

A Commentary on the Book of Matthew

Daily Insights into the book of Matthew
as presented on the Internet blog,

“The Bible As I See It”

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Table of Contents

The Genealogy of Jesus	9
(Matthew 1).....	9
Similarities between Jesus and Moses Births	9
(Matthew 2).....	9
The Baptism of Jesus and John the Baptist’s Ministry.....	10
(Matthew 3).....	10
The Temptation of Christ.....	11
(Matthew 4).....	11
The Beatitudes.....	12
(Matthew 5:1-12).....	12
Salt of the Earth and Jesus Establishes the Standards of Christianity.....	15
(Matthew 5:13-30).....	15
Teachings on the Higher Call of Christ	16
(Matthew 5:31-48).....	16
The Lord’s Prayer and Issues of Seeking Praise from Men	18
(Matthew 6:1-15).....	18
Seek First the Kingdom of God and other teachings.....	20
(Matthew 6:16-34).....	20
Judge not that you be not Judged	22
(Matthew 7:1-6).....	22
Ask and it will be Given, Seek and you will Find, Knock and it will be Opened ..	23
(Matthew 7:7-11).....	23
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you	25
(Matthew 7:12).....	25
Enter by the Narrow Gate	26
(Matthew 7:13-14).....	26
Beware of False Prophets and False Teachers	28
(Matthew 7:15-20).....	28
Who will go into God’s Kingdom?	29
(Matthew 7:21-23).....	29
Build Your House Upon The Rock	30
(Matthew 7:24-29).....	30
Why Jesus Healed the Sick	31
(Matthew 8:1-13).....	31
The Unlimited Healing Power of Jesus	33
(Matthew 8:14-17).....	33
Trust Jesus in All Situations	34
(Matthew 8:18-27).....	34
The Power of Jesus Conquers All Things.....	35
(Matthew 8:28-34).....	35
Jesus’ Power to Forgive Sins	36
(Matthew 9:1-8).....	36
Jesus Came to Call the Sinners	37
(Matthew 9:9-13).....	37
Fasting in the New Covenant	39
(Matthew 9:14-17).....	39
Your Faith has Made You Well	40

(Matthew 9:18-26).....	40
Sheep Without a Shepherd.....	41
(Matthew 9:27-38).....	41
Power and Authority.....	43
(Matthew 10:1-4).....	43
The Disciples Commission and Earning their Income	44
(Matthew 10:5-15).....	45
Sheep in the midst of Wolves	46
(Matthew 10:16-23).....	46
Suffering for Jesus Sake	47
(Matthew 10:24-26).....	47
There is Hope in God for He Cares for Us	49
(Matthew 10:26-35).....	49
Not Peace but a Sword.....	50
(Matthew 10:34-39).....	50
Representatives and Rewards from God.....	52
(Matthew 10:40-42).....	52
John the Baptist Seeks Proof that Jesus is the Christ	53
(Matthew 11:1-6).....	53
Who was John the Baptist?.....	54
(Matthew 11:7-15).....	54
Damned if you Do and Damned if you Don't.....	56
(Matthew 11:16-19).....	56
Miracles don't Change the Heart of Non-Believers	57
(Matthew 11:20-24).....	57
The Revelation to the Babes in Christ.....	59
(Matthew 11:25-27).....	59
My Yoke is Easy and My Burden is Light	60
(Matthew 11:28-30).....	60
Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.....	61
(Matthew 12:1-8).....	62
Self Righteousness and Healing on the Sabbath.....	63
(Matthew 12:9-14).....	63
Where there is Life there is Hope.....	65
(Matthew 12:15-21).....	65
A Divided Kingdom will not Stand.....	66
(Matthew 12:22-28).....	66
The Unforgivable Sin	68
(Matthew 12:29-32).....	68
Out of the Abundance of the Heart the Mouth Speaks.....	70
(Matthew 12:33-37).....	70
A Sign from God.....	71
(Matthew 12:38-42).....	71
One Important Reason to Receive the Holy Spirit	72
(Matthew 12:43-45).....	72
The Family of God	73
(Matthew 12:46-50).....	73
The Parable of the Sower.....	75
(Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23).....	75
Why Jesus Spoke in Parables.....	77

(Matthew 13:10-17).....	77
Weeds Among the Wheat, Wheat and the Tares.....	79
(Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43).....	79
The Parable of Mustard Seed.....	80
(Matthew 13:31-32).....	80
The Kingdom of God is Within You - Parable of the Leaven.....	82
(Matthew 13:33).....	82
Jesus and the Parables.....	83
(Matthew 13:34-43).....	83
Hidden Treasure Parable.....	84
(Matthew 13:44).....	84
Parable of the Merchant Seeking Pearls.....	85
(Matthew 13:45-46).....	85
The Good the Bad and the Ugly.....	86
(Matthew 13:47-50).....	86
Treasures New and Old.....	86
(Matthew 13:51-52).....	86
A Prophet is Without Honour.....	88
(Matthew 13:53-58).....	88
Beheading of John the Baptist.....	90
(Matthew 14:1-12).....	90
Fishes and Loaves Bible Story.....	91
(Matthew 14:13-21).....	91
Walking on Water with Jesus.....	92
(Matthew 14:22-33).....	92
The Hem of His Garment.....	94
(Matthew 14:34-36).....	94
Traditions of Men Versus the Word of God.....	95
(Matthew 15:1-9).....	95
What Comes Out Defiles a Man.....	96
(Matthew 15:10-20).....	96
Crumbs from the Master's Table - The Canaanite Woman's Faith.....	97
(Matthew 15:21-28).....	97
Jesus Healing People.....	99
(Matthew 15:29-31).....	99
Jesus Feeds the Crowd.....	100
(Matthew 15:29-39).....	100
Bible Signs of the Times.....	101
(Matthew 16:1-4).....	101
Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees.....	103
(Matthew 16:5-12).....	103
On this Rock I will build my Church.....	104
(Matthew 16:13-20).....	104
Jesus Foretells his Death and Resurrection.....	106
(Matthew 16:21-23).....	106
Whoever Loses His Life for My Sake Will Find It.....	107
(Matthew 16:24-28).....	107
Transfiguration of Jesus.....	109
(Matthew 17:1-8).....	109
First Elijah Must Come.....	110

(Matthew 17:9-13).....	110
The Power of a Prayer of Faith	112
(Matthew 17:14-21).....	112
Jesus Announces His Death.....	113
(Matthew 17:22-23).....	113
Paying the Temple Tax.....	114
(Matthew 17:24-27).....	114
Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?.....	115
(Matthew 18:1-6).....	115
Temptations to Sin are Sure to Come.....	116
(Matthew 18:7-9).....	116
Seeking the Lost Sheep.....	118
(Matthew 18:10-14).....	118
Dealing with Sin in the Church.....	119
(Matthew 18:15-20).....	119
Forgiving Your Brother.....	121
(Matthew 18:21-22).....	121
The Parable of the Two Debtors	122
(Matthew 18:23-35).....	122
The Sanctity of Marriage	124
(Matthew 19:1-9).....	124
Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.....	126
(Matthew 19:10-12).....	126
No Gatekeepers between Man and God	127
(Matthew 19:13-15).....	128
Perfection in Jesus Christ.....	128
(Matthew 19:16-22).....	128
Hard for a Rich Man to Enter the Kingdom of Heaven.....	129
(Matthew 19:23-26).....	130
The Promise to Jesus Followers.....	131
(Matthew 19:27-30).....	131
Labourers in the Vineyard	132
(Matthew 20:1-16).....	132
Jesus Foretells His Death.....	133
(Matthew 20:17-19).....	133
The Servant Leader.....	134
(Matthew 20:20-28).....	134
Jesus Healing the Blind	136
(Matthew 20:29-34).....	136
Jesus Enters into Jerusalem.....	137
(Matthew 21:1-11).....	137
Marketing in the Church.....	138
(Matthew 21:12-13).....	138
Jesus in the Temple	140
(Matthew 21:14-17).....	141
Ask in Faith and it Will Be Done.....	142
(Matthew 21:18-22).....	142
Jesus Confounds the Priests.....	143
(Matthew 21:23-28).....	143
Doing the Will of the Father	144

(Matthew 21:23-27).....	144
Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard	146
(Matthew 21:33-41).....	146
The Stone that the Builder Rejected.....	147
(Matthew 21:42-46).....	147
Parable of the Marriage Feast - The Great Invitation.....	148
(Matthew 22:1-10).....	148
Wedding Garment	150
(Matthew 22:11-14).....	150
Revelation 6:11.....	150
Revelation 7:9.....	150
Revelation 7:13-14.....	150
Paying Taxes to Caesar.....	151
(Matthew 22:15-22).....	151
Marriage in the Resurrection.....	152
(Matthew 22:23-33).....	152
Jesus is the Son of David	154
(Matthew 22:41-46).....	154
Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites.....	155
(Matthew 23:1-4).....	155
The Greatest Among You Shall be the Least.....	156
(Matthew 23:5-12).....	156
You Shut the Kingdom of Heaven Against Men	158
(Matthew 23:13-15).....	158
Woe to You Blind Guides.....	159
(Matthew 23:16-22).....	159
Straining Out a Gnat and Swallowing a Camel	160
(Matthew 23:23-24).....	160
Cleanse the Inside of the Cup First	162
(Matthew 23:25-26).....	162
You Are like Whitewashed Tombs	163
(Matthew 23:27-28).....	163
Killing the Prophets.....	164
(Matthew 23:29-39).....	164
Signs of the Close of the Age.....	166
(Matthew 24:1-8).....	166
Trouble for the End Times Church.....	168
(Matthew 24:9-14).....	168
Wherever the Body is there the Eagles will be Gathered	169
(Matthew 24:15-28) - Part 1.....	169
The Return of the Lord	171
(Matthew 24:15-28) - Part 2.....	171
The Second Coming of the Lord.....	172
(Matthew 24:29-31).....	172
The Lesson of the Fig Tree	173
(Matthew 24:32-35).....	173
No One Knows the Day and Hour.....	174
(Matthew 24:36-44).....	174
Warning for the Servants of God	176
(Matthew 24:45-51).....	176

Parable of the Ten Virgins	177
(Matthew 25:1-13).....	177
The Parable of the Talents	178
(Matthew 25:14-30).....	178
To Serve the Lord, Serve His People	181
(Matthew 25:31-46).....	181
Conspiracy Against Jesus	183
(Matthew 26:1-5).....	183
Anointing of Jesus for Burial.....	184
(Matthew 26:6-13).....	184
Judas Betrays Jesus.....	186
(Matthew 26:14-16).....	186
The Last Supper	187
(Matthew 26:17-25).....	187
Breaking of Bread in Communion	188
(Matthew 26:26-29).....	188
The Disciples Will Fall Away.....	190
(Matthew 26:30-35).....	190
Jesus Prays in the Garden at Gethsemane.....	191
(Matthew 26:36-46).....	191
Jesus is Betrayed	193
(Matthew 26:47-56).....	193
The Trial of Jesus before Caiaphas	194
(Matthew 26:57-68).....	194
Peter Denies Jesus	195
(Matthew 26:69-75).....	195
Thirty Pieces of Silver	197
(Matthew 27:1-10).....	197
Jesus before Pilate	198
(Matthew 27:11-14).....	198
Jesus and Barabbas.....	199
(Matthew 27:15-26).....	199
Humiliation of Jesus.....	200
(Matthew 27:27-31).....	200
Jesus Nailed to the Stake	201
(Matthew 27:32-44).....	201
The Death of Jesus	202
(Matthew 27:45-50).....	202
Signs Attending the Death of Jesus.....	203
(Matthew 27:51-54).....	203
Jesus Earthly Family.....	204
(Matthew 27:55-56).....	204
The Burial of Jesus	205
(Matthew 27:57-66).....	205
The Resurrection of Jesus	206
(Matthew 28:1-10).....	206
Jesus Resurrection Cover up by the Priests	207
(Matthew 28:11-15).....	207
The Great Commission Part 1	208
(Matthew 28:16-20).....	208

Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew
www.freegiftfromgod.com

The Great Commission Part 2.....	208
(Matthew 28:16-20).....	208
The Great Commission Part 3.....	210
(Matthew 28:16-20).....	210

The Genealogy of Jesus

(Matthew 1)

It seemed like a good idea to capture the things I am learning as I read the Bible, and that is the purpose of this blog.

Anyone who has read the New Testament knows that the first chapter of Matthew is a lot of long and sometimes difficult to pronounce names. But it is an important piece of scripture as it shows the genealogy of Jesus. The Old Testament said that one of the descendants of Abraham, Judah and David the King would come as the Messiah. Matthew 1:1-16 shows that lineage and is evidence of who Christ is from a prophetic perspective.

Verses 18-19 show some interesting things too. It occurred to me that after the initial mentioning of Joseph, he hardly gets mentioned again in the Bible. And yet it stands to reason that he was around for he was a carpenter & Jesus too must have learned that trade from his supposed father. Also we see that Joseph was a good and just man for the scripture says that he was unwilling to put Mary to shame and was going to divorce her quietly. When you consider that he had discovered she was pregnant the first thought any rational person would make is that she had been unfaithful. Yet in spite of that Joseph was prepared to keep a lid on the matter and not make a big fuss, not for his own sake, but for hers. This is a sign of a just and reasonable man.

Of course what we see then is angel of the Lord coming to Joseph to explain what the situation is and that he should continue to take Mary as his wife.

Now what is also interesting in what the angel said to Joseph is the reason why Jesus was coming to the world. In verse 21 we see that Jesus was being born, "...to save his people from their sins." This is the primary reason why Jesus came and we see this same purpose repeated in many places throughout the gospels. The very reason that Jesus was born, lived and died was to save us from our sins. This is a significant part of Jesus' ministry and one that will unfold in future posts.

Similarities between Jesus and Moses Births

(Matthew 2)

The whole book of Matthew focuses quite heavily on the fulfillment of prophecy. This is very clear in this second chapter. We see that in all aspects of his life Jesus fulfilled all of the prophecies pertaining to him beginning with his birth in Bethlehem.

Verse 11 is interesting in that it shows the wise men "go into the house" to worship. This blows apart the traditional Christmas nativity scenes where the wise men bring

their gifts while Jesus is in the manger. It is made even clearer that some time had passed, and thus Joseph and Mary had moved from the manger to a house, when we see that Herod's edict to kill all male children under the age of two years old, based upon the time the wise men had given him.

But in spite of Herod's evil plans, God protected the young Jesus by warning his parents to get out of that place and go to Egypt...and again this fulfilled scripture, as did their return to Nazareth so that Jesus could be "called a Nazarene" and "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

There is another interesting aspect to this sequence of events as well. We saw that when Moses was alive he said that the Lord would raise up another prophet like him, from amongst their brethren (Deut 18:15-16, Acts 3:22-23). What we see is that there are many parallels between the lives of Moses & Jesus. For example, the rulers at the times of both their childhoods sought to kill all male children under the age of two. They were also both brought up out of Egypt. Moses was given the Old Covenant law to teach Israel and Jesus brought the New Covenant into effect to save the spiritual Israel. There are many other interesting similarities in their lives and again this strengthens the fulfilment of scripture and proof that Jesus is the Christ.

The Baptism of Jesus and John the Baptist's Ministry

(Matthew 3)

Here we see the beginning of John the Baptists ministry. John came to do two things. He came to prepare the way for the Lord and to bear witness to Jesus as being the Christ. Was it necessary for him to do this? Probably not, but under the law a matter was considered true if two or more people witnessed it. And besides, it was prophesied that John would appear and do this work. He was the prophet that came in the spirit of Elijah as spoken of elsewhere.

Now we see John preach baptism as a sign for the repentance of sins, and this was very important. He introduced this process that was later carried forward into the New Covenant. John also made the point that it is not enough just to be baptised for repentance but you needed to be live a repentant life. He told the Jews that they could not simply rely on their genealogy to save them; they needed to "...bear fruit that befits repentance." It is the same today. You cannot go through the motions and expect salvation; you need to live in accordance with the word.

Now the New Covenant did not exist in John's time because it was not ratified and could not come into existence until after Jesus had died. The Old Covenant required the sacrifice of goats and bulls and the blood of these animals sufficed to do two things. Firstly they brought the covenant into existence & secondly they were the offering for sin. Jesus death was similar in that His blood brought the New Covenant into effect, but it was not an offering for sin but took away mans sin. To enter the

New Covenant then we need to enter into Jesus' death, which is done through baptism.

Now John also recognised Jesus was mightier than himself for he said when Jesus came for baptism that he (John) needed to be baptised by Christ. But we see in Jesus' answer a very interesting response. Jesus said he needed to be baptised by John, "...for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Baptism is necessary to meet the requirements to fulfil all righteousness and without baptism this cannot be achieved. In Jesus' case he did not need to be baptised, as John knew, but by being baptised Jesus provided an example for us all to follow. No person can say they do not need to be baptised because Jesus was not baptised. That is how important baptism is in the new covenant. Indeed baptism is the mechanism by which we enter the New Covenant through Christ Jesus. He said elsewhere that, "I am the door" and we need to enter by the door. We do that through being baptised into his death.

We also see that God the Father was pleased with Jesus and this process because God the Father gave his seal of approval saying from heaven, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."

The Temptation of Christ

(Matthew 4)

This chapter is interesting for we see in it the beginning of Jesus' ministry and this is interesting because we also see that before he began he was attacked by Satan and tempted in the wilderness. Also note that the devil mocked Jesus for he began his first two temptations with the words, "If you are the Son of God..." The devil knew full well that Jesus was the Son of God and that there was no "if" about it. But using such mockery was an attempt to goad Jesus into doing the devil's will rather than the will of God. We see this same thing as Christians. People will say, "...and you call yourself a Christian..." when they mock or stand opposed to us. As the devil sought proof's from Jesus with his mockery so too the devils servants do the same thing to the servants of the Lord. Don't fall into that trap for that is what it is. Jesus was tempted and attacked at other times too, but this first occasion is interesting as it was to test his faith in a number of key areas.

First (vs. 3-4) the devil tempts him with human and physical needs. After forty days without food Jesus would be weak for the scripture says he was hungry, and the devil knew this. So he offered bread, food for the physical body, in an attempt to lure Jesus astray. What we can take from this is that we too will be tempted and lured by the physical things we may need or want. Also the devil does not play fair for he tempted Jesus at his weakest moment and with the very thing that would solve his immediate need, but that would also have put Jesus into the power of the devil. He will do the same to us and as Jesus fought back with scripture, we too need to use the power of the word to fight back. This then suggests how important it is to learn and understand the word, otherwise you will be unable to fight off the temptations of the devil.

Second (vs. 5-7) the devil tempts Jesus with fanaticism to call on the miraculous power of God. Note here that the devil actually uses scripture to attack Jesus. There are some who do take such fanatical stands and essentially put God to the test, and this is not what we are called to do. There is security and protection in the Lord, but we should not put Him to the test. We are not greater than God and so we have no right to try him or to tempt him through fanatical religious over-zealousness. In this day there are some who seek miracles and the miraculous power of God, but in reality those things are not the most important things. Ultimately miracles will cease to occur for they will not be necessary. Instead we are to seek God's kingdom and learn to live in His love for love lasts forever. Common sense apart from what the scripture teaches would surely show that what lasts into eternity is much more important and valuable than something that is only temporary. This is a message repeated in a number of places in the Bible and will be dealt with further in those places. Finally we see the devil tempt Jesus with power, wealth and riches. What we see from this is that the devil is in control of the kingdoms of this world and in the Luke version of this scripture (Luke 4:5-6) we see the devil state that the kingdoms of this earth have been delivered to the devil and he gives them to whomever he wants. To that end then as Christians we should learn not to desire the things of this world for they are not of God. Riches, money, wealth and power in this world are not the things of God but are temporary and exist only for this lifetime. But to attain the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ is eternal and is not of this world but from God. That is where our focus and priority should be.

In all of these temptations the Lord defeats the devil by scripture. We too need a knowledge of the scripture to fight Satan and his attacks. And after the devil was sent packing we see that angels came and ministered to his needs. In the same way when we go through temptation the Lord will strengthen, comfort and establish us in due course.

When Jesus began preaching in Galilee we see that like John the Baptist, he began by preaching for the people to repent. We will see later in Acts that the disciples too began their ministries in this same way and a short review of Hebrews 6:1-2 will show that repentance is one of the six key foundation teachings of the New Covenant. Now whilst I have said above that miracles are not the most important thing, they do have their place. For we see that as Jesus preached the word (vs.23-25) that he did heal the sick and perform many fantastic works. But we see that the key to miracles was explained in Mark 16:17, "...these signs will accompany those who believe." and in Mark 16:20, "...they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it." So miracles have a place as a confirmation of the message. But this is not something that can be taken but must be given by the Lord. When the message is right he will provide the signs and confirm it where necessary.

The Beatitudes

(Matthew 5:1-12)

It occurred to me that there is an order to the preaching of the word by Jesus that I had not seen before. In the previous chapter we saw the beginning of his preaching which starts with repentance. Repentance was the focus of John the Baptist's ministry and also the starting point of the disciples ministry after Jesus had been put to death. The essence of repentance is that it is a state of preparation. Repentance is meant to prepare a person so that they turn away from an old life of sin, ready to commence a new life with Christ. In essence it is like "turning over a new leaf" to start afresh. So we see that in each case the three key ministries of the New Testament begin by teaching the people to come to a state of preparation for what is to come. In particular we note that John the Baptist's primary ministry was to fulfil the prophecy that said he was to prepare the way for the Christ and his focus was repentance from sin.

But now we see that after repentance the next phase of Jesus teachings are shown in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7 which covers the teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount. There are many teachings in this sermon which I will get to shortly, but when you stand back to examine the sermon at a high level we see that Jesus was establishing a new standard. He was in effect setting the bar for what is the new life in the New Covenant, and it is a higher standard than what was required under the law. The law defined the difference between right and wrong, but the new standard commenced in the sermon on the mount leads to perfection. As we will see in later chapters and books, Jesus did not expect man to be able to do this by himself. It is testified in many places that man could not even keep the law, so how could man be expected to attain a higher standard than the law by himself? Man can't but within the New Covenant teachings we see that Christ and God have provided help through the provision of the Holy Spirit to counsel, teach and guide us as we walk the new path. But I am getting ahead of myself as this will unfold in future sections. The process of establishing the standard up front is not unusual in the Bible. We see that in Genesis chapter 1 that God described His plan for creation and that it would be perfect. We then see in the following chapters the commencement of that work when he talks about, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created." (Gen 2:4) So this "process approach" in the New Testament follows a similar process to one already established.

Now in Matthew 5:1-12 we see what is commonly called the Beatitudes. Each of these shows a reward for a state of being or suffering for the sake of a person's belief in God. They provide hope for those who follow Christ according to the New Covenant. In the verses we see:

Vs. 3 – The poor in spirit, that is those who are not high-spirited or flighty, but rather are stable and sober of mind. These people shall receive the kingdom of heaven. High spirited people are into everything and their lives are like whirlwinds, always in a hurry and a rush. But Christ is seeking people who are steady, calm and able to consider a matter without rushing off into all manner of schemes. Wisdom is found in quiet places and not in turmoil. Turmoil promotes haste which can lead to poor decisions and loss without consideration for consequences. But wisdom is pure, peaceable, considerate and above all is the gift of God.

Vs. 4 – Those who mourn shall be comforted. Mourning is the outcome of loss and grief and the Lord promises that there will be no grief in His Kingdom. Any who have

suffered and wept will find comfort in Jesus Christ both in his Kingdom here and tomorrow. Many people mourn the loss of loved ones, but in Christ our mourning does not become devastation for we know where those we love are going. When there is knowledge there is understanding and in the case of the loss of loved ones we have some understanding of what the Lord is doing and take comfort from that knowledge.

Vs. 5 – The meek shall inherit the earth. This scripture flies in the face of conventional wisdom that suggests men of aggression and force will have power. But in Christ's kingdom it is the meek who will be in charge. In all cases in history we have seen aggressive people try to take possession of power by force in this world, and in all cases they come to nought. Yes they may have control for a time but in the end their situation ends in ruin and despair. Consider the contrasts of people like Hitler or Saddam Hussein in comparison to Ghandi and Martin Luther King. Peaceful protest brought about a greater and lasting change than violent aggression and force. The greatest of the meek and peaceful leaders ever known was Jesus Christ and his words echo across the millennia. Also it should be noted that meek does not mean weak. Jesus, Martin Luther King and Ghandi as examples could never be considered weak but each of them was powerful in their opposition to evil and wrongdoing, but through peaceful means.

Vs. 6 – This verse indicates the need to be seeking the kingdom. To those who are seeking righteousness and wanting to do what is right with all their heart and soul there is a promise they will receive it. Righteousness does not come from anything a man does or can do but comes as the gift of God. It is the essence of the teaching of the New Covenant that it is through faith in Jesus Christ that we receive the gift of God's righteousness. And if we are hungering and thirsting for it, we will receive it.

Vs. 7 – Those who show mercy will receive mercy. There are many teachings in a similar vein throughout the New Covenant, such as "Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword," and "You will reap what you sow." This teaching in the verse follows that same line. It is incumbent on all people that they show mercy towards those who need it, for at some time we too may be in a similar position. And likewise if we are merciful towards our brethren and neighbours, then God will show us mercy when we are in need.

Vs. 8 – The pure in heart will see God. No one who is not pure in heart will see God but will be rejected by him. The call of the New Covenant is to lead us to learn how our hearts may be purified. The promise of eternity with the Lord is in becoming pure of heart, and this is achievable not through anything we do, but through the working of the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus Christ. We can and will be transformed in our hearts as we learn and walk with Christ.

Vs. 9 – The peacemakers shall be called the sons of God. There are several ways this might be read. Firstly it can be those who make peace with others or broker peace between others, and secondly it is those who learn how to be at peace and make peace within themselves. In my opinion it is this second group to whom this scripture refers. Throughout the bible we see the value and impact of peace. Jesus calls us to peace and through his teachings we can find peace within. And if we are at peace within ourselves, then we are at peace with the rest of the world. If we can gain internal peace, then whatever occurs outside of our minds and bodies cannot have any impact

or influence on us. A peaceful heart and mind can overcome all obstacles. Jesus had many names and titles, one of which is the “Prince of Peace.” As the Son of God then it stands to reason that those who make peace and find peace in themselves will be identified with God also as his sons and daughters.

Vs. 10-12 – These verses offer both warning and reward. Those who seek to follow the righteous path of Jesus will be persecuted by those who do not. There are no “ifs and buts” in this matter, it is a simple matter of fact. But the reward for suffering persecution for righteousness sake is to receive the kingdom of God. There are many people in this world who are persecuted for many reasons, but it is those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for following the ways of God, to whom this promise is made. Jesus shows that we should not be surprised quoting the examples of the persecution of God’s prophets that went before. If they persecuted those righteous men and Jesus himself, be assured they will persecute Christians today. But if we seek the Lord and learn the ways of righteousness, finding peace in our hearts and the meekness of Jesus Christ forms in our minds, then we will not be overthrown by persecution but will attain the promise of receiving God’s kingdom in due course.

Salt of the Earth and Jesus Establishes the Standards of Christianity

(Matthew 5:13-30)

We see in verse 13 it says, “You are the salt of the earth.” How often do we hear this said as a description of someone who is considered a good person in some way? And yet today salt is often condemned as causing high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems. However this is due to the excesses of salt used in our modern highly over-processed foods. But this was not so in the Lord’s day and it would not be an issue today if salt were used sparingly. At one time salt was very precious, and indeed it was sometimes used to pay people for their work, which is where the word “salary” is derived. Salt was precious and highly regarded. Even under the old covenant they spoke of a “covenant of salt” which was an eternal covenant and binding. Jesus was saying in this section that those people who followed him were like salt. As a light sprinkling of salt can turn some food from dull and bland to a taste sensation, so too those who hear and do God’s will “season” mankind and bring life in God’s eyes where there is none. In God’s eyes those who follow Jesus are like salt as it was viewed in Christ’s time: they are both valuable and precious to Him.

Again in vs. 14-16 Jesus says of his followers, “You are the light of the world.” Light infers insight, knowledge, understanding, wisdom and life. Those who choose to follow his path will find these things in his teachings and shine as beacons of hope and light to the rest of the world. He says, “Let your light so shine before men,” and in truth it would be hard not to do so. Those who follow Christ’s ways will be perceived as being different from those who do not for they live by a different set of standards and principles. In the world men live by such adages as, “Greed is good,” and “What’s in it for me,” and “Take care of number one,” and “Dog eat dog,” and so on. But in Christ we live by the teachings of, “Love thy neighbour,” with a focus on

compassion, giving, care for others and attitudes of humility, love, peace, faith and hope. This is often the opposite of what the world is like and so a Christian will stand out for their light will shine forth.

Jesus begins to speak in verses 17-20 of the law and our relationship to the new covenant. He came to fulfil the law not to abolish it and yet through Christ we can have freedom from the law. It was necessary that he fulfil the law for to be the perfect sacrifice so we could be set free from the law and sin, he had to be without sin. The only way a person can be without sin is to fulfil the law, and no man is capable of that. Although he has set us free from law in his death, the law is still in effect for it was a covenant of God and is thus in place until God says it is not. But Jesus provides a mechanism to be able to pass out from being under law, which is achieved in his death and will be explained in greater detail when we review Romans and other writings of Paul. Finally he says that our righteousness needed to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. They strove after a self-righteousness through keeping the absolute letter of the law, but as he says elsewhere, they missed the mark regarding Justice, mercy and truth. Self-righteousness is no righteousness at all. The only righteousness that matters is that given by God through Jesus Christ. It is possible to lead a good life under the law, and many people did then and do today, but righteousness can only come as the gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ. There is much written about this in Romans and Galatians and will be discussed in depth then. In verses 21-26 Jesus is seen to be lifting the standard for Christians above the requirements of the law under the old covenant. While the law forbade killing another man, Jesus forbids even insulting another person or calling them fools or even being angry with them. What he is seeking is a people who are perfect as he is perfect. Now we might say this is an impossible thing to ask. Everyone gets angry at times and upsets or insults others in some way. But Jesus also provided a way by which we could learn this way of life and gave us a teacher, counsellor and guide whose specific job is to work this transformation in us so that we can live this perfect life. I am of course referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit and it is his role to lead us to the perfect place. When we learn how to walk in the Spirit using the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome the weaknesses in our flesh, such as anger, insults and so on, then we can be perfected and be transformed into the image of Christ. More of this though when we get to Romans, Galatians and Corinthians.

Verses 27-30 continue this required transformation and define the perfect life from one that is not. It is easy to see that the standard set is much higher than the law. The law spoke to things of the flesh and the physical aspects of life. But Jesus speaks to the mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of life. The law was meant to curtail the excesses of the flesh of man, but the standard Jesus sets is meant to change the heart, mind and spirit of a man through the working of the New Covenant and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Teachings on the Higher Call of Christ

(Matthew 5:31-48)

Continuing on from the previous post, we see verse 31-32 continues the theme of the previous section where Jesus is teaching the elements of the higher call under the New Covenant. In this section he speaks of divorce and it is evident that this is not something to be taken lightly. Unchastity, that is, sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner, is clear grounds for divorce. However he likens divorce for other reasons as being like adultery. Adultery under the old covenant law was punishable by death, so it is clear that the Lord had a dim view of divorce. Elsewhere the bible shows that if a couple are to separate then they should either be reconciled if possible, or remain single. Divorce was certainly accepted under the law, & even in this section it talks about a certificate of divorce being given. In some cases divorce may be a necessary option to gain freedom from a violent or destructive relationship, but it is not carte blanche to run off and marry someone else if a person is just tired or bored in the relationship as happens too often in today's society.

Verse 33-37 looks also at the practice of giving an oath. In many things today and especially in courts of law, people are required to give an oath as witness to the truth of their testimony. Jesus however is teaching that we should not give oaths at all. His desire is that we will stand by our words without oaths. That we will always be honest, truthful and upright in what we say. Today it is a common expression for people to say they, "Swear on a stack of bibles," to the truth of a matter. But Jesus did not seek this. He wants us to speak with integrity so that only the truth comes from our mouth.

The principle of turning the other cheek is shown in verses 38-42 and this is one of the Christian practices that is much maligned by people who do not understand what this means. Jesus is not looking for his people to be violent and aggressive. He is not looking for his people to retaliate. At the very end of the bible in Revelation 22:11 he says, "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right and the holy still be holy." All mankind will receive the recompense for what they have done on the Day of Judgement. It is not for us to seek revenge if we are struck, nor to fight with others who oppose us. We are to be gentle and lowly of spirit, and contrary to what many believe, this requires strength. It is harder to be meek and mild than to fight back when struck. The Lord has said, "...never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." (Romans 12:19) As Christians we are to do good to all for by so doing we may even overcome their evil with our good.

In a similar way in verses 43-48 we see that Jesus teaches we are to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Again this requires great strength of heart for it is not natural to mankind to do such a thing. But this what the Lord did and it is the higher standard being set for his people.

What he is teaching in this whole section, and indeed in the whole of the sermon on the mount, is what the standard of perfection in Christ should look like. The final verse in this chapter shows this and also the reason why we are to aspire to and attain this higher standard. It says in vs. 48 that, "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Christians are being called to perfection, which was not attainable under the Old Covenant law, but which can be achieved under the New Covenant. How this can be achieved is rolled out methodically in later books,

specifically in Romans and Galatians, but here we are seeing what that perfection will or should look like.

The Lord's Prayer and Issues of Seeking Praise from Men

(Matthew 6:1-15)

We begin to see Jesus teach about our behaviours in front of others in this section. He tells us that being a Christian is not like a spectator sport. We should not prance about as someone or something important nor do things that draw attention to ourselves. Our aim is not self-aggrandisement but rather it is to do the will of God. Thus when we do things in public it should be done quietly and without pomp and ceremony. If we are doing good for someone we do not have to shout it from the roof tops and nor should we be like that boy in the nursery rhyme, little Jack Horner who said, "What a good boy am I."

When we seek the praise of other men we have missed the point of Christianity. There is a reward in doing good and doing what is right, and that reward comes from God. But if we seek a man's praise then we will not have God's reward for the praise of man is our reward. We have got what we wanted. But if we seek God's reward then we are much better off for His reward leads to eternity. Nothing that we do that is good will go unrewarded but it depends what our hearts desire is as to whether we receive that reward from man or from God. If we seek to look good before man, then the motivation is vanity and earthly gain, but if we are seeking God's approval we are motivated by humility, love and godliness.

Jesus then moves into teaching us about prayer and how we ought to pray. Firstly he teaches that when we pray our personal prayers that we should go somewhere apart from others so that our conversation is between ourself and God. There is also a place for community prayer, but personal prayer is a private matter and again it is not a spectator sport. There are people who do pray on street corners in some places and who look pious and very religious through doing so, but Jesus is saying that this is not what he wants. Those who pray in public like this are basically making a show of themselves and again are seeking man's approval and that will be their reward. But it would be better they had sought God's approval so that their prayers might be answered.

From verse 7-15 we see a well-known and badly misused piece of scripture. This section contains what is commonly known as the Lord's prayer.

Now what is interesting in this section is that Jesus begins by saying, "...in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words." Empty words are like chants or prayers that are repeated by rote for there is no thought in them. A prayer that is repeated by rote is just a regurgitation of someone else's words or thoughts, but not the words of the person speaking. Jesus is seeking a conversation with his people through prayer, but using empty words,

chanting and praying from a prayer book by rote is not a conversation. He wants to know what our individual needs, desires, joys, pains, issues, problems, pleasures and fascinations are that we bring to him in prayer. He does not want to hear someone else's words repeated over and over for that is just many words empty of substance. One of the greatest misuses of empty words is the often heard repetition of the Lords prayer. Jesus gave us this teaching not so we would repeat it by rote, but so that we would know how to pray, not the words to say. In the Luke version of this section we see it is preceded by a request from the disciples saying, "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1) The disciples were not asking what words they should repeat over and over, but wanted Jesus to show them the form of prayer and how they should go about praying to the Lord in a way that He wanted to hear. Likewise we see that in Matthew 6:9 Jesus says, "Pray then LIKE this." (my emphasis) Again he did not say to pray these specific words but that this was how a prayer needs to be constructed. When people repeat the Lords prayer over and over they are doing the exact opposite of what Jesus both wanted and intended. So when you pray, use your own mind and say what you are feeling and ask for the things you need or want.

Now let's look at this example prayer to see how the Lord intended we should come to God in prayer.

It starts in vs. 9 with a salutation addressing the person to whom we are praying. And this would be normal in any conversation. If you see your friend walking down the street you would call out to them to get their attention. When we pray to God we likewise address him. The prayer then shows respect to God and recognises his greatness for the blessings he has given to us. It recognises him as God and we as his humble servants and sets the right scene for the conversation. We are coming to him to speak and to ask and we should recognise that he is greater than we are. Ultimately in all the we may ask of God, it is his will that will be done, not ours. There will be times when we may not receive the things we ask for our own good. Sometimes we may need to go through a period of suffering to test and strengthen us and sometimes we may be asking for something that is not what we really need. God knows the path he has set us on and where he is trying to lead us so we need to recognise his knowledge and wisdom in dealing with our lives and we do this in our prayers. As the prayer progresses we see Jesus says it is OK to ask for physical things saying, "Give us this day our daily bread." There are physical needs that we have and we can ask the Lord for them. In trying times we may have a need for money, clothing, shelter or food and not know where they will come from. There may be the need for a job or some other thing. What the Lord showed here is that it is quite acceptable to ask for such things for he knows we need these things.

Then there is a request that looks at relationship issues. He framed this in the next segment of the prayer saying, "...forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." This is a reminder that as we seek forgiveness, so too we should give forgiveness to those who might have wronged us in some way. In the beatitudes we saw it said that, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." Here in the Lord's prayer we find that sentiment repeated. It is important for us to treat others in the same way we would want to be treated. Do we want forgiveness from God? Then we need to likewise forgive our brethren.

He then says we can ask for matters of a spiritual nature with his example saying, "...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." We can ask the Lord for his protection and security both from the things and people we can see as well as from the hosts of wickedness that surround us in the spiritual realm. This is also a call for the Lord to give us the strength to be able to overcome temptation when or if it is presented before us. And it is acceptable to ask for such things.

Finally the Lords prayer closes by acknowledging the greatness and power of God saying, "...for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, Amen." Elsewhere in the scripture we are told to address our prayers to God in the name of Jesus and likewise we should close in His name which recognises his power over all things.

The Lords prayer was never meant to be something spoken by rote. It was never meant to be repeated over and over again, and especially in a community setting. The Lord's prayer was an example of a personal prayer given to show the disciples and us how we should pray. This is the method for prayer when we are alone in our rooms and come before God. It is a powerful teaching and a great example and it should not be wasted through mis-use and repetitive chanting which renders the lesson worthless, even opposed to the word of God.

Seek First the Kingdom of God and other teachings

(Matthew 6:16-34)

Jesus continues his teachings about not doing things to be seen by men in verses 16-17 saying when you fast you should not look dismal, but rather go about your business as if all were normal.

Let us look for a moment at the scriptural significance of fasting as it matters to the Christian under the New Covenant.

In Jewish laws and customs fasting had several purposes and breadth of application. There were four appointed public fasts mentioned in the Old Testament, and a fifth that was less stringently applied. There were also appointed fasts set up by rabbis. In addition people often held personal and private fasts for various reasons. One of the customs that arose from private practice but with no specific scriptural basis was fasting twice a week, specifically on Mondays and Thursdays.

Fasting is seen as the abstinence from food and/or drink, but the Hebrew words that it is translated from also have a broader application. They can include all forms of abstinence such as washing, comfort, anointing, wearing of shoes as well as abstaining from the desires of the flesh and passion that leads to sin.

Some more information on the Purpose and Conception of fasting includes: In the ancient Near East (ie. not in the scripture), prayer and fasting were advocated as a means to have one's requests fulfilled by the gods. The Bible emphasizes that the fast is not an end in itself but only a means through which man can humble his heart

and repent for his sins; his repentance must manifest itself in his deeds (Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:8). The idea is especially stressed in Isaiah (58:3ff.) where the contrast is made between a fast which is not accompanied by any real repentance, and which is therefore unacceptable to God, and the true fast which leads to God's merciful forgiveness: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the fetters of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free... Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him... Then shalt thou call, and the Lord will answer."

Other scriptures also stressed that a fast without sincere repentance is valueless and senseless (Jer 14:10-12, Isaiah 58:1-9). Jesus upbraided the Pharisees example of fasting for the did it to just look and appear religious but failed in the requirement of a penitent heart or a desire to come close to God. To them the fast was a bit like the prayers of empty words discussed in the last post and became a meaningless and futile exercise as they were seeking the approval of men rather than God.

Verses 19-21 talk about the seeking of money and wealth. The issue here is not the money or wealth in themselves for in reality they are neutral. Rather it is the condition of the heart of the person. If a person puts their trust and hopes on money and wealth they are behaving foolishly for all things of this earth are temporary and will ultimately disintegrate through time or may be lost and stolen. Today we see this is even more apparent for the ravages of inflation and the financial crises that have arisen from time to time wreak havoc with the value of money. You cannot trust in money to save you or to get you through anything. And as the Lord showed in this section, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." If we make our treasure in the heavenly places and put our value on praise, worship and the seeking of God rather than seeking the temporary riches and pleasures of this life, then our hearts will be with God and we will receive his blessings.

The next section from vs. 22-23 continues and expands this teaching saying, "The eye is the lamp of the body." It is through our senses and especially our eyes that we perceive the world. If we look for good things then we fill our mind, heart, soul and life with the light of what is good. But if we seek out the things that are evil and bad in this world then in a similar way we will pollute our life and our thinking which guides our life will be unsound. When we seek God and the truth of all matters, we seek what is good, holy, just and true for in God there is no darkness of evil. It is important for us to watch carefully what we seek with our eyes and other senses for we become what we take in through the senses. The surest way to be free from evil is not to accept it in through senses in the first place and thus not allow it into your heart and mind to pollute your thinking.

Jesus continues in the next verse (24) showing again the problems of seeking money saying, "You cannot serve God and mammon," (mammon being a Semitic word for money). You cannot serve two masters for you will end up being devoted to one and hating the other. At some point in time the two masters will pull in different directions and a choice will need to be made which will cause you to oppose one or the other. If it is money you are serving, seeking to find riches, at some point it will lead you away from God. And as discussed earlier, money will never and cannot ever save you.

Now Jesus understood that we will be anxious about these things, for in the next section from vs. 25-34 he teaches the we should not be anxious. There is a great promise in this section that God will provide for his people. All that we need to sustain our life and live well will be provided when we seek Him. All of the world seeks the things of the world and the Lord knows there are things we need for daily subsistence. He knows we need food, clothing, shelter, water and so on and in this section of scripture he has promised he will provide all those things. But he also makes the point that we must get our priorities right. In vs. 33 it is clear that we must, "...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." This is a call to align our lives correctly and put our treasure in the Lord. This is a call to seek out what is good and right and true and not look for the evil things of this world. This is a call to put our trust and hope in a living God and not to trust in the temporal things of this world that have no real power to save us. And if we do these things, then there is no need for us to be anxious for God will sustain us both today, tomorrow and forever.

Judge not that you be not Judged

(Matthew 7:1-6)

We are called to have a positive relationship with one another as brethren. In any positive relationship there is no judgement of our fellow man. At the start of this chapter Jesus points out that we are not to judge one another. The fundamental principle here is that the basis of our judgement is completely flawed for man judges according to his own perception, whereas God judges according to the heart. Man judges with only part of the facts but God judges according to the truth. Man's judgement is clouded by a host of issues including his own limitations, biases and environment, but God looks at all things from a position of perfect knowledge and judges according to a standard based on his own perfection.

It is often said that it takes one to know one and in some measure this is what these first verses are saying. The apostle Paul spoke of this also in Romans 2:19-24 showing that in many cases those who judged others and preached about all manner of evil were actually doing the very same things themselves.

The act of judgement is not right for us to do. When we take it upon ourselves to judge another we are no longer a brother but a judge. In judging we assume a position greater than the other person and think that we are better than they are, yet we are all equal in Christ. In judging another then we assume the position of judge and the only one who has the right to judge us is God himself, so in judging we take God's rightful position.

Furthermore, there is no-one perfect for we all suffer the same weaknesses as the rest of humanity. While the Lord is working with us and being merciful towards our faults and weaknesses, we need to be of the same mind towards our fellow brethren and show mercy towards them. We do not know at any point in time exactly which weakness a person may have that the Lord is dealing with and so it is not our position to judge. The person may have some fault we perceive and can see, but the Lord may be dealing with a deeper underlying issue that is more grave and of more importance

to resolve first. The apostle John said it best in John 7:14-24 saying, “Do not judge by appearances but judge with right judgement.” Whenever you consider a matter, weigh it up not by what you think it might be from appearances but against what is right, holy and true. We are not called to judge our brethren but we do need to weigh matters and make decisions about courses of action. We may judge a deed but never judge a person for we are all beset with weaknesses and failings.

We must remember also that Jesus came to save the sinners and as Paul wrote in Romans 8:1, “There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.” If the Lord does not condemn us, then who are we to condemn another person through judging them? We should not even judge ourselves, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5, and sometimes we are our own worst critics. We put ourselves down and condemn ourselves for some foolish thing we may have done. But when we judge and condemn ourselves we are doing something worse than the action we are condemning ourselves for. Again it is not our position to judge even ourselves for judgement rests in the hands of God.

The next section in vs. 6 gives a warning saying, “...do not throw your pearls before the swine...” There is great value and reward in Christ and the teachings that will lead us to His Kingdom. But there are many people in this world who are simply not interested and indeed are hostile to Christianity. Whenever the subject of religion arises they may ridicule, abuse, deride and belittle those who are speaking of Christianity. So not only do they fail to see the benefits, they turn and attack those who are trying to give them something of value. To these people the precious gifts of knowledge of God are as worthless as dirt. They have no concept of the value of Gods word nor any desire to know it’s value. They cannot see that it can lead to a better life now and later to eternity for they are blinded to the truth of the gospel.

Jesus said that these people would exist and he has given fair warning that if we try to give them the things of God they will reject them, in some cases violently. So what is the answer? Don’t give them your gifts. Jesus has said elsewhere that where he is there is his servant also (John 12:26) and so if He is working with these people he will have the right servant speak the right words. If these people reject his words, then their judgement is upon their own heads. Why should you continue to bang your head against the wall only to be ridiculed and have your good spoken of as evil. In the final analysis the Lord said at the very end of Revelation to, “Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” (Rev 22:11) Let them alone for if the Lord is working with them he will put it upon their mind to seek, and if they reject the Lord there is nothing you can do about it.

Ask and it will be Given, Seek and you will Find, Knock and it will be Opened

(Matthew 7:7-11)

Another set of wonderful promises in this section of scripture. Beginning with, “Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened,.” These are

such positive messages to the Christian who is really looking for the truth. There is no if, but or maybe about this passage, but rather a positive statement that says, “Do this and you will get what you are after.”

Now each of these points while similar are slightly different and it is worth considering them individually for a moment. “Ask and it will be given.” When we are trying to understand a matter and when we need help or some other assistance, the Lord says simply to ask. He says ask and you will get what you are after. Consider the reverse of this. If you don’t ask for something, how will the person, including the Lord, know what you really want? How can someone give when they don’t know what you need? Too often in the world we hear people complain that they never get anything, but often it is because they don’t ask. Rather than get all bitter and twisted about it, would it not be simpler just to ask? After all, what is the worst that could happen? You could get a knock back and the person say no, but at least it is a decision which you can then work on. When the answer is no, sometimes you need to ask in a different. Many times a negative answer is not necessarily the final answer, it just may mean there are other things that need to be done.

Which brings us to, “Seek and you will find.” Have you ever lost something of value, say your car keys or the TV remote? Would there be any point just sitting around wishing they would turn up without going to look for them? Of course not. The Lord gives an example in the parable of a woman having ten coins and on losing one of the coins she searched diligently and swept the house until she located it (Luke 15:8-10). Seeking the things of the Lord is much the same as this. We need to seek diligently, looking high and low, and then the Lord has promised we will find what we are seeking.

Then we have the scripture, “Knock and it will be opened.” This is a bit like the other two above in that if we were to come to a door wanting to enter, how would those on the other side know we were there if we did not knock? It would be pointless to just stand there in the hope that someone might open the door. Generally when we come to a building or house wishing to enter or speak to those inside we need to knock. Knocking on the door announces our arrival and lets the occupants know we are waiting for them. It gets their attention so that they will come and open the door for us. Generally we knock because we want to come inside for any one of many reasons. It is the same with the Lord. We want to come into his presence and so we need to knock at his door, metaphorically speaking. We need to make ourselves known to him through prayer to seek entrance to his presence so we can ask and seek the things we may wish to know. Prayer is rather like knocking on heavens door. We address our prayers to God and then ask for whatever we may be seeking. And best of all in this section of scripture the Lord has said we will receive what we need and are seeking...presuming of course that it is in his will and is what we really need at that time. Make no mistake, sometimes the Lord does say no, but when he does it is because whatever we were seeking is not what we may really need.

He further goes on to show that when we ask him for anything, he always gives us good things. He likens it to us with our children. If they ask us for bread would we give them a stone? Of course not! And in the same way when we ask the Lord for anything he will give us what is good for us. This is why in some cases we may not get what we are seeking because it is not good for us. We do not know the future but

the Lord does. I recall a personal example where at one time I sought to change jobs and asked the Lord to make the change happen. It didn't and I was puzzled because I was far and away the best candidate for the role. The person actually employed was later fired for fraudulent activity. But shortly after that the organisation was restructured and the role ceased to exist. In the wisdom of the Lord who knew these things in advance, he protected my employment situation whereas if I had followed the course I wanted I'd have been unemployed. He gave me what I needed and indeed something better by saying no to my request.

The Luke version of this scripture goes one step further saying if we ask him he will give us the Holy Spirit. (Luke 11:9-13) There is probably no greater gift than this, for it is the Holy Spirit who becomes our teacher, counsellor, guide and protector to lead us into the kingdom of God and to transform our natures into the image of Christ. All we have to do is ask.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you

(Matthew 7:12)

In this one verse (vs. 12) the Lord has shown us a summary of what was contained in the Old Covenant law and the words of the prophets. "Whatever you would wish that men would do to you, do so to them." This one verse provides both an insight into what the Lord is seeking from us as well as a maxim to live by.

There are several focal points of Christianity and this scripture provides one of those points. The first point is about worshiping the Lord Jesus Christ and creating a relationship with God through him. The second point is about our relationship with our fellow man and learning how to live in harmony with one another. What we see in this scripture is the key to this second focal point of the teachings of Christ. How to live in relationship with other men.

Consider for a moment the Old Covenant law. There are in excess of six hundred laws that were given to the children of Israel by which they were to live. When you distil the essence of these laws we find that at the bottom of them is this precept spoken of by Jesus, which is to do unto others as you would have them do to you. In the Ten Commandments for example we see that they speak entirely about relationships. First about our relationship to God and then about our relationship with our fellow man. The third level of relationship contained in the old law was about our relationship with ourself. As an example there were laws and precepts about what to eat and wear, and the wisdom contained in these laws would keep us healthy and free from sickness if we followed those laws.

So the entire scope of the teachings of the law and prophets comes down to relationships and that is in essence what Jesus was telling us in this single verse. We need to learn how to get along with each other. When you consider the ultimate reward for following Christ this becomes apparent. After all things have been

concluded and all sin is washed away, the Lord will rule his people into eternity. In that time he wants his people to be able to get along with each other. He does not want people to argue, back-bite and fight with each other as that would certainly not be a pleasant place to live. Instead he wants his people to be at peace and in harmony with each other and this is what this verse is telling us. How do you want to be treated by other people? Then do the same to them. If you do not like to be spoken against and upset and stressed and so on, then don't do these things to others.

Easy to say, but not always easy to do. Fortunately the Lord has provided us with teachings and processes through the Holy Spirit to enable us to learn how to live this way. When we learn to walk in the spirit we can truly find the way to live in peace and harmony and truly fulfil the truth of this scripture.

Enter by the Narrow Gate

(Matthew 7:13-14)

One of the disciples once asked the Lord, "Will those who are saved be few?" (Luke 13:23) The Lord responded saying, "Strive to enter by the narrow door," and here in this section we see that same teaching being repeated in a slightly different manner. Here the Lord is saying we need to "Enter by the narrow gate." He says that there will be many who take the wide and easy path that leads to destruction, but the gate and the path that leads to life are narrow and hard. Finally he says that those who even find it will be few, let alone those who enter by the narrow gate.

Locating this narrow gate will be hard for not many will even find it let alone be able to enter. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made the following points. "Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened." These three aspects of finding things out and searching for the truth all had a promise that the searching would not be in vain. The fact that he said this three ways suggests the level of importance there is in making the effort to search out the way.

Then in this scripture we see that it will be hard to find and the way will be difficult to walk that leads to life. Too many people may not be prepared to walk the hard road and will be lost through taking the easy way out. The easy way is a life of compromise and half measures, of listening to what others say and accepting it without verifying the truth of a matter. But as Christ has taught us, we must do the work. We must ask, seek and knock if we are to even find this narrow gate, let alone enter it.

Will the road to life be hard? The truth is that it will be hard in some ways, for there will be the need to subjugate everything for the sake of walking the path to life. It will require a complete change and sometimes a full reversal of human nature, while being bombarded daily by temptation through the weaknesses and passions of the flesh as well as the attacks from the devil and his hosts. But we must also weigh this with other scriptures where the Lord says to, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is

easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:29-30) We need to balance these seemingly two opposing positions to try to understand what is happening.

When we come to the Lord he does teach us. We see also that there are many levels of teaching and understanding in the Lord, which Paul described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-12, “For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw.” There is no other foundation by which we may have life than following Jesus Christ. But there are many levels of teaching that are built on that foundation. Consider all the many Christian denominations and non-denominational churches that exist today. All of them have the foundation of a belief in Christ, but then their teachings range from what could be considered rubbish like chaff and sticks, up to precious gold and silver. The analogy Paul makes also ties in with the Lords teaching about how hard the narrow gate will be to find, for it is easy to find chaff and grass for hay, but it is increasingly difficult to find gold and silver. To find the more precious things requires hard toil, searching and great effort. Finding the narrow path will be the same.

Now Paul makes the point that all who have the foundation of Christ may be saved, but they will be tested with the fires of adversity. And fire which will destroy wood, hay and chaff actually has the opposite effect on gold and silver, for they are refined and purified even further through fire as the dross is melted and burned off.

It is my opinion that the reason Jesus said there will be few who find the narrow path is that he was talking about those who find the path in this age. Ultimately everyone who seeks the Lord will need to be made perfect if they are to eventually live with the Father, but there will not be many who reach that standard in this time on earth. Jesus talks of two flocks one of which he calls the little flock (Luke 12:32). He describes the little flock in John 10:1-16 and how they follow the shepherd (Jesus) wherever he goes and listen to his voice. In the last verse he then mentions a second flock that is not of this same group that must be brought in also to make one large flock. Now when we go into Revelation we see there is a group called the 144,000 who fit the description of this little flock in John 10, for they are with the Lamb and follow Jesus everywhere he goes (Rev 14:4). These 144,000 are those who achieve perfection in this age and they go into heaven with Christ singing. These are the ones I believe who found and entered the narrow gate and who found the gold teaching that Paul alluded to.

But we also see a second group in Revelation referred to as a, “...great multitude that no man can number.” (Rev 7:9-17) They also go into heaven but in a much different way. For the 144,000 went into heaven following Jesus singing and with much joy, but this second group we see had suffered on this earth. For it says they were hungry and thirsty and beaten down by the sun and scorching heat. They had need of shepherding and teaching and they were in tears for the Lord will wipe every tear from their eyes. They were in torment while on this earth because they lacked the teachings and the guidance necessary to overcome the issues in this life. They had not found peace or perfection, but they followed Christ to the best of their ability. They are those who had the foundation, but the building on that foundation could not withstand the fire of testing.

The aim for all of us is to aspire to find and by enter the narrow gate and to aspire to the standard of the 144,000. Naturally not everyone will achieve that level in this time otherwise there would not be only 144,000. But the closer we can get to that place through prayer, study and searching for the truth, the less we will suffer in this age and the less tears will need wiping from our eyes when the Lord sets up his kingdom.

Beware of False Prophets and False Teachers

(Matthew 7:15-20)

One of the greatest challenges all Christians face when trying to seek out the truth is...who do you believe. Jesus warned us in this section about being careful to spot and avoid false prophets or false teachers. If we choose to follow the wrong teachings from one of these people then we may be taking in information that is not aligned with the truth or even put ourselves in a position where we are being taken advantage of by unscrupulous people ministering lies for profit.

Many people have been hurt by false teachers and false prophets through accepting false teaching. I recall an instance where at a church one time a speaker made an altar call at the end of the service for people to come up who had been hurt in some way by the church. With the exception of just a handful of people, the whole church of several hundred people stood and went forward. Such a situation is an absolute travesty and speaks much about the extent of corruption that can exist in Christianity today through false teaching and false prophets.

But what can you do about it? Well Jesus also provided some good information in this section of scripture on how to spot these frauds and what to do.

Firstly we need to understand that they may be hard to see. He talks of wolves in sheep's clothing, meaning that these false prophets will look as if they are good and will be well disguised and camouflaged. They will have all the appearances of being good teachers and doing what is right. But like all liars, they will not be able to hold onto their lies and evidence will begin to show up that shows them for what they truly are. In order to perpetrate a lie, a liar must tell more lies to cover the original lie. They must then continue this path and weave a web that they will eventually be caught in as inconsistencies arise. Jesus said, you will know them by their fruit. The fruit is the teachings and the things they do. Fruit does not immediately appear on a tree but must go through a process of pollination, germination and growth before it is ripe and ready for picking. So too these people will take time to show their true colours.

Next we see that Jesus shows that they will not be able to help going down this path for the evil will bear evil fruit, but good people will do good. It's like the old saying that a leopard can't change it's spots. These false teachers or false prophets are exactly the same.

Finally it is important that when you come into contact with Christians you need to do two main things. Firstly, you must have an understanding of the truth in the Bible and

weigh up all that they say or do against that knowledge. And secondly, you need to spend time to watch these people and see what they do over time, for Jesus says when their fruit ripens you will know them by their fruits. Over time there will be a pattern from these people. If the pattern is to help, assist, speak good things aligned with Bible truth and respecting others, then they may be true prophets teaching truth. But if their words and actions are self-serving, seeking to get gain from those around them and using people to get advantage, especially when falsely using the teachings in the Bible to get power over others, then their fruits can be considered bad.

These are the wolves Jesus is talking about. They feed their own appetites and do nothing unless it is to their own gain or advantage. They are proud and arrogant, but at the same time will disguise themselves well with cunning and deception. As individuals we need to learn from the Bible, seek the truth, and ask Jesus to give us understanding so that we can spot these false teachers when they come along. For as sure as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, they will come. There are many people who see Christianity as a means of gain and will use it to further their own devices and designs. While there is gain through Christianity in godliness, as the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:3-6, the gain comes through contentment, not material gain. And these false prophets are not seeking contentment but rather are seeking material gain or power. This is not of God and as Jesus said, we must beware. In due course they will be seen for what they are, and even if their disguises are very good, they will be cut down by the Lord. He will protect his church from these people, but it is important for us to likewise recognise them and take action so that we are not hindered through false teaching.

Who will go into God's Kingdom?

(Matthew 7:21-23)

Jesus tells us in this section of scripture that not everyone will go into God's Kingdom. There are many who appear to be righteous that will miss out.

It is not enough to call on the name of the Lord to gain entry into God's Kingdom. Jesus says here that not everyone who does so will gain entry. And we see that some of these people who will miss out did many mighty or significant works in the name of Jesus. Yet still they did not gain entry into the Kingdom of God. The question that obviously arises is why? There are many in today's churches who are seeking to do magnificent works that may miss out too. We see many who set up ministries, who go out into missionary works, who preach and prophesy and exercise the power of the Spirit but still may miss out.

The key to entry into God's Kingdom though is not in the mighty works. It is not in saying great words or preaching the word or prophesying or missionary work or building churches, schools, hospitals or any of the other works that can and are being done. No, the key to entry into God's Kingdom is by doing the will of the Father.

What is the will of the Father? It is to believe in Jesus whom he sent to be our saviour. Paul wrote in Romans 1:17, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." It is by faith or by believing in God and Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour that we shall live and gain entry into God's Kingdom. The apostle John made it even more clear that faith in Jesus was the key saying in John 6:40, "For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

So the key is through faith in Jesus Christ. All the works that a man may do will come to nothing if he does not have faith. It is the condition of the heart and the faith that a person has that is the key. The question will be whether they are truly doing these works for the Lord or for their own benefit. There may be people who believe they can buy or even bribe their way into heaven; that by building churches or setting up ministries of different sorts they can gain forgiveness for their sins or make atonement for their evil ways. Likewise some years ago there used to be talk that by going to church and donating to the church was like putting savings or credits into a "spiritual bank account." That these things would offset any sins that a person may have committed or would do in the future. There is no spiritual bank account. God does not weigh up a measure of sin and a measure of good deeds to see which pile is the larger to decide whether a person has life or not. Those who believe such things are blind and have been led astray by false teaching and lies. These things are of no consequence for the forgiveness of sin cannot be bought and God cannot be bribed. Forgiveness is freely available to all, but only through faith in Christ Jesus and through repentance.

The works of God are not like the works of man. Jesus was asked about this matter in John 6:28-29 which says, "Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So the works of God are about faith in Jesus Christ, and without faith there is no entry into God's Kingdom. No person will be accepted on the basis of works of the law as Paul wrote in Romans 3:20, "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." He added in Galatians 2:16, "...a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified."

Do you want to go into God's Kingdom? Then learn what it means to be doing the will of God. Learn what it is to have faith in Jesus Christ and what to believe, for that is the pathway to life.

Build Your House Upon The Rock

(Matthew 7:24-29)

In this final section of the sermon on the mount Jesus gives the last warning to the people and to us today. When he speaks of building your house upon the rock he is

talking about your life. And again in this section he is giving us the key to life and living a stable and solid life.

Whenever a builder constructs a house, the first thing they do is to dig a foundation. They dig down until they strike bedrock and build the foundation and structure of the home so that it is anchored on this bedrock. This is to ensure that the building can withstand the forces of nature through wind and rain and so on, and be able to stand firm. If the builder were not to do this and just build the house on the surface of the ground, then movements in the soil caused by the elements would cause it to collapse.

Jesus likens life to this same principle of the building of a house. The key to life is to build your life on the solid foundation of his words and do them. The key is in doing what he says. It is not enough to just hear or read the words of Jesus, but you must then also follow up on them and live your life in accordance with his words. This is akin to building upon the rock. Jesus' words are wisdom, based upon the wisdom of God, and it is His words that will lead us to eternal life in the future as well as a stable and solid life in the here and now. His words provide guidance, insight, knowledge and wisdom about all matters pertaining to this life and the future with God. If you take his words to heart, learn them and apply them in your life, then you will find the pathway to truth and life that exists only through faith in Christ Jesus. This is the solid foundation on the rock of Jesus.

The alternative is like a house not just built on the ground but on sand. If a house built without a foundation on soil will not stand, then how much less if it were built on sand. Sand shifts so readily having no binding properties that it is almost liquid. It takes very little wind or water to move sand and so anything built upon it will simply not stand, but very quickly collapse. There is no anchor on sand and no solid base on which to anchor any kind of a structure.

If you were to hear the words of Jesus and do nothing else, it would be the same. You have nothing to anchor to and hold you fast when the winds and rain of trouble, temptation and ordeal come upon you. What is there to hold onto to anchor you against the days of adversity? This is why when we see disaster strike people in the world they fall apart and are perplexed, not knowing which way to turn. They are without hope in the world and as such are at the mercy of the problems, troubles and issues that befall all in the world. But in Jesus there is hope for he provides guidance in his words that will answer these days of adversity. And in him there is protection.

If you would have life and peace in this world then you need to listen to the words of Jesus and then act upon them. You need to take his words to heart and live by them and they will give you light and life.

Why Jesus Healed the Sick

(Matthew 8:1-13)

(At the end of chapter seven of Matthew we see Jesus finishes his sermon on the mount. The people having heard his words were astonished at his teachings for he taught as one who had authority. He spoke powerfully and boldly to the people all the words of life and what would be the keys to entry into God's kingdom.

(Then as evidence of this authority he had, he confirmed all of the words through the acts that he did. This is one of the reasons he did many of the miracles including healing the sick and infirm. We see over in Mark 16:20 saying, "And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it." The signs the disciples were given to practice included healing the sick and the purpose of these signs was to back up the ministry. Likewise when Jesus preached, his ministry and words were confirmed by the signs. No man could do the miracles he did unless the power of God was with him to do it, and so it was evidence that the words He spoke were the words of God.

(Now after finishing the sermon on the mount Jesus went forth and healed many who were ill which confirmed the message he had just given. But there are other teachings in this message as well. We see in the first section of Matthew 8:1-5 where Jesus cleansed the leper. Under the Mosaic law there were explicit teachings as to what needed to be done if ever a leper were cured of leprosy. There were offerings to be made over a period of time and they needed to be pronounced cleansed by the priests at the temple and various other practices. At the time of Jesus there was no New Covenant in effect because it did not commence until Jesus died, so the people were still under the law. Also Jesus could not be seen to be breaking the law and he would not, for he came to fulfil the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17). So in accordance with the law he instructed the leper now healed to go and make the offerings and show himself to the priests in accordance with the ordinances on the cleansing of leprosy.

(Jesus was not making a great song and dance about this healing either. He was not doing the healings so that people would come to him and look upon how great and marvellous he was. On the contrary he typically told the people who were healed not to tell anyone but go and do as he instructed them. The point of the healings was not personal edification or gain but to confirm the message of the Kingdom of God.

(We then see a second healing in this section on the servant of a centurion in Matthew 8:5-13. This healing is different in several ways. Firstly, Jesus was prepared to go to the sick man and heal him, but the centurion said it was unnecessary to do that. The centurion recognised the power of Jesus and that if he would just say the word it would be done. He knew that the power of God was everywhere and that it did not require the Lord to be physically present for his healing power to go forth. Jesus marvelled at this centurion for Jesus saw that the man's faith was great. This man had an understanding that many others did not. He had faith and so the Lord did the healing as the man requested and his servant was healed instantly.

(Although there were many healings done by Jesus and many miraculous things occurred, they were done for a purpose. They showed the power of God and were a wonder and blessing to those who received them, but the main purpose of the healings was to back up the words that Jesus spoke. It is the ministry that is important for the ministry and teachings are what will lead a person to life. Eventually all of the

miracles will cease for they will not be required. In God's kingdom there will be no sickness or death and so healings will not be needed. But the teachings of life are eternal. It is these that are more important and must be noted.

(Some Christians and some churches today are seeking miracles once again. It is more important to seek the kingdom. We should rather seek the truth and find the faith that will lead us into the kingdom of God as this is everlasting. Miracles and healings are temporary and of this world only, but the truth lasts forever. Focus on finding the truth that leads to God through Jesus Christ instead.

The Unlimited Healing Power of Jesus

(Matthew 8:14-17)

In first part of this section (vs.14-15) Jesus goes to Peter's house and seeing Peter's mother-in-law lying sick with a fever he heals her. There are a couple of interesting points here in this small section. Firstly this woman was Peter's mother-in-law which shows that he had a wife and thus was married. This was further indicated by Paul who likewise showed that Peter was married in 1 Corinthians 9:5. Some have thought that Peter was celibate but this was clearly not the case.

The second thing we see in this small section is that Peter's mother-in-law had a fever. Most fevers are associated with infection of some kind and usually not too much to worry about. We don't know how serious this fever was or the underlying condition causing the fever. It may well have been associated with something quite minor such as a common cold or could have been something more serious. The point here though is that if this was a minor condition it shows that Jesus was concerned not with just major health issues, which were the "big" miracles, but he was also concerned with the small infirmities as well. God is not just God of the big stuff but of the small stuff too. And there is no problem too large or too small that we cannot take to him, even a minor fever from the common cold.

In the next verse (vs. 16) we see many people were brought to him for healing and to have demons exorcised and he healed all of these people. There were no questions, no requirements to be healed, no offerings given or requested. It was a matter as simple as, they came, they were sick and he healed them. All who came were healed. None were too difficult and no case was a bother to him.

Matthew then wrote in the final verse in this section (vs. 17) that Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah who said, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." So we see from this and my previous posts that there were many purposes to these miracles and healings. They were a sign to confirm the message he preached, they were to fulfil Old Testament prophecies and of course they were to show the power of God.

Trust Jesus in All Situations

(Matthew 8:18-27)

Here we see that as the crowds began to press upon him as his fame grew and word of mouth got around that miracles were being performed. After seeing these things the people began to press around him wanting to be close to him and seeking more. Under such circumstances he was unable to rest and nor would the people be able to rest.

He showed this when a scribe said to him that he would follow Jesus wherever he went. This is not unlike high profile people today who are hounded by the paparazzi and constantly being followed. Jesus made this point in vs. 20 saying, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." There was no place he could go at that time where he would not be followed and thus not be able to get a break from the people. We must remember that although he was the Son of God, he was here as a man and suffered all the issues a man suffers including being tired and exhausted.

Jesus needed to move on & he needed to get some rest. He said to his disciples to get into a boat to go across the water. As they went a great storm arose and the boat was being swamped, but Jesus was so tired he slept through it all. The disciples with him though were in great fear thinking they would perish. They still had not the faith to know that they had the Son of God with them and he would protect them from all dangers. When you consider for a moment that he could raise people from the dead it becomes evident that a storm should have been of little concern to the disciples.

At this stage though they did not have that faith for it was still early in Jesus ministry and they were young in Christianity. They had not learned they needed to trust in the Lord and know that he is watching over them and us. So fearing disaster they woke him up saying, "Save, Lord, we are perishing." His response was simple and showed their lack of faith, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" This was a simple enough position. They had seen the miraculous works he had just done, but their faith was still not strong enough to recognise that Jesus was God and could do anything. So he spoke to the storm and rebuked the wind and waves and it became calm. He showed them his power is unlimited. The disciples were shocked and amazed because it was unheard of that anyone could speak to the weather and change it by a word.

Through these proofs he showed the disciples that there is no need to fear the storms of the world, nor the storms of life. Whether physical matters, such as sickness, spiritual matters, like demon possession, or other things that may cause us to be afraid as they feared the storms, there is nothing that Jesus cannot and will not bring under control when the time is right.

We need not fear these things either for the Lord showed in all these scriptures that he protects and he will control these things. When we do have issues though, as the disciples feared being swamped, we need to call out to the Lord for help and he will save us. As we go through the storms of life we need to remember that we can call on him for help and that He has the power to save us from any and every situation.

The Power of Jesus Conquers All Things

(Matthew 8:28-34)

When Jesus took a boat across the water he came to the district of the Gadarenes where he met the demoniacs living amongst the tombs. When these demoniacs saw him it is evident that the demons in the two men recognised who Jesus was and understood his power over them, for they were subject to him.

There were many demons afflicting these men. In the other gospel versions of this section the demons called themselves “Legion” indicating not so much a name but a number. The structure of the ancient Roman army was made up of a number of legions of soldiers. A legion was essentially a complete army which included cooks, armour bearers, smiths and tradesmen to maintain and repair equipment as well as soldiers. It was effectively an army in its own right along with all the necessary service and support personnel necessary to wage war. Typically a legion comprised of up to about six thousand men. So when the demons possessing the men Jesus met called themselves “Legion” they were most likely referring to the number of demons possessing the men, which may have been as many as six thousand evil spirits.

These demons recognised Jesus as the Son of God and were afraid. It is evident also from other scriptures that when a demon is cast out of a man it is most unpleasant for them. Matthew 12:43 says, “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest...” So when the demon is cast out it is like wandering through a hot, dry and hostile desert for them and they suffer much torment as a result.

Now the demons in this case, having been commanded to depart from the men, did not wish to be tormented and so they begged Jesus to be allowed to enter the herd of swine. Jesus gave them leave to do so, but their wish was short-lived as the herd immediately rushed down to the sea and drowned and the demons would have to wander the waterless places anyway.

James wrote in his epistle that, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” (James 2:19) We see here in Matthew that they had good reason to believe and shudder for they knew they would receive no mercy for their evil ways and would be cast into a place of despair. Nor should they receive mercy as in this case they had tormented these men they possessed and caused them much suffering and harm. The end judgement of these demons was a just punishment for their actions.

The last few verses are interesting too. The people who came out to see him from the town nearby were greatly afraid at what they heard and saw. They were so afraid that they asked him to go away. Jesus did not attempt to force himself on them and nor does he force himself on anyone today. He did as they asked and got into the boat and left. It is interesting that even though a great sign had been performed among them, they did not want any part of what he was doing. There are many people today who

say, "Show me a sign and then I'll believe." In reality if they do not believe without the sign, the sign may not make much impact. Jesus showed this same principle in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). For after the rich man died and went to Hades he asked that Lazarus be sent back to warn his brothers. But he was told that the brothers had the teachings of Moses and the prophets that they needed to listen to. But the rich man said, "...if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." Then he was told that, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead."

A miracle means nothing to one who has no belief. The miracles Jesus did confirmed the truth of the message he taught, but it is the message that is most important, not the miracle. We must listen to the message and not get dazzled by the miracle for the message of Christ is what will lead us to life.

In the whole of Matthew chapter 8 we see that Jesus has power over all things. He healed the sick, calmed the storms and cast out demons all to show that his is the power from God. We who believe in him should take comfort from the knowledge that he cares for and protects us. And he also showed that no issue was too small or too great for him to handle if we only have faith and believe in Jesus.

Jesus' Power to Forgive Sins

(Matthew 9:1-8)

In the previous chapter of Matthew we saw that Jesus showed he had the power over all physical ailments, demon possession and the elements of this world. Now we begin to see the spiritual power he has to enable us to conquer and overcome the passions and weaknesses in our lives.

In this first section of chapter nine we see that a paralytic is brought to Jesus for healing. Previously we saw Jesus heal the sick and lame and so there is no question that he would have the power from God to do this healing as well. But we see now that Jesus takes a different approach to this healing than he had previously.

Instead of just saying to the man, "Rise and walk," Jesus says to him, "Your sins are forgiven." This is an unusual statement given that the man has come to be healed. But the lesson here is quite profound. The scribes who were there at the time said that Jesus was blaspheming by saying that the man's sins are forgiven. Their position was that only God can forgive sins, and to a degree they were correct. But they still did not understand that Jesus is both the Son of God and he IS God. So when Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven" he was within his rights to do so and was not blaspheming at all.

He then upbraided the scribes for thinking such evil of him. It is clear that no man on earth, and certainly not a sinner or blasphemer can say to a paralytic to rise and walk. Man does not have the spiritual authority let alone the healing power to do such a thing and the scribes as well as the people at the time knew this too. So Jesus used the

power of healing in this case to prove that he had the authority to forgive sin. He said to them, “Which is easier, to say ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” (vs.5) He knew that they knew no man could say to a paralytic “Rise and walk” and see the man healed. So using this knowledge he then said to them, “But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” — he then said to the paralytic — “Rise, take up your bed and go home.” And the man rose and went home, fully healed of the paralysis that had kept him bedridden.

The healing was done in this case to prove to the people that Jesus could forgive sins. The healing was not for the sake of the healing alone, but to prove Jesus had AUTHORITY to forgive sins. The testimony of John the Baptist when he bore witness to Jesus was, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) And in this section of Matthew we see Jesus proving he had the authority to do exactly that. In this healing he showed he could and would be able to take away the sins of mankind. This is an important point for without the removal of sin we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. No sinner will enter God’s Kingdom, but in Jesus our sins can be taken away for he has both the power and authority to do so. This matter will be discussed in greater detail in future posts or can be studied further on the website www.freegiftfromgod.com.

Jesus Came to Call the Sinners

(Matthew 9:9-13)

In this section of Matthew we begin to see a further expansion of Jesus’ work where he begins working not with just healing the sick, but teaching and healing sinners. When Jesus had begun his ministry he was called to account for his actions on many occasions by the scribes, Pharisees and the religious people of the day. They judged Jesus for the way he conducted himself and the things he did. On each occasion Jesus pointed out to them why he did what he did, and at the same time it showed up their hypocrisy, which is in part why they both hated and feared him.

On this occasion we see the call of Matthew who was a tax collector. Tax collectors of the day were a much disliked people for often they extorted and defrauded the people taking more than they should have. And nobody likes to pay taxes...even today. But Jesus did the contrary thing by going with the tax collectors and eating with them and other sinners. He often kept company with these kinds of people who were considered sinners and thus looked down upon by the religious people of the time.

But when questioned about this Jesus made the point saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” These people were “sick” but not from illness and diseases, but from sin. They were not necessarily physically ill, but were suffering the effects of sin in their lives. Jesus was teaching that they needed to be “healed” of their sin as he had previously healed those who had physical ailments and infirmities. So in his response to the Pharisees he was saying that in order to heal and release the sinners, he needed to be with the sinners. He needed to

go to the sinners so that they could hear his words and learn what was needed so they could be released from their sin. As an example, you cannot catch fish if you don't go to the water, you cannot buy food if you don't go to a shop or a market, and Jesus could not heal the sinners unless he went to them and they could receive his healing words.

The Pharisees on the other hand had no desire to even associate with the sinners. They felt they were a cut above the sinners and that the sinners were a low-class citizen, unworthy of their attention or presence. Their attitudes showed prejudice and pride, whereas Jesus showed no bias and humility. Yet these same Pharisees who were the keepers of the laws of God and responsible for teaching the law given to Moses, rejected that same law in their actions and attitudes. Thus they were so often called hypocrites by Jesus for in their hypocrisy they denied the very teachings and attention the sinners needed to be lifted up from their sins. They chose rather to condemn than to build up. They used the law as a weapon against the people rather than a tool of education so that the people could learn and understand the wisdom of the laws of God.

Jesus did the opposite to the Pharisees. He came and taught the people words of truth, and gave them an even better way forward than existed in the law. For Jesus did not just teach the people about the law, but taught them about repentance and the ways that would lead to life and God's kingdom. And as he said, Jesus came to call not the righteous, but to call the sinners. His purpose was not to just come and spend time with those who were already righteous, but to seek out those who had need of righteousness and who were burdened with sin so that he could proclaim release and take away their burdens.

Finally Jesus pointed to the Pharisees the way they needed to go forward saying, "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Under the law the Pharisees condemned the people for their sin. There was forgiveness of sin under the law through the process of the sacrificial offerings, but Jesus was saying that this was not what he nor God were seeking. Instead they were seeking mercy and came to give mercy to the people so they could be released from sin. God did not want burnt offerings continually from the people as a means of seeking forgiveness from sin. He wanted the people not to sin. He wanted the people to learn to live lives free from sin and to worship God. He wanted them to live with humility towards each other and in harmony with one another doing what was good and right. He did not want them to think they could do as they pleased and then come and offer their sacrifices and sin offerings as tokens of forgiveness. No, he wanted them to live "right" lives in full observance of all that is good, honourable and pleasing to God and not to please themselves.

Jesus came amongst other things to proclaim and teach the process of mercy. The Pharisees were teaching condemnation and damning the people under the law. But mercy overlooks the faults of others and recognises that as they have faults, so too do we. Mercy does not stand above people, overbearing and condemning, but it encourages and teaches people about what is good and right and true. Mercy is compassionate and loving. Condemnation is judgemental and places barriers between people. Jesus came to take away the barriers of condemnation through giving us his mercy by the grace of God, and it is only in God's merciful grace that we can stand.

Fasting in the New Covenant

(Matthew 9:14-17)

Jesus is approached by the disciples of John the Baptist and asked why his disciples did not fast like they and the Pharisees did. Jesus then used this teaching to show that the New Covenant was a new teaching and fasting under the New Covenant was quite a different matter to the Old Covenant.

Fasting in the Old Covenant was a process employed for many reasons. There were four appointed fasts under the law of Moses that were strictly applied as well as a fifth fast that was less strictly applied. Typically fasting was a form of abstinence, usually from food or drink, for a period of time. Fasting was also not an end in itself, but was a purpose or means to an end. Often fasting was seen in the Old Testament as a mechanism for a person to draw near to God for a specific purpose. As an example we saw King David fast to come before God in the hope that God would heal his child and prevent his death. (2 Samuel 12:13-23) Esther also proclaimed a three-day fast among the Jewish people to come before the Lord on her behalf before she went in to approach the King on behalf of the Jews. (Esther 4:10-17) There are other examples, but the key to these fasts, both individual and of the whole community, were that the fasts were targeted towards a specific purpose and to seek out God.

In addition to the appointed fasts, there was also a practice of personal fasting when an individual would abstain from food or some other pleasure so as to come before God. They would fast and bring their prayers to the Lord during the period of fasting. The practice of fasting twice a week arose and became a custom although there was no scriptural basis for this practice in either the Old or New Covenants.

Fasting in the New Covenant is only occasionally mentioned and does not appear to be a strict condition or requirement under the New Covenant, unlike the appointed fasts ordained in the law under the Old Covenant. A problem had arisen in the practice of fasting in the New Covenant period as Jesus mentioned this in several of his teachings. We see in Matthew 6:16-18 that some people would disfigure their faces and look dismal when they fasted so that people would see their situation and perhaps commend their abstinence or look upon them as being pious. Rather, Jesus counselled that they should clean themselves up when fasting so no-one knew of their fast so that when they brought their petition before God they would receive their commendation from Him and hopefully gain the answer to their prayers. We see Jesus also upbraided the Pharisees who saw themselves as better than other people for they fasted twice a week (Luke 18:9-14). But in this case the Pharisees were fasting as an end in itself. They fasted so that they could look good before others rather than trying to draw closer to God. Indeed the Pharisees on numerous occasions were upbraided by Jesus for doing the works of the law without applying the wisdom, justice, mercy and truth of the law. Their fasts were not to come closer to God but were done to look pious or religious in front of the people. It was a mark of their pride, arrogance and hypocrisy which Jesus disdained.

Now in this teaching back in Matthew 9:14-17 we see also that Jesus was showing that these were new teachings he was giving. Indeed he was teaching the New Covenant although at that time few would have been aware of this matter. And he showed that there was a challenge in giving this teaching for it involved a significant change. Humans as a species typically resist change because it requires effort and leads to the unknown. He gave two examples saying that you don't put a new patch of unshrunk cloth into a garment that is already washed and old, and you don't put new wine into old wineskins. In both cases if you do, more damage is done to both parts of the change. The wineskins are destroyed and the wine is lost and the patch shrinks and tears making a worse hole in the garment that was being repaired.

The old wineskins and the old garment in his examples are the people who have received the Old Covenant teachings. They are comfortable with the teachings and accepting of what they understand. The new wine and the new cloth patch represent the New Covenant teachings that Jesus was teaching the people. He was saying that to try and put these New Covenant teachings into the old people would be difficult and could even be damaging to them. The apostle Paul in his letters shows the anguish and heartache he went through in his walk as he had to reject the old Pharisee teachings he was steeped in from a young age, so that he could accept the New Covenant teaching he was receiving from Christ through the Holy Spirit. So it is possible to replace the old teachings, but Jesus was showing it would not be without difficulty and in some cases loss. In many cases it is better to leave the old people with their teachings and to seek new people to learn the new.

And so with fasting in the New Covenant, Jesus was saying that this is a new teaching too. Although it was mandated in the Old Covenant it is not as important in the New Covenant. The purpose of fasting in the Old Covenant was to come before God, but in the New Covenant we have direct access to God in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said that he would be with us until the end of the age and we have access to him even today. The Holy Spirit he has given us has direct access to the Father to petition on our behalf, so we do not have the same need for fasting today as in former times.

The true fast that God sought from man was not an abstinence from food but rather to abstain from evil and to do good as shown in Isaiah 58:1-9. The fasts the Pharisees held were a sham but the true fast is consistent with the teachings that Jesus gave. There are times in the New Covenant where people did fast, however whether these are necessary now is questionable as we now have access to God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit directly. I would not suggest they either are or are not necessary and for the most part it is an individual matter. However they are not mandated in the New Covenant as they were under the Old Covenant.

Your Faith has Made You Well

(Matthew 9:18-26)

At this point in the book of Matthew we begin to see Jesus teaching on the power of faith. In the next few scriptures Jesus performed several healings and miracles, and in each case pointed out that it was through the person's faith that they were made well.

The first of these was when the woman suffering a haemorrhage came and touched the fringe of his garment. She believed and had faith that the power of Jesus was such that if she only touched him she would be made well. In another version of this section (Mark 5:25-34) we see that Jesus was not even aware who the woman was when she had touched his garment. He perceived that power had gone forth from him to do a healing, but did not know who it went forth to and asked, "Who touched me?" When the woman realised she could not hide she fell at his feet in fear and trembling, explaining her situation before him. Jesus again said, "Your faith has made you well," showing that it was on the basis of her belief that she received this healing.

Likewise in this same scripture we see Jairus who was one of the rulers of the synagogue of the Jews who in desperation came to Jesus to heal his dying daughter. Now Jairus was taking quite a risk for the Jews had agreed that if anyone should confess that Jesus was the Christ they were to be put out of the synagogue (John 9:22). And yet here we see this ruler of the synagogue showing his faith in Jesus to be able to heal his daughter. It is evident from this and other scriptures that there were rulers of the synagogue who did believe Jesus in spite of the general opposition from the Pharisees and rulers (Note that Nicodemus in John 3:1-2 was also a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee, but he too came to Jesus and confessed his faith to Jesus). Jairus' daughter died and while others told him not to bother Jesus any further, Jesus said to Jairus to only have faith. When he had come to the house of Jairus he went into the girls room where she lay dead, and taking her hand he raised her back to life. Again this healing was performed because the father of the child had faith and called on the Lord to help.

Faith is fundamental to come to Jesus for anything, whether it be healing, learning or life. Without faith we cannot receive any of God's gifts for they are all based upon faith. In order to receive anything from the Lord we must first believe and then go to him convinced that he can do what we desire. As it says in Hebrews 11:6, "Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." If we do not believe, how can we receive? The whole of that chapter in Hebrews 11 is devoted to the many men and women of God who through faith in God did and received many wonderful things. Faith is the key to coming to God as it was truly said by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:7 that we, "Walk by faith, not by sight"

Sheep Without a Shepherd

(Matthew 9:27-38)

In the previous post we saw Jesus showing that faith was a key requirement for the people to receive healing. On several occasions he made the point that the healings they received was done according to their faith. We see now in this section that as

Jesus continued his work he began to get opposition from the Pharisees and he made the point that the people were not being cared for as they were like sheep without a shepherd.

In the first section of this scripture (verses 27-31) we again see the position taken by Jesus that faith is a key to healing. Two blind men came crying aloud after him saying, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." When Jesus went into the house where he was staying he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" to which the men answered, "Yes, Lord." Jesus then touched their eyes and they received their sight.

Now the key in this section is that the men first confessed their faith and that they had the faith to be made well. It was evident they knew who Jesus was for they referred to him as the Son of David. They had no doubt heard of the miracles he had previously done, and so believed that Jesus was able to heal them of their blindness.

Jesus was not looking for glory from all the healings he was doing. He was not seeking fame or self-glorification or the praise of men, for after doing this healing he charged the men sternly to tell no-one. Jesus did this a number of times, but it was impossible to hide these wondrous things. For when these men went back to their homes and families and could now see, the people would immediately ask and wonder how such a miraculous thing could occur. And in this case the men went away and spread his fame throughout all the district. Jesus on other occasions instead said for the people to give the glory to God and that is what we should do too when we receive his gifts today.

There is a twist too that we see in the next part of this scripture. A dumb demoniac was brought to him and Jesus cast out the dumb demon and the man spoke. The people marvelled at such a thing having never seen anything like it before. But what we see also is that the Pharisees become jealous of his growing fame and reputation and they begin to stand against and accuse him. What they do not realise is that they commit the unpardonable sin in their comments saying, "He casts out demons by the prince of demons." The one sin that will not be forgiven is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit as Jesus showed in Matthew 12:31-32. What is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? In this case it is calling the wondrous works of the Holy Spirit or attributing the work of the Spirit to the devil. These Pharisees were saying is that Jesus was casting out demons, not by the power of the Holy Spirit but by the power of Satan...and this is blasphemy. In Matthew 12 this topic will be covered in more depth for the scriptures there are more revealing and we can begin to understand why this is the unforgivable sin.

In the final paragraph of this text we see Jesus moving about the villages amongst the people, preaching and teaching the word of God and the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. The truth and the power of his words were confirmed by the signs attending him as he healed all sicknesses, diseases and infirmities. Matthew wrote that Jesus had great compassion for the people for they were like sheep without a shepherd and he said to his disciples to pray that the Lord would send out people to minister to the people.

Is this any different today? There is today still a great need for the Lord to send out ministers to preach and teach the truth of the gospel. There have been many people today hurt by the church and those who should have been helping and protecting the flock, but instead used them for their own gain. There are preachers today who distort the words of God and the Bible to justify their own ends and to seek advantage over others. This should not be so and the Lord will judge those people accordingly. Are all the teachers and preachers today like that? No they are not, but it is often difficult to tell the good from the bad. For as the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds."

If Satan disguises himself to look good, so do his people. Jesus said you would know them by their fruits and so it is important not to blindly accept what anyone says purely at face value. We must study and learn the words of God in the Bible and ask for the Holy Spirit to come to us and teach us so that we can discern truth from error and see deceitful men for what they are. If we come to the Lord in humility and ask him to lead us, he will do so and will expose impostors and take us to where his people can be nurtured in the truth. As Jesus promised, "Seek and you WILL find."

Power and Authority

(Matthew 10:1-4)

There is a marked distinction between power and authority. You can have the power to do something, but without the authority you are not able to do it. Similarly you may have the authority to do something but not the power. In order to be truly effective at anything you must have both power and authority.

Throughout the book of Matthew up to this point we see that the thing that separated Jesus from the scribes, Pharisees and religious leaders of his day was authority. At the end of the sermon on the mount we saw the people astonished because he, "...taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." (Matthew 7:29) The disciples too were amazed at him for he commanded the wind and waves with authority and they said, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him." (Matthew 8:27).

Jesus himself marvelled at the faith of the centurion who came to have his servant healed, not because he believed that Jesus had the power to heal him, but because the centurion recognised Jesus authority to heal without having to be physically present. The centurion understood authority for he said, "...I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one 'Go,' and he goes, and to another 'Come,' and he comes." (Matthew 8:9) The centurion recognised that Jesus had authority over diseases and only had to say the word and it would be done even though he were not physically present with the sick person. Finally we see that the evil spirits in the

demoniacs in the country of the Gadarenes recognised Jesus had the authority to cast them out for they too were subject to his command. (Matthew 28-34)

And here at the beginning of chapter 10 we see Jesus about to send out the twelve disciples, and he gave them the authority to cast out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and infirmity. They already had the power to do this work, for Jesus said of the twelve that the Holy Spirit was with them and would be in them (John 14:17). It is the Holy Spirit that gives the power to do these miracles and healings. Jesus could do nothing until he received the Holy Spirit after he was baptised by John the Baptist, as he did not have the power. He further testified that, "I can do nothing on my own authority..." for his authority came from God the Father and he could do only what the Father permitted. (John 5:26-30)

Today we see some of the leaders in the churches seeking the power of God to do miracles. They believe that if they had the power to do miracles that the world would be turned upside down as it was in Jesus time and in the period of the first disciples. These men today have missed the point for the real power that God gives is the power to become the children of God (John 1:12) and that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. As to the working of miracles and healing, that is a question of having the authority of God to do those works. Men today receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as they did all those years ago and so they have the power to do miracles, but not the authority.

It is my opinion, and I stress it is only an opinion, that the reason men do not have the authority to do miracles today is because of three main reasons.

1. The purpose of miracles was to confirm the truth of the message of God (Mark 16:20) and at present that message is not fully established in the churches.
2. It is my opinion that Jesus cannot yet trust man with this authority for it would go to a man's head. In Acts we saw a man who wanted to buy the authority of God so he could do the miraculous works the apostles were doing, and he was condemned for his desires. He wanted this power and authority for proud purposes to set himself up as being someone of importance and his heart was not right. (Acts 8:18-24). Until a man or a church reaches the level of maturity in Christ that the apostles held they cannot be trusted to wield the power nor have the authority to do the mighty works of God.
3. Finally, I believe the time is not yet right, for the Lord said at the end there would be a great invitation sent out and many would turn to him before the coming of the Lord. (Matthew 22:1-10)

Today we need to seek the power of God to become the children of God through faith, for to do this is to seek the love of God. Love will last into eternity, but the miracles will cease. When the Lord returns and his kingdom is established there will be no death, no sickness, no disease and no evil. The very purpose of miraculous healing will no longer exist, but love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

The Disciples Commission and Earning their Income

(Matthew 10:5-15)

After Jesus had selected the twelve who were commissioned to be his initial disciples, he gave them authority to do many works. They were to go out amongst the people and to heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons and most importantly to preach the good news of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Amongst his instructions he told them to take no money, food or additional clothing for they would be provided as they went along preaching. He made the comment that, "...the labourer deserves his food." (vs. 10) And he also pre-empted that statement by saying, "You received without paying, give without pay." (vs. The disciples who were working in the preaching and teaching of the word were entitled to receive their food and other bodily requirements. These would be provided as they moved amongst the people from thus who had the resources to provide. When the disciples were to enter any town, they were to find out who was worthy and stay with them for the duration of their stay in the town.

Now there are several things we can learn from this that conflict with the way the churches often operate today.

1. Many churches today take tithes from the people to pay for the ministers and ministry of the church. Jesus did not tell his disciples to take tithes when he first sent them out, on the contrary he said that they received without paying and so should give without paying. Nowhere else in the New Covenant were the ministers instructed to take a tithe from the people for tithing is not a part of the New Covenant but of the old.
2. The disciples were meant to receive the requirements necessary to sustain themselves. They were to receive food and lodging and perhaps clothing if needed, and this would be provided. They were not in the business of collecting significant sums such that they became wealthy at the expense of the people they were preaching to. In essence they were not to be a burden on the people but to provide a service. They were to be as Jesus was, servants not the ones who are served.
3. Jesus did not tell the disciples to go from house to house, staying first with one and then another, but rather to find out who was worthy and that they would provide their needs. There are some churches today however who do go from door to door seeking contributions towards their ministry.

Is it OK to receive your living from preaching the word? Yes it is, but it should never be a pathway to riches as we see in some ministries today. Even in the times of the apostolic church we saw that some were preaching for base gain and financial reward. Paul talks of such men saying, "...they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach," (Titus 1:11), and also in 1 Timothy 6:5-10, "...wrangling among men who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For

the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.”

There is no doubt that the pursuit of money is a great temptation in the church today. Western society is awash with the lust for money and it is difficult even for men of God to stand against such desires. The deception is that they say the money is for the expansion of the ministry and how many more people can be helped with the additional income. So they squeeze their supporters and those in their care to give till it hurts through tithes and offerings, but how much goes into the hands of those who need it? How many of the people in these churches need help, not just in physical ways, but also in financial as well? I must say at this point that not all ministries are like this, but when you see ministers of the church driving expensive cars and wearing expensive, tailored, imported suits and jewellery... you have to ask whether they are following the Lord's instructions to his disciples in Matthew 10:8-11 or if they are following their own desires.

The processes of tithing and seeking offerings as were laid down in the Old Testament law do not belong in the Christian New Covenant church today. Not only is it morally wrong, it is scripturally wrong. If you wish to understand more on this matter I have written a paper on this subject, which can be found at [here](#).

Sheep in the midst of Wolves

(Matthew 10:16-23)

Jesus told his disciples when he sent them out to preach and teach that they were going into a dangerous situation. The imagery of sheep in the midst of wolves conveys a picture of warning and danger. He made no promises here that when you teach the word of God all would be sweetness and light. Rather he showed that teaching the word of God would be a tough assignment. People would stand opposed to them, they would be widely condemned, flogged and persecuted, treated shamefully and even some would be put to death for preaching the word of God. Jesus made no illusions about how difficult it would be for these disciples he was sending out to preach.

But who were the persecutors that were going to treat the disciples so badly? Jesus said for them to “Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles.” (vs. 17-18) The men who were going to cause them this grief and do all these evil things were those who were in power, especially the religious powers of the day. It is they who had access to the power of the councils and who ran the synagogues and who had access to the kings court that would be the most vehemently opposed to the teachings of Christ that his disciples would be preaching.

Why would they be so opposed to this new teaching? Because it is the religious leaders of the day who were being threatened by these new teachings and who stood

to lose their power base, so they would be the most opposed to these New Covenant teachings. As people moved away from the old teachings, these religious leaders began to lose their hold over the people. And with it they lost their positions of power, prestige and esteem amongst the people. In the teachings of the New Covenant all the forms of worship were changed and there was no place for the old teachings that these religious leaders taught. No longer could they lord it over the people as intermediaries between man and God, for now all men had direct access to God through Jesus Christ. And the leaders did not want this to happen for they did not want things to change.

And so the imagery of sheep in the midst of wolves is quite apt. The sheep for the most part are peaceful, passive creatures that have need of a shepherd to protect them. But wolves are vicious, cunning and destructive. They hunt in packs and when they capture prey they rip and tear it apart doing great damage. Christians are the sheep and we have in Jesus a shepherd who can and will protect us from these religious, fanatical wolves. They may take some and force them to give account, but the true Shepherd of the Sheep, Jesus Christ, has promised that if and when that occurs, he will provide the words. He says in verses 19-20, "When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

The promise here is that the people of God would receive the words to say when opposed and called to account. The Holy Spirit would speak through them and so they need not be anxious when they were led before councils, synagogues and governors for the sake of the word of God. We saw the power of this statement fulfilled in the martyrdom of Stephen who spoke strongly and boldly, convincing many of the truth of the gospel even though it cost him his life. But the reward for standing firm in Christ is eternal life with Christ and Stephen was well aware of this fact.

We as Christians are in the same position today. Jesus said we would be hated by all for his name's sake, and who among Christians has not been the subject of ridicule, derision and contempt of those who are not followers of Christ? When you make a stand for Christ you immediately stand opposed to the things of this world. In Christ you expose the falseness, lies and deceit of this world. In Christ you are saying that you do not accept the madness, folly, hate and evil of this world but rather are seeking peace and the divine love that comes only from God. And the world does not like that and will oppose you. But Christ's reward is for freedom and peace now, and there is true freedom and peace in him now, and later there is eternal life free from sin, evil, sickness, death, despair and all of the things that are wrong with this world today. It is a far better opportunity and reward than the fleeting pleasures offered by the wolves of this world.

Suffering for Jesus Sake

(Matthew 10:24-26)

It goes without saying that no man can be greater than Jesus who is Lord and the Son of God. However every person can aspire to be like Jesus. One of the reasons for his appearing was to provide us with many examples of how we are to live in this world. He modelled the attitudes and behaviours that we are to copy and learn from so that we can learn to be like him.

However, as we saw in his life, he was maligned and opposed by the authorities and religious leaders of the time. He is preparing his people who choose to follow his path in this section of scripture so that they are not surprised when people turn to attack them. The apostle Peter also wrote that we should, "...not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you." (1 Peter 4:12) The apostle Paul also wrote that, "...all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived." (2 Timothy 3:12-13)

It is clear that those who choose to follow Christ will be opposed. Why is that so? There is a puzzle in this situation, but it is a fact that this does and will occur. When we consider that the intent of the followers of Christ is to live a good and peaceful life, it makes you wonder why Christians suffer such opposition. Jesus gave us the answer to this puzzle in John 3:20, "For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." They oppose those who want to do what is good and right because they themselves are evil. The nature of man is not to do good but to do evil. Most people are restrained from doing evil because they fear retribution from the authorities, but even that is not always a deterrent. The person who wants to do the right thing and stands against those who choose evil is maligned. They are called names, opposed, attacked verbally and sometimes physically and all because they have exposed the evil of these other people. Those who are evil are exposed for their evil and suffer guilt in the presence of those who do good. They feel as if they are being attacked, when in truth their own consciences are attacking them with guilt, and so they attack those who have exposed them.

In my opinion, this is the reason why Christians are opposed and maligned. It is because they choose to do good and not go along with the evil desires of the world. What makes it even harder for the Christian is that they are choosing to be like Jesus, and many in this world will oppose them for this reason alone. As the Lord said in verse 24, "If they have called the master of the house Be-el'zebul, how much more will they malign those of his household." If they called Jesus a devil, which is who Be-el'zebul was, then they will also call those who follow Jesus all manner of evil things.

But as Jesus says, we need have no fear of them. Their ends will correspond to their deeds, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:15. We need not be worried about them or take offence at them when they do oppose us. Who knows, in time they may see the errors of their ways and turn in repentance and come to Jesus themselves. I always take the optimistic view that if someone who so utterly opposed the Lord as the apostle Paul did before his conversion on the Damascus road could come to the Lord, then so can anyone else.

The best advice and action we can take is to do as Jesus instructed in Matthew 5:44-45, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so

that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” We do not know the hearts of these people or when, where or how the Lord may choose to prick their conscience in the hope they may turn to him for forgiveness.

There is Hope in God for He Cares for Us

(Matthew 10:26-35)

Do you have hope for the future? Do you worry about tomorrow and what it may bring? If you are in Christ there is no need to fear about tomorrow for the Father himself cares for you. There is hope in God for he cares for us. It is not even possible to begin to understand how much he cares until we give it some perspective.

Some time ago I was sent a presentation showing the respective sizes of the earth with the planets in the solar system. Then it showed these against the sun, then the sun against other stars, then the stars against the Milky Way and then the Milky Way against the rest of the known cosmos. What it was saying was that in the total scheme of things the earth is barely a speck of dust and how insignificant are we compared to the breadth, depth and size of the creation. Taking this down another level it showed there are some six billion people on the earth, all with their own problems, anxieties and difficulties. The point was that our individual problems are so insignificant that we should consider for a moment and try to put our life into perspective.

However I got a different message from this presentation. When I saw the vastness of the creation and the respective size of all things created, it filled me with a sense of wonder and humility. For the one who created all of this, who brought all things into being and who put man on this earth said he cares about me as an individual. In the total scheme of things we are just a speck of dust. But to God we are the most important things in all of his creation. Look at what the scripture says in this section in verses 29-33:

29 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will.
30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.
31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.
32 So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven;
33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

In spite of the size and the magnificence of His creation, and our insignificance in it, he has even gone to the trouble to say each individual hair on our head is numbered. Not even man can think in those terms and at that level of detail. And as he also says, not a single sparrow will fall to the earth and die unless and until it is the will of the Father, and we who follow Christ are of inestimable more value than many sparrows.

How great is His love for us and how magnificent are his promises for our security, both now and for the future? Man cannot calculate these. So knowing this we can take hope and we should live in the hope of the tremendous salvation he has given us in Christ Jesus. For Jesus says that if we acknowledge him, he will acknowledge us before the Father who is the master of all. Even Jesus said that he did not begin to compare himself to the Father, so how great is the acknowledgement we might receive to be acknowledged by Jesus before the Father? we can take hope, comfort and encouragement from these words.

When you consider the enormity of the creation, how is it possible that anything can be hidden from him? Jesus says not to fear what men may do to us for the worst they can do is to take our physical life, and they would be punished for that anyway. Rather we need to fear and respect God who can destroy our immortal soul and not just the physical body. Men will try all manner of things. They will do evil, they will lie and cheat and seek their own ends while trying to cover up what they are doing, but the Lord said, "...nothing is covered that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known." (vs. 26) Similarly when we do good it will be known for you cannot hide good deeds. All things will be known so we need to focus on following Christ and doing what is good in the sight of God. Then we will receive the due reward from him at his return.

There is hope in God for he cares for us and will reward those who follow the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Not Peace but a Sword

(Matthew 10:34-39)

Here is a fascinating scripture, especially at this time of the year when people have been celebrating Christmas. At Christmas we see people saying, "Peace on earth and goodwill to men." One of the challenges we find in the Bible is that every now and then there are scriptures that seem to contradict each other. This requires a deeper study of the word to unravel the mystery hidden in the words, for God does not contradict himself, and nor does the scripture. When there seem to be contradictions, it generally means either we do not understand what the Lord is driving at, or there may be an issue with the translation of the text.

We are fortunate today there have been a great many texts of the New Testament uncovered, including some of great age going back to the time when the letters and gospels were first written. Thus the translators of the more modern Bibles have more ancient texts to work with, which helps overcome the confusion when there are only a few documents and they conflict. Most of the errors of the old documents are transcription errors for the letters and gospels were hand-written and then copied by hand to distribute them. With each copy, and subsequent generations of copies, errors could creep in. Thus the older the text the more likely it is to be accurate.

There is a difficulty in Luke 2:14 where some of the old manuscripts have been translated as, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” (KJV) However since the King James bible was written in 1611, many more ancient manuscripts have been located making for better and more accurate translations. With the addition of more ancient manuscripts, the translators of the more modern bibles read (in some form or other) Luke 2:14, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” The key here is that peace is towards those, “...with whom he is pleased.” This is the way this scripture is translated in the NIV, Amplified Bible, New Living Translation, ASV, RSV, The Message, ESV, Contemporary English Version, New Century Version and the Common English Bible. Indeed all of the more modern texts of the New Testament use a translation similar to this. The older translations, such as Young’s and Darby’s Bibles did not have the benefit of the more ancient manuscripts and are typically like the KJV for that same reason.

Now this is quite a different rendering of this popular Christmas quote. When we see that there is peace and good will to those, “...with whom he is pleased,” we see a quite different picture emerge. Among those with whom he is NOT pleased there is no peace or goodwill. Rather for those who choose to do evil and to do the opposite of what God requires there is judgement.

In this section when Jesus said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” we see there are two aspects to this statement. First, for those who choose to do evil and oppose what is good, there is the sword of judgement. They will be given every opportunity to repent and turn to God, but if they persist in their evil ways, they will suffer judgement and will not receive the eternal life and peace offered to those who please Him. Secondly, there is a polarising effect in following the word of God and Jesus. There is a sword of division that will divide all those who choose the path of righteousness in Jesus and separate them from those who do not.

Thus in a family, we will see divisions between family members where it is those who follow God separated from those who do not. And Jesus shows this saying he will set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and in-laws against each other and the basis of this separation is those who follow Christ will be separated from those who do not.

He also shows in verse 37 that this is a serious matter. Nothing and nobody must get between us and the love of Christ Jesus. Our walk with him is what will determine whether we receive the reward or not. In these verses he says, “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” He is not saying we should not love and care for our family, but that we must keep things in perspective. Our first duty is to follow the Lord and then everything else comes after that. As mentioned above, there will be a sword of division in families, and those who are not of the Lord will put pressure on those who are following Christ. They will try to pull them away from Christ and put obstacles in the way of the followers of Jesus. So the point Jesus is making here is we must not allow their attempts to pull us away to succeed. We must make our faith and following the Lord the first priority and when a conflict arises, choose the Lord...always.

Will we suffer doing this? Yes! Jesus said also in verses 38-39, "...he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." Using the analogy of taking up the cross Jesus is saying whoever is not prepared to suffer for the sake of their Christian walk and following Jesus will be considered unworthy. When he adds that, "...whoever finds his life will lose it," he is saying that if we seek the life and living of this world we will lose our eternal life if we are not prepared to give up all for his sake. The converse applies too, in that if we lose everything in this life for the sake of the Lord, we will find our life into eternity with him.

The essence of this section is that we must put our walk with Christ above all other things. It's that important. Everything else pales into insignificance compared to the worth of knowing Jesus and following his ways. For in him we have hope and the promise of a better life both here and now, and in the future a life into eternity with him.

Representatives and Rewards from God

(Matthew 10:40-42)

We must be careful how we treat people and especially the people of God. Jesus shows in this section that we should consider whenever we are dealing with the people of God that we are dealing with the Father himself. He says in verse 40, "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me." So if we receive a brother or sister in the Lord, it is as if we are receiving Christ himself, and if Christ then it is as if we are receiving and dealing with the Father directly.

All who represent Christ represent the Father for Christ himself represented the Father. Jesus said to the disciples that, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9) As we are being changed into the image of the Father through Christ Jesus and the working of the Holy Spirit, Jesus showed that He was already in the image of the Father. In John 10:30 Jesus also says, "I and the Father are one." He is not saying they are the same person, but in their thinking and decision-making, in their attitudes and nature and in the way they do, judge and behave in all things they are the same. This is what it means to be in the image of one another. They are one and united in all things as if they are mirror images and reflections of each other's nature.

Now as to the rewards in this section of scripture, we see that Jesus says that if any person receives a prophet or a righteous man or a disciple and provides for them in some way, they will receive a reward. God will reward those who provide for his people but the person receiving these followers of the Lord will also receive the rewards from the people they are assisting. What is the reward of a prophet? It is prophecy and teaching and the understanding of God's ways. What is the reward of a

righteous man? It is the understanding of righteousness and the peace that comes through the knowledge of the righteousness that comes from God.

Jesus stated that if anyone gives a disciple even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, he would not go without reward. There are two things to consider here too. Firstly, a disciple can be a person who is young in the Lord and still with much to learn. They may have only just come to the Lord and begun their walk with Christ and are not advanced in the word of God. Yet God still sees them as very important and will reward anyone who aids them or assists them. Secondly, even if the assistance is as minimal as giving them a cup of cold water, which is such a small thing to do, they will still receive their reward.

To be rewarded by the Lord does not require big things or great gestures. You do not have to go out and build churches or schools or communities. You do not have to go to the wild places of the world and set up missions. There is nothing wrong with any of these things, but you do not have to do any of these things to receive the rewards of God. All you need to do is to receive God's people and if they need only a cup of cold water, to provide it. It is the small things that God sees as well as the big things. And often it is the small things that make all the difference. A cup of cold water to an extremely thirsty man may be a small thing to the giver, but to the receiver it could be the most precious gift of all.

Jesus showed the importance of this point and the significance of assisting his people in the parable of separating the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 26:31-46) In this parable we see the Lord separating those who were his and who had assisted him in a time of need from those who did not help him when they could have. In both cases the people said, (and I paraphrase) "When did we see you in need of help and minister to your needs?" Jesus replied that whenever the person saw someone in need and either assisted or didn't assist him or her they were doing it to Jesus. The rewards they received for assisting these people and thus Jesus were entry to God's kingdom. But those who failed to help when needed were cast out.

Do not underestimate the good that is done and can be done in the small things you do for people. Do not think that you are not doing much in the name of the Lord or not serving him. For whenever you assist one of his people with something they cannot do themselves, you are serving not just them, but them as the representatives of Christ, and Christ as the representative of the Father. Everything you do for the Lord's people you do for God. And you will be rewarded by God for the things you do.

John the Baptist Seeks Proof that Jesus is the Christ

(Matthew 11:1-6)

By this time John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod and was at the point of being executed. However, even John needed to know whether or not Jesus was the saviour to come. It is clear that Jesus had become well known for the many mighty

works that he had done, and before him John was well known for his preaching to the people about a Christ who was to come. The word, Christ, means an anointed one.

The primary reason why John the Baptist arose was to bear testimony to the Christ who was to come and he needed to know for certain whether Jesus was the Christ or if there was another.

Now Jesus said that in the last days there would be many false prophets and false teachers who would claim to be the Christ. In Mark 13:5-6 he said, "And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." Now in the situation with John Jesus needed to provide proof of who he was and not simply tell John and his disciples that, "I am he" lest he be perceived to be one of these false ones.

So instead Jesus told John's disciples to observe what he was doing. He said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offence at me." (Verses 4-6) The proof he provided was not in his words but in his actions and deeds.

We see in other places when he talks of those who go about teaching and preaching that you will know them by their fruits. In Matthew 7:15-18 he said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit." Using this analogy we see a good tree, or a good teacher, will not give bad fruit or bad teaching. But a bad tree or a false teacher can only bear bad fruit or evil teachings.

It is by what they do that you can assess whether the person and their teachings are good or not. What we saw when John's disciples came to him was Jesus applying this same principle to himself. If they saw good being done and the good word being taught they could be confident that he was the Christ. But if they perceived his actions to be of evil intent then they should report back to John that he was not the Christ.

This shows great wisdom and insight by the Lord for he used his own test that he gave us to determine good teaching from evil on himself. Needless to say the disciples reported back to John what they had seen Jesus do and teach and John was fully convinced that Jesus was the Christ. We see elsewhere that in this knowledge of Jesus as the Christ, John said that Jesus would grow while John would fade as he had done what he was meant to do. His words were, "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30) And increase he did as he brought about the New Covenant by which all of mankind has the opportunity to be saved.

Who was John the Baptist?

(Matthew 11:7-15)

Jesus described John the Baptist saying, "...among those born of women there has risen no-one greater than John the Baptist." (Vs. 11) This is high praise indeed coming from the Son of God, especially when we consider what John must have appeared like to the common man.

John the Baptist lived in the wilderness and not in the towns or cities. He wore rough clothes made of camel hair and he ate nothing but locusts and wild honey and drank only water. A sparse and rather unusual diet indeed. Had he lived today he would have been called an eccentric, or possibly a nutter given what his appearance looked like and his way of life. And yet Jesus said of this rather rough and wild looking man that there was no-one greater than he amongst all of mankind.

In spite of his obvious eccentricities John the Baptist had a message that he preached and that message was from God. He taught the people about the ways of repentance and to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. And the people went out into the wilderness to hear what he had to say and to be baptised for repentance in the Jordan. The people recognised that the power of God was with John and so they went out of their way to go to him and hear the words of God. Even the Pharisees came to him to hear and be baptised, and John showed up their hypocrisy as Jesus later did too.

The message of John the Baptist about repentance is as important today as it was then. All who come to God must be repentant as this is the very first step of a relationship with Jesus Christ. Repentance from sins is one of the six key foundation teachings of the New Covenant as defined in Hebrews 6:1-2. It is by repenting that we are made ready to receive the truth of the New Covenant and to accept Jesus. Jesus said of John that, "This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.'" (Vs. 10) The words John spoke to the people about repentance and baptism were to prepare them for the coming of Jesus and the ministry that was to follow.

Jesus also asked the people why they went out into the wilderness. Was it just to see the sights? That is, did they go to see, "A reed shaken by the wind?" (Vs. 7) No, they went to see and hear the words of John the Baptist. Now as mentioned already, he must have looked a rather odd person, and so the insight we can gain from that is that the word of God can come from anyone or anywhere. When Jesus said in verse 8, "Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses," what he was showing here is that it is not necessary to wear fancy suits and to dress to the nines to get or to receive the word of God. In fact those who "dress to impress" are not doing so for the Lord but for man or for vanity.

Fancy clothes, fine jewellery and so on do not impress God and neither should we be. God is concerned only with the condition of our heart and our faith in his son Jesus Christ. Just because a minister dresses well does not guarantee that his teachings will be any better than one who does not. Ultimately we must look past the man and listen to the words, for this is what God does and what we must do too.

Finally we see that Jesus said in verse 13, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John...” In this statement Jesus is defining the end of a period of time. He said, “All the prophets and the law prophesied until John,” and thus he showed that the end of the Old Covenant period ended with John. From that point on when Jesus began his ministry we saw the coming of the new age of the New Covenant period. And it came violently and with violence, for the New Covenant did not come into force until the violent death of Jesus Christ when he was sacrificed for our sins and raised for our justification.

Damned if you Do and Damned if you Don't

(Matthew 11:16-19)

In this section Jesus showed that as a Christian sometimes you would never be able to please people. He had just been speaking about John the Baptist, commenting that among those born of women there was no one greater than John.

Now John was a rough and rustic sort of an individual. He wore clothes made of camel hair, ate only locusts and wild honey and drank only water. This was covered in my post yesterday, which may be worth a look if you have not already seen it. The people of the time falsely said of John, “He has a demon,” (vs. 18) for he came neither eating normal foods nor drinking wine. But when Jesus came we see he describes himself as one who came both eating and drinking. Still the people were not satisfied and found fault, for they falsely said of him, “Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” (Vs. 19)

It was clearly a case of being damned if you do and damned if you don't. He compared that generation to children playing in a marketplace. When he said, “We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn,” (Vs. 17) he is showing that they were behaving like children. Sometimes you see children gathered together and some just will not play with others regardless of what they do. They try to do one thing and get no response, then try the opposite or something else with no response. This is what that generation of Jesus time were doing. Whether John or Jesus came and spoke to the religious people of the time, they would not go along to learn from them. Neither John who was somewhat eccentric by appearance, nor Jesus who was a man of the people, it made no difference for the religious leaders of the time rejected both of them.

Then at the end of the section Jesus makes an interesting statement about both himself and John. He says, “Wisdom is justified by her deeds.” (Vs. 19) What a person does is an indicator of their wisdom. In the case of eating and drinking as Jesus was applying in this section to himself and John, wisdom would suggest that there are things different people should do and others not do. An alcoholic for instance should not drink. That is wisdom for them. A person with food allergies should not eat certain foods. That is wisdom for them. A person prone to anger or violence should not go

into places and situations that will trigger these emotions. That is wisdom for them. And there are many other similar examples that could be given.

Wisdom is not some strange, unimaginable, ethereal, untouchable thing as often promoted in television and certain movies. Wisdom is the application of knowledge. It is about learning good things and then applying that knowledge in your life circumstance. Even the simplest person who applies the knowledge that they have to live a better, more peaceful life with less stress and tension is using wisdom. James showed that wisdom is about how you live your life when he wrote, “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” (James 3:13) Solomon spoke of wisdom in the book of Proverbs many times saying to seek it like silver and to guard it as it would guard and protect you.

True wisdom comes down from God and it is greater than any wisdom of man, for again James wrote, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity.” (James 3:17) If we seek him and follow in the ways of Jesus then we too may find the true wisdom of God. But we must also recognise that even if we do, others will judge us falsely as they did John the Baptist and Jesus, even though both were teaching the truth. There will always be opposition to the Lord and his people. Knowing this is wisdom too; as it gives you leave to move on where you are not welcomed rather than banging your head against a wall.

Miracles don't Change the Heart of Non-Believers

(Matthew 11:20-24)

You would think that if miracles were performed in front of the eyes of people they would change. If you saw something totally amazing that could only have been done by the power of God, that you would listen to the one doing those things. Well man just doesn't seem to be like that, as Jesus showed many times.

In this section of Matthew 11 we see Jesus upbraiding the towns and cities where he had performed many of the marvellous and mighty works God allowed him to do. In these cities and towns the sick were healed, lepers cleansed, demons exorcised, the dead raised and many other mighty works. While he did these he was preaching the word of God. But these cities on the whole did not turn around and repent and follow the truth. They were amazed at what was done, but not for the understanding of God's word, but rather for the spectacle of the miracles. To them it was more like a show than a confirmation of the true Gospel of God, and a call to change their lives.

Jesus expected this to be the way things went anyway. He knew that some would follow but most would not, and he knew that even miracles would not turn people around. Jesus taught this in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16. Lazarus lived on the street in utter squalor and with nothing at the gate of the rich man who lived in the lap of luxury. Lazarus though was a good man despite his afflictions, whereas the rich man was proud and arrogant. They both died and Lazarus went to

Paradise to be comforted with Abraham, while the rich man went down into Hades to be tormented in hell. A conversation ensued between the rich man and Abraham with the rich man first pleading arrogantly for Abraham to send Lazarus with water to quench his thirst. He was still arrogant and proud, thinking that Lazarus was nothing more than a slave to do his bidding. When Abraham said no, the rich man pleaded that he would send Lazarus back to earth to warn the rich man's five brothers so they would not suffer. In verses 28-31 we see Abraham's response.

28 "...for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'

29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

31 He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'"

When Jesus upbraided the cities and towns for their lack of repentance, it was this same situation as Abraham spoke of with the rich man. Abraham said, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." The words of Moses and the prophets were the words of God. Similarly the words of Jesus are the words of God. Unless a person listens to and acts upon the words of God when they hear them, then no amount of people rising from the dead, miracles or mighty works will change their minds and bring them to repentance.

Miracles will confirm the truth of the word to believers. They confirm that what they believe in is the truth and this is from God. But non-believers will not believe even if they see miracles. Consider the miracle of Creation today. Non-believers are seeking "scientific" explanations for the Creation of the heavens and the universe. They are looking for "scientific" ways that man was created, let alone all of the animals, insects, plants, fish and so on. They do not believe that God created the world and everything in it, and everything was made in their species and according to their kind from the beginning. Instead man chooses to accept evolution and the gradual changing of species over countless generations and eons until we get to where we are today.

To be honest, I doubt the earth has been around long enough for this to even occur. Science estimates the earth at about 4.6 billion years old (Source: <http://www.extremescience.com/zoom/index.php/geologic-earth-history>). But how old is the beginning of life? Again science suggests the first single cell organisms appeared some 3 billion years ago and did not change for another 2 billion years. Then these cells became multi cell organisms and began the process of evolution starting around 1 billion years ago. So in the past billion years we went from single cell organisms to complex life forms and rational, reasoning, thinking man. Is it rational and reasonable to think that all of that could happen in one billion years? And where in the fossil records are all of the crossover species? For years science has tried to locate the crossover between apes and man, but what about the crossovers for every other species as they all evolved according to science? The fossil record should be littered with crossover species if evolution is to be believed, but there is not a single crossover to be found.

Why is that? Because they don't exist! Science cannot believe the miracle of creation and yet chooses to accept the fairy stories of evolution and call it fact when even a non-scientist can see it cannot hold water. Even using scientific method to look at the fossil records, as they do, is positive proof of the absurdity of evolution. They cannot show the existence of a single crossover species when there should be millions of such species in the fossil record if evolution were true.

This is exactly what Jesus was speaking of when he said that even if they saw miracles they would not believe and repent. And it is for such lack of belief and repentance that he upbraided the towns of Chora'zin, Beth-sa'ida and Caper'na-um where he did his mighty works. From this we must learn to listen to the Lord, regardless of miracles, and repent so that we can find the truth for ourselves and follow him.

The Revelation to the Babes in Christ

(Matthew 11:25-27)

When the Lord came to open up the word of the New Covenant, he intended for the message to be accessible and available to all mankind. The revelation of his word was such that any person would be able to understand it if they came to him seeking to understand.

Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:3-6, "This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" In this Paul showed that there was to be no intermediary between man and God apart from Jesus. This was unlike under the Old Covenant where there was a priesthood selected only from the tribe of Levi and the high priests were to be of the blood lineage from Aaron.

Again it was shown that access to God was no longer the domain only of the high priest, for when Jesus died the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom indicating every man had access to the Holy of Holies through Jesus. (Hebrews 9:1-12) Prior to this only the high priest was permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies and then only once each year. But when Jesus came and died, he entered on our behalf and now sits at the right hand of God to mediate the New Covenant on our behalf directly with the Father.

So if there was to be no intermediary apart from Christ as high priest, and the job of the priests was to teach the people the requirements of the religion, then it was important that the teachings of the New Covenant be accessible to all. It was necessary that it be simple enough that everyone could understand the Covenant and the teachings that would lead to life. To that end, after Christ died he said we would receive the Holy Spirit to teach us all things as we see in John 14:26, "But the

Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

Simplicity is the key and we see this in many places. The basis of the New Covenant and receiving God’s gifts is faith and through faith to come to know the love of God. The reason it was based on faith is so that every person would be able to receive it and every person would be equal. Everyone has the capacity to believe and this is the one great equaliser.

But some men tried to seek God through other means, such as knowledge, and they missed the mark. For it is written that “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1) So here in Matthew 11:25-27 we see Jesus extolling the fact that God has seen fit to open up his word of faith and love in the New Covenant to those who were not of great standing with regards to wisdom and knowledge of this world, but to babes in such matters. Paul noted this too saying in 1 Corinthians 1:18-21

“18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.”

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”

To those who seek knowledge and wisdom of this world the teachings of Christ are like foolishness because they are based on faith. They cannot begin to understand how it works or can work because they do not understand the wisdom of God and matters of the Spirit. But to those who accept Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, this same word is all-powerful and able to change a man’s life. And the Son of God reveals this to us when we are called and answer his call. He reveals to us all matters pertaining to life and the very nature of the Father, for the nature of God is love.

My Yoke is Easy and My Burden is Light

(Matthew 11:28-30)

This is a beautiful piece of scripture for in it we see the Lord reveal the essence of walking with him under the New Covenant.

Being a Christian and walking with the Lord is not a hard thing to do. Sure there may be hard times that need to be faced and issues dealt with, but it is not a hard thing to walk with Christ.

Walking in the New Covenant is a simple matter. It is not a complex set of rules and regulations, with intricate instructions, processes and methods of worship. It does not require special training and tools to walk with Christ. You do not need a degree in

divinity or theology to understand the teachings of the New Covenant for as Jesus has said in this section, "...my burden is light." (Vs. 30)

Jesus has not burdened his people or made it a hard and wearisome task to walk with him. Instead he has taken away all of the difficulties and obstacles to walking with God under the Old Covenant and stripped them down to a few bare principles. At its simplest form, to walk with the Lord all you need to do is to believe and have faith in Jesus Christ. You can sum up the minimum requirements of the Christian faith in the following few words. Jesus is the Son of God who came to this earth to die and set us free from sin and the law so that we could be transformed into the nature of God and live with him into eternity.

Yet even in these few words there is a depth of knowledge and understanding required that those who choose not to follow his path would never see. The revelation of the truth and the revealing of God is not something a man can understand by himself. Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light," and he has provided the means by which we can find these things out. He has given us a teacher, guide and counselor in the Holy Spirit to teach each and every one of us the depths of the New Covenant.

The Spirit reveals all things to us that we need to know. We do not have to transform ourselves, and in truth we can't anyway, for no man knows or understands the nature of God. The Holy Spirit knows the nature of God for the spirit proceeds from God, as we see in John 15:26, "But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me." The work and task of the Holy Spirit is to do the work of transformation in us. As it says in 2 Corinthians 3:18, we, "...are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." And in John 14:26 we see the teaching and guiding work of the Spirit, "the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." And again in John 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."

So we see that with all of this power given to us from God to teach, guide and transform our lives, there is little for us to do other than to be receive God's word and to accept Jesus as our Saviour through faith. The rest of the work is his and is being performed by the Holy Spirit. Our part in this process is to learn and apply the teachings as we are taught, and to have faith, trust and hope in Jesus Christ.

These are not burdensome things and thus as Jesus said, his yoke and burden are truly light and easy. The Apostle Paul showed best that this is Jesus' work in Ephesians 2:10. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." And as we are his workmanship and he is doing all the work, our load is light and easy.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

(Matthew 12:1-8)

At the end of chapter 11 we saw Jesus state that his “yoke was easy and his burden light.” (Matthew 11:30) Now we see him begin to teach things that have reduced that burden of the Old Covenant.

Under the Old Covenant men were required to keep the Sabbath day holy. This was one of the Ten Commandments. On the Sabbath they were not to travel, nor work, nor prepare food. All food preparation was to be done the day before so they could rest and worship the Lord on the Sabbath day.

Now as Jesus and his disciples walked through some grain fields, the disciples plucked some of the grain and began to eat it. The Pharisees, who were sticklers for the smallest points of law took any opportunity to find fault and brought this to Jesus’ attention saying, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” (Vs. 2) The Pharisees expected Jesus would upbraid and condemn his disciples for breaking the law, but instead Jesus responded by showing other instances of where men did what was unlawful and yet were not condemned. David the king entered the temple and took the bread of the Presence, which no one but the priests were allowed to eat, and ate and gave it to those with him and yet he remained guiltless (1 Samuel 21-16). This was clearly a more significant issue than the disciples rubbing a few heads of grain to eat for the bread of the Presence was part of the offering and was consecrated as holy to the Lord. Then too Jesus said of the priests who offer the lamb and cereal sacrifices in the temple on the Sabbath (Numbers 28:9-10), which technically is breaking the Sabbath, also remain guiltless.

Jesus then showed that this new teaching under the New Covenant was greater than the old teachings under the law. At the end of this section he says, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is lord of the sabbath.” (Verses 6-8)

Under the New Covenant those who come to Christ are guiltless for Jesus has taken away their sin. In the Old Covenant men had to seek forgiveness of sin by sacrifices and offerings, but the forgiveness in the New Covenant is not based on offering sacrifices. The one perfect sacrifice has already been offered and we have been set free from sin through the blood of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice is the only one that cannot merely give us forgiveness of sin, but completely remove and take our sin away. John the Baptist said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) This is why Jesus came to offer his own blood on our behalf. So that our sins would be taken away, not simply forgiven.

Expanding on this we see in Hebrews 10:5-6, “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure.” God does not want constant offerings for sin. He wants us to not sin at all. He wants us to be merciful toward each other for our weaknesses and not judgmental over minor points of law, which is what the Pharisees were doing. In the constant sin offerings there was also the constant reminder of sin. But when Jesus took away our

sins, he also took away the law so that we would not need to continue to make the offerings and would not be bound by sin.

This is too lengthy a subject to go into here, but if you wish to see more on this matter there is a free eBook on you can download here that looks at the Foundation Teachings of Christianity There is much more detail in this booklet covering this message about freedom from sin and freedom from the law through faith in Jesus Christ.

When we are set free from the law through Christ Jesus, we are also set free from the law concerning the Sabbath. This is why the disciples could be considered guiltless for the law applies only to those under the law. In Christ we are set free from the law and no longer under it and thus guiltless.

Self Righteousness and Healing on the Sabbath

(Matthew 12:9-14)

By this time the Pharisees were seeking opportunity to condemn and destroy Jesus. They were jealous of him and afraid of his power, for all the people were following this new teaching and the Pharisees were losing their authority and position over the people.

The problem the Pharisees had was they could find nothing on which to accuse Jesus and prove him wrong. Here we see them ask him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (Vs. 10) They considered healing to be a form of work and on the Sabbath no man was supposed to work. But they could not fault the answer Jesus gave them. He said that if any of them had a sheep and it fell in a pit on a Sabbath, would they not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of course they would, for if they were to leave it in the pit until the Sabbath ended, the sheep may die. To a man they would have removed the sheep from a pit rather than see it harmed. And as Jesus pointed out, a man is of much greater worth than a sheep.

Jesus showed that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. In the same way that the Pharisees would not have allowed a sheep to suffer on the Sabbath, why would they consider it a sin to allow a person with an infirmity or sickness to be healed on the Sabbath? They were splitting hairs and being contentious for the sake of their own evil ends. After Jesus had healed the man the Pharisees went and took counsel how to destroy him.

The New Covenant came into being so that we could be set free from the law of sin and death and have life. As Paul wrote, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1) Paul also showed us that, "Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified." (Romans 10:4) But the Pharisees were not able to see the righteousness that came from God. Instead they were seeking to establish a form of self-righteousness based on keeping the letter of the law. Paul showed the folly of such an approach in Romans

10:3, “For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”

Jesus was showing this same point to the Pharisees when he healed the sick on the Sabbath. He said to the Pharisees earlier, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,” (Matthew 12:7), but the Pharisees did not understand him. In healing the sick he was showing mercy to the sick people. The Pharisees would have made it hard for the man causing him to wait for another day to be healed. They would have preferred he showed “sacrifice” by waiting in pain for the sake of the law. They were legalistic to the extreme and could not see that what God sought was for man to be merciful to his fellow man.

Jesus showed in another section the degree to which the Pharisees went and failed in their self-righteous approach. In Matthew 23:23-24 we see these words:

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

The Pharisees and scribes went to extreme lengths to tithe tiny amounts of their produce, even down to herbs grown possibly in a window garden or a pot. But then, as we saw with the man with the withered hand, they neglect the more important aspects of the law, justice, mercy and faith. Jesus then shows us a comparison of how foolish they were.

Jesus compared tithing to a gnat, which is one of the smallest insects known. If we had a drink and swallowed the gnat most people would not even notice because gnats are so small. If a fly fell in most people would throw out the drink and get another, or if they swallowed it would gag and cough. This shows how small a gnat is in comparison to even a fly. But Jesus says that the failure of the Pharisees was as if a camel fell in their drink and they continued drinking and swallowed it.

Now a camel compared to a gnat is a huge comparison. A camel stands taller than a full-grown man and can weigh up to 700 kg (1540 pounds). A gnat on the other hand is so light you would not even feel it on you. In this analogy, Jesus showed the difference in the importance of tithing as compared to mercy, justice and faith. Tithing is insignificant compared to these other matters. And yet the Pharisees thought that by their tithing they were doing God’s will. This same issue rages still today with some churches promoting the importance of tithing over many other matters of the truth.

But self-righteousness through works of the law, which is the path the Pharisees were following in their tithing, is no righteousness at all. God gives the only true righteousness that exists through faith in Jesus Christ. To walk in God’s righteousness means to follow Jesus’ example. Do good and show mercy when it is warranted, as he did to the sick man who was healed on the Sabbath, for Jesus also showed, “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

Where there is Life there is Hope

(Matthew 12:15-21)

Jesus left the area knowing that the Pharisees were taking counsel and conspiring how to destroy him. But still his fame and reputation grew, for the people came to him and all who were sick and infirm he healed.

However he was not seeking fame or notoriety, for in all cases he ordered the people not to make him known. This was not merely a case of self-preservation, knowing the malice of the scribes and Pharisees, but it was his nature. It was also that the prophecies about him would be fulfilled.

In vs. 19 we see, “He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets.” In this we see that he was not trying to be seen to be someone of importance, even though Jesus was the single most important person to ever walk on the earth. He was after all the Son of God. Instead though we see that he didn’t blow his own trumpet. He did not try to market himself as people do today, nor did he self-promote in any way at all. Instead his words and deeds spoke for him. As Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:25, “So also good deeds are conspicuous; and even when they are not, they cannot remain hidden.”

Jesus also came to level the playing field so that all men would have access to God. Prior to his coming, Israel was the chosen people of God. They received the law and had the prophets and to them were given the promises of the Lord. But in the New Covenant we see that the door was opened for the Gentiles as well so that everyone has access to life. We see in vs. 18, “I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles,” and again in vs. 21, “and in his name will the Gentiles hope.” So it is in Christ that the reconciliation of all men to God has been achieved.

Paul wrote about this reconciliation of the Gentiles and the Israelites in this way, “...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.” (Ephesians 2:12-14) And God has reconciled us to himself through Christ (Ephesians 2:16) and also given us the ministry of reconciliation to preach to the world, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

So now we see that all men regardless of race or genealogy are equals in Christ. We are all on the same level and all can approach the throne of God through Jesus Christ. There is no longer any distinction, we are all now the same. Once we were sinners but have now been set free from our sins in Christ Jesus through faith in his resurrection

and the power of God. Romans 10:12-13 shows this saying, “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” We may not all have been children of Israel in the flesh and able to receive the promises of God, but we can all become children of the spiritual Israel in Christ and thus become children of God.

Finally we see that Jesus is gentle. In Matthew 12:20 it says, “...he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick, till he brings justice to victory.” By this he is saying that where there is life there is hope. If a person is bruised or suffering, he does not reject or ignore them, nor break them like a plant bruised and ready to be uprooted. Instead he offers help, care, healing and support to try to restore and strengthen. Where there is even a glimmer of light in a person, like a smouldering wick, he does not extinguish the light, but instead hopes that it will be fanned and become fully alight. If there is any chance that a person will come to him for reconciliation to God, he offers full opportunity to do so. No one is rejected, no one is left out who seeks or shows even the slightest desire to come to him.

A good example of this we see in the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. We see that when the prodigal son finally came to his senses and returned to his father broken and repentant, the father did not wait for him, but seeing him in the distance he ran to meet him. Jesus is the same. If we begin to approach him, even from a distance he will meet us on the way to help and guide us. Where there is life there is hope and our hope is in Jesus Christ and the redeeming power of his word.

A Divided Kingdom will not Stand

(Matthew 12:22-28)

The Pharisees continued to grow more jealous, envious and hostile toward Jesus. Their criticism of the work he was doing was evil and wrong. They could find no real fault with his message and so they made things up. They spoke lies to a depth of evil that was unimaginable considering the good works Jesus was doing. In response Jesus showed wisdom and knowledge, proving them to be foolish and liars in their opposition to him.

In this section we see Jesus cast the evil spirit from a blind and dumb demoniac. The man was healed and all who saw it were amazed. The people knew there was a Messiah to come who would be the Son of David, and they began to wonder aloud whether Jesus could be the Messiah. Jesus indeed was the Messiah and his works and the message he proclaimed testified to this fact. In addition, Matthew’s account of the Lord’s time on earth showed that all of the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus.

The Pharisees also knew the Messiah was to come. Their expectation was he would come to rule as a great king, which was also prophesied and will occur after the second coming when Jesus will rule as king. And this was how the Pharisees expected

him to appear when he came the first time; to come in great power and glory, not as a lowly son of a carpenter and a man of the common people with a message of salvation to proclaim. They also expected that as the keepers of the law and the temple worship they would be exulted by the Messiah when he came.

Regardless of the works he did and the message of freedom and salvation that he preached, they rejected Jesus as the Messiah. This too was spoken of in the prophets, "Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. But when they tried to arrest him, they feared the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet." (Matthew 22:42-46)

Jesus showed them they were the builders who rejected the stone (Jesus) that became the head of the corner. Every house of brick that is built is begun from one corner of the house. That first brick or stone that is laid is the most important of all. If that stone is laid wrong, then every brick after it will be wrong, for that stone determines the position of the house and locks in the position of every other stone that follows. When the Pharisees rejected Jesus, he became the foundation stone of a new house, the New Covenant. This house is not built on law and temple worship but is built on salvation, faith, justice and freedom from sin. It is certainly a much better house than the old house administered by the Pharisees, but they were not prepared to "move house." And instead they attacked the builder of the new house, Jesus.

They could not attack his teaching and his message, so the Pharisees attacked the wonderful works he was doing. To try to undermine him they accused him of casting out demons by the prince of demons, Be-el'zebul, who is the devil or Satan. Jesus immediately rejected and refuted their position, knowing the evil of their thoughts. He said, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand; and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?" (Matthew 12:25-26) Common sense tells us that a divided kingdom cannot stand. In team sports it is critical that the team play as a unit, each doing their part to help the team win the game. But if the team is divided and selfish and not working together as a cohesive unit, they will lose every game. Likewise in the business world or the political arena today we often see division amongst the leaders. It is disruptive and destructive to that business or government when this occurs, leading to all manner of issues and problems for the people. And they then lose control of their kingdoms because they cannot stand as shareholders sell off their shares and governments are ousted from power.

So when the Pharisees said that Jesus was casting out demons by the power of Satan, he sharply rebuked them. Jesus pointed out that if they thought he were doing this by the power of Satan, then by whom were their sons casting out demons? They could not say that their sons were operating in the power of God but Jesus by the power of the devil when both parties were working to the same end. The actions of their own exorcist sons was judgement against the wrong thinking and evil thoughts of the Pharisees in this matter.

Finally Jesus said that if it was actually by the Spirit of God that he was casting out demons, as they would have agreed their own sons did, they were witnessing not some act of the devil, but the expression and working of the Kingdom of God. If that was the case, then perhaps they ought to listen to what he said and give God the glory for the wondrous works that were being done in the name of God by Jesus.

The Unforgivable Sin

(Matthew 12:29-32)

There are many wrong things a person might do which the Lord will forgive them for when they turn to him in repentance. However there is only one thing that the Lord ever said would not be forgiven. We see it here in vs. 31-32 where he says, “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

Jesus and the Father are prepared to forgive men of virtually anything they might do, even if they blaspheme Jesus who is the Son of God. But they will not forgive any person who blasphemes the Holy Spirit. Let us look at this in some more detail.

What is blasphemy? There are numerous dictionary definitions that include: to speak impiously, use profane words, revile, and curse. In short it is to call something evil when it is good. As regards blasphemy of the Holy Spirit it is to say that the good works and actions of the Holy Spirit are demonic or of the devil. We saw in the section just leading up to this that the Pharisees had said that Jesus was casting out demons by the power of Satan. This is exactly what blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is. Jesus was casting out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit and these Pharisees said he was using satanic power. They had committed blasphemy of the Holy Spirit Jesus was warning the people of the seriousness of this sin.

Why is it that blasphemy of the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven when Jesus said if a man blasphemed Jesus they would be forgiven? To understand that we need to understand something about whom the Holy Spirit is, and more importantly, what the role of the Holy Spirit is in the New Covenant.

The Holy Spirit is our teacher, comforter, counsellor and guide to bring us to the Lord. (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-15) The work of the Holy Spirit is to transform us from our evil ways and nature into the image of the Son of God. This is accomplished by the spirit who changes us gradually from one degree of glory to another as it says in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

Now we saw that the Holy Spirit was first received by the disciples at Pentecost in Acts 2:2-4 like this, “And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a

mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” So the Holy Spirit is received and enters a man to dwell within him and work with him individually.

Jesus spoke of this indwelling of the Holy Spirit too, “...even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.” (John 14:17) Paul also wrote of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in several places, saying in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” He also warned Timothy to, “...guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.” (2 Timothy 1:14) And he also wrote of the indwelling spirit in Romans 8:9-11.

Now why is this matter of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in man significant in relation to the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? Consider the nature of man for a moment. We know that there is nothing good dwelling in man’s nature as Paul said in Romans 7:18, “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” We may wish to do good but we often fail. The passions of a man are evil and we know that many people will do whatever they can get away with. This is not God’s nature. The nature of man is described by Paul as, “Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.” (Galatians 5:19-21)

We know that the Holy Spirit is holy and given to us individually as a gift from God. And we know also that, “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.” (Romans 11:29) So when God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit he does not take it back.

But we see also that, “... the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would.” (Galatians 5:17) And again, “...the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (Romans 8:7-8) So knowing that our human passions and desires are opposed to the desires of the Holy Spirit, how awful a job is it for the Holy Spirit to have to do in us? We are being transformed into the nature of God, but until that state is achieved the Holy Spirit has to put up with all manner of unholiness, strife and evil passion in the human nature as he dwells within each individual.

This must be a terrible job for one who is holy. To have to put up with all manner of evil in man while he works to change man into the nature of God must be the most difficult task ever given to anyone. It is for this reason that I believe that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only unforgivable sin. It is just retribution for the filth and rubbish that the Holy Spirit has to put up with as he dwells within us to do the work of change. And praise God that he is prepared to do this horrible and awful task for it is for our benefit and we should thank the Lord daily for his compassion and be mindful of the Holy Spirit as we live our lives.

Out of the Abundance of the Heart the Mouth Speaks

(Matthew 12:33-37)

Jesus makes an interesting point in this section, and it is rather at odds with some modern thinking. Here he says, “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.” (Vs. 33) The point he is making is that people are either good or bad and you will know them by what they do.

Whatever comes out of a person defines who they are. As he said elsewhere, “...not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” (Matthew 15:11) In this case he was using the traditions of the Pharisees concerning the washing of hands before eating. We know there are hygiene issues today, but the Pharisees were teaching this as a doctrine and making it of greater importance than the law of God. Jesus showed their folly and error and in his teaching made the above point. What goes into the mouth is food and it goes to the stomach and passes on. But what comes out of the mouth are the thoughts of men expressed as words and if these are evil, that is what defiles the man. Eating with unclean hands might make you unwell, but speaking evil will cost you your life into eternity.

The words we speak and what we do are controlled by our thoughts and the passions of our flesh. These are the fruits of our minds. Thus a person who does evil bears evil fruits and a person who does good bears good fruit in the words, deeds and behaviour. The point Jesus was making is that it is not possible for an evil person to bear good fruit and vice versa. He stated as much in the section about being aware of wolves in sheep’s clothing. (Matthew 7:15-20) In that passage Jesus also made the point that, “You will know them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:20) It is by this method we are to test for false teachers and prophets.

So if the abundance of the heart of a person is fundamentally evil, that is what will come out of them in words, deeds and behaviour. They may be able to act for a time and masquerade as being good, but in time the truth will come out and they will be seen for what they truly are.

This position is different to much modern thinking. Today we see teachings from eastern religions about the “Yin and Yang.” This teaching says that in everything good there is some evil and in everything evil there is some good. That is not what Jesus taught. Jesus shows that we are either one or the other. There are no halfway or part way positions. “Either make the tree good and it’s fruit good or make the tree bad and its fruit bad.” (Vs. 33) Yin and Yang teachings are positions of compromise, but the word of God is not compromised.

If we accept compromise, how much should we accept before we are totally compromised? Jesus taught about this matter too saying, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is

darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:22-23) What he was saying here is that if we take in evil and accept it into our thinking we will be compromised. And if the light of knowledge in us is compromised by some darkness of un-truth or lies, how dark is our understanding and where will it end? The answer is to reject all evil and not seek out the darkness but to seek the knowledge of the truth that comes from Jesus Christ and God alone.

There is a fearful prospect of judgment in this section too, for Jesus shows we will render account for every careless word we utter. If such is the case we must learn to bite our tongues and mind what we say. As James wrote, "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." (James 1:19) Good advice if we are to avoid this judgment of all that we say.

A Sign from God

(Matthew 12:38-42)

The Pharisees and the scribes came to Jesus saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." (Verse 38) What they were actually asking was, "Prove you are the Son of God."

Jesus had already performed many signs and miracles before their eyes and yet they still did not believe in him. He had cast out demons, healed the sick and even raised the dead, but they did not believe. One wonders what kind of sign they needed to change their hearts and minds.

The truth of the matter is that no sign would have been sufficient for them. It did not matter what Jesus did, their hearts were still hardened against him. With every successive sign they got harder and more furious with him and sought ways to condemn and destroy him.

So asking for a sign was sheer malice on their part. They were cunning and mocking also when they called him teacher, for they did not accept his teaching and did not recognise him as the Son of God. It was evident that such seeking of signs was common amongst the Jews at that time. Even Paul made mention that, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." (1 Corinthians 1:22-23) Even today we see that those who come into contact with Christians are still seeking proof of who Jesus is through signs. Christians are opposed on many fronts and often they are asked to, "Prove there is a God." This may be by some profound proof of wisdom or by showing a sign from God, which is exactly the point Paul made. So there is no real change today when dealing with those who are not followers of Jesus.

Jesus response to the scribes and Pharisees was evidence that he understood their hearts and their malice. He said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three

days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” In this remark he condemned them for asking for this sign, but also told them that a sign would be shown anyway. The sign would be that three days after he was put to death he would arise in the same way that Jonah returned from supposed death after three days in the belly of the whale.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus said, “And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:30-31) Now Jesus has risen from the dead as he said he would, and he did so after three days, giving them the sign of Jonah. Did they believe? No they didn’t. And right through his time of ministry Jesus continually upbraided the scribes and Pharisees for even though they claimed to be followers and teachers of the Law of Moses, they did not keep the law. So as Jesus said, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.”

The law shows the difference between right and wrong. It is both a standard and a preparation for it shows what is required to live a good standard of life. It is a preparatory step for we see Paul write, “...the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” (Galatians 3:24 KJV) In the law we see we were being trained. The law contains the wisdom of God for Paul also said the law is holy, just and good. (Romans 7:12) Thus Jesus rightly said that any person, who would not listen to the wisdom of God contained in the Law of Moses or the words of the prophets, would not be convinced if someone (Jesus) were to rise from the dead. Both are from the same source, the power and wisdom of God. So if they ignore and reject one they will ignore and reject the other.

And finally Jesus said of the Pharisees and scribes that through their rejection of him and his teachings, they would be condemned. They did see signs and wonders, but more importantly, they had the Son of God, Messiah and Saviour himself teaching them and they rejected him. Jesus’ teaching was much more important and greater than the teachings of all the prophets of the past, and so to reject him is a greater failure than to reject them. Let us today not make the same mistakes and fail to hear the words of the truth of Jesus so that we do not share in their judgment.

One Important Reason to Receive the Holy Spirit

(Matthew 12:43-45)

Jesus gives us two fascinating insights in this short section. First he provides an insight into the spiritual realm. He shows us what happens to a demon when it is cast out of a man. Second, he then gives us a warning to make the necessary changes that will keep the evil spirits away.

In relation to the first point we see that when an evil spirit is cast out it “...passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none.” (Vs. 43) It is clear that for an evil spirit to exist outside the flesh of man is a harsh experience, like being in the

desert. There is no rest and it is a difficult existence for the evil spirit. (Don't take pity on them...they deserve what they get!)

After wandering in this spiritual desert for some time the evil spirit then returns to the man from whom it was cast out. In the example Jesus gives we see the evil spirit finds the "house" from which it came, that is the man it was cast out from, "...empty, swept and put in order." (Vs. 44) This is showing us that the man has been cleaned up but is empty, ready and waiting for a new occupant. But as the "house" (man) is empty, the spirit goes and gets seven demons worse than him...and moves in.

Now why does the evil spirit bring back seven worse demons than itself? I believe it is for self-preservation and protection. You see if the demon has all these strong and worse demons with him, they may be able to take a stronger hold over the man to prevent him seeking the Lord and thus make their "home" secure...from the Lord. By making the evil in the man stronger they can control him.

Jesus pointed to this in Matthew 12:29 saying, "...how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house." This is important for it tells us both what the evil spirits were thinking and also how we can keep the evil spirits away.

This brings us to the second point, how to keep the evil spirits at bay.

The reason this man had such trouble is that although he had been swept and put in order, ready for a new "tenant", he was still empty. By being put in order by the Lord he was made ready to receive the Holy Spirit, but the man had not taken that step. Now if they do not receive the Holy Spirit after cleansing of the evil spirit, what is there to stand in the way of the evil spirit returning? But if the new tenant is a "strong man" as referred to in verse 29, then he will prevent the old evil spirit from coming in. And the Holy Spirit is a "strong man" having access to both Jesus and the Father himself.

So the warning we see here is...don't leave the "house" empty after it has been cleaned. Otherwise the evil spirit squatters will return and, "...the last state of that man becomes worse than the first." (Vs. 45)

Jesus also warned the people of his generation that they too could end up like this. They were being prepared through his teaching and ministry to repent and be baptised (i.e. swept and put in order), in preparation to receive the Holy Spirit. If they chose not to, then they too would be in a worse state than they were previously. So we too must heed his warning. When your "house" is swept and put in order, don't leave it empty. Fill it with the in-dwelling Holy Spirit so you can be led into all of the truth.

The Family of God

(Matthew 12:46-50)

Everyone knows Jesus had a mother by the name of Mary. But many people do not realise he also had brothers and sisters too. He was part of an earthly family as well as being in the family of God.

This comes as a shock to some people the first time they see this, as common perceptions are that Jesus was an only child. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When Joseph was about to take Mary for his wife and found her to be pregnant he was going to divorce her. He believed she had done wrong by him by having sexual relations with another man. But Joseph was visited in a dream by an angel of God. The angel explained that the child Mary carried was of God and would be the saviour of the world. Joseph then changed his mind and took her as his wife. But the scripture says, "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:24-25) Joseph and Mary did not consummate their marriage until after Jesus was born. However after that blessed event, their marriage was like the normal relationship between a man and a woman, which included sexual intercourse and the birth of other children.

In Matthew 12:46 we see that someone came to Jesus saying that, "...his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him." So this verse indicates that Jesus did indeed have physical brothers who were the sons of Joseph and Mary. In Mark 6:3 we see that he had four brothers and he had at least two sisters as well. The brothers are named in this scripture as follows, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" So Jesus was the eldest child of Mary and through her he was half brother to four brothers and at least two sisters for the word "sisters" in this verse is plural.

Now even though we have a physical family on this earth, Jesus shows us that we will have brothers and sisters in the Lord as members of the family of God. This family that we gain in Christ, our brothers and sisters in the Lord, may even be more important in some ways than our family in the flesh. There are many people who are abused and hurt by their fleshly families, but the family of God will not do that to us.

Here in Matthew 12:46-50 we find Jesus showed us that everyone who does the will of the Father is his brother, sister or mother. And if we are thus related to Jesus, we are sons and daughters of God and part of the family of God. The key to becoming part of the family of God is to do God's will, which is to believe in Jesus Christ and to follow his teachings and ways.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples just prior to Pentecost, he told them they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8) On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to them in the rush of winds and flames of fire and they all began speaking in tongues. (Acts 2:1-4) There was indeed power in this event and afterwards the apostles did many miraculous things, healing the sick, raising the dead and other things, all done by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today there are some in the church who wish to have this power to do miracles. But in thinking that way they miss the point about the power that the disciples received.

They received power to be his witnesses so that they could bring people to God and increase the family of God. The real power that the disciples received is the power to become children of God as the apostle John said, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

The power to become the children of God and thus members of the family of God is the true power we have been given. Miracles are just a flash in the pan by comparison, for they will fade away and disappear eventually. In 1 Corinthians 13:8 we see it stated, "Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away." All of these miraculous things will cease eventually but love, and especially the love in the family of God lasts forever. It is the power to become the children of God through doing God's will that is important.

We may lose our fleshly families in the process as our physical brothers and sisters may choose not to follow Jesus. But Jesus promises that if we lose our earthly families we will gain a heavenly family in the family of God. He said in Mark 10:29-30, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

So we can take heart that even though we may lose the people who are close to us, not that we walk away from them, they will leave us, we will gain a family in God that will sustain us in ways our earthly family cannot. And his promise is that we will receive even more both now and in the future an eternal life with God the Father, Jesus and the rest of the family of God.

The Parable of the Sower

(Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)

The parable of the sower gives us tremendous insight into how people will react to hearing the words of God. It shows us what they will do upon hearing it and helps us understand why it is that some people do not, cannot or will not accept Jesus.

In the first part of the parable of the sower we see that a seed is sown. The seed is the word of God that is sown by preaching to men. As it is sown it falls into different areas of ground with different degrees of fertile soil. The different grounds are the different types of people who hear the word and how it affects them. Jesus shows us that there are four basic types of ground and thus four different types of people who receive the seed of his word.

The first group do not even listen to the words. This is the seed that falls along the path. He indicates that the birds come along and take the seed away even as it falls.

The analogy here is that when they hear the words of the kingdom, they do not understand them and so the evil one comes along and immediately snatches it out of their heart. The seed never gets a chance to take root. They do not believe and often oppose the words of God, turning on and attacking those who do accept his words.

The second group are like those where the seed falls into rocky soil. There is no depth of soil among the rocks and so nowhere for the seed to take root and grow. These people take the word and receive it with joy. They may appear to be on fire for the Lord. However at the first sign of tribulation or opposition, or if they get persecuted and put to the test for the sake of what they believe, they crumble and wilt under the intensity of the heat of opposition. They walk away from the Lord as they don't have the depth or desire to continue on in the face of opposition and stand up for what is right. They have put their own comfort ahead of their eternal salvation, and sometimes it can be uncomfortable being a Christian. Sometimes we do have to swim against the current to stand up for what is right. Peter said that this would happen when he said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." (1 Peter 4:12-14) We will go through fiery ordeals in our walk with Christ, which is why it is important that the word of God needs to take root in our lives so that we can stand in the face of these fiery ordeals.

The third group of people are like seed that falls among the thorns and grows with the thorns, but is eventually choked by them. Jesus says that these people have heard the word of God but the cares of this world and the delight in riches choke the word and it proves unfruitful. It is easy to get caught up in the things of this world. It is easy to chase after the good things of this life, perhaps even more so today as we have sophisticated and targeted marketing to induce us to go down certain paths. They promise the world, but often not for our sake or any real benefit. Paul wrote about the issues of those who fall among the thorns suffer saying, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:9-10) It is the love of money and the desire to be rich that causes all manner of evil in people's lives. Money is only a medium of exchange, but many seek it as if it is an end in itself. They are lured and enticed to their ultimate destruction. Consider all who are gamblers of any type. The lure is to make money. Any pursuit where the lure is wealth can be a snare and a trap for people. And ultimately the chase after the things of this world chokes out any effect that the words of God may have had in their life.

The final group are those where God's seed falls on fertile ground. It grows and they bear fruit for the kingdom of God. These are the people who hear and accept the word and it takes root in their lives. They see the value of the word and they make it a priority so that they can live a godly life now and have the reward of entering God's kingdom when Jesus returns. Even among those who receive the word there will be different degrees of fruit. He speaks of some producing thirty fold, some sixty fold and some one hundredfold. When we come to God we are not expected to all achieve

one hundredfold as we all have different talents, abilities and gifts. The important thing though is that we accept Jesus into our life through faith and we learn from him. We need to be receptive to his words so that he can work with us and transform us into the image of God.

Paul showed that there would be different levels of belief among people who come to the Lord. He said, “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.” (1 Corinthians 3:10-13)

All have the one thing in common, the foundation of Jesus Christ. But what is built upon that foundation, which is the teachings and beliefs accepted by each person, may be of poor or good quality. Like seed bearing thirty fold or one hundredfold. When the fiery ordeals of life come against the building, that is when they are tested. If they burn up it is clear the quality of teaching was low. If they stand it is good.

There are many things taught in the church today that have no foundation in the scripture. The only way we can truly find the truth is to first come to Jesus through faith, second seek out his truth and his word and third, compare all that we hear with the truth of the gospel in the bibles he has given us. Only then will we become like seed that produces one hundredfold with buildings of gold that are actually purified by fire, built on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Why Jesus Spoke in Parables

(Matthew 13:10-17)

When Jesus taught the people he used parables, analogies, stories and figures of speech to convey the messages of the Kingdom of God. Why Jesus spoke in parables was so that the truth of the kingdom could be spoken and at the same time kept hidden from those who chose not to find it. There are deep messages in the parables and the words of the truth, but without the revelation of these words they cannot be understood.

It is a bit like trying to learn a complex subject without a teacher. Can you understand quantum physics, advanced mathematics and so on unless you have someone to guide and teach you? Probably not. But the truth of the gospel is different because unlike those things, it is very simple and accessible to any person even though Jesus spoke in parables. You do not need to be a great intellect to see and hear the truth of Jesus ministry. But in its simplicity many people miss the point and fail to see the kingdom of God. They fail because they try to approach it like you would approach human knowledge. Yet in Christ the way we approach God is through faith.

The truth of the kingdom and understanding the parables of Jesus and his words of truth only comes through the revelation of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Jesus showed this in John 16:12-13 saying, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." To those who come to the Lord and receive his spirit, who seek out the truth and ask for his insight, will receive it. It is by the Holy Spirit that our eyes are opened to see God's kingdom, and our ears are opened to hear the truth and our minds are given the understanding of the words that lead to eternal life.

In this section of Matthew we see Jesus explain why he spoke in parables. The disciples had been given the understanding of the words of the kingdom of God, but the general masses remained ignorant even though they heard his words. Many followed him not for the sake of the teaching, which was backed by signs and wonders, but because they were being fed. As Jesus said after feeding the multitude on loaves and fishes, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." (John 6:26-27) He counsels the people to seek the spiritual food, which are the teachings of the kingdom, and not the food, desires, pleasures, riches and things of this life.

The disciples were given the understanding, but the rest were not. Though the people as well as the Pharisees and scribes saw and heard they did not understand his words. They did not recognise the power he brought to lead them to life. To those who did not receive this understanding, his words were just a bunch of interesting stories. But to those to whom the truth was revealed those same words were life, and on the opening of their eyes to the truth they were amazed and humbled.

If you seek his kingdom you will receive it. "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7) And here in Matthew 13:12 we see Jesus say that everyone who receives something of the understanding of the kingdom will receive more. "For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

It may seem odd to say of those who have nothing that what they have got will be taken away. How can you take away something from someone who has nothing? If you have nothing there is nothing to take. However we must understand that Jesus is not talking about matters of the flesh but of the spirit. He is not interested in the things of this world but the things of the spirit. In a spiritual sense everybody has something. They have life, as does every person on the planet, and they have the promise of eternal life if they choose to follow Jesus. When he says, "from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away," he is talking about these things of the spirit. They will lose their life and the promise of eternal life by choosing to reject God's salvation through Jesus Christ.

The insight that Jesus has given us in the New Covenant far outweighs anything that preceded it in the Old Covenant. The old prophets testified to the coming of the

Messiah and the New Covenant. They saw it from afar and longed to gain the insight into it. They were not permitted to see it as they were told this was for a later generation. We are of that later generation and fortunate that the revelation of this truth is now open and available to all. If we choose to seek it out we will find it today. But even today as back then, many will see and not perceive, hear and not understand and choose not to believe, for they still seek the things of this world and miss the glory of the kingdom of God.

Weeds Among the Wheat, Wheat and the Tares

(Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)

Jesus provides another parable of what the kingdom of God is like in the parable of the weeds among the wheat, or as the KJV states, the tares among the wheat.

While we think of weeds in many ways and varieties, the original Greek word translated as weeds among the wheat or tares among the wheat was actually quite a specific type of weed. The word used was "zizania" which is a weed commonly known today as darnel. In it's immature form it is very similar to wheat, but when the heads of grain appear than it can be distinguished quite easily from wheat. When wheat is fully grown the head of grain is quite heavy causing the head to droop on the plant and the grain is golden brown in colour. Darnel grains though are much smaller and are black. The effects of eating darnel are quite toxic for both man and livestock. Some of the symptoms noted when eaten are sleepiness, drowsiness, hypnotic episodes, convulsions, drunkenness, intoxication, trembling, inability to walk, hindered speech, vomiting, stupefaction and dim-sightedness.

Now knowing what these weeds are like and the effects of their consumption, we see this parable of the weeds among the wheat or tares among the wheat in a different light. Jesus gave us the parable in verses 24-30 and then at the disciples' request he explained what it meant in verses 36-43. His explanation of the parable was, "He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age."

There is a challenge for us today because the weeds are still among the wheat. We must understand first that the field is the world and the wheat is the sons of the kingdom. Where are the sons of the kingdom? They are in the churches of God worshipping the Lord. Jesus says that the enemy, the devil, has sown his weeds, the tares, among the field of wheat. So where are these evil ones? They too are among the churches. But their purpose is not to worship the Lord but to destroy and tear down God's people.

As darnel looks like wheat in it's early stages of growth, so too these people will look like Christians. They are well disguised, which is why they can grow and flourish in

the churches almost undetected. In the end they will be rooted out from among God's people and destroyed at the time of judgment. Their destructive influence in the cunning ways of the devil can uproot people, families and entire churches. This is why Jesus said in the parable to let them grow up with the wheat and they would be dealt with at the close of the age.

But in the mean time how are we to know these people and deal with them appropriately? Jesus said earlier in Matthew 7:16, "You will know them by their fruit." It is what these people do that will distinguish them from the true believers. They will be hard to detect initially for they are well camouflaged, like wolves in sheep's clothing, but their evil will come out for they will be unable to hide it. It is part of their heart and who they are. As the heart of a seed of darnel is black, so too the hearts of these people are black. Their desire is to overpower and take control of the church or the people of the church for their own ends, not the glory of God.

So why has Jesus allowed these people to continue in the church? There are several reasons. First in the explanation of the parable he says that if he were to root them up it may pull the wheat up at the same time. If you consider a field of wheat, it is like a carpet. Unlike a vegetable plot that has rows and access paths between the plants where weeds can be easily identified and removed, in a wheat field the tares and the wheat are closely intermingled. If you pull one up you may uproot the other at the same time. If you pull the darnel out while the wheat is still immature, then the wheat will never grow and come to maturity. Some of the weeds in the church may be very close to the true believers, perhaps even family members. If the weeds were removed, you could remove the rest of the family at the same time and the good people would be lost along with the bad people. They would not have the opportunity to learn and grow and come to maturity.

Our challenge is to gain as much insight as possible from the Lord so that we can distinguish the weeds from the wheat. Our job is to become mature in Christ so that we can see these people for what they are and beware of their false teaching and destructive influence.

In the end Jesus will deal with these people. If they are too destructive he will have them removed at the right time or will take his people away from them. If not, then he will deal with them at the close of the age. The evil will be gathered and go into judgment of fire while the wheat, those who follow Jesus, will be gathered into his kingdom and receive eternal life.

The Parable of Mustard Seed

(Matthew 13:31-32)

Jesus gave a number of parables concerning the kingdom of God and the parable of mustard seed seen in this section is particularly interesting. The parable of mustard

seed has been interpreted many different ways. I believe there is both a meaning for the community of God's people and for the individual in this parable.

Let us take a literal look at the parable first. There are several key elements, the first of which is the mustard seed that Jesus describes as the smallest of seeds. Then there is the bush or tree that it grows into, which is described as the largest of shrubs. This tree is so large that birds come and nest in its branches. The two significant points here are the dramatic transformation from tiny seed to large tree, and the sheltering of birds in this tree.

The kingdom of heaven will start out small, like a tiny mustard seed. When planted in a field it will grow into a large mustard tree. If we consider this from the perspective of the community of God's people, his church, then that is exactly what has happened. From Jesus' beginning the Christian movement with a band of a dozen or so disciples, it has grown to millions of believers and changed the course of this world.

Whether the modern church is representative of the kingdom of heaven is questionable, just as the religion taught by the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees was not representative of the truth of the Old Covenant. There are many things taught in the modern church that have no basis in the scripture. There are also some teachers and preachers that twist scripture to their own purposes. Yet even in the church described as Babylon in Revelation there are people who are God's people and part of the kingdom of heaven. He says, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities." (Revelation 18:4-5)

When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven in the parable of mustard seed, he is not necessarily talking about the physical church. Clearly there are people who are part of God's kingdom that were found in the false church known as Babylon in Revelation. So the Kingdom of heaven cannot be described simply as a church. Instead it is the community of true believers who come to Jesus and worship according to the truth. This is evident when we see Jesus say elsewhere, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." (Luke 17:20-21) Also in Romans 14:17 "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." So the kingdom of God is not a physical place, but a spiritual place. Jesus also said that, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20)

When we meet together in Jesus' name he is there with us in the spirit. Truly then the kingdom of heaven is in our midst when we meet together for the King himself is with us. And the kingdom of God is not about church buildings, protocol, laws and regulations, but how we live our lives in accord with the words of Jesus. The true kingdom of heaven that is in our midst exists in the spiritual realm amongst the community of those who worship God according to the truth.

So how does this apply to the parable of mustard seed? We see the kingdom begins as a small seed. Within that seed is the tree that will grow if it is planted, fed and watered. In the same way the kingdom of God may start with us as a single word and a grain of faith, as faith is also compared to a mustard seed elsewhere (Luke 17:6) As

a community the kingdom of God begins with one person as it did when Jesus began his ministry, and when Paul went from town to town preaching the words of the kingdom. And within each of us as individuals it began likewise with a single word, or belief.

Then as we learn and grow, the kingdom expands. At an individual level our knowledge grows and we learn how to be stable in the word, not tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. At the community level as people come to the kingdom it too grows and expands.

Which brings us to the second critical point in the parable of mustard seed being the birds that come and nest in the branches of the tree. When we consider this analogy we need to understand why the birds come. They nest in trees for protection from predators, security, comfort, rest and stability. These are exactly the same reasons why we come to the kingdom of heaven. We too as individuals and as a community of believers come to the Lord and his kingdom to find protection from the evil one, rest, security, peace and comfort from the problems of this life.

The kingdom of heaven provides these blessings in abundance and in the future the hope of an eternal salvation in God's kingdom. May that day hasten and come soon.

The Kingdom of God is Within You - Parable of the Leaven

(Matthew 13:33)

This short parable of the leaven is talking about the kingdom of God within you. It is similar to the previous parable of mustard seed, but there are some marked differences. There are many commentators who have placed a negative connotation on this parable of the leaven because Jesus uses the analogy of leaven as something evil in other places. However in this scripture he is comparing this analogy to the kingdom of heaven, which is good, and so it should be seen in the light of something good.

Leaven is important to the making of bread because it causes the bread to rise and makes it soft and palatable. The way leaven works is through an organic process. As it sits in the flour mixture it slowly expands and works its way through the flour until all of the flour becomes activated by the yeast or leaven. Leaven improves the quality of the bread.

In the parable of the leaven we see a more personal view as it shows the kingdom of God is within you and how the gospel works to transform you. First we see a woman "hides" a piece of leaven, which is yeast or yeast affected dough, in three measures of flour. The act of hiding this leaven is interesting and the process of hiding something is seen in other places as well. We see in verse 44 of this chapter that a man found a hidden treasure and covered it up till he could acquire the field and own it fully. Similarly this woman hid the leaven in the flour.

When a person hears the words of the kingdom, if they do not fully understand it, the evil could snatch it away if they are not careful. This was like the birds taking the seed in the parable of the sower. (Matthew 13:4, 19) Thus by hiding it they can meditate on it and learn more so that the word expands and grows in them, transforming them in the same way that leaven transforms flour to make bread. It is a slow growth as the words of the kingdom of God work on your life.

Like the leaven is in the flour, the words and the truth of the kingdom of God is within you. The teachings of Jesus act on your life from within, working from the inside out. The work of transformation is a work that occurs by the Holy Spirit on your own spirit. It starts within and changes your life from within, just as leaven transforms flour from within. This work of transformation is a long slow process, which is also why we speak of walking with Jesus. We do not run with him but we walk. Walking is sustainable for a long time, and suggests a slow but steady progression to reach a destination. Leavening a lump of dough is also a slow process and progression until it is fully ready for baking. And we are being slowly transformed by the working of the truth of the gospel as we grow from within until we are changed into the image of Jesus.

Jesus and the Parables

(Matthew 13:34-43)

Do you understand Jesus and the parables? Do you know why Jesus spoke to the people in parables? In this section we see the reason why he did so and also how we can learn to understand the parables of Jesus.

The section begins with Jesus leaving the people and going into a house with his disciples. In relation to Jesus and the parables we see that he said nothing to the rest of the people without a parable. This was to fulfil the words of one of the old prophets who said, "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." (Matthew 13:35, Psalm 78:1-4) So the point of Jesus and the parables is to bring forth knowledge and insight about the kingdom of God. But he does this in parables so that it can be given to those who seek it out, but will remain veiled to those who do not. For them they are just interesting anecdotes, but to the people of God they give powerful insights.

We see that the disciples also questioned this matter and sought understanding. They came to him privately as they often did and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." (Verse 36) Now I will not go into that explanation as I did that several posts earlier, but what we need to see here is the process of what is happening. Back in verse 11 Jesus said to the disciples, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." They were following him and looking for the truth and Jesus gave it to them willingly and gladly.

All they needed to do was ask. And because they asked he explained all of the parables, privately and away from the rest of the people.

The teachings of Jesus are not teachings of this world, but are teachings of the spirit. In order to understand the things of the spirit we need a spiritual interpreter to show us these matters. With Jesus and the parables, the disciples had such a spiritual person, for Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus promised to send the disciples a Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, after he had been put to death. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to be our teacher and guide so that we could understand the mysteries of the New Covenant including the teachings of Jesus and the parables. Jesus said, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." (John 14:26)

The Apostle Paul also wrote, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:12-14) So again we see that the mysteries of the New Covenant remain veiled to those who are not of Christ, for they do not receive the Holy Spirit so they can learn and understand. But for those who come to him, who ask for the Holy Spirit and who seek to know the truth of his word, he reveals it.

As a result we see in the final words of this section, which relates as much to Jesus and the parables in general as it does to this particular explanation, that, "The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." And he ends the section with an urgent command to his people saying, "He who has ears, let him hear." That is, listen to what Jesus says and learn the lessons of the kingdom of God.

Hidden Treasure Parable

(Matthew 13:44)

What would you do if you found a hidden treasure in a field? Let's say you found gold nuggets or diamonds. Would you go and tell everyone about it? Would you tell people where you found it? Not likely. The hidden treasure parable is saying the same thing.

The hidden treasure parable tells us that find the truth of the gospel is like finding hidden treasure. It is of inestimable value. Like finding hidden treasure in a field, you should not go and tell everyone about it. Keep it to yourself, at least for the time being.

When a person first finds the truth of the Kingdom of God, they experience great joy. Here at last is something that can fill the gap, the emptiness or the longing in their

lives. Many people experience emptiness before coming to the Lord because they find this world offers nothing permanent. There is no hope in this world, but in Jesus there is the promise of peace, joy, salvation and eternity.

So the parable of the hidden treasure says that when a person comes across this great treasure they should cover it up. Don't race off and tell everyone about it. First make sure you have it for yourself. In the parable of the hidden treasure Jesus said the man went and sold all that he had to buy the field. By this means he could ensure that he had full right to the treasure. That it was his and his alone.

Some people believe that as soon as you become a convert you ought to be out on the streets evangelising the world. They point to the great commission, which is to preach to the entire world. But how is a person to do that if they don't yet fully understand it for themselves? When people ask them questions they can't answer they do not put their best foot forward in Christ.

Instead, the message in the hidden treasure parable tells us that we should make sure this treasure from God is our own first. We must first understand the teachings of Christ and God's Kingdom before we go out and tell everyone about it. This is what he means by selling all we have to buy the field. If a person does not do this, then others can mock, cajole or do many things to drag them away from the Lord and they will lose this great treasure. To lose this hidden treasure of God that leads to life would be a great tragedy.

Parable of the Merchant Seeking Pearls

(Matthew 13:45-46)

This parable is similar to the previous one where a man finds a great treasure in a field and covers it until he can buy the field. However a few nuances make this parable slightly different.

In that previous parable (verse 44) the man discovers a treasure hidden in the field. He didn't know or expect it to be there for he wasn't looking for treasure. He just stumbled onto it and realising his luck, took full advantage of it. Some Christians come to the Lord that way. They are not necessarily looking for God, but they stumble across him and realise this is what they have been looking for all their life.

However in this second parable of the merchant seeking pearls, we see a different perspective. In this case the merchant is looking for pearls of value. He is searching and seeking diligently to find a valuable pearl. Then again we see he finds one pearl of immense value, so he goes and sells all of his possessions so that he had sufficient money to buy that pearl.

There are people who likewise are looking for the truth. They have been through all kinds of systems, religions and philosophies but nothing satisfies. These are the other lesser value pearls. While some may provide a little value, some are rubbish and

worthless. Then they find Jesus, Jesus may find them and they discover the fullness of what he offers. In comparison to everything else they have been looking at this is awesome. So they give away all they have and as Paul wrote when he found God, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ.” (Philippians 3:7-8)

Paul had discovered the pearl of great value in Jesus Christ. He was a perfect example of the man described in this parable. Paul was searching for the truth but until Jesus revealed himself to Paul, his life was going in the wrong direction.

The lesson here for all of us is that when we find such a valuable asset, whether by stumbling on it like treasure in a field or seeking a pearl of great value, make it your own. There is nothing that compares to the worth of knowing and being known by Jesus Christ.

The Good the Bad and the Ugly

(Matthew 13:47-50)

This parable of the kingdom is about the end of the time when Jesus comes to judge the world. We saw earlier that he will allow the weeds to grow with the wheat and they will be separated at the end of the days. This parable is saying much the same.

The net will be cast into the sea of peoples and all people will be gathered into it. Like each of the fish caught in the net they will be judged and graded. All people will be judged as well and it will be determined whether they are fit for the kingdom of God or worthless. Those deemed fit will go into his kingdom to live eternally with God & Jesus Christ. However those who fail to meet the test will be sentenced to punishment and will be thrown into the lake of fire with Satan and his demons.

This is a warning. If we want to avoid judgement we are to make the right decisions now. Now is the acceptable time of salvation as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 6:2. If we ignore his warning and follow the ways of this world, then we choose the path of destruction.

It is my hope and prayer that I will achieve the right to enter God’s kingdom. It is also my hope and prayer that all who read this will heed of Jesus’ warning and seek out the truth for him or herself.

Treasures New and Old

(Matthew 13:51-52)

This section concludes the parable teachings that Jesus gave to his disciples at this time. He also provides a valuable lesson here on the methods by which they were to pass on this information. He describes here how they are trained and were to train others. To understand some of this it was necessary to refer to the original Greek so that the full meaning of the words could be extracted.

First Jesus asks the disciples if they have understood all that he has told them, to which they said, "Yes." He then wraps up the section with a comment about the training of scribes for the kingdom of heaven and how they were to teach.

First we should consider the word scribes. Although Jesus often upbraided the scribes of his time, he is now not talking about those men and what they taught. Here he is talking about a scribe in a general sense. In Jesus' time the scribes were the learned men. They could read and write and had knowledge. There were no printing presses at the time and so the scribes were employed to hand copy documents and books for distribution. It was necessary that they were accurate so that the meaning of the texts were not distorted or lost, and for the most part they were good at this function.

We see then that Jesus is talking about a specific type of scribe, one who is trained for the kingdom of heaven. So these people he is referring to are the teachers and preachers of the gospel. They are the learned people of the good news of the kingdom of God and who are entrusted with the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the means by which people can enter the kingdom of God.

He likens these people to a householder who brings out treasure. However the original Greek word for "householder" is better translated as the "master of the house." This master is the head of the house who in that house is the person in charge or a person of authority. In relation to the house of God, Jesus is the master of the house and the one in charge. And the scribes of the kingdom of heaven are like the master of the house, who is Jesus. The work of the New Covenant in our life is to transform us into the image of Christ so that we truly can be like the master of the house. So the teachers and the preachers of the New Covenant are to be like Jesus who is the master of the house.

Now the master of the house brings out treasures new and old. If we think about an event about to take place in a great house, say like a wedding, the house is decorated. And the decorations will often be valuable and some will be old, like family heirlooms, and some will be new that were bought for the occasion. These things are taken from the storage in the house, which may have been a locked treasury in days gone by. It is a place where items of great value are kept for just such occasions. The treasures new and old that we have are likewise of great value, for the teachings of the kingdom of God are teachings of life.

When a teacher then is bringing forth the message of the New Covenant, he may and should bring forth this treasure in both old and new things. A teacher needs to use all of the information, knowledge and wisdom they have gained through trial, error, experience and study to bring forth the message. It may be things they have learned many years ago or may be knowledge acquired just recently. It may be examples from the Old Testament or doctrine from the New Testament. Whatever it is, the teacher

needs to bring forth what is appropriate for the lesson and time at hand. They cannot just continue to drone about the one thing constantly but as the people learn and grow, the message needs to grow too.

This is a valuable insight into the way that Jesus showed the disciples to teach the new covenant. It is interesting that he used the analogy of a scribe, for the scribes of his time were anything but flexible in their teaching. And in essence he is saying that to bring forth treasures old and new is to be flexible in how they should teach. Not to compromise the message, but to apply it the best way to the situation. The scribes of that time though were rigid and inflexible. They taught the law in a legalistic and rigid manner. But as Jesus showed, they ignored the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."
(Matthew 23:23)

Paul knew this too, for he said, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law--though not being myself under the law--that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law--not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ--that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." (1 Corinthians 9:19-22) Paul took this message to the people using old and new methods to teach it in a way they could understand the message.

There is wisdom in this teaching for any who teach the gospel not to be dogmatic or rigid. Learn the truth and apply it to your life and the way it is taught. Speak to people using the old and the new treasures of the covenant as Jesus did so that we too can be like the master of the house in our preaching and teaching.

A Prophet is Without Honour

(Matthew 13:53-58)

There are three valuable lessons in this last section of Matthew 13, culminating with the teaching that a prophet is without honour in his own country and house. In this part we see him finish his parable teachings and returning to his own home country.

Firstly though we see an insight into Jesus earlier life and his family life. Contrary to how he is often portrayed, Jesus was part of a wider family. We know that his mother was Mary and his earthly, though not biological father was Joseph. However Jesus is often portrayed as an only child. This was not the case for here we see there was an extended family. He had four brothers who were named here as James, Joseph, Simon and Judas and he also had a number of sisters who were not named. The sisters were described as "all his sisters" who could mean three or more, and definitely at least two, although you would expect if there were only two they would say "both his

sisters." (Vs. 55) So Jesus understood the issues and problems as well as the benefits of family life.

Secondly we see that the people of his hometown all recognised him. They knew who he was for he had grown up among them. This was Jesus, the carpenter's son who played and worked in their streets and villages as a child and young man. They were puzzled because they had heard about him but when he came and taught with such wisdom in their synagogue, they were astonished. However they did not recognise him as the Son of God. Thus they took offence for they were hardened of heart because of their familiarity with the old Jesus, not this teacher of God's Kingdom bring the good news of the gospel. They could not accept that this was the same person and so they did not believe in him.

We see also that because of their unbelief and lack of faith, Jesus did no mighty works there. Why? Because the works that he did were based on faith. The people had to believe that God could do the works that Jesus did before they would come to him for his help. For example, if a person did not believe Jesus could free them from a sickness, disease or infirmity, they would not come for healing. Over and over we see this when Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well" (Matthew 9:22, Mark 5:34, Mark 10:52, Luke 8:48, Luke 17:19, Luke 18:42) Without faith the people would not come. Was the power Jesus had lessened because the people did not believe? Absolutely not. But if they did not come and ask for healing through a lack of faith, then they would not get healed. Jesus did not force his will or his healing power on anyone. They had to make the first move, and the first move is faith. The people did not believe for they considered him to still be the carpenter's son rather than the Son of God.

Finally we find Jesus make the statement that a prophet is without honour in his own country, land and house. This is the same as saying that familiarity breeds contempt. In his own house and country a prophet was nobody special. Everyone knew them for they had grown up together so they knew the person's behaviour, strengths and weaknesses. A prophet in another place is among strangers who do not know these things and so they listen for all they have to judge the character of the person is what they see and hear. But in his own home a prophet is just a brother or son and part of the wider family unit.

Even Jesus had this experience and it was included here to show us an insight into the nature of man. Often when we try to bring the good news to our own family and friends we too are treated with a lack of faith. These people know our past and us. If we had a colourful past they will not believe this is the same person speaking to them as the one they knew. And so they too may take offence as they did with Jesus. Sometimes the people closest to us who we may want to bring the message of the gospel to are the hardest to convince. With them we need to adopt a silent approach so that they may be won over by observing our changed behaviour. The apostle Peter wrote of this very thing saying, "Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behaviour of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behaviour." (1 Peter 3:1-2)

So we can take heart from these lessons and understand that if we are rejected by those we know best, it may be that it is not the right time for them. They may need to be convinced not by words but by seeing the changes in our life.

Beheading of John the Baptist

(Matthew 14:1-12)

At the beginning of this chapter we see the circumstances that led to the beheading of John the Baptist. There are a few interesting point and lessons to be learned from this event, both historically and spiritually. The beheading of John the Baptist unfolded in the following manner.

First we see that John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod because John the Baptist had told Herod that it was unlawful for him to take his brother Phillip's wife, Herodias, as his own. Basically John the Baptist told Herod he was committing adultery. Herod was angry and wanted to put John the Baptist to death, but he feared the people who held John the Baptist to be a prophet.

A feast was held for Herod on his birthday, and as an aside this is the only time in the New Testament that we see a birthday being celebrated. Evidently the idea of hold a birthday celebration goes back quite a long time. At this birthday feast the daughter of Herodias danced before Herod and all of his guests and this pleased Herod greatly. Now perhaps Herod had had too much to drink or was emotionally overcome by the event, but he then did what can only be described as a foolish thing.

Herod was so pleased or perhaps entranced by this dance that he offered the girl anything she wanted, even to the value of half of his kingdom. Indeed he swore an oath to the girl to give her whatever she wanted, and there were many witnesses to his oath. This was a rash statement made under the influence of emotion. He was certainly not thinking straight when making this statement.

Now Herodias, the mother of the girl, also bore a grudge against John the Baptist, because he too would have accused her of adultery. Seeing the opportunity she prompted her daughter to ask for the beheading of John the Baptist and to be given his head on a platter. Herod was sorrowful and realised the rashness of his oath and his statements. But he could not or would not back down and lose face in front of the guests and so ordered it to be done.

The lesson for us here in Herod's example is that we must watch what we say. We should never make rash statements nor make any important decisions in the heat of emotion or the passion of the moment. We have been instructed to let our yes be yes and our no be no, (James 5:12) but we must first think through the consequences of our words. The tongue is a fire and no human being can control it as James also wrote. (James 3) We are fortunate that the Lord has given us the Holy Spirit to do the work of transformation in our lives to bring us into the likeness of God. No human

being has the power to control the tongue. But through the working of the Holy Spirit over time, this may be achieved.

Finally we must take the advice of James once again when he said, "Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God." (James 1:19-20) Listen carefully to what is being said and then think it over before saying anything or making a decision. If the statement makes you angry or touches any emotion at all, do not make a decision while under the influence of emotion. You must stop and weigh things in the light and strength of reason, not emotion, and then you have a chance of making the right choice or saying the right words. Above all else, if it is an important decision, put it in the hands of the Lord with prayer to guide you. And wait for him to do so.

Fishes and Loaves Bible Story

(Matthew 14:13-21)

The fishes and loaves bible story is one that is commonly heard in the world today. Quite often the fishes and loaves bible story is cited when people have somehow fed a large number of people as Jesus fed the multitudes in this section of Matthew, or when people have sufficient food to feed the five thousand. But there are deeper meanings to the fishes and loaves bible story that show other aspects of Jesus ministry.

Jesus had gone to a remote place after the beheading of John the Baptist, but the crowds heard of it and followed him. Out of compassion for the people he healed their sick and he taught them about the gospel and the Kingdom of God well into the evening.

The disciples were trying to be considerate of the people by saying to Jesus to send the people away into the villages so they could buy food to eat. They were aware that the people had been there all day and needed food. But Jesus said to the disciples that they need not go away but for the disciples to give them food. The disciples responded saying they had only five loaves and two fish, which they brought to Jesus. Jesus took the fishes and the loaves and looking up to heaven he blessed and broke them and they were distributed among the people. When the five thousand men, plus many women and children, had all eaten and were satisfied, there were twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.

This was a remarkable miracle performed that day. In this fishes and loaves bible story what actually happened was that Jesus created matter in the form of the fishes and loaves. He literally created this food from thin air, something created from nothing. You can almost imagine that as he broke a piece of bread or fish off the main lump, it grew back or reappeared so that he could break it off again, multiplying the food to feed the five thousand plus people there. We have seen through the ages people searching for a way to create or transform matter. Alchemists in the dark ages

tried to turn lead into gold. Today scientists have just discovered how to clone cells to grow tissue. But Jesus did not clone the food; it was created from nothing instantaneously.

But why did he do this? It was to show several things to the disciples and the people. First, they had no need to worry about the resources available to the Lord. He knows that we need to eat and have food, and he is able to provide food from nothing. We see this same principle in the Old Testament when Elijah was brought food morning and evening by the ravens. (1 Kings 17:6) also when Elijah went and stayed with the widow from Zar'ephath the Lord refilled her jars of meal and oil for many days, perhaps several years, during the famine of the time while the Lord withheld the rains. Again in this situation, the Lord created food from nothing. (1 Kings 17:8-16)

But the fishes and loaves bible story shows us also that he feeds us the spiritual food. Jesus had been teaching the people all day giving them the spiritual food that would lead to life. And in compassion he showed that you need both and he provided both. This was a lesson to the disciples. They would have sent the people away, but Jesus showed that if you give only the spiritual food when there is also a need for physical food, they needed to give both. You cannot expect people to accept the spiritual matters while there is a concern for physical well-being. James also showed the pointlessness of saying, "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:15-16) Part of the compassion and caring of the New Covenant is in ensuring that the people of God have what is needed for the spirit as well as the body.

However Jesus also taught in another version that the people had been more focussed on then physical food then the spiritual food. Although they needed to eat, they needed to learn more. Jesus said, "Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." (John 6:26-27) So likewise we must not spend our energy labouring for the things of this world, but rather we need to study and learn the things of the spirit that will lead us to life with Christ.

So the Lord will provide our physical needs and if we trust in him we have no need to be worried. We can take comfort from this knowledge knowing that in the fishes and loaves bible story there is evidence of the providence of the Lord.

Walking on Water with Jesus

(Matthew 14:22-33)

After Jesus fed the five thousand we see the teaching where Peter came walking on water with Jesus. This teaching about walking on water with Jesus holds many good

lessons. There are elements of faith, doubt, trust, comfort, power and authority contained in the lesson on walking on water with Jesus.

To begin with we see Jesus send the disciples off in a boat across the sea while he dismissed the crowds and sent them home. After this Jesus went up alone on the mountain to pray. It is important to understand that even Jesus, as the Son of God still needed time alone with God to pray. He still came to the Father for guidance and to put his thoughts and needs before him. He did this alone which aligns with the teaching he gave in Matthew 6:6 saying, "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Jesus followed this same principle of praying alone and away from others to the Father.

Then we see Jesus come walking on water to the boat, intending to pass them by, but when they saw him he came to them. The disciples were terrified thinking it was a ghost until Jesus called to them not to be afraid. Peter then said, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come."

Now here is an interesting situation when Peter came walking on water with Jesus. First we must understand that no man has the power or authority to walk on water. Peter could not do so until he was given permission and authority from the Lord. Once he had permission Peter came walking on water to Jesus. Any miraculous works that are done can only be done under the power and authority of the Lord. You cannot take the power of God and you cannot take or claim the gifts of God either. These things are given as gifts and if the Lord does not give us both the power, which comes through the Holy Spirit, and the authority to exercise that power, we will be able to do nothing.

So Peter received the power and authority to come walking on water with Jesus. When he stepped over the side of the boat, believing it was the Lord; he had put his full trust and faith in Jesus that he would be able to walk on water with Jesus. And that is exactly what happened. Peter walked to Jesus in the middle of the sea on the water. While Peter kept his eyes on Jesus and held to his faith, he could literally walk on water with Jesus, not alone but with Jesus.

But then Peter looked around himself and saw the raging wind and waves and he became afraid and began to sink. He took his eyes off Jesus and basically said to himself that this can't be happening. How can a man walk on water? And so he began to doubt, and when he began to doubt, he began to sink.

How many times do we find ourselves surrounded by the storms of life? When we look to Jesus the storms do not affect us, but when we focus on the storms we too begin to sink. The analogy here is easy to see and understand. While our focus is on Jesus we too can figuratively walk on water with Jesus. When we are together with Jesus, anything is possible. But when we separate ourselves from Jesus through doubt or setting our minds on the problems and issues that we are surrounded with, we sink. Doubt is a lack of faith.

When Peter came walking on water with Jesus and doubted, he quickly refocused and called out to Jesus to save him as he was sinking. Jesus reached out his hand and

caught him saying, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" Then they got into the boat and we see a further interesting thing occur. After Jesus had assisted Peter, he calmed the wind and sea. In essence he removed the storms and the problems that were causing them to be battered and hard pressed to reach the other shore. Likewise when we call to Jesus for help in our storms, as we ask in faith and trust him, in due course he will calm the storms around us.

This is a wonderful teaching from which we can take heart and hope. There is comfort in knowing that through Jesus anything is possible if we will call to him to help us. He has the power and the authority over all things and there is nothing he cannot do to help us. All we need to do is ask.

The Hem of His Garment

(Matthew 14:34-36)

After Jesus had walked on the water with Peter and calmed the seas, they came to the other shore to land at Gennes'arat. On arriving the local people recognised Jesus and sent word to all in the region. People came from all around for healing and to merely touch the hem of his garment so they would be healed. And the healing power of Jesus was such that to merely touch the hem of his garment was sufficient, for as many as did touch the hem of his garment were made well.

Here we see that Jesus fame had spread throughout the land. Everywhere he went from here on there were crowds. They came to be healed, to see the mighty works and to hear the good news of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus did not self promote to achieve such a presence in the land. There was no marketing, no hype, no trumpets or town criers going before him to announce his arrival. There was no You Tube or Facebook or Internet to spread the word of him in those days, but still his fame spread like wildfire. In fact in many of the healings Jesus specifically told the people to tell no one as we see in Mark 7:36, "And he charged them to tell no one; but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." Despite telling the people to keep it quiet, the more they spread his fame.

It stands to reason that he would be seen for it is written elsewhere, "So also good deeds are conspicuous; and even when they are not, they cannot remain hidden." (1 Timothy 5:25) And also, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid." (Matthew 5:14) In this scripture Jesus was referring to the disciples and those who followed his word. If the disciples cannot be hidden, how much less the author of salvation, Jesus Christ himself?

The faith of the people had grown to such levels that we see them wish only to touch the hem of his garment and the believed they would be healed. And as many who did touch the hem of his garment were healed. In another section we see a woman with a flow of blood come to him and touch the hem of his garment without his knowledge

and she too was healed. But Jesus was aware of the power going out to do the healing and when she realised she could not hide she confessed. Jesus made the comment for her to go in peace for, "Your faith has made you well." (Luke 8:43-48)

The key to healing is faith. We see this also under the anointing with oil for healing. In James 5:14-15 we see this shown, "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." In this case we see that it is a combination of faith. The sick person must have faith enough to call for the elders of the church to anoint and pray for him or her. And the elders must have faith that the anointing with oil and prayer to the Father, both in the name of the Lord Jesus will heal the sick person. Indeed our whole life in Christ is based on faith in Jesus and we live in him only by faith and the power of Jesus' name.

Traditions of Men Versus the Word of God

(Matthew 15:1-9)

The scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus asking why the disciples did not observe the tradition of the elders regarding the washing of their hands before eating. Jesus used the opportunity to teach about the traditions of men versus the word of God.

The scribes and Pharisees had many traditions of men, many of which opposed the word of God. In this section we see Jesus describe one of those. The word of God says to honour your father and mother, but the Pharisee's tradition allowed a person to ignore their father and mother if what they would have done for them was given to God instead. So for the sake of their tradition they made void the word of God. They were clearly wrong as Jesus stated, and in the case of eating with unwashed hands they were wrong too, but we will see that in the next post.

Today the church has many traditions, some of which are good and some not so good. We still have traditions in the church today that make void the word of God. One that occurs every year at Easter is the tradition of not eating red meat on Good Friday at Easter. This is supposed to be out of respect for Christ who gave up his flesh on Good Friday. So what people typically do is eat fish on Good Friday. But nowhere in the bible does it say we are to forgo eating meat on the Friday before the Passover, which is when Jesus was put to death. This practice is a human tradition of the church. They will and do eat prawns, shrimp, clams, scallops, mussels, oysters, shark and other seafood rather than red meat. And yet the food laws in the Old Testament clearly state we should eat nothing from the sea that does not have fins and scales. These other forms of seafood do not have fins and scales and so under the food laws are prohibited foods. So for the sake of the church tradition they allow people to break the food laws that were given by God to the people.

The reason God gave the food laws was for our benefit and protection. All of the prohibited foods we know today have some kind of issue. Shellfish are high in

cholesterol, oysters in particular are a high cause of food poisoning, shark can be high in heavy metals because it is a scavenger, and so on. Of the meats, pork is also a high bacterial content food and often at the root of salmonella outbreaks. While we are not under the law in the Christian covenant, it does not make sense to ignore the wisdom of God where he has given us instruction for our benefit.

There are other traditions that were delivered to the church that are good and should be followed. Examples are the breaking of bread, anointing with oil, baptism and the laying on of hands. These traditions form part of the way we worship under the New Covenant and are to be practiced and protected. But any tradition that changes or opposes the word of God are to be avoided and removed.

There are many traditions in the church and we must take care to consider when the traditions of men versus the word of God. Such traditions that make void the word of God destroy our worship. When the tradition becomes more important than the word of God, the tradition must go. As Jesus said, quoting Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." (Matthew 15:8-9)

Many traditions that have infiltrated the church today have their roots in pagan and non-Christian religions. Examples are many of the traditions of Christmas and Easter. There is no evidence in the bible for the giving of Easter eggs or setting up Christmas trees. However these practices do have roots in pagan teachings. And yet these traditions have infiltrated the church as though they were meant to suggest some form of worship of Christ. Even the dates of these two supposed Christian events are incorrect (although every so often the date for Easter does align with the Passover).

These traditions take people away from God. They destroy the worship of God when the church rules the tradition to be more important than following the teachings of Jesus Christ. Our challenge is to identify the traditions in our own church and our own life and question whether they are affecting our worship of God. If the tradition is not backed up by scripture then it needs to be tested to see if it is opposed to God in some way, and if so removed.

What Comes Out Defiles a Man

(Matthew 15:10-20)

Jesus gave this parable about what comes out of a man and eating with unwashed hands after upbraiding the Pharisees and scribes about upholding traditions. He was concerned about matters of the spirit and not physical issues. Eating with unwashed hands was about a physical issue, but it is what comes out of a man that proceeds from the heart that is the real issue.

There are many things that man believes to be sin which are not. The Pharisees were so steeped in their human traditions that they took offence at the disciples for eating

with unwashed hands. They considered this a transgression of the tradition of the elders and equated that with sin. But Jesus showed clearly this was not the case. It is what comes out of a man that will defile him. For all sin proceeds from the spirit of a man, from his heart and soul, and it is sin that defiles a person.

The disciples did not understand this parable so Peter asked the Lord to explain it to them. The Pharisees were focussed on what goes into a man, that is, food. They believed that it was unclean to eat with unwashed hands for the food would be contaminated in some way. While we know today about issues of bacteria, salmonella and the like, we do not wash before eating as a religious tradition like the Pharisees did, but for hygiene reasons. Even then, if we did not wash before eating in most circumstance we would not suffer any harm, and certainly it is not a sin.

So it is not what goes into a man that is an issue but what comes out defiles a man. Jesus listed all manner of evil, the primary concern being evil thoughts. Evil thoughts in particular are at the root of what comes out of a person and defiles them. In other scriptures when the Lord says, "You shall know them by their fruits," he is saying to watch and see if what comes out defiles a man or if what comes out is good fruit.

In speaking of the false teaching that the Pharisees were promoting based upon their human traditions, Jesus counselled the disciples to "Leave them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Verse 14) He was saying that they are spiritually blind for they put their traditions above the word of God. While there are some traditions that are harmless and some that were delivered to us to keep by the Lord himself, any time we put a tradition or any false teaching ahead of the word of God we are in peril of being a blind guide.

Spiritual blindness is worse than physical blindness for it clouds and darkens the spirit of a man and leads him astray. Succumbing to spiritual blindness will cause people to fall away from following the Lord and wandering into error. Thus as the writer of Hebrews counsels, "Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." (Hebrews 2:1) Whatever we hear from other people we need to weigh against the scripture and the words of Jesus to see if it accords with the truth of the gospel of Christ. To do that we need to study the scriptures so that we are immersed in it and can more quickly pick the error from the truth. As Paul wrote, "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles." (Ephesians 4:14) Only by doing this in combination with Christian fellowship and prayer are we able to ensure we are not swayed by false doctrine and the teachings of blind guides.

Crumbs from the Master's Table - The Canaanite Woman's Faith

(Matthew 15:21-28)

The teaching about the Canaanite woman's faith, sometimes referred to as feeding on crumbs from the master's table, is an unusual one. Some people argue that the Lord was being cold or unkind in his treatment of the Canaanite woman in this teaching. However that is not the case.

This woman was following Jesus and the disciples crying after them to seek healing for her daughter who was demon possessed. She clearly knew the Lord could do this for no doubt she had seen or heard about the healings he had already performed. It also appears that her constant crying to the Lord was annoying the disciples, for they said to Jesus to send her away. But Jesus didn't send her packing, which in itself is a sign that he had compassion for her even before he did anything.

Jesus made the reply to the disciples when they said to send her away that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The Canaanite woman was a Gentile and not of the tribes of Israel. Now some could argue there was inconsistency here. Jesus did not immediately grant her request, but we saw back in Matthew 8:5-12 that he did immediately assist the Gentile centurion, who came to him pleading for the healing of his servant. However in that case we can presume that the centurion's servant may have been of the tribes of Israel and thus one of the lost sheep to whom Jesus referred.

In this case though the woman was pleading for her daughter who clearly would not have been an Israelite. She was not prepared to accept no for an answer either, which is a lesson we can all learn. For when she made her request Jesus responded, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (Verse 26) Most people would have given up at that point, but this Canaanite woman was not any ordinary person. She responded back saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (Verse 27) Jesus recognised she had great faith and so granted her request. The crumbs from the masters table she referred to are evidence that she had been seeking the Lord and taking in the teachings. The Canaanite woman's faith was strong, as she had clearly learned the principles of faith from listening to Jesus and taking in the good news of the gospel.

Although the initial ministry of Jesus was to the Israelites, it was prophesied by Isaiah that, "The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles hope." (Romans 15:12) So there was no reason that Jesus should withhold healing other than that it was not time yet to reach out to the Gentiles. The ministry had to go to Israel first and spread from there.

There is a warning in here about being legalistic. Legalism is rigid and unbending. It says, "The law is the law and it cannot be changed." But Jesus came to preach freedom from law, and although he was born under law, in his subsequent death he would remove all sin and the law so that we could be freed. The ministry of freedom too is a ministry of compassion, not rigid but open to reason and doing what is good and right and true.

The Canaanite woman's faith was such that she deserved this healing she sought. We know that it is the children of faith who are children of Abraham, and thus children of Israel. For Paul wrote, "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." This means that it is not the children of the

flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants." (Romans 9:6-8) Through their faith in God the Gentiles are reckoned as descendants of Abraham.

They are children of promise through faith and are children of God through faith in the promises of God. As Paul also wrote, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith." (Romans 3:28-30) The uncircumcised are the Gentile nations and these are made righteous or justified through their faith. Thus we see the Canaanite woman receive her request because of her faith and through her faith became a descendant of Israel in a spiritual sense and thus one of the lost sheep of Israel.

So Jesus was not being cold or inconsistent. Since she was a descendant of Abraham through faith in the promises of God, she was entitled to the healing she sought. She proved herself to be a child of Abraham and a child of God through her faith.

Jesus Healing People

(Matthew 15:29-31)

Jesus healing people was a large part of why people followed him around. It would be no different today. When you consider the amount of sickness in the world today, and back in Jesus' day, Jesus healing people was almost a full time job.

But the message he had to give was not just healing of the body. He also taught the people the good news of the New Covenant. There was a spiritual healing for the people too if they would listen and accept his word. That same offer of Jesus healing people spiritually is still available today. And the healing ministry along with all of the other miracles performed was done for the specific purpose of confirming the truth of the message. We see at the end of Mark that when the disciples were sent out to preach, there were miraculous signs performed to back up the message. The scripture says, "And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it." (Mark 16:20)

Many people who first come to Christ do so when they have reached rock bottom. When they are completely down and out spiritually they begin to wonder if there is anything more to life, and start to seek in the spiritual dimension. Some go completely in the wrong direction and become spiritually ill, but those who seek the Lord find him or are found by him. When they come to the feet of Jesus in the spirit through prayer and repentance, they are healed as the people brought the sick and laid them at his feet for physical healing in this section of scripture. It says they brought the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb and many others and Jesus healed them all. None were missed. No sickness, deformity or issue was too hard or too great for him to overcome.

We see the people on seeing Jesus healing people were amazed and they were in wonder at the mighty power of God they were seeing in front of their eyes. They knew the source of this power for they glorified the God of Israel on seeing these miracles performed. And all the while Jesus continued to teach them the truth of the Kingdom of God.

Unfortunately many would reject his teachings at the time. The multitudes turned against him when he was brought before Pilate and put to death. But thereafter they recognised their error when Peter stood and preached to them on Pentecost day and they repented and turned once again to the Lord, this time for spiritual healing. Today this opportunity still exists to turn to Jesus for healing of the spirit. When we learn about the truth of the gospel, it is freedom and release that heals us in the spirit. In Jesus Christ we can find and receive his peace into our hearts and live in harmony with the Lord and one another.

Jesus Feeds the Crowd

(Matthew 15:29-39)

Jesus feeds the crowd again in this section. This is the second miracle where Jesus feeds the crowd with just a few loaves and fishes.

The details of this miracle are similar to when Jesus feeds the crowd of five thousand. In this case we see there are four thousand men plus women and children, so it is a substantial crowd following him. Apart from the miracle itself, the lesson to be learned is strengthened by him doing this miracle twice. So what are the lessons to be taken from this?

1. The hand of the Lord is not shortened. He is able to provide for his people even being able to create food from nothing.
2. He is compassionate to his people. They had been following him for three days and he did not want to send them away hungry.
3. He shows we are to provide both spiritual food and physical food when the need is there.
4. It is hypocritical to say when someone is in need of food or clothing to, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body," (James 2:16) That is, our faith is completed by our deeds and actions.

Now even today when Jesus is not walking the earth as he did two thousand odd years ago, we still see his miraculous power at work. His people who follow him are constantly watched over and guarded and do not suffer want. Testimonies abound of how people have sought the Lord for many things and received his blessing, sometimes in miraculous ways. As examples, here are a few instances from my own life and experience of the Lord's provision and protection.

In all things we can come to him. There is no matter too great or too small that he cannot resolve. We need to firstly have the faith to bring our needs and concerns to

him and then give him praise and glory to God when the prayers are answered. We also need to understand that sometimes the answer will be "No." It is just like when our own children come to us for things that we know from experience is not good or right for them.

So if Jesus can feed the crowd on just a few loaves and fishes, he can do just about anything we may ask. The key is to ask and to believe that you will receive an answer.

Bible Signs of the Times

(Matthew 16:1-4)

In this section we see Jesus upbraiding the Pharisees and Sadducees who were looking for a sign from heaven to test Jesus. There are many Bible signs of the times throughout both Old & New Testaments relating to Jesus' coming. The Pharisees and Sadducees were aware of them, but refused to accept this mere carpenter as the Messiah spoken of in the Bible signs of the times discussed in the old books of the prophets.

They wanted proof that Jesus was who he was, but even if they were to receive a sign, they would not have believed. As Jesus showed in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." (Luke 16:31) The sign that Jesus offered to the Pharisees and Sadducees was exactly this. He said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah." (Matthew 16:4) In effect when Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by the great fish, spending three days in its belly, he was presumed dead. However when he was regurgitated he effectively rose from the dead. In Jesus' case he would spend three days in the tomb and actually did rise from the dead. This is the parallel he was drawing by quoting the sign of Jonah.

But as we see, the Pharisees and Sadducees still would not believe even after he was raised from the dead. The chief priests of the time and elders of the temple paid off the guards and told them to spread the story that Jesus disciples came by night and stole the body away while the guards slept.

So Jesus upbraided them for although they could look at the signs in the sky to predict the weather, they were blind to the signs of the times. The Bible signs of the times have been given to us so that we may be aware of what is happening and what is to come. We can see from what is going on around us, and comparing this to the Bible and see the hand of the Lord. Let us look at some of the things occurring today and consider what they mean in the light of scripture and the Bible signs of the times.

2 Timothy 3:12 "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." If you desire to follow Jesus and to live a godly life, you need to know that there will be persecutions and you will have trouble. This goes with your call to

Christ. But you will also be strengthened by looking to Christ and be given the means to come through such persecutions. So as far as Bible signs of the times go, this is one at a personal level. When you are persecuted for the Lord, not if you do wrong, you are blessed and can take comfort that you are doing something right. If you were not, the devil would not persecute you.

Matthew 24:6 "And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet." Consider the wars and skirmishes of recent times. The world or parts of it have been in constant war and fighting for the past century where nations have risen against nations. Look at the two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, two wars in Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan and the many crises in places like Uganda, Cuba, the Falklands, Yugoslavia, Georgia in the USSR, Timor, the middle east and many more that have occurred in recent years. These are pointers to the beginning of the end of this age; the birth pangs of the end as it is described.

Matthew 24:7 "...there will be famines and earthquakes in various places." The seismic activity in recent years is unparalleled in the world's history. There are more earthquakes occurring in more places than ever before. While there is some argument that we now have more and better equipment to identify and measure earthquakes, if we look only at the major quakes, i.e. greater than magnitude 8 on the Richter scale we see a definite increase. In the 1980's there were 4 Mag 8+ quakes, in the 1990's there were 6 Mag 8+ quakes and in the 2000's there were 13 Mag 8+ quakes. This data is according to the US Geological Survey dep't and can be seen graphically here.

Matthew 24:12 "And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold." Man's inhumanity to man is beyond precedent today. Random acts of terror; random shootings and stabbings are daily news events. People lock themselves away for fear of violence on the streets.

Luke 21:25 "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves." We are seeing more damage caused by sea and tsunamis than ever before. Consider the tsunami that hit Indonesia on Boxing Day 2004. Nobody knows exactly how many people perished in that disaster, but they have accounted for at least 220,000 lives lost and possibly as many as 280,000. Recently in 2010 & 2011 there have been freak waves that hit Sydney and nearby beaches washing people out to sea with some lives lost. The common response to this freak weather was "Where did it come from? People and reporters were perplexed, as too were the weather experts. This is another manifestation of this sign in the Bible written several thousand years ago.

The prophet Daniel enquired of the Lord what some of the prophecies of the last days meant. He was told, "...Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." (Daniel 12:4) Was there ever a time in history like the one we are in today in respect of these matters? The Internet has made knowledge accessible to everyone and it is increasing at a rapid rate daily. Technological advance is such that sometimes gadgets are obsolete within months of their release. Consider the first IBM PC was released in 1981 and the change to the world in just 30 years since then as a result of that invention. And

mankind is running to and fro all over the place. The pace of change is such that "busy-ness" is the norm for most people today and with global flights so cheap, people are on the move.

The upshot of all of these Bible signs of the times is that it is plain we are in the beginnings of the end times. Make no mistake, the Lord is returning in the not too distant future. We have not been given to know when that will be, but we have been given these and many other signs to help us understand what is happening, and to point to the approaching end of this age.

Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees

(Matthew 16:5-12)

We see here that Jesus has just left the Pharisees and is warning his disciples to beware the leaven of the Pharisees. The disciples did not immediately understand this saying and were confused. They questioned amongst themselves saying, "We did not bring any bread."

Jesus said to them did they not recall the times he fed the four thousand and fed the five thousand and how much bread was left over? It was only then they understood he was not talking about bread but by saying beware the leaven of the Pharisees he was telling them to beware the teachings of the Pharisees.

Let's consider leaven for a moment. Leaven is yeast. A lump of leaven could also be a piece of dough that has had yeast added and is mixed in with a batch of dough. The purpose of leaven or yeast in bread making is threefold. Firstly, it causes the bread to rise. Yeast is a living substance with bacteria that give off carbon dioxide, which is the gas generated to cause the dough to rise. Secondly, it improves the taste and texture of the bread. Anyone who has had damper, which is an unleavened form of bread, will know that it is rougher in texture and tastes more floury or doughy than leavened bread. And finally it spreads and expands when put into flour. It gradually goes right through the bread and leavens it all.

Consider these aspects of leaven as they apply to the teachings of the Pharisees. First leaven causes bread to rise. In essence it puffs the bread up. The Pharisees were puffed up with pride and full of hypocrisy. They believed they had the knowledge of the kingdom and were the keepers of the kingdom of God, but they were wrong. As Jesus said in Matthew 23:14, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in." Paul also wrote of the puffery of knowledge saying, "We know that "all of us possess knowledge." "Knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up." (1 Corinthians 8:1) So the first warning Jesus was giving about the teachings of the Pharisees was that it leads to false pride and arrogance.

Now let us look at leaven in relation to the improvement of taste and texture. Often the false teachings that are offered are wrapped in a cloak of deceit. They sound good but they are destructive. Many New Age teachings are like this. As Paul wrote, "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh." (Colossians 2:23) He also spoke of these false teachers and their leaven-like teachings that would lead people astray. "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." (2 Timothy 4:3-4) People will look for teachings that justify themselves rather than lead to the glory of God. They will seek things that they like to hear and look for people teaching this false doctrine.

Finally the invasive nature of leaven is like these false teachings, and the most dangerous aspect of these teachings and teachers. It is Satanic for he was the author of deceit and deception, the master of the lie and the half-truth. Paul showed this insidious leaven-like aspect of false teaching like this; "Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. Among them are Hymenae'us and Phile'tus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some." (2 Timothy 2:16-18) The greatest problem of the leaven-like teachings is that they are insidious. They will seep into a person and like leaven will colour all that a person believes, causing them to swerve from the truth as Paul wrote.

Jesus also showed this insidious nature of the false, hypocritical teachings of the Pharisees in the following parable. "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:22-23) If we look for what is not good, the darkness, and allow it into our minds, how greatly will it darken our life? We must shun the teachings of darkness and seek the light of the Lord that comes through the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

There are many teachings that Jesus uses to warn his people of the false teachings that will come. Jesus constantly warns us about wolves in sheep clothing, false teachers, false prophets and the problems of accepting the lies from these people. Instead we must focus on the teachings of God and weigh all things up against the words in the Bible. When in doubt, seek his guidance in prayer and make no decision until you learn the right path.

On this Rock I will build my Church

(Matthew 16:13-20)

When Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi he asked the disciples who men thought that he was. They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah

or one of the prophets." When he asked whom the disciples believed he was, Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus then said Peter was blessed for this knowledge does not come from man but is a revelation of God. It is a revelation based upon faith, and that is the key to this understanding and this scripture.

Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church." The rock to which he refers is twofold. Firstly, Jesus himself is the rock. He is the rock of ages and the foundation stone on which the church is built. In 1 Peter 2:4-8 we see him thus described as follows:

"4 Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious;
5 and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
6 For it stands in scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame."
7 To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner,"
8 and "A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall"; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do."

Christ is the cornerstone and foundation of the church. We who believe in him are the living stones being built into this spiritual house of God.

Secondly, the rock is about faith. When Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," he was using the Greek words "petros" and "petra." The first of these is translated as "stone" and the second is "rock." When Jesus called Peter a stone he was showing that he was one of the living stones that was being built into the house of God. But also when he said, "...on this rock," he was speaking of the rock of Peter's faith in believing that Jesus is the Son of God and the Christ.

Faith is the key to entering the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus said to Peter, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven," he is talking about faith. Furthermore, Jesus shows that the powers of death will not prevail against this rock and his church. In Jesus case, he could not be held by death. The true church similarly cannot be held by death for those who enter go from death into life through Jesus. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24) The key here is to hear Jesus' words and believe in God. This is faith and through faith we have moved from death into life.

We see the power of faith described by Paul who talks about it as the "shield of faith." "...besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one." (Ephesians 6:16) Through faith we overcome the devil and all of the powers he throws against the sons of God. It is only through faith that we stand. And it is only through faith that we can say of Jesus, as Peter did, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus Foretells his Death and Resurrection

(Matthew 16:21-23)

Jesus regularly pre-warned the disciples of things to come. Jesus never leaves us completely in the dark, either then or now. Here we see Jesus foretells his death and resurrection to his disciples so they would understand what was coming and what would happen. He wanted to assure them that this was what was supposed to happen so they would not be surprised and shocked.

The very purpose of Jesus coming to the earth was to establish the New Covenant so that man could be set free from sin and death. However, to achieve a release from sin required a sacrifice to be made, as was ordained in the law. But there was no sacrifice adequate on this earth, and so Jesus came to become the perfect sacrifice. It was for our benefit that Jesus suffered so that we would not have to suffer also. It was the greatest gift ever given to man.

Naturally, Satan would oppose anything God would do for man. Here we see that Satan was at work opposing God and Jesus again. We have insight into Satan's treachery in this passage for we see that he influenced even Peter, who in the previous section was blessed by Jesus for his faith. Satan influenced Peter to try to convince Jesus that such suffering and death as Jesus was describing to the disciples would or should never happen. Through Peter, Satan attempted to sway Jesus to escape such an end.

Jesus was aware of Satan's malice and treachery. He recognised the hand of that devil immediately and thus warned him off saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." (Verse 23) Satan was attempting to hinder Jesus and using Peter to say the words. We note that Jesus did not accuse Peter of this treachery but went to the source of these words of hindrance, to Satan himself. Other translations of this verse, and the original Greek manuscript say, "...you are setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men." (ESV)

Satan was attempting to get Jesus to think like a man rather than to follow the path of God and think on the Spirit. He was appealing to the flesh of Jesus to lead him away from the things of the Spirit. When the flesh leads a man he is in opposition to God and cannot do what is pleasing to God. We see Paul cover this in Romans 8:5-8 saying;

5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot;

8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Satan attempts to cause Jesus to set his mind on the flesh. He attempts to force him to think of the preservation of the flesh, self-preservation, by using Peter to say the words that this should never happen to Jesus. He was attempting to cause Jesus to walk in the flesh and set his mind on the flesh.

But the work of God is the work of the spirit, and to walk in the Spirit requires a person to set their minds on the things of the Spirit. This even included Jesus, who though he was the Son of God, was manifested in the flesh like any ordinary man. Jesus was tempted in all the same ways that any man is tempted, but without succumbing to temptation. This attempt by Satan was another of the temptations of Christ. Jesus walked in the Spirit and sent Satan packing. Walking in the flesh would have meant Jesus should seek to escape this upcoming death and suffering. But then how would the New Covenant appear and the word of God be fulfilled? Walking in the Spirit meant that Jesus would do as he was required by the Father to bring about the New Covenant for our sake, even though it meant death and suffering.

This scripture shows how great was Jesus' love for us. Even though he was tempted and lured to swerve from the course that would lead to death, he did not waver. The Spirit prevailed and we are the more blessed for Jesus actions. In his actions we too have an example of walking in the Spirit. There may be times when the Lord's course will cause us suffering too, so we need to be prepared to likewise walk in the Spirit.

Whoever Loses His Life for My Sake Will Find It

(Matthew 16:24-28)

What does Jesus mean by saying whoever loses his life for my sake will find it? Is he talking about dying for the sake of Jesus? And what about where he says whoever would save his life will lose it? How does this work?

In simple terms when Jesus says whoever loses his life for my sake will find he is talking about following him rather than following after your own desires. This is covered in verse 24 of this section saying, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." There are three distinct points to this verse. Firstly he says, "If any man would come after me," meaning to follow Jesus. If they are to follow him they must be prepared to do what follows. The second point is to "deny himself." By denying oneself a person puts the needs of the Lord before their own needs. There are times in following the Lord when we must put our own needs second to what the Lord may require of us. Which brings us to the third point, which is to "take up his cross." This is a representation of the need to suffer and as Christians we will go through suffering from time to time for our walk with Christ. As Peter wrote, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his

glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4:12-13) We must be prepared to suffer for Christ if that were needed in our endeavour to follow him.

Incidentally, there is some query over the translation of the Greek word rendered here as "cross." the Greek word is "stauros," which literally translates out as a stake, post or pole. This word was incorrectly translated into the Latin Vulgate bible as "cruz" and for reasons unknown subsequently incorrectly translated into the English bibles as "cross." Thus for the sake of accuracy it would appear that Jesus was put to death on a stake rather than a cross.

So we are to be prepared to lose the things of this life and to suffer if we are required in our walk with Christ. We see that Jesus shows the importance of this in the next scriptures saying, "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?" (Verse 26) If a person is not prepared to give up everything in this life for the sake of the Lord, if that should be required of them, then they may stand the risk of losing everything of real value. You could gain the whole world and become the richest person on earth, but what is that compared to your life? Is anything worth more than keeping your life to eternity? That is the promise of the Lord. If we are prepared to suffer with him, then we too shall live with him.

There is an additional twist in this section too. Verse 27 states, "For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done." When he speaks of what a person "has done," he is not talking about doing great deeds or wondrous works. He is talking about what this whole section is speaking of, which is to follow him. That is the key to this whole section. We are called to follow him as the first and utmost priority. Great works will not ensure you receive life; only following Jesus can assure this.

As an example consider the scripture that says, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'" (Matthew 7:21-23) These people will come to him proclaiming the works that they did in his name, but they did not follow him. They believed they would be saved for their works, but it is not through works that anyone is to be saved. Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone. No other way is able to save a man from sin and death.

The principle of "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" is bound up in the need to follow Jesus. Everything else a person can do is secondary to this requirement. As Jesus said to the rich young man, "Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21) Perfection in Christ is attainable only by following him. We must be prepared to give up everything for his sake if we are to achieve life, for all other things are distractions.

Transfiguration of Jesus

(Matthew 17:1-8)

There is an important symbolism in this section of scripture about the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, witnessed by the three disciples, Peter, James and John, is an important revelation of the New Covenant. There is an explanation of the New Covenant versus the Old Covenant contained in this event.

We see during the transfiguration of Jesus that his appearance was transformed. His face shone like the sun and his garments became white as light. (Verse 2) We see also that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus and were talking to him. Needless to say the disciples were greatly astonished and did not know what to do. In his amazement, Peter offered to make three booths, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

Now this is an interesting insight into the mind of Peter and the disciples. All of their lives they would have been taught about Moses and the prophets. The deeds of Moses and the prophets were part of their history, and were almost the stuff of legend. Through their works they received release from bondage in Egypt as well as the law that the Israelites cherished deeply. Seeing Moses and Elijah would have been even more profound for a Jew than it would for the average person today because of their learning and heritage.

Part of the symbolism of this event is in what each person represents. Moses was the giver of the law and represents the Old Covenant. Elijah was probably the greatest of the old prophets, and he was the only one of the prophets who never died but was taken by God. Elijah represents the prophets of old. And finally Jesus represents the New Covenant and the new way that was being introduced.

In Peter's offer to make three booths for Moses, Elijah and Jesus he treats them as equals. But the intervention of God the Father at the transfiguration of Jesus sets a different path. The Father's words are crucial to understanding the transfiguration of Jesus for he gives a powerful message in a few words.

A bright cloud overshadowed Peter and the disciples as he was speaking and the voice of the Father came from the cloud. He said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." (Verse 5) There are three messages in this statement for the disciples and for us.

First, God the Father identifies who Jesus is. He is the Son of God. If ever there was any doubt that Jesus is the Son of God and the Christ or the Messiah, it is done away with by the testimony of the Father himself.

Second, we see that the Father is well pleased with what the Son is doing. It is a pleasure to the Father for the Son is obedient to the word of the Father and the work he has been given to do. In another version of the transfiguration of Jesus we see that Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus about his impending death and resurrection in Jerusalem. (Luke 9:28-36) It is this that the Father is well pleased about in this

instance for it is by Jesus death and resurrection that the New Covenant would be established and sin dealt with.

Finally, we see the Father give instruction to the disciples directly. He tells them to, "Listen to him," speaking of Jesus. He does not say to listen to all three of them, but to listen to Jesus only. This point is emphasised even more when we see the disciples fall to the ground in awe, but when they arose they see Jesus alone. Moses and Elijah were gone and they were left only in the presence of Jesus.

The allegory in this teaching is that with the advent of the New Covenant, the Old Covenant, which is the law and prophets, as represented here by Moses and Elijah, is done away with. The Old Covenant has been made obsolete and is superseded by the New Covenant. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, "In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Hebrews 8:13) This does not mean there is no value in the Old Covenant. There is great wisdom in the Old Covenant. But for Christians, we are to listen to Jesus, as instructed by the Father himself in this section on the transfiguration of Jesus.

To mix the two covenants is like mixing oil and water. The Old Covenant identifies sin and puts man under laws to attempt to control sin. But the New Covenant offers freedom from sin, freedom from law and the ability to transform the nature of man to be like the nature of God, so that we do not sin. We do not sin not because the law says not to, but because we are transformed into the nature of Jesus Christ and of God who cannot sin. The Old Covenant was incapable of doing this transformation for it dealt only with the flesh of man, not the spirit of man. It is only when we "listen to Him", that is, when we take in the words of Christ that we can achieve the freedom on offer in the New Covenant. That is why the teaching of the transfiguration of Jesus is so important and fundamental to Christianity today.

First Elijah Must Come

(Matthew 17:9-13)

Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone of his transfiguration until after his death and resurrection. The disciples then asked him an unusual question. They said, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" (Verse 10) There are several dimensions to this question worth considering. If the scripture was to be fulfilled then first Elijah must come before the day of the Lord.

The scribes were quoting the last words of the prophet Malachi in the Old Testament. This scripture says, "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6) The scribes were looking for the signs of the Messiah's coming. One of those signs was that first Elijah must come. Elijah was to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

The scribes and Pharisees had asked whether John the Baptist was the Christ, but he confessed saying, "I am not the Christ." (John 1:20) They then asked whether he was Elijah and again he said, "I am not." (John 1:21) Now it is interesting for Jesus said of John that he was indeed Elijah who was to come first. However he was not Elijah the prophet of old himself. To think that he was would be to accept reincarnation, which is a false teaching. For we know from scripture that, "it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment." (Hebrews 9:27)

So how is it that John the Baptist could be Elijah? This is cleared up in the Luke version. The angel Gabriel appeared to John's father, Zechariah, and told him that he would have a son. He said of this child, "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:16-17)

So John could confidently say that he was not Elijah, for he was not Elijah the prophet from old times. However he did come in the spirit and power of Elijah to do the ministry of preparing the way of the Lord. So when we see that first Elijah must come to do the work of preparation, we find that prophecy fulfilled in the work of John the Baptist.

It was interesting too that the scribes and Pharisees had already asked whether Jesus was the Christ. His response was, "So the Jews gathered round him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me." (John 10:24-25) The key here is that the works he was doing bore witness to Jesus that he was the Christ. It was exactly the same with John the Baptist. When you review his works, which were to prepare a people for the coming of the Lord, it is clear that his works testify that he was Elijah who was to come. Not the actual Elijah of old, but the one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord.

Now Jesus also warned the disciples not to mention the transfiguration events until after his resurrection. Why was that? Well prior to the resurrection if the disciples began spreading the word that they had seen Elijah, let alone Moses as well, the scribes and Pharisees would say they were making it up. They would want proof that Elijah had come before they would believe, not that they would believe anyway. How would the disciples be able to substantiate such a claim? In fact it would confuse matters more for John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come. The scribes were looking for Elijah, not John the Baptist who came in the spirit of Elijah.

But after Jesus death and resurrection the scribes had a much greater sign, which they should not have ignored. They had the proof that Jesus was the Christ and the fulfilment of Jesus word that the only sign they would get was the sign of Jonah. (Matthew 16:4) His death and resurrection was proof that Jesus was the Christ. And yet still they would not believe. However, if Jesus was the Christ, which he was, then they had to also accept that John the Baptist was Elijah who must come first.

The Power of a Prayer of Faith

(Matthew 17:14-21)

In this section a man came to Jesus seeking for his son to be healed. The boy was demon possessed and suffered often from the influence of the demon. The man had already made this request of the disciples, but they were unable to cast the demon out. Jesus says the demon could not be removed because it was of a particular type and because of the little faith. But whether it was the little faith of the disciples or the father is unclear. We see then that the power of prayer needed to come into play in this particular exorcism.

The detail of this event needs expansion, as the description here in Matthew does not provide the full evidence of the issues at hand. In the version of this event in Mark 9:14-29 we gain some additional insight. First we see that the father is lacking in faith, for he says, "...if you can do anything, have pity on us." (Vs. 22) Jesus focuses on this statement saying, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." (Vs. 23) The father then cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Vs. 24)

So we see in this section that the father of the child doubted whether anything could be done for his child. He brought the boy to the disciples in desperation, but without sufficient faith that he would be healed until Jesus set him straight.

We then see also the disciples come to Jesus privately after the healing to ask why they could not cast the demon out. Jesus responds that, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." (Vs. 29 and some manuscripts suggest fasting also is required). Back in the Matthew version, verse 21 is included in some of the original manuscripts, but not all and as such is included as a footnote only in most modern translations. It too suggests that this kind of demon is removed only by prayer and fasting.

Now it is evident from this that there are different kinds of demons, some more persistent than others. That is also evident when we see that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is, "... the ability to distinguish between spirits." (1 Corinthians 12:10) When Jesus walked the earth there was no issue with removing any kind of demon. Jesus gave the authority to the disciples to remove demons, but at that time we must remember they had not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit and so could not distinguish between demons. They were still being trained by the Lord on how to deal with matters of the spirit and their faith was not yet strong.

Even though the disciples had the authority to cast out demons, because of their lack of faith and this particular type of demon, they were unable to cast it out. But there is a lesson for us in this that applies to any situation, not just casting out demons. There is a message of faith and the power of prayer. Jesus showed the disciples that when we are unable to do anything ourselves, we need to use the power of prayer. We need to appeal to God himself through prayer. For even though we may be powerless over a situation, God is not. There is nothing he cannot do, and nothing he will not do is we ask in faith, including casting out stubborn demons.

If we have faith all things are possible. As Jesus said in a similar situation in Mark 11:22-24,

22 And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God.

23 Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.

24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

So it is through faith in God and by asking in prayer with no doubting that our needs will be met. This was the method that Jesus was teaching to the disciples and which holds true today as well. James also attested to this matter saying, "...the prayer of faith will save the sick man." (James 5:15) We will do well to remember this in our own times of need. To hold firm to our faith and to put all of our issues and matters before God in prayer, for there is nothing he cannot or will not do if we ask him.

Jesus Announces His Death

(Matthew 17:22-23)

Jesus and the disciples left the place they were in and were gathering in Galilee. They were preparing to go up into Jerusalem. At this time in keeping with his practice of telling the disciples what was to come, Jesus announces his death and how it would take place. He tells the disciples that when they go to Jerusalem he is to be delivered into the hands of men and they would kill him.

Needless to say the disciples were greatly distressed about this. Earlier we saw that when Jesus spoke of his departure Peter being influenced by Satan began to say, "No, not you Lord." (Matthew 16:21-23) But at that time Jesus knew the source of this saying and told Satan to get behind him.

In this second discussion the disciples were greatly distressed. Again they may have been concerned about Jesus, or they may have been concerned for themselves. They may have been wondering what would happen after Jesus was gone. What would happen to them and the ministry they had been given? Who would lead them forward? Thoughts like this may have been going through their heads, as they did not understand what was happening. The understanding of this was hidden from them as we see in other versions of this event. (Mark 9:30-32, Luke 9:43-45) If they thought these things, then as Peter behaved previously, they were not thinking or walking in the Spirit over these matters. They were walking and thinking in terms of the flesh.

One of the key messages we get from this section, and particularly in the other versions of this event, is that we should ask when we don't understand. Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given you, seek, and you will find, knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7) During this event the disciples were afraid to ask and so they did not receive an answer. It says in the Mark & Luke versions that the meaning was

concealed from them and they were too afraid to ask. Had they asked, perhaps they would have received the insight to quell their fears.

How much better is it to know what is going on? When we don't know what is happening, the result can be fear, anxiety and frustration. But these things are removed when we know and understand what is going on. We have been instructed by the Lord to ask for insight when we don't understand what is happening so we don't have to suffer fear and anxiety. Consider these scriptures:

1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you."

James 1:5-6, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind."

James 4:2 "You do not have, because you do not ask."

So it is evident that the Lord wants us to know what is happening. He wants to help us in our time of need. He does not want us to suffer needlessly and to be overtaken by emotion. All we need to do is ask.

Paying the Temple Tax

(Matthew 17:24-27)

There are a number of lessons in this short section to do with the paying of the temple tax. Under the Mosaic Law there was a tax to be paid to the temple. When asked if Jesus paid the tax Peter responded that he did. Jesus used this instance to give Peter and us a valuable insight into the working of the kingdom of God.

Jesus asked Peter whether taxes are paid to the king by their sons or others. Naturally the sons of kings do not pay taxes so Peter responded that others paid taxes. Jesus then made the point that the sons then are free from paying any taxes, tolls or tributes.

When we consider that the temple was the temple of God and supposedly operating for the kingdom of God on earth, then in fact Jesus being the Son of God was exempt from the tax. The kingdom over which the temple was ruling was the kingdom of God. Jesus as the Son of God was exempt. Likewise we who enter into God's kingdom through Jesus' death are sons of God too, so we now are also exempt from paying taxes, tolls and tribute to the king.

Jesus also made the statement that the sons of the kingdom are free. Jesus came so that we could be set free from sin and death. He also opened the way for man to enter into God's kingdom through his death and resurrection. As we have put on Jesus death through baptism, we have also received life through his resurrection. This can be seen in Romans 6:3-4 saying, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into

Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Through Christ we have entered into the kingdom of God and are sons of God. As we are therefore now sons of His kingdom, we are free in relation to all aspects of the kingdom. We are free from sin, law, toll and tribute. We have passed from death to life and now live by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Now in Peter's case he had already responded for Jesus, which he should not have done without asking. We too should not respond on behalf of another without checking first also. But rather than tell Peter he was wrong and that he should go back and rectify his mistake, Jesus took the route of compassion and mercy. Instead he said to Peter to go catch a fish and he would find a shekel in the mouth of the first fish he caught. Rather than anger the temple tax collectors he was instructed to pay this shekel to them, half for Jesus and half for Peter.

So in effect even though Peter had wrongly said Jesus would pay the tax, Jesus in ultimately did not pay it anyway as the money did not come from his purse or efforts. He remained free being the son of the true king, the kingdom of God.

Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

(Matthew 18:1-6)

The disciples came to Jesus to ask who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. This is a common thought of man. When we look at things like the Guinness book of records we see a collection of the most outstanding achievements of mankind in all disciplines. When we think about the "Who's Who" books we see a list of who is considered to be the greatest of all men. But all of these approaches will not identify who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

God does not think like man. God does not consider greatness the same way that man does. To think someone is greater than someone else is a human thing. It is not of God. God does not show partiality, but looking at someone as being greater than someone else is to be partial to one over another.

Paul understood this issue quite well too. He wrote, "Not that we venture to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding." (2 Corinthians 10:12) To measure someone against someone else shows a lack of understanding. The truth of the matter is that we are all different. So what if someone can't jump, ski, surf, ride a bike, drive a car or run faster than someone else? So what if someone is more creative artistically, dramatically or musically than someone else?

The truth is not everyone can do everything better than everyone else. When we compare someone to someone else, we dent the capabilities of the person considered lesser than the other and who may have other qualities that are greater and more beneficial than the person being idolized. Consider those in the public spotlight from the entertainment world. Some of them are on drugs, in brawls, heavy drinkers and caught in all kinds of scandals. Is it right to idolise them when their behaviour is worse than the rest of society?

So when the disciples asked Jesus who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven they were thinking like men, not like God. To answer them Jesus took a child and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3-4) He did not say that children were the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven, but those who turned and became like a child.

When we think of children we think of innocence, humility and openness to learn. Children are sponges and take in everything about the world around them. Likewise a child of God needs to take in everything about the kingdom of God. They need to be humble under the mighty hand of God and they need to repent and become innocent like children.

Jesus also warns that anyone who puts a stumbling block or temptation into the paths of one of these people who are children of the kingdom of God are in a dangerous place. He says, "...whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Verse 6) This is a serious indictment on those who would try to lead God's people astray.

If we would be great in the kingdom of heaven then we need to take in Jesus' words. We need to become like a child and learn from Jesus. We need to seek out the ways of God by following Jesus and learn to do what is pleasing to him. Then we will truly become great in the kingdom of God.

Temptations to Sin are Sure to Come

(Matthew 18:7-9)

As we live in this world we must understand that there are many temptations to sin in the world. Jesus was well aware of this for he knew that temptations to sin are sure to come and in this section even said it was necessary that temptations come.

Everyone in this world suffers temptation. It is how they respond to temptation that is important. If we are to suffer temptation then it is important that we understand a little about what it is and how it occurs.

Temptation occurs in this way. "...but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and

sin when it is full-grown brings forth death." (James 1:14-15) Temptation is external to a person, but it is the internal issues of human passion and desire that allow temptation to bring forth sin. If we are tempted we are at a decision point to resist the temptation or to succumb to it, which leads to sin.

Jesus was aware of how this felt for he too was tempted while on the earth. It is written of him, "For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted." (Hebrews 2:18) So when we are tempted we have an advocate to help us and we can look to Jesus for support in the time of temptation. He understands our plight for he has been tempted in every way that we men and women are tempted, plus a few others. He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness to prove he was the Son of God, he was tempted through his hunger, and he was tempted with power and many other things as well.

In overcoming temptation we can go to Jesus. We can also appeal for salvation from temptation at the time of the temptation by walking in the Spirit. We see that in Jesus we have a great high priest who can help us in our time of need. The bible says, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16)

We also receive help in temptation as Paul wrote, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) The way of escape at the time of temptation is to walk in the Spirit. It is to go to the Lord in prayer to seek strength to overcome the temptation. Paul in this verse echoes Jesus words for he says that we need to be able to endure temptation. That is, we must still go through the temptation and endure it, but that through God we will not be tempted beyond what we can bear.

Jesus describes how important it is to overcome temptations to sin. He indicates the kind of drastic steps that might be considered if temptation were out of control in a person's life. A thief who could not resist the temptation to steal might consider cutting off their hands to prevent them from stealing. A person tempted through anger to kick out at another and harm them might consider cutting off a foot to stop them. Now while these may seem drastic, and they are, they illustrate how important it is not to succumb to temptation. Jesus is not telling us to cut off our hands or feet or to pluck out our eyes, but we must take drastic steps and measures to overcome temptation. If we fall snare to temptation and fall back into sin, then the temptation will rob us of our eternal salvation and life with Christ. That is why it is essential that we be prepared to punish every disobedience of our own and to take the most severe steps to fight against temptation. Our eternal salvation may be at stake.

People will tempt us. Satan will use other people to put temptations in our way. Jesus bemoans these people saying, "...woe to the man by whom the temptation comes." (Verse 7) It is bad enough that we need to go through temptations, but it will be worse for the person bringing the temptation. And we need to be on our guard to ensure we do not put a temptation in the way of others. Peter was used of Satan to try to tempt

the Lord Jesus as we see in Matthew 16:21-23. What should we do if we land in such a place? Repent and turn to the Lord for his forgiveness, support and help.

Temptations are necessary and must come to test us and strengthen us. But we need to learn how to resist temptations through the power of walking in the spirit and with the help of the Lord Jesus, knowing that he has already been through these things, but without sin.

Seeking the Lost Sheep

(Matthew 18:10-14)

The previous section spoke about the fact that temptation was necessary, but what happens when a Christian succumbs to temptation? Here we see that God protects his people and goes seeking the lost sheep when one of his people falls. This scripture tells us of the love of God for his people and why Jesus said woe to those by whom the temptation to sin should come.

In verse 10 Jesus tells us, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven." Now in this and the previous sections from Matthew 18:1-9, he is talking about those who are the children of God. This conversation began with the disciples asking who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and Jesus is addressing that question. So the people he is speaking of are those who have come to God and are children of God, that is, they are Christians.

Now the literal translation of the word "Christian" means an anointed one, that is, someone who has received the Holy Spirit as Christ did. This is important because it helps us to understand what Jesus was talking about when he says, "...their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven." The question arises, who are these angels?

If we look at Hebrews 1:7 he speaks of the angels in this way, "Of the angels he says, "Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire." He describes the angels as being able to take the form of wind and fire. We saw that description fulfilled when the disciples received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is described in Acts 2:2-4, "And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." This indicates that the Holy Spirit is an angel for he fits the description that God gave to the angels.

Furthermore we see again in Hebrews 1:13-14 the angels described as, "But to what angel has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet"? Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who

are to obtain salvation?" We are those who are to obtain salvation. We are those whom the angels as ministering spirits are sent forth to serve by God.

When we look at the work of the Holy Spirit we see that his role is to serve by ministering to each individual. In John 16:7 we see that the Holy Spirit is sent to us by Jesus and the Holy Spirit is given to us from the Father to dwell within us (John 14:16-17, John 15:26). The Holy Spirit teaches, guides, counsels and comforts so that we may be saved. (John 14:26, John 16:13) And the Holy Spirit does the work of transformation in our life to change us into the image of God from one degree of glory to another. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

So from this it is clear that the Holy Spirit given to each of us is an angel sent from God to do this work of transformation in each person. This is why Jesus says to be sure we do not despise one of God's people. In doing so we would also despise the Holy Spirit within that person as well. If a person succumbs to temptation and wanders away from God they are like a lost sheep. Within the spiritual realm there is great concern for the one who becomes lost this way, and we see that God seeks that person to bring them back into the fold. This too is through the working of the Holy Spirit in us. And when that person returns to Him, there is great joy in heaven over the return of a lost person.

So we can take comfort that we have this protection by the Father through the Holy Spirit. When Jesus says, "...their angels behold the face of my Father..." he is speaking of the Holy Spirit within each person given by God. The Holy Spirit has full access to all that the Father has to give for Jesus says of the Holy Spirit, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16:13-15)

Dealing with Sin in the Church

(Matthew 18:15-20)

There is a process for dealing with sin in the church. Church discipline is extremely important for training and maturity. Discipline in the church should not be considered as punishment. It should be done in a loving manner rather than accusing another of a fault or a sin.

In this section we see the Lord provides a process for dealing with sin in the Church. The key thing we see in this disciplinary procedure is that it is fair and just but firm. The aim is first to address the issue with the person doing the wrong, and second to ensure the church is aware if an escalation is required so they can all learn from the matter.

This section begins, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." (Verse 15) Now an examination of the original Greek text shows that the two words "against you" are not in the original texts. So this is not about a brother sinning against you, but if the sin and you find out about it. We should also understand that Jesus is talking about a brother (or sister) in the Lord.

The first step in dealing with sin in the Church is to go to the brother committing this wrong and speak to them one on one about it. This is fair to them and gives them the opportunity to repent of the wrong and to make things right. It is done privately so that they are not possibly put to shame in front of the rest of the church. Perhaps they are new Christians and have not yet learned that what they are doing is wrong, so this can be a process of learning as well as repentance. If they listen and take this advice and make amends through repentance, then that is the end of the matter.

However if they do not listen, this process escalates to the second step in the disciplinary procedure. If they will not listen to you, take along two or three others to witness the conversation and again explain to them their fault. By this process the matter is still kept relatively private and there are others who can confirm every word that is spoken. It is hoped that the person will take notice this time and repent of the wrong. They may not have listened to just one person as they may have thought it is just "your opinion versus mine" so to speak. However with several witnesses it is no longer opinion but it becomes much more serious.

We also see in the last section of this scripture that Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Verses 18-20) So by the evidence of the two or three extra witnesses there is power to loose or bind the matter. Jesus has given authority to the church to make these collective decisions, and whatever two or three here on earth agree, in the Lord, will be done and agreed in heaven.

One other point that comes out of this last section is that we see where two or three are gathered, Jesus is in their midst. Effectively then, two or three coming together in the name of the Lord is a church with the rights, responsibilities, power and authority of a Church. People sometimes think of a Church as needing a great number of people, but this is not the case. Two or three people meeting together in the name of the Lord constitute a Church.

The final step in this disciplinary procedure for dealing with sin in the Church occurs if the person still does not take heed even after a discussion including two or three witnesses. The final step is to take the matter to the whole Church and tell it to them. If at this point the person repents, then welcome him or her back. But if they will still not listen, even after telling it to the whole Church, that person is to be cast out of the Church.

This final step does several things. First and foremost it removes a potential source of trouble from the Church. Someone who is so arrogant as to ignore three warnings and

unwilling to change their ways despite the matter being brought to their attention should be removed. This is so they do not taint the minds of others who may still be weak in the Lord. In addition it serves as fair warning to the rest of the Church that matters requiring discipline will be dealt with, but they will be dealt with in a fair and just manner in accordance with the Lord's instruction.

The point of this section is that it is important to maintain the Church as a place of refuge, learning and rebuilding where people can come together and meet in joy and praise for the Lord.

Forgiving Your Brother

(Matthew 18:21-22)

The power of forgiveness is an incredible thing. Jesus teaches us here that forgiving your brother in Christ is an important part of the Christian teaching. Forgiving your brother should be unlimited, which is the point Jesus is making in this section.

However when we look at the Luke version of this scripture we see that this is a conditional forgiveness. Forgiving your brother is not automatic but follows a process. The Luke version of this uses the words of Jesus rather than the words of Peter and says, "Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4) So we see here that forgiving your brother is based upon their repenting of their sin.

The process follows this path. The first step is if your brother sins rebuke him. Tell him his fault and how he has wronged you. It would be remiss not to do so for how would your brother learn? Then if he repents of the sin or the wrong he has done, forgive him. We are not meant to hold grudges for grudges lead to bitterness and bitterness to division among brethren. No, instead forgive him wholeheartedly and welcome him back as a brother.

Now this forgiveness is unlimited. The point Jesus was making was that there are no limits to how many times we should forgive our brethren, on the condition that they repent. As he said, "I do not say to you seven times (in a day) but seventy times seven." (Verse 22) Now it is highly unlikely that your brother may sin against you seventy times seven, that is, four hundred and ninety times in a day. But if he does and turns and repents, we must forgive them. And if he does it all again tomorrow and turns and repents, again we must forgive them.

We do not know what may be driving our brethren to act in this way. The Lord may be dealing with far worse things than the issue that we are seeing in that person. Our responsibility is to provide a caring environment to help them while they work things out with the Lord. And caring for your brethren also means helping them to see when they have done the wrong thing so that they can learn and put the matter before the

Lord in prayer for a resolution. The resolution though may not be instant, and thus the need for forgiveness when they repent.

Finally we need to understand that we too need repentance from time to time. We came to the Lord as sinners and needed forgiveness and release from our sins, and we have all sinned far more against the Lord than we have one another. Yet he has forgiven all of those sins of ours and comforted us with his love and grace, bringing us into the presence of God. If then he did such a great thing for us, then we must likewise do the same for our brethren. If they sin, rebuke them, and if they repent, forgive them. Then we can truly become like sons of the Father, as Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

The Parable of the Two Debtors

(Matthew 18:23-35)

The parable of the two debtors gives us an insight into the need for forgiveness. It explains why we must forgive our brother from the heart. The underlying principle shown here is to forgive as we have been forgiven.

In the parable of the two debtors we see a king settling accounts with those who owed him money. One debtor was brought to him owing ten thousand talents, and as he could not pay, the king ordered the man to be sold into slavery along with his wife, family and all his possessions.

This amount of ten thousand talents is interesting because we cannot reconcile that figure in today's monetary terms to see how great a debt this was. The footnote to this scripture indicates that one of these talents was equivalent to fifteen years wages for a labourer. So the total sum involved was equivalent to wages for one hundred and fifty thousand years for a labourer. Bringing this into today's terms, the average weekly earnings for a labourer in the construction industry during 2010 was a little over \$1,300-00 per week. (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics - Ave Weekly Earnings, Series ID: A2734096L) So extrapolating that out we find that today the equivalent of fifteen thousand talents is \$10,140,000,000! That's \$10.14 billion dollars, which in anyone's terms is a lot of money and an awful lot of labouring. I doubt Bill Gates could pay that debt off.

Then we see the man in verse 26 say, "Lord have patience with me and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for the man the King forgave him the debt and released him.

The analogy here is that we are that debtor servant. We have this huge debt of sin in our lives before coming to Christ and we cannot repay that debt. It is highly improbable that the servant in the scripture would ever have been able to repay the King this debt. So it shows the compassion and forgiving nature of the king who rather than taking what he could, released the man, set him free and forgave this huge and monstrous debt. God has done exactly the same for us. He has released us from

sin, released us from condemnation by removing us from his law, forgiven our past sins and set us free to follow his Son Jesus Christ.

Now as the parable of the two debtors continues we see this man just released comes across another man who owes him money. This second debtor owes the first debtor the sum of one hundred denarii. Now a denarius was a day's wage for a labourer. So again converting that into today's currency, one hundred denarii is equivalent to about \$26,000-00. A fair sum, but not even the price of a new car today. It is certainly not outside the realm of being repaid in a reasonable period of time for someone on average weekly earnings.

However we see the first debtor demand payment from the second debtor say, "Pay what you owe." The second debtor then fell down begging for patience and that he would pay it all in due course, just as the first debtor had done with the king. But the first debtor, unlike the king, did not show any compassion. Instead he had the second debtor thrown into prison until the debt was paid. This was despite the fact that the first debtor had just been forgiven an unbelievable debt by the king.

When the other servant saw what happened they told the king. The king summoned the first debtor and said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Verse 32-33) In his anger he threw the first debtor into the prison until he should pay all of the debt, which would clearly have been a death sentence given the size of the debt.

What we learn from this is that we have been forgiven a huge debt, much greater than anything we could possibly imagine. From time to time our brothers and sisters around us will do the wrong thing by us too, which is like being owed a much smaller debt. But because we have been shown compassion by God, we too must show compassion to his people when they ask for our forgiveness and mercy. We are to forgive them from the heart as the Lord has forgiven us.

There is another interesting point in this teaching too. There is a doctrine about along the lines of "once saved, always saved." The basis of this is that when a person is saved, regardless of what they might do wrong, other than apostasy, they are always saved. This scripture shows that doctrine to be false. The Lord is saying here that if we do not show mercy and compassion to our brethren, we will not be forgiven our debts and we will be subject to the death sentence. Once saved, always saved may provide comfort to some, but it is scripturally inaccurate, and you should not set your hopes upon such a doctrine.

Even in the Old Testament the prophets showed that it was the last state of a person that determined whether they live or die. Consider the words of Ezekiel 18:21-29, and especially verse 24. It says, "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity and does the same abominable things that the wicked man does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, he shall die."

Does this sound like a person who is once saved is always saved? No. It is repentance that is the key and if a person is unrepentant, they will surely lose their salvation. We must not be like that. We have an opportunity to come to Christ and learn his ways and receive the salvation of God. But we have a responsibility to learn and apply his teachings in our life and turn away from evil. If we deliberately turn back into sin after coming to Christ, we cannot presume that we will be saved because of past good or righteous deeds. "The soul that sins shall die." (Ezekiel 18:20) Our past good deeds will not commend us to Christ if we have turned away from his righteousness.

And ultimately it is by grace we have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Anyone who turns back to sin after knowing the truth of Jesus' way has lost their faith, fallen from grace and lost their salvation. The doctrine of once saved, always saved is a false doctrine.

The Sanctity of Marriage

(Matthew 19:1-9)

The sanctity of marriage and matters of divorce are an area over which I am still learning. There is much about this section of scripture that I do not understand. Some aspects of this scripture seem to be overly harsh, which seems at odds with other parts of the Bible. I recommend that any who have issues in this area do as I am doing. Seek God in prayer to provide you with answers. If you get an answer from the Lord, then please let me know as well so we can all learn together.

Have said that though, the following is my understand of this scripture at this point in time, but I emphasise, I am not confident that I understand this fully yet. What I am confident of though is that in the Lord's time he will show me what I do not now know. Let us begin...

In an age of quickie marriages and even quicker divorces, the sanctity of marriage has become a farce. People today consider marriage like a set of clothes; something you can put on for a while then take off, discard and replace with something else. This has not always been the case. It is just one of the ways that morality in these latter years is breaking down.

Jesus showed us in this scripture that the sanctity of marriage was something God takes very seriously. The Pharisees were aware of this, but they chose marriage and divorce as a means to test Jesus to try and find fault with him. But they could find no fault and he closed down their malicious argument by quoting the word of God.

When God created man and woman he created them to be joined together in marriage. They were to be partners and helpers for each other. The bond of marriage in God's eyes was such that he said when a man and woman are joined together they become one flesh. The two become one through marriage. They are no longer individuals but are a unit; a paired set and they are to build a life together.

However the Pharisees said to Jesus that if this was so, why was there the availability of divorce under the Law of Moses? Why did Moses allow the people to divorce if they were joined together in the eyes of God, and as Jesus said, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." (Verse 6) And Jesus response shows the compassion of God towards man and God's understanding of the frailty of the human condition.

Jesus responded saying, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." (Verse 7) God knew that man was weak. He knew that in many ways men and women could and did make bad decisions. Human passions and the desires of the flesh often led man astray to do the wrong thing and often led to sin. Knowing this, the Lord provided an opportunity to be released from a bad situation.

People sometimes get into bad marriages. They married partners who became physically or mentally abusive or caused all manner of grief through bad attitudes, bad behaviour and wrong decisions. It is not the will of God for people to be in bad situations. His offer under the law was freedom. The law provided discipline for the people and if they followed God's law they led an exceptionally good standard of life. That being the case, would God then insist a person stay in a marriage that was personally destructive and cause grief to the partners in the marriage? If one partner was a follower of God and the other was not, should the godly person suffer at the hands of the one who was not a follower? Should they suffer especially if the other person was behaving in an unchaste manner?

No. It is not the desire of God to bring man into bondage, but through following God's ways to lead man to freedom and a life of peace. That is why the law of divorce was provided. It provided an escape from a bad situation. It was never meant to be an easy way out for someone who in the lust of passion wanted to marry someone else if they tired of their first partner. It was meant to allow a person to escape a bad situation so that would not be further harmed, either physically, mentally or in their health and wellbeing.

To emphasise the importance with which God viewed marriage though, Jesus finished this section saying that under the law if someone divorced and married another, they were committing adultery. Or if a person married someone who had been divorced then they too were committing adultery.

The apostle Paul clarified this by saying, "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) --and that the husband should not divorce his wife." (1 Corinthians 7:10-11) If a couple are divorced for any reason other than unchastity, Paul says they should be reconciled to one another, or if that is not possible they should remain single. This would be the best course of action, but is not always possible.

As I said in the introduction, I am still questioning and asking the Lord to provide me with guidance about this matter. For I do not believe the Lord would be so strict as to

prevent a person from remarrying when or if they subsequently found a partner who offered a union of joy, freedom, happiness and peace. There are things about this teaching that I admit I have no answers for, and thus I am still seeking the wisdom and insight from the Lord over this matter. Although the scripture points in one direction, the compassion and justice of the Lord suggests there is more yet to be understood here, so I await his answer.

Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven

(Matthew 19:10-12)

In the previous section Jesus spoke of matters of marriage. I commented that I did not fully understand that section, as it seemed quite harsh.

It is clear also that Jesus' disciples struggled with this teaching to for in this section they said, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry." (Verse 10) When they said it is not expedient, they were saying it is not a good idea or it is not profitable to marry. They were saying that if there was this possibility of divorce and adultery as the fallout of a marriage if the marriage went bad, then it might be better not to get married at all.

Jesus then said, "Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given." (Verse 11) In essence he was saying that they were right, but not everyone would be able to abstain from marriage and remain celibate. Indeed very few would be able to do so. In fact the disciples and apostles of the Lord, including Peter were married as Paul stated when referring to himself and Barnabas, "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" (1 Corinthians 9:5)

Paul and Barnabas were not married and had no wives because they chose to be that way. Paul said of himself that he was not sexually inclined and thus did not need to be married. While giving instruction on marriage he said, "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (1 Corinthians 7:7-9) He did not feel the need for marriage because he was not sexually inclined, and this was the same message that Jesus was giving in this section of Matthew.

Jesus indicated that not many men would be able to receive the saying that it was not expedient to marry. For men and women have natural sexual desires and urges which they need to exercise, and Jesus and Paul were saying that if they were to exercise those urges, they should do so by being married. To refrain from exercising such urges would be difficult for many people because it is a natural urge.

Jesus went on to speak of eunuchs saying, "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are

eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." (Verse 12)

A eunuch who has been so from birth was a person like Paul. Some people do not have much sexual desire. For them there is no need to marry because their sexual urges are weak and they can keep it under control. Then there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men. These are men who are castrated and in so doing lose their sexual desire as those parts of the body that produce the sexual drive hormones are removed. Although not a practice today, castration was common in days when kings had harems. Eunuchs were used as guards and bed keepers in the harems for they had no sexual desire and could be trusted with the king's harem.

Finally there were those who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. These people made a conscious decision to remain celibate for the sake of their calling. It was their decision and they needed to exercise self-control over their sexual passions and desires. Although Paul may have had minimal sexual desire, he may also have fallen into this category too. It may have been a conscious choice of his to remain celibate.

But regardless of the reason for being a eunuch, Jesus said that not many people could accept such a teaching for sexual desires are strong in people. And if that was the case, as Paul wrote in the verse quoted above, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (1 Corinthians 9) Marriage is better than suffering under a strong desire and being aflame with passion.

Paul also showed, "he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better." (1 Corinthians 7:38) Marriage brings with it a host of other matters. A married person is concerned about affairs of the earth. They are concerned for the wellbeing of their wife or husband, which takes away their focus on the Lord. An unmarried person can remain totally devoted to the Lord and be free of the hassles that will inevitably arise in a marriage; how to care for their partner, have they upset them, chasing after kids, anniversaries, leaving the cap off the toothpaste, leaving the toilet seat up, etc. The unmarried person does not have any of these issues about day-to-day life that a married person suffers. And yet still the married person needs to keep their devotion to God alive as well. That is why Jesus and Paul suggest a single person would do better than a married person because they do not have the same number of distractions.

They are not opposed to marriage at all, but are just saying it will be easier if a person has the capacity to remain single. Not all people have the capacity to do so and so it is better that they marry. But they need to be aware that they will have other issues because they have married than someone who has the capacity to refrain from marriage.

No Gatekeepers between Man and God

(Matthew 19:13-15)

At this time the people were bringing children to Jesus to have him lay his hands on them and pray. They were seeking for the Lord to bless their children.

However as often happens, the people around the Lord, his disciples, were "running interference" to try and "protect" Jesus from these interruptions. Imagine the personal assistant of a major corporation CEO who acts as gatekeeper to ensure the boss isn't disturbed by the unimportant masses and you'll get the idea.

However Jesus was showing a principle in his actions. Between Jesus and man there are no gatekeepers. We all have direct access to him at any time. This was the key point he was making to ensure the disciples and the rest of his followers from then on recognised that there were to be no gatekeepers getting in the way. Likewise there were to be no gatekeepers to prevent people from coming to the disciples.

Jesus said in this section to let the children come to him. Now he was concerned about the children of course, but the point he was making were in his following words, "...do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." (Verse 14) The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who become like children. It belongs to those who are humble, innocent and open like children. Jesus made this point earlier in chapter 18 when the disciples asked him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

We see also that Paul made the point that there are no gatekeepers saying, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5) No one stands between God and us and no one can act as gatekeeper between God and man as that is the position that Jesus holds. No man has the right to take the place of Christ and no man can stand as gatekeeper between man and God. We are all equals in Christ, brothers and sisters in the Lord and no person has the right or authority to Lord it over another in Christ.

Perfection in Jesus Christ

(Matthew 19:16-22)

Is perfection in Jesus Christ possible? Is it possible to become a perfect man at all? And what is the requirement for having eternal life? Jesus answered all of these questions in this section of the Bible. And it is interesting for it flies in the face of much of what is taught as Christianity today.

We see a rich young man approach Jesus and ask the question, "What good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" (Verse 16) Jesus responded by saying, "Keep the commandments." Now there are in excess of six hundred commandments in the Law of Moses, so the rich young man sought a more specific answer and asked, "Which?" Jesus again responded quoting six specific laws from the Old Testament including the need to love your neighbour.

Now what we see here is that Jesus is saying that if a person were to keep as a minimum these few laws they would receive the gift of eternal life. This is the minimum standard acceptable to God to be able to enter life. This is not commonly taught in the church today, but it is evident from Jesus own words that this is what is required as a minimum. There is life available to those who keep the laws of God.

But the rich young man went on further saying, "All these I have observed; what do I still lack?" (Verse 20) In the Mark version of this scripture (Mark 10:17-22) it says Jesus loved him for he had indeed done these things. So we see also that by keeping the law we have the love of God too. However the rich young man knew that there had to be more. He recognised there was still a lack in his life. He had wealth, he had achieved things in the world and it was evident that his lifestyle meant he had the love of God and the promise of eternal life. Yet he felt there had to be more for he asked, "What do I still lack?"

Jesus then showed there is a higher standard than the law. There is a better way, but it requires sacrifice. He said to the man, "If you would be perfect..." Jesus was now about to show the man and us too, the road to perfection in Jesus Christ. This is important and we must listen to what he says. "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Here was the path to perfection in Jesus Christ. The rich young man though could not follow this path. For him, the loss of his possessions was too great a sacrifice and he went away sorrowful.

Is Jesus telling all of then to go sell what we have and give to the poor? No he isn't. This was a specific message to that man, and it is also a message to all that seek the wealth of this world. If you put the value of possessions above your walk with Christ you will not achieve perfection in Jesus Christ. Indeed if you put anything above your walk with Christ you cannot achieve perfection in Jesus Christ.

The key to this section is in the last three words, "Come, follow me." This is where perfection becomes possible. It is through following Jesus Christ that we can be transformed into his image and be truly perfected. There is no other way but to follow Christ. The rich young man would have eternal life, but he would not be able to conquer sin and the passions and desires of the flesh that lead to sin in his life. That is what perfection in Jesus Christ is all about, conquering the flesh to obey Christ. That is what it means to enter the kingdom of heaven, which we will see in the next section, for there is no sin in the kingdom of heaven. Without following Christ it is not possible.

Conquering sin is a major part of the New Covenant and a topic that will be discussed later. It is enough to know here though that Jesus said following him can perfect us, and that perfection is the removal of sin and the transformation of a person into the image of God.

Hard for a Rich Man to Enter the Kingdom of Heaven

(Matthew 19:23-26)

The Lord says that it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact he says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Why is that so? What is it about being rich that is such a great stumbling block?

We see in some churches there is a prosperity ministry. This ministry teaches in principle that God blesses his people so that they will prosper and that this will be seen in material gain. There is no question that God blesses his people, but wealth may or may not be part of that blessing. A greater blessing than any financial gain is for the Lord to say to us, "Well done good and faithful servant." This is greater than all of the riches of this world.

Money is a trap. Wealth can lead a person to stray from the truth. Money can cause a person's interests and attention to be divided. As Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and mammon," Mammon being a Semitic word for money. (Matthew 6:24) No person can be devoted to money and devoted to the Lord. Money is of this world it is not of God. Jesus showed this when the Pharisees questioned him as to whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. He said, "Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:19-21)

In this statement he shows that money is the invention of the government, it is not of God. You cannot worship God with the things of man. If we are to worship God we must come to him on his terms and the way that he wants us to worship him. Jesus said in John 4:23-24, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." We do not worship the Father through money or wealth. We do not worship the Father by expanding our financial or material possessions. We worship him by following Jesus Christ and being transformed into his likeness.

Think about it for a moment. If we were called to worship with money, only the rich would go to heaven. Where would the poor sit in the total scheme of things? It's the same if any other aspect of life in this world were the mechanism of worship. Only those who could do or achieve those things of the world could worship God. But as it is God has said we must worship him in spirit and truth. Every person is capable of learning the truth and worshipping in spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. Thus the word and worship is open to all of mankind in Christ Jesus and not just a fortunate few.

Money will not commend us to God. Nor will works of law, nor acts of denial, nor the taking or abstinence of food or physical acts or anything else of mans making. Only seeking the truth through faith in Jesus Christ and worshipping the Father in spirit and truth will commend us to him.

This is why prosperity ministry is so far off the mark. It teaches that if you have money you can do more for the Lord. While a rich person may be able to help others

more, it will not commend them to God any more than a poor person. Look at Jesus comments while watching the people put gifts into the treasury. The rich put many great and extravagant amounts of money in, but it was a poor widow who contributed just a few copper pennies who won Jesus' approval. The rich contributed from their abundance, but the poor widow in her poverty gave all of her living. This was a far greater sacrifice and she was blessed in her giving.

So it is not in the abundance of money that a person is blessed but in their attitude and faith. Without the right heart towards God, no amount of money will help. And having great wealth means that you will spend time looking after that wealth. A rich man's attention is divided and his thoughts diverted from Christ. That is why it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Promise to Jesus Followers

(Matthew 19:27-30)

The previous sections discussed the things that may need to be given up in following Christ. But what about what we gain? Peter made the point that the disciples had given up everything to follow Jesus and so he asked what was in it for them.

Jesus said that nobody who gave up anything for the sake of the Lord would miss out. In fact they would receive even more abundantly both in this age and the age to come. He was not promising great wealth as some prosperity teachers preach, but he was promising an abundance in relationships with him and his people.

Every person who has had to forgo friends, family and property for the sake of God would receive these back in greater abundance than they had to give up. Whether in this life or in the eternity we will spend with him, our blessing will far outstrip our losses.

In this age there is nothing greater and more important than securing our life with Christ. The single most important thing we can do is to follow Jesus Christ. He has shown us here and in previous sections of this chapter that nothing must get in the way of following that goal.

Today unfortunately we live in an age and society seeking instant gratification. But in Christ we must learn patience. His timing is not like ours. Consider Abraham who was told by the Lord he would be the father of many nations. And all the while his wife Sarah was barren and past the age of bearing children. But Abraham knew nothing was impossible to God and he grew strong in his faith that the Lord could and would do what he had said. But it took another ten years before his son Isaac was born.

God's timing is perfect and not like ours. He will keep his promises to us as he did the promise to Abraham. We too like Abraham must be patient and grow strong in our

faith in God, knowing that he can and will deliver on his word. The promise is there for all of us if we will only hold to our faith in Jesus Christ, firm to the end.

Labourers in the Vineyard

(Matthew 20:1-16)

The labourers in the vineyard parable is interesting as it divides our thoughts between matters of the flesh and the spirit. When we look at it through eyes of flesh it is not fair. But when we look at it through God's eyes and consider the promise of God it is perfectly fair and reasonable and perhaps even adds an "unknown" blessing.

If we look at the parable of the labourers in the vineyard for a moment it can be summarised this way. The vineyard owner needs labourers to go out into the vineyard to work. He goes to the marketplace and hires a bunch of people offering them a denarius for the day's work, which they accept. But there are not enough labourers so he goes back to the marketplace a few hours later and hires more, again offering to pay them what is right. This repeats at around lunchtime, mid-afternoon and then finally when there is only an hour of the working day left he hires a few more people to labour in his vineyard.

The analogy here is that God is the vineyard owner, the vineyard is the world in which we live and the work these labourers are doing is the work of the Lord in spreading the gospel.

At the end of the day the householder calls in the labourers to give them their pay. Starting with the group whom he hired last he pays them a denarius each. When the earliest group sees this they think they might receive more since they toiled all day through the heat and took on a greater burden of work. But when it is their turn to be paid they too receive a denarius each.

At this point we see the labourers looking at this through the eyes of the flesh. The early employees grumbled amongst themselves and complained that they had not got more than the rest given the amount of work they did. Although it does not say it, I am sure too that the last group employed could not believe their fortune for they received a full day's pay but only worked for an hour. One group considered the vineyard owner to be miserly and unfair, but the other thought him exceptionally generous. This is the way people of the world would naturally think in such a situation.

But when we look at this through the eyes of the spirit we see that both perceptions are wrong. The vineyard owner agreed with the labourers to pay them a denarius for their work. He did not specify a time period that they should work. He just said they should come and work in his vineyard and he would pay them a denarius. In essence he created a contract with the workers and all he was doing was honouring that contract. They all had agreed to the contract and so had no right to grumble.

But there is still more to this parable. What is it that the labourers are grumbling about? Money and inequity. One group were grumbling that God had made all of them equal by giving the same reward to each. But that is the truth of the New Covenant. God shows no partiality in anything, including how much we may have worked in his kingdom or not. The person who attends church, sits in the back pews and just listens and applies the words of Jesus to their life will receive the same reward as the preacher, evangelist, and prophet or miracle worker. The lowliest person in God's kingdom receives the same reward as the Apostle Paul. There is no partiality. Just because a person has not done a great ministry does not mean they will receive only a little bit of life in God's kingdom. We all have the same reward on offer and all of us agree with God that we will accept the same reward regardless of the work we might be called to do in his vineyard.

We must understand that the reward we receive in truth is not like the wage given to the labourers in the vineyard. They earned a wage, but we receive life as a gift. And a gift is given according to the whim of the giver, not the receiver. Jesus showed this in the parable too saying, "I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (Verses 14-15) What we are given is a gift by the grace of God so we must not grumble.

Besides, I read elsewhere another interesting twist on this too. The labourers who began early actually had a greater blessing than those who entered at the end. The early starters actually had the care and protection of the master of the vineyard throughout the day with the knowledge they would be rewarded at day's end. The late starters for most of the day were wandering aimlessly not knowing if they would have work and get payment to buy food or provisions or whatever. So actually the first group were much more blessed for they had an assurance of something better to come that the late starters did not have for most of the day.

We must apply this thinking to ourselves and learn to look at things through the eyes of the spirit rather than the eyes of flesh. Then we will see clearly the glory and promises of God.

Jesus Foretells His Death

(Matthew 20:17-19)

Jesus took great pains to warn the disciples of his impending death. In the book of Matthew to this point Jesus foretells his death on at least three occasions. He was preparing the disciples for what would be a great shock to them and a cause for concern.

Jesus had already warned the disciples of his impending fate in Mathew 16:21-23 when Peter was used by Satan to try and sway Jesus decision. The disciples Peter, James and John also were made aware of Jesus impending death when they were with

him at the transfiguration. They heard Jesus discussing his death with Moses and Elijah in Matthew 17:1-8. Then a third time Jesus foretells his death to the disciples in Matthew 17:22-23.

When his death came he did not want the disciples to be unaware of what was going on. He did not want them to be scared or concerned at what was happening. We see he also taught them that it was to their advantage that he died and that it was for this purpose that he came. (John 16:7)

Without the death and resurrection of Jesus there is no New Covenant. For a covenant to be brought into effect there was the requirement for a blood sacrifice. Under the Old Covenant the purpose of the sin offerings were twofold. Their first function was to bring into effect the covenant, and second, to be the offering for the sins of the people.

Jesus' sacrifice followed this same principle. He died once for all, firstly to bring the New Covenant into force and secondly to be the perfect sacrifice that would enable the removal of sin for mankind.

The disciples were distressed at what Jesus was telling them for they did not understand this yet. They had the Holy Spirit with them, but not in them at this stage. They were still immature in the Lord and needed his guidance and reassurance. However once he had died and been resurrected, and once he had given them the Holy Spirit at Pentecost they understood fully why he had to die and how the New Covenant worked in their lives. They became bold to preach the word of God.

Jesus did not want his death to be a surprise to the disciples. He knew it was for their best that he leaves and he knew also that they would be sorrowful. That is why he spoke to them often about his death and also the suffering that he would go through at the hands of the elders in Jerusalem.

And we should give thanks that he did also. For through his sacrifice we now have the opportunity to be saved from sin and remade into the image of Christ. We are being prepared to receive the gift of glory and eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to his glorious name and the love of both Jesus and the Father towards those who will choose to follow him.

The Servant Leader

(Matthew 20:20-28)

The servant leader is a principle of leadership that exists only in Christianity. It is a powerful thing and the complete opposite of the way the world considers leadership to be like. Jesus shows in this section and from his own example what it means to be a leader and to be in authority as a Christian.

To be a servant leader is to be a leader who serves those of whom he or she is in charge. In the world as a person rises in authority, whether in an organization or business, means they gain more power over those under them. As they increase in position and authority they become masters and are served by those beneath them. Thus we see the typical structure where the servant serves the master.

However in Christianity as a person grows in Christ and rises in maturity as a Christian, they become a servant. The authority and power given to a leader in Christ is the authority and power to serve others. The power of their position is in their service, not in being served. Jesus himself said that he came to serve and not to be served. (Verse 28) Jesus was the Son of God and yet showed what it means to be a leader in the New Covenant through his own example.

The point is that as Christians we are not here to become the boss. We are here to help each other to learn and grow so that everyone in Christ comes to an equal footing in Jesus Christ. We are called to be equals, brethren in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not called so that a few lord it over the rest as supreme rulers, to be served by their minions.

The model of master and servant in the world is the complete opposite of the process in Christ. In Christ as we progress, we become more humble as we overcome pride and arrogance and become better able to serve. In the world often it is the leader who becomes more proud and arrogant as they rise with their success. But in Christ as Jesus shows in this section, pride and arrogance have no place in leadership in Christianity. What counts in Christ is learning to be humble and obedient to God so that we can teach others His ways.

We are learning to put away pride and to put away all of the passions of the flesh to serve Christ. The request that the mother of James and John made in this section, for her two sons to be seated at the right and left side of the Lord was based on pride. It was a mother looking out for the best for her two boys. The other disciples were indignant at this request, and we can see that left unchecked it would have set up a division amongst the disciples. The worst thing that can occur in a church, especially in an eldership, is for division to occur. Division leads to the breakdown of churches and thus Jesus statement that "It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant." (Verse 26)

It is no different in a worldly organization. When there is a division in the leadership group, generally there is pride at the root of the situation, one person or one faction seeking a proud advantage over the rest. They have the intention to divide and conquer, to take over the reins of power from the current ruling person or group.

But in Christ when the leaders are the servants of all, when they have put all pride and arrogance aside, then they can truly lead for the betterment of the church, for the growth of the flock in their charge and for the glory of the Lord. When the desires of the leader are to do the will of the Lord rather than to follow their own will, then you have a truly strong church in Jesus name.

Finally we see the greatest compliment the Lord can give to any person, which shows how much he values the servant leader. When we come into his kingdom and stand

before his judgement seat, the finest thing we can hear him say to us is, "Well done good and faithful servant." (Matthew 25:21,23) There is no greater honour the Lord can bestow upon an individual than to consider them a good and faithful servant. It is in our serving of each other that we truly honour the Lord and help to grow the church so that, "...we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13)

Jesus Healing the Blind

(Matthew 20:29-34)

There are a number of examples of Jesus healing the blind in the New Testament. These can be looked at from several perspectives, both as a physical miracle and the spiritual analogy. However in this section we see an additional teaching. Here we see a perspective from the position of the blind person.

The analogy of Jesus healing the blind works two ways. He came so that the blind may see, not just physically, but spiritually. (John 9:39) To have your eyes opened spiritually means to be able to perceive and understand the truth of the New Covenant. Your eyes can only be opened if the Lord opens them. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. The Holy Spirit opens up the word of the gospel so that we can understand all of the gifts of God and receive those gifts.

In this section of scripture showing Jesus healing the blind we find something more. There is a lesson that the blind men here can teach us all. As Jesus left Jericho a great throng of people followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the side of the road and on finding that Jesus was passing by they called out to him. "Have mercy on us, Son of David." (Verses 29-30) The crowd rebuked the men telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more and did not heed the crowd.

Now here we see two things at work. The men were calling for the Lord to have mercy on them. They were asking for a healing so they could see. This is good and right to do for the Lord himself said, "Ask, and you shall receive." (Matthew 7:7-8) Had they remained silent they would not have received their sight. What is more we see that the crowd stood opposed to them. They told the men not to cry out and rebuked them for their asking. Many times we will be in a position where we need to also go against the flow of the crowd. Many times going along with the crowd will not get us the things we need or want. The crowd mentality is not always right and people can get carried along with the crowd too easily. Today we hear often about the effects of peer group pressure, especially on the young. The need to conform to be socially acceptable amongst ones peers is a strong drive in many people. But to be a Christian we often have to step away from the crowd to seek the Lord. We often have to stand as an individual to have the Lord come to us as he did to these two blind men.

The two blind men ignored the crowd and continued to cry out to Jesus. Jesus heard their cries, stopped and called them over, asking, "What do you want me to do for

you?" (Verse 32) Their continued crying to the Lord got his attention. They ignored the crowd and sought the Lord. If they had heeded the crowd and kept silent they would have never got the attention of the Lord and would never have been able to ask him what they wanted.

They answered the Lord saying, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Jesus took pity on them and touching their eyes, he healed their blindness and they received their sight. (Verses 33-34)

There are several valuable lessons here for all of us.

First we must seek the Lord always. We must put our desires, requests, plans and issues to him.

Second, we should ignore the crowd who might say not to bother Jesus. Nothing is too much of an issue for the Lord and he cares about everything that affects us for he cares about us. Just because the crowd say something, and just because a lot of people believe a certain thing or a certain way does not make it right. For many years people (i.e. the crowd) believed the world was flat, they believed the earth was the centre of the solar system and all kinds of things we now know to be false. It is the same when we come to the Lord. The crowd is not always right so be prepared to stand as an individual to seek the truth from Jesus directly.

Third, we must not give up crying out to the Lord and seeking his answers. If we don't get our response straightaway we should continue to ask, as the blind men continued to cry out to him. Had they remained silent they would not have received their sight. Likewise if we remain silent we cannot expect the Lord to give us what we need.

So we see that Jesus healing the blind has many applications and lessons for us. Let us take the example of these blind men and do likewise so that we too can receive our spiritual sight from the Lord.

Jesus Enters into Jerusalem

(Matthew 21:1-11)

The final stages of Jesus ministry approaches as Jesus enters into Jerusalem to be put to death. Jesus at this time has reached the peak of his renown and everywhere he goes crowds follow him. The work that he has done, the teachings he has given and the miracles he has performed have shown the people that he is the Messiah. The people recognise him as someone great and they treat him as a king as he makes his way into Jerusalem.

Initially in this section we see Jesus operate a word of knowledge as he instructs the disciples. He tells them of events he could not have seen and how they are to get the ass and it's colt and bring them to him. He also tells them what to say if challenged.

This was all done to fulfil prophecy as further proof that Jesus is the Messiah. (Verses 1-7)

We see also in this section the impact of the crowd mentality. They all thought as one as they put their garments on the road and cut branches from trees to lay before him and shouted blessings saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David." (Verses 8-9) The crowd in their enthusiasm worshiped Jesus and bestowed on him the praise and reverence associated with a king. And he is a king and worthy to be praised. Indeed, in the version of this in Luke 19 we see the Pharisees telling Jesus to rebuke the people, asking that they should be told to be silent. But Jesus responded saying, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." (Luke 19:40)

Crowd mentalities though can be very fickle. While Jesus was in Jerusalem he did many more wondrous signs and taught the people of the coming kingdom. But we see that in just a few days time, the crowd were stirred up to condemn him and to call for his execution.

One of the things we learn from this is the importance to weigh things for ourselves. The mentality of a crowd is driven by emotion, not by reason. Crowd mentality is carried along and swayed by the passions and desires of the leaders of the crowd. The purpose of Jesus' teaching was to bring us to a place where we could stand as individuals, fully understanding the word of truth and not carried along by the crowd. Paul shows that God has given gifts to the Church so that we can grow and be stable. He says in Ephesians 4:11-14,

11 And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,
12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,
13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;
14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

We must learn Jesus lessons so that we too are not tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. The crowd that followed Jesus were examples of this issue. On his triumphant entry they praised and worshiped him as King. Several days later they turned on him and cried for his execution. Both of these situations were in the will of God, and both were meant to occur as they did. But the lesson we need to take is not to get caught up in the "group think" of the crowd. We must weigh all matters up in the light of the scripture and in consultation with the Lord through prayer to come to the truth of a matter. Then we can stand stable and sure and not carried along by the will of the mob.

Marketing in the Church

(Matthew 21:12-13)

When Jesus entered Jerusalem the first place he visited was the temple. He was angered at what he saw there for we see him take action to set things right. What was it that upset him so? Marketing in the church! Jesus drove out the moneychangers and the sellers of pigeons from the temple. These people had set up business in the temple and were using the temple as a place of commerce to make money. Jesus took exception to this saying, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers." (Verse 13)

Now Jesus was not upset about the fact that people were changing money or selling pigeons, but rather that they were doing it inside the temple. If they were doing this in a normal place of commerce and business, that would not be an issue. But it is wrong to do this in the temple for the temple was to be holy to God.

One of the fundamental principles of marketing is to provide your goods and services where the people gather. It would be pointless running a marketing campaign and setting up shop in a place where there are no people. This idea was clear to the money changers and pigeon sellers, for they knew the people came to the temple in great numbers and so they set up shop there too. So on entering the temple your first impressions would have been the noise and smell of birds and the clink of money. This is not consistent with a house of prayer but a marketplace.

Is the church any different today? Does this teaching about marketing in the church have application today? Yes it does. Although many churches today are houses of prayer as Jesus intended, there are many too who have fallen into the trap of become businesses, some of them very large businesses. The focus on making money in the church today runs rampant through many of the large churches. You walk into some of these and your first impressions are that you have entered a gift shop. There are mugs, CD's, books, bracelets, badges, clothing and other paraphernalia for sale all brandishing the name of the particular church, their logo or some catchy marketing message.

Who has not seen the marketing hype and gifts offered such as "The Prayer of Jabez" or the "WWJD" items (What Would Jesus Do)? It would be interesting if Jesus were to enter these churches that use Christianity as a marketing method to sell trinkets. What would Jesus do? He would probably do as he did in the temple and drive them out!

Let's look at what the Bible says about such things. 1 Timothy 6:1-10 talks of those false teachers in the church, who among other things believe, "...imagining that godliness is a means of gain. There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content." (Verses 5-8) These false teachers believe that Christianity and godliness is a means of gain. They use Christianity as a means of making money and are condemned for doing so.

This scripture continues on condemning those who do this saying, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs." (Verses 9-10) In their desires to make money

and become rich they fall away from the faith. They are snared and trapped by the love of money, which is the root of all evils, especially evils in the church.

There is no place for marketing and commercialism in the church. To preserve the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ marketing must be shunned so that no one has the opportunity to fall into the snare of greed for money. Jesus gave the Gospel to man for free, so why should anyone charge a fee for it and use it as a marketing tool? There is nothing wrong with a person receiving an income from teaching and preaching the word, but when it becomes a marketing circus and a money making juggernaut as it is in some churches, then that goes too far. Their focus is on money, not on preaching the Gospel of Jesus. The message from the platform is often about buying paraphernalia and shelling out money to the church, not on teaching the people how to live upright and godly lives. This is highly evident in many of the tele-evangelists presentations.

Look also at what the Lord said about Churches who sought wealth and money. He spoke of the church in La-odice'a in Revelation 3 by saying they were neither cold nor hot and that he would spew them out of his mouth. Not a pretty picture when you consider he is talking of a type of church. He says in verses 17-19:

17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.

19 Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent.

This church believed they had it all. Money, wealth, power and they believed they needed nothing more. Jesus said they were naked, blind, poor and pitiable. They were naked in spirit and blind for the greed for money had blinded their eyes from seeking the truth. They sought the things of this world rather than the things of God. They were the great Church marketers who used Christianity to make a buck.

This is not where Jesus wants his church to be. Jesus wants his church to be a place of fellowship, a place to worship God in prayer and to praise him for his wonderful works. It is to be a place of refuge from the world where we come to learn God's will and learn godliness so that we can get the real gain of godliness that Paul wrote to Timothy about...contentment.

There is no place for marketing in the church and as Jesus drove the marketers from the temple, so too the marketers should be driven from the church. Take this teaching as a warning. If your church is focussed on marketing, would Jesus have approved of it or not? Would he have come in and been pleased or would he have driven out the marketers? And if you are in such a church, is it providing the food of godliness or focussing on making itself wealthy.

Jesus in the Temple

(Matthew 21:14-17)

Jesus cleared the temple of the moneychangers and the pigeon sellers on his return to Jerusalem. He restored the temple to be a temple of praise and a house of prayer. He removed and cast out those who practised commerce in the temple, returning it to a place of teaching and worship of God.

In this section we now see Jesus in the temple. He shows us an example of how the temple should operate. We see three distinct aspects to this operation of the temple in this section of scripture.

First we see all the lame and the blind and those with various afflictions come to him in the temple and he healed them all. This was to fulfil the words of Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." (Matthew 8:17, Isaiah 53:4) Second, we see Jesus teaching the people the words of God and the truth of the Kingdom of God. This is shown in following sections of this chapter. And finally we see the people praising Jesus, calling out "Hosanna to the Son of David." As Jesus said to the priests and scribes, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise." (Verse 16)

But there is opposition from the priests and scribes. They were indignant at the people who were praising God and Jesus. And they were indignant at Jesus because of the many wondrous things he did there in the temple. But what was the basis of their indignation? Why were they indignant when it was clear that the work of God was being done in their midst? It was because they did not recognise Jesus as the Christ and Messiah. He was not the Messiah they wanted. They expected the Messiah to come in great power and glory and to be all that they thought he should be, not a man of the people. They were expecting a ruler, one of their own classes, not a teacher and healer. Their pre-conceived ideas and notions of what the Messiah was supposed to be meant they were unable to see the Messiah when he stood in the temple doing the works of God that no other man had ever done. So they refused to accept him and believe, and thus they missed out.

Jesus in the temple was the most natural thing that could have occurred. When Jesus was about twelve years of age and his family went up to Jerusalem, Jesus was found in the temple discussing things with the elders. When queried as to his whereabouts by his mother he said, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) So now as an adult when we see Jesus in the temple, he is simply going to his Father's house again. He is taking his appointed place in his Father's house to teach, heal and be with his people.

This provides a brief glimpse of what it will be like in the Lord's Kingdom in the new heaven and earth. We see this description of what it will be like in Revelation 21:3-4, "...and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

When Jesus restored the temple to its correct functioning, this is what he was doing. This was a precursor to what it will be like in the New Jerusalem. God will be with his people as Jesus was with the people in the temple. God will wipe away every tear from his people's eyes, as Jesus taught and helped his people who praised him in the temple. God will take away all sickness, mourning, crying and death, as Jesus healed all the infirmities of the people in the temple, and they did not mourn but sang perfect praise.

When Jesus came into the temple he restored things to how they should have been, albeit for a short time only. He gave us a glimpse of how things will be when he returns and all opposition is taken away. When God dwells with man after the last judgment it will be a time of great rejoicing. Peace and righteousness will reign and we will sing praises to God saying, "Hosanna to the King of Kings."

Ask in Faith and it Will Be Done

(Matthew 21:18-22)

This is an unusual teaching for on the surface it might look like the Lord was being vindictive or cursing. But this is not the case, as we will see. There are several messages here, the main one being to ask in faith and it will be done.

First we see the Lord come to a fig tree in the morning seeking fruit for he was hungry. But there was no fruit on the tree and he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again." (Verse 19) The tree then withered at once at these words, and the disciples marvelled at this turn of events.

Now there is a lesson to ask in faith and it will be done coming, but there is also an allegory in this message too. Jesus came to this tree expecting to find fruit. It was a healthy tree for it was covered in leaves and we must presume that there should have been fruit on it. Under normal circumstances it takes a fig tree some years to produce fruit. They can produce as early as two years after planting, but 4-5 years is more typical. Thus they need fertilisation, water, food and sunlight to ensure they crop well.

Christians are like these fig trees. We are expected to show some fruit over the course of time. Christians are called to walk with Jesus, which indicates a steady progression forward. As we progress we should mature and like the fig tree in due course we should begin to bear fruit. Jesus does not expect us to bear fruit immediately. There may be many issues in our lives to be dealt with first, but eventually a Christian should begin to bear fruit. This allegory of the fig tree seems to suggest that as the fig tree was expected to have fruit, which may have been a tree of four or five or more years old, so too we should be seeing some fruit in our life after a similar time frame. We should begin to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-24.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.

24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

This is the fruit we should be bearing as we mature in Christ, the most important being that we crucify or put to death the passions and desires of our flesh. And we see a warning that if we do not bear fruit as the fig tree bore no fruit, we may be uprooted to wither and die spiritually.

The disciples marvelled at the withering of the fig tree. But Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." (Verses 21-22)

The power of prayer and faith combined is an awesome thing. The promise the Lord gave us here that whatever we ask in prayer, if we ask in faith, we will receive is something to truly marvel at. The withering of the fig tree caused the disciples to marvel, but the promise of the Lord is much more marvellous. When we seek the Lord and look to him, when we put our requests, problems and issues to him, do so in faith and know fully that they will be done. This is Jesus promise to his people. If you believe you can move mountains, and you ask the Lord in faith, know that it will happen.

Naturally there would need to be a good reason to have the mountain moved and it would need to be in the Lord's will, but you must know that if that is the situation, it will be done if you ask in faith. Jesus does not want us to be frivolous in our prayers, but to commit to him those things that are important to us. He might still say no, but he will do that for a reason. Sometimes we do not know what the future holds and to have the mountain moved might not be what is required. The mountain may be providing us with protection or a barrier from cyclonic winds or trouble on the other side. We may not find this out until later and then see the wisdom of the Lord in saying no to us. But if this is not the case, then the mountain will be moved if we ask the Lord in faith.

Jesus Confounds the Priests

(Matthew 21:23-28)

When Jesus entered the temple and began to teach, the priests questioned his authority. They asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" But Jesus knowing their malice turned the question back on them.

Now it was evident to all that the deeds he did could have come from one authority only, from God. The people recognised Jesus as the Son of David and worshipped him as the Son of God, but the priests, the Pharisees and the scribes refused to accept him as such. They believed they were the ultimate authority in the temple and thus they questioned Jesus' authority. Had they recognised Jesus as the Messiah and the

Christ, they would not have queried him. Had they bothered to take any notice of his works they would have seen who he was. And had they checked the scriptures they were charged to teach the people, they would have seen him for who he was, the true Messiah who was to come. But they did none of these things and chose instead to try and undermine his authority.

Jesus was having none of that though. Instead he threw the ball back into their court and asked them a question. He said, "I also will ask you a question; and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven or from men?" This was a very clever response for whichever way the priests chose to answer, they would have to admit they were in the wrong. If they said John was of God, then Jesus could legitimately say, "Why then did you not believe him?" Just as they rejected Jesus they previously rejected the teachings of John. And after Jesus died they would reject the teaching of the Apostles to come. However if they said John's ministry was from men they would be rejected by the crowd and the people who rightly believed John to be a prophet. Any way they went they would have to admit fault in their teaching and beliefs.

So they took the easy way out, which was a lie, and said, "We do not know." Since they refused to answer Jesus' question, Jesus refused to answer theirs.

Now Jesus showed the power of the gift of wisdom and knowledge in his answer. He also said that in out times of need when we are delivered up to the counsels as he was, that we need not fear. He tells us that in those times we should not meditate beforehand how we will answer such charges against us. In the time of need he says, "...for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict." (Luke 21:15)

Just as Jesus confounded the priests who were arrayed against him to question his authority, so too he will give us the right words at the right time to stand against opposition. We saw this in the case of Stephen who though he was martyred, could not be faulted in the words he spoke in his defence. (Acts 7)

Jesus will give us the words we need when we need them. In every way he cares for us, protects us and shows us what we need. The priests questioned his authority, but his authority comes from God. God has given all power to Jesus and all authority is in his hands. Against his power no earthly man or power can stand for he says, "...for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." (Romans 14:11)

Doing the Will of the Father

(Matthew 21:23-27)

What does it mean to be doing the will of the Father? Do you know what the will of the Father is in the first place to be able to do it? Jesus shows us what it means to be doing the will of the Father in this section of scripture.

Doing the will of the Father is about obedience. It is about doing what the Father asks of us. It is not about what we think or say but about obeying His will and His commands. But what is it that God asks of us so that we may do his will? Jesus explains what the Father requires of his people when he said, "For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life." (John 6:40) The will of the Father is to believe in Jesus Christ. The Father's will is not about what we are doing, but being obedient to his word, which is to believe in Jesus and thus receive the free gift of eternal life. That is the will of the Father.

We see also that those who do the Father's will shall be called the brothers and sisters of Christ. (Matthew 12:50) That is, they will be called the children of God, and as God's children will receive the inheritance promised.

There are many who will claim to be doing the will of the Father but are not. Jesus showed in Matthew 7:21:23, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'" There are some who will come to him on the last day claiming to have been doing the will of God but Jesus will reject them. Their supposed claims will be based upon works rather than on faith. You cannot please God on the basis of works. You cannot enter the kingdom of God by just doing works. You must have faith in Jesus Christ as it is only through faith in Jesus that you will be doing the will of the Father.

Now in this section of Matthew 21 we see Jesus speaking to the temple priests and showing them this message. He raises the situation of a father with two sons whom he asks to go out and work in his vineyard. The first says, "I will not," but later repents and goes out to work in the vineyard. The second says, "I go sir," but did not go out. Jesus asks the priest which of these did the father's will. Clearly it was the first son, for the will of the father was to work in the vineyard. In spite of his first assertion that he would not go out, he repented and went, thus doing the will of the father. As for the second son, he said he would go but did not. On the surface he appeared to be doing what he should, but failed to follow through on his word. This was hypocrisy rather than obedience and was even worse than not going.

Jesus likened the tax collectors and sinners to the first son, for they were opposing the will of the heavenly Father, as the first son opposed his fathers will, but in due course they repented and did do the Father's will. However he likened the priests of the temple to the second son, for although they held the appearance of religion, just as the second son held the appearance of one ready to go and do the Fathers will, the priests were not doing the will of the Father for they did not believe either the words of John the Baptist or the teachings of Jesus. Their lack of faith showed they were not doing the will of the Father, and worse, they were opposing the Father's will.

As Jesus said also, even when they saw that the effect of John's ministry they still did not believe. So they were rejected.

We must learn from this. We must learn not to fall into the trap of trying to seek righteousness by works, but trust in faith to God and seek His righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ. There is no other path to the Kingdom of God but through faith in Jesus Christ. And if we are to be doing the will of the Father, we must believe in Jesus and follow his ways.

Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard

(Matthew 21:33-41)

The parable of the tenants in the vineyard shows the way that the teachers and preachers of Jesus day abused their position. The priests, Pharisees and scribes were appointed to do a job, just as the tenants in the vineyard were to tend the vineyard and produce fruit. The priests, Pharisees and scribes were to teach the people the ways of God, but they failed in their role. Instead they took these appointed roles and used them to have power over the people.

In Christ we see many places where the Lord teaches that we are a brotherhood. As God shows no partiality, neither should Christians show partiality. There should be no "bosses," no benefactors in authority over the people. The gifts of ministry given to the church such as apostles, pastors, teachers, prophets and so on were not give so that these people would lord it over the people. These were given for the express purpose of building up God's people so that all would come to maturity in Christ. We see this in Ephesians 4:11-13.

11 And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists,
some pastors and teachers,
12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,
13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,
to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ

In this parable in Matthew 21 however we see Jesus talking about the priests, Pharisees and scribes who used their positions wrongfully. They used their position to gain power, authority and advantage over the people. Thus, when God sent his servants, the prophets and teachers, to rectify this situation and teach the people, the priests had them taken away or killed. We see they had John the Baptist beheaded and there were many of the prophets likewise killed or shamefully treated. This is what Jesus meant when speaking of the owner of the vineyard sending servants to receive fruit from the tenants, whom the tenants beat and killed. They were not prepared to give up any of the fruit of the vineyard, just as the priests would not give up their power and authority over the people. The priests refused to accept the authority from God and so removed anyone who stood in their way.

Then the owner of the vineyard sends his son, whom the tenants should respect. Likewise Jesus came as the Messiah and Christ and should have commanded the respect of the priests, Pharisees and scribes as it was evident to all the Jesus was doing

the works of God. Instead they were jealous and like the tenants in the vineyard, they had the son killed so they could hold on to their power.

When asked by Jesus what they thought the owner of the vineyard would do, they rightly pointed out that the owner would remove the tenants and let the vineyard out to others who would be obedient to the owner. They were unaware they were talking about themselves and casting judgment upon their own situation. And this is what the Father did. He removed the Old Covenant through the death of Jesus and set up the New Covenant. He removed the power base of the priests and gave the promise and inheritance of the kingdom of God to new tenants, to those who followed Jesus Christ.

The Stone that the Builder Rejected

(Matthew 21:42-46)

Jesus Christ is the stone that the builder rejected. But what does this analogy mean? Why did Jesus make that analogy of the stone that the builder rejected to the priests in Jerusalem?

Jesus often talks about houses in his parables and analogies. He talks about the kingdom of God as a house, the church as a house and likens those who hear his words as being like houses built on rock or sand. The analogy of a house or a building is used often in Jesus ministry. Here too we see the building of a house as the basis of this teaching.

A builder builds all houses and they are put together following a definite process. A builder has a plan, obtains materials, lays out the job on the ground and commences. Before the invention of concrete, the foundations of a house were made using heavy lumps of rock and stone. These were laid on the ground or in trenches and then the rest of the house was built on top of them.

All houses and buildings even today are begun in the same way. They all commence building from a corner and the very first stone laid is the most important. This stone is called the head of the corner or the cornerstone. Why is it the most important stone? The position of this first stone determines where every other part of the structure will lay. If this cornerstone is put in the wrong place, then the rest of the house will be in the wrong place. If this cornerstone is not laid straight and square, the rest of the house will not be straight and square. Choosing a cornerstone then is critical to the quality of the building of the house and ensuring the completed product is what was planned.

Now when we bring this understanding to the teaching of Jesus in this section, we see that he says, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner." In the previous section of this chapter we see that the priests, Pharisees and scribes had rejected Jesus. But Jesus was to be the foundation of the New Covenant. He knew he would be put to death, and this was in God's will, as he also knew death could not hold him and he would be resurrected. His death issued in the New

Covenant and this is the new building of which Jesus is the cornerstone and foundation.

The New Covenant rests solely upon Jesus Christ's teachings and his sacrifice for us. We enter that building through Jesus Christ as he is the door to life, as he says in John 10:9, "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." How do we enter through Jesus? By being baptised into his death. When we are baptised we go down into the water and symbolically take on the death of Jesus as our own death. By this we die to sin, die to the law and die to the world. When we are lifted up out of the water we are symbolically resurrected with Jesus and are born again as new creations in him. Through faith we accept this death and resurrection as our own so that we may live a new life with him. And when we believe in the power of his death and resurrection, God accepts our faith and imputes righteousness to us, not through anything we have done, but through what Jesus has done.

There is much to be said about this and it will be discussed in great detail when we get to the writings of Paul. If you would like to know more in the mean time, check out the eBooks and teachings on my website, (www.freegiftfromgod.com) especially the eBook on the Foundation Teachings of Christianity.

Parable of the Marriage Feast - The Great Invitation

(Matthew 22:1-10)

The parable of the marriage feast is interesting for several reasons. It was given to the chief priests and Pharisees and showed how they and those who acted similarly to them were unworthy of the kingdom of heaven. It also shows how the great invitation to all mankind was given so that every person may have the opportunity of coming to God and entering the kingdom of heaven.

First we see the king in the parable of the marriage feast send out servants to call in all of those who were invited. The ones who were invited in this sense were those who were supposed to be the followers of God. This included the chief priests and Pharisees and those who followed their teachings. They were the office bearers and those in control of God's house and the teachers of the Old Covenant and so should have been in a position to know and understand his ways.

However we see from this parable and other teachings that these people had gone away from a pure devotion to God's ways and turned aside into other things. They were holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Thus we see Jesus say of these people who were invited that they made light of the invitation, they refused to come to the marriage feast, they went off on other business and worst of all they beat, killed or treated shamefully the servants sent to call them to the marriage feast. These servants were the prophets, teachers and apostles of Jesus and God who were treated badly by the supposed people of God.

So they were all found to be unworthy. They made excuses why they could or would not attend the marriage feast, or they turned on the king by attacking his servants. Thus the king sent and destroyed those murderers and their city. God broke down the power base of the temple by bringing into effect the New Covenant through Jesus Christ. The New Covenant has now replaced the Old Covenant.

Now we see the great invitation go out to all of mankind. The king in the parable tells his servants not to go to those who were invited and found unworthy, but to go to the world, to the streets and thoroughfares and invite all of mankind. In Jesus Christ under the New Covenant we see the way is open for all mankind to come before God. There are now no intermediaries between man and God. There is no clergy and laity in God's kingdom, no group who are to have authority over other and stand between man and God. All are equal in God's sight and come to him through Jesus Christ only. Jesus is the only intermediary between man and God and the only one through whom we may be saved.

The servants of Jesus Christ have delivered the great invitation. The preachers, teachers, apostles and so on of the Lord are the servants going out to the thoroughfares and streets of the world to invite all mankind to the marriage feast. That is, they are all offered the opportunity to come to God through Jesus Christ and enter into his kingdom.

We have still yet to see the full effect of the great invitation. The time is soon, but has not yet fully arrived. Jesus says, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14) This is to occur just prior to the time of the end. When he says, "this gospel," he is talking about the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Not the many things that is preached as truths but have no basis in Christianity or backup in the Bible. There are many things taught in the name of Christianity that are false and sometimes even opposed to the New Covenant. When the time comes I believe we will see the truth of the gospel preached. It will come attended with the signs and wonders as testimony to the truth of the words spoken.

There will also be pretended signs and wonders from Satan to lead astray the people. So it is important now to ground yourself in the knowledge of the truth. You must find out for yourself the truth of the New Covenant and to follow the ways of Jesus Christ. Thus when the truth is preached and the great invitation goes out, you will be ready to hear it and accept God's invitation to the marriage feast.

I do not pretend for one moment to know all of the truth of the New Covenant or the ways of God. But as Paul said, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:12) Likewise we must all press on to make it our own. We must listen to the words of God and learn from the Bible. Listen to the teachers and preachers and compare what they say with what the Bible says. Find the tests in the Bible by which you can compare these teachings and apply the tests to understand if what is said is truth or error. As an example, the New Covenant calls us to freedom in Christ Jesus. Thus any teaching that brings you into bondage is not of Christ. Always look to the Lord for guidance and leadership and you will find the truth and gain entry

into the marriage feast and the kingdom of heaven when the great invitation is sent out.

Wedding Garment

(Matthew 22:11-14)

The great invitation will go out to many people to come to the marriage feast in the kingdom of heaven. Many will be called but few will be chosen. (Verse 14) There will be a great number who will be called but not everyone will answer the call. I believe that at some point in every person's life they have the opportunity to come to God. There may be many opportunities, but some will reject the invitation.

In this section of scripture we see a man has come into the wedding feast without a wedding garment. We know that when people attend a wedding they dress appropriate to the occasion. Here we see a man who was not dressed appropriately. The king said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" (Verse 12) The man could not answer but was speechless, and the king had him removed from the wedding feast and cast into the outer darkness.

In like manner no person will enter the kingdom of heaven unless they are dressed appropriately. Unless they have the wedding garment of the kingdom of God they will not be able to enter, and as shown here, even if they could get in they would be cast out.

What are the wedding garments of the kingdom of heaven? The primary wedding garment will be the robe of righteousness. God gives this to man. No man can claim righteousness; it is given as a gift from God. We see the robe of righteousness discussed in several places, especially in Revelation.

Revelation 6:11

"Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer"

Revelation 7:9

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes"

Revelation 7:13-14

"Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

And then in the final words of the New Testament we see this also stated, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and

fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood." (Revelation 22:14-15) This is a perfect description of what the parable is saying. Those who are invited shall need to be appropriately dressed in the right wedding garment. That garment is to be washed and made pure in the blood of Jesus Christ. This is the washing and regeneration from sin to be made perfect in Christ Jesus. Those who do not do so will be cast outside with those who choose to follow evil in all and any of its forms.

Look to Jesus and seek his truth. Be washed in his word. Learn what it means to be washed and made pure in the blood of Jesus for that is the path to salvation. Seek his kingdom and learn his ways and you will be able to stand in his kingdom at the end of the days.

Paying Taxes to Caesar

(Matthew 22:15-22)

There are some interesting aspects to this teaching about paying taxes to Caesar. The Herodians sought to entangle Jesus in his talk. They sought to have him say it was wrong to pay taxes to Caesar so that they could accuse him of defying the ruling authorities. But Jesus was aware of their malice, and in his response he gave us some wonderful insights about money.

The Bible says, "For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:10) Paul was speaking here not about the people of the world, but the church and the people of God. He makes the point that the love of money has caused some to wander away from the faith, thus his concern is about the church.

One of the biggest issues in the modern church is about money. It causes much angst between both those in leadership and the people attending church. There is a great deal of false doctrine and misuse of scripture used to justify what is essentially "fleecing the flock." In this teaching about paying taxes to Caesar we Jesus put money into its correct perspective.

When asked if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not Jesus asks to see the coin for the tax. He then asks, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" The Herodians answered, "Caesar's." Jesus then replies, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Verses 19-22)

In this statement Jesus shows that money is the invention of the government. It is not a thing of God but is of man's invention. Jesus does not command the people to take the things of men and give them to God, but rather to give God what is of God. We are to give God praise, worship, obedience, prayer and thanksgiving. These are the things of God. We are to do the will of God, which is to believe and have faith in

Jesus Christ. We are to learn the things that are pleasing to God so that we can do the will of God.

God is not interested in money and God does not want your money. God wants you. He does not command us to give money to the church. There are many who will disagree and say, "What about tithing?" To them I say, tithing is firstly not about giving money and secondly is not a part of the New Covenant or the New Testament church. Tithing in the church today is one of the misuses of scripture designed to "fleece the flock." Tithing is an exaction. It is not a gift but is like a tax that was taught under the Old Covenant for the express purpose of the upkeep of the priesthood. Tithing was given as a perpetual due to the Levites. Any person who is not descended from Levi is not entitled to take the tithe, and this includes the modern ministers of the Christian churches. They have wrongfully applied the teachings of tithing for their own gain.

There is even a more sinister side to tithing in the Christian church, which causes the annulment of Christianity. Those modern churches that preach and take tithes in effect are setting up a false version of the Old Covenant practice. They set themselves up as descendants of Levi, which they are not, and take the tithe wrongfully as it was promised only to Levi. In effect they are stealing what belongs to Levi, and applying the teachings of tithing wrongfully to increase their gain. What is more, they have set up a false version of the temple worship, which was about teaching the law of God. Yet Jesus came to set us free from the law of sin and death and so these modern, tithe taking preachers are rejecting Jesus teaching by taking up the teachings of the Old Covenant.

Is it any wonder that some of the churches of today are in such a mess spiritually! There is a great deal that can be said about tithing in the modern church and I have written a separate free eBook on this subject. (www.freegiftfromgod.com/Tch/TchMain.html) Some may think that I am anti-tithing. That is not true. But I am anti the misuse of scripture to justify a false teaching in the Christian church. Tithing is not part of the New Covenant and not part of the Christian church, as you will see in my free eBook concerning this matter.

Suffice to say that money is not of God, which is what Jesus was showing in this section of Matthew 22. Certainly it can be given as a gift, and even in the Old Covenant temple, gifts of money were often given to the treasury, but it was not and is not a bible-based requirement. Do not let any man, preacher or not, say that you must give money to the church. There is no scriptural basis for such a teaching.

Marriage in the Resurrection

(Matthew 22:23-33)

The Sadducees were testing Jesus again after he had silenced the Herodians. The Sadducees believed there is no resurrection, but showed their malice towards Jesus by questioning him over a matter to do with resurrection, marriage in the resurrection.

They concocted a situation of a man who had a wife and the man died leaving no children. Under the Law of Moses the man's brother was to take the wife and raise up children for his dead brother. However the second brother died. The woman was then married to a third brother who also died. She was married in total to seven brothers all of whom died leaving no children and finally the woman herself died. Their question to Jesus was, "In the resurrection, to which of the seven will she be wife?" (Verse 28)

The mere fact that they would ask such a question shows their malice. They did not believe in the resurrection anyway, so why would they accept a response from someone who did? This was purely a question designed to put Jesus to the test. But Jesus could simply answer the question, for unlike the Sadducees, He knew how the resurrection worked and he knew how these things would occur in the kingdom of heaven.

He began his response quite clearly and put them in their place. "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God." (Verse 29) This is a warning to all of us to be sure that we learn and know the scriptures so that we are not likewise pushed away. They were wrong because they failed to realise from the scriptures that marriage is of this life only. A man and a woman are married only while they live on this earth. Marriage does not extend beyond the grave; it is for this life only. We see that marriage is binding on a husband and a wife while they are alive, but if either one of them dies the living party is freed from the bond and laws of marriage. They are then free to remarry anyone they may choose.

If the Sadducees had known the scripture they would have realised the foolishness of their argument. For if marriage extended beyond the grave and into the resurrection, then the woman and the last six of the seven brothers would have been guilty of committing adultery. But marriage is of this life only and so there was no sin in what they did. At death every married person is freed from his or her vows, so there is no marriage carried forward into the resurrection. They are all free like the angels in heaven as Jesus stated.

Will there be marriage in the kingdom of God when He returns to the earth to rule and reign forever? Perhaps there will, but what form it may take is unknown. Scripture suggests there will be children in the new kingdom, so one would expect there may be some kind of union of a man and woman, but how or what that may be has not been shown to us. I should add here that this is pure conjecture on my part and I do not offer it as doctrine. I will wait to see what the Lord has in store.

As for the issue with the Sadducees though, Jesus then goes on to upbraid them about their lack of belief in the resurrection of the dead. He quotes the words of God saying, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." (Verse 32) Now when he says "I am" he is not talking in the past tense. He did not say, "I was the God of Abraham, etc." speaking of these three forefathers of Israel as being dead, but he speaks of them as being still alive. Then Jesus adds, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living." (Verse 32)

These three men were alive then and are still alive today. Jesus and God do not see what we know as death to be the true death. What we know as death is the separation of the spirit from the body. The body decays and rots away, but the spirit is still alive and living. This is why Jesus said God is God of the living and not the dead.

A further aspect is that those who choose to do evil and to reject Jesus Christ could also be considered as dead, even while they live on the earth. Their lot is to be destroyed after the final judgement, so they are good as dead even while they live. Their God is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but the god of this world, who is Satan. (2 Corinthians 4:4)

While we live we need to focus our priorities and attention on finding the truth. Learn the things of Jesus so that you can be counted amongst the living and find your place in the resurrection of the just.

Jesus is the Son of David

(Matthew 22:41-46)

After silencing the Herodians and the Sadducees, Jesus asked the Pharisees a question saying, "What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?" The Pharisees answered, "The son of David." Jesus responded, "How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet'? If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?"

Jesus is the son of David, king of kings and lord of lords. But the Pharisees would not accept that and could not understand how this could be. David recognised that the Christ would come and that he would be of the lineage of David. This was shown in prophecy and revealed to David. However the Pharisees were expecting a king to appear and to rule, not a common man of the people as Jesus was, albeit he was the Christ and did works no other man had ever done. David was the king who was recognised as a man after the heart of God.

It was normal for the younger generations to revere the elders. Unfortunately today this is often not the case, but it certainly was true in the time of Jesus. In those days they understood that with age came wisdom, knowledge and experience. Age brought with it the practice of many years training and first hand experience that can be gained only through time. Thus they revered and looked up to the elders of the people. As such it was very strange that David would make the statement he had made, for he was the elder and all of his sons would naturally revere his wisdom and experience. This was even more so because of his unique relationship with God and the fact that he was a great king.

That is why it puzzled the Pharisees so much. They could not conceive of a father, no matter how many generations removed, revering a son not yet born and calling him Lord. David knew that the Christ was to be of his lineage and he also knew that the

Christ was the Son of God. It was certainly also recorded in scripture that there was to be a child born of a virgin as a sign, but this was after David's reign. (Isaiah 7:14) One can only presume this knowledge was given to David and thus he understood the Christ would be the son of God and also of his lineage.

Due to the knowledge of the Lord and these questions he asked, no one subsequently dared question him over matters of scripture. Indeed he made the teachings of the Pharisees appear foolish for he showed them up to be inadequate and hypocritical in their handling of the truth of the scripture. Thus they were rejected. And in addition they did not recognise that they were the subjects of this prophecy. They were the ones who were the enemies of the Lord and would be subjugated under his feet in due course. They would prove themselves his enemy by having Jesus put to death, even though this was the plan of God. For through Jesus' death we have received life, but those who are his enemies and reject the Christ will receive death.

Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites

(Matthew 23:1-4)

The twenty-third chapter of Matthew is an indictment on the scribes and Pharisees. Many times throughout this chapter he says to them, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." If there is anything the Lord hated more than anything else it was hypocrisy. Men are no different either. Nobody likes a hypocrite and one of the worst names a person can be called is to be called a hypocrite.

This chapter of the bible more than any other shows up the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. It is unfortunate that today we still see many of these hypocritical attributes in the modern church. There is much to learn and much to be gained by a study of this chapter.

In these first few verses Jesus tells his disciples to listen to the words of the Pharisees and scribes when they preach the law. He recognised that they were the keepers of the law and were responsible for teaching it. They had the experience and practice to do so. But Jesus also warned them that although the scribes and Pharisees had this charge, they themselves did not keep the law. Thus they were hypocrites and thus the Lord said to the disciples to listen to their words, but not to do what they did. They did not practice what they preached.

One of the great problems Jesus saw with these men was that they made life difficult for the people. They bound the people up in laws, statutes and ordinances but did not give the people relief or a way of escape. As he said, "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger." (Verse 4)

They used the Law of Moses as a means of control and power. They used it to lord it over the people. But the law was given to Moses not as a burden, but to teach the people right from wrong. No man could keep the law, but through the law all men

could learn the wisdom of God. All men could look into the law and understand that by keeping the law of God, man could live a better life. And God was compassionate to mankind for even within the law he made allowances for the fact that man would make mistakes. Yes there were punishments for breaking certain laws, but there were also offerings and sacrifices that could be given to atone for sins. God was not so intolerable that he did not allow for the frailty and humanity of men.

But the Pharisees did not teach the law in this way. They used it to gain advantage and influence over the people. They were overbearing and burdened the people, and as Jesus showed, would not lift a finger to lighten the burden. They were legalistic in the most negative sense of the word, and this brought only bondage and suffering. Compassion would have provided release, but these men chose to rule with an iron fist so they could retain control over the people.

We see a classic case of their legalism in the story of the woman caught in adultery and brought to Jesus. They said to him that under law she was to be put to death, but sought what he would do to test him. Jesus showed compassion by saying, "Let him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone," and one by one they all left from the eldest to the youngest. Jesus did not condemn the woman but showed her compassion. But there was a condition. She was to go and sin no more.

The Pharisees could have equally shown compassion to the woman, but they did not. Their immediate response was to stone her, and they were within their right to do so, but Jesus showed that through love and compassion there is a better way. We do not know the details of the case and whether this woman had been entrapped or whatever. Still the Lord gave her the benefit of the doubt on the proviso she did not continue to sin. I am sure if she were caught again the verdict would have been much different.

The hypocrisy of the Pharisees still remains in the church today. There are still those who would stone those caught in sin rather than offer compassion and release that comes through Jesus Christ. We are fortunate that Christ has provided a way to be free from sin and the law. And we will see as we go through the rest of this chapter some instances where the hypocrisy of the Pharisees remains in the church today.

The Greatest Among You Shall be the Least

(Matthew 23:5-12)

The hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the scribes extended to their desire to be considered as persons of importance. As Jesus showed in this section, they desired and looked for the adulation and praise of men rather than the praise of God. They took their roles to be positions of power so they could lord it over the people. However as Jesus taught, the greatest among you shall be the least.

There are many of the so-called leaders of the church today who still look at working in the ministry as an opportunity for power. They still seek the praise of men and are doing the same things the Pharisees did. In this section of scripture we see Jesus

upbraid them for a number of things. They sought the best seats in the synagogues. Is this any different to the elders, pastors and leaders of the church having special seats assigned on the platform of the churches? They sought places of honour at feasts and salutations in the market place. Is this any different to those in the ministry who seek these same things today? They loved being called rabbi or teacher. Is this any different to those today that insist on being called father or pastor, using this as a title rather than a function?

No. These forms of hypocrisy that Jesus called the Pharisees and scribes to account for are still occurring in the church today. Jesus said that his people are not to do these things. Those in the service of the gospel and the Lord are called to serve. Just as Jesus said that he came to serve and not to be served, so too his people and especially the ministers of the gospel are called to serve.

The role of the ministers of the gospel is not to be at the head of the church. That is Jesus' place. Indeed any man who sets himself up or is set up as the head of a church is taking the place of Jesus. This is even worse than hypocrisy for if a person takes the place of Jesus in the church, it is no longer a Christian church. This becomes an anti-Christ structure since they have replaced Christ.

Jesus said call no man on earth your father, not meaning our biological father, but meaning our spiritual father. We have only one spiritual Father and that is God. Likewise we should call no man teacher or master on earth. We have only one teacher and master and that is Jesus Christ.

What Jesus is saying is that we are a co-equal brotherhood in Christ. None is greater than any other or less than any other. We are all equal. Thus we should not use names or titles of exaltation or salutation with one another. As Jesus said, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." One of the most important qualities we can all develop in our walk with Christ is an attitude of humility.

If we would wish to be exalted by the Lord and by God, then seek to be humble. Seek humility and you will be exalted by the Lord. Those who exalt themselves show themselves as being proud and arrogant. A proud person does not listen. An arrogant person does not learn for they believe they know better and are better than others. This was one of the main problems with the Pharisees. They were proud and arrogant and believed they had it all. They would not listen, they did not learn and so they missed out. Even worse, they opposed Jesus who could have taught them and they tried to prevent him teaching and preaching to the people, as they also did with the disciples.

We must take heed of these lessons in Matthew 23 and learn the mistakes of the Pharisees and scribes so we do not repeat their mistakes. We must be humble and sit at the feet of Jesus to learn from him. Then we will move forward and grow into mature Christians. Then we will be able to learn what is pleasing to God and do what is good in his sight. So be aware of these things and also be aware of any who are not practicing these things in accordance with the words of the Lord. Learn from the mistakes of the Pharisees so you do not repeat them.

You Shut the Kingdom of Heaven Against Men

(Matthew 23:13-15)

Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in." (Verse 13) What does he mean by this saying? How do you shut the kingdom of heaven? To understand this we need to look at a few other scriptures.

The analogy of a door is used in many places throughout the bible. Jesus said of himself, "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved." (John 10:9) It is through Jesus that we gain entry into the kingdom of heaven. After Jesus had died we see that he took his place seated at the right hand of the Father. (Colossians 3:1) Jesus has direct access to the Father in the kingdom of heaven for he acts as a high priest on our behalf. (Hebrews 8:1-3) Prior to Jesus only the high priests and they only once each year had access to the Father when they entered the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people.

The role of the priests was to administer the law and the Old Covenant. They were to teach the people the law and to ensure the proper running of the nation of Israel in matter of worship. However they did not do this as they were supposed to do. They used their role as priests for the purpose of gaining power, position and authority over the people. They became rather than a source of knowledge, help and learning for the people, an overbearing bureaucracy that were pompous, proud and arrogant. They bound the people up in regulations and ordinances, many of which were not in the Law of Moses and sometimes contrary to the law, thus gaining Jesus' condemnation of their actions as hypocrisy. They set themselves up as being the only access to God and one of the greatest punishments they served up to people who did not follow their ways was to cast them out of the synagogues.

We saw an interesting occurrence when Jesus was put to death. "And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (Matthew 27:51) This indicates that the access to the Father is now open to all mankind, not just the priesthood. This access is attainable through Jesus Christ. It is through him that we now have access to the Father and there is no other intermediary between man and God but Jesus Christ.

However the priests of the Old Covenant temple did not realise that the age of the Old Covenant had ended and the New Covenant had begun with the death of Jesus. They were not prepared to give up their power and control. So they sewed up the torn curtain and continued on their way. It is an excellent allegory of how they shut the kingdom of heaven against men. They did not enter because they rejected the messiah. They also could not enter under the Old Covenant for they did not follow the law but were hypocrites. Thus any person who chose to follow in their ways was

twice a child of hell as they were. By this method they closed the kingdom of heaven against men for the closed the door of knowledge.

We are fortunate today that we can enter the kingdom of heaven by accepting Jesus Christ as our Saviour. Through him we can come to that open door to God's Kingdom. When we allow man to stand between ourself and Jesus Christ, then we allow them to close the door just as the priests and Pharisees closed the door to the kingdom in Jesus' day. No man stands between you and God. No man can intervene between you and God. Every person has individual and unique access to God through Jesus Christ and this was achieved when Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification.

Woe to You Blind Guides

(Matthew 23:16-22)

Jesus condemns the priests, Pharisees and scribes for being blind guides saying, "Woe to you blind guides." He calls them this because their focus is wrong. The things they consider important are not what God considers important.

Jesus said elsewhere, "Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Matthew 15:14) Again he was speaking of the Pharisees and it is clear that anyone who follows a blind man will stumble. If you cannot see where you are going you need guidance by someone who does see clearly. Think about a time when you have got up in the middle of the night and moved about the house without turning on a light. You bump into things, perhaps stub your toe or fall over. But these problems go away when you turn on the light.

In a spiritual sense it is the same. If you seek the light of knowledge that comes from the Lord you will see clearly to navigate the waters of life. But these blind guides, the Pharisees, were teaching wrongly. They focussed on the wrong things. When they said that a person is not bound by their oath if they swear by the temple, but only if they swear by the gold of the temple, they were quite wrong. The temple makes the gold sacred, not the other way around. Take the gold out of the temple and it is just gold. But the temple remained the house of God.

Furthermore, such teaching leads to loopholes in the law. They offer what is called "wiggle room" by lawyers today, which is anathema to God. They allow the people an "out" so they can renege on their vows, and in God's sight this is wrong and comes from evil. In fact Jesus taught that a person should not even make oaths but let their yes be yes and their no be no. (Matthew 5:37, James 5:12) What he wants is that we should be a people who keep our word. He wants us to be trustworthy in what we say with no shades of grey or "wiggle room."

But these Pharisees showed their lack of knowledge through what they were teaching. They were blind to the truth. As Jesus showed, because the temple is holy, so too is

everything in it. Likewise, as the altar is holy, then so too is everything on it. There are no ifs, buts or maybes in God's sight, but that is exactly what the Pharisees were preaching and were rightly condemned for it.

Is it any different today? Do teachers and preachers focus on the priorities of God or of men? Fortunately many teachers and preachers do focus on the right things, the things of God. But there are "Pharisees" still around today. When the preachers of today are focussed on the things of man, when they focus on money, works and power for themselves they are clearly blind. When they consider themselves as greater than others they show their blindness. As an example of the kind of church in this category look at what the Lord said to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-18.

"15 I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!

16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see."

They are blind but believed they had it all. By contrast the Lord says they are blind. They cannot see that they have gone astray and are chasing the things of the world rather than the things of God. They are seeking wealth, power and riches, but have ignored the truth. So the Lord counsels them to seek the truth and the righteousness that comes from God.

For us we need to look out for those who would take us into captivity with false teaching. We must be aware of what we are listening to and seek the light of the knowledge of truth. Place your focus on the things of God and not the things of men so that the Lord will not say to us, "Woe to you blind guides," as he said to those Pharisees.

Straining Out a Gnat and Swallowing a Camel

(Matthew 23:23-24)

Jesus calls the Pharisees to account for their hypocrisy using the analogy of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. What is interesting in this teaching is what he is referring to, for he is speaking of the comparison between tithing in the minutest amounts, in relation to justice, mercy and faith.

The Jews would have been aware of the significance of gnats and camels. Under the Law of Moses there were clean and unclean foods. Virtually all insects were considered unclean and should not be eaten with only a few exceptions, such as locusts. As for meats, only animals that had hooves that were parted and chewed the

cud could be eaten. A camel chews the cud but it does not have hooves and so it was not a clean meat.

If a gnat fell into someone's drink they would normally flick it out and continue drinking. If a larger insect, say a fly or bee fell in; they would usually throw out the drink and make another. If a camel fell in it would crush the cup and the person drinking it as they weigh up to 700kg or 1,500 lbs, and stand about two metres tall (six to seven feet). The Jews would have considered it disgusting to even think about the idea of swallowing a camel because of their food laws.

Now when Jesus used this analogy he was making a comparison. He was saying that the Pharisees were tithing the smallest amounts of produce, herbs such as mint, dill and cumin, but were neglecting the things that were really important under the law, justice, mercy and faith. The tithing was a show of works of law. The comparison was that tithing was so miniscule, so unimportant in comparison to the other matters that it was like a gnat compared to a camel. God is not looking for us to do works of law such as they were doing. He is not interested in such high degrees of legalism that a person should tithe the herbs they might grow on their window shelf. God wants man to be just and merciful and faithful to him. He wants man to treat others with respect and dignity; to do unto others as they would do unto themselves.

But the Pharisees wanted to be seen by men. They wanted the glory of man and so they carried out works of the law to the most ridiculous lengths. They were under the law and so it was right that they should tithe. Tithing was required under the Jewish law. But not at the expense of what the law really represented, which was the nature of God. The law was meant to teach man right from wrong so they would learn to be just, merciful and faithful. By failing to follow these truths of the law, they may as well have swallowed a camel for they have missed the point of the law.

However under the New Covenant we have been freed from the Old Covenant laws through Jesus Christ. Tithing is not part of the New Covenant, and in fact it is quite damaging to the New Covenant. Space does not permit me to go into this in depth here, but if you are interested in an in-depth study of tithing and the problems it causes to the New Covenant Christian, I recommend my free eBook on this matter, which you can find [here](#).

In the Old Covenant Jesus was showing that in the total scheme of things, although tithing was important, it was not nearly as important as those things he called the weightier matter of the law. The Pharisees though had this twisted and were putting the greater emphasis on tithing. They were wrong.

Today we see a great many churches with a heavy emphasis on tithing. They are wrong too. Tithing is not part of the New Covenant and in fact it prevents a church from finding the truth. Tithing is a bondage, but the truth of the New Covenant is about freedom, not bondage. By accepting just one law, the law of the tithe, a person has bound themselves to all of the laws. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:3 that, "I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law" James also wrote that, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it." (James 2:10) So accepting any one of the Old Covenant laws such as the law of the tithe causes a person to be bound to the whole law. And if

they are under the law they caught up again in the bondage that Jesus has set them free from when he died.

We must learn the wisdom of the law but not be bound under it. We must learn about truth, justice, mercy and faith but without being caught under the law. We can achieve this only when we accept the gift Jesus gave us when he died on Calvary. His gift was to set us free from sin and to release us from the bondage of the law.

Cleanse the Inside of the Cup First

(Matthew 23:25-26)

The Pharisees were very concerned about position. They wanted to look good to men. They wanted the praise of men rather than the praise of God. But Jesus taught that it is not what is on the outside that matters but what is on the inside. That is the essence of this teaching to cleanse the inside of the cup first so that the outside would be clean too.

When you think about a cup, if it has been used you will always wash it out before re-using it. And when you wash it your focus will be more on the inside of the cup than outside, for it is the inside that will hold your drink. You do not want your drink contaminated by grime so you will always focus a greater attention on cleaning the inside first. Even if the outside were unable to be properly cleaned, you could always use a spoon or a straw to eat or drink the contents, but the most important thing is that the inside is clean first.

In this analogy Jesus uses the cup as a representation of men, specifically the Pharisees. His beef with them is that they will go to great lengths to clean up the outside but spend little or no effort on the inside. Back in Matthew 23:5 he said, "They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long." They focussed on wearing the cloaks and clothes of their office as priests so that they would look "righteous." They wanted people to look at them and say, "Look at him in those clothes. He must be a righteous man of God." But contrary to a common saying, clothes do NOT maketh the man. Jesus did not go about in robes that made him stand out from the crowd. He did not wear the clothes, cloaks and garments of the clergy. He just wore the same kind of clothes that the rest of the people wore.

In Jesus it does not matter what you wear or what you look like on the outside. The focus of the New Covenant is not about making us look good, it's about training us how to be good. The New Covenant and the teachings of Jesus are aimed at transforming us into his image. They are meant to bring us to maturity in Christ in our spirit, not in the flesh. Jesus said, "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." (John 6:63) If we are to have our spirit changed and if we are to receive life, then it is our inside that must be transformed. It is our spirit that must be cleansed.

The Pharisees were focussed on making a good show in the flesh. They were trying to look good on the outside. Paul also upbraided those who did such things saying, "It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that would compel you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh." (Galatians 6:12-13) There were some in the early church insisting on converts being circumcised according to the law. But Paul opposed them and repelled such actions for circumcision is not necessary under the New Covenant. As he said, they were doing this so they could glory in the flesh.

This is exactly what Jesus was saying too. They were trying to cleanse the outside without first cleansing the inside. It does not matter if a person is wearing the cloth of the clergy or is circumcised. These things do not make you any holier. It is only by focussing on the inside and being set free from sin that you can come to the Lord. It is only by accepting Jesus as Saviour and learning his teachings that we may be cleansed from sin and set free from law. Then our spirits will be changed and this will work from the inside out. We will be cleansed within which will cleanse the outside as well.

You Are like Whitewashed Tombs

(Matthew 23:27-28)

Jesus continues his analogies of the hypocrisy of the religious people of his day by comparing the Pharisees and scribes to whitewashed tombs. There are some today who also fit this description and we have seen the fall of some of the supposed leaders of the church where they too were like whitewashed tombs.

It would be a horrible thing for the Lord to say to you, "You are like whitewashed tombs." He then defines what he means by this description. A whitewashed tomb looks good on the outside but within is full of dead men's bones. If we look at some of the famous tombs and burial grounds we get a picture of this. The pyramids for all their wonder and glory were tombs. The many cemeteries that have beautiful gardens and monuments are just resting places for dead men's bones. Arlington cemetery in Washington, which is a remarkably ordered, tidy and beautiful place, is still also just a place full of dead man's bones. Man frequently builds these shrines to their dead, especially their heroes and great people, but to all intents and purposes they are still just places full of dead men's bones. Inside these places they are musty, potential sources of sickness from evil bacteria and full of rotting flesh and bone. They are not really nice places to be and belie the outward appearances of these places.

Jesus compares the scribes and Pharisees to such places saying, "You are like whitewashed tombs." He says they look good on the outside but inside are full of iniquity and hypocrisy. They dress in the robes of the clergy and have the appearance of righteous men, but they do not act and behave like people of God. A good example of what he was showing here can be seen in Mark 12:38-40. "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and

the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

These supposed men of God looked like holy men, but they used their position to take advantage of those least able to defend themselves. Instead of assisting and helping the weak, they were using them for their own gain. They would, "...devour widows houses and for a pretense make long prayers." They took but did not give in return.

In the church today we see some who are doing this exact same thing. They go to the homes of their flock seeking gain and advantage. They take excessive sums of money and goods from the flock for their own gain and purposes. They wear expensive clothes and jewellery, drive expensive cars and live in luxurious houses while their flock often struggle from day to day. They preach messages of prosperity, contrary to the gospel, for the riches in Christ are not about the things of this world, but the things of the Kingdom of God. The true riches that come from righteousness, faith, love, joy in the Holy Spirit and fellowship with Christ and his people. It is not about money and the wealth of this world. Those things are temporary and will pass away, but God's love is eternal.

As Jesus described the Pharisees in this section saying they are like whitewashed tombs, so too there are whitewashed tombs among the clergy and the churches today. Not all ministers are in this mould of hypocrisy, but many are tempted down that path by the lure of the love of money. The prosperity movement in the church can be deadly for as Paul wrote to Timothy, "For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:10-11) It is the love of money and the craving for the riches of this world that have led some in the church to fall away from the purity of the gospel of Christ. As Paul said to Timothy, shun all of this. Get your own priorities right and aim at the things of God, not the things of this world.

And finally, beware of those who are like whitewashed tombs. Jesus said "You will know them by their fruits," (Matthew 7:15-20) so watch carefully. If the ministers in your church are preaching a message of prosperity in the things of this world, beware. The true riches are permanent and come from God. As for the things of this world, the Lord does and will provide all of our needs in abundance. Our focus and aim is not wealth here and now, but entry into the kingdom of heaven.

Killing the Prophets

(Matthew 23:29-39)

The greatest hypocrisy Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes over concerned killing the prophets. They said that had they lived in the days of their fathers they

would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets. However Jesus condemns them out of their own mouths.

He shows that they witness against themselves. In their statements they have shown their guilt for they witness that they are the sons of murderous fathers. Their fathers killed the prophets and righteous men sent by God to aid his people. And they would do the same and worse. Already they had consented to the death of John the Baptist. They were about to condemn Jesus and have him put to death. And they would also stone Stephen and put to death James the brother of John when the apostles commenced their ministry.

Indeed they were not only just like their fathers, but they were worse. As Jesus said, all the righteous blood shed would come upon his generation. It was their generation that would put the Christ to the stake and to this day they have been condemned.

They opposed the Lord and the prophets of God down through the generations because they wanted the power to themselves. They sought to rule and control the people for their own gain and benefit. They misused the power they had, which was given to teach the people the ways of God. Instead they used and abused the people and it would be required of them. This was the message he showed to them in various parables. It was stated in the parable of the vineyard let out to tenants (Matthew 21:33-41). It was also the essence of the parable of the marriage feast in Matthew 22:1-10. And yet still the Pharisees could not or would see the evil in their hearts and turn for repentance.

This persecution of God's people by those who claim to be his but are not is still occurring. Many have been thrown out of churches, excommunicated and shut out because they chose to follow God rather than the false doctrines of religious teachers. Many have suffered when they need not have because they failed to recognise these falsehoods for what they were.

A church or religious leader has tremendous power. They have power over people's lives and people listen to them for guidance, advice and teaching. If this power goes to their heads it is a dangerous situation, both for the teacher and the flock of God. That is why the Lord says through James, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness. For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also." (James 3:1-2) Above all else they must find the truth themselves and then communicate it to those in their care. They cannot afford for error in the ministry and so must take the greater pains to validate what they are teaching. Their teachings must align with the truth of the words of God. It must be scripture based and it must lead to life and freedom in Jesus Christ.

And yet many preachers continue to teach bondage as did the scribes and Pharisees. Bondage to the law, bondage under sin, condemnation and a ministry based upon works. These are not the teachings of Christ or the New Covenant. They are teachings developed by men for their own devices and to achieve their own ends. The aim of ministry should be growth. Not necessarily the growth of the church in terms of great numbers, but rather the growth of the individual to maturity in Jesus Christ. Ministry should bring us all to that place described in Ephesians 4:11-14.

11 And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,
12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,
13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ;
14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

If the ministry of any minister is not leading to this end, they are not teaching the truth of the New Covenant. Thus it is essential that we all learn the scripture, learn the truth and seek the Lord to guide us into all truth so that we may be able to stand. As a simple test of ministry and teachings, Jesus came to give us freedom, not to bring us into bondage. If the ministry being fed to you is bringing you into bondage in any way, you must question it and resist it. We are not captives in Christ but free men. Let no one put you back into slavery under false teaching.

Signs of the Close of the Age

(Matthew 24:1-8)

As Jesus left the temple his disciples asked him about his second coming and the signs of the close of the age. His response is particularly of interest to us today for we are living in the age when these prophecies are beginning to be fulfilled. These and other prophecies in the Bible point to this age as being the beginning of the time of the end and the fulfilment of the signs of the close of the age.

In this section Jesus specifically mentioned a number of signs. He prefaced his remarks with a warning saying, "See to it that no one leads you astray." This is a warning we must pay particular attention to. Although at any time the opposition to Christ and Christians has been strong, in these last days it will intensify.

Jesus says that many will come claiming to be the Christ and will lead many astray. We have seen numerous cults from the deadly ones like the Jonestown massacre and the Branch Davidians through to men setting themselves up as if they are Christ. The work of the antichrist structures in the Churches are also testimony to these times. The coming of antichrist movements were already being seen in John's day as he indicated in his latter letters. They are even more evident today. An antichrist structure in a Church occurs when a man takes the place of Christ. Any Church that has a man set up as the head of the church is an antichrist structure. Jesus is the head of the Church and no man has the right to take his place. An antichrist structure will lead the people in the church away from the truth into all kinds of error, and you will know these false teachers by their fruit. They will bring the people into bondage and take away the freedom that is in Christ Jesus. They will deny Jesus by taking his place at the head of

the church. Thus it is essential that we focus on seeking the truth and looking to the Lord so that we are not led astray. There is only one source of truth and that is from Christ.

Jesus then showed the disciples several of the signs of the end. Specifically he said there would be wars and rumours of wars. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There would also be famines and earthquakes in various places.

These signs have never been more apparent than they are today, and especially just at present. Recent deadly earthquakes in Japan and New Zealand are just the culmination of an extended period of increasing seismic activity in the past century. We saw a couple of years ago the earthquakes that led to tsunamis in Indonesia where several hundred thousand died. Current estimates of those dead or missing in Japan are in the order of tens of thousands. Never have we had the number or intensity of earthquakes as we are seeing at this time.

Consider also the wars and skirmishes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and uprisings of the people against their governments in the Middle East including Egypt, Libya and other places. Never have we had the number of wars and rumours of wars as are occurring at this time.

Finally we are seeing issues with food crops. The intense weather systems are destroying crops in some places. Outcomes from the Japan earthquake with radiation contamination of foods and the contamination of the seas from nuclear reactor problems are impacting the food chain. Locust plagues in some places are the worst they have ever been. Drought has killed off many stock animals and crops which have then been washed away in flooding rains in Australia. All of these are the pre-cursors to times of famine.

We are in interesting times for as Jesus said, these are just the birth pangs of the signs of the close of the age. What we are witnessing is the beginning of the end. The time is getting short and the day of the Lord's return is coming soon. Our challenge is to be prepared for his return, and we shall see in the next few sections that this is a clear message the Lord is giving to us in this last generation. He is telling us that we must be prepared, for these are just the beginnings and it will get worse.

Now is the time when all God fearing people need to have their wits about them. Now is the time when we will be called upon to bear testimony to the truth. There will be tough times ahead and tremendous opposition as the time draws near. The activity of Satan will increase and his lies will permeate everything in this world. He will not be obvious but will be very deceptive and will lead many astray. Satan is the master of deceit and cunning and that is how many will be captured. We who follow the Lord need to learn what is pleasing to God so that we can stand in the face of his opposition. The Lord will be faithful and will stand with us. However he also warns that some will face death for their stand as Christians. This is not a time for the faint hearted but is a time to consolidate and be prepared to stand up for what is right. His aim in telling us these things in advance is to ensure that we understand and have the knowledge that these things will happen so that we should not fear, unlike the rest of mankind.

In spite of these bad times ahead Jesus said that we must not be alarmed. There will be many disasters ahead as we see the fulfilment of these prophecies. As these things unfold we can be assured that his return will be soon. If we stand with him to the end, standing up for the truth and righteousness we will be rewarded and reap eternal life. There is no middle ground and no fence sitting in these times. We must be prepared to make a stand for Christ regardless of the consequences and be prepared to forgo all the things of this life, including life itself if necessary, for the vastly greater reward of life eternal with him. Focus on the Lord so that you can become strong in his might, ready, able and willing to stand with him in these final days.

Trouble for the End Times Church

(Matthew 24:9-14)

There will be trouble for the end times church as Jesus tells us in this next section. The church will have trouble and individual Christians will suffer for it. There will be a sifting of the wheat from the chaff in the end times and there will be no fence sitting, as these end times will be times for making a stand.

Jesus says that Christians will be delivered up to death and many will fall away. Those who were their brothers and sisters will betray some, and all Christians will be hated by the nations of the world for bearing the name of Christ. These are drastic times for the church and for Christians. Any who proclaim the name of Jesus will be in difficult circumstance. In spite of these fearful warnings though, we must stand firm and fear not. It is the Lord's battle and he will wage it according to his plans. If some of us die in that battle for taking a stand for Jesus, then so be it. Our reward will be to stand with Jesus on his return and not suffer the loss of our eternal salvation. We will not be cast out as like the sinners and those who choose to oppose Jesus Christ.

These will be times for bearing testimony to Jesus Christ. They will be times for endurance as it is those who endure to the end who will be saved. They will be wicked times and we will see wickedness multiplied. And because of the increase in sin and wickedness in the world we will see that the love of people for their fellow man will grow cold. People will not readily extend a helping hand to those in need, they will not condemn those who do evil, they will fear retribution and so turn away their eyes when they see a wrong committed and they will ignore or reject the plight of those who have been wronged. This is all part of this prophecy of Christ for these end times and we are seeing many of these things happening today.

Prior to the end coming Jesus says there will be many false prophets who will lead many astray. If we are not solidly grounded in the truth and the word of God, then we may also be led astray. It is essential to learn the truth of the gospel now. At this later time it may be too late. Urgency is of the utmost importance. This is not like a school exam where you can cram it all in the night before. Learning the truth of the Christian message and having the truth of the New Covenant take effect in your life takes time.

To become mature in Christ is a long road and you cannot expect it to happen overnight.

There will be opportunity to hear the truth of the gospel in the end days amongst all of the false teaching in the church and in the world. For Jesus says, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." (Verse 14) The key words here are "this gospel." There are many gospels in the world and many are tainted by the opinions of some preachers or church positions. There are some that are simply polluted and false that are designed to do bring gain to the preacher. But Jesus says that "this gospel" must be preached before the end. He is talking about the gospel of the truth. He is talking about HIS gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ that leads men to freedom and to peace.

At present the true gospel, like the true church is hidden from the prying eyes of man. The true gospel is the message of salvation from sin, death and the law and sets man free from all of the things that bind him up both under the law and in the nature of the human passions of the flesh. Only through the gospel of Jesus Christ can a man be set free and only through faith and the grace of God is this achieved. At the right time this true gospel of Jesus Christ will be made plain and open to all of mankind. The time is not yet right for when it does go out and is preached to all of mankind, then there will be a polarising effect such as has never been seen before. Everyone will have to take a position either for or against Christ when this gospel is preached. Those who stand against it will make war on those who stand with Christ. But Christ's soon to come return will shut them down and prove where the truth stands.

These are interesting times we live in for many who are here today will see these things unfold. These will also be times of trouble and in this section we are called to endure for the sake of Jesus Christ. No person can hide their head in the sand over this matter and these teachings. They will happen whether we like it or not. We must make a stand and we will be forced to make a choice. The choices are clear to be with Christ or against him. There is and will be no middle ground. You must choose where you stand and then do something about it to seek the truth of Christ and the transforming power of his gospel.

Wherever the Body is there the Eagles will be Gathered

(Matthew 24:15-28) - Part 1

In speaking of the last days Jesus gives many warnings and indications of what must happen. Amongst the many signs of the end times there will be great desolation and opposition in the Church. Satan will have his messengers attack the Church from without and within. There will be many false teachers and false prophets arise whose sole purpose is to lead astray the people of God. These false prophets and false teachers are the vultures or eagles Jesus refers to when he said wherever the body is there will the eagles be gathered.

He warns us not to be quickly shaken by these people and these times. They will perform pretended signs and wonders to lead people astray. They will say things indicating where you may find Jesus saying, "He is in the wilderness" or "He is in the inner rooms" or he is someplace else. But Jesus says to ignore them. Don't listen to them and don't follow them for they do not know what they are talking about. When Jesus returns it will be such a spectacular event and on such a grand scale that no one in the world will miss it. He likens it to the lightning flashing from one end of the sky to the other and it will not be missed by anyone. (Verse 27) You will not have to go looking for Jesus when he returns as he will literally be larger than life, bigger than any Hollywood blockbuster could ever make him and obvious and apparent to every person on the earth.

But coming back to the eagles, these false teachers and false prophets are likened to birds of carrion. You find eagles and vultures out in the deserts and bushlands where there are dead bodies. Animals that have died in remote places from natural causes, killed by other predators or even hit by cars are the food of these carrion birds. They live off of the flesh of the dead.

These false teachers and false prophets are the same. People who choose to follow falsehoods and refuse to seek or accept the truth are spiritually dead. Even these churches, which may have the appearance of being alive, are spiritually dead. The Lord showed such a thing can exist in the prophecy to the church at Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6. He begins that prophecy saying, "I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead." Such a church as this is ready to be attacked by these carrion, the false teachers and false prophets. In that section of Revelation there is a warning to beware and repent and so come back to the Lord before falling prey to these vultures.

Individuals will follow after any teaching and forms of belief in the last days, for they choose not to seek the truth by coming to Christ. The apostle Paul was aware of this when he wrote to Timothy saying, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." (2 Timothy 4:3-4) Today we see all manner of teachings that are false. There are philosophies, New Age teachings, occult, humanism, atheism, worship of the things of the earth and more, all of which are false teachings designed to lead people astray. And in the church there are polluted teachings that mix some of these things in as well as mixing up teachings from the Old and New Covenants to produce a mumbo jumbo of teachings that have the appearance of religion, but do nothing to set people free from bondage to sin that is at the heart of the New Covenant.

It is the false prophets and false teachers who promote these things to lead people astray. Why do they do these things? Because they are vultures and eagles feeding off the bodies of the spiritually dead who will not listen to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their end will be with those who are doomed to eternal damnation.

So the warning is clear to all who choose to follow Christ. Seek his ways and learn from him so that when confronted by strange and diverse teachings you are not led astray.

The Return of the Lord

(Matthew 24:15-28) - Part 2

The last days will be difficult times and a time of tribulation such as has not ever been seen before. Jesus says that when we see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place that those in Judea should flee to the mountains. I believe this is a warning for those who live in the region of Jerusalem and Judea to get out of that place and go to higher ground, and to do so quickly. The prophet Daniel was shown that from the time the continual burnt offering is taken away and the desolating sacrilege is set up there would be 1,290 days. (Daniel 12:11) I believe these are actual days and not prophetic days where a day often means a year. Daniel is then told, "Blessed is he who waits and comes to the thousand three hundred and thirty five days." (Daniel 12:12) This is a difference of forty-five days.

It is my opinion that the reason these people who wait the additional forty-five days are blessed because they will see the coming of the Lord. I believe the blessing referred to by the angel speaking to Daniel is the end of the age and the returning of the Lord. If that is so, then Jesus' advice for those in Judea and Jerusalem to flee to the mountains makes sense when they see the desolating sacrilege set up in the holy place.

The only place ever referred to as the "holy place" was in the temple in Jerusalem. No other place from a biblical perspective has ever been called the holy place. So that is the place where this desolating sacrilege will be erected, whatever it may be. But why would Jesus tell his people to flee to the mountains at this time? The fact that the man of sin referred to in Daniel and Revelation will set himself up in the temple proclaiming to be God may be justification enough, but he will have been there for several years prior to this time. But it is when the desolating sacrilege is set up that Jesus tells his people to get out of the place and move to higher ground.

I believe the answer is in Zechariah 14. When Jesus was taken up from the earth after he was resurrected and had appeared to the apostles and disciples, he told them that he would return in the same way that he had left. (Acts 1:11) When Jesus was taken up from the earth at that time he had left from the Mount of Olives also known as Olivet. (Acts 1:12) So when he returns we can expect that he will return in the same way and come back to the same place, that is, the Mount of Olives. This is where the scriptures in Zechariah are important.

Zechariah 14:4-5 says, "On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that half of the Mount shall withdraw

northwards, and the other half southwards. And you shall flee by the valley of the Lord's mountain, for the valley between the mountains shall reach to Azal; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him."

So when the Lord's feet touch the earth at the Mount of Olives on his return, which is where he left the earth some 2,000 years ago, the Mount of Olives will split in two. There will be a great earthquake when the Lord returns that will split the mountain in two from east to west as the mountain is split to the north and south. At that time the great chasm formed by the earthquake will be filled with water for it will split as far as the Dead Sea in the west and the Mediterranean sea in the east. We see this prophesied in Zechariah 14:8, "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter."

Again I preface this section by stating that these are my opinions and I am happy to hear any other views on this matter for my own learning and information. Looking at this from a geological perspective we could say that in effect Jerusalem may become a seaport as the waters flow from the Mediterranean, living waters, to the Dead Sea in which no life can exist because of the high salt content. In addition we see that living waters will flow out from Jerusalem to the east and the west. There are significant fresh water aquifers beneath Jerusalem and the surrounding areas at depths of between 500-650 metres. When the great earthquake occurs and the landscape changes according to the prophesy of Zechariah, it is feasible that these aquifers of fresh water will hit the surface and flow from Jerusalem to the east and the west following the crack in the fault line caused by the earthquake.

It is interesting to note also that Zechariah prophesied this earthquake, which God had made known to him. Today we know there is a significant fault line passing through Jerusalem at the Mount of Olives. This fault line runs all the way from Africa through to Syria and is alternately called the "Dead Sea Transform" or the "Syrian-African Rift." There is no way that Zechariah could have known about this geological fault line and the length and directions it follows. This then provides a proof of the accuracy and more importantly the source of prophecy in the Bible. This knowledge could only have come from God.

So we shall see in these last days at the time of the return of the Lord that there will be great tribulation. But he has pre-warned his people and told us when the clock will start on the countdown to his return. The key is when we see the continual burnt offering removed and the desolating sacrilege is set up in the holy place. At that time those who are his people in the regions of Jerusalem and Judea should flee to the hills if they are to survive the great earthquake and devastation in the area that will occur upon his return.

The Second Coming of the Lord

(Matthew 24:29-31)

At the very end of these days those left on the earth will witness the second coming of the Lord. There will be signs in the sun and the moon for they will both be darkened and will not give their light upon the earth. This is sometimes attributed to pollution or the outcome of the release of clouds of smoke from a great war in the last days. Whether that is true or not, I do not know. I do not necessarily believe those things to be so, but without alternatives you cannot discount anything. This will be a "wait and see" proposal for me.

When the Lord does return, the peoples of the earth will then know the truth of the Lord and of God. There will be the sign of the Son of God appear in the heavens as he approaches. Nobody knows what that will be, but it will be evident to all. The peoples of the earth will mourn and cry for they will know they are in the wrong. They will know that there will be no opportunity to turn from their evil at this point...time will have run out.

But for those who do follow Jesus and have taken his teachings to heart, this will be a time of rejoicing. This will be the time of what is commonly known as the Rapture. Jesus says that he will send out his angels into the whole earth to gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (verse 31). This is described further in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18.

16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first;

17 then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

This is a time for rejoicing for those in the Lord. The end of evil on this world is at hand. The time of Judgement is soon to come and the reward for seeking and living according to the truth of the gospel is soon to be ours. Jesus has come again to rule and reign over this earth and to drive out all forms of sin. This is in preparation for the ultimate reward still to come, which is the establishment of the New Jerusalem and the beginning of the eternal age when God the Father makes his home with men.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

(Matthew 24:32-35)

The whole of Matthew chapters 24 and 25 are concerned with times of the end and the signs preceding the second coming of Jesus Christ. This small section of scripture here though is the key to these prophecies. It is the point at which the lessons in these chapters pivot. The preceding sections speak of the signs of Jesus' return and the following sections teach us about being prepared and ready for his return. We need to

learn the lesson of the fig tree. If we do this we will not be surprised and will be ready at his return.

The fig tree like many plants goes through stages and cycles as the seasons change. The fig tree is a deciduous fruit tree. It loses its leaves during winter and becomes dormant during those colder months. By watching the fig tree Jesus shows that you can know when the seasons are about to change. At the end of the winter months as the fig tree comes out of its dormancy, its branch becomes tender and it puts forth leaves. This occurs as the seasons move from winter to spring and you can know that summer is approaching.

Likewise Jesus tells us that when we see all of the signs he showed in the earlier sections of this chapter we can know that his return will be soon.

He does not keep his people in the dark. He wants us to know what is going on so that we are not surprised like the rest of the world. He does not want us to suffer fear or anguish through lack of knowledge. Elsewhere he has shown these things saying, "You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15) We are called to follow Jesus and to obey his commands. If we do this we are his friends, and if we are his friends he will show us all that we need to know. This includes understanding the times of the end.

Needless to say there are a few things we do not know and have not been given to understand. But all of the things that are required for us to have salvation and to be prepared for the kingdom of God are given to us. In relation to the second coming, we may not know the day or the hour of his return, but that does not mean we will not know the week, month and year.

We saw in the previous sections that a time period was established. The countdown to his return will commence when the continual burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up in the holy place. When we see these things take place we will be able to calculate the timing of his return and be ready. They will be days of distress and require endurance. But they will also be like those darkest hours before the dawn. Initially it will be a great spiritual darkness, but those days will be followed by unspeakable joy upon the return of Jesus Christ. At least, it will be a time of joy for those who are his and who are patiently awaiting his return.

So let us take the lesson of the fig tree to heart. Watch carefully the unfolding of the signs of the times. Continue to learn and grow in the truth of the gospel. And be prepared and ready for him at his coming. The time is growing short and every day brings his return and our salvation closer to reality.

No One Knows the Day and Hour

(Matthew 24:36-44)

No one knows the day and hour of Jesus' return except the Father. He has set the time of his return and when that will be has not been given for us to know.

There have been many people over the years that have claimed to know the date of the second coming. Some have announced it publicly and then fallen into disrepute as the day they claimed came and went uneventfully. They clearly did not listen to the word of God. They cannot have possibly understood it if they read it for as we see here, Jesus said, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." (Verse 36)

Now if Jesus himself does not know the day and hour of his own return, what man can claim to have such knowledge? Consider these other scriptures too.

1 Thessalonians 5:2 - "For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."

Matthew 25:13 - "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Acts 1:6-7 - "So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority."

All of these scriptures give clear indication that the coming of the Lord will be at a time set by God and no man has been made privy to that date or time. To claim such knowledge is to ignore the words of Jesus and of God. Any man that makes such a claim is acting foolishly and you would have to question that truth of anything else they may preach.

However, it is possible that we shall know when the Lord will return, for it is not his desire that his people be kept in the dark. I am not suggesting that I know when this will occur, but the Lord has shown that when the time approaches we will be able to calculate it quite accurately.

In the prophecies of Daniel he has established a "countdown" period. It will commence from the time that the continual burnt offering is taken away and the desolating sacrilege is set up in the holy place. In Daniel 12:11 the prophet was told that from the time the continual burnt offering is taken away and the abomination referred to as the desolating sacrilege is set up there would be one thousand two hundred and ninety days. I believe these are actual days, as we know them and not prophetic days. Daniel also went on to say, "Blessed is he who waits and comes to the thousand three hundred and thirty five days." (Daniel 12:12) Why would people be blessed for waiting this further forty-five days? This will be a time of unparalleled tribulation and distress, the like of which has never been seen before. The greatest blessing that could come out of such a period of tribulation is the return of Christ. I believe that is the blessing to which the prophet refers.

So we do not know the day or hour now, but when we see these signs taking place we shall be able to identify the timing of the second coming of the Lord. Even then we will not know the hour and we may not exactly know the day. But we may be able to calculate within a few days of the correct time.

I say this purely from speculation, as I don't know the answer to this matter. The reason for my speculation is that the removal of the continual burnt offering will be a big issue for the Jews. The continual burnt offering is pivotal to the Old Covenant and to Judaism. For the man of sin who will do this thing I expect it will not be publicly announced but will be done in secret. There will not in my opinion be a great song and dance announcing to the world, "Hey look at this one and all. We have taken away the continual burnt offering!" No, instead I would expect this to be done slyly and with cunning and it will be hidden from the world. We may not know exactly when it occurs but just find out one day that it has gone.

As I say, this is all speculation and I may be wrong. We shall have to wait and see. Before any of this can happen there are many other signs to come, the most important of which is the rebuilding of the temple. The continual burnt offering cannot be taken away if it is not first set up. And it cannot be set up until the temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem. This will happen in due course and then we will see all these things spoken by the Lord and his prophets come to pass.

Warning for the Servants of God

(Matthew 24:45-51)

The servants of the Lord in this section are those who have a responsibility for the church. They are the teachers, preachers and ministers of the church. Their responsibilities are to care for the people of the Lord and to ensure they teach them well so the people grow to maturity in Jesus Christ.

Jesus places a warning in this section to all teachers and preachers in the church. He warns them not to consider their roles as an opportunity for power over the people, but rather to serve God by serving his people. They are not given authority to rule for their own benefit. They have authority to rule for the benefit of the people.

Good leadership and good rule is a benefit to the people when it provides a benefit to people. Good rulers in the church are givers not takers. They offer the people the gifts of the Lord for their up-building and growth. The whole purpose of ministry is to bring people to maturity in Christ. We see this in the writings of Paul where he says that the basis of the gifts of ministry given by God are for the purpose of bringing the people of the Lord to the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ.

Thus the ministers of the Lord and of the church have a responsibility to teach the people. They do not have the right to use and abuse them. They do not have the right to extort money and property from them, nor the right to have people look up to them as though they are something great. We are to praise God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the object of our worship. And yet some men in places of power in the churches seem to have themselves set up on pedestals as though they were something special. This is not what the Lord wants of his ministers.

In this section of scripture we see that his ministers are given authority so they can serve, not be served. They are to feed the flock in their charge so they will grow and mature. Those ministers who do this will receive the blessings of the Lord. But those who abuse the power given them will be banished from the Lord's presence and will suffer loss.

This is a timely warning, especially in the present time when there are many abusive teachings in the church. Wealth and power ministry are not of God and these things take away the truth of the gospel. The focus of the ministers must return to the truth of the gospel and not focus on the things of the world. Wealth ministry is about the things of the world. But the truth of the gospel is about freedom, peace, love and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are the things of God and need to be emphasised in the ministry to the church. In addition the ministers need to teach how to achieve these things and how to apply them in their life. The ministers need to be an example to the people as Jesus, Paul and the apostles were examples to the people in their time.

If you teach the word of God, be aware that you will be judged with greater strictness as James wrote. Let this sink in and be a sobering thought so that you fulfil the ministry to which you were called, not for your benefit, but for the benefit of the church. Then you will receive the blessing of the Lord and not his condemnation.

Parable of the Ten Virgins

(Matthew 25:1-13)

In keeping with the parables in this section of Matthew, this one is about watching and being prepared for the Lord's return. Here we see ten virgins who have been invited to the marriage feast. All of them brought lamps as it was night, but five of them were foolish for they brought no spare oil. The other five were wise for they did bring additional oil with them.

Now it is important to first realise that all of these ten virgins were invited to this marriage feast. All of them had been called by the Lord to come to his feast. We who come to the Lord are like those virgins. We have received an invitation to the marriage of the Lamb and the church. But what we see about those who were invited in this parable is that half of them are foolish. The five who brought no oil were not ready and were unprepared for the feast. They did not have sufficient oil to ensure their lamps would stay alight and their lights were going out.

As Christians we are invited to come to the Lord. Like these virgins, we receive the teachings of the Lord that are light to our souls. And like these virgins we must continue to feed our knowledge with the teachings of the Lord so we may grow and not have the light of life dim and go out. If we do not have sufficient oil, that is the

knowledge of the truth, our lamps may flicker and go out, as happened to the five foolish virgins.

The oil in our lamps is the teachings of life. These bring the light of knowledge and insight about the gospel of Jesus Christ into our hearts, minds and souls so that we are full of the light of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We must continue to learn and to take in these teachings. We must apply the teachings to our lives so that we come to maturity.

However it is evident that some of the people called by the Lord will not do so. They will not get the additional oil necessary to grow with Jesus Christ and their lamps may go out. We see the five foolish virgins asking for additional oil from the five wise maidens, but the response was that there might be insufficient to go around. The wise virgins counsel the foolish ones to go to the dealers to get more oil.

The dealers represent the teachers and preachers of the church, led by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that teaches us all things and brings all of the teachings of Christ to our remembrance. So the foolish virgins are advised to go to the teachers and preachers to get more oil. They are to "go to the dealers" to obtain what is needed to prevent their lamps from going out. One of the issues with this is that it is late at night. The dealers have probably closed up shop for the day and would not be able to provide what the foolish maidens sought. Likewise, the teachers and preachers of Jesus Christ may not be available at the time when these foolish people are seeking his ways. It may be too late and they are inaccessible.

After the foolish virgins go and return they seek entry into the marriage feast. But because they were not ready when they should have been, they are excluded. In the same way, those who are not ready when the Lord returns will also be excluded. They will not be able to enter the kingdom of God for they were not prepared.

So again Jesus finishes his discourse saying, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." This is again a warning to all of his people. This parable is telling us to be prepared and to make ready. If we are not ready when he returns, we will be excluded. Now is the time to prepare. Now is the time to come to him for teaching and to learn his ways.

The Parable of the Talents

(Matthew 25:14-30)

This parable continues the warnings Jesus gave to those who are his so that they would act as they should. The parable of the talents has two significant sections. First it discusses the giving of the talents and how they are to be employed, and second what will occur on the return of the Lord.

The parable of the talents is about a man going on a journey and entrusting his property and business to his servants. We see him give different amounts to each of

three servants. In this case a talent was a significant sum of money. They were to trade with these talents for the benefit of their master. Their work was to be in the employment of their master by using the talents he had given them so they would increase the wealth and size of the masters business.

We could look at these talents also as abilities and skills that the Lord gives to each of us. His teachers, preachers and ministers have certain talents, skills and abilities, which they are to employ in the service of the Lord for the purpose of expanding his kingdom here on earth. These talents, skills and abilities are used for the teaching, up-building and encouragement of the church. Perhaps more to the point, the Lord also gave gifts to men for the purpose of working in his kingdom. Some are called to be teachers, some prophets, pastors and evangelists for the purpose of bringing the people of God to full maturity in the gospel of Christ. (Ephesians 4:8-14)

We can also look at these talents as the skills and abilities given to all of mankind. Every person is given a life and certain abilities. Whether they choose to use their life to seek and follow the Lord or to turn from him will determine their outcome in relation to the inheritance of the kingdom of God.

Coming back to the parable we see that the three servants were given different amounts of money to trade with. One received five talents, one received two talents and the third received only one talent. Now it is evident that the master gave his property to the servants on the basis of who would do the best job with it. The servant who received the five talents was well trusted by the master and he expected he would do the best job with what was given him. This level of trust would have been based on prior history and how this servant had behaved and performed on previous occasions. The master knew the servant would do a good job because he had been tested over time and had performed well. Thus the master had a high level of trust and so gave him the lion's share of his property to work with.

It is appropriate that the servants of the Lord are likewise found to be trustworthy. They are to serve the Lord such that they can build trust by doing a good job with the gifts given to them. Whether it is to teach, preach, pastor, aid, administer or whatever, they are to faithfully employ the gifts they are given for the benefit of the Lord and the church and not their own benefit.

The second servant was still in the process of being tried and proven. He was not yet ready and perhaps had not yet fully gained the confidence of the master. Thus he was given only two talents to see what he would do. The master had a level of trust but was not yet sure of his capabilities. However this servant did not let his master down but took the talents given to him and worked hard to produce one hundred percent growth. This built the masters trust and faith in this servant such that he received the same reward as the first servant. Both of them received the same blessing of their master on a job well done and were to receive the same promise of a reward for their work in his service.

Every person who comes to God and follows the teachings of Jesus Christ is offered the same reward. We all have the offer of eternal life with Christ in his kingdom upon his return. If we follow him and learn his ways we will receive this reward. But we may also be given work to do in the service of the Lord and we are to do that work as

trustworthy servants. The reward is the same but the blessing is greater for it is more blessed to give than to receive. If we receive a gift from God, the blessing comes from using that gift in the service of the Lord for the advancement of his people and the purpose of the Lord.

Finally we see the last servant to whom only one talent was given. The master clearly did not yet have much trust in this servant and so he only gave him a small amount to see how he would perform. This servant had the opportunity to use the gift given to him but chose not to. He hid this talent away and did not employ it in the service of the master. There was no growth and there was no benefit to the master on his return from this final servant. All he got back was what was his own.

We then see the reason for why the servant had done nothing explained. The servant chose to blame the master for his own lack of performance. He did not accept any responsibility himself but was in effect saying to the master that he was an evil master. He said, "It's your fault that I did not do anything because you are a hard man to work for so I did nothing rather than fail." It is clear this servant was wrong, for whether the master was a hard man or not, he had been entrusted to do a job and failed to do it. The master then said, "Well if you knew I was a hard and an evil man, you should have done something similarly evil to give me a return for what I had given you." The master said the man should have put his money out to the money lenders to receive usury or interest if he thought the master was evil so that the evil master would have received an evil gain from the servant.

Jesus was not condoning the practice of taking usury or lending money at interest in this section. Usury was forbidden under the law and with good reason for it is destructive. But what Jesus was showing was that if the servant thought the master was evil, he could have used evil methods to do as the master wanted. In essence he was condemning the servant for saying the master was a hard man from the servant's own mouth. The servant chose not to do what he was supposed to do and so was condemned. There was no one else to blame for his inaction and he could not shift the blame. The responsibility for doing nothing fell squarely on the servant's shoulders and he was punished accordingly.

Many people who are given the gift of life choose to waste that gift and do nothing with it. They choose to do the opposite of what the Lord would hope for giving them this gift and they destroy rather than build up. This is a waste. Some even say it is too hard to follow Jesus and so take the easy road to do nothing. They are wrong and are trying to shift blame for their inaction to the Lord, as this third servant tried to blame the master. Their end is condemnation for their failure to use the life they were given to come to the Lord and learn his ways and then bear the fruit of a life lived in accordance with the truth. They fail because they choose a life of error rather than the way of truth in Jesus Christ. The gift given to them of life was a waste and so it will be taken away.

The master had only entrusted a small amount to the third servant because he had not yet earned the trust of the master. The master was testing the servant to see whether he was trustworthy enough to be given greater responsibility. The same tests were applied to the first two servants and they passed the tests, but the third servant failed miserably. Not only did he fail the test, he would not take responsibility for his own

action and so was condemned as well. Had he only failed to trade and make a gain it would not have been as bad, but in his attempt to blame his master for his own inaction he proved himself to be untrustworthy. As such he was cast out of the masters employment.

The Lord expects those who are given gifts to employ them in his service to work with his people so there will be spiritual benefit. His servants have been given gifts so they can use them to build up the church. If we use those gifts we will receive more and greater opportunities to do the Lord's work. Then we too will receive the ultimate blessing, which is to have the Lord say, "Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." But those who abuse the gifts given to them and fail to employ them will be cast out.

Those who do nothing like the third servant, on the basis that they believe the Lord to be hard and harsh, will suffer loss. When the Lord says, "...to those who have not, even what they have will be taken away..." I believe he is talking about their life. Every person has life and the chance to do something with it. They receive gifts and abilities in this life (i.e. like the talents given to the servants) and the opportunity to employ them for the good of the kingdom of God by serving their fellow man and brethren in the church. If they choose not to do that and turn away from the Lord, they will suffer loss. They effectively have nothing if they do not seek the Lord and even what they have, their life, will be taken away.

To Serve the Lord, Serve His People

(Matthew 25:31-46)

If you want to serve the Lord, serve his people. This is the message of this section of scripture. It is an important lesson and one we must remember. It is clear from this section of scripture that judgement will be based in part upon how we have treated our brethren.

The Lord has made it clear that the primary message under both the Old and New Covenants is about relationships. Firstly, it is about our relationship with God, and secondly it is about our relationship with our fellow man. In this section of scripture he shows that when we do any kindness or provide any service to one of our brethren, we are doing it to him. We serve the Lord by serving his people. The contrary also applies. When we fail to serve his people and ignore the needs of his people, we are failing to serve the Lord.

The essence of our relationship with both God and man is love. When asked by the lawyers, which was the greatest of the laws he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40) Under the law the basis of all the commandments rested on these two: to love God and to love your neighbour.

Under the New Covenant it is the same principle underlying the teachings of Jesus. Jesus taught that we are to love one another. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1-8,

- 1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
- 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.
- 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.
- 4 Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;
- 5 it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;
- 6 it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.
- 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
- 8 Love never ends

Without love towards God and our fellow man we are nothing and have nothing. Love is the basis of life and the essence of relationships, for God is love as John wrote. (1 John 4:8, 16) In 1 Corinthians 13 we see the love of God defined and described. This love is a love that is about action. It is not emotional love but action based and behavioural love. We do good things and behave with compassion and care towards those we love. When we do the things expressed in this scripture we show that we love our neighbours, brethren and our fellow man.

Likewise in this section of Matthew 25:31-46 we see that all of the things Jesus is saying to the people in this parable are based on love. He will judge his people on the basis of their love for their fellow man based upon how they treat their neighbour. This is about action. It is about what you do, not what you say.

In Matthew 23 Jesus upbraided the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. A hypocrite is someone who speaks but does not do what they say. They say one thing and do another. They are rightly condemned for their false ways. Christians who hear the words of God and the teachings of Jesus but do nothing about them are likewise on shaky ground. He says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21-27;

- 21 "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.
- 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'
- 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'
- 24 "Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock;
- 25 and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.
- 26 And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand;

27 and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it."

The key here is not about hearing the words of God, but doing them. Acting on the teachings of Jesus so that we can grow and mature in Christ. Part of this is about how we treat our fellow man and this is the teaching being brought forth in this section of Matthew 25.

Learn what you need to know to live a life based on love. Learn the teachings of Jesus that will enable you to walk in love. And make sure that you fulfil the call of a Christian, which is to live a life of love for God by showing love towards him, Jesus and your fellow man. If you want to serve the Lord, serve his people.

Conspiracy Against Jesus

(Matthew 26:1-5)

In the first section of this chapter we see two different points of view regarding the conspiracy against Jesus. Jesus was aware that his time had come to leave the earth. It was now fast approaching when he would be betrayed into the hands of the chief priests and would be condemned to death.

Jesus did not want his disciples to be afraid nor unaware of what was about to happen. As he had done numerous times already he warned them of the events to come. His knowledge was such that he knew exactly how and when his time would come and by what means it would occur. To that end he kept the disciples informed so they would not be surprised by the events about to unfold.

Jesus has provided many advance warnings to his people. As he did with the disciples then, so too he has ensure that today we would have signs of his second coming. These have been discussed in part in some earlier posts and there will be more to come. He does not want his people to be in the dark over what is happening today as he did not want his disciples then to be uninformed. We must look to the signs today so that we are not caught unawares by what is coming.

The chief priests took counsel at that time as to how they could get rid of Jesus. Jesus was a thorn in their side for many of the people were going to him to hear his teachings rather than following the priests and giving them glory. Jesus taught with authority and power. He took away their diseases, cleansed the sick and cast out demons. The chief priests could not compete with him and on many occasions Jesus showed up their hypocrisy in front of the people. The priests were consumed with jealousy and envy and sought to arrest him and kill him.

The conspiracy against Jesus was about to go into high gear, but even then Jesus had a better understanding of what was going to occur than those conspiring against him. Jesus told his disciples that he would be delivered up to be put to death at the Passover which was to occur in two days time. However those involved in the

conspiracy against Jesus said not to take him during the Passover feast in case there was a tumult or a revolt among the people. The words of Jesus prevailed for he was taken and put to death on the eve of the Passover as he had said would occur.

It was necessary that he die this way and at this time. Under the Law of Moses a male lamb without blemish was killed on the eve of the Passover. This originated when the people of Israel were in slavery in Egypt. After many plagues the Pharaoh would not release the people so the angel of the Lord was sent to kill the first-born of all people and animals in Egypt. To ensure the Israelites did not also suffer this punishment, the Lord through Moses instructed the people to kill the Passover lamb on the eve of the night this destruction was to occur and dab some of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their homes. When the angel of the Lord saw the blood he would pass over those houses so that they did not lose their first-born children.

The allegory is that Jesus became the perfect sacrifice for his people so that they too could pass over from death to life through him. Thus it was necessary that he die on the eve of the Passover as these Passover lambs were sacrificed, and by his blood we are able to pass through death into life.

The chief priests were unaware that in their conspiracy against Jesus they were fulfilling the requirements of the Passover that would bring into effect the New Covenant. They did not understand that it was necessary that Jesus died in this way so that he could give life to all who come to God through him. They also did not understand that in their actions, rather than removing a thorn in their side, they were setting in place the foundation of the New Covenant that would supersede the Old Covenant and take away the old forms of worship. The temple worship under Moses would cease to exist and their power base would be destroyed through their actions in putting Jesus to death.

We can be thankful that Christ died and suffered for us in the way he did for through his sacrifice we have the chance at life. We have the opportunity to find a better life now, freedom from sin, law and condemnation and the hope of a future with Jesus Christ in his kingdom.

Anointing of Jesus for Burial

(Matthew 26:6-13)

There are a few principles we can learn from this section of scripture where we see the anointing of Jesus by this woman. We see here a woman came to Jesus while he was in the house of Simon the leper and anointed him with a flask of very expensive ointment.

The disciples were indignant over this matter saying that this was wasteful. They thought it would have been better for the ointment to be sold as it was quite valuable, and then the money could have been used to aid the poor. The intentions of the disciples may have been good, but they were wrong. In other versions of this incident

it was Judas who made these claims. He did not care for the poor but he was a thief and was stealing money from the moneybox. (John 12:1-8) No doubt they could have sold this ointment and used it to help the poor, but that was not the path Jesus took in this matter.

Jesus said to the disciples not to be indignant and not to reproach the woman for her actions. Instead he said that this woman had done a beautiful thing for him. In doing this she had done what she could in preparation for his burial. Jesus also made the point that they would always have the poor with them and could use whatever opportunities arose to help them out at other times. But they would not always have Jesus with them in the flesh. There are some principles here that Jesus was making and which we all should consider.

First we must understand that the flask of ointment belonged to the woman. She had the right to do whatever she wanted to do with it. If she wanted to take it and give it to the poor she could have done so. If she wanted to take it to the sea and throw it over a cliff she could have done that too, for it was hers to do with as she pleased. By anointing Jesus with this ointment she was doing what she wanted and was honouring the Lord in a way that was pleasing to her and the Lord.

This same principle is seen in Acts 5:1-5.

1 But a man named Anani'as with his wife Sapphi'ra sold a piece of property,
2 and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.
3 But Peter said, "Anani'as, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?
4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."
5 When Anani'as heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.

The point Peter was making here is that the property that this man and his wife had was at their disposal to do with as they pleased. They did not have to sell it nor did they have to offer all of the proceeds of the sale to the apostles for distribution to the poor. It was theirs to do with as they chose both before and after the sale. Their fault was in lying about the matter to look good. They sold the property and kept part of the money and then lied saying they sold it for a lesser amount than they actually received. They would have been better to have sold it and then offered a part of the proceeds and told the truth about the amount rather than lie to try and impress others or make themselves out to be better than they were. They paid for their lies with their life.

Whatever we own is ours to do with as we choose. We can give it or keep it. When we give it should be given freely and without feeling pushed into giving for then it is no longer a freewill gift. Nor should we give expecting something in return.

No person has the right to judge another for his or her decision to give or not give either. This is what the disciples were doing with this woman who gave her expensive

ointment to Jesus. They did not have the right to judge and reproach her over her gift for it was hers to do with as she pleased. And in recognition of her gift, Jesus set them straight and said that she would be remembered always for the gift she gave to him.

The importance of this scripture to us today is to be careful likewise not to judge someone for his or her decision. Whether they give or choose not to is up to them, not us. If their decision is wrong, they will wear the consequences of that decision as Anani'as and Sapphi'ra did. But ultimately it is their decision to do whatever they please with their property. We may hope they use it well as we should try to use our own property well, but it may not always be the case. We may not understand the reasons, but we must accept them for it is worse to judge another person especially as we may not know the circumstances under which they are making their decisions. It is especially important for us not to take the path the apostles took. When a person does give we should not denigrate or minimise the value of the gift as they did for the gift is from the heart and according to the wishes of that person to help as they see fit. We should not judge another persons decision but accept it for what it is as giving is an expression of love. Do not condemn over an expression of love.

Judas Betrays Jesus

(Matthew 26:14-16)

The chief priests could find no way to accuse Jesus and arrest him. Their opportunity came when Judas offered to betray the Lord into their hands. In this section Judas betrays Jesus, which was prophesied and was done to fulfil prophecy as another proof that Jesus was the Messiah and Christ.

It was prophesied by Zechariah that the Lord would become the great Shepherd of the flock and he would be betrayed for the sum of thirty pieces of silver. (Zechariah 11:7-14) All of this relating to the betrayal and death of Jesus was prophesied and recorded in the words of the old prophets. There were no surprises. The Lord had planned this to happen this way and once the plan of the Lord was set in motion nothing would prevent it coming to a conclusion.

Why would Judas betray Jesus? We saw that Judas was a thief and stole from the moneybox. Even though he had been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry it was clear he did not have the faith to follow Jesus. He used this position as an apostle, false though he was, to line his own pockets. He saw that by being with the Lord there was an opportunity for personal gain. He was corrupt in mind and did not have faith. Thus we see in another version of this scripture that Satan himself entered Judas to carry out the betrayal and deception that would hand Jesus over to the priest for execution. (Luke 22:1-6)

The priests could not take Jesus by force and they could not arrest him, as they feared a tumult amongst the people. They may have succeeded but the people would have revolted and they would have lost their own power base. So in order to take Jesus they needed to do it with stealth. Thus when Judas approached them with a proposition to

betray him, they gladly offered him the thirty pieces of silver for his service. Judas as one of the twelve knew the movements of the Lord and could lead the priests to him at a place where there would be no crowd to with which to contend.

Judas was operating true to his form, which was ordained from the beginning and which was the task for which the Lord selected him. He was clearly well disguised as when Jesus told the disciples that one of the twelve would betray him, the other eleven did not immediately look at Jesus. And this is just like the nature of Satan who is the great deceiver of mankind. Satan does not appear in the form of a devil as shown by Hollywood or in the imagination of man. He does not come with horns, a pointed tail and a pitchfork. Satan is a deceiver and masters of deception do not stand out from the crowd. They are well disguised and hidden and work their deception in secret and by small degrees. This is how Judas worked to betray the Lord when Satan entered into him for this purpose.

Satan could take over Judas for he was not walking with Christ. His ways were not the ways of the Lord. He did not have the spirit of the Lord and the nature of the Lord being formed within him. He rejected the Lord and thus Satan was at liberty to do with him as he pleased.

Despite all of these things we must remember that this was all in accordance with the preset plan of God. His plan was formed and followed so that we could receive the gifts of grace and life through Jesus Christ. Jesus' death was ordained so that we may live. When we enter into the death of Jesus Christ through baptism we come to God to have our consciences cleaned and prepared to follow the Lord to salvation. The betrayal of Jesus was one of the most heinous actions of all time, but it was necessary so that we may have life.

The Last Supper

(Matthew 26:17-25)

The last supper when Jesus took the final Passover feast was an important point for Christians. It was here that he taught us a valuable lesson to remember during the last supper we also see that he knew he would be betrayed by one of the twelve and it was here that Judas was revealed as the betrayer.

Initially in this section we see Jesus operate a gift of knowledge. He told his disciples to go into the city to a specific place where they would find certain things identifying that place. They were to approach the householder and advise him that Jesus would keep the Passover feast at his house with the disciples. The disciples followed his instructions and found that it was all as he had said and they prepared the Passover that was to become the Last Supper.

When evening came and they were gathered together eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." (Verse 21) Now it was evident that the disciples had no idea which of them it would be and they were quite sorrowful at this news.

This is an indication of how well disguised and how deceptive Judas was amongst them. He was called as part of the twelve, but it was evident that he was always the betrayer. Previously we saw that he was a thief and was stealing money from the poor box, so it is clear he did not have a repentant heart.

But Judas was well hidden among the disciples. He did not stand out as the obvious betrayer prior to this time. We see the disciples in their angst at Jesus' words began questioning him saying, "Is it I, Lord?" (Verse 22) They had no idea who was to betray Jesus, which shows how deceptive Judas was among them. And this is exactly how Satan works. His evil does not always stand out but is cunning, deceptive and cloaked in what seems to be robes of righteousness. He looks good on the surface, as Judas appeared to be righteous to the point he fooled the disciples, but underneath Satan and his people are full of sin and evil. As Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." (Matthew 23:27-28) He also said that you would be able to pick out these servants of Satan. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:15-16) Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14) so how much more so will the disciples of Satan disguise themselves as servants of righteousness?

Jesus knew the hypocrisy of Judas for he too asked the Lord saying, "Is it I, Master." Jesus responded saying, "You have said so." (Verse 25) This was all part of the smug disguise Judas wore to try and hide the evil he was about to carry out. But he was laid open and in plain sight for Jesus knew he had already betrayed him to the chief priests. At this, Judas knowing he could no longer hide went from there into the night to carry out his evil work.

The message we must take from this is that Satan will disguise himself, as will his people. He is a clever and dangerous adversary but his designs will be known and his evil will come out. By following Jesus and learning the truth from his word we can see the evil for what it is. We must not blindly accept what anyone says until we see whether they are holding to the truth. As Jesus said, we will know them by their fruits, and the fruits of the evil ones will come to the fore in due course. So too the fruits of those who seek the truth of the Lord will likewise be evident. So watch carefully how you walk and what you take in and accept.

Breaking of Bread in Communion

(Matthew 26:26-29)

There are very few ordinances required under the New Covenant. Baptism, laying on of hands, anointing with oil and the breaking of bread in communion are about all that are established in the New Covenant. Each of these is important, and especially the breaking of bread in communion for it is a remembrance of all the Jesus did for us.

On the night that the Lord was betrayed he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples to eat. He said to them, "Take, eat; this is my body." (Verse 26) He then took the cup and after giving thanks gave it to the disciples to drink saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Verse 27-28)

The symbolism in these acts and what they mean to us today cannot be understated. Both of these actions in the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine in communion are symbolic and meant to remind us of the sacrifice the Lord made for us on our behalf. It was through his sacrifice that we could be set free from sin, set free from the law and have the freedom to live in Jesus Christ. It is only through this freedom that we can then be transformed into the image of Christ and be prepared to be able to live a life in perfection with Jesus and the Father. Without the sacrifice Jesus made none of this would be possible. So it is important that we remember what he has done for us in this way.

As for the symbolism we should consider the bread and the cup as Jesus described them. The bread is representative of his body, which was broken for us. His body was the sacrifice made for us so that we would be set free. As the lamb was sacrificed each year as a sin offering for the people of physical Israel, Jesus became the sin offering for the people of the spiritual Israel. And more than that, the lamb was offered annually for the sins of the people because that sin offering could not make a man perfect. But Jesus as the Lamb of God who was the perfect offering needed to be offered only once, for in his offering the ability to be made perfect was achieved.

Under the Old Covenant the offerings were made to address the weaknesses of man, and because man was weak the offerings had to be made continually. But in Christ the offering is made just once for in Jesus we have the ability to reach perfection through the working of the New Covenant and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. By separating man from sin and setting him free from the law so that sin no longer has power over man, Jesus brought us to a place where there is no condemnation. How can you be in condemnation when the Lord has forgiven your sin, set you free from sin and removed you from the law that defines sin for what it is? If all of these things have occurred then you no longer have the condemnation of sin hanging over your head and you have perfection by faith. But in this state where there is no sin, the Lord has then given us the Holy Spirit to change us gradually into his image so that the perfection we have by faith can be completed and we can become perfect, as he is perfect.

The cup that we drink in communion with the Lord is a remembrance that he shed his blood for us. In order to ordain the New Covenant blood had to be shed, just as the Old Covenant was ordained through the shedding of the blood of animals. The blood was brought into the temple and offered for the cleansing of the people from their sin and also to ratify the covenant. In the same way Jesus has taken his perfect blood into the presence of God and offered it so that those who come to God through Jesus Christ are cleansed and his blood ratifies the covenant and brings the New Covenant into force.

The power and the wonder of this process are simply mind-boggling. What the Lord has done for us to give us life is astounding. Thus we remember his sacrifice and the giving of his body and blood so that we may have life when we come together in the breaking of bread in communion. There is much more that can be said to describe how this whole process was set up and how it works, which you can find in my free eBook on the Foundations of Christianity.

The Disciples Will Fall Away

(Matthew 26:30-35)

After the last supper Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives. In keeping with his desire that there be no surprises, Jesus told the disciples they would all fall away from him that very night. This was to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah, which said, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." (Verse 31, Zechariah 13:7) Peter said in reply that even if all the rest of the disciples fall away, he would never fall away.

Jesus then operated a word of knowledge saying that not only would he fall away, but also Peter would deny him three times that night before the cock crowed. Peter's bravado and pride came to the surface then when he said, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of the rest of the disciples said the same.

Did Jesus gain any reassurance from their statements of bravado? Did he expect that they would do as they swore to do and not fall away or deny him? No. Jesus knew that it was just talk and that they would all flee when the time of testing came.

Often today when we are put to the test we too flee. We sometimes turn away from the Lord when the going gets tough and sometimes deny him as Peter did back then. We do this because we are weak or we lack faith and trust in the ability of the Lord to deliver us from the thing causing us problems at the time. When we do fall away as the disciples did, should we worry and condemn ourselves? Let us look at what Jesus did when he spoke these words to the disciples.

We see this same discussion recounted also in Luke 22:31-34. What is interesting in this section is that the Lord, being aware that Simon Peter would deny him said to him, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." (Luke 22:31-32) Jesus knew that Simon Peter would fall, so he was consoling him here with these words. He was telling him that it would not be held against him for he knew Peter's weaknesses. Instead though he said, "When you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." That is, when you have repented and returned to the Lord in faith, help your brethren and the other disciples who likewise fled to be consoled. Strengthen them so that they will not suffer condemnation and sorrow over their weakness. So rather than condemn Peter and the rest for their failures, Jesus was saying not to worry about it and move on.

In John 14:1 he shows Peter what he must do when he turns again saying, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me." He tells them to have faith. Don't worry about your failures and weaknesses, even when they denied him on the eve of his death. Instead they were to trust God, lift up their hearts and have faith. This was the message to Peter in particular who was to help the other disciples lift themselves when they fell into condemnation over their failure to be strong with the Lord.

The message is the same today. When we fall through our human frailties and weaknesses, we are to pick ourselves up and have faith in Jesus Christ. We have already been forgiven. When we were baptised we were already set free from sin, past, present and future and we were also set free from the law of sin and death. At baptism this has already occurred and Jesus says there is no condemnation in him. If this then is true, why condemn ourselves for our failures? Instead, let us accept the grace of God, repent and return to the Lord, walking in his truth, and learn from the experience so that we may be stronger next time temptation comes our way. We may fall again many times, but as we claw our way back and hold firm to the faith we have in Jesus Christ, we will eventually have the victory through him.

When we do fall, if we are truly seeking to follow Jesus, we suffer a Godly grief. Paul wrote, "As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death." (2 Corinthians 7:9-10) So when we suffer Godly grief it leads to repentance and then to salvation for our desire is to be cleared of the wrong we had done. On the other hand when we are not looking to the Lord and we suffer grief, there is no one to console and forgive and that leads to death.

The key to this issue of repentance and returning to the Lord as Jesus explained to Peter and the disciples is to have faith. Trust in the Lord, repent and have faith that in Jesus Christ he will cleanse away all our sins and all our misdeeds. We can take comfort over these things as he shows us, "...if we are faithless, he remains faithful--for he cannot deny himself." (2 Timothy 2:13) It is our faith in Jesus that can lift us up and set us free when we repent. It is faith that Jesus told Peter and the disciples to rely on when they repented of their failures to keep their word. And it is faith that will eventually lead us to life.

Jesus Prays in the Garden at Gethsemane

(Matthew 26:36-46)

After the Last Supper we see Jesus take the disciples and go to the garden at Gethsemane. What we see when Jesus prays in the garden at Gethsemane is that these are the last few hours before his betrayal. He spends this time knowing that his betrayer approaches and that he will be delivered into the hands of men for execution.

What we see then is that the Lord takes aside Peter, James and John asking them to stay awake and keep watch. He knew that the betrayer Judas would soon be upon them and so he was going through great anguish for he also knew what was to come. But the disciples were tired and could not stay awake. Three times the Lord stepped aside to pray to the Father and three times he returned to find the disciples sleeping.

The prayer the Lord made to the Father was a prayer of great anguish. He asked the Father saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Verse 39) Jesus was asking whether there was any other way this thing that had to be done could be achieved without him having to suffer, as he knew he would. He was seeking if there was a way out, but even in this hour of anguish he was obedient to the Father for he sought the will of the Father in this matter and not his own will.

It is evident that he was going through a great temptation. In his suffering and sorrow he was seeking a way out and knowing he had to die he would have been under tremendous pressure and temptation to seek to escape it if he could. Thus the words in verse 41 seem odd as in all translations I have read they say a similar thing. "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Verse 41) The question I raise here is how were the disciples being tempted? By falling asleep? The person being tempted at this point in time was not any of the disciples; it was Jesus being tempted.

When you review the original Greek texts we find that the word "you" is not in this verse. The translators have added it. A literal translation of this verse says, "Pray that not enter in temptation." There is no "you" in this section of scripture. As such I believe that Jesus was asking the disciples to watch and stay awake and pray that HE (Jesus) did not enter into temptation. If Jesus succumbed to temptation at this crucial point in time, the whole work from the beginning of time would be wasted. The New Covenant could not come into being without the perfect sacrifice and the blood of Jesus. And if that happened there would be no hope for man as we would not be freed from sin and able to come into the presence of God.

No it was not a temptation to the disciples that Jesus was concerned with but a temptation to himself. He needed their prayers as support so that he would have the strength to carry out the role he was destined to play and thus give man the opportunity for life. It is evident from the prayer of Jesus that he was sorely tempted and would have desired some other way to do the will of God rather than die in the painful and torturous manner that he was about to go through. He knew Judas was to betray him there in the garden at Gethsemane and it would have been a great temptation to just leave before the betrayer arrived. But if that happened how would he have achieved the will of the Father and provided man with the means to escape from sin and be reconciled to God?

It was necessary that Jesus suffers and dies for us. And we see in the prayer that although he would have liked an alternative route to the one planned, God did not give him an alternative. In fact the answer to his prayer was "No." Sometimes we too ask for things but the answer is "No." We need to understand also that as Jesus had to go through this trial so that we might live, we too will go through trials for our learning, understanding and strengthening.

There are some valuable lessons in this section of scripture, which we should take to heart. Also we should praise the Lord Jesus even more for the fact that he did not succumb to temptation and thus we have the opportunity to receive his grace and the freedom that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Praise God for this glorious gift.

Jesus is Betrayed

(Matthew 26:47-56)

After Jesus had finished praying in the garden at Gethsemane he was betrayed into the hands of the authorities. Judas came with a crowd who were armed to the teeth with swords and clubs to seize him. The sign Judas gave that was to betray Jesus was that he would kiss him.

The time had come when all the prophecies of old to be fulfilled. Jesus knew this and that there was no other way for it to occur than had been already pre-ordained. One of his disciples though was prepared to stand and fight for the sake of Jesus. In another version of this even we see that it was Peter who took the sword and struck Malchus who was the slave of the High Priest and cut off his ear. (John 18:10) We also see in the Luke version that Jesus told his disciples not to resist the mob. And after cutting off the ear of Malchus, Jesus said, "No more of this!" He then touched and healed the slave's injured ear. (Luke 22:49-51)

So even in this darkest hour and against his captors we see Jesus show compassion and love towards those who would do him harm. He certainly could have escaped if it was the will of the Father. As Jesus said, he could have appealed to the Father and received the help of more than twelve legions of angels, that is, more than sixty to seventy thousand angels. But as he said, if he were to do so how would the prophecies be fulfilled? How would the New Covenant come into being for it could only be ratified by the sacrifice of perfect blood? That could only be achieved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

At the end of this section we see also that Jesus words came true when all of the disciples fled and forsook him. Their bravado from earlier sections where they said they would stand with Jesus even if it meant death came to nothing in the end. But this was to fulfil prophecy and had to happen. If they had stood their ground and been put to death too, then who would preach the gospel to the world? It was actually necessary that they take flight to preserve themselves so that in due course they would be able to take the gospel of Christ to the world. At Pentecost when the disciples received the Holy Spirit and power, we see a dramatic change of heart. From the men who fled from the crowd who took Jesus captive, they became bold and strong, standing and preaching the word of truth in the face of great opposition. And the people listened to them and many came to Christ.

All of this could not take place unless and until Jesus had been thus betrayed and put to death. The power that was to come through receiving the Holy Spirit could not come unless Jesus first died and opened the way for man to stand before God under the New Covenant. His betrayal, which seemed to be the end and a victory for the powers of that day, turned out to be their great loss and our great gain. What seemed to be a failure in the death of the Lord was in fact the greatest victory of all. For this victory of Jesus was a victory over sin and death and through his victory we received the ability to enter into that victory and be saved.

The Trial of Jesus before Caiaphas

(Matthew 26:57-68)

The trial of Jesus before Caiaphas could only be described as a kangaroo court. They had already pronounced judgement before he was brought to trial. All they needed was for someone to provide a reason for taking their drastic action and give them reason to put the Lord to death.

However this was not as easy as they presumed. Many false witnesses were brought forward to accuse him, but none of their testimonies corroborated. Under the Law of Moses, judgment could be made on the evidence of two witnesses. However they could not find two that agreed. Their witnesses were false and their legal process was a mockery.

Eventually two people came forward testifying that Jesus had said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days." (Verse 61) However they were wrong for Jesus was not saying he would destroy the temple of God. In John 2:19 it shows he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Then in Mark 14:58 it says, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands." In both instances he is not speaking about the destruction of the temple of God in Jerusalem, but as John showed, "...he spoke of the temple of his body." (John 2:21) Their testimony was wrong for they misinterpreted his words for they could not understand what Jesus was speaking about.

In fact what the Lord was telling them was that when he was put to death he would rise after three days. His death and resurrection would then indeed have the effect of destroying not the temple of God, but the temple worship. All of the practices and customs followed under the Law of Moses would cease to be relevant when the New Covenant was ratified in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. People would no longer need to go to worship God at the temple in Jerusalem under the processes of the law. Instead they would need to worship God in spirit and truth. Jesus explained this matter in some detail in his conversation with the woman at the well in John 4:20-24.

20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

23 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.

24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

When Jesus was standing before Caiaphas, his accusers had no understanding of what this statement meant. And despite all of the miracles, healings and wonders he performed, not to forget the teachings of life that he brought to the people, they still did not recognise him as the Christ. In verse 63 we see the high priest ask again saying, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." When Jesus said that it was so and that they would only see him in future coming on the clouds and seated at the right hand of Power, that is the Father, his accusers called his statements blasphemy. Jesus was speaking the truth and they called his truth a lie. They used their lie then as justification for putting the Lord to death and treated him shamefully, striking him and spitting in his face.

This was indeed a low time and a time of great sorrow. Jesus did not deserve this treatment for he had spoken the truth. He is the Son of God, he is the Christ and he is the Lamb given as a sacrifice so that we may be set free from sin and death. He is the Saviour of mankind and the death he was about to go through at the hands of these men would be their undoing and our pathway to righteousness and freedom. He is the door to life and we enter life through him and through his death when we enter baptism. The power of his blood as a sacrifice is greater than the power of the blood of goats and bulls offered under the law for the forgiveness of sin. The power of his blood was to remove sin once and for all and forever and to set us free from the law so that we could walk in righteousness and stand in the presence of God. His sacrifice was our blessing and we should praise him always and forever for what he did on our behalf, for we are undeserving of this wondrous gift. May we praise the Lord always and thank him for his inexpressible gift of grace and love that we could find life in Jesus Christ.

Peter Denies Jesus

(Matthew 26:69-75)

Of all the twelve disciples chosen by the Lord to follow him, Peter was the one he selected to take the gospel to the people after his death. But we see in Peter also all of the failures and weaknesses that man suffers. For despite having followed Jesus for the previous three years or so, Peter denies Jesus in this last hour to save his own skin.

This was exactly as Jesus had predicted. Jesus had said to Peter that not only would he not stand and be prepared to go to the death with him, Peter would deny Jesus three times that night before the cock crowed. Peter along with all the disciples of the Lord

was full of bravado. They had all committed to stand with the Lord, but when the crowd came with swords and clubs to seize Jesus, all his disciples fled.

But Peter followed the crowd at a distance and sat outside the courtyard to see what would happen. It was here that his allegiance to the Lord was queried by the maids and bystanders saying he was one of the Lord's disciples. On each occasion Peter denied it saying, "I do not know the man." On the third occasion he even began to invoke a curse on himself and swear that he did not know Jesus. It was then that the cock crowed and Peter remembered the words of the Lord and he left there and went out weeping bitterly for he knew he had failed.

How must Peter have felt? How low would he have been at this point? His sorrow would have been immense at the capture of the Lord, but then to deny even knowing him, and knowing that the Lord knew he would do this would have put him into untold depths of grief. It is unimaginable to comprehend Peter's feelings at this time.

Jesus knew he would fail and had told him so. He knows there will be times we will fail too in our walk with Christ. There will be times when we are called to stand up for what we believe and we will fail to do so. And as Jesus knew it of Peter, he knows it of us too. So we must remember the advice he gave to Peter and take it to heart when we fail and fall.

Jesus said to Peter that when he failed, to repent and turn back to the Lord. He was to first lift himself up in repentance and then to comfort and strengthen his brethren. (Luke 22:32) Even though Jesus knew the weakness that would cause Peter to fail, he also knew the strength and character of this great disciple and that he would bounce back, ready and able to help the rest through their own anguish and failure. He also said to the disciples when he told them they would forsake him to, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me." (John 14:1) So the power by which they were to overcome the trouble in their hearts from their failure was faith. They were to hold fast their faith in God and Jesus Christ and their faith would win the victory over this weakness in their flesh.

It is the same with us today. The power to overcome our weaknesses and failures relies on repentance and faith. When we fall we must first repent and turn back to the Lord. Then we must believe in Jesus and the power of his blood, which has already freed us from sin and the law. This faith in Jesus and the power of his resurrection is what will enable the Holy Spirit in us to change us so that we can be transformed into the image of Christ. We have an advantage that Peter and the disciples did not have, for today the New Covenant is in force and those who have received the Holy Spirit have access to the power of transformation that is in the New Covenant.

So let us not dwell on our weaknesses and failures. Rather let us take the advice of the Lord given to Peter and the disciples. When we fall, repent and believe that the Lord has set us free. When we are tempted, put the matter before the Lord so that he will provide the strength to come through the temptation and to overcome it in victory. And finally let us always give Jesus praise for giving himself for us so that we can have access to this life in him.

Thirty Pieces of Silver

(Matthew 27:1-10)

Judas for the sum of thirty pieces of silver had betrayed Jesus. In betraying Jesus Judas had been taken over by Satan to do this deadly deed. Although those involved at the time were probably unaware, this all happened in accordance with prophecies that were hundreds of years old. This whole process, including the sum of the thirty pieces of silver was pre-ordained by God and would follow the course he had set.

The prophets Jeremiah and Zechariah had both prophesied about the fact that Jesus would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver. Jeremiah also prophesied about what would be done with the money. Judas when he came to himself sought to repent of the action he had taken and took the money back to the chief priests. They would not take it back and release Jesus, so Judas threw the money down in the temple and left. This was to fulfil prophecy too. The chief priests said they could not take the money and put it into the treasury for it was blood money, and to do so was against the Law of Moses. So they used it to buy the potter's field as a burial place for strangers, and that field became known as the Field of Blood. As for Judas, he went out and committed suicide, for there was no way he could repent of the deed he had done by spurning and betraying the Lord. We see this principle discussed in Hebrews 10:26-29 saying,

26 For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

27 but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries.

28 A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses.

29 How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?

Judas certainly fell into this role. He spurned all that Jesus had offered him as a disciple and as part of the twelve. He threw this all away to betray Jesus, and in his final hour, knowing there was no path back, he killed himself.

Most of this section is an historical account of what happened at the time. What we can learn from this and take from it is this. These actions were not happening by chance. They were all pre-ordained and set in concrete in prophecy hundreds of years earlier. Everything that was done was to fulfil prophecy and everything prophesied came about as it had been said. Each of the prophecies was established and came to fullness in Christ.

These things are proof of Jesus as being the Christ and the Son of God. They are clear evidence that he was who he said he was, and thus the New Covenant established in his blood is truth as well. Furthermore, every other prophecy in the bible that has not yet been fulfilled will come to pass in due course. God has ordained these things and set the processes, times and seasons in place so that these things must happen. We can take heart that the word of God is true and not just a bunch of well-planned stories, as

some would suggest. All that is written in the Bible is truth and the fulfilling of the prophecies, as we saw in the events surrounding the times of the Christ, is proof of the truth of the words of God.

So these things must encourage us. We must know and have faith that the things spoken of in the Bible are true and will happen. And we must be comforted in the knowledge that as we look to Jesus we will receive his grace, blessings and salvation. We must also know for a truth that he is coming again soon as was prophesied and that time is not too far away. Every day brings his return closer, so we must learn and prepare for his return now.

Jesus before Pilate

(Matthew 27:11-14)

After his betrayal, the chief priests sent Jesus to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. In this section we see Jesus before Pilate as his accusers testified against him. But throughout these proceedings Jesus stood silent, not answering a word to a single accusation made. This section of scripture is more a recounting of historical events, but there are some things we can take from it and learn.

The brining of Jesus before Pilate was done to fulfil prophecy. Isaiah spoke of these things saying, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7) Jesus gave no defence against the accusations made. The accusations were lies and he knew it. He had also previously said that had he wanted he could have called upon the Father to send great armies of angels to fight on his behalf, but then how would the prophecies be fulfilled? How would the New Covenant have been brought into effect and how would we have received redemption and salvation?

It was necessary that these things occur and as I have said in prior posts, these things were done to fulfil prophecy, which did two things. First it proved the accuracy, validity and performance of the prophecies thus showing that the words of God can be trusted. Second it showed proof that Jesus was the Son of God and the Christ or Messiah sent to save mankind from sin.

We can trust in Jesus and in God to bring about all of the prophecies in due course. The plan of God and the words of the Father stand firm and will not be changed. Many other things may change, but the course that God has set is steadfast and sure and all of the things prophesied in the Bible will come to pass.

And this provides us with comfort. For knowing this to be true we can watch the events of the world around us and understand these things in the light of the truth. We can look at things like climate change, earthquakes and tsunamis, wars and all the things the people of the world fear, knowing that these things must take place. The

Bible tells us of all these things and many more that will occur. So rather than fear these things as the people of the world do, let us instead recognise that this is part of the predefined plan of God and know that the time of Jesus return is drawing near.

Jesus and Barabbas

(Matthew 27:15-26)

Jesus stood before the governor Pilate for judgement. Pilate could find nothing wrong by which to judge him in spite of the fierce accusations made by the chief priests. So Pilate wishing to release Jesus offered to set him free, as his custom was to release one prisoner at the Passover feast. So in order to polarise the decision of the people he put up two prisoners for them to choose; Jesus and Barabbas.

Barabbas was a criminal of some infamy at the time. Pilate judged that when offered two choices between a righteous man and a notorious criminal, the people would choose the good man over the evil man. However the chief priests understood psychology and the mentality of the mob. So they incited the crowd by placing a few people in it to whip up a frenzy of emotion and to have the mob choose the evil Barabbas over Jesus Christ.

Pilate's wife sent word to him not to have anything to do with the judgement of Jesus. She had dreamed about Jesus and suffered anguish over him in her dream, so she warned her husband. When Pilate saw that the crowd was swinging towards Barabbas he asked them what they would have him do with "Jesus who is called Christ." The emissaries of the priests now had sway with the mob and they then incited the crowd to have Jesus Christ put to death. So violent was this mob that they were at the point of rioting. So Pilate literally washed his hands of the matter. He took a bowl of water and before them all washed his hands saying, I am innocent of this mans blood; see to it yourselves."

The mob mentality had complete control and they responded saying, "His blood be on us and on our children." And at this saying Pilate released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to the will of the priests to have him put to death. Jesus had said that all the righteous blood of the prophets spilled on account of the word of God would come upon this generation. He said, "Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation." (Matthew 23:36) And here we see that the mob took this on themselves. Thus Jesus said also of the chief priests, "Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate." (Matthew 23:38) As a result of their action in condemning and killing the Lord, the house of the chief priests, which was the temple worship, has become desolate and fading away, for it has been replaced now by the spiritual worship we have in Christ Jesus. This could not occur until he had died and been rejected by the priests and the people.

We can learn much from this. The mentality of a mob is not like the mentality of an individual. The devil likes mobs because they are not ruled by reason and logic, but

by emotion. It is not hard to sway a mob once there is a head of momentum. In physics and nuclear reactions they talk about a reaction reaching a critical mass where the reaction just builds of its own accord with no outside ignition. That is what a mob mentality is like. They sway in accordance with the emotions of the rest of the mob and they innately pick up the moods of the mob to unite as if a single organism. Mobs are ruled by the powerful emotions: hate, anger, racism, fear, wrath and blood lust. Even football crowds suffer a mob mentality for their emotions run high, and if there is a negative event they too can become quite violent.

We need to learn from this. In Christ we stand as individuals and are being trained to think and act based upon reason. One of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 is self-control. Indeed all of the fruits of the Spirit are not the fruits of the mob mentality but of the individual. And this is how we stand before Christ and will stand before the judgement seat of God. We will stand as individuals giving account of ourselves. There will be no mob to hide amongst, for that is the power of the mob, the ability to do evil incognito.

For us then who choose the path of Christ, let us look to Jesus and learn to stand in our own right. Just because a hundred, thousand or million people may believe something and go one way does not make it right. We need to learn for ourselves and be guided by the Holy Spirit as individuals. Learn from the Bible. The Lord has put his teachers and preachers into the church to help us grow, but we need to ensure even what they are preaching is correct. Weigh all things against the word. Ask, seek and knock on the Lord's door for him to open the truth and he will answer you.

Humiliation of Jesus

(Matthew 27:27-31)

After Pilate released him into the hands of the chief priests, the soldiers took Jesus to the praetorium where he was humiliated. The humiliation of Jesus was in the form of mockery and abuse. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him as if he were royalty, plaited a crown of thorns, put a reed in his hand as a sceptre and mocked him. He was struck and spat upon and they treated him shamefully.

This was all to fulfil prophecy for it was written by the prophet Isaiah, "In his humiliation justice was denied him." (Quoted in Acts 8:33) Jesus humiliation was of the worst kind for he was truly and innocent man. What is more, in their mockery the soldiers dressed him as royalty, pretending he was a king, and yet not recognising him as the King of kings.

All of this the Lord did and suffered on our account. All of this shame he took on our account so that we might have the chance to be freed. In him we receive salvation, but the price he paid in humiliation, mockery, abuse and ultimately death was enormous.

We need to recognise his suffering and be thankful. In the same situation would we be prepared to suffer in the same way? Probably not. But Jesus who had first descended

from magnificence and the right hand of God suffered all of this on our account so that we could be saved.

His humiliation was our salvation. His weakness before these men became the strength in which we live. His sacrifice became our great salvation and the means by which we are reconciled to God.

We cannot give thanks enough for his sacrifice. There are insufficient words to praise him for this magnificent gift. He has given us the gift of life, which we do not deserve for we were all sinners. He gave us this gift even while we were sinners and effectively the enemies of God. But by the grace of God, by his undeserved kindness and compassion towards us, he suffered this humiliation and death so that we could be released from our bondage to sin and become the children of God. His gift is inexpressible and it is for this reason all people should praise God.

Jesus Nailed to the Stake

(Matthew 27:32-44)

Jesus was led away to be nailed to the stake. I have used the term "stake" rather than "cross" for the Greek word is literally translated as stake and not cross. I am led to believe that this word was translated as "cruz" in the Latin Vulgate and thus when the early translations into English were done they took the word "cruz" and rendered it as "cross." Whether the actual stake Jesus was nailed to had a transverse beam or not is not really known. Thus I will use the term "stake" as it was written in the original Greek.

When a person was put to death in this manner it was normal custom and practice in those times to also nail up the charge or list of charges against them. This was to show the basis for the execution. In the case of Jesus the "charge" that was written was, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Now while they meant it to be mockery and a denouncement of Jesus, it was in actual fact the truth. They did not know it at the time, or rather refused to accept it as truth, but it was indeed the truth. He was both King of kings and Lord of lords.

All who saw him thus displayed derided and reviled him. Even the two thieves who were likewise executed with him derided him, and yet they too were suffering the same punishment. Such is the foolishness of men. In one of the other versions of these events we see one of the robbers come to his senses. He said to the other robber that they too were in the same situation as Jesus and yet Jesus had done no wrong. He repented of his actions and asked the Lord to remember him when he came into his Kingdom, which the Lord said he would do. Many people use this situation as a point of hope to make a deathbed confession and thus be saved.

Anyone who thinks such as this is living in a fool's paradise. Who apart from God knows the timing or manner of their death? Who knows whether they will even have

the chance to make a deathbed confession? And if they have lived a life of sin and this confession is just a mockery or a slim hope of not suffering for their sins, will it even be accepted by the Lord? God knows the hearts of all mankind and will render to each according to their faith and works. If anyone thinks there is a "get out of jail free card" by making a deathbed confession is kidding themselves. The old saying that you can fool some of the people some of the time but you can't fool all of the people all of the time does not apply to God. You cannot fool God ANY of the time.

Jesus suffered humiliation right up to the point of his death. It was as if the devil wanted to wring out every ounce of suffering, derision and humiliation against the Lord that he could. And well he might, for in the death of Jesus, Satan was defeated and the Lord victorious. In the death of Jesus the New Covenant came into force and through Jesus' death man could be set free from sin, death and all forms of bondage. The devil is the master of bondage and so in the death of Jesus those bonds were not just loosened, they were shattered.

In spite of the humiliation of Jesus or rather because of his humiliation we should give thanks. Without his death we would still walk in sin and under the power and bondage of the law. But in his death we are set free if we come to him and accept his freedom through faith in the power of his blood and through entering into this death in baptism. Praise be to God for his gift.

The Death of Jesus

(Matthew 27:45-50)

After Jesus had been nailed to the stake we see darkness descend over the earth for three hours. Some say that there was a solar eclipse at this time. However a solar eclipse lasts only minutes as the moon passes across the face of the sun. In this case twilight and darkness covered the land for three hours.

Clearly this was a sign to show who this was that was being put to death. Here was the great King of kings and Lord of lords dying for the sake of man. He was being put to death wrongfully for he had done only good and never sinned in his life. The sign was recognition of the great and grave gift he was making on our behalf.

In his final moment Jesus called out to the Father saying, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Verse 46) Had the Father forsaken Jesus? No he was with him always, but Jesus in his anguish must have felt he had been left alone.

There are times when we too feel all alone. There are times when we feel the Lord has left us. But he is with us at all times. He said as we ascended into heaven, "...lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:20) When we feel alone it is often we that have walked away from him, not the other way around. When we are in those places we need to take the advice of James saying in James 4:7-10,

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

8 Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind.

9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection.

10 Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

If we draw near to God he will draw near to us. When we come to him he will rush towards us as the father of the prodigal son did to his broken and repentant son. When we are feeling separated from God it is often that we have strayed, so let us turn to God in repentance and come back into his presence.

At the end of this section in Matthew we see that Jesus finally cried out with a loud voice and then gave up his spirit. These words are telling too, for his life could not be taken from him. Life is taken and man because of sin receives death. Paul wrote that, "Wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) So man does not get the right to determine his death, his life is taken away because of sin. However Jesus had never sinned and so he gave up his life as it could not be taken from him. Jesus explained this himself saying, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father." (John 10:17-18)

There were many other things that took place at the death of Jesus, which will be discussed in the next sections.

Signs Attending the Death of Jesus

(Matthew 27:51-54)

When Jesus yielded up his spirit there were signs attending his death. The most significant of these was the curtain in the temple that separates the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place was torn in two from top to bottom.

This was no ordinary curtain. It separated the Ark of the Covenant from the people. It was quite a thick and heavy curtain and stood twenty cubits tall (thirty feet or a little over nine metres). No man would have the strength or the capability to tear this curtain in two, especially beginning from the top.

This curtain was also a symbolic barrier. Only the high priest could enter behind it, and then only once each year on the day of Atonement to offer sacrifices for sin, first for himself and then for the people. This showed that there was a barrier between man and God, and that barrier was sin. No man could enter into the presence of God because of sin. All men sinned and fell short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Only the high priest could approach God once a year in the Holy of Holies and only after offering the sacrifices for sin for himself and the people.

But at the death of Jesus all this was changed. The veil that stood between man and God in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Symbolically this shows that at the death of Jesus it became possible for all men to come into the presence of God since there no longer existed a barrier. The way was open to all people through the death of Christ. He took not the blood of goats and bulls as a sin offering, but his own blood as the perfect sacrifice. And not for forgiveness of sin, but to take away the sins of man and set man free from sin and law so that men could come into the presence of God.

That is why these signs occurred at his death. They indicated there was a new way forward and a new way for man to stand righteous before God.

Other signs were the great earthquake that shook the earth and the saint that were resurrected from the tombs and went into the holy city. We should note that these saints were not resurrected until after the resurrection of Jesus. This was to show that Jesus is the resurrection and the life as he had stated. (John 11:25)

The earthquake that shook the earth at his death was nothing compared to how the New Covenant would shake the world from that time forward. We are still feeling the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus shaking the world today.

Is it any wonder then that the Centurion and those standing with him said, "Truly, this was the Son of God." (Verse 54)

Jesus Earthly Family

(Matthew 27:55-56)

As Jesus was dying there were many people around him. Two of them we see in all accounts were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. But who were these two women?

Mary Magdalene is spoken of in several places, and she played an important role after Jesus resurrection. She was a convert to Christianity after she had been exorcised of seven demons. (Luke 8:2) Contrary to popular opinion, nowhere in the bible does it ever say or even hint that she was a prostitute as she is often portrayed. I do not know how this myth arose as there is no scriptural basis for this common assertion. She became one of several women who had been healed of infirmities or demon possession, and travelled about with Jesus and the disciples attending to their needs from their own means.

As for the second Mary standing afar and watching the Lord die, her identity is a little more of a mystery. The bible in this section says she was the mother of James and Joseph. Two people were named James who are referred to in the early church. These two early disciples were James the brother of John and sons of Zebedee, and James

the elder who wrote the book of James in the New Testament. It is clear this woman was not the mother of the two brothers for their mother, the wife of Zebedee also stood with the two Mary's watching the Lord die.

There is another place where the mother of James and Joseph is mentioned. When Jesus returned to his own country and among the people he grew up with, they were amazed at the works and teachings he was giving. They said of him, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?" (Matthew 13:53-56) This second Mary looking on from afar at the Lord dying was Mary the mother of Jesus.

Jesus is often portrayed as an only child, but here we see that he had at least four brothers and two or more sisters, for the writer refers to "sisters" being plural. Joseph and Mary had other children after Jesus birth. Jesus was of course the Son of God, Mary being the vessel used for his birth. But Joseph was the father of the others who thus were half brothers and sisters to the Lord in the flesh. Paul spoke of James in this way, "James, the Lord's brother." (Galatians 1:19) Matthew also wrote of an event saying, "...his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him." (Matthew 12:46)

From these and other scriptures it is clear that Jesus was not an only child, but he had a family here on earth. Also we can now see that this Mary standing afar and watching him die was his earthly mother. One cannot begin to imagine her anguish as a mother, but she too would receive great joy when he arose.

The Burial of Jesus

(Matthew 27:57-66)

After Jesus had died, a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple, went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus. He took the body and prepared it for burial by wrapping it in a linen shroud and laying it in his own brand new tomb hewn into a great rock. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sat opposite the sepulchre as a great stone was rolled against the door. This all happened to fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah, "And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death." (Isaiah 53:9)

But after all of this we see the priests go to Pilate to make the tomb secure. They knew Jesus said he would rise from the dead after three days, but did not believe him. However they expected his disciples might come and steal away the body in the night and claim Jesus had risen.

Their attempts to prevent Jesus resurrection would prove fruitless. They may as well have tried to stop the tide turning. However they were given a company of soldiers to stand guard and make the tomb as secure as they could. With these preparations and security in place they felt any attempts to remove the body would be stymied.

But they did not consider the purpose and plan of God. It was necessary that the Lord be raised and that it would not happen in secret. Many would witness his resurrection. There would be a great many witnesses and proofs of his resurrection to come in the following six weeks or so as Jesus would appear many times to his disciples and others. This will be discussed further in upcoming posts.

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Matthew 28:1-10)

The single most significant event of Christianity was the resurrection of Jesus. Without the resurrection of Jesus all of the rest of Christianity falls apart and is meaningless.

The New Covenant could only come into force and be ratified upon the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But the life that we receive under the New Covenant rests on the resurrection of the Lord, not his death. Life is in the resurrection as Jesus said of himself, "I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25) The death of Jesus was a critical event, for we enter into his kingdom through being baptised into the death of Jesus. But it is in the resurrection of Christ that we are raised as new creations, set free from sin, law, death and condemnation and receive life.

The resurrection is the one defining doctrine of Christianity that sets it apart from all other religions. Only Christianity preaches the power of the resurrection and entrance into eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is also the only religion where worshippers cannot visit the grave of the founder of the religion, for Jesus is alive: "He is risen." (Verse 6)

Jesus' resurrection was not hidden in a corner. He appeared to all of the disciples, including five hundred at one time in the days that followed his resurrection. The soldiers guarding the tomb were witnesses to the angel rolling back the stone at the door of the tomb, before they fainted with fright. They reported it back to the priests and so it must have been clear to them the truth of the resurrection. Still they refused to believe and sought to cover it with lies.

As an aside, the first people entrusted to preach the resurrection were not the Lord's close disciples, but were women. The two Mary's were specifically told by the angel to go to the disciples and carry the message that Jesus had risen and would meet them in Galilee. The disciples did not believe them when they took this message back, and in the Mark version we see the Lord upbraided the disciples for their hardness of heart and unbelief for not listening to these women (Mark 16:14) Today we see a great contention about women in ministry, but the Lord showed no such partiality. In fact he entrusted women with this first message of the resurrection that is central and pivotal to the New Covenant and Christianity, and that women should bring the message to the disciples.

In the resurrection we see the fulfilment of the work of Jesus on earth and the power of God through Jesus to reconcile man to God. Let us give him thanks for this inexpressible gift that through the death and resurrection of Jesus we might have the right to stand before God and receive life.

Jesus Resurrection Cover up by the Priests

(Matthew 28:11-15)

After Jesus had risen from the grave, the soldiers guarding him went back to the priests and reported all that had happened. It is unimaginable to think what went through the minds of the priests. They believed they had finally killed and gotten rid of Jesus just a few short days ago in shameful and humiliating circumstances, and yet now they were hearing reports that he had risen from the grave!

However rather than repent, accept and believe the truth about Jesus, they continued to follow their own evil path. They lied about it. They bribed the soldiers to spread a lie that the disciples of Jesus had come by night and carried off his dead body. Today this lie still exists and has been perpetuated over the many intervening years. One wonders how a small band of peace seeking men and women could overpower a trained company of soldiers who were armed to carry out such a deed. Such a lie cannot be remotely conceivable as truth and yet it persists even today.

Any person who has come to know the truth of the New Covenant and the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ can refute this lie in an instant. When you have seen and felt the power of the Holy Spirit in your life and the miraculous change that comes with knowing Jesus as saviour and Lord, you will know that there is no lie in what Christians believe. In Jesus Christ we receive the power to become the children of God.

We can perceive the truth of the resurrection of Jesus in the events and changes taking place in the lives of Christians. The power of the blood of Christ to save us from sin, to set us free from law and to reconcile us to God is truly wondrous. And the resurrection through which we are raised as new creations gives us the ability to stand perfect before God through Jesus Christ and the grace of God.

The New Covenant is simplicity itself, but the power of the New Covenant is beyond human wisdom or comprehension. For that we give thanks to God for his mercy, grace and love that have given us this opportunity to know him and to be known by him.

The Great Commission Part 1

(Matthew 28:16-20)

After he had risen from the grave Jesus instructed his disciples to go to Galilee where he would meet with them. It was on the Mount of Olives where he gave them what is often called the Great Commission. Their task was from that time forward to go into the world and to make disciples of all the nations.

The Great Commission actually had three parts. The first of these was the requirement to make disciples. This is quite well known to all of the churches. A great deal of energy and effort is put into this part of the Great Commission by many churches today. They spend a good deal of time in the process of making disciples, and this is a good thing for it is important that all people have the opportunity to come to the Lord. The benefit they receive is a better life now and the promise of eternal life in the future.

However there were two other elements to the Great Commission, which are to greater or lesser degrees either ignored or not well understood. Not by all churches as there are always exceptions to the rule, but the vast majority focus mainly on the first element of the Great Commission to the detriment and sometimes the exclusion of the others. In this post I will look only at the first element, making disciples, but will look at the other two elements in more detail in the next couple of posts.

In regards to making disciples, it was at this time that we see the Lord for the first time declare open the way for all mankind to come to him. No longer was the promise of being God's people limited to the nation of Israel, but it was now opened to all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues. Under the New Covenant your lineage, race, colour of skin and ethnicity was immaterial. All people had the way open to come to God through Jesus Christ under the New Covenant.

Of course this was not the first time this had been spoken of for the prophets in the Old Testament had prophesied that this would occur. But at this time when Jesus specifically said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Verse 19) he opened the floodgates, announcing that the time had come and the prophecies were fulfilled regarding this matter.

It was then that he told the disciples what they should do in making disciples. He had already taught them all they needed to know and given them his own example to follow. Now they needed to take that knowledge and information forward to expand the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ among all peoples by following the second and third elements of the Great Commission.

The Great Commission Part 2

(Matthew 28:16-20)

The second element of the Great Commission after telling the eleven to go and make disciples was, "...baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Verse 19) Some churches have either ignored this element of the Great Commission or given it only lip service. They do not understand the importance and significance of baptism, especially water baptism.

Given that these words from the Lord to his disciples were probably the last words he spoke to them on earth, you would expect they would be extremely meaningful and important. Nothing that Jesus said in teaching his disciples was ever without meaning and valuable as a lesson. So in these last words of his you could naturally expect Jesus to emphasise the very important matters that they were to recall and do under the Great Commission.

This baptism in water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit was incredibly important both then and now. The fact that this message was given in the last words of the Lord makes it incomprehensible that some churches today do not take these words seriously. They either do not observe this command of the Lord at all, or treat baptism as a kind of initiation into the church and a naming ceremony for babies. It was never intended as such. They fail to see and understand the truth and ramifications of water baptism. Since Jesus made a point of telling his disciples to do this specific thing as they made disciples, especially as Jesus himself was baptised before he began his ministry by John the Baptist, then it is evident that the Lord placed great importance on baptism. When we learn and understand the truth about baptism we begin to see why the Lord emphasised this requirement for all his disciples in his final words.

It is through baptism that we die with Christ as we go down into the water. And then as we are raised out of the water we are symbolically resurrected with Christ. By faith in believing that we enter into the death and resurrection of Christ as we go through baptism we then gain entry into the kingdom of God. It is by this faith in entering the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through baptism that we are set free from past sins and set free from the bondage to the law. In baptism we take on the death of Jesus Christ as if it were our own death, and that is what we believe. And if we believe that we have died through the body of Christ by proxy, God says that he accepts us as having died to our old life and being reborn as new creations in Jesus Christ.

Now when a person dies they are no longer under the power of sin and the law. Paul showed this in Romans 7:4 saying, "Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ." And if we are dead to the law we are no longer under it. And if we are no longer under the law we can no longer break the law and so we are set free from sin. And if we are set free from sin we can stand righteous before God, but only by faith. We still have all the weaknesses and failures of humanity and we still fall down and make mistakes, but as new creations in Christ we come to the place where God can and will work with us to transform us into the image of Christ. He will slowly work with us and take away all those human weaknesses and failures until we can stand righteous not just by faith, but in the way we live. We may not achieve that place in this lifetime, but the work will commence immediately once we are baptised and hold on to these elements of faith.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to do the transformation within us as Paul wrote, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) The veil that covers a persons face referred to here is the law. When the law is removed, then the Holy Spirit is able to do the work of transformation.

All of this commences and is based upon being baptised in water into the death and resurrection of Christ and understanding through faith what that baptism is all about. This is why it is so important and why Jesus took pains to emphasise the need for baptism in his last words to the disciples.

There is a great deal of scripture that discusses the purpose and power of baptism throughout the New Testament and space here does not permit a full discussion. If you would like to look at this in more depth and check the scriptures that deal with baptism, I recommend to you to look at my free eBook on the "Foundations of Christianity" which is located elsewhere on my website.

I will look at the last element of the Great Commission in the next post.

The Great Commission Part 3

(Matthew 28:16-20)

The third element of the Great Commission given by Jesus to his disciples was, "...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Verse 20) He told the disciples to teach the people what he had taught them. These are the teachings of the New Covenant, which he instructed the disciples to teach to those who came to them.

He did not instruct them to teach the law and prophets or the Ten Commandments or anything that pertained to the Law of Moses. As we saw in the last post, baptism is meant to set us free from law so why would that form part of the New Covenant? There are many sections in the New Testament where Jesus and the apostles taught or had disputes about the teaching of the law to the new disciples. The law is not part of the New Covenant and in fact it can have a damaging effect on those who are under the New Covenant.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not preaching to oppose the law nor do I oppose the law. There is great wisdom contained in the law for it was the words of God given to Israel to show them right from wrong. We can learn much from the law about how to live a life that is in harmony with God and those about us. But within the law comes the knowledge of sin and the law cannot set a person free from sin. That is only possible by faith in the grace of God and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to take away the sins of the world and this cannot be achieved under the law since it is the law that condemns man as a sinner. If sin is to be removed, then the law must go too.

The commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples under the Great Commission was to teach the people to observe all the "HE" had commanded them. There is a conflict between the teachings of Jesus under the New Covenant and the Mosaic Law under the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant law was about bondage and sin, but the New Covenant is about freedom, release from sin and life. These two cannot exist together. You cannot be in bondage and freedom at the same time. As oil and water do not mix, neither can freedom and bondage.

Paul wrote in Romans 7:1-6 that to try to live under both covenants at the same time was like living in adultery. It cannot and should not be done. Again I have discussed this in much more detail in my free eBook, "The Foundations of Christianity" which you can download and review if you choose and I refer you there for a more detailed study of these matters.

Is it then any wonder that so many Christians are confused and suffering needlessly? If they are trying to live under the two covenants at the same time, and thus trying to live a life of freedom while under the bondage of the law, they have no chance of progressing in Christ. They will live as good a life as they can and will be accepted for what they have rather than what they do not have, but they will suffer needlessly under condemnation because it is only when the law is removed that the Holy Spirit can begin the work of transformation into the image of Jesus Christ.

And all of this occurs because the teachers and the churches (not all mind you) have not heeded the words of the Great Commission to teach the people, "...to observe all that I have commanded you." (Verse 20) They are being taught things that were NOT commanded by Jesus. Thus we see the confusion in the church. If it were only the teachings of the Old Covenant that were clouding the minds of Christians it would be hard enough, but they also bring in many other teachings and lies that have no basis in scripture whatsoever. So it is important for all of us as individuals to seek out the truth for ourselves. In the final judgement we will all have to stand before God and give account and there will be no one to act as intercessory on our behalf. It is our responsibility to find the truth.

And at the end of this final section of Matthew 28 Jesus gives us a great promise. He says to all of his disciples, then and now, "I am with you always to the close of the age." (Verse 20) Jesus has never left us. He is always here if we will seek him out. He said for us to seek and we would find him. This was not "maybe" you will find him, but a definite, "you WILL find me." (Matthew 7:7) It is up to us to seek the Lord for he is there to be found when we search for him diligently. Jesus will come to us to teach, guide, strengthen, protect and comfort us. In due course as we listen to his commandments and follow his ways he will transform us into his image through the Holy Spirit and will give us eternal life if we will walk in his ways.

Jesus is with us now and forever until the close of the age. His return is drawing near, so we must also be diligent and prepare for his return. Give him praise and thanks for the opportunity to know and be known by him.

This now ends my commentary on the Gospel of Matthew.