His Son and His Son's companions. That ignorance explains why Jesus thinks it is important to say, “I have known Thee.” Even His knowledge was not something to be taken for granted in such a world. The man Jesus had to make an effort to keep God in His knowledge - just as much as He had to keep Himself unspotted from the world's corruptions. It was just as hard for Him to know and confess God as Father in a world that in a thousand ways practically denied that Fatherhood as to live a life of love in the midst of many temptations to put self first. The truth is the two problems were really one. To be light in the midst of darkness, love in the midst of selfishness, holiness in the midst of depravity, are in effect the same thing.

While Jesus is pleading His own merit, He does not forget the claims of His disciples. In essence, He says this about them: “They have known Thee second-hand through Me. I have known Thee first-hand by direct intuition” (vs. 25). Not content with these remarks, He elaborates on the importance of these men as objects of divine care. He indicates that they are worth keeping, that they already possess the knowledge of God's name. They are destined (before long) to know it even more perfectly so they will be able to make it known as an object of praise to others. God will be able to love them even as He loved His own Son as He was in the world faithfully serving His heavenly Father. “I have made Thy name known to them, and will make it known; that the love wherewith Thou didst love Me may be in them, and I in them” (vs. 26). Wonderful words to be uttered about mere earthen vessels!
Section 1 - “All The Disciples Left Him and Fled.”
*Matthew 26:36-41,55,56,69-75; John 18:15-18*

From the room where they had eaten supper (where we have spent so much time), we go into the world outside to witness the behavior of the Eleven in the great and final crisis. The passages we are looking at describe the part they played in the solemn events that are associated with their Master’s end. Sadly, that part was an unheroic one. Their faith, love, and principles all gave way before the instincts of fear, shame, and self-preservation. The best of the disciples, the three who were the most reliable and selected by Jesus to keep Him company in the garden of Gethsemane, totally failed to provide the service that was expected of them. While their Lord was experiencing His agony, they fell asleep, just as they had done before on the Mount of Transfiguration. So even the hand-picked men proved that they were only raw recruits, unable to shake off the drowsiness while they were on duty as lookouts. “What! You men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?” Then, when the enemy appeared, both these three and the other eight ran away panic-stricken. “All the disciples left Him and fled” (Mt. 26:56b). One of them who thought He was bolder than his brothers not only left Him, but denied His beloved Master, declaring with an oath, “I do not know the man!” (Mt. 26:74).

The conduct of the disciples at this crisis in their history was very weak and unmanly. Naturally, two questions arise: 1) “How should they have acted? and 2) Why did they act as they did (i.e., what were the causes of their failure?).

**How Should They Have Acted?**

Consider the first question. When we try to formulate a distinctive course of action that was demanded by faithfulness, it is not readily apparent at what point the disciples were at fault (of course, Peter is the exception). What could they do when their Lord was arrested but run away? Offer resistance? Jesus had positively forbidden that immediately before they seized Him. When the band of armed men appeared, “and when those who were around Him saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, shall we strike with the sword?’” (Lk. 22:49). Without waiting for a reply, one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. John tells us that the fighting disciple was Simon Peter. He had brought a sword with him from the room where they had supper to Gethsemane (there was a second sword there also; see Lk. 22:38). Peter was thinking it might be needed and fully intended to use it if necessary. Though later he proved himself to be a coward among the servants and maids, he was no such coward in the garden. He used his weapon boldly, perhaps even skillfully, and did some damage, though thankfully none
that was deadly. When it happened, Jesus intervened to prevent further bloodshed, speaking words that, as recorded, clearly established a policy of non-resistance. “Put your sword back into its place,” He said to Peter. Then He added this reason: “for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (Mt. 26:52). It was as if He was saying, “In this kind of warfare, we are going to receive the worst of it.” Then He hinted at more noble reasons for non-resistance than mere considerations of prudence or expediency. “Do you think,” He asked the warlike disciple, “that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?” (Mt. 26:53-54). He could confront human force by a superior, divine, celestial force if He chose to. But He did not choose this way, for to overpower His enemies would be to defeat His own purpose in coming to the world. And that purpose was to conquer, not by physical force, but by truth and love and godlike patience - by drinking the cup which His Father had put into His hands, even though it was bitter to His flesh and blood (cf. Jn. 18:11).

These words spoken in Gethsemane harmonize with the statements Jesus made on the same subject when He left the room where they had eaten together (Lk. 22:35-38). In Luke's letter, these statements seem to point to a policy that is the very opposite of non-resistance. Jesus seems to say that the great work and duty of the hour, for all who are on His side, is to obtain swords for themselves. The need is so urgent that whoever wants a weapon must sell his clothes to buy one. But the very emphasis with which He speaks demonstrates that His words are not to be taken literally. It is very easy to see what He means. He uses graphic language to let His disciples know that the situation is serious. “Now,” He would say, “now is the day. In fact, the battle is happening right now. If My kingdom is of this world, as you have thought, now is the time for fighting - not dreaming. Now the situation has come to a head, and you need to have all of your resources. Equip yourselves with shoes, purse, and knapsack. Above all, make sure you have your swords and warlike courage.”

The disciples did not understand their Lord’s meaning. They gave a stupid, ordinary interpretation to this part of His farewell discourse (like they had done with so many other parts). So, with ridiculous seriousness, they said, “Lord, look, here are two swords” (Lk. 22:38). The foolish remark provoked a response which should have opened their eyes and kept Peter from carrying the matter so far that he actually took one of the swords with him. “It is enough,” Jesus said, probably with a sad smile on His face as He thought about the ridiculous simplicity of those dear childish and childlike men: “It is enough” (Lk. 22:38). Two swords. Actually they are enough, but only for the one who does not intend to fight at all. What were two swords for twelve men against a hundred offensive weapons? The very thought of fighting in those circumstances was absurd. It only had to be broadly stated in order to appear to be an absurdity.
So, the disciples were not called on to fight for their Master to keep Him from being delivered over to the Jews. What else, then, should they have done? Was it their responsibility to suffer with Him and to go with Him to prison and death? This would have certainly carried out the intentions that Peter had mentioned. But this was not required of them either. When Jesus surrendered Himself into the hands of His captors, He suggested that they should let His followers go on their way and only take Him into custody (Jn. 18:8). He did not do this simply out of compassion for them. As the Captain of salvation, He was making the best arrangements for Himself and for the interests of His kingdom. For it was just as necessary for the disciples to live as for Him to die. He gave Himself up to death in order that there might be a gospel to preach. He was concerned about the safety of His disciples in order that there might be men to preach it. It is readily apparent, then, that it was not the disciples’ responsibility to expose themselves to danger. Their duty lay, instead, in taking care of their lives in order to be used in the future.

If the disciples, then, did not fail in fighting for or suffering with their Lord, where were the Eleven at fault? The answer lies in their lack of faith. “Believe in God, and believe in Me,” Jesus had said to them at the beginning of His farewell address. And at this critical hour, they did neither. They did not believe that everything would end well for themselves nor for their Master. Nor did they believe that God would provide for their safety without any sacrifice of principle, or even dignity, on their part. The only confidence they had was in the swiftness of their feet. If they had possessed faith in God and in Jesus, they would have witnessed their Lord's arrest without being discouraged, for they would have been assured of both His return and of their own safety. Some would have followed the officers of justice to see what happened. The others, squeamish about disturbing and painful situations, would have retired quietly to their homes until the tragedy was over. But they lacked faith. They neither calmly followed nor calmly retired. Rather, faithlessly and shamefully, they forsook their Lord and fled. The sin was not in the outward act so much as in their inward state of mind. They fled in unbelief and despair as men whose hope was shattered. They fled from a Man whose cause was lost and whom God had abandoned to His enemies.

**Why Did The Disciples Act As They Did?**
We have determined the point at which the disciples were at fault. Now we have to look into the causes of their wrong behavior. At the very outset, we remember that Jesus anticipated the failure of His followers. He did not count on their being faithful; He expected them to desert Him. When Peter offered to follow Him wherever He might go, Jesus told him that before the cock crowed the next morning he would deny Him three times. At the close of the farewell address, He told all of the disciples that they would abandon Him. On the way to the Mount of Olives, He repeated the statement in this way: “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered’” (Mt. 26:31).
On all these occasions, the tone He used was more prophetic than reproachful. He expected His disciples to be panic-stricken, just as anyone would expect sheep to flee when a wolf appeared. Jesus was lenient with them and, from His attitude, we should infer that the sin of the disciples was one of weakness. This is something we can be sure of. We know it is true because of the words He used to address the three drowsy disciples in Gethsemane. “Keep watching and praying,” He said to them, “that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41). The kind judgment Jesus expressed was pronounced especially for the failure of Peter, James, and John in the garden. But it clearly applies to the behavior of all the disciples (even Peter’s denial) throughout the terrible crisis. Jesus regarded the Eleven as men who were totally committed to Him but who were likely to fall, because of the weakness of their flesh, when they were exposed to sudden temptation.

But what do we mean by the weakness of the flesh? Instinctively loving life, dreading danger, fearing man? No. These instincts were a part of the Apostles throughout their lives. But they did not ever lead (except in one situation) to misconduct again. What was weak? Not only the flesh, but also the willing spirit. Their spiritual character at this time was deficient in certain areas which typically give steadiness to the good impulses of the heart and mastery over the weaknesses of human nature. The missing elements of strength were: forethought, clear perceptions of truth, self-knowledge, and the discipline of experience.

Because they lacked forethought, it so happened that the seizure of their Lord took the Eleven by surprise. This may seem hard to believe since Christ had given them so many hints about His approaching death after the institution of the Supper, the farewell address, the reference to the traitor, the prophetic announcement about their own frailty, and the discourse about the sword, which was like a trumpet calling all to battle. Yet there can be no doubt that this was a fact. The Eleven went out to Gethsemane without any definite idea about what was coming. These raw recruits actually did not know that they were on a march to the battlefield. The three disciples asleep in the garden is sufficient proof of this. Had the three “guards” been thoroughly impressed with the belief that the enemy was nearby, they would not have fallen asleep, even though they were tired and sad. Fear would have kept them awake. But understand this: “If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into” (Mt. 24:43).

The failure of the disciples at the final crisis was also due in part to the lack of clear perceptions of truth. They did not understand the doctrine about Christ. They believed their Master was the Christ, the Son of the living God. But their faith was wrapped around a false theory of Messiah’s mission and career. In their theory, the cross had no place. As long as the cross was only talked about, their theory remained firmly rooted in their minds. The words of their Master were quickly forgotten. But when the cross finally came, when the things which Jesus foretold began
to be fulfilled, their theory went down like a tree suddenly smitten by a whirlwind, carrying the
ivy of their faith with it. From the moment Jesus was seized, all that remained of their faith was
simply a regret that they had been mistaken: “We were hoping that it was He who was going to
redeem Israel” (Lk. 24:21a). How could anyone act heroically in these circumstances?

A third radical defect in the character of the disciples was ignorance. The person who knows
his weaknesses may become strong even at the weak points. But the one who does not know his
weaknesses finds it difficult to be strong at any point. Now Jesus’ followers did not know their
weaknesses. They credited themselves with a faithfulness and courage that only existed in their
imaginations. Every one of them adopted Peter’s sentiment as their own: “Even if I must die
with You, I will not deny You” (Mt. 26:35). Surprise! They did not know how much fear of man
was in them, how much pitiful cowardice they had in the presence of danger. Of course, when
danger actually came, the usual consequence of self-conscious courage followed. All of these
bold-hearted disciples forsook their Master and fled.

The last, but not the least, cause of weakness in the disciples was their inexperience with situa-
tions like the ones they were having to go through now. Experience in war is one great cause for
the coolness and courage of veteran soldiers in the middle of danger. A practical acquaintance
with the dangers of military life makes them callous and fearless. But Christ’s disciples were not
yet veterans. They were only entering into their first engagement. Until now, they had experi-
enced only the kind of trials that fall on the rawest recruits. They had been asked to leave home,
friends, fishing boats, and everything on earth to follow Jesus. But these initial hardships do not
make a soldier - nor this, nor the discipline demanded by the drill sergeant, nor putting on a
uniform. Behold the green, soft young man with his bright uniform when he is brought face to
face with the stark reality of battle. His knees knock, his heart grows sick, perhaps he even faints
and is carried to the rear, unable to take any part in the fight. Poor lad - pity him, do not scorn
him. He may turn out to be a brave soldier one day. The bravest of soldiers probably do not feel
very heroic the first time they are under fire.

These observations help us understand how it happened that the little flock was scattered when
Jesus their Shepherd was arrested. The explanation is really proof that the disciples were sheep,
not yet ready to shepherd people. This being the case, we are not surprised at the leniency of
Jesus which we have already mentioned. No one expects sheep to do anything other than flee
when the wolf comes. Cowardly fear is only severely detested in shepherds. Bearing this in mind,
we will more readily forgive Peter for denying his Lord in one unguarded moment (Mt. 26:69-75)
than for his cowardice at Antioch some years later. Then he gave the cold shoulder to his
Gentile brothers because he feared the Jewish people from Jerusalem (Gal. 2:11-12). Peter was a
shepherd then, and it was his responsibility to lead the sheep or even to carry them against their
wills into the wide green pastures of Christian liberty. Instead, he tamely followed those who
demonstrated that they were just lambs in Christ’s flock. His actual behavior was very blame-
worthy and very wrong. In reality, he was not leading; he was led. And as an Apostle, he enjoyed
the reputation and influence of a chief shepherd. Therefore, he had no option but either to lead
or mislead. He misled. Even Barnabas was influenced by his duplicity (Gal. 2:13). It is a serious
thing for the Church when those who are shepherds in office and influence are really sheep in
opinion and heart; leaders in name, led in fact.
Section II - Sifted as Wheat
This part of the conversation at the supper table is important because it shows us Jesus’ perspective on the crisis through which His disciples were about to pass. Technically, it is an address to Peter; but it is really an appropriate word for all of them. This is evident because the plural pronoun is used when Jesus speaks directly to Peter. “Satan,” says Jesus, “has demanded permission to sift you” (plural, not singular) - you, Simon, and also all of your brothers with you. The same idea arises when Jesus tells Peter to use his fall (his denial) to benefit his brothers. The brothers, of course, are not only the other disciples that were then present but everyone who would believe. The Apostles, however, are not to be excluded from the brotherhood. They were also to benefit from Peter’s experience. In fact, they are probably the main people who were the first to benefit.

Look at Jesus’ words in this light: They expressed His insights on the nature of the crisis that the Apostles were going to experience in the future. Note three things in what He said.

A Time for Sifting
First, Jesus regards the crisis as a time for sifting the disciples. Satan, the accuser of the brethren, was skeptical about their faithfulness and integrity, just like he was of Job and all good people. He intended to sift them like wheat and hoped they would turn out to be nothing more than chaff and become apostates like Judas. At the very least, he wanted them to have a miserable and scandalous downfall. In this respect, the final crisis we are studying now was like the one at Capernaum the year before. That also was a time for sifting Christ’s disciples. The chaff and wheat were separated then, and it was discovered that the chaff was out of proportion to the wheat. “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (Jn. 6:66).

But even though there is a general similarity between the two crises - the minor and the major one - an important difference should be noticed. In the minor crisis (the one that occurred after the feeding of the 5,000), the chosen few were the pure wheat, and the fickle multitude was the chaff. In the major one, they are both wheat and chaff. The sifting is not between man and man, but between the good and the bad, the precious and the vile, in the same man. The hearts of the Eleven faithful ones are going to be searched and all of their hidden weaknesses exposed. The old man must be separated from the new. The vain, self-confident, self-willed, impetuous Simon son of Jonas must be separated from the devoted, chivalrous, heroic, rock-like Peter.
The distinction between the two crises implies that the last one was better suited to search their hearts in a deeper way. Upon reflection, it is obvious that this is true. Consider how different the situations were for the disciples! In the minor crisis, the multitude goes away, but Jesus stays; in the major one, Jesus is taken from the Eleven, and they are left like sheep without a shepherd. There is a great difference between these two. It sufficiently explains the difference in the behavior of the same men on the two occasions. Without a doubt, it was very disappointing and disheartening to see the mass of people, who had recently followed their Master with enthusiasm, dispersing like a crowd that had just seen a play or movie. But while the Master remained, their hearts would not be broken by the defection of phony disciples. They loved Jesus for who He was, not for His popularity or for any other reason. He was their Teacher who could give them the bread of eternal life, and this was what they were looking for. They were not interested in the bread that perishes. He was their Head, their Father, their elder Brother, their spiritual Husband, and they would cling to Him no matter what. Their faithfulness would be like that of a son, brother, or wife. He meant more to them than the whole world. If their future looked bleak even with Him, where could they go that would be any better? They had no choice but to stay where they were.

So, faithfully and courageously they remained with Jesus. What kept them unshakable was their sincerity, a clear understanding of the alternatives, and a fervent love for their Lord. But notice this! When it is not the multitude but Jesus Himself who leaves them, what are they supposed to do? (He is not really forsaking them but is torn away from them by the strong hand of worldly power). Now they can ask Peter’s question, “To whom shall we go?” and become discouraged about the answer. Jesus’ presence was their comfort during a trying and discouraging time. Even when His doctrine was mysterious and His behavior could not be understood, He meant more to them than everything else in the world. But He is ripped from their side. Now they are utterly despondent - without a Master, a champion, a guide, a friend, a father. It gets worse. In losing Him, they not only lose their best friend, but their faith. They had no trouble believing Jesus was the Christ even though the multitude deserted Him. They truly thought this apostasy happened because of ignorance, shallowness, and insincerity. But how can they believe in the messiahship of someone who is led away to prison instead of seated on a throne? Instead of being crowned a king, He is on His way to be executed as a felon. With Jesus being taken away from them in this way, they have lost their Christ as well. The unbelieving world asks them, “Where is your God?” - and they are not able to reply.

The following two thoughts summarize the difference between the two “siftings”: “Christ and we against the world” and “Christ in the hands of the world, and we are left all alone.” The results of the sifting process were also different. In the first one, it caused a separation to occur between those who were sincere and those who were insincere. In the final one, it exposed weakness even
in those who were sincere. On the earlier occasion, the men stood firm; on the last one, they fled panic-stricken, looking out for their own safety without maintaining their dignity. In at least one case, it was done with shameful disregard for the truth. Note how weak even good men are without faith! With faith, no matter how unrefined or badly informed, you can overcome the world. Without the kind of faith that consciously places God right beside you, you have no chance. Satan will get possession of you and sift you, cause you to lie like Abraham, pretend that you are mad like David, or disguise yourself and swear falsely and profanely like Peter. No one can tell how far you will fall if you lose faith in God. The just live justly and nobly, and only by their faith.

_The Sifting: Dangerous, but not Deadly_

Secondly, Jesus regards the crisis through which His disciples are going to pass as one that will not be deadly to their faith, though it will be dangerous. His hope is that even if they fall, they will not fall away. Though the sun of their faith is eclipsed, it will not be extinguished. He even has this hope for Peter and makes sure that He prevents a major catastrophe. “I have prayed for you, that your faith doesn’t fail.” And the result was just as He expected. The disciples demonstrated that they were weak in the final crisis, but not wicked. Satan tripped them up, but he did not enter into them nor possess them. In this respect, they differed _toto cælo_ (by the whole heavens; diametrically opposite) from Judas, who not only lost his faith but threw away his love. He abandoned his Lord, defected to the enemy, and became an instrument for accomplishing their wicked purposes. The Eleven, at their very worst, continued faithful to their Master in heart. They neither committed, nor were they capable of committing, acts of disloyalty. Even in fleeing, they identified themselves with the losing side.

But what about Peter? Was he not an exception to this statement? Well, he certainly did more than fail in his faith. And we have no desire to gloss over the seriousness of his offence. Rather, we see it as a sobering illustration of how close the best men may be brought to the worst. At the same time, it needs to be said that there is a vast difference between denying Christ among the servants of the high priest and betraying Him into the hands of the high priest for a sum of money. The latter act is the crime of a traitor who has no principles. The former might be committed by someone who would be true to his master on every occasion except when his personal interests seemed to be at stake. In denying Jesus, Peter thought he was saving himself (by disguising himself) without causing any damage to his Lord. His act resembled Abraham when he circulated the lying story about his wife being his sister in order to protect himself from the violence of unprincipled strangers. That was certainly a very base, selfish act, and most unworthy of the father of all the faithful. Peter’s act was not less corrupt and selfish, but also not more. Both were acts of weakness rather than of wickedness. Very few people would have the right to throw stones at Abraham or Peter. Even those who act like heroes on great occasions will, at other times, act in an unworthy manner. Many people hide and misrepresent their convictions at the dinner table but would boldly proclaim their feelings from the pulpit or some platform. When
they stand in the place where Christ's servants are expected to speak the truth, they bravely draw their swords to defend their Lord. But when they associate with others who are in the same socio-economic group that they are in, too often they say, "I do not know the man!" Therefore, Peter's offence, even though serious, is certainly not uncommon. It is virtually committed by multitudes of people who are totally incapable of public and deliberate treason against truth and God. The disciple who made the error was much more remarkable in his repentance than in his sin. Of all the people who virtually deny Christ when they commit acts of weakness, how few, like him, go out and weep bitterly!

Why didn't Peter fall like Judas, totally and irrevocably? It was due, in part, to a radical difference between the two men. Peter was, at heart, a child of God. Judas, in the core of his being, had been a child of Satan all along. Therefore, we may say that Peter could not have sinned like Judas sinned, nor could Judas have repented as Peter repented. Yet, while we say this, we must not forget that Peter was kept from falling away by special grace that was given to him in answer to his Master's prayers. We do not know the precise words Jesus used when He prayed for Peter. They were not recorded as the prayer for the Eleven was (Jn. 17). But the meaning of these special prayers is clear from the account given by Jesus to Peter. The Master had prayed that His disciple's faith might not fail. He had not prayed that he might be exempt from Satan's sifting process or even kept from falling. Jesus knew that a fall was necessary to show the self-confident disciple his own weakness. He had prayed that Peter's fall might not ruin him, that his grievous sin might be followed by godly sorrow, not by a hardening of his heart. He prayed that his sorrow would not be the sorrow of the world, like that of Judas, which leads to death. This sorrow is the remorse of a guilty conscience which, like the furies (the three terrible, winged goddesses with serpentine hair - Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone - who pursue and punish doers of unavenged crimes), drives the sinner headlong to damnation. And in Peter's repentance, which happened immediately after his denials, we see the fulfilment of his Master's prayer. Special grace was given to him in order to melt his heart, overwhelm him with an abundance of grief, and cause him to weep bitterly. The wonderful result was produced, not by his piety or goodness of heart, but by God's Spirit and God's providence working toward that end. Except for the cock-crowing, the warning words that Jesus had spoken which came to his mind, the glance of Jesus' eye, and the tender mercies of his Father in heaven, who can tell what gloomy, demonic thoughts might have gotten hold of the guilty disciple's heart! Remember how long the godly David gave place to the devil? He harbored the demons of pride, falsehood, and an unrepentant spirit after his grievous fall. Do you see how unlikely it was for Peter, immediately after denying Christ, to come under the blessed influence of a broken and contrite spirit? Do you see how unusual it was that the spiritual crisis through which he passed had a happy ending at all? By grace he was saved, as we all are.
The Spiritual Benefits of Sifting

Jesus considers the crisis that His disciples are about to go through as one which will not only end happily but result in spiritual benefits for them and qualify them to be helpful to others. This is apparent from the command He gives to Peter: “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk. 22:32). Jesus expects the frail disciple to become strong in grace and capable and willing to help those who are weak. He holds this expectation for all of His disciples, but especially for Peter. He assumes that eventually the weakest might, and should, become the strongest. The last first; the greatest sinner, the greatest saint; the most foolish, the wisest, most kind and sympathetic to others.

How encouraging is this gracious, kind view of moral failure for those who have erred! In essence, the Savior says to them, “Sin cannot only be forgiven, but it can even be turned into good, both for yourselves and for others.” Falls, when properly corrected, can become stepping-stones to Christian virtue. They can also provide training, preparing people to become comforters and guides. How much healing is provided for the troubled conscience! People who have erred, and who take their sin seriously, are prone to let their hearts be consumed with their past and waste their time thinking about it. Christ assigns them work to do that is more profitable. “And when you have turned back,” He says to them, “strengthen your brothers. Stop all of your empty regrets over your past which cannot be changed. Devote your heart and soul to works of love. Let your labors help you forgive yourself. May you learn from your faults and foolishness these traits: meekness, patience, compassion, and wisdom which are necessary for successfully carrying on such labors.”

But while very encouraging to those who have sinned, Christ’s words to Simon contain no encouragement to sin. Some people seem to love this teaching - that we are permitted to do evil that good may come from it; that we must be prodigals in order to be good Christians; that a mud bath must precede the washing of regeneration and the baptism of the soul in the Redeemer’s blood. This is a false and harmful doctrine. The Holy One could not be its author. Do evil that good may come, you say? And what if the good does not come? As we have seen, it does not come automatically. Nor is it more likely to come because you make the hope of its coming an excuse for sinning. If the good ever comes, it will come through the narrow gate of repentance. You can only become wise, gracious, meek, sympathetic, and a burden-bearer to the weak by going out first and weeping bitterly. What do you think the chances are that a repentance which melts the heart will show up in someone who believes and acts on the principle that a life of sin is necessary in order to gain insight, a knowledge of self, compassion, and every other kind virtue? Probably the issue surrounding this kind of training is a hardened heart, a seared conscience, a perverted moral judgment, the destruction of every sincere conviction concerning what is right and what is wrong. The opinion that evil leads to good unconsciously transforms itself into the idea that evil is good and prepares the one who believes it to commit sin without shame or reservation.
And dare we to this fancy give,
That had the wild-oat not been sown,
The soil, left barren, scarce had grown
The grain by which a man may live?

Oh, if we held the doctrine sound,
For life outliving heats of youth;
Yet who would preach it as a truth
To those that eddy round and round?

Hold thou the good: define it well:
For fear divine Philosophy
Should push beyond her mark, and be
Procress to the lords of hell.

- Tennyson, In Memoriam, 53

In Peter’s case, good did come out of evil. The sifting in his life became a turning point in his spiritual history. The sifting process resulted in a change which was more thorough than his conversion. There was a turning from sin, not just generally, but specifically. He turned from the sins which had troubled him for a long time with a repentance that was better informed and more fervent. His goal was a new obedience with less self-reliance. This kind of obedience was more reliable anyway. Whereas he had been a child before now - a child of God, yes, but only a child - Peter became a man who was strong in grace and equipped to bear the burden of the weak. Yet it is important to note that Jesus, fully aware of how Peter’s fall would turn out, did not regard it as something to be desired. The Author of our faith had very little sympathy with the teaching that evil may be done so that good may come. He did not say, “I have demanded permission to sift you like wheat.” Rather, He assigns the task of sifting the disciple to the evil spirit who, in the beginning, tempted our first parents to sin by the deceptive argument, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). He reserves for Himself the role of an intercessor who prays that the evil which has been permitted may be overruled in favor of that which is good. “Satan has desired to have you...I have prayed for you.” What better words than these could be used to convey the idea of guilt and danger? They suggest that Simon is about to do something that the evil one longs to do. This makes it necessary for the Savior of souls to especially pray for him. People must go somewhere else to find support for apologetic or pantheistic views of sin.
Some may think that the reference to Satan tends to weaken moral responsibility by encouraging people to blame their failures on him. Though this is theoretically possible, practically speaking, it is contrary to fact. For those who are soft on sin are also those who do not believe in the devil. Sartorius writes, “The further the age has removed from the idea of a devil, the laxer it has become in the imputation and punishment of sin. The older time, which did not deny the temptations and assaults of the devil, was yet so little inclined on that account to excuse men, that it regarded the neglect of resistance against the evil spirit, or the yielding to him, as the extreme degree of guilt, and exercised against it a judicial severity from which we shrink with horror. The opposite extreme to this strictness is the laxity of recent criminal jurisprudence in which judges and physicians are too much inclined to excuse the guilty from physical or psychical grounds, while the moral judgment of public opinion is slack and indulgent. It is undeniable that to every sin not only a bad will, but also the spell of some temptation, contributes; and when temptation is not ascribed to the devil, the sinner does not, on that account, impute blame to his bad will, but to temptations springing from some other quarter, which he does not derive from sin, but from nature, although nature tempts only when under the influence of sin. The world and the flesh are indeed powers of temptation, not through their natural substance, but through the influence of the bad with which they are infected. But when, as at present, the seduction to evil is referred to sensuality, temperament, physical lusts and passions, circumstances, or fixed ideas, monomanias, etc., guilt is taken off the sinner’s shoulders and laid upon something ethically indifferent or simply natural” (Ernst Sartorius (1797-1859), *Die Lehre von der heiligen Liebe*).

The perspective Jesus gave on His disciple’s fall cannot, therefore, be accused of weakening the sense of moral responsibility. On the contrary, it tends to inspire a hatred of sin and gives hope to the sinner. It presents any sin that is about to be committed as something to be feared and hated. When it has already been committed, it presents sin as not only forgivable (when true repentance is offered) but as capable of being made useful for spiritual progress. On the one hand, it says to us, “Do not fool around with temptation, for Satan is near, seeking to ruin your soul - ‘fear, and sin not.’” On the other hand, it says, “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous - ‘despair not; forsake your sins and you will find mercy.’”
Section III - Peter and John
John 18:15-18; 19:25-27
All the disciples, without exception, forsook Jesus at the moment He was arrested. Two of them, however, soon recovered their courage enough to return and follow their Master as He was being led away to judgment. One of these was Simon Peter, always original both in good and evil. We are told he followed Jesus “at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome” (Mt. 26:58). The other man, according to most interpreters, was John. He is not named but is simply described as the other disciple. Since John is the one giving us the account, it is almost certain that he is the person alluded to. “Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest” (Jn. 18:15b). This person is well-known and unnamed. We meet him often in the fourth Gospel. His conduct is so outstanding that if he was anyone else besides the evangelist, he would certainly not have remained nameless in this narrative. For this scene is given to us in such minute detail that even the name of the servant whose ear Peter cut off is not too insignificant to be recorded (Jn. 18:10).

These two disciples, though very different in character, seem to have had a friendship with one another. On various occasions, other than the one mentioned here, we find their names mentioned together in a way that suggests they had a special relationship. At the supper, when the announcement about the traitor had been made, Peter gave the disciple whom Jesus loved a sign that he should ask Him to whom He was referring. Three times between the resurrection and the ascension these two men were linked together as companions. They ran together to the empty tomb on the resurrection morning. They talked confidentially about the stranger who appeared in the early dawn on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. They were on their last fishing trip when John recognized the Risen One and said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” Shortly after this, they walked together on the shore and followed Jesus. Peter followed because he was commanded to. John followed because of the voluntary impulse of his own loving heart. An intimacy that was cemented by such sacred times together was likely to be permanent. Later we find the two disciples still companions after they had begun their duties as Apostles. They went up together into the temple at the appointed time for prayer. There, they got into trouble because they healed the lame man at the temple gate and had to appear together before the ecclesiastical tribunal. They were tried by the very same men, Annas and Caiaphas, who sat in judgment of their Lord. In this situation, they were companions at the bar, just as they had been before in the palace of the high priest.
This friendship between these two disciples is not at all surprising. They had belonged to the inner circle of three whom Jesus honored with His confidence on special occasions. So they had plenty of opportunities to become close, having been placed in circumstances that brought them together as spiritual brothers. And even though they had their characteristic differences, they were well-suited to be special friends. It was obvious that both men were original and forceful in character. They had more common sources of interest than with the more ordinary members of the apostolic band. Even their differences, rather than keeping them apart, would draw them together. They were made in such a way that they complemented each other. Peter was more masculine than John in temperment. Peter was a man of action; John, a man of thought and feeling. Peter’s role was to be a leader and a champion; John’s, to cling, and trust, and be loved. Peter was the hero, whereas John admired heroism.

The way these two friends behaved during this crisis was similar yet, at the same time, dissimilar. They were alike in that they both expressed a high degree of concern about the fate of their Master. While the rest of the Apostles completely left the scene, these two followed to see the end. The course of action they took probably grew out of the same motives. We are not told what these motives were, but it is not difficult to guess. First, they both had a bias for action. Neither Peter nor John had natures that were listless and passive, especially while such serious events were going on. They could not sit at home and do nothing while their Lord was being tried, sentenced, and treated as a criminal. If they cannot prevent His final sufferings, at least they will witness them. The same burst of energy that made these two disciples run to see the empty tomb three days later now compels them to turn their steps towards the judgment hall to witness the transactions there.

Besides the things that were going on in their minds, we perceive something of a daring spirit at work in the behavior of the two disciples. We learn from the book of Acts that when Peter and John appeared before the council in Jerusalem, the rulers were taken back with their boldness. Their boldness, then, could have been predicted because of the way they behaved during this current crisis. It is true that, by that time, they had experienced a great spiritual change, as had the other Apostles. But still, we cannot fail to recognize their true character. The Apostles had demonstrated the potential they had to become spiritual men in the days when Jesus was discipling them. Now they had grown to maturity. It was a brave thing for them to follow the band of men who had taken Jesus prisoner, even though they followed at a distance. The fundamental character of a martyr is in any man who could do that. Cowards would not have acted this way. They would have eagerly taken advantage of Jesus’ permission to flee and comforted their hearts with the thought that they were only doing the duty that was required of them, that is, if they were only thinking about their own safety.
Peter and John’s Motives and Actions

We believe the conduct of these two men sprang mainly from their deep love for Jesus. When the first wave of fear passed, their concern for personal safety was overshadowed by a greater concern for the fate of the One whom they truly loved more than life. The love of Jesus compelled them not to think about themselves but about Him whose hour of sorrow had come. First, they slowed their pace. Then they stopped. Then they looked around. As they see the armed band getting closer to the city, their hearts are pierced, and they say to themselves, “We cannot leave our dear Master in His time of danger. We must see the outcome of this painful event.” And so, with spirits full of anguish, they left for Jerusalem, Peter first, and then John.

The two men were companions up to this point. But they were much different after they arrived at the scene of the trial and suffering. John clung to his beloved Lord to the very end. It appears that he was present during the various interrogations to which Jesus was subjected and heard with his own ears the judicial process (he gives such an interesting account of it in his Gospel). When the sinful sentence was executed, he was a spectator. He stood at the foot of the cross where he could see everything and where he could be seen and spoken to by His dying Master. From his vantage point, he saw, among other things, the strange phenomenon of blood and water flowing from the wound made by the spear in the Savior’s side. He carefully records this in his narrative. There he heard Christ’s dying words. One of them He addressed to his mother, Mary, and John. To her He said, “Woman, behold your son” (Jn. 19:26). To him, “Behold, your mother” (Jn. 19:27).

So John was consistently faithful throughout. And Peter - what about him? Note this! What need is there to tell the familiar story about his deplorable weakness that raised its head in the hall or inner court of the high priest’s palace? Do we need to rehearse the time when he gained entrance through the street door with the help of his brother John and first denied his connection to Jesus to the young girl? Need we review his repeated denial to other people and the addition of a solemn oath? Or, do we need to revisit him when he is irritated by the repetition of the charge against him, and perhaps by his consciousness of guilt, when he denied Him a third time? This final denial was not with a solemn oath but with the degrading addition of profane swearing, “I do not know this fellow you are talking about!” (Mk. 14:71). Finally, he heard the cock crow and caught Jesus’ eye. He remembered the words, “The cock will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me” (Lk. 22:34). Then he went out to the street and wept bitterly!

We are not told what happened to Peter after his tears. In all probability, he went back to his lodging - humbled, dispirited, crushed - and remained overwhelmed with grief and shame until he came to his senses on the morning of the resurrection when he learned the good news.
This difference in behavior between the two disciples corresponded to a difference in their characters. Each one acted according to his nature. It is true that the circumstances were not the same for both men. They were favorable for one and unfavorable for the other. John had the advantage of having a friend in the court. Somehow he was known to the high priest. This relationship gained him entrance into the judgment chamber and gave him personal security without any risks. On the other hand, Peter had no friends in the court. It might not have been unreasonable for him to fear the presence of personal enemies. He had been obnoxious in the garden, engaging in rash behavior. So he might have been worried about facing the consequences for that one act. These fears would not have been groundless. We learn this from John. One of the people who charged Peter with being a disciple of Jesus was a relative of the man whose ear had been cut off. He brought this charge against Peter, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him?” (Jn. 18:26). Therefore, it is very likely that he was conscious of having committed an offence that was resented by others. This would have made Peter anxious to avoid being identified as one of Christ’s disciples. His untimely courage in the garden helped make him a coward in the yard outside the palace.

**Peter and John: The Key Differences**

Even when we make allowance for the circumstances, we think the difference in the behavior of the two disciples was primarily due to a difference in the men themselves. Even if Peter had not been guilty of a lack of wisdom in the garden, we fear he would have denied Jesus in the courtyard. On the other hand, when we think of John being in Peter’s position, we do not believe he would have committed Peter’s sin. Peter’s temperament made him susceptible to temptation. John’s, however, was a protection against temptation. Peter was frank and extroverted. John was dignified and reserved. Peter’s tendency was to befriend everybody, while John knew how to establish personal boundaries. It is easy to see the kind of impact this distinction would have on anyone who was placed in Peter’s position. Think of John in Peter’s place. How would he have acted? Picture, for a moment, certain people walking about the court who possessed neither authority nor influence. They question John about his relationship to Jesus. He is neither afraid nor ashamed to acknowledge his Lord. Nevertheless, he turns away and does not answer them. They do not have a right to question him. He has no sympathy with the spirit behind their questions. He feels that it will not serve any good purpose to reveal his relationship to Jesus with these kinds of people. Therefore, he is like his Master when confronted with false witnesses: He remains quiet and withdraws from the people with whom he has nothing in common. He has no respect for them.

Peter, on the other hand, does not have the capacity to protect himself from the inconvenience of being interrogated. He does not have the dignified cautiousness that John has. He cannot seem to keep inappropriate company at arm’s length. He is too frank, too open, too sensitive
to public opinion, and cannot seem to discern its quality. If a servant girl asks him a question about his relationship with the Prisoner at the bar, he cannot brush past her as if he didn't hear her. He is compelled to answer her. And because he instinctively feels that the bent of the question is hostile to his Master, his answer has to be a lie. He is unable to see that this encounter with danger came about because he was getting too close with the people hanging around the palace. So the foolish disciple must get even more involved in the net by mingling confidently with the servants and officers who had gathered around the fire which has been kindled on the pavement of the open court. Naturally, he does not have a chance of escaping here. He is like a poor fly caught in a spider's web. When these men use a rude tone (the tone of insignificant court personnel) and charge him with being a follower of the Man whom their bosses now have in their power, he cannot do anything other than blunder out an unpleasant, base denial. Poor Peter is obviously not equal to the situation. It would have been wiser for him to have stayed at home and restrained his curiosity until the end. He, like most men, would learn wisdom only by bitter experience.

The contrast we have made between the two disciples suggests this thought: *Growth in grace may be different for different Christians!* Neither John nor Peter was mature yet, and their immaturity was revealed in different ways. Peter's weakness was to be found in his tendency to be friendly with everyone, but without discernment. John, on the other hand, was not in any danger of being on friendly terms with each and every person. No, it was *too easy* for him to distinguish between friends and foes. He could take a side and keep it. He could even hate with an intensity that bordered on fanaticism, but he could also love with beautiful womanly devotion. Remember his proposal to call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritan villages! That was a proposal that Peter could not have made. He did not have it in his nature to be that destructive toward another human being. So far, his good nature was something to be commended, even though, in other respects, it opened him up to temptation. The faults of the two disciples were opposite. Consequently, growth in grace would naturally assume two different forms in their respective experiences. In Peter, it would take the form of concentration; in John, of expansion. Peter would become less loving; John would become more loving. Peter would progress from showing indiscriminate goodwill to having a moral compass which would help him distinguish between friends and enemies, the Church and the world. On the other hand, John's progress became apparent when he stopped being a bigot and developed the same spirit of cordiality, humanity, and sympathy that Jesus had. When Peter became mature, he would not care as much about the opinions and feelings of men as he did right now. John, again, would care much more.

We would like to add a final word on the question, "*Was it right or wrong for these two disciples to follow their Lord to the place of judgment?* In our view, it was neither right nor wrong, in and of itself. It was right for one who was able to do it without spiritual harm. But it was wrong for someone who had reason to believe that, by doing it, he was exposing himself to harm. The last
case was Peter's, and the first seems to have been John's. Peter had been adequately warned about his weakness. If he had taken the warning to heart, he would have avoided the situation where the temptation occurred. By disregarding the warning, he chose to run into the tempter's arms. And, of course, he fell. His fall is a lesson to all who do not seek the counsel of God or regard the counsel that is given. They try to accomplish things that are way beyond their strength.
Section I - Too Good News To Be True
The black day of the crucifixion is past. The next day, the Jewish Sabbath, when the Weary One slept in His rock-hewn tomb, is also past. The first day of a new week and of a new era has dawned, and the Lord has risen from the dead. The Shepherd has returned to gather His scattered sheep. This is surely a happy day for the distraught disciples! What unbelievable joy must have filled their hearts at the thought of being reunited with their beloved Lord! How eagerly they must have looked forward to that resurrection morning!

This is what one might be inclined to think, but it really didn't happen this way. The disciples had none of these expectations. When the resurrection of Christ took place, their state of mind resembled that of the Jewish exiles in Babylon when they heard they were going to be returning to their native land. The first impact of the good news was that it made these men feel as if they were dreaming. The news seemed too good to be true. The captives (Israelites) who had sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion had given up hope that they would ever return to their own country. In fact, they were incapable of hoping for anything. “Grief was calm and hope was dead” within them. Then, when the exiles had recovered from the shock of the surprise that they were going back, they burst into laughter and irrepressible song (Ps. 137:1ff). This was the second impact that the good news made upon the Israelites.

The disciples had a very similar experience when Jesus rose from the dead. Their grief was not calm, but their hope was dead. The resurrection of their Master was totally unexpected by them. When the news came, they were surprised and could not believe that it had occurred. This is evident from the statements that all four of the evangelists make. Matthew states that when Christ met with His followers in Galilee after He had risen, some doubted while others worshiped (Mt. 28:17). Mark relates that when the disciples heard from Mary Magdalene that Jesus was alive and that she had actually seen Him, “they refused to believe it” (Mk. 16:11). He also writes that when the two disciples who were making the journey to Emmaus told their brothers about meeting Jesus on the way, “they did not believe them either” (Mk. 16:13). Furthermore, Mark comments about another occasion when Jesus met with all of the Eleven at the same time. “He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mk. 16:14).
Luke agrees with these statements of the first two evangelists. The way he represents the mental attitude of the disciples toward the resurrection of Jesus is very graphic and animated. According to him, the reports that came from the women seemed to be “nonsense” to them, and they would not believe them (Lk. 24:11). He also notes that the two men who were walking in the country when Jesus appeared to them had sad countenances even though they were aware of the rumors about the resurrection. It is true: They were so depressed that they did not recognize Jesus when He joined them and began to speak with them (Lk. 24:16). The resurrection was not a fact for them. All they knew was that their Master was dead and that they had trusted in vain that He was the One who would redeem Israel. Luke also informs us that when Jesus presented Himself to His disciples for the first time, they did recognize the resemblance of the apparition to their deceased Lord but thought it was only His ghost. Therefore, they were terrified. In fact, they were so frightened that Jesus had to show them His hands and feet and invite them to touch His body in order to alleviate their fear. He wanted them to satisfy themselves that He was not a ghost but a substantial human being with flesh and bones like any other man (Lk. 24:36-37).

Rather than giving us general statements, John gives a specific example of the unbelief of the disciples concerning the resurrection. He tells us about the extreme reaction of Thomas. He lets us know that Thomas had such unbelief that he refused to believe until he put his finger on the scars where the nails had been and placed his hand into the wound in the Savior’s side that was made by the spear. The other disciples struggled with their belief too, but to a lesser degree than Thomas. This is implied in the statement John made in an earlier part of his narrative. When Jesus met His disciples on the evening of the day on which He rose, “He showed them both His hands and His side” (Jn. 20:20).

The women who had believed in Christ did not expect the resurrection any more than the Eleven. They went to the sepulchre on the morning of the first day of the week intending to embalm the dead body of the One whom they loved. They sought the living among the dead. When Mary Magdalene (who arrived at the tomb before anyone else) found the grave empty, she thought someone had carried away the dead body of her Lord (Jn. 20:2).

When the disciples’ unbelief finally gave way to faith, they changed like the Hebrew exiles from being extremely depressed to having extravagant joy. When Thomas’ doubt was removed, he exclaimed with elation, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28). Luke tells us that when they recognized their risen Lord, the disciples “could not believe it for joy” (Lk. 24:41), as if toying with doubt acted as a stimulus to their joy. The two disciples with whom Jesus spoke on the way to Emmaus said to each other after He left them, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Lk. 24:32).

There is still another way in which the Eleven resembled the ancient Hebrew exiles when they were notified that they would return to Israel. Though their faith and hope were weak from
Jesus’ death until His resurrection, their love remained steadfast. The exiled Jew did not forget Jerusalem when he was in the land of strangers. Absence only made his heart grow fonder. As he sat by the rivers of Babylon - listless, motionless, with a far-away look in his eyes, gazing at the sluggish waters with glassy eyes - the big round tears rolled quietly down his cheeks, because he had been thinking about Zion. The exile who had a poetic soul did not forget what he owed to Jerusalem’s honor. He was not capable of singing the Lord’s songs in the hearing of a heathen audience, who cared nothing for their meaning, but only for the style in which they sang. So he refused to prostitute his talents for these oppressors of Israel, even though by doing so he might gain his restoration to the beloved country of his birth. This is supposedly what the Athenian captives did in Sicily when they recited lines from their favorite poet Euripides in the hearing of their Sicilian masters.

The disciples, like the exiles, were just as loyal to the memory of their Lord. They were like a “widow indeed” (I Tim. 5:16) who remains faithful to her deceased husband and emphasizes his virtues, even though he has absolutely no reputation in the eyes of the world. It didn’t matter that others wanted to call Jesus a deceiver; they simply could not believe that He was. An impostor? Never! Therefore, though He is dead and their hope gone, they still act like men who treasure their connection to their Master whom they have lost. They stay together like a bereaved family, keeping their blinds down, so to speak, shutting and barring their doors because they feared the Jews. And they identify themselves with the Crucified. As His friends, they dread the unbelieving world’s desire for them to experience ill-will. But their lives are an admirable example to all Christians on how to act when trouble, rebuke, and blasphemy come, or when the cause of Christ seems lost, and the powers of darkness have everything going their own way (for the moment). Though faith is overshadowed and hope extinguished, let the heart always be loyal to its true Lord!

The disciples’ state of mind at the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is of great importance to those who seek to defend the faith. Their despair after their Lord’s crucifixion provides great weight to the testimony given by them about the fact of the resurrection. Men who were in this frame of mind were not likely to believe in the resurrection unless it could not reasonably be disbelieved. They would not be satisfied with a half-truth as people tend to be when they desire and look for certain things to happen. No. These men would be skeptical and demand an abundance of evidence, just like men do in situations when they want certain things to happen, but they do not expect them. They would be slow to believe the testimony of others and might even hesitate to believe their own eyes. They would not be able to manufacture a belief in the resurrection of Jesus just because the women who went to embalm His body found His grave empty on the third day after His death. When that was reported, it made Peter and John run to the sepulchre to check things out for themselves. But after they confirmed the women’s report, the question still remained: How was the empty tomb supposed to be explained? Mary Magdalene’s theory that someone had carried off the corpse would not seem to be all that improbable.
From what we know about the mental condition of the disciples, the inferences we have presented are fully supported by the Gospel accounts about the reception they gave to the risen Jesus when He first appeared to them. Every one of them approached these appearances with skepticism and went to a lot of trouble to satisfy themselves that what they were seeing was not a ghostly apparition, but a living man, the same Man who had died on the cross. One moment, the disciples are doubting the resurrection even took place. The next, they are doubting the identity of the Person who appeared to them. Therefore, they were not content just to see Jesus. At His own request, they touched Him. One of them not only handled the body to ascertain that the substance or matter could not be compressed but insisted on examining, with skeptical curiosity, those parts which had been injured by the nails and the spear. All of them perceived the resemblance between the person they were looking at and Jesus, but they could not be persuaded of the identity because they were so totally unprepared to see the Dead One alive again. At first, their theory was that they had seen a ghost or apparition. And the very fact that they entertained that theory makes it impossible for us to do the same. In the face of that fact, we cannot not accept Strauss’ position (David Friedrich Strauss, 1808-1874), that “the faith in Jesus as the Messiah, which by His violent death had received an apparently fatal shock, was subjectively restored by the instrumentality of the mind, the power of the imagination and nervous excitement.” We know how much the power of the imagination and nervous excitement can do. People in an abnormal, excited state often see things in outer space which are only the creations of a “heated brain.” But people in a crazy state like that - subject to hallucination - are not usually cool and rational enough to doubt the reality of what they see. Nor is it necessary in their case to work hard to overcome such doubts. Instead, what they need is to be made aware that what they think they see is not a reality. This is the very reverse of what Christ had to do for the disciples. He did it by solemnly asserting that He was not a spirit, by inviting them to touch Him in order to satisfy themselves that he had material substance, and by eating food in their presence.

The Theft Theory
When we constantly keep the mental condition of the Eleven at the time of Christ’s resurrection before our eyes, the falsehood and absurdity of the theft theory which was invented by the Jewish priests becomes readily apparent. According to this theory, the disciples came at night while the guards were asleep and stole the dead body of Jesus so that they might be able to circulate the belief that He had risen from the dead. Matthew tells us that even before the resurrection, the murderers of our Lord were afraid this might happen. So, to prevent any fraud like this, they appealed to Pilate to have a guard put at the grave. He did as they asked and, with contempt, granted them permission to take whatever steps they felt were necessary to prevent a “resurrection” on the part of the dead or the living. With scorn, he replied, “You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how” (Mt. 27:65). So they did. They sealed the stone and placed guards there. However, their precautions did not prevent the resurrection nor the belief in it. It only furnished an illustration of the folly of those who try to manage providence and to control the
course of the world's history. They assigned themselves a lot of work, and it all came to nothing. We are not saying that we lean in the direction of denying the astuteness of these ecclesiastical politicians. Their plan for preventing the resurrection was very thoughtful, and their way of explaining it away afterwards was very plausible. The story they invented was really a very respectable fabrication and was certain to satisfy everyone who wanted a decent theory to justify a foregone conclusion as, in fact, it seems to have done. According to Matthew, it was commonly reported years later after the resurrection (Mt. 28:15). It was not improbable that soldiers would fall asleep at night while they were on duty, especially when guarding a dead body (which was not likely to give them any trouble). And, in the eyes of the unbelieving world, the followers of the Nazarene were capable of using any means to promote their own goals.

Even if we grant all of this and assume that the members of the Sanhedrin had been right in their opinion about the character of the disciples, their theft theory is ridiculous. The disciples were not in a state of mind to even think about something like this, even if their consciences allowed them to steal the body. They did not have it in them to be so daring. Sorrow lay like a lead weight on their hearts and made them almost as dead as the corpse they are supposed to have stolen. So the motive for the theft is one which could not have influenced them then. Steal the body to propagate a belief in the resurrection? Did they have any interest in propagating a belief that they did not entertain themselves? “For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (Jn. 20:9). Nor did they remember anything their Master had said about this subject before He died. Some people have a hard time believing this statement. In order to handle this difficulty, some suggest that our Lord’s predictions about His resurrection may not have been as definite as they appear in the Gospels but may have taken on a more definitive form after it occurred when their meaning was clearly understood. We do not see any reason to accept such a position. There is no doubt that Jesus spoke very clearly about His death. Yet when He died, it took the disciples as much by surprise as the resurrection did. One explanation is sufficient in both cases. The disciples were not clever, quick-witted, sentimental men as Renan makes them out to be (Editor’s note: J. Ernest Renan, 1823-1892, was a French theologian who tried to eliminate the supernatural and reduce Jesus merely to a magnetic teacher; wrote Life of Jesus in 1863). They were stupid, slow-minded people; very honest, but very incapable of taking in new ideas. They were like horses with blinders on. They could see in only one direction - in the direction of their prejudices. The surgery of the events that took place was required to insert a new truth into their minds. Nothing would change the current of their thoughts but a dam of undeniable fact. They could be convinced that Christ had to die only by His dying, that He would rise only by His rising, and that His kingdom was not to be of this world only by the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and the grafting in of the Gentiles. Let us be thankful for the honest stupidity of these men. It gives great value to their testimony. We know that nothing but the facts could make men like this believe what today they are accused of inventing.
We have used the doubts of the disciples about the resurrection of Christ in order to defend the Christian faith. This is not only a legitimate use of their doubts but obviously what was intended by virtue of their having been recorded. The evangelists have carefully chronicled these doubts that we might have no doubt. These things were written that we might believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead. The Apostles attached supreme importance to that fact - a fact they had doubted in the days when they were being discipled. It was the foundation of their doctrinal building, an essential part of their gospel. The Apostle Paul correctly summed up the gospel that was preached by the men who had been with Jesus, as well as by himself, with these three truths: “That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that He was buried; and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (I Cor. 15:3-4). All of the Eleven thoroughly agreed with Paul’s thoughts that, if Christ had not risen, their preaching was vain, and the faith of Christians was also vain (I Cor. 15:14). There is no gospel at all unless He who died for people’s sins also rose again for their justification. Having this conviction in their minds, they constantly bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus wherever they went. Bearing witness was such an important part of their work that, when Peter suggested that someone be chosen to replace Judas, he singled this out as the most important function of the apostolic office. “Of the men,” he said, “who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us....one of these should become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22).

**Apostolic Preaching**

In their apostolic preaching, they attached supreme importance to the fact of Christ’s resurrection, and it is our responsibility to do the same. Modern unbelievers, like some in the Corinthian church, try to persuade us that it does not matter whether Jesus rose or not. They say all that is important in Christianity has nothing to do with historical truth. Many believers who are addicted to an empty spiritualism practically agree with these people. They neglect the supernatural facts and treat them with contempt. Consequently, they believe the high doctrines of the faith are all that is worthy of their respect. To the people who think like this, the kind of studies which we have dealt with in this chapter seem to be a waste of time. And if they told us how they really feel, they would say, “Let these insignificant things alone and give us the pure and simple gospel.” Intelligent, sober-minded, and sincere Christians differ toto cælo (by the whole heavens; diametrically opposite) from both of these types of people. From their point of view, Christianity is, in the first place, a religion of supernatural facts. These facts occupy the primary place in their creed. They know that if these facts are honestly believed, all the great doctrines of the faith must sooner or later be accepted. On the other hand, they clearly understand that any religion which despises or disbelieves these facts is just a fanciful dream which must soon vanish or is like a house built on sand which the storm will sweep away. Therefore, while these Christians acknowledge the importance of all revealed truth, they place a very special emphasis on revealed facts. So, even though they believe with their hearts the precious truth that Christ died for our sins, they are careful, like the Apostles, to include in their gospel these facts: that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day.
Section II - The Eyes of the Disciples Opened

After His sufferings, the first time Jesus presented Himself to His disciples and showed them that He was alive and had a body was on the evening of His resurrection. It was the fourth time He had made Himself visible since He rose from the dead. The first person He had appeared to in the morning was Mary of Magdala. She had earned this honor by her unparalleled devotion. She had the same spirit that Mary of Bethany had and stood out among the other women who came to Joseph’s tomb to embalm the dead body of the Savior. When she found the grave empty, she was overcome with emotion and cried because they had taken her Lord away, and she did not know where they had laid Him. Those tears were a sure sign of deep, true love and were observed by the Risen One. The sorrows of this faithful soul touched His tender heart and brought Him to her side to comfort her. Distressed, she turned from the sepulchre and saw Him standing there but did not recognize Him. “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, ‘Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’” (Jn. 20:15-16). Startled by the familiar voice, she looked more closely and immediately returned the kind greeting with an expressive word that indicated she recognized Him, ‘Rabboni.’ Thus, “to holy tears,
in lonely hours,
Christ risen appears.”

Peter was given the privilege of being the second person to see Jesus. However, we do not have any details about this private meeting between Jesus and His erring disciple. It is simply mentioned by Paul in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (I Cor. 15:5) and by Luke in his Gospel (Lk. 24:34). But we do not have any doubts about the purpose of the meeting. The Risen Master remembered Peter’s sin. Jesus knew how troubled he was about it. He desired, without delay, to let Peter know he was forgiven. So, out of His sensitivity for Peter’s feelings, He planned to meet him for the first time after his fall - alone.

During the course of that day, Jesus appeared a third time to the two men who were walking to Emmaus. Luke highlighted this third appearance more than anyone else, probably because it was one of the most interesting anecdotes about the resurrection which he found in the collected writings from which he compiled his Gospel. And, truthfully, we cannot imagine a story
more beautiful and interesting than this one. We get a clear picture of what Jesus' disciples were thinking when we consider the two friends who were walking together. They were talking about the things that had just happened, including the sufferings of Jesus three days before and the rumors that had just come to them about His resurrection. As they talked, they shifted between despair and hope and could not be consoled when they reflected on the crucifixion of Him whom, until then, they thought was the Redeemer of Israel. At other times, they wondered if it was possible that He could have risen again! How compassionate is Jesus' behavior throughout the time He spends with them! Because of His love for them, He goes along with them incognito. He joins the company of the two sorrowing men and asks them in a carefree way about the subject they are discussing so sadly and seriously. When the men respond with a question that expressed surprise that even a stranger in Jerusalem would not know about the things that had transpired, He dryly and indifferently asks, "What things?" Once He had drawn the story out of them, He proceeded to show them that an intelligent reader of the Old Testament ought not to be surprised by the things that were happening to someone they believed to be Christ. He uses the occasion to explain to them "the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:27), without ever saying that He was speaking about Himself. When the travelers arrive at the village where the two men were going, the unknown One pretends that He is going on further. It would not have been appropriate for a stranger to invite himself to stay with them. But when they urge Him to stay, He accepts the invitation. Finally, the two men discover whom it is they have been entertaining without being aware of it. It fills them with joy.

Jesus' appearance to the two men on this road was a kind of prelude to the one He made on the evening of the same day in Jerusalem to the Eleven, or rather, the Ten (Thomas was not present; see Jn. 20:24). As soon as they discovered whom it was that they had for a guest, Cleopas and his companion set out from Emmaus to the Holy City, eager to tell their friends there the exciting news. And note this, while they are in the very act of telling about the things that happened on the way and how Jesus became known to them in the breaking of bread, Jesus Himself appeared in the midst of them, uttering the kind greeting, "Peace be with you" (Jn. 20:21). He has come to do for the future Apostles what He has already done for the two friends, namely, to show that He is alive after His sufferings and open their minds that they might understand the Scriptures. He wanted them to see that, based on what had been written about Christ in years past (the O.T.), it was necessary for Him to suffer, die, and to rise from the dead the third day.

While the general purpose of the two appearances is the same, we notice a difference in the order of the procedure that Jesus followed. In one case, He opened the eyes of the understanding first, and then the eyes of the body. In the other, He reversed the order. In His words with the two brothers, He first demonstrated that the crucifixion and the rumored resurrection were in perfect agreement with the Old Testament Scriptures. When He had finished, He made Himself visible to their physical eyes as the Jesus who had risen from the dead. In other words, He first
taught them the true scriptural theory of the Messiah’s earthly experience and then satisfied them with the facts. In the meeting at night with the Ten, on the other hand, he dealt with the facts first and then took up the theory afterwards. He convinced His disciples that He really was risen by showing them His hands and His feet and by eating food. Then He proceeded to demonstrate that the facts were only what they should have expected because they were the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

By varying the order of revelation in this way, Jesus was only making His procedure relevant to the different circumstances of the people with whom He had to deal. The two friends who were going to Emmaus did not notice any resemblance between the stranger who joined them and their beloved Lord about whom they had been thinking and speaking. “Their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him” (Lk. 24:16). We believe the main reason for this was simply heavy hearts. Sorrow caused them not to see. They were so engrossed in their own sad thoughts that they could not see anything outside themselves. They did not make the effort to really notice the person who had joined them. It would not have made any difference, even if the stranger had been their own father. It is obvious how men in this state of mind must be dealt with. They can only get outward vision by, first of all, getting their inward eye opened. Their diseased minds must be healed so that they may be able to look at what is right in front of them and see it for what it is. This is the principle Jesus followed with the two men. He met them where they were and led them from despair to hope. Then their outward senses recovered their ability to perceive and told them who the stranger was. In essence, He said, “You have heard a rumor that the One who was crucified three days ago is risen. You believed this rumor was a story that could not be trusted. But the question is, “Why not?” You believe Jesus is the Christ. If He was the Christ, His rising again was to be expected as much as His sufferings, for both of them are foretold in the Scriptures which you believe are the Word of God.” When these thoughts took hold of their minds, the hearts of these two men begin to burn with the kindling power of a new truth. The dawn of hope breaks on their spirits. They wake up as if they have been having a dream. They look outward, and behold, the Man who has been discoursing with them is Jesus Himself!

**Jesus’ Appearance to the Ten**

The situation was different for the Ten. When Jesus appeared to them, they were amazed at the resemblance to their deceased Master. They had been listening to the story of Cleopas and his companion and were in more of a frame of mind to observe. But they could not believe that what they saw was really Jesus. They were terrified and thought they had seen a spirit - the ghost of the Crucified. The first thing Jesus had to do in this situation, therefore, was obviously to quiet their fears and convince the frightened disciples that the Being who had suddenly appeared was not a ghost, but a Man - the same Man He seemed to be, even Jesus Himself. Until He had done that, no discourse could be given from the Old Testament on the subject of Messiah’s earthly history. So, accordingly, Jesus immediately addressed their fears and then proceeded to explain the true Messianic theory.
We have pointed out the difference between the two and the ten disciples and their belief in the resurrection. Something analogous to this may be found in the ways that different Christians are now brought to faith. The evidences for Christianity are commonly divided into two main categories - the external and the internal. One is taken from outward historical facts, while the other is taken from the adaptation of the gospel to man's nature and needs. Both kinds of evidence are necessary for a complete faith, just as both kinds of vision (outward and inward) were necessary to make the disciples thorough believers in the truth of the resurrection. But some people begin with one and some with the other. Some are convinced, first, that the gospel story is true and then, perhaps later on, get a sense of its importance and preciousness. Others are like Cleopas and his companion. They are so engrossed in their own thoughts that they are unable to appreciate or see the facts. First, they have to have the eyes of their understanding enlightened to see the beauty and the worthiness of the truth as it is in Jesus. At one time they may have had a kind of traditional faith in the facts and believed that those facts were well attested. These are the kind of people who, even if they lost their faith, might still have regrets about losing it. They may be skeptics and yet be sad because they are. In fact, they may feel that they were better off when, like others, they believed. But even though they may attempt it, they cannot restore their faith by studying only the external evidences. They may read books that deal with such evidences, but they are not moved by them. Their eyes stare straight ahead and cannot see Christ coming to them in that outward way. So, He reveals Himself to them in another way. He has a hidden discourse with their spirits and conveys to their minds a powerful sense of the moral grandeur of the Christian faith. He makes them feel that, whether it is true or not, it is at least worthy to be true. Then their hearts begin to burn. They hope that what is so beautiful may turn out to be objectively true. Then they become interested in the external evidences. They inquire, they read, they look. And what do they see? Jesus revived - a true historical person for them. He is risen from the grave of doubt to live forever as the sun of their souls, and even more precious because of the temporary loss they experienced without Him. He comes

“Apparelled in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of their soul”

than He ever did before they doubted.

**The Impact of Jesus’ Exposition of Scripture**

From these remarks on the order of the two revelations that were made by Jesus to His disciples (first, the revelation of Himself to their physical eyes, and second, the revelation of the Scriptural doctrine of the Messiah to the eyes of their minds), we move on to consider this question: “What impact did Christ's expositions of Scripture have on His hearers?” Did the disciples gain enough light from these expositions so that they would not need any further illumination? Had
Jesus Himself done the work of the Spirit of Truth, whose advent He had promised before He suffered, and led them into all truth? Certainly not. The opening of their understanding which took place at this time did not, by any means, amount to a full spiritual enlightenment in Christian doctrine. The disciples did not yet comprehend the moral grounds for Christ’s suffering and resurrection. They did not know why He had to go through these experiences. At this time, the words ought and should did not mean any more than this: They might and should have anticipated the things that happened, if they had properly understood the Old Testament prophecies. They were in the same frame of mind as the Jewish Christians probably were to whom the Epistle to the Hebrews was addressed. These Christians were not grounded very well in the truth of the gospel. They could not see the glory of the gospel dispensation, nor how it harmonized with what had existed before and under which they had been educated. Specifically, the divine dignity of the Author of the Christian faith seemed to them to be incompatible with His earthly humiliation. Therefore, the writer of the epistle attempted to prove that the divinity, the temporary humiliation, and the subsequent glorification of the Christ were all taught in the Old Testament Scriptures. He quotes them liberally for that purpose in the early chapters of his epistle. In fact, his written expositions did for his readers what Jesus did through His oral expositions for His hearers. And what should we say was the immediate impact of the writer’s argument on the minds of those who attentively read it? This is what we imagine: that the new believer, after he put the book down, would be compelled to admit, “Well, he is right. These things about the Messiah are all written in the Scriptures. Therefore, not one of them, not even the humiliation and suffering, over which I stumble, can be a reason for rejecting Jesus as the Christ.” A very important result, yet a very elementary one. What a vast difference between the admission that the real life of Jesus corresponded to the ideal life of the Messiah as portrayed in the Old Testament and the admiring, enthusiastic, and thoroughly intelligent appreciation of gospel truth that the writer put forth on every page of his epistle!

The difference between the disciples’ frame of mind after Jesus explained to them the things in the law, the prophets, and the psalms about Himself, and their enlightenment as Apostles after the Holy Spirit came was also significant. Before Pentecost, they only knew the basics of the doctrine of Christ. But when they matured, they were thoroughly initiated into the mystery of the gospel. Before the coming of the Spirit, a single ray of light came into their dark minds. But later on, the daylight of truth flooded their souls. We can express the difference in words that John uses in his narrative about the things that took place in connection with Jesus’ first appearance to His disciples. John relates that at a certain moment when they were together, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 20:22). They did not, then and there, receive the Spirit in the promised fulness. The breath was only a sign and a “down payment” (earnest) of what was to come. It was only a symbolic renewal of the promise and a first installment of its fulfillment. It was just a little cloud the size of a man’s hand that predicted the coming downpour (see I Kings 18:44) or the first gentle puff of wind that precedes the power-
ful storm. Right now, they have the little breath of the Spirit’s influence, but not until Pentecost will they feel the rushing wind. There is a great difference between now and then, between the disciples’ spiritual enlightenment on the first Christian Sabbath evening and that of the Apostles in the days ahead.

For the disciples, it was still just a day of small things. The small things, however, were not to be despised (and they weren’t). We are not told how the Ten valued the light they had received. But we can safely assume that their feelings were similar to the two brothers who made the journey to Emmaus. As these men talked together about Jesus’ discourse after He left their presence, they said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Lk. 24:32). The light they received may have been small, but it was new light, and it had all the heart-kindling, thought-stirring power of new truth. That conversation on the road created a crisis in their spiritual history. It was the dawn of the gospel day. It was the little spark that kindled a great fire. It put into their minds a thought which was to form the core or center of a new system of belief. It took away the veil that had been put over their faces when they read the Old Testament and was, therefore, the first step in a process which was to result in their “beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord,” and in their “being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (II Cor. 3:18). How happy is the person who has even received as much as these two disciples at this point in their lives!

Some dejected person may say, “I wish that same happiness could be mine!” In order to comfort such an unhappy brother, let us take note of the circumstances in which this new light arose for the disciples. Their hearts were set on fire when they had become very dry and withered - hopeless, sick, and weary because of their sorrow and disappointment. This is the way it always is: The kindling must be dry in order for the spark to set it on fire. When the people of Israel complained, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off,” the word went forth from God, “O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel” (Ez. 37:11-12). It was the same way with Jesus’ disciples. When every bit of the sap of hope had been drained out of them, and their faith had been reduced to this, “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” (Lk. 24:21), then their hearts were set on fire by the kindling power of a new truth. It has been the same in many instances since then. The fire of hope was kindled in the heart, never to be extinguished, just at the moment when the men were becoming more and more discouraged. Historically, faith has been revived even when someone thought of himself as an unbeliever. The light of truth has risen in minds that had stopped looking for the dawn. The comfort of salvation has returned to people who had started thinking that God’s mercy was gone forever. “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Lk. 18:8).
There is nothing strange about this. The truth is, the heart needs to be dried through trials before it can be made to burn. Until sorrow comes, human hearts do not catch the divine fire. There is too much of this world’s sap in them. That was what caused the disciples to be so slow to believe all that the prophets had spoken. Their worldly ambition prevented them from learning the spirituality of Christ’s kingdom, and their pride blinded them to the glory of the cross. Therefore, Jesus rightly rebuked them for their unbelief and their mindless stupidity. If their hearts had been pure, they might have known beforehand what was going to happen. But what really happened was that they did not comprehend anything until their Lord’s death had crushed their hope, blasted their ambition, and bitter sorrow had prepared them for receiving spiritual instruction.
Section III - The Doubt of Thomas

John 20:24-29

“Thomas, one of the Twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came” on that first Christian Sabbath evening and showed Himself to His disciples (Jn. 20:24). One hopes he had a good reason for being absent. But it is at least possible that he did not. Having a melancholy temperament, he might have been simply nurturing his wounds of sadness by being alone. This is not unusual. Even now, some people whose Christ is dead spend their Sabbaths at home or in solitude while avoiding corporate worship which, for them, can be either offensively cheerful or boring. Whatever the reason, Thomas missed a good sermon. It is the only one, as far as we know, in the entire ministry of our Lord, in which He formally explained the Messianic doctrine as found in the Old Testament. If only Thomas had known that such a discourse was going to be delivered that night! But one never knows when good things will come. The only way to make sure we will receive them is by always being where we ought to be and doing what we ought to be doing.

The same melancholy temperament that probably caused Thomas to be absent when Christ first met with His disciples after He rose from the dead also made him more skeptical than the others over the news of the resurrection. When the other disciples told him they had just seen the Lord, he replied with vehemence, “Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (verse 25). He would not be satisfied with the testimony of his brothers. He must have credible evidence for himself – not that he doubted their truthfulness. But he could not get rid of the suspicion that what they said they had seen was only a ghost. He felt their eyes had been deceived.

Thomas’ skepticism was, we think, mainly an issue of temperament. It had very little in common with the doubts that some people have who tend to be rationalistic, who are constantly challenging everything that is supernatural, and who have problems with anything that even hints of being miraculous. For years, people have been calling Thomas the Rationalist. It has even been suggested that he belonged to the sect of the Sadducees before he joined Jesus and His men. However, when we maturely examine the issue, we are compelled to say that we do not see any strong basis for this perspective. Nevertheless, we certainly do not blame modern doubters who may derive some degree of comfort from their position. We are very much aware that there are sincere and even spiritually-minded people who find it very difficult to believe in the supernatural and the miraculous. In fact, for some, it is extremely difficult. It is even
questionable that if they had been in Thomas’ shoes and had been able to freely handle and carefully inspect the wounds in the risen Savior’s body, that they would have been able to have an unhesitating faith in the reality of the resurrection. We do not believe that there is any reason à priori (theoretically) for maintaining that no disciple of Jesus could have been a person with such a temperament. All we are saying is that there is no evidence that Thomas was a man who was cut out of this mold. There are no facts to support it. Nowhere in the gospel history do we discover any unwillingness on his part to believe in the supernatural or the miraculous per se. We do not find, for example, that he was skeptical about the raising of Lazarus. We are only told that when Jesus suggested they visit the afflicted family in Bethany, Thomas thought the journey would be dangerous to his beloved Master and to them as well. He said, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him” (Jn. 11:16). At that time, he demonstrated that he was not so much a Rationalist as a man with a gloomy temperament. He was prone to look on the dark side of things, living in the pensive moonlight instead of the cheerful sunlight. His doubt did not spring out of his system of thought but out of his emotional makeup.

There is something else we must say about the doubt of this disciple. It did not come from an unwillingness to believe. Rather, it was the doubt of a sad man. The event he doubted (the resurrection) was one in which he would have welcomed the news that it was true. Nothing could have given Thomas any greater joy than to be assured that his Master was indeed risen. This is readily apparent from his outbreak of joy when he was finally satisfied: “My Lord and my God!” (vs. 28). This is not an exclamation from someone who is forced to reluctantly admit some fact that he would rather deny. It is common for people who have never had any doubts themselves to blame all doubt on bad motives and denounce it indiscriminately as a crime. Now, unquestionably, far too many doubt because of bad motives. They do not want to believe - and can’t afford to. Many deny the teaching that there will be a resurrection of the dead because, for them, it would be a resurrection to shame and eternal contempt. But this is by no means true of them all. Some doubt who really want to believe. In fact, their doubt is due to their excessive anxiety to believe. They are so eager to know the truth and feel so deeply the immense importance of the issues at stake, that they cannot take anything for granted. For some period of time, their hands tremble so much that they cannot grab hold of the great tenets of faith such as a living God, an incarnate, crucified, risen Savior, and a glorious eternal future. This kind of doubt is limited to sincere, thoughtful, and pure-hearted people. It is vastly different from the doubt of those who are frivolous, worldly, and vicious. The “good” kind of doubt is holy and noble, not vile and unholy. We may not praise it, but we ought not to harshly condemn and exclude it from the circle of Christian compassion. This kind of doubt is, at worst, only an infirmity which always ends in strong, unwavering faith.

Jesus thought Thomas’ doubt was like this. We infer this from the way in which He dealt with it. As we said, Thomas was absent when Jesus first appeared to the disciples. But the risen Lord
makes a second appearance for his special benefit and offers him the proof he needed. Once the greetings are over, He turns immediately to the Doubter and addresses him in terms that are designed to remind him of his statement to his brothers, saying, “Reach here your finger and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believe” (vs. 27). There may be something of a rebuke here, but there is more compassion than anything else. Jesus speaks to a sincere disciple whose faith is weak and not to one who has an evil heart that is filled with unbelief. When other people who only wanted an excuse for not believing demanded evidence from Jesus, He addressed them in a very different way. “This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah” (Lk. 11:29). This is what He said in these situations.

**Thomas’ Faith**

Having determined the nature of Thomas’ doubt, let us now look at his faith. The melancholy disciple’s doubts were soon removed. But how? Did Thomas make use of the means he was offered for ascertaining the reality of his Lord’s resurrection? In other words, did he actually put his fingers and hand into the nail and spear wounds? Opinions differ on this point. We think it is probable that he did not. Several things cause us to favor this position. First, the narrative seems to leave no room for the process of investigation. Thomas answers Jesus’ proposal by what appears to be an immediate profession of faith. The way the profession is made is not what we would expect from someone who had examined His body. “My Lord and my God!” is the warm, passionate language of a man who has undergone some sudden change in his heart, not the words of a man who has just concluded a scientific experiment. Furthermore, we observe that there is no allusion to such an inspection when Jesus makes a comment about Thomas’ faith. The disciple is said to believe because he saw the wounds, not because he handled them. Finally, the idea that Thomas would actually go through the process that Jesus proposed is inconsistent with his character. He was not one of your calm, cold-blooded men who conduct investigations into truth with the passionless impartiality of a judge. He would not have examined the wounds in the risen Savior’s body with the coolness of an anatomist who dissects dead carcasses. No. He was a man with a passionate, poetic temperament, strong in his belief and his unbelief, and moved to faith or doubt by the feelings of his heart rather than through the reasoning powers of his mind.

We imagine the truth about Thomas went something like this. Eight days before his encounter with Jesus, when he made the threat to his fellow disciples, he did not deliberately mean all that he said. It was just an off-the-cuff comment from a melancholy man who was feeling dejected and miserable. “Jesus risen? It is impossible, and that’s all there is to it. I won’t believe unless I do so and so. I don’t know if I will believe when all is said and done.” But eight days have passed and, behold, there is Jesus in their midst. Now He is visible, not only to Thomas, but to all of His disciples. Will Thomas still insist on going through with his rigorous test? No! No! His doubts
vanish as soon as he sees Jesus, like the morning dew at sunrise. Even before the Risen One has revealed His wounds and spoken those somewhat rebuking, yet kind and sympathetic words, Thomas is virtually a believer (by the way, Jesus’ words prove that He had an intimate knowledge of everything that had been going on in Thomas’ mind). And after he has seen the ugly wounds and heard Jesus’ kind words, he is ashamed of his rash, reckless speech to his brothers. Overcome with joy and tears, he exclaims, “My Lord and my God!”

It was a noble confession of faith. In fact, it was the most advanced confession that had ever been made by any of the Twelve during the time they had been with Jesus. The last is first. The greatest Doubter comes to the fullest and strongest belief. This has often happened in the history of the Church. Richard Baxter (1615-1691) indicates that it was his own experience and says that nothing is so firmly believed as that which has at one time been doubted. Many Thomases have said, or could say, the same thing about themselves. The doubters have eventually become the soundest and even the warmest believers. Doubt by itself is a cold thing. In the case of Thomas, it often speaks harsh and heartless words. This should not surprise us. For when the mind doubts, the soul is in darkness. And during the chilly night, the heart becomes frozen. But when the daylight of faith comes, the frost melts, and hearts that once seemed hard and stony prove to be capable of demonstrating an abundance of enthusiasm and strong devotion.

Socinians, whose doctrine is totally undermined by Thomas’ confession when it is naturally interpreted, tell us that the words, “My Lord and my God” do not refer to Jesus at all but to the Deity in heaven. They say his words are only an expression of his astonishment when he discovered that what he had doubted had really come to pass. He lifts up his eyes and his hands to heaven, as it were, and exclaims, “My Lord and my God! It is a fact. The crucified Jesus is restored to life again.” This interpretation is absolutely desperate. It disregards the text itself. When Thomas spoke these words, he was answering and speaking to Jesus. Their interpretation also forces a man who is bursting with emotion to speak coldly. For though the expression “my God” might have been an appropriate phrase by which to indicate astonishment, the two phrases, “My Lord and my God,” are too weak and unnatural to accomplish that purpose.

**The Meaning of Thomas’ Profession**

Therefore, we do not have a mere expression of surprise here. We have a profession of faith that was completely appropriate for the man and the circumstances. It is as pregnant with meaning as it is brief and compelling. Thomas immediately declares his acceptance of a miraculous fact and his belief in a very significant doctrine. In the first part of his response to Jesus, he recognizes that the One who was dead is now alive: “My Lord, my beloved Master! It is He, the very same person with whom we enjoyed such wonderful fellowship before He was crucified.” In the second part, he acknowledges Christ’s divinity. If not for the first time, at least now it was done with intelligence and an emphasis that was new in every way. From the fact of the resurrection
he moves on to the *doctrine*: “My Lord is risen. Yes! Therefore, He is my God. For that One is
divine over whom death does not have any power.” The doctrine also helps supply the fact of the
resurrection with an additional certainty. For if Christ is God, death *could not* have any power
over Him, and His resurrection naturally followed. Once Thomas concluded with his majestic
affirmation, “My God,” he made a transition. When he demanded the physical evidence, He had
been standing on a low platform of faith. Now he has moved to the higher platform where he
feels this kind of evidence is unnecessary.

**Believing Without Seeing**

Finally, we need to focus on the remark the Lord made about the faith just professed by His dis-
ciple. “Jesus said to him, ‘Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who
did not see, and yet believed’” (Jn. 20:29).

These words on the blessedness of those who believe without seeing is really concerned about
the future, even though they are expressed in the past tense. The situation Jesus referred to would
also be true for every believer who lived *after* the apostolic age. Since then, no one has seen Him,
and no one today can believe in Him because he has seen Jesus physically, like the Apostles did.
They saw so that we might be able to believe - without seeing - by trusting their testimony.

But what does Jesus mean when he pronounces a beatitude or blessing on those who do not see
and yet believe?

He does not intend to commend those who believe without making any inquiry. It is one thing
to believe without *seeing*; it is another thing to believe without *consideration*. To believe without
seeing means that a person can be satisfied with something less than an absolute demonstration
or to have such a powerful inward illumination that it makes external evidences unnecessary.
We need this kind of faith. For if faith were only possible to those who could see with their physi-
cal eyes, belief in Christianity could not extend beyond the apostolic age. But to believe without
consideration is a different matter altogether. This means the person does not care whether the
thing that is to be believed is true or false. There is no benefit in that. This kind of faith has its
origin in everything that is corrupt in mankind - their ignorance, slothfulness, and spiritual
indifference. It cannot bring any blessing to those who possess it. Even if the truths are made to
seem so high, holy, and blessed, what good can a faith do that accepts them simply without any
investigation or without even so much as knowing what the truths that are believed mean?

The Lord Jesus, then, does not bestow a blessing on believing without considering the evidence.
Neither does He mean to say that all the joy goes to those who have never doubted like Thomas
did. This is just not true. Those who do not have trouble believing certainly enjoy a blessedness
that is all their own. They escape the torment of uncertainty, and the current of their spiritual life
flows along very smoothly. But those who have doubted, and finally believe, also have their peculiar joys. No stranger can experience their joy. The joy they experience comes from the fact that what was dead is alive again, and that which was lost is found. Theirs is the elation that Thomas experienced when he exclaimed, “My Lord and my God,” when he really thought Jesus was gone forever. Theirs is the bliss of someone who has dived into a deep sea and brought up a pearl of great price. Theirs is the comfort of having their former doubts used for growing their faith. Every doubt becomes a stone in the hidden foundation on which the superstructure of their creed is built. The distresses over their faith are converted into confirmations. To illustrate, when the agitations in the motions of the planets were discovered, people thought it would throw doubt on Newton’s theory of gravitation. Further research, however, confirmed his theory.

What, then, does the Lord Jesus mean by these words? Simply this: He wants those who must believe without seeing to understand that they do not have any reason to envy those who had an opportunity to see and then believed only after they saw. Those of us who live today, far from the original events, are very prone to imagine that we have been placed at a great disadvantage when compared with Jesus’ disciples. In some respects we are. Faith is more difficult for us than for them. But then we must not forget that to the degree that faith is difficult, it is more noble and precious to the heart. It is a greater accomplishment to be able to believe without seeing than to believe because we have seen. And if it takes more effort, the trial of faith only enhances its value. Furthermore, we must remember that we never reach the full blessedness of faith until what we believe shines in the light of its own self-evidence. Do you think the disciples were happy men just because they had seen their risen Lord and believed? They were much happier when they received clear insight into the whole mystery of redemption. They felt the proof of this or that specific fact or doctrine was unnecessary.

Jesus wanted His doubting disciple to have joy. By contrasting Thomas’ situation with those who believe without seeing, He lets us know that joy is attainable for us as well. We, too, may attain the blessedness of a faith that has been raised above all doubt by its own clear insight into divine truth. If we are faithful, we may rise to this blessedness from very humble beginnings. We may begin, in our weakness, by being Thomases, clinging eagerly to every piece of external evidence in order to save ourselves from drowning. But, as we grow, we can end up with a faith that almost amounts to sight, rejoicing in Jesus as our Lord and God, with joy unspeakable and full of glory.
Section I - Pastoral Duty

John 21:15-17

“I am going fishing,” Peter said to his companions sometime after all of them had left Jerusalem and returned to the region around the Sea of Galilee (Jn. 21:3). “We will also come with you,” replied Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John, and two others who are not named. There were seven of them, counting Peter. These were probably the only ones of the Eleven who were fishermen by trade. Everyone went on that fishing expedition con amore (with love; very earnestly). We presume, in the first place, that it was an expedition to get food. But it was also more than that. They were returning to their beloved old habits and familiar surroundings. It brought back many fond memories of the past. The trip was recreation as well as comfort to them. They welcomed it, because they had just gone through very painful and emotional experiences. It was a vacation for men who had become fatigued by their sorrow, the surprises they experienced, and by constantly being on guard. Every student who has over-taxed his brain and every craftsman who has worked until his muscles ached know first-hand about the abandon with which those seven disciples threw themselves into their boats and sailed out into the depths of the Sea of Galilee to practice their former trade.

What were these men thinking about while they were out on the water that night? Since Jesus made a significant reference to Peter’s youthfulness in His words spoken the next morning, we think their thoughts could have been something like this: “After all, is it not better to be simple fishermen than to be apostles of the Christian religion? What have we received by following Jesus? Certainly not what we expected. And do we have any reason to expect better things in the future? Our Master told us that what happens to us in the future will be similar to what He experienced - a life of sorrow probably ending in martyrdom. But here in our native province of Galilee, we can pursue our old calling. We can think, believe, and act as we please. And we will live in obscurity and be protected from all danger. We will be delightfully free and independent in this rustic life by the shores of the Sea! In earlier days, before we left our nets and followed Jesus, we put on our fishermen’s coats and walked wherever we wanted. When we become Apostles, all of that will end. We will be carrying a heavy burden of responsibility and will be obligated to constantly think about others, not ourselves. There is a possibility that we could have our personal liberty taken away. In fact, we may lose our lives.”
By putting these words into the mouths of the disciples, we do not violate probability. Their feelings are both natural and common in light of the serious responsibilities and dangers they are about to face. Perhaps no one ever put his hand to the plow, the plow of a difficult undertaking, without momentarily giving into the temptation to look back (see Lk. 9:62). It is a weakness that easily plagues human nature.

Yet, even though it is natural for people to look back, it is not wise. The thoughts that people have about their pasts are, for the most part, deceptive. This was certainly true in the case of the disciples. If the simple life they left behind was so happy, why did they leave it? Why were they so quick to leave their nets and boats to follow Jesus? Ah! Fishing in the blue waters of the Sea of Galilee did not satisfy every aspect of their beings. Life is more than food.

The kingdom of God is man's primary purpose. Furthermore, the life of a fisherman has its downside. It is by no means as romantic as it seems. You might sometimes go out with your nets, work at it all night, and catch absolutely nothing.

**Jesus Awakens the Seven Disciples**

This actually happened in the present situation. “That night they caught nothing” (Jn. 21:3b). The circumstances probably helped break the spell of romance and awakened the seven disciples from a dream. Whatever the case, there was One who knew all of their thoughts and would see to it that they did not maintain these feelings very long. “But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach” (vs. 4). He has come to reveal Himself to His disciples for the third time (the sixth appearance since He had risen), not as before, when He tried to convince them He had risen. This time He encouraged them to dedicate their minds and hearts to their future vocation - being fishers of men and under-shepherds of the flock. He wanted to do this before He departed from the world. All of His actions on this occasion are focused on that one purpose. First, He gives them instructions on how to catch a great haul of fish, reminds them of their former call to be His Apostles, and personally becomes an encouragement to them about their success in their apostolic work. Then He invites them to eat the fish He had already prepared on a fire that He had made on the shore. He wanted to cure them of the concerns of this world and to assure them that if they would seek to serve the kingdom with an undivided heart, He would take care of all of their desires. Finally, when the morning meal was over, He started a conversation with the disciple who had been the leader in the adventure on the lake that night and spoke so that all of the disciples could hear Him. He addressed Peter in a style that was intended to bring out all of his potential enthusiasm, as well as the enthusiasm of all of those present.

On the surface, the words Jesus spoke to Peter seem to pertain only to him. His purpose seems to be to restore him to his position as an Apostle, a position that Peter might have thought he
had forfeited because of his conduct at the high priest’s palace. This is the view commonly held about this memorable scene which occurred on the shore of the Sea. And whether we agree with it or not, we must admit that, for some reason or another, the Lord Jesus wanted to remind Peter of his recent failures. References to some of Peter’s past history are unmistakable. Even the time He selected to have the conversation is significant. It was while they were eating that Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. After they drank, Jesus gave His disciples His new commandment of love, and Peter vehemently affirmed his devotion to his Master and His cause. The name by which the risen Lord addressed His disciple - not Peter, but Simon son of Jonas - was intended to remind him of his weakness and of the occasion when Jesus warned him that Satan was about to sift him like wheat. At that time, He called him by the same name. Jesus repeated the question, “Do you love Me?” three times. This could not fail to remind Peter of his three-fold denial and to renew his grief. Note the form in which the question was first asked - “Do you love Me more than these?” (Jn. 21:15). This contains a clear allusion to Peter’s declaration, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Mt. 26:33). The command, “Tend My lambs,” points back to the prophetic announcement that Jesus made on the way to the Mount of Olives: “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’” (Mt. 26:31). He was saying to Peter, “Do not let the sheep be scattered like you were for a period of time.” The command, “Tend My lambs,” which is Jesus’ response to the first question, “Do you love Me more than these?” makes us think of these words: “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk. 22:32). The idea suggested in both cases is the same, namely, that the man who has fallen the most deeply and learned the most thoroughly what his own weaknesses are is, or ought to be, the best qualified person for strengthening those who are weak - for feeding the lambs.

Even with all of these references to Peter’s fall, we are not able to agree with those who maintain that, during this meeting, Jesus formally restored the erring disciple to his position as an Apostle. We do not deny that Peter needed restoration to comfort him and give him peace of mind after what he had done. But our difficulty is this: “Had he not been restored already? What was the meaning of that private meeting between him and Jesus, and what happened as a result of that meeting?” Who can doubt that after that meeting Peter’s mind was put at ease and, from that time on, he was at peace, both with himself and with his Master? If more evidence is needed to prove this point, look at Peter’s behavior when he recognized Jesus from the boat. As the Master stood on the shore in the gray morning, Peter threw himself into the sea because he was in such a hurry to be near his beloved Lord. Would a man who was afflicted with a guilty conscience act like this? Yet someone will argue, “There was still a need for a formal, public restoration since the offense that was caused by Peter’s sin was public.” We don’t believe this. But even if we agreed with this position, what do we make of it? Why didn’t the restoration take place sooner, at the first or second meeting in Jerusalem? Then consider this question: “Does the encounter by the shores of the sea really look like a formal transaction?” Can we consider that casual, easy, inti-
mate meeting and conversation after breakfast with two-thirds of the disciples as an ecclesiastic-
cal meeting that was assembled for the solemn purpose of restoring a fallen brother to church
fellowship? The idea is too cold and academic for anyone to take it seriously. One more objec-
tion to this theory needs to be stated: It fails to provide unity for the various parts of the whole
picture. It may explain the questioning to which Jesus subjected Peter, but it does not explain the
prophetic reference to his future history that He spoke about next. Peter’s fall did not suggest this
kind of thinking. There is no connection that can be made between these two statements: “I al-
low you to be an Apostle, even though you have sinned in the past,” and “I am warning you, that
as an Apostle, you will not have the freedom which you enjoyed in earlier days”. For his actions
did not spring from a love of freedom but from the fear of man.

**Peter’s Recall**

This encounter is not about Peter being restored to a position he had forfeited but his recall to a
more solemn understanding of his high calling. It seems to us that the thrust of Christ’s words to
him, and to all of his fellow-disciples, is not “I allow you,” but “I urge you.” By every means pos-
sible, Jesus would move them to give their hearts and souls to their apostolic work. He wanted
them to let the boats, nets, and everything else alone - forever. “Remember your own weakness,”
He would say to Peter. “Do your work because of my forgiving love and your gratitude for it. Do
it because your brothers need it. Your own past failure may teach you to be understanding and
compassionate. Do it because you are so devoted to Me. Taking all these things into consider-
ation, I charge you, on the evening before My departure, to be a hero. Play the man. Be strong
for others, not for yourself. ‘Shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but
voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness’ (I Pt. 5:2).
Do not avoid responsibility. Do not covet leisure. Bend your neck to the yoke and let love make
it light. Liberty is sweet to your heart. But patient, burden-bearing love, though less pleasant, is
far more noble.”

Jesus wanted this message to be heard by everyone present. Peter was just the most appropriate
one to be selected as the medium for conveying it. He was an excellent “text” on which to preach
a sermon on consecration. His character and conduct furnished all the poetry, argument, and il-
lustration that was necessary to give passion and substance to the theme. How his spontaneous,
passionate spirit loved unrestrained freedom! And what heart is not touched when it hears that a
man like Peter has disciplined his excitable, temperamental spirit to become patient and submis-
sive? The young, playful, determined fisherman went here and there and did just as he pleased;
the old, saintly Apostle, meek as a lamb, stretched forth his arms to be bound for martyrdom.
What a moving contrast! In some ways, Peter was the strongest character of the Twelve. Yet this
passionate man was in other senses the weakest. Who, therefore, could better illustrate man’s
need for shepherding? Had he learned what his weaknesses were? Through this knowledge, had
he grown even stronger? If so, then how could anyone better state the general responsibility for
When Jesus required Peter to demonstrate his love by becoming a shepherd to the little flock of believers, He adapted His demand to his spiritual capacity. Loving the Savior does not necessarily mean one will feed the sheep. When Jesus’ disciples are immature and inexperienced, they are sheep. Only when the weak become strong and established in grace can they become shepherds and care for others. As Jesus gives Peter and his brothers these pastoral responsibilities, He is making an announcement that they have now passed, or are about to pass, out of the category of being weak into the category of being strong. In essence, He says to them, “Until now, you have been like sheep. You needed to be guided, watched over, and defended by the wisdom and courage of someone else. Now, however, the time has come for you to become shepherds. You must be able and willing to do for the weak what I have done for you. Until now, you have allowed Me to care for you. From now on, you must get used to the idea that you must be looked to as guardians, in the same way that you looked to Me. Until now, you have been like children under Me, your Parent. From now on, you must be parents yourselves and take charge of the children. Until now, you have been like raw recruits, likely to panic and flee from danger. From now on, you must be like captains who have conquered their fears. By your calm determination, you must inspire the soldiers of the cross by acting like heroes - daring.” To summarize, Jesus, announces to Peter and the rest that they are now ready to make the transition from boyhood to manhood. They would change from being students and would begin to govern themselves; from being dependent and being exempt from caring for others, to having influence, authority, and responsibility. They would be leaders and commanders in the Christian community, doing the work for which they had been trained for so long. This transition and transformation actually took place shortly afterwards. The disciples assumed the position of Christ’s deputies or substitutes after His ascension. Peter was the main leader, though not the Pope, in the infant Church. And their character was changed to prepare them for their high positions. The timid disciples became bold Apostles. Peter, who weakly denied the Lord in the courtyard, heroically confessed Him before the Sanhedrin. The ignorant and uncomprehending disciples, who had been continually misunderstanding their Master’s words, became filled with the spirit of wisdom and understanding. People listened to their words as if they were listening to the very words of Jesus Himself.

Shepherds or Sheep?
We have said that loving Christ does not automatically imply His disciples will take on the role of a shepherd. Rather, loving Him is demonstrated in the greatest number of believers by their simply hearing the shepherd’s voice, following him, and being willing to be guided by those who are wiser than themselves. We must add that all who are motivated by the spirit of love for the Redeemer will either be shepherds or sheep. They will either be used in caring for the souls of
others or thankfully using the provision which has been made for the care of their own souls. Too many, however, do not fall under either category. True, some are sheep, but sheep that have gone astray. Others are neither sheep nor shepherds. They are self-reliant but have no interest in helping others. They are too self-willed to be led but have no inclination to make their strength and experience available for their brothers and sisters. They utilize all their talents in order to serve their own personal interests. These kinds of people can be found in the Church and the State. They will do anything to avoid holding office or taking responsibility, and they severely criticize those who have placed themselves under the authority of the Church. They comment on their timidity and bondage, in a similar way that unbroken colts (if they could speak) might comment on the tameness of horses who have been harnessed. The bits and bridles that form a part of the Church harness come in the form of confessions and become the target of their censure.

Now, it is alright to be like a wild colt, rejoicing in unrestrained liberty for a period of time while one is young. But it is not acceptable to resist the yoke for a lifetime. “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1). Without a doubt, it is fun to be free of responsibility and to live without being restrained in one's opinions and actions. Who wouldn't want to throw off those who depend on us, to live the life of gods, without any concern for others? However, it is not the main purpose for any person's existence, certainly not for someone who is wise and strong, to be free from caring for others or free from trouble. Whoever has a Christian heart must feel that he is strong and wise for the sake of others who want strength and wisdom. He will fulfill the shepherd's office, even though he approaches his responsibilities with fear and trembling and is conscious of the fact that he is agreeing to have his freedom and independence greatly curtailed. The yoke of love which binds us to others is not always easy, and the burden of caring for them is not light. But, for the most part, it is better and more noble to be a subordinate serving under someone who is loving than to be a free person living in utter selfishness. It is better that Peter is a prisoner and martyr for the gospel, than Simon begging his Lord to “save Yourself” or basking in luxurious ease on the Mount of Transfiguration saying, “Lord, it is good to be here” (Mt. 17:4). It is better to be bound by others and led to death as a good shepherd who is sacrificed for the sheep, than Simon putting on his own clothes and walking along with an apathetic attitude like that of a modern pococurantist (an indifferent, apathetic person). It may be acceptable to dream or sing about living life by the ocean, in the woods, in the mountains, or in the clouds. But the only life from which genuine heroism and poetry comes is the one who spends it on this solid, ordinary earth, engaged in the humble work of doing good.

*Evidence for Peter’s Readiness*

Finally, take a look at the evidence that is given in Peter’s answers to his Lord’s questions, that he is truly ready for the responsible work to which he has been called. It is not simply that he can
come to Jesus as the One who knows all things and say, “You know that I love You” (Jn. 21:17). For, as we have already suggested, every sincere disciple can do that. There are two specific signs of spiritual maturity that can be discerned here. They are never found in anyone who is weak in grace and are not found previously in Peter himself. First, there is an obvious humility - very noticeable in such a driven man. Peter no longer makes comparisons between himself and his brothers like he had done before. In spite of what seems to be true, he argues that he does love Jesus, but he is careful not to say, “I love You more than they do.” Not only does he not say this, but he doesn’t even think it. The bragging spirit has left him. He is a humble, subdued, wise man and is spiritually prepared for the pastorate for the simple reason that he has stopped thinking about himself as supremely competent for it.

The second sign of maturity that can be discerned in Peter’s responses is godly sorrow for his past failure: “Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’” (Jn. 21:17). He was grieved because when he was asked three times about his love, he was reminded that his three-fold denial was the reason for calling his love into question. Notice, in particular, the feeling that emerged over this delicate reference to his former sins. It was grief - not irritation, anger, or shame. There is no pride, passion, or vanity in this man’s soul; only holy, meek contrition. One cannot observe any sudden rush of blood to his face but only the gracious, softened expression of a penitent, chastised spirit. The man who can accept these references to his sins is not only able to tend the sheep; he can even nurse the lambs. In a spirit of meekness, he will restore those who have fallen. He will be compassionate toward offenders, not with a questionable love that is unwilling to condemn sin strongly, but with a genuine love from one who has received mercy for the sins he has repented of. Because of his kind compassion, sinners will be converted to God, having genuine sorrow in their hearts for their offenses and humble hope that they will be pardoned. By Peter’s watchful care, many sheep will be kept from ever straying from the fold.