

MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE

Volume 2

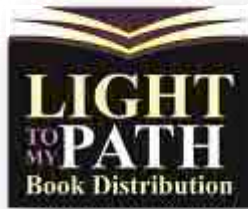
A Devotional Look at Christ's
Later Ministry

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

Matthew, Mark and Luke

Volume 2

A Devotional Look at the Later Ministry
of the Lord Jesus



F. Wayne Mac Leod

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Matthew, Mark and Luke, Volume 2
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FOREWORD

Matthew, Mark and Luke recount the story of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ from His birth to His resurrection and ascension. There is a lot of repetition in the accounts of these three writers as they tell the same story. In the interest of not repeating myself, I have decided to examine the accounts together. The stories told by Matthew, Mark and Luke not only complement each other, but, when examined together, give us a better picture of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus.

I have faced several problems in preparing this harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Probably the biggest problem has to do with the order of events. The gospel writers do not always present the events of the life of Christ in the same order. This is to be expected as each author has a different purpose. This commentary is not an authority on the order of events recorded in these Gospels.

Another problem I encountered is really more of a problem for the reader. Because I am commenting on three gospels at the same time, the reader is forced to jump from one passage to another. I apologize for this and realize that this makes it difficult to find a specific passage. To simplify this I have provided an index of passages and the chapter

where the reader can find the commentary. Consult the index if you are looking for a particular passage.

The large quantity of material covered in these three Gospels presented yet another challenge. I have decided to cover the material in three volumes. In this second volume we will examine the later ministry of Jesus. See the index for a more detailed list of passages covered in this second volume.

I pray that this commentary will reveal the work and teaching of Jesus to you in a greater way. May it point you to his power, wisdom and mercy. May it challenge you to follow His example and open your heart to Him and His work on your behalf.

This commentary, as with all the others in this series, is designed to be devotional in nature. My desire is that it not only imparts knowledge but also life. It is my desire that the reader understands each passage and be changed by its truth. I trust that you will be a different person for working through these important Bible books. May God bless you richly as you embark on this study.

F. Wayne MacLeod

Table of Contents

Foreword	iii
1 The Call of Christ.....	1
2 Jesus Calms the Storm.....	7
3 The Gerasene Demoniac.....	13
4 The Woman Who Touched Jesus'Garment	19
5 Jairus' Daughter.....	25
6 The Blind men and the Mute Demoniac	31
7 Rejected in Nazareth	37
8 The Lord of the Harvest	41
9 The Disciples Sent Out	47
10 The Cost of Discipleship	51
11 More about Discipleship.....	59
12 The Death of John the Baptist.....	65
13 The Feeding of the Five Thousand	71
14 Jesus Walks on the Water	77
15 Unclean Hands	83
16 The Syrophenician Woman.....	91
17 Miracles in Decapolis	97
18 Seeking a Sign.....	103
19 The Faith of the Pharisees and the Disciples Compared.....	107
20 The Blind Man in Bethsaida	111

21 Peter's Confession	115
22 Jesus Foretells His Death.....	123
23 Taking up the Cross	127
24 The Transfiguration	133
25 Questions About Elijah	139
26 The Demoniac Boy.....	143
27 Death and Resurrection Foretold.....	149
28 Jesus Pays His Taxes	153
29 Who is the Greatest?.....	159
30 Knowing the Enemy	165
31 Offending a Little One.....	173
32 Salt.....	179
33 Dealing With Offences.....	185
34 The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.....	195
35 Don't Look Back	201
36 The Seventy-Two are Sent Out	207
37 Revealed to Little Children.....	215
38 The Parable of the Good Samaritan	219
39 Mary and Martha	227
40 Teach Us To Pray	233
41 Woe to the Pharisees	239
42 The Parable of the Rich Fool.....	245
43 The Parable of the Watchful Servants	251
44 Division.....	257

45 Unless You Repent.....	263
46 The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree.....	267
47 A Daughter of Abraham Set Free.....	273
48 The Salvation of the Few	279
49 Rejoicing in Jerusalem.....	287
50 Carefully Watched	293
51 The Place of Honour	299
52 The Banquet	305
53 Counting the Cost	311
54 The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin..	317
55 The Parable of the Prodigal Son	321
56 The Unfaithful Manager	331
57 The Rich Man and Lazarus	339
58 The Dutiful Servant	347
59 The Ten Lepers	353
60 The Coming Kingdom	357
61 The Unjust Judge.....	363
62 The Pharisee and the Publican	367
63 The Question of Divorce	373
64 Jesus Blesses the Little Children	379
65 The Rich Ruler.....	383
66 Labourers in the Vineyard.....	391
67 Jesus Predicts His Crucifixion	397
68 Bartimaeus	403

69 Zacchaeus.....	407
70 The Parable of the Minas	413
Index of Bible Passages	419

1

THE CALL OF CHRIST

Read Matthew 8:18-22

On this particular occasion the crowds had gathered around Jesus. We can safely assume that some had come with their sick and afflicted to be healed. Others wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. The opportunity for Jesus to minister was present. Not only was there opportunity but there was also a need. The people were lost in their sin. They came wounded and broken.

Opportunity and need are not necessarily reasons to minister. Jesus had the opportunity and saw the need but He chose to walk away from it. When I first sensed the Lord calling me to the mission field, people around me would say: "Why are you going to the mission field, there are plenty of needs right here in your own country?" There was no way I could deny the reality of the needs in my own country but there was something greater than need, that was the call of God. I did not go to the mission field because there was a need. I went because the Lord God sent me. If you base your ministry on need, you will quickly be overwhelmed and distracted. How many servants has the

enemy destroyed because they could not say, “no” to a ministry opportunity? There will always be need. It is important for us to follow the leading and direction of the Father. On this occasion Jesus had no sense of the Father’s direction to minister to the crowd that had gathered before Him so He left with His disciples for the other side of the lake. The Father had another plan for that day.

As Jesus stood by the shore before crossing the lake, two significant things happened. The first was that a teacher of the law approached and told Him that he would follow Him wherever He went. There were not many teachers of the law who were willing to make this statement. The fact that he approached Jesus and said this would not have gone over well with his fellow teachers of the law.

The answer Jesus gave to this man is somewhat startling. He reminded him that following Him would not be easy. He told him that the foxes had holes and birds had their nests but He did not have a place to lay His head. Jesus was telling this man that he really needed to count the cost before he came after Him. Following the Lord was not something a person could take lightly. Jesus was looking for men and women who would lay everything down and not be afraid to suffer and endure hardships for the sake of His kingdom.

How often have we made bold statements like this without counting the cost? We promise the Lord that we will give Him everything. We promise to serve and love Him. We make all kinds of promises but don’t follow them through. As servants of God we are so desirous of getting everyone we can into the kingdom of heaven that we don’t always challenge them to count the cost of being a disciple. The result has been that we have churches filled with people

who are not ready to take up their cross. They want to be with Jesus and hear Him teach. They want to see His miracles and have the security of His salvation but they are not ready to pick up their cross. They are not willing to suffer and die for His name. Jesus challenged this man to count the cost before making such a bold statement.

The other incident that happened before Jesus crossed to the other side of the lake was that one of His disciples came to Him and said: "Lord, first let me go and bury my father" (Matthew 8:21). We are not told who this disciple was but he was asking Jesus for permission to bury his father before he went any further with him. The Lord told him to follow Him and let the dead bury their own dead. We need to consider what Jesus was saying here.

There is no indication in this verse that the father of this disciple had actually died. When the disciple asked the Lord for permission to bury his father, it is likely that he had a father who was old and sick and he wanted to spend time with him until he died. He would then follow Jesus. This could have been a matter of days, months or years. When Jesus told the disciple to let the dead bury the dead He is not condemning him for wanting to arrange a funeral or spending time with his father but rather for putting off the call of the Lord.

While it is somewhat unclear what Jesus was saying when he told him to let the dead bury the dead we need to understand here that physically this was impossible. Dead people cannot bury the dead. We should understand the word "dead" here in the spiritual sense. This disciple was alive spiritually because he had been given grace to see Christ and understand His teaching. His family, however, had not been made spiritually alive. The members of his

family may have been unbelievers and dead in their sin. It could be that the Lord Jesus was telling this man to let his unbelieving family care for his father in his final years. Jesus is not being heartless. The father would be cared for by the members of the disciple's family. As for this particular disciple, God had a higher calling for his life. He was to leave the care of his father to his family and follow Jesus.

There are times when God will call us to leave what we truly cherish. This disciple had a deep concern for his father and his failing health. Jesus' call on his life, however, was a higher calling. We should not assume from this that we are all to leave our families like this disciple, but we do need to be ready to follow the call of God no matter the cost. God will call some to stay home and care for their dying parents. He will call others to leave. It is important to know the leading and call of God and obey it.

It is very important that we follow the call and leading of the Lord in our ministry. It is easy to be moved by the needs around us. Our hearts can be broken by what we see, but is this God's calling for us? Jesus was moved by the large crowd that stood before Him. The teacher was moved in his heart to follow the Lord everywhere He went. The disciple felt a burden on his heart for his dying father. All these individuals were moved by the needs around them. They also had opportunity and willingness to do something about those needs. They were all called, however, to something else. While they are to be commended for their compassion and concern, they needed to learn to look more to the leading of the Spirit of God than to the needs they saw around them.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself overwhelmed by the need around you? What is the temptation at this time?
- Why does the Lord show us need and not call us to do something about it?
- What would happen if everyone responded only to the needs they saw around them and did not listen to the leading of the Spirit of God?
- Have you counted the cost of serving the Lord Jesus? Are you willing to surrender all for Him and His service?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a deeper sensitivity to the direction and leading of His Spirit.
- Thank the Lord that He is able to care for those things we have a deep burden for but are not called to do.
- Ask the Lord to show you the role He has for you in particular.

2

JESUS CALMS THE STORM

Read Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25

In the last meditation we saw that the crowd had gathered around the Lord Jesus and His disciples. Jesus decided to leave the crowd and go to the other side of the lake. He got into one of the boats and His disciples followed Him.

As they sailed across the lake, Jesus fell asleep. A sudden storm arose. As the storm raged the waves pounded against the boat. The disciples wrestled to keep the boat from sinking. Jesus continued to sleep.

The fact that the Lord Jesus slept through this storm is an indication of how tired He must have been. The crowds drained Him of his human energy. Part of the reason why He left the crowd that day had to do with His need of rest. The Lord Jesus felt the tiredness and weariness we feel.

The disciples were doing all they could to deal with the storm but it was getting ahead of them. Fearing the boat was going to sink, they decided to wake Jesus.

Notice the frustration of the disciples at this time. Mark seems to express their frustration better than the other Gospel writers when he quotes the disciples to have said, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" The disciples seemed to resent the fact that the Lord was not doing anything about their situation. They wondered if He cared about them and the danger they were facing. They pleaded with Him to do something. Perhaps you have found yourself in a similar situation. You see the storms, trials and tribulations surging around you and wonder why the Lord does not do something about it.

Keep in mind here the stress and turmoil in the minds of the disciples. Perhaps they are bailing out the water from the boat as fast as they could. They were trying to row the boat but their strength was quickly fading. They had nothing left to give. They had no more strength. They had done everything they could and were now resigning themselves to the fact that they were going to die if Jesus did not intervene. It is at this point of helplessness that they call on the Lord Jesus. The Lord woke from His sleep. He saw the situation and rebuked the disciples for their small faith. Standing up in the boat Jesus rebuked the winds and waves commanding them to be still. Immediately the wind stopped and the waves died down. All was calm.

This incident shows us our own weakness. The stresses and problems of this life are many. Like the disciples, we are easily overwhelmed. We are powerless to change our situations. Our resources and understanding are limited. In an instant the Lord changed everything. The disciples were amazed at the power of God that day. The rest of the journey would have been very interesting. They had seen

the power of God working on their behalf. They were also intensely aware of their lack of faith.

Do you find yourself overwhelmed by a situation in life? The Lord Jesus was with the disciples in the boat. He is with you, too, if you know Him as your Saviour. He knows all about what you are going through. In an instant with a simple word from His mouth everything can change. He opens doors where presently no doors exist. Mountains are moved. Storms are calmed. People are changed. The impossible is done. We are left like the disciples with our mouths open in amazement at the power and wonder of God.

It is important for us to understand also that while the Lord could have prevented the storm, He didn't. God not only allows storms, He also allows us to go through these storms for a time. He does this to show us His power. The Lord God allowed His children to struggle in Egypt. He allowed Pharaoh's heart to be hardened in order to reveal His power to Israel and the world. Speaking to Moses in Exodus 14:4 God says:

“And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.”

God reveals His power to us in the storm. The more difficult the trial the more we stand amazed at His overcoming power. The storm is God's way of telling you that He wants to reveal more of Himself to you.

The disciples in the boat could not help but be humbled that day as they realized the smallness of their faith. They

had seen the Lord do many wonderful miracles. They were His chosen disciples but they had failed to trust Him in this particular storm. Their faith needed to be stretched. This was Jesus' intention all along. As they moved across the lake they would engage in an even more intense spiritual battle. The Lord allowed this storm to prepare them for what was ahead.

Are you facing a storm in life right now? These storms are God's way of building your faith. Instead of grumbling and complaining we need to learn what God has for us to learn. We need to let Him draw us closer in these times. The disciples would certainly not be the same after that storm. God would use the storm to accomplish His purposes in them and prepare them for what was ahead.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about how the Lord Jesus can identify with our physical limitations?
- What trial are you going through now? Can you see this as an opportunity for the Lord to demonstrate to you His power?
- Consider a trial you have had to face in the last while. What did that trial teach you about God and His ability?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for your lack of faith. Ask Him to increase your faith in Him through the storms He sends your way.
- Thank the Lord that despite our lack of faith He still demonstrates His power and love to us.
- Ask the Lord to give you a trusting and peaceful heart in the midst of your present struggle.

3

THE GERASENE DEMONIAC

Read Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and His disciples had left the crowd and crossed the lake. Many people had come to Him for healing and to hear Him speak. The Father, however, had another purpose for Him. Part of that purpose was to minister to the disciples in the boat on the sea. The other reason had to do with another individual who needed His attention. We will meet this person in this chapter.

It is important that we see how the Lord prepared His disciples for what was about to happen. On the other side of the lake, in the region of the Gerasenes, the disciples would be confronted with a demon-possessed man. Matthew tells us that while there were two demon possessed men that meet the Lord that day (Matthew 8:28) our concern is with only one in particular.

The Gospel writers describe this man to us. They tell us that the people of the region were so afraid of him that they

would not pass by the place where he lived. He was a very violent man. He did not wear clothes. He lived in the tombs screaming and crying out day and night. He would cut himself with stones. There had been attempts to restrain him but he broke the chains. He could not be subdued. His physical strength was above normal. That strength was demonic in origin. He was a man to be feared. He was also a man to be pitied. The fact that he kept cutting himself and crying out indicates that he was hurting very deeply. He could not sleep. He was up at all hours of the night walking through the tombs. He was a man in deep pain and agony. He was being tortured by the demons that possessed him.

We can only imagine what the disciples felt that day as they saw this demoniac approaching them. Fear and terror would have been quite natural. The trip across the lake, however, and seeing Jesus calm the storm had been real preparation for what was going to happen.

When the demoniac saw Jesus, he fell down crying out, "What do you want with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" (Matthew 8:29). Luke tells us that the man shouted at the top of his voice begging the Lord not to torture him (Luke 8:28). There are several things we need to notice here.

Notice first that the voice that spoke was the voice of the evil spirits in the man. They had control of not only his body but also his voice. This man had no will of his own. The words he spoke were the words of the demons in him.

Second, notice that these evil spirits needed no introduction to the Lord Jesus. They knew who He was and what He had come to do. They were terrified of Jesus. They had

been terrorizing the whole region. They feared no one in that region but when they saw the Lord Jesus they shouted out in absolute terror. They saw in Him the one who could destroy them and send them away to a place of eternal agony. These demons feared the Lord. They feared what He would do to them. They feared being sent to hell. They knew the terror of hell and did not want to go there. If the demons themselves fear hell how great must be its terror!

Notice, thirdly that the demons bowed to the Lord. They were obligated to bow to Him. They knew they were in the presence of one who was much greater than they were. As much as they hated Him, they still bowed in His presence. Every knee will one day bow to the Lord Jesus (Philippians 2:10) even the demons themselves will have to fall at his feet.

Finally, notice that the demons knew they were defeated. They knew that there was an appointed time for them to be judged and to go to that place of torture. They asked Jesus if he had come to torture them before the appointed time. Even Satan knows that his time is limited (Revelation 12:12). He knows that he cannot win the battle but he wants to do as much damage as possible.

When Jesus saw the man, He commanded the demons to leave. The demons pleaded with Jesus not to drive them out of that region. Luke 8:31 tells us that "they begged Him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss." These demons feared hell. They did not want to go there. They begged Jesus not to send them there before their time.

Jesus asked the demon his name. The demon told Jesus that his name was Legion. He had that name because there were many demons. The demons asked Jesus to

send them into the herd of pigs that were grazing in the fields not far away.

With one word, the Lord Jesus commanded them to go to the herd of pigs. The pigs immediately rushed down the steep bank and into the lake where they perished. It would have been a very disturbing sight to see. The demons acted according to their destructive nature and killed the whole herd of pigs. We are not told where they went from there.

Those who were tending the pigs ran off to the town and told the town folk what had happened. Upon hearing the news, they came to see Jesus. When they arrived, they saw the demoniac clothed and in his right mind. Luke 8:37 tells us that they asked Jesus to go because they were overcome with fear. What they saw that day was a power greater than the demonic power that had terrorized them for years. They feared that power and what it could do to them. They did not want it in their midst.

The prophets of old also experienced this powerful presence. Isaiah fell before God feeling that he was coming apart at the seams (Isaiah 6:4-5). John fell as though he were dead at the presence of Jesus (Revelation 1:17). There was an awesome sense of the power and presence of God that day that caused great fear in the minds and hearts of those present. They were not ready to surrender to that power. They were not ready to make things right and so they asked Him to leave. There are many people who are running from God today because they too are afraid of Him and His power. They fear to surrender, so they run for their lives.

Jesus did not debate with these individuals. He listened to what they said and He and the disciples got in the boat to leave. The man from whom the demons were cast begged Jesus to let him come with Him but Jesus told him to stay. He told him to tell his family how much Jesus had done for him and how He had shown mercy toward him. The man heard what Jesus had to say and went throughout that region proclaiming to everyone that would listen to him how much the Lord had done for him. People were amazed at his incredible testimony.

The amazing thing about this story is that this man was the only one who was touched that day. Jesus crossed the lake for him. Jesus touched this one life and sent him on his way. That one man would in turn powerfully impact the community in which he lived. Jesus did not try to reach that region Himself. He simply empowered someone else to do it. Each of us has a role to play.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about hell?
- What does this passage tell us about the power of Jesus over the forces of hell?
- What do we learn about the work of evil spirits?
- What encouragement do you receive from the fact that the Lord can so radically change a life like that of the demoniac?

- What role does the Lord Jesus have for you to play?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is greater than the forces of hell.
- Thank the Lord that He is able to deliver you from the strongholds of the enemy.
- Ask the Lord to show you your role in the kingdom of God.
- Take a moment to ask the Lord to reveal to those around you the reality and terror of hell.

4

THE WOMAN WHO TOUCHED JESUS' GARMENT

Read Matthew 9:18-22; Mark 5:21-34; Luke 8:40-48

According to Mark 5:21 and Luke 8:40 when Jesus and His disciples crossed the lake after healing the Gerasene demoniac they were again confronted by a large crowd. Luke 8:40 tells us that this crowd expected Jesus. They came with their needs and burdens. They wanted Jesus to heal their diseases and solve their problems but they were quite unwilling to give up everything to follow Him.

As Jesus was by the shore, a ruler of the synagogue came to Him and asked Him to come to his house. He had a young twelve-year old daughter who was dying. He begged Jesus to touch her so that she would live. Jesus decided to go with this man to his house. The crowd followed Jesus. Luke tells us that the crowd almost crushed Jesus (Luke 8:42). This is an indication of just how many people were gathered around Him. Many of these people were desperate. They wanted to get close to the Lord. Everyone wanted Him to heal their sickness. The only way

to get to Him was to push through the crowds. You can imagine the confusion as the people all tried to get to Jesus.

Among the people present was a woman who had a blood problem. She was subject to bleeding for twelve years. Mark tells us that she had suffered much because of this condition. She had been to many doctors but none could heal her. She had spent all she had and her problem had only gotten worse. When she heard that Jesus was in the region, she was among those present in the crowd. She saw Jesus as her only hope.

The crowd was so large that the woman did not feel she could ever have a personal audience with the Lord. Perhaps she felt somewhat unworthy of His attention. She believed, however, that if only she could touch the hem of His garment she could be healed.

What we need to understand here is that the Law of Moses stated that a woman who had such a disease was ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 15:19). Any garment she touched would become unclean and so would the person who wore the garment.

Pushing her way through the crowd, the woman got close to the Lord Jesus. She reached out and touched the hem of His garment. She did not want to be noticed. She felt she could touch His hem and nobody would know. There were so many people present that day that people may have been bumping up against Jesus anyway. When she touched His garment she was immediately healed. Her bleeding stopped. She knew something had happened.

Jesus also was aware that something had happened. Mark tells us that He felt power leaving Him. Each miracle cost Jesus something. This work was an exhausting work. When He felt this power leave, Jesus turned and asked who had touched Him. Luke tells us that those around Him denied that they had touched Him. The woman herself did not come forward. Peter reminded the Lord that the crowd was pressing up against them and that someone could have easily touched Him without being aware of it. They felt that Jesus' question was rather foolish in this context.

Jesus knew, however, that someone had touched Him and had been healed. He kept looking through the crowd to find the person who had touched Him. Luke tells us that the woman, who had been hiding in the crowd, realized that she could not go unnoticed. She knew that the Lord Jesus would find her. She came to Him and fell at His feet. She trembled as she came. She was filled with terrible fear as she lay at His feet (Mark 5:33). She told Jesus how the moment she touched His garment she was healed.

Why does this woman tremble at the feet of Jesus? She did not know what to expect. She, as an unclean person, had touched the Lord Jesus. Now that His eyes were on her, she may have felt guilty for her boldness. While she was healed, she now trembled because she was in the presence of the Son of God. Would He punish her for her boldness? Would he strike her for defiling His garment? The law said she should not have touched Him. She knew this. She had broken the law in approaching Him. She was guilty and unclean as she stood in the presence of the Messiah. She dared not even look in His eyes. She lay with her face in the dirt awaiting her judgment.

Jesus understood her fear. He saw her trembling at His feet. He spoke directly to that fear. "Take heart, my daughter," He said (Matthew 9:22). Jesus did not condemn her. He affirmed her. He told her that her faith had healed her. "Go in peace," He said (Luke 8:48). "Be freed from your suffering" (Mark 5:34). From that moment on she was healed. Never again did this sickness return.

It is particularly important to understand why the Lord so intentionally called her out from the crowd. She had been healed. Why would the Lord not leave until she had been identified? There may be several important reasons for this.

First, the identifying of this woman showed the crowd the grace and mercy of God. We have already seen how this woman was unclean. She dared to approach the Lord Jesus. Jesus did not condemn her. Instead, He accepted her. Maybe you feel like this woman. You feel unclean and unworthy of the Lord's affection and forgiveness. You are afraid of what He will say to you. You lay at His feet trembling. You know you are guilty. The Lord wants to reach out to you like He did to this lady. He wants to forgive you and heal you. We come as guilty sinners but we come to a God of tremendous mercy and forgiveness.

Second, by identifying her, the Lord showed this woman that she was not to hide her light. She had experienced a wonderful blessing from the Lord. She had been healed from a twelve-year disease. She was keeping this to herself. She was hiding her light. Jesus called her forth. She had to stand before the crowd and share what the Lord had done for her. She had to testify to His goodness and mercy. Has the Lord done something in your life? Don't be like this lady and hide your light. When Jesus healed the

Gerasene demoniac, He told him to go back to his family and tell them what the Lord had done for him. This woman feared not only Jesus but also the crowd. She needed to be set free from her fear of what others might think. She needed to be willing to let her light shine.

Third, this woman needed to recognize and confess her sin. She had touched the hem of His garment as an unclean person. She had stolen a blessing from Him. She came trembling with fear because of her sin. She came as an unclean sinner. She needed to understand her sin before she could truly understand the forgiveness and mercy of the Lord toward her. All too many people do not confront their sin. They want to be healed but they do not want to admit that they are sinners. Unless we understand and confront our sin, we will not be able to understand what the Lord has done for us and live in the victory He provides.

Finally, Jesus needed to confirm His blessing on her healing. This lady did not go unnoticed. Jesus singled her out. He felt she was important enough to stop what He was doing to spend a moment with her. Remember that the Lord is going to the home of a child who was dying. Every moment counted. Jesus stopped what He was doing to notice and speak to this woman. Up until this point the blessing this woman had received was stolen. She had never asked Jesus for this healing, she simply took it. Had Jesus not called her out, she would have left healed but not aware of the depth of the Lord's love for her. By calling her out, Jesus confirmed the miracle and gave His blessing to it. He assured her that it was His will that she be healed. He seals the healing and affirms His love for her personally. He sent her on her way with a deep awareness of her unworthiness but an even deeper awareness of His wonderful love, forgiveness and healing as well as a

commission to let her light shine and not be ashamed to telling others what the Lord had done for her.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage tells us about the importance of recognizing and confessing our sin?
- What do we learn here about the importance of "letting our light shine?" Does your light shine for Him?
- What do we learn here about the love and compassion of the Lord for individuals?
- What has the Lord Jesus done for you personally?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you boldness to let your light shine more brightly for Him.
- Thank the Lord for His mercy and compassion. Thank Him that He notices you personally.
- Thank the Lord that He always has time for you.

5

JAIRUS' DAUGHTER

Read Matthew 9:23-26; Mark 5:35-43; Luke 8:49-56

Jesus was on His way to the home of Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue. His twelve-year old daughter was sick and at the point of dying. On His way there Jesus healed the woman who touched the hem of His garment. According to Mark and Luke, it was while the Lord was speaking to the woman that one of Jairus' servants came with the news his daughter had just died.

Jesus had stopped to speak with the woman and as a result this young girl had died. What would the woman, healed of her blood flow, have felt hearing this news? We are not told. Jesus told Jairus, however, not to be afraid, but to believe, and his daughter would be healed.

Mark tells us that the Lord refused to allow the crowd to come any further. He went to the home of Jairus with Peter, James and John. He was also accompanied by Jairus and his wife (Luke 8:51). When they arrived at the home, Jesus noticed the flute players playing their mournful tunes. A crowd had gathered to mourn the loss of this

young girl. There was a lot of commotion and noise with all the wailing and grieving.

Jesus approached the crowd and told them to stop wailing. He told them that the girl was only asleep. We should not think here that the child had not died. Her death had already been confirmed. The funeral was underway. When Jesus said that this young girl was asleep, He spoke as one who knew that she would rise again. The death of this young girl was not permanent. She would be healed and go on to live a normal life.

This story reminds us of Lazarus in John 11:38-43. Jesus allowed him to die so that the glory of God could be revealed. Jesus was delayed by the woman who had touched the hem of His garment but that delay would accomplish an even greater purpose. God would receive greater glory. There are times when we encounter obstacles on our pathway. Realize that these obstacles are under God's control. He will accomplish His purposes in time.

I like to think of Jairus in this scene. What was he thinking when Jesus was delayed by the woman who touched His garment. I have to admit that there are times when my stress level begins to mount because things are not happening the way I would like them to happen. If I were Jairus I would likely have been trying to get Jesus to move a little faster. I would have been explaining to Him that my daughter was very soon going to die. When the message arrived that his daughter was dead, there would probably have been many questions in Jairus' mind. Why did Jesus not come sooner? Why did He stop for that woman? What we need to see here is that the delay was all part of the plan. We need to learn how to trust the Lord more. We need to trust that the obstacles and delays are also under His

control. The power of God would be revealed in an even greater way now that Jesus had been delayed and Jairus' daughter had died.

When Jesus told the crowd to go away because the young lady was only sleeping the crowd laughed at Him. Luke tells us that they knew Jairus' daughter was dead. They laughed because they felt that He didn't know what He was talking about.

Jesus took His disciples and the girl's parents with Him and went in to where the girl was lying. He took the girl by the hand and said "*Talitha koum!*" (Mark 5:41). These were Aramaic words meaning "little girl, I say to you, get up." Mark alone gives us the actual words Jesus spoke. The words spoken by Jesus that day were so powerful that Mark does not seem to want to translate them. With these simple words, the power of God was released. Immediately the girl stood up and walked around. Jesus told the parents to give her something to eat.

Both Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus gave strict orders that the parents were not to let anyone know what had happened. They could hide the fact that their daughter was alive, however. News of her healing spread throughout the region. Jesus was not telling them to hide their daughter. What He was telling them, however, was not to go out of the way to spread the details of what had happened that day. Jesus knew what the response of the crowd would be. The crowds already pressed in on Him. We can only imagine what would have happened had they started bringing their dead to Jesus asking Him to heal them as well. This miracle was not intended for the crowd. It was intended to minister to this particular family.

We see here the wonderful power of God over death itself. We should find tremendous hope and comfort in His power over every obstacle that comes our way. Nothing is outside of his control.

For Consideration:

- What has been your response to the obstacles that come on your pathway? What is the challenge of this passage for you?
- What does the Lord teach us here about His sovereign control over all things? What issues are you facing right now? Is He in control of those issues? What encouragement do you find in this?
- In the story of the woman healed from her flow of blood, Jesus called her to testify to what He had done for her. Here in this story, however, Jesus told the parents not to tell anyone what He had done. Are there things God does for us that He wants us to keep to ourselves? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the obstacles He has allowed to come into your path and for the lessons they have taught you in life?
- Thank the Lord that there is not a problem He cannot solve.

- Ask the Lord to give you more patience as you wait on Him and His timing.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to understand when He wants you to share what He has done and when He wants you to keep these things to yourself.

6

THE BLIND MEN AND THE MUTE DEMONIAK

Read Matthew 9:27-34

Jesus had raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. After ministering to this family, Jesus and His disciples left the region. Two blind men followed them.

As the blind men followed Jesus they cried out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (Matthew 9:27). The expression "Son of David" is significant. This title was used by the Jews to speak of the Messiah. By calling Him the Son of David the blind men are stating that they believed He was the Messiah who was to come.

Matthew tells us that Jesus went indoors and the blind men followed Him (Matthew 9:28). Why does Jesus take them indoors? At this point in His ministry, the Lord has been challenging those He healed to be quiet about their healing. He told the family of Jairus that they were not to spread the news of how He had raised their daughter from the dead. Instead of healing these blind men in public, Jesus

found a private location where He could spend some time with them alone, away from the crowd.

When Jesus was alone with the men, He asked them if they really believed He could heal them. The men had very obviously been blind for some time. It was hard to imagine being able to see again. Standing in front of Jesus now they were forced to examine their faith. Did they really believe or were they just hoping He could do something? There is a world of difference between believing generally that Jesus can heal and believing that He will heal you personally. They had heard about how Jesus had healed others but did they believe that He would do the same for them?

The blind men told Jesus that they did believe. Jesus touched their eyes and said: "According to your faith will it be done to you" (Matthew 9:29). Their sight was restored that very moment. They did believe. How important it is that we see what Jesus is teaching us here. Examine your prayer list. Do you really believe that God will answer your prayers? He may not answer them the way you think but are you aware that when you pray, you are presenting your request before the King of kings and Lord of lords? You don't walk up to a king and ask him for things you don't really even want. You don't ask him for things you don't believe he can give you. We need to come with hearts that truly believe what we are asking. We need to come trusting that He can and will do something about our request.

When they had been healed, the Lord Jesus told them that they were not to tell anyone what had happened. Matthew tells us that Jesus "warned them sternly" (Matthew 9:30). Again the reason for this seems to be because the crowd would have pressed in even more to Jesus with their

needs. Jesus was constantly being swamped with people and their needs. We need to remember that Jesus, though He was the Son of God was also human just like us. He felt tired and knew what it was like to be overwhelmed by the crowds.

How often have people demanded our time and energy? We become slaves to people and their needs. The apostle Paul had to deal with this problem in his ministry. In Galatians 1:10 he wrote:

“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

People will demand our time and energy, but are we doing what God requires? I have seen too many pastors become slaves to their congregations. They live their lives trying to please the members of their church rushing from one need to another. Jesus teaches us that there are times when we will have to ignore the needs around us to do the will of the Father.

While Jesus sternly warned the blind men not to say anything, they went from that place spreading the news of what Jesus had done. This would no doubt have encouraged even more people to come to Jesus with their needs and illnesses.

Leaving that place, Jesus encountered a man who was possessed by an evil spirit. The demons had bound his tongue so he could not speak. Jesus drove the demon out of the man and he began to speak.

The crowd was amazed. “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel,” they said (Matthew 9:33). The Pharisees, however, were not convinced. They saw the miracles but told those present that Jesus had performed this miracle by the power of Satan.

The individuals we have spoken of in this section needed healing in different ways. There is no reference in the story of the blind men to any demonic oppression. Their problem was physical in nature. Jesus ministered to them physically. On the other hand, the man who was mute was suffering from a demonic presence in his life. To deal with his problem Jesus needed to cast out the demon. The battle we are engaged in has many faces. Each situation needs to be examined independently. The solution to each problem will be different. We need great discernment and wisdom as we seek to advance the kingdom.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the importance of faith in our prayers?
- Have you ever found yourself coming to God with requests that you really did not believe God would answer? How should we come to God in prayer?
- What does this passage teach us about the ability of demons to afflict us physically?
- Have you ever found yourself being a slave to people and not a servant of God? Give an example.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to increase your faith so that you can pray believing that He will answer as He promised.
- Ask the Lord to give you greater discernment to minister to those who come to you.
- Ask the Lord to keep you from being a slave to people. Ask Him to help you to follow His leading and direction in your ministry and life.

7

REJECTED IN NAZARETH

Read Matthew 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6

As the Son of God, the Lord Jesus was turned away from towns. Many did not understand or appreciate His message. He knew what it was like to preach and have people refuse His word. People turned their back on Him. He knew the pain of rejection.

Here in these next passages the Lord Jesus returned to Nazareth, His hometown. On the Sabbath day He went to the synagogue and began to teach. The people who gathered to hear Him that day knew Him well. Jesus had grown up in their midst.

When the people of Nazareth heard Jesus preach they were astonished at his words. They wondered where He got His wisdom and power to perform such incredible miracles. They were amazed at what they saw and heard. Jesus' words demonstrated the wisdom of God. They were unlike the words of the teachers of the Law. Jesus spoke with power. His ministry was anointed by the Holy Spirit.

Evidence of the hand of God was on Jesus, but the people of Nazareth had a real problem with Jesus and His claims.

They knew Him as a young boy. They knew His earthly father and mother. To them, He was just a carpenter's son. His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas were living in the community. Jesus also had sisters who lived in the region of Nazareth. The inhabitants of that town could not believe that Jesus could be anyone great, certainly not the Messiah. They somehow felt that the Messiah would have come from a greater family. They could not believe anything great could come from their town.

There are a couple of points we need to see here. The first is how the Lord God is willing to use what seems to be small in the eyes of this world to do a wonderful work. The citizens of Nazareth could not imagine that God could use such an insignificant family to raise up the Messiah of Israel. God did just that. He delights in doing great things through small people.

The second point to consider is how often we limit God. By not believing that God could use the small and insignificant, the people of Nazareth limited what Jesus did in their midst. Somehow we believe that God can use other people but not us. Sometimes we go through life not expecting anything from God. We don't believe He will use us and so we don't step out.

The Lord recently challenged me in this area of my life through a passage from Mark 4:25 which says:

With the measure you use, it will be measured to you--and even more.

What kind of a measure are you using? The people of Nazareth did not have a very big measure. Their expectations were very low. Many people live their lives with very small

expectations from God. They settle into a sense of apathy. They don't expect much and they don't get much. I believe that the Lord Jesus wanted to shatter this "Nazareth mentality." He came to Nazareth to show them the power and wisdom of God. He came to demonstrate to them that God had raised up the Messiah from their midst.

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that the people of Nazareth were "deeply offended" by the things Jesus taught. These are strong words. His words, though powerful and anointed by the Spirit, were offensive. The people could not accept them.

Seeing their rejection, the Lord told them that a prophet was honoured everywhere but in His own home town and among His own family. It is quite easy to believe that God can use others. It is much more difficult to believe He can use people we have grown up with. We see the weaknesses of our own family. We have seen them at their worst. We know what they are like.

The result of this mentality was that Jesus did only a few miracles in that region. Their unbelief kept the Lord from doing greater things. These people did not believe and so they received very little from the Lord that day. If you want to see the Lord work, you need to step out in belief. You need to crush the mentality that says that God would not be interested in doing anything in you. The reality of the matter is that the Lord delights in showering His blessings on us. We feel unworthy of His blessings. We don't want to ask for more. We feel that somehow He rations his blessings and only hands them out to the very best people. As a result, we miss out on God's purpose for our lives and ministries.

Mark 6:6 tells us that Jesus left Nazareth amazed at their unbelief. He went out to other villages and preached the Good News to them. Would Jesus be amazed at our unbelief? Would He be amazed at how little we want and expect from Him? May God break this mentality and set us free to receive all He wants to give.

For Consideration:

- What is that "Nazareth mentality?" Do you see evidence of it in your life?
- How does this mentality keep us from the blessings of God?
- What is the importance of faith according to this passage?
- Have you ever found yourself limiting God? What makes us content with so little?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to break the "Nazareth mentality" in your life.
- Thank the Lord that He uses the small and insignificant to do wonderful work.
- Take a moment to consider what the Lord wants in your ministry and personal life. Ask the Lord to give you more courage to step out in faith for greater victories.

8

THE LORD OF THE HARVEST

Read Matthew 9:35-38

As Jesus moved from town to town, he taught in the synagogues and preached the good news about the presence of the kingdom of God. He healed every kind of disease and sickness, demonstrating the reality of that kingdom and its power over the kingdom of evil.

It is important for us to note here that the ministry of the Lord Jesus was two-fold. It was to preach and teach about the kingdom of God, but it was also to release prisoners from the kingdom of Satan. These two ministries walked hand in hand in perfect balance in the work of the Lord Jesus. We are called not only to proclaim the kingdom of God by our words but also to demonstrate the reality of that kingdom by moving into the territory of Satan and reclaiming what he has taken from us.

The Lord calls us not only to preach but to demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God in real life. All too often our faith consists only of doctrines and ideas about God. God also wants us to move in the power of that kingdom.

He wants us to be instruments through which He can not only proclaim the truth of the kingdom but also demonstrate its reality.

This two-fold ministry of the Lord drew a crowd. Jesus was constantly surrounded by people looking to be set free from their sicknesses and diseases. When Jesus saw this crowd His heart was broken. He had compassion on them. He saw them as a people who were harassed and helpless. The cares of this world were overwhelming them. The devil was oppressing and harassing them. They were being vexed and troubled. Jesus felt their pain and worries. He saw how they were overcome by sin, the world and the devil. They were helpless and unable to care for themselves. They were incapable of finding victory over their circumstances. They were like sheep without a shepherd.

It was in this context that Jesus turned to His disciples and told them that the harvest was plentiful but the workers were few. He called His disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the harvest. There are several things we need to notice here in these words of Jesus.

The Greek word for “send” is a very strong word. The word used here means to pull out, to cast out or to drive out. It has the sense of compelling and commanding someone to go out. It can also be understood in the sense of drawing something out with force or to lead with a force that cannot be resisted. In other words, there is urgency to this prayer. Jesus tells His disciples to pray that God would drive out people into the harvest. He asks them to pray that God's hand would be so heavy on the lives of His people that they would not be able to resist His call. Have you felt the urgency in your own heart? Have you been driven out into

this harvest? Is the call of God on your life such that you cannot help but go? This is what the Lord calls us to pray.

Notice second that God is the one who does the sending. We are not called to choose the workers ourselves. We are not called to manipulate or persuade anyone to serve the Lord. God will do this work. We are called to pray. God knows who He wants to serve and in what capacity. Imagine what the harvest field would be like if we were doing the choosing. God does not give us that privilege. He chooses, calls and equips. He asks us to pray.

Jesus promised that when the disciples prayed, the Father would speak to hearts. As we cry out to the Father, He will convict, compel and move in people's hearts. He will put a burden on their heart so that they cannot resist His call.

There is one final thing we need to see in this passage. Jesus speaks here of a harvest. Our task is to bring in a harvest. The Lord God has already done the work. He has been working in the lives of those who go but He has also been working in the lives of those to whom they go. He has been opening their eyes. He has been convicting them of their sin. He has been drawing them by His Holy Spirit. Through various circumstances that He has been bringing into their lives, He has been softening their hearts. He has been preparing them to be harvested. This is God's work. Our work is to harvest what God has been doing. If God has not prepared these people, there can be no harvest. If we are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, He will lead us to the fruit He has prepared for us to harvest.

The understanding that we are harvesters influences how we minister. It shows us that we should not think too highly of ourselves. All we do is pick the fruit God has already

prepared. Understanding that we are harvesters helps us to trust more in God and His working in people's lives. We cannot change people. We cannot convert a soul. We can, however, follow the leading of the Lord and be His instruments to bring in the harvest. The miracle of new life and growth in Christ is the work of God's Spirit. We are called to partner with Him in this ministry by harvesting what God is doing in the lives of His people. May God give us grace to be greater instruments in His hands.

For Consideration:

- Have you found the balance between preaching the truth of God and demonstrating the authority of the Kingdom practically?
- Have you ever felt the compelling call of God to the harvest? Have you been faithful?
- Is there evidence of people around you being harassed and helpless?
- What are the implications of being a harvester in the harvest field? How does this show us the need to be more sensitive to what the Lord God is doing in the lives of those to whom we minister?
- Have you ever found yourself trying to run ahead of God? Does this really accomplish anything of value? Is it possible to hinder the work of the kingdom by trying to run ahead of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reaffirm His call in your life.
- Ask the Lord to raise up more workers who can harvest by proclaiming the truth and demonstrating the power and authority of the Kingdom in their lives.
- Ask the Lord to empower you not only to preach but to demonstrate the power of the Kingdom of God.
- Ask God to help you to be content to be a harvester who harvests the fruit He has been preparing. Ask God to give you a greater sensitivity to His leading so you can harvest what He wants you to harvest.

9

THE DISCIPLES SENT OUT

Read Matthew 10:1-15; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-5

In the last section we saw how the Lord challenged His disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to thrust labourers into the harvest field. Here in this section Jesus called His twelve disciples to Himself and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and heal every disease and sickness. He then sent them out to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:2). Again we see the two-fold focus of their ministry. They were not only to preach the kingdom of God but also to demonstrate its power and presence by healing the sick and casting out demons. Matthew takes the time to list the names of each of the disciples Jesus sent out (see Matthew 10:2-4).

You can imagine what it would be like for these disciples to be sent out. There would be an element of fear in their lives. They would have felt inadequate and unworthy. They had, for some time now, watched the Lord Jesus minister. Their faith had been stirred as they watched Him. Now, however, Jesus sent them out on their own to stretch their faith in what God could do through them.

It is one thing to know the truth about the kingdom of God and the power of God over Satan and His works. It is another thing to experience this reality in our lives and ministry. The disciples knew the truth but now it was time for them to experience the power for themselves. Armed with the authority of God, they went out to the crowds to follow Jesus' example by setting people free from the bondage of the devil.

When Jesus sent His disciples out, He gave them further instructions. He told them not to go among the Gentiles or Samaritans. They were only to go particularly to the "lost sheep of Israel." Jesus, at this point, ministered to the Jews. He commissioned His disciples to go to their own people first. The time would come when they would go beyond their own people but, for the moment, they were to minister at home. Israel would be their training ground.

Jesus also gave them the message they were to preach. He told them to preach that the Kingdom of God was near. They were to preach that the presence of God had come to earth. They were to declare that sin and Satan were defeated and that God was raising up a people to reign with Him.

Jesus commissioned His disciples to demonstrate the power of the kingdom by healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers and driving out evil spirits (Matthew 10:8). They were not to take money for their ministry. They had received their commission and empowerment freely and they were to offer their service freely to those to whom God would lead. They were to minister out of compassion and not for profit.

Jesus also had another requirement for His disciples at this time. They were not to take any money with them nor were they to take extra sandals, staff or tunic. Instead, they were to trust the Lord to provide for all their needs. Jesus reminded them that the worker was worthy of his keep. God's people were to provide for them as they went. They were to wait on God's provision.

As they went into the various towns and villages, the disciples were to receive the hospitality of the people in the communities. If someone provided them a place to stay, they were to stay in that home, receive their hospitality and minister in that community. They were to bless the homes that received them and let their peace rest on those homes. God would bless those who received His disciples.

If, on the other hand, nobody received them, they were not to waste time in that community. Instead, they were to shake the dust off their feet and leave (Matthew 10:14). Jesus told them that it would be better for the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment than for those towns that rejected His disciples. To reject these disciples was to reject the Lord who sent them. They went as His representatives to the towns and villages with the message the Lord had given them. The disciples were to offer the message of the kingdom freely. They were to be sensitive to what the Spirit of God was doing. They were to go through the doors He opened. If the people of a given community were not ready to receive them, they were to move on to a town that would receive them. They were to move where God was moving. They were to bless what God was blessing.

In obedience to the Lord's command, the disciples went out to the various towns and communities of the region.

They preached and healed many people. The blessing of God was on them as they served and they were amazed to see what God did.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between talking about Jesus and His power and stepping out and personally experiencing the reality of that power?
- Have you been experiencing the power of the Lord in your life and ministry?
- What do you think the power for the kingdom should look like in your ministry?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to step out in faith like the disciples in this passage.
- Thank the Lord for the way He desires to demonstrate His power through us.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you had a hard time believing that He would want to demonstrate the power of the kingdom through you.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Read Matthew 10:16-33

Jesus was speaking to the disciples He sent out. He had given them authority to preach the kingdom of God and demonstrate the power of that Kingdom. Here in this section He reminded His disciples that their ministry would not always be appreciated. Anyone who ministers in His name needs to count the cost of being a disciple.

As Jesus sent His disciples out, He told them that He was sending them out like sheep among wolves. The world into which he was sending them would be hostile to their message. Satan will oppose those who tread on His territory. In light of this fact, Jesus called His disciples to be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). Let's briefly look at what Jesus is saying here.

Throughout the Bible, Satan is compared to a serpent. When we are called to be as wise as serpents we are called to be wise to his tactics. Paul makes this clear in 2 Corinthians 2:10-11 when he says:

“If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

Notice the phrase, “We are not unaware of his schemes.” How can we fight the enemy if we are not aware of his tactics? If we are to do battle with the enemy, we must be wise to his plots and plans. We must be aware of how he is trying to deceive and tempt us. We dare not go into the battle unaware of his tactics.

Not only are we to be wise to the attacks of the enemy but we are also to be as innocent as doves. The dove is a peaceful bird. Unlike birds of prey, this bird is totally peaceful and harmless. We, too, need to be innocent and harmless; to walk in the truth and be at peace with God. We need to work toward peace and harmony with our brothers and sisters. We need to be pure and holy. We dare not fall prey to the tactics of the enemy or fall prey to his temptations. How the enemy would love to bring division. How he loves to divide and cause strife and bitterness. As disciples of the Lord Jesus we do not fall prey to his tactics. We are innocent and harmless and walk in holiness and purity of life. Holiness and purity of life are our greatest weapons against the enemy.

Jesus reminded His disciples that they needed to be on their guard as they went out to minister in His name. There were people who would seek to harm them and cause them to fall. They would not be appreciated by all who heard their message. He warned them that they would be handed over to the authorities of the land, flogged and beaten in the synagogues. Their persecution would be at

the hands of religious leaders who worshipped at the synagogue.

This persecution would come to them because they belonged to the Lord Jesus and preached the good news of the Kingdom. Satan would stir up men and women against the disciples of Christ. Because they stood for Christ, they would be arrested and brought before governors and kings. As they stood before these governors and kings, they would bear witness to the Lord Jesus. Verse 18 tells us that their testimony would even be heard in the Gentile community.

They were not to worry about what they were to say in those days. As they stood before their accusers to be tried, the Spirit of God would make His presence known to them. He would give them wisdom and the words they needed for the moment.

The Lord told His disciples that the day would come when they would not even be safe in their own homes. Brother would turn against brother. A father would betray his Christian child and deliver him or her over to the authorities. Children would rebel against their parents so that they would be delivered over to be put to death for their faith in Christ.

As servants of Jesus Christ, they would be hated by all men. Even as they hated Jesus, so they would hate His servants. As believers, we preach a message that is not always welcome in this world of sin and darkness. The message we preach exposes the sin of our day. We tread on enemy territory. Satan will stir up all manner of people against us because of the message we preach.

Jesus promised that as His disciples stood firm to the end they would be saved. We should not see here that our salvation depends on our efforts. What Jesus is telling us here is that those who persevere in the midst of trials will see the Lord come to their aid. They will be freed from their struggle either by deliverance or death. In either case the Lord would prove faithful.

As the disciples travelled from town to town the enemy would stir up people against them. If persecution broke out against them in a particular city, they were to flee to another. They were not to stay where they were not wanted. They were not to seek persecution though it would come. Remember that the disciples were harvesters. They were simply called to harvest what God had been doing in the lives of men and women who were ripe for harvest. If the harvest was not ripe in a particular town they were to go where it was ripe. Jesus told them in verse 23 that they would not finish going through all the cities of Israel before the Son of Man came. There is some question as to what the Lord meant by this statement. Could it be that He is telling them that the task would not be completed until the Lord Jesus returns again to judge the world? We are called to persevere in this work of preaching and demonstrating the power of the Kingdom of God until the Lord Jesus returns.

People persecuted our Lord while He ministered on this earth. They said that Jesus ministered in the power of the devil. They mocked and ridiculed Him. They nailed Him to a cross. Jesus does not call us to do anything that He was not willing to do for us. The servant is not above his master. The student is not above the teacher. If they persecuted the Master, they will also persecute His servants. If they rejected the Teacher they will reject His disciples.

When you choose to enrol in the army of the Lord, you chose to follow in His steps. You may be persecuted. You may lose your life. Are you ready to come to Him on these terms? Any good soldier knows that He will have to tread on enemy territory. A good soldier is one who is willing to suffer and even die for the cause he represents. We expect this of the soldiers who represent our nations. We need also to expect this of the soldiers of Christ.

Because the Lord is our guide, we are not to be afraid. Instead we are to be bold in stepping out. What God speaks to us in the dark we are to speak in the daylight. What He whispers into our ear in quiet we are to shout out on the rooftop. In other words, we are not to hesitate to share what God puts on our heart. We are to cast off all fear. People may not like what we say. They may kill our bodies but they cannot kill our soul. Instead of being governed by the fear of people and what they will do to us, we need to be governed by the fear of God. People can only kill our body but those to whom we speak will one day have to face Him who is able not only to destroy the body but also the soul (Matthew 16:28). What a terrible thing it will be for those who do not know the Lord. Will we let our fear of people keep us from warning them? We must speak what God puts on our heart. We are His instruments to warn those who do not know Him. We must fear God and boldly step out as He leads us. We must willingly place our lives on the line. As soldiers of the cross we must expect that as we tread on enemy territory he may shoot his arrows at us. Our fear of God, however, drives us on. We hear His commands and we obey. As good soldiers we are willing to risk everything for His sake.

While the road may be very difficult and dangerous, Jesus encourages us in verse 29. He reminds us that in the

market place of His day two sparrows were sold for a penny. They had a very low value in the eyes of the world. The fact of the matter was, however, that not one of those sparrows fell to the ground without the Lord God being aware of it and taking notice. Not one single sparrow fell to the ground outside of the will and purpose of God. He watched over the sparrows. They would not die until He permitted it. Jesus reminds us also that the Lord God knows how many hairs are on our head. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows every detail of our life. Jesus reminds us that we are of far greater value in the heart of God than any of these sparrows. If the sparrow does not fall to the ground outside of the will and purpose of God, then how can we fear? The hand of Almighty God is on us and He cares for us more than He cares for the sparrow. This ought to give us great confidence. We are protected and kept by God as we go in His name. He surrounds and keeps us.

The promise here is not only that God values us and protects us but also that when we boldly acknowledge the Lord before men despite what they say and do to us, the Lord will also acknowledge us before his Father in heaven. If, on the other hand, we disown Him before men He will also disown us before the Father in heaven.

This merits some careful consideration. What does it mean to disown in this context? Does this mean that we lose our salvation? The apostle Peter denied the Lord Jesus. John Mark decided to abandon Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey. Both of these men would be forgiven and given a second chance. When we fail to stand firm the Lord Jesus is grieved. We do not act as one of His children. He cannot commend us before the Father in heaven. He must report our failure to act as His child. He must report that

we have been embarrassed to be His child. He must report that we have been afraid to stand up for Him. Like the father turned His back on the Son when He bore our sin, so the Lord Jesus must turn His back on us when we act in sin and disown Him before men. This does not mean that we lose our salvation. It does mean, however, that God must turn His head in shame. Our actions grieve or rejoice the heart of Christ. When we are faithful He proudly speaks to His father about us. When we grieve him He feels ashamed. Listen to what Jesus told His disciples in Luke 9:26:

“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

This section of Scripture challenges us to take a stand. We need to realize that things will not always be easy for us. We are called to step out and be ready to suffer for the cause of the Lord. He promises to watch over us. He promises to keep us. He will empower us and enable us as we step out. When we step out and acknowledge Him, He acknowledges us before the Father. How often have we been governed, however, by fear of what would happen to us? We are called to cast off fear and boldly step out. This is what is required of us as soldiers of the army of God. To do any less would be to dishonour Him.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever allowed fear to keep you from serving the Lord and stepping out in obedience?

- What is your fear? What does this section tell us about fear?
- Do we have any real cause for fear? What does this passage teach us about the Lord's protection on our lives and the value He places on us?
- What does Jesus mean when He tells us that if we disown Him He will disown us? Can we make God ashamed of us? Is God proud of you as His servant?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to banish all fear of people from your heart
- Ask him to forgive you for the times you failed to step out because you were afraid or failed to trust in His provision and care.
- Make it your commitment to step out into what the Lord has been calling you to do. Ask Him to give you grace to be faithful.
- Thank God that He promises to keep you no matter how difficult things become.

11

MORE ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

Read Matthew 10:34-11:1; Luke 9:6

Jesus continues to speak here about the high cost of being a disciple. Challenging those He was sending out in His name, Jesus made it clear that their ministry would not be easy. He reminded His disciples that He had not come to bring peace to the earth but a sword. This statement is somewhat strange in light of what the rest of the Scripture teaches. Did Jesus not come to bring us peace with God? Isn't peace one of the fruits of God's Spirit? What did Jesus mean when He said that He did not come to bring peace but a sword?

In this context Jesus was speaking of the high cost of discipleship. He told His disciples that if they were going to be His servants they must be ready to suffer for His sake. He reminded them that the enemy would not appreciate their efforts. Because they were trampling on Satan's territory, they could expect Him to strike back at them. The message of the kingdom of God would be an offense to many people. It is in this context that we need to understand Jesus' statement about not coming to bring peace. He came

to do battle with Satan sin that kept us from experiencing the peace of God. Anyone who stepped out in this purpose would experience opposition.

Jesus reminded His disciples that a result of choosing to follow Him would be problems in their homes. Family members would not understand their commitment to follow Christ, and some may even respond in hostility. Their worst enemies might be the members of their own family.

When we come to the Lord Jesus we have to be willing to leave everything behind. He must be first. The Lord called my wife and me, a number of years ago, to leave our family and country to serve Him on the Islands of Mauritius and Reunion. There we met young people who were rejected by their families because they had accepted the Lord. The call of the Lord will sometimes take us away from our families. Some in our families will not understand why we serve the Lord or why we love Him as we do. They may reject us. Jesus reminds us, however, that anyone who loves his father or mother, son or daughter more than they love Him is not worthy of the Kingdom of God. The Lord demands that He be first in our lives. Are we ready to leave everything to follow Him? Before we embark on this journey with the Lord Jesus we must first count the cost.

Jesus went on to tell His disciples that they were to be ready to “take up their cross” (Matthew 10:38) and follow Him. He added that if they didn’t take up their cross they were not worthy of Him. What is this cross? The cross for Jesus represented His death. It was on that cross that He laid down His life for us. He suffered the mocking and scorn of those around Him. He was rejected and died to pay for our sin. This is what the Lord is asking in return. If you are to follow Him, the one requirement is that you take

up your cross. In other words, you must be willing to lay down your life for Him. You must be willing to suffer even as He suffered. In Revelation 3, the Lord rebuked the church of Laodicea because they were lukewarm. They were not willing to give everything. Jesus is looking for disciples who will lay down everything to follow Him.

Jesus told His disciples that if they found their lives they would lose them but if they lost their lives for His sake they would find them (Matthew 10:39). There are many people who chose to live for the things in this world. They enjoy their comfort, their riches, their friends and their reputation. They are well respected and live life to the fullest. They have everything they want in this life and are often envied by those who have much less. Jesus reminds us, however, that these earthly possessions and advantages will not last forever. The day is coming when all these things will be stripped from us. If we live for this world than that is all we will have. One day it will all be gone.

It is true that those who pick up their cross to follow the Lord Jesus will experience suffering and persecution in this world but the presence of God and the reality of His life in them is very powerful. The Lord draws near to them. If we are not willing to die to ourselves and our own ideas to live for Christ and His purposes we will not know what it is to experience this wonderful life in Christ. If we want to truly live we must die to ourselves and seek Christ alone. In this we find true meaning and purpose in life. We find something that will never be taken from us.

In Matthew 10:40 Jesus told His disciples that whoever received them received him as well. To honour a prophet is to honour the one who sent him. How important it is that we understand what Jesus is teaching here. How often

have I seen church members complain and grumble about their spiritual leaders? How often have we failed to honour those leaders the Lord has placed over us? There is a deep connection between the Lord and His servants. The Lord calls, empowers and enables His servants to minister in His name. What a privilege it is to go in His name and represent Him. As unworthy as we are, we represent the Lord. If we bless and honour God's servants we honour Him as well. If we grumble and complain about His servants we dishonour the One who sent them.

Jesus reminded His disciples that it was a tremendous honour to be His servants. Those who received them received their Lord. Those who blessed them blessed their Lord. At the same time, however, their ministry would not be easy. They would suffer at the hands of those who rejected their message. They were not to fear what would happen to them. God promised that if they lost their life for His sake they would truly find it. They had nothing to fear. They could step out in great boldness in his name. Even in the midst of suffering or death they would know true life.

After speaking these things to His disciples the Lord sent them out to minister in His name. Mark and Luke tell us that they went out from village to village preaching the good news of the kingdom. They drove out demons and they anointed the sick so that they were healed. They experienced a powerful anointing of the Lord God in their lives and ministries. These were ordinary men whom God had called and equipped to do a powerful work. I'm sure they were astonished at what the Lord God was doing through them for the sake of the kingdom.

Being a servant of the Lord is not something to take lightly. Those who are His true servants have offered their lives to

Him. They are willing to be rejected and ridiculed for the sake of His name. They are ready to lay down their lives for the cause of the Lord they love and serve. The Lord loves these servants deeply. To dishonour them is to dishonour Him. To serve them or minister to them is to minister to Him. He empowers and equips them for the ministry to which they have been called. While there is a tremendous cost to being a servant of God there is also blessing beyond measure. Nothing of any value comes without cost. Are you willing to pay the price?

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to consider what you are willing to do to follow the Lord Jesus. Is there anything that you are unwilling to surrender for Him?
- Consider for a moment how you have treated the servants of God. Have you honoured them as God's representatives?
- How has your life changed since you have taken up your cross to serve the Lord Jesus? Have you found life to be fuller and more meaningful?
- What keeps us from being willing to surrender everything to the Lord?
- What are some of the blessings you have known as a servant of God?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to ask the Lord to show you if there are any areas in your life that you have not yet surrendered to Him.
- Thank the Lord for the way He honours us when we honour Him.
- Thank Him that though the life of a servant of God is difficult it is also filled with wonderful blessings for those who live and serve Him.
- Ask God to give you a greater willingness to surrender everything to Him.

12

THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Read Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9

As Jesus ministered, the power of God was evident in His life. This power was revealed so that people could see evidence of the Kingdom of God in their midst. Not everyone understood this. There were various ideas about Jesus circulating in the region. We see King Herod's opinion about Jesus in this next section. This passage is significant not only because of what it teaches us about how people saw the Lord Jesus but also because it demonstrates what we have been examining in the last few meditations regarding the cost of following the Lord Jesus.

Jesus' fame had spread. Reports of what he had been doing were quickly moving throughout the region. Everywhere people were forming opinions about Jesus and who He was. Mark tells us that some thought Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. Others believed He was Elijah. Still others believed Him to be a great prophet. None of these people understood him to be the Messiah.

When Herod heard about Jesus, he was afraid. He was convinced that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. His fear came from the fact that he had had John beheaded for what he had said about him. He may have been feeling guilty about what he had done. We cannot be certain. What is clear, however, is that the news of Christ and the discussion about who He was struck fear into Herod's heart. Luke 9:9 tells us that Herod tried to see Jesus. It seems that he had to know if John had returned.

Both Matthew and Mark take the time to share the story of how Herod had killed John the Baptist. John had been arrested because he stood up for the truth. Herod's brother Phillip was married to Herodias. Herod fell in love with Herodias. She decided to leave her husband Phillip to marry Herod. When John heard about this, he approached Herod and spoke out against what he had done. He told Herod that it was not lawful for him to have Herodias as his wife. This caused bitterness between Herodias and John the Baptist. The result was that John the Baptist was put in prison.

Herod would have killed John for daring to speak these things about him but he was afraid because the people considered him to be a prophet. Mark 6:20 tells us clearly that Herod knew that John was a righteous and holy man. He feared John and sought in some ways to protect him. We are led to believe that he liked to listen to him speak but he did not really understand what he was saying. Herod kept John in prison for some time.

In Mark 6:19 we read that Herodias (Herod's illegitimate wife) "nursed a grudge" against John. That grudge was ultimately what killed John. It is important to note here that Herodias "nursed" that grudge. The word in the original

language has the sense of being entangled in or ensnared by. When we “nurse” a grudge by allowing it to remain in our lives we become entangled in it. It begins to take control of our thoughts and actions. It entangles us and becomes part of our every thought. If we do not deal quickly with this it will overcome. This is what was happening to Herodias. She was unwilling to forgive John for speaking out against her. She held on to her bitter and angry thoughts. Like a weed in the right soil, those angry and bitter thoughts sprang up within her. Soon the weeds of anger began to choke out everything else. She became entangled by these thoughts. Ultimately she could get no relief until she had killed John.

On the day of Herod's birthday, all the important officials came to a great celebration. The daughter of Herodias danced before them. The dance pleased Herod very much. Speaking with the young girl, Herod told her that she could ask for anything and he would give it to her. Herod promised to give her up to half of his kingdom if she were to ask him for it.

The young girl went home to speak to her mother about Herod's offer. Prompted by her mother, the young girl returned to Herod and asked him for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Mark makes it clear that this was a very urgent request. Listen to how Mark puts it in Mark 6:25:

“At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

Notice that the girl “hurried” to Herod and asked him for John's head “right now.” Why was this request so urgent?

Herodias saw here the opportunity she was looking for to kill John the Baptist. Herod had likely been drinking. It may have been the wine that made him so generous. All those present heard Herod make this statement to Herodias' daughter. Herodias may have known that tomorrow, after the friends and officials had left and the influence of the drink had worn off, Herod would not want to kill John. Now, however, he could not go back on his word in the presence of all these officials. Herodias sent her daughter immediately while all the officials were present to make her request. She asked for John's head right away. All the officials would see if Herod was just talking or if he really meant what he was saying. Herod would certainly have felt this pressure.

There is another thing that we need to consider here. Notice the selfishness of Herodias. It was to her daughter that Herod had made this promise. Her daughter should have been the one to receive the benefit of this offer. Herodias does not hesitate to take this offer for herself. She also does not hesitate to put her husband on the spot. She knew that Herod had been refusing to kill John the Baptist. She knew that he enjoyed listening to him. She knew that he feared to kill him. Despite these things, she still brought this request to him in front of all the guests. In doing so she does not respect her husband. It is quite easy to see what this grudge did to Herodias. She had become so wrapped up in her bitterness and anger that she willingly disrespected her husband and stole her daughters blessing to satisfy her grudge. Again we see how dangerous it is to nurse a grudge and allow it to remain in our lives.

When Herod heard this request, he was greatly distressed. It broke his heart to issue this decree. He feared losing face before his guests, however, so he ordered that John

the Baptist's head be cut off and brought in on a platter. You cannot help but feel the atmosphere in that room. Satan was working. An evil presence very likely filled that place as Herod made his decree. Though he knew what he was doing and really did not want to surrender to what Herodias was demanding, he chose to order the execution.

John was beheaded and his head put on a platter and presented to the girl who carried it to her mother Herodias. We have to wonder if Herodias really felt any better about killing John.

When John's disciples heard that John had been killed, they took his body to give it a proper burial. They put his body in a tomb and went to tell Jesus what had happened.

We see in this passage the danger of holding on to grudges, bitterness and anger. We also have an example of what Jesus meant when he said that if we want to be His servants we are to take up our cross. Here before us is that example of a man who willingly laid down his life for the cause of Christ. He stood boldly for the truth and did not hesitate to speak even to the king about his evil lifestyle. May God give us more men and women like John in our day.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about the danger of holding grudges, bitterness and anger in our hearts?

- To what extent are you influenced by the opinions of those around you?
- Would you be willing to take the stand that John the Baptist took regarding Herod, even if it cost your life?
- What principles are you willing to stand up for or die for today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to search your heart to see if there is any bitterness or anger in it. Confess and surrender this to Him.
- Ask the Lord to make you willing to take your stand for Him.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from any need to please people. Ask Him to help you to seek to please Him alone.

13

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

Read Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17

When Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist, He left the region and went by boat to a solitary place in Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). Why did Jesus withdraw? Could it be that He wanted time to reflect on what had happened? We can be sure that the Lord Jesus would have felt the pain of John's death. John the Baptist had a very special place in the heart of the Lord. It was John who had introduced Jesus to the world. Beyond this, however, His heart grieved over the evil that had taken place in that region and the hatred of righteousness.

There is another important reason for the retreat of Jesus. From the account of Mark and Luke we understand that it was at this time that the disciples Jesus had sent out came back to Him. Jesus decided to take some time alone with His disciples to hear what had happened when they were away. Mark 6:31 tells us that Jesus wanted time with His disciples for rest.

Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

The disciples would obviously be very tired at this point. Their ministry trip had been very draining. Jesus knew that they needed rest so He suggested that they get away from the crowds to spend time alone. Jesus taught His disciples how important it is for them to get proper rest. How easy it is for us to forget this. Somehow we feel that it is not spiritual to go to bed or take a break from ministry. Jesus recognized this need to get away to rest and encouraged His disciples to do the same.

Jesus and His disciples took a boat to the other side of the lake. Seeing this, the crowd rushed to get there ahead of them. By the time they arrived, the crowd was waiting for them. When the Lord Jesus saw the crowd, He had compassion on them. He spoke with them and healed those who were sick. It appears that He ministered to them for the better part of the day. When evening approached, the disciples asked Jesus to send the crowds away so that they could buy food and eat. Remember that these disciples were tired. This day had been full of activity and they had not found time to rest. The Lord suggested to His disciples that they feed the crowd before they left for the surrounding towns and villages for the night.

The disciples were taken back by this request. It would take at least eight months wages to buy the food necessary for such a crowd. They saw this request as being absolutely impossible. The disciples went to see how much bread they could find. They returned with five loaves of bread and two fish. This was all they had available to them.

Jesus asked them to bring the bread and fish to Him and have the people sit down in groups of fifty or one hundred. When all the people were seated, Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish and looked up to heaven. He gave thanks to the Father and broke the loaves. He also divided the fish among His disciples. He then sent them out to distribute these portions among the people.

We need to understand here that the disciples were given pieces of the bread that the Lord had broken off the five small loaves. Present that day were five thousand men. As was the tradition of the day, women and children were not mentioned in the count. We can safely assume that there were women and children present as well. The Lord handed each of his disciples some bread and some fish. The disciples handed it out to the various groups of fifty and one hundred. As they handed the bread out it multiplied. When everyone had received a sufficient portion, the disciples gathered up twelve baskets of leftovers.

There are several important lessons we need to see in this account. First, we need to see that it is impossible to exhaust the resources of God. The Bible tells us that each person had sufficient to eat. They were all satisfied. God does not have to ration His resources. There is no limit in God. You can take all you want and never take away from the person next to you. If you do not have sufficient, it is because you did not take enough. We need to be bolder. Satan will tell us that we should not be too greedy. He will encourage us to just take a little. His intent is to keep us from feasting on the resources of God. He knows that as we feast we will overflow with the presence the power of God to others. We are called to take all we can of God and His resources. You do not need to fear that there will not be enough for others. God's resources are unlimited.

The second point we need to make here is that the blessing of God multiplied as it was used. There was more left over than when they began. The more the blessings were taken the more they grew. Imagine the disciples looking at the small amount of bread and refusing to step out because their minds were telling them that this small amount of bread could not possibly feed the crowds. How often have we been guilty of this sin? We look at our gifts and say: "What are they compared to the need in the world today?" We don't step out in faith. It is only as we step out that we can truly experience the blessing of God. You have to spend the resources that God has given you if you want to see them multiply. Faith brings down the blessing of God. God delights to see us trust Him.

There is a final point I want to mention here. The disciples of Jesus had just come back from their ministry trip. On this trip they saw the Lord God doing wonderful things through them. There is no doubt that their faith had been stretched in those days. They came back excited about what the Lord could do through them. It is interesting, in this context, that the disciples had so much doubt in their minds when the Lord Jesus asked them to feed the five thousand people with the little they had. If those disciples were coming back with any sense of pride in their spiritual abilities, they were now very humbled. Their doubt and lack of faith in this situation showed them that they still had a long way to go. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was not only intended to meet the need of the people but to remind the disciples returning from their powerful ministry trip of their own humanness. God has a way of humbling us lest we become too proud.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the importance of faith?
- Have you seen God use you as you stepped out in faith? Explain.
- Have you ever found yourself hesitating to use the gifts that God gave you? What kept you from stepping out in faith?
- What gifts has the Lord given you? How can you step out in faith and use these gifts?
- What do you think the feeding of the five thousand taught the disciples about their own lack of faith? Have you ever found yourself becoming proud because of your gifts? What do we learn here about how God humbles the servants He wants to use?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you how he would have you to step out in faith.
- Thank the Lord that there is no limit to His resources and that the more we use what He gives, the more it grows.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have lacked faith and refused to step out.

- Ask God to keep you from becoming proud. Thank Him that despite your weakness He is pleased to use you for the sake of His kingdom.

14

JESUS WALKS ON THE WATER

Read Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52

As I write this section of this commentary I am sitting outside on a balcony overlooking the Caribbean Sea on one side and a mountain on the other. Here in Haiti I have been overwhelmed by the need. These have been busy, but rewarding days. Everywhere I turn there are people. This morning I have some time by myself to spend with the Lord and write. I treasure these moments. In these quiet moments I am able to reconnect with the Lord and seek Him, His direction and blessing.

Jesus knew what it was like to be busy. He had spent the day ministering to the crowds. Sometimes He had little time for Himself. He was tired and in need of time with His Father. Jesus told His disciples to get in the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side of the lake. He stayed behind and dismissed the crowd. When the crowd left, the Lord Jesus went up into the mountain by Himself to pray. He spent the evening with His Father in prayer. As I sit

here by myself and reflect on this passage I can understand the importance of this time in the life of our Lord. The crowds drew from His energy. Jesus needed to be filled again with the presence of the Father. He needed to reconnect and be refreshed. He needed clear direction and guidance for His ministry. How important it is for us to be able to have this time with the Lord our God.

As for the disciples, they crossed over the lake to the region of Bethsaida. They had gone a considerable distance from the land when the winds began to pick up. John 6:19 tells us that they had rowed three and a half miles on the lake. Mark 6:48 tells us that Jesus saw them straining at the oars. It is hard to imagine how Jesus could see these disciples in the evening in the middle of a storm, three and a half miles out on a lake. It should be remembered, however, that Jesus was in prayer with His father. Could it be that the father was revealing this to Him in His spirit? While He knew the problem His disciples were facing, the Lord Jesus waited until the fourth watch of the night before going to His disciples. The fourth watch would have been three o'clock in the morning.

We can imagine the condition of the disciples by this time. They had recently come back from their preaching and ministering tour. They had spent the day with Jesus on the mountaintop feeding the crowd. Now they were fighting a storm on the sea. It was three o'clock in the morning and they were exhausted. Remember that the disciples had previously gone through a similar storm when Jesus was in the boat asleep. On that occasion Jesus showed them that He was Lord over the wind and the storm. The question here was whether the disciples had learned their lessons well enough to face this new storm with confidence.

Could it be that the Lord Jesus left them in the storm for this time to test their faith?

It was at 3 o'clock in the morning when the Lord Jesus came to them walking on the water. When the disciples saw this figure coming toward them on the water they thought it was a ghost. They were terrified and began to cry out. They were terrified of the only person who could help them at this time. There are many people in this situation. They know that they need the Lord and His direction in their lives but they are afraid to surrender to Him. They do not know what He will ask them to do. They are afraid of having to pick up their cross to follow Him. They fear the only one who can help them.

Mark 6:48 tells us that Jesus was about to pass by them. Why would the Lord Jesus pass them by when they were in this situation? The book of Revelation paints a picture of the Lord Jesus standing at the door and knocking. He stands there but He does not force Himself through the door. He waits for the door to be opened. Was Jesus waiting for the disciples to come to the end of their resources and invite Him into their boat? It is not that He does not want to help us or minister to us but He waits for us to ask. The moment you ask He will come and minister to you. He comes to us when we open our hearts and ask Him to come.

As soon as the Lord Jesus got into the boat the storm died down. The disciples were absolutely amazed at how the storm died down as soon as Jesus entered their boat. Mark tells us in this context that these disciples had not really understood the miracle of the loaves and fishes (Mark 6:52). In other words, they had seen Jesus multiply the bread and the fish. They had seen the power of God

demonstrated through them as they distributed those loaves and fishes but they did not apply those lessons to this new situation in life. If Jesus was able to multiply the bread and the fishes could He not also deal with the situation they found themselves in on the lake? How often have I been guilty of this in my own life? I see God doing a wonderful thing in my life and experience His power but when another situation different from the first comes up in my life, I wonder if God will really do it again. This is what the disciples were experiencing. God seemed to use the whole incident to convict the disciples of their unbelief.

Peter was among those present that day. He seemed to be the type of person who wanted to step out for the Lord. He was not content, like the other disciples, to simply see the Lord calm the storm. He wanted something more. He wanted to step out and walk on the water like Jesus. It is unclear why Peter wanted to step out like this. What purpose would this accomplish? Was Peter simply desirous of experiencing this wonderful power of God?

When Peter asked to walk on the water, Jesus invited him to come out to Him. Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water. He approached Jesus but when he saw the wind he became afraid and started to sink. He cried out, "Lord save me!" and the Lord reached out His hand and caught him. Jesus rebuked him for his lack of faith. Peter was humbled. His faith was not as big as he wanted others to believe.

There are several things we need to understand from this story of Peter. While it is important that we not judge the motives and intentions of Peter here, we wonder if in reality Peter was tempting the Lord rather than seeking to advance the kingdom of God. Even in the days of Jesus there

were many people who were fascinated by the power of God. They wanted to see the miracles and the healings. Their interest was not the advancing of the Kingdom of God so much as personal gain. What is Peter's motivation here? We cannot be certain but we need to understand just how important it is for us to examine our motives as we step out in the power of God.

The second thing we need to see is the importance of faith. Jesus does not condemn Peter here for stepping out of the boat. Jesus even invited him to come to Him. What we see here, however, is a condemnation for his lack of faith. Peter had a wonderful idea but he did not have the faith to back it up. Faith and trust in the Lord was a necessary ingredient here. When Jesus healed the blind men in Matthew 9:29, he told him that it would be done to him according to their faith. Peter did not have the faith necessary to walk on the water and as a result he failed. Great works require great faith. The Lord moves through our faith. To seek to accomplish great works when we have not grown enough in our faith to accomplish those works is an invitation to failure.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the importance of faith?
- What is the difference between stepping out in faith and tempting God?

- What do we learn here about the importance of inviting the Lord Jesus to come into our situations and struggles?
- Have you ever found yourself having to be humbled like Peter? Explain.
- What do we learn here about the importance of finding time alone with God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you the faith necessary to accomplish His purposes for your life and ministry.
- Ask the Lord to give you a greater vision for your ministry.
- Ask the Lord to enable you step out of your boat and trust Him for greater things.
- Ask the Lord to give you time alone with Him for refreshing and empowering.

15

UNCLEAN HANDS

Read Matthew 14:34-15:20; Mark 7:1-23

Jesus and His disciples had crossed over to the other side of the lake and were now in the region of Gennesaret. It was very early in the morning when they arrived. Jesus had met His disciples on the lake around 3 o'clock in the morning. They anchored the boat and Mark 6:54 tells us that as soon as they got out of the boat the people of the region recognized Jesus and started to bring their sick to Him. Finding time alone was a very rare thing at this point in Jesus' ministry.

Wherever Jesus went in this region people brought the sick and needy to Him. Some begged Him simply to let the sick touch the edge of his cloak so they could be healed. Whoever touched Jesus was healed of their sickness or disease. The power of the kingdom of God was on Him. The power of darkness was being broken.

Wherever the Kingdom of God is active we can also expect to see the kingdom of Satan set up its defences. Here in this region the enemy came through the Pharisees and the

teachers of the law. The Pharisees and teachers of the law came from Jerusalem. It is uncertain why they were in the region but they seemed to follow Jesus. Obviously their intention was to examine and question His practices and doctrine.

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law noticed that the disciples of the Lord did not wash their hands in the ceremonial way before they ate. The Jews believed that this ceremony of washing the hands before eating was important. According to some historians, breaking this ceremonial law was equal to breaking one of the Ten Commandments. The Scripture does not have any record of this law. In fact, it was an invention of man. The intention was good. The principle of washing hands before eating cannot be faulted but where it began to cause problems was in the enforcement. The Jews insisted that all men practice this man-made law and placed it on the same level as the laws of God. It came to a point where they were unable to distinguish between what God commanded in His Word and what was human tradition.

This problem is very common in the church today. How often have we confused our traditions with the clear teaching of the Word of God? The apostles did not sing the type of hymns we sing in church today. They did not wear suits and ties. In fact their church service would look quite different from what we are used to today. There are many things we do today that are merely human traditions. These traditions are not bad. They can be good and helpful but they should not be confused with the direct commands of God. It is possible to become slaves to tradition and not servants of the Lord.

The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees asked Jesus why they broke the tradition of the elders by eating with unwashed hands. Notice that they speak of this as the tradition of the elders but spoke of it as an absolute necessity. Jesus responded to this question by quoting a passage from the prophet Isaiah recorded for us in Mark 7:6-8:

He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.'"

Notice what Jesus told the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. He told them that they were hypocrites. They were not sincere before God in their own faith and yet they acted as judges over others. He told them that they honoured Him with their lips but their hearts were far from Him. They put on a good show before people and spoke with words that made people think that they were very spiritual. They prayed long and well worded prayers but their hearts were far from God. Jesus told them that their worship was in vain. They went through the motions but the Lord God was not interested in their worship. He did not accept their praise because their hearts were not right with Him. Their faith consisted of human rules. These rules were not God given rules but rules they made up themselves. Satan delights to confuse the clear teaching of the Word of God with human rules, regulations and traditions.

Human traditions can appear to be spiritual but they can also be a very powerful tool in the hand of the enemy. He can cause many to believe that these traditions are

actually the Word of God, multiplying these traditions to such an extent that the Word of God gets lost. There are churches who have found themselves caught up in the observation of traditions, believing that in doing so they are obedient to God.

If the enemy is successful in getting our attention focused on human traditions he can cause us to forget what the Word of God teaches. This is what had happened to the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. Jesus asked them in Matthew 15:3 why they broke the Law of God in favour of their traditions. This may have come as a surprise to them. They would never have seen themselves as law breakers. The enemy had so focused their attention on their human traditions, however, that they saw their traditions as being even more important than the actual Law of God.

Jesus reminded the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law that the Law of God taught that they were to honour our father and our mother and that anyone who cursed his father or mother was to be put to death. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law, however, had established a tradition that stated that if money was dedicated to God it could not be used for any other purpose. This tradition sounded very spiritual but its application left them guilty before God. We are told that a person who did not want to use his money to care for his father or mother would simply dedicate it to God. He would then not be able to use this money to care for his parents. The catch here was that he could redeem this money at the year of Jubilee. While this money would have to be redeemed at a cost, it would be theirs to do with as they pleased when it was redeemed. It is quite obvious how this tradition profited those who did not want to use the money for the care of their parents. The tradition

opened a door for the individual to disobey the clear commandment of God. What was so dangerous about this tradition was that it sounded spiritual. A person was able to look spiritual by declaring his money was dedicated to the Lord while all the while he was simply trying to avoid caring for his parents. Satan hid this evil under the cloak of spirituality.

Having rebuked the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus called the crowd to and told them that it was not what went into a person's mouth that made him or her unclean but what came out of his mouth. Jesus left the people to reflect on this statement. He did not explain what He meant.

Later the disciples came to Jesus to tell Him that the Pharisees were very offended by what He had told them. Jesus told His disciples that every plant that his Father did not plant would be uprooted. They were not to concern themselves with the Pharisees and their teaching. The Pharisees were blind to the things of God and were leading people astray. God would uproot them. Both the blind Pharisees and their followers would fall into the pit and be destroyed. Jesus does not have anything good to say about these Pharisees and teachers of the Law. In the eyes of the world they were respected and honoured as great men of God. They practiced their traditions and laws and looked good before people but Jesus saw through their hypocrisy. They could not fool God. One day they would stand before Him. They had their traditions but they had disobeyed the Law of God. They would be judged accordingly.

When the disciples were alone with Jesus, they asked him to explain what he meant by the statement He had made

to the people when He said that what goes into the mouth does not defile a person but rather what came out of their mouth. Jesus told them that whatever went into the mouth went into the stomach and out of the body. This did not defile the person before God. This was simply the natural process that God had created. What defiled a person before God was what came from the heart of man. Out of the heart of man came evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimonies and slander. These things defiled a man or woman before God. By entertaining evil thoughts and acting on them, a person became guilty before God. Eating with hands that were not washed would not make a person unclean or guilty before God but careless words, thoughts and deeds that came from their heart would.

Mark makes it clear that by this statement Jesus was declaring all foods to be clean. This would have been a very difficult thing for many of the Jews to accept. Jesus was teaching that righteousness was far deeper than externals. The Law of Moses taught the importance of being ceremonially clean and not touching or eating certain things. Jesus, however, taught a righteousness that went far deeper than this. It was a righteousness that came from the heart. He taught that you can follow all the traditions and not be holy. He taught that you can do all the right things and still not be righteous. Righteousness came from the heart. This passage is important because it shows us how Jesus differed in His teaching from the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. It also shows us that Jesus taught a righteousness that was different from the Law of Moses. He spoke of a new and changed heart not merely of external actions.

We need to recognize how easy it is for the enemy to trap us into a system of human spiritual traditions. Jesus calls

us to a righteousness that comes not from following spiritual traditions but from a completely changed heart.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about how the enemy can use our spiritual traditions to keep us from the Lord and His Word? Do you know of churches that are based on following human spiritual traditions?
- Are all traditions bad? How do we find the balance between maintaining our traditions and remaining faithful to the clear teaching of the Word of God?
- What do we learn here in this passage about the righteousness the Lord is seeking?
- Take a moment to examine your life. Are there traditions or spiritual activities in your life that do not come from your heart?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to search you to see if there are any places in your life where you have lifted up human traditions above the Word of God.
- Ask God to give you a heart that is sincere before Him.
- Take a moment to pray for your church. Ask the Lord to protect it from the trap into which the

Pharisees and the teachers of the law had fallen.
Ask Him to give you a heart for Him and His Word.

16

THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN

Read Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30

Jesus left the region after His debate with the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law concerning the ceremonial washing of hands. The Bible tells us that He withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. These two cities were sea-ports in the region of Phoenicia.

Mark tells us that Jesus found a house and entered it (Mark 7:24). He makes it clear that Jesus did not want anyone to know that He was in the home. It is quite likely that the Lord needed some rest. A Phoenician woman heard that Jesus was in the region and came to Him. Matthew called this woman a Canaanite. Canaanite was a general term used to describe the people who lived in the area that Israel had conquered. The Phoenicians were traders.

This Phoenician woman came to Jesus because she had a daughter who was suffering from a demon. She addressed Jesus as the Son of David. This term was used to

describe the Messiah of Israel who was to be a descendant of David. In using this title, the woman showed that she has some understanding of the Jewish faith. She recognized the Lord Jesus as the Son of David. She fell at Jesus feet and asked Him to have mercy on her and to drive out the demon that was oppressing her daughter.

The response of Jesus here is quite interesting. Matthew tells us that Jesus did not answer her. There have been many times in my life when I have experienced the silence of the Lord. There have been times when I have come to Him seeking His favour in a particular matter in my life but my prayers seemed to remain unanswered.

The disciples saw that the Lord was not responding to the woman. They recognized her as a Phoenician woman. They had the understanding as Jews that salvation was for the Jewish nation only. The non-Jew was considered unworthy of the favour of the Lord God. The disciples asked Jesus if He wanted them to get rid of the woman. The woman did not give up but persisted in her request. Matthew 15:21 tells us that she kept crying out.

The woman gives us an example to follow. She did not give up until she heard from the Lord. This woman recognized that her daughter's only hope was in Jesus so she kept asking. Have you ever prayed and when you don't receive an answer you turned to something or someone else? Have you ever just taken matters into your own hands when you did not receive an immediate answer? Do we come to the Lord as our only hope? Will we persevere until He answers?

When Jesus finally answered the woman, His response did not seem to be favourable. He told her that He was

sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. In other words, His ministry was to the people of Israel. While Jesus would send His disciples to the far corners of the earth with the message of the Kingdom of God, in His earthly ministry He did not go to other nations. He remained in Israel.

This statement did not stop the woman from crying out. She continued to seek the Lord's favour for her daughter. Kneeling at His feet she cried, "Lord, help me!" (Matthew 15:25).

Again Jesus responded by telling her that it was not right to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs (Matthew 15:26). The children Jesus referred to here are the children of Israel. The term "dog" was a term used by the Jews to describe the Gentile nations. The dog was an unclean animal. This is how they saw the Gentiles.

Even this statement did not hinder the woman. She recognized that she was unworthy. She did not dispute the fact that she was not one of the chosen Israelites. She told Jesus, however, that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table of their master. She knew that if she could even get the crumbs that fell from the table this would be enough to heal her daughter.

While the children of Israel sought for greater signs, this woman was content with the crumbs. She didn't need any great sign from the Lord. She didn't need Him to come to her house. She didn't need Him to touch her daughter. Just a word or a nod of approval would be enough. She understood the power of the crumbs. She understood the power of Jesus in a way that the Jews had not. Just a word or a glance was sufficient for her. Even the crumbs that fall

from the table nourish the unworthy dogs if they are willing to eat them.

Seeing the faith of this woman touched the heart of the Lord Jesus. He told her that her request was granted and her daughter would be healed. Mark tells us that Jesus told her that the demon had left her daughter. When she went home, the woman found her daughter lying on her bed completely healed.

This story shows us the importance of persevering faith. It shows us that even the small faith we have can be mightily used by God. This woman did not expect to eat from the same table as the children of God. She was content to eat the crumbs that fell on the ground. Even those crumbs, however, brought healing to her daughter. She only had faith to believe that she could have the blessing of a dog but even that was sufficient to restore her daughter. It is not how much we have but how we use what we have that counts. Better to have little and use it than to have much that is not used.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about persevering in prayer? Have you lost heart and stopped praying about certain things?
- Does the silence of Jesus mean that He is not willing to answer our prayers? Why do you suppose Jesus is silent sometimes?

- What do we learn here about the importance of using the little we have for the Lord?
- Do you feel that you have little faith or that your gifts are not very big? What encouragement do you find in this passage?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to use what He has given you for the expansion of His kingdom. Thank Him that He can use you just as you are in powerful ways.
- Thank the Lord that even the little we have can be wonderfully used of God
- Ask the Lord to give you faith to step out with the little you have.
- Thank God that while we are unworthy of His grace He is willing to minister to us and use us for His glory.

MIRACLES IN DECAPOLIS

Read Matthew 15:29-31; Mark 7:31-8:9

After Jesus healed the daughter of the Phoenician woman, Mark tells us that Jesus left that region and went along the Sea of Galilee to the region of Decapolis. Here He went up the side of the mountain and sat down. Matthew tells us that great crowds came to Jesus bringing the lame, the blind the crippled and the mute. Jesus healed them all. The people were amazed at what they saw Him do and praised the God of Israel for such marvellous things.

Mark gives us an example of one man who was healed that day. He was a deaf man who could hardly speak. Seeing that he could not clearly speak for himself, those that brought him begged Jesus to touch and heal him. Jesus took the man aside. We are not told why He did this. When Jesus was alone with the man He put His fingers in his ears. He also spit and touched the man's tongue. Jesus then looked up to heaven and said "*Ephphatha*" which means "be opened." Immediately the man's ears were opened and he began to speak plainly. There are a couple of things we should notice in this story.

Notice how Jesus heals this man. When Jesus healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter He did not go to her house. He declared her daughter delivered from her demon and continued on His way. Here Jesus took the time to touch the man's ears and anoint his tongue with spit. Why does Jesus touch this man? One thing is certain; Jesus did not need to touch this man to heal him. The fact that He does, however, is significant. Not only was Jesus sensitive to the will of the Father in each of these healings but He was also sensitive to how the Father wanted to heal each individual.

When we see Jesus healing using various techniques, we understand that there is no magic formula. It is not the laying on of hands nor is it the words we use that bring healing. God alone heals. Could it be that Jesus is showing us that we are not to fall into the trap of thinking that we need to do things in a certain way? We are not to trust our methods. Our confidence must be in the Lord alone. We must be sensitive to what God is saying not only concerning who He wants to heal but also about how He wants this healing to take place.

On one occasion the Lord asked Moses to strike a rock for water to come out. On another occasion the Lord told him to speak to the rock. It is certain that God could have done these miracles without Moses doing these particular things. What is important for us to understand here is that God requires obedience. He gives us authority but that authority is only released in obedience. This keeps us humble. This keeps us listening to God and helps us to realize that He alone can heal.

As Jesus looked at the crowds that gathered that day, He knew that many of them had been with Him for three days

without any food. He did not want to send them away hungry for fear that they would not be able to make it home without collapsing on the way.

When He shared this with His disciples they were puzzled. "Where can we get enough bread to feed such a crowd," was their response. This was the second time the Lord Jesus would feed such a large crowd. On the last occasion there were five thousand men not counting the women and children. The very fact that the disciples ask this question may show us that they had not remembered what Jesus had done the first time nor had they truly learned the lesson from that miracle.

When asked what they had on hand, the disciples told the Lord that they had seven loaves and a few small fish. As He did with the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus asked the crowd to sit down. When everyone was seated, He took the loaves of bread and the fish and gave thanks to His Father for them. He then gave these pieces to the disciples and they distributed them to the people. The disciples gave what they had received from the Lord. Ultimately this is what we are all to do. We can only give what we have received from the Lord. You cannot give out of your emptiness. If you want to give as a pastor or a leader in your church you must first be filled. You must sit at the feet of the Lord Jesus and receive from Him. You must make it a priority to receive all you can from the Lord. He must be your instructor and your friend. You must not become so busy in activities that you cannot spend time in His presence to be filled. You have nothing of any value to give that does not come from Him.

Notice that what they received from Jesus was distributed to the crowd, and satisfied their hunger (Matthew 15:37).

Our intellectual insights on the Word of God are interesting but they are not ultimately satisfying. I have met many people who know their doctrine inside and out but they are empty and dissatisfied. You can preach a wonderfully prepared and theologically correct message that will touch no one. On the other hand, you can flounder in your presentation of a message that God has put on your heart and that message will have tremendous impact. It is bread from the Lord. It satisfies because it is from Him.

When everyone had had sufficient to eat, the disciples picked up what remained. They gathered up seven baskets of broken pieces that were left over. Four thousand men plus women and children left that region astonished at the provision of the Lord. After these events, Jesus and His disciples left the region and went to the region of Magadan.

There are two key lessons we learn from this section. The first is that we have been given authority in the name of the Lord to step out in His name and conquer the kingdom of darkness. This however, must be done in absolute obedience to the Lord. We must be in tune with Him and His will and we must take that authority in the way He asks us to take it. Authority is released through our obedience to His will and purpose.

The second lesson we learn here is that when we give what we have received from the Lord there is blessing and satisfaction. We need to be a people who spend time in the presence of the Lord. We need to be filled with the presence of God so that from our overflow we can give to others.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the authority we have in the name of the Lord? Have we taken that authority seriously?
- What is the connection between obedience and authority?
- What have you been receiving from the Lord? Take a moment to examine your daily routine. Do you have time in the presence of the Lord to receive from Him?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to find more quality time in His presence so that you can be filled with more of Him and His wisdom.
- Thank the Lord that He has given you authority in His name. Ask Him to teach you more about this authority.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be more sensitive to His leading and direction in your life so that you can move in tune with Him and His purposes.

18

SEEKING A SIGN

Read Matthew 15:39-16:4; Mark 8:10-12

After the feeding of the four thousand, Jesus got into a boat and crossed over to the region of Dalmanutha. The Pharisees and Sadducees approached Him. Matthew tells us that they came for the purpose of testing Jesus by asking Him for a sign from heaven. Mark tells us that Jesus sighed deeply when He heard their request. This deep sigh indicated grief and frustration with them.

We are told that the reason the Pharisees and Sadducees asked for a sign was to test the Lord. Jesus told them, however, that no sign would be given to them apart from the signs they had already received. He told them that only a wicked and adulterous generation sought a sign. The only sign He would give them was the sign of Jonah.

The prophet Jonah was known as the prophet who was swallowed by the great fish. For three days he lived in the belly of that fish and on the third day was vomited out on dry land. This was what would happen to Jesus. Death, like a great fish would swallow him up. For three days He

would be in its belly but on the third day death would vomit him out. He would conquer death and the grave. He would rise from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus was a sign from the Father that Jesus was everything He claimed to be. By His death on the cross, Jesus conquered death. By His resurrection He proved to all that He was bigger than death, Satan and sin. His resurrection proved that His work had the Father's approval. This would be the only sign the Pharisees would get from Jesus. Even this sign, however, would not be enough. They would still remain in their unbelief.

Jesus reminded the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16 that while they were able to read the signs in the heavens they could not read the signs given to them by God. By looking at the evening sky they could tell what kind of day it would be when they woke up in the morning. If the sky was red, the next day would be a nice day. While they knew how to interpret these signs in the sky, they were totally blind to the signs of the time.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees asked for a sign out of disbelief. Jesus refused because they were an adulterous and wicked generation. They were adulterous in that they came to Him but were interested in another god. They worshipped the god of tradition and law. They did not worship the Lord God of Israel.

We should not see this passage as a warning against seeking a sign from the Lord. The Lord has often given His servants signs. Moses received many signs from the Lord. God told him to throw down his rod so that it became a serpent. He was told to put his hand in his cloak so that it became leprous and when he put it back again it was healed (see Exodus 4). Gideon asked the Lord for a sign

to confirm the work he was called by God to do. He asked God to make the fleece wet and the ground dry all around (see Judges 6). By this means he knew that the purpose of God was for him to lead his people into battle. In Genesis 24, Isaac's servant asked the Lord for a sign. He asked that the Lord would bring the woman he had chosen to be the wife of his master to the well and that she would offer water to his camels. When Rebecca came and did exactly as he had requested of the Lord, the servant knew that she was the woman God had chosen for Isaac. When the Lord God sent out His prophets He sent them out with signs to confirm to those they went to that they were truly from Him. Jesus ministered and demonstrated practically the power of God through healing the sick and the miracles He did. These signs were intended not only to minister to people but also to confirm His message.

God is not against us asking for signs to confirm His will and purpose. There are times when the will of the Lord is not clear. Sometimes the only way of knowing what the Lord wants us to do is to ask Him to confirm this to us by some sign or evidence. There is a difference in asking for a sign because we want to know and understand the purpose of God and asking for a sign out of disbelief. On the basis of the sign of the burning bush Moses went on to conquer Egypt. On the basis of the sign of the wet fleece Gideon also went to become God's warrior delivering his people from their enemies. The Pharisees angered the Lord because they saw the signs and miracles but refused to believe. God would give them no new signs until they believe and acted on what they had already received.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between asking for a sign out of disbelief and seeking a sign to clarify and confirm God's purpose?
- When is it appropriate to ask the Lord for a sign of confirmation?
- Has the Lord ever given you a sign to confirm His purpose? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He delights in making His will and purpose clear to us.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see the signs and evidences of His presence.
- Ask the Lord to give you strength to persevere even when you see no sign.

19

THE FAITH OF THE PHARISEES AND THE DISCIPLES COMPARED

Read Matthew 16:5-12; Mark 8:13-21

The Pharisees had come to Jesus seeking a sign. Jesus saw through their evil hearts of unbelief and told them that He would give them no further sign. After that discussion, Jesus and His disciples got into a boat and went to the other side of the lake. The disciples forgot to take bread with them. According to Mark they only had a single loaf of bread in the boat.

As they were crossing the lake, Jesus seemed to be pre-occupied with the discussion He had just had with the Pharisees. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees," Jesus told His disciples (Matthew 16:6). Mark adds the Herodians to this list (Mark 8:15). The Herodians were Jews who supported Herod and his policies.

Jesus compared the teaching of these groups to yeast. In the Scriptures, yeast is a symbol of sin and pride. The Pharisees, Sadducees and the Herodians were a proud people. Their doctrine tended to swell them up and made them arrogant. While they had an appearance of righteousness, their faith was a legalistic faith that had nothing to do with the Lord and His purposes. They were more interested in following their traditions than the principles of righteousness. In fact, they were leading people away from the Lord and His truth.

When the disciples heard Jesus speaking about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees they did not understand what He was saying. They connected what Jesus was saying about yeast with the fact that they had forgot to bring bread for the journey.

Jesus was aware that His disciples did not understand him. His heart was grieved because they had so little faith. They were concerned because they might not have enough to eat. Jesus reminded them, however, of how He had multiplied the bread to feed the five thousand. They had seen this miracle but they did not understand that the Lord Jesus would provide for them in this situation also. How often have I found myself in this situation? I have seen the Lord provide so much for me in my ministry and personal life, but with each new challenge I find myself wondering if He will provide again?

There are two things we need to take from this passage. First, realize that not everything that appears to be spiritual really is. The religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees was a religion of works. Those who practiced their type of religion were sinful and arrogant. They rejected the Lord and

His ways. You can appear spiritual before others but still be far from God.

The second challenge here is to learn to trust the Lord. He has often proved Himself to us in difficult situations. His power has not diminished nor has His love and care for us. He who provided for us in the past will provide for us again. He will not abandon us.

We have two types of faith here in this passage. The first is a false faith that seeks the approval of people and not of God. The second type of faith is one that knows the truth but is somehow not able to apply it to everyday situations. The Lord's heart was grieved by both of these.

For Consideration

- The faith of the Pharisees was compared to yeast here in this passage. Their faith was sinful and arrogant. Is it possible for us to have a wrong motivation for practicing our faith? Explain.
- Has your faith ever tended to make you proud?
- The disciples could not always apply the lessons the Lord had been teaching them to everyday life. What lessons have you learned in the past that you are applying to your life today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you humility in your walk with Him as you teach and preach the truth.

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have doubted His provision and care.
- What truth has the Lord been teaching you recently? Ask the Lord to help you to apply this truth to your everyday life?

20

THE BLIND MAN IN BETHSAIDA

Read Mark 8:22-26

While Jesus was in the region of Bethsaida a blind man was brought to Him for healing. This particular story is of interest because of the way in which Jesus healed Him. His healing was not instantaneous like many of the healings we see in the Gospels. This healing seemed to take place in stages.

Those who brought the man begged Jesus to touch and heal him. It is quite interesting to see that it is not the blind man who was doing the begging but his friends. While we cannot be sure, we are left to wonder what the blind man thought of all this. Did he believe Jesus could heal him? Was he being dragged to Jesus by his friends? How much faith did he have? We simply do not have a clear answer to these questions.

Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Notice that though Jesus touched the man he

was not healed. The woman who touched the hem of Jesus garment was healed instantly. Here we have a man who held the hand of Jesus as they walked together but he was not healed.

The fact that Jesus took the time to take him by the hand and walk with him would have been reassuring to the blind man. Jesus was a powerful and important spiritual leader. Here He was now walking hand in hand with this blind man. He may have felt unworthy of this attention. We don't have any record of what Jesus said to him at this time but we can be assured that this time would not be easily forgotten. By taking him away from the crowd Jesus showed the blind man that that matter was a very personal one between him and his Lord.

When they arrived outside the village, the Lord spit on the man's eyes and put His hands on them and asked him if he saw anything. He told Jesus that he saw the men around him but they looked like trees walking around. In other words, his vision was unclear. It was hard for him to distinguish between a tree and a man.

It is quite important that we examine this incident. Not only was the man not healed when Jesus took him by the hand and led him out of the village but he was not completely healed even when Jesus anointed his eyes with spit. What are we to understand by this? Matthew 13:58 tells us that when Jesus was in Nazareth He could not do many miracles because of their lack of faith. Faith is a necessary ingredient for seeing God accomplish His work in us. Could it be that this man needed his faith strengthened? We can be sure that as his healing came, his faith would be stirred. Was Jesus ministering to him in a spiritual way as well?

When the man told Jesus that he saw men as trees walking, what was he saying? There had been a healing of sorts. The man had been totally blind but now he could see partially. This in itself was a wonderful thing. While he had experienced a measure of healing, it was not complete.

How often have we been content with partial healing? We see men as trees and we are content. We see some victory over sin in our life and we are content. Like the children of Israel taking over the Promised Land we let the enemy remain in the land. We decide that instead of a full conquest of the land we will live with the enemy. This story is a challenge to us. It is true that the Lord's ways are not always our ways. Sometimes He does leave us a thorn in the flesh for our good. Having said this, however, the Lord is often willing to give us a more complete victory in those things that keep us from a deeper relationship with Him. He is willing to uproot the strongholds and pull out every sin that keeps us from Him. Why should we be content with partial victory when complete victory can be ours?

Once more Jesus put His hands on the man and touched his eyes. This time the man's eyes were opened and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home giving him instructions not to go into the village. Going into the village would only have stirred up the crowds and brought them running to Jesus with all their sick.

This passage encourages us in our prayers. While we have seen the answer, we need to believe that the Lord has heard our request and He is leading us to the place of wholeness. The passage also challenges us not to be content with partial answers to our prayers. There are times when the Lord is willing to bring a complete answer but we have been content with the partial answer. This is

especially true when it comes to those things that keep us from a deeper walk with Him. Let us seek Him for complete and total victory.

For Consideration:

- Do you have requests that the Lord has not answered? What are they? What encouragement do you receive from this passage?
- Describe a time when your faith was strengthened as you had to wait for the Lord to answer your prayer.
- Are there areas of your life where you have only experienced a partial answer to your prayer? What are they? Do you believe that the Lord can give you the complete answer?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to increase your faith to believe that He is able to give you a complete answer to your request.
- Thank the Lord that while He does not always answer our prayers right away He does hear us. Thank Him that He is a God of victory over sin and the power of the enemy in our lives.
- Ask the Lord for patience to trust in Him and His leading as you wait for Him to answer your request.

21

PETER'S CONFESSION

Read Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21

Jesus and His disciples continued to move about the region. On this occasion they were in the region of Caesarea Philippi about 120 miles (200 kilometres) north of Jerusalem. Luke tells us that Jesus was praying with His disciples. During that time He asked them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13). Matthew is the only one to use the term "Son of Man." The term "Son of Man" emphasizes the humanity of our Lord.

It should be understood that the Lord Jesus knew what men were saying about Him. He does not ask this question out of curiosity. He asked it for the benefit of His disciples.

The disciples responded to this question by telling Jesus what they had been hearing. They told Him that some people said He was John the Baptist raised from the dead. This is in particular what Herod thought (see Matthew 14:1-2). Others believed that Jesus was Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other great prophets come back to life. There was confusion in the minds of the people of Jesus' day

about His identity. Notice that not one person admitted that He was the Messiah. How sad this must have been for Jesus. He came as the fulfilment of prophecy, to be the Saviour of the world, but those to whom He ministered did not see Him as their Saviour. Admittedly, He was a great man of God, and they were willing to admit that He ranked among the great prophets but no one went as far as to say that He was the Messiah, their Saviour. Their eyes were blinded.

Having heard what people were saying about him, Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was. It was Peter who answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16). This was a powerful statement. You can almost feel the sense of awe that must have struck the group as Peter uttered these words. Jesus was the Christ, the anointed one of God. He was the Son of God come down to earth. He was God in flesh. What an awesome statement this was. These disciples were walking and talking with the Son of God. He was the one prophesied from ages past. He was the hope of Israel and the hope of the world.

Matthew goes on to tell us something of the conversation between Jesus and Peter after he made this statement. Jesus told Peter that he was truly blessed because this matter had been revealed to him, not by man, but by his Heavenly Father (Matthew 16:17). All who have been given eyes to see that Jesus is the Christ are blessed like Peter. There are many people around us who do not understand that Jesus in the Christ, the one anointed to save His people from their sin. They have heard stories about Him and have marvelled at His teaching but they have not come to understand that He is the one God sent for their salvation. We are blessed because it has been given to us

to know the Lord Jesus and understand and accept Him as our Lord and Saviour.

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus made a statement that has confused Bible scholars of all ages. Here in this verse he reminded Peter that his name was "Peter." The word used here in the original Greek is the word "*petros*." Petros means stone. Jesus told Peter that he was like a stone. Jesus then said, "On this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). The word Jesus used for rock is the word "*petra*." While it comes from the same root word as "*petros*" this is a different word. "*Petra*" refers to a cliff or a large rock. This is in direct contrast to the word that Jesus used to describe Peter. While Peter was a little stone, Jesus would build his church on a large and unmovable rock. The question we need to ask ourselves is what is that large rock that Jesus is referring to in this verse?

It is at this point that commentators differ. Some have said that Peter is the rock on which the Lord would build His church. The context, however, would indicate that this is not the case. Jesus uses two different words here. He seems to be contrasting Peter the stone with the Rock on which He would build His church. This does not take away from the fact, however, that Peter (as well as the other apostles) would be mightily used of God to build the church.

Others have said that the rock that Jesus refers to here is the confession of Peter. Peter had just told the Lord that he believed Him to be the Christ the Son of the Living God. It is quite certain that this was the central truth on which the Church would be built. The church of our day is established firmly on the fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He was the Christ the anointed one who came from God

to save us from our sin. This is the truth the church proclaims. This is the truth that would conquer the enemy. Satan cannot stand against this truth. A solid rock makes a good foundation. The church of Jesus Christ today is built on this solid and unchanging truth that Jesus is the Christ, sent of God to save us from our sin.

Jesus reminded Peter and the disciples that His church would be built on the truth that He was the Christ the Son of the Living God. He told them that He would build His church and hell itself would not be able to overcome it. Hell would certainly try its best to overcome the church. History clearly shows us that Satan has done his best to wipe out the church but he has not been able to do so. Throughout every age there have been those who have believed and stood firmly on the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, come to save us from our sins.

Notice here that it is the Lord who builds his church. We are instruments in the hands of the Lord, but it is He who does the building. When we understand that it is the Lord who must build the church we put aside our plans in favour of His. We stop trusting in our human wisdom and strength and place our trust and confidence in Him and His work. If He builds the church we must surrender to Him and do the work His way. How often we have taken this responsibility on ourselves.

Jesus told Peter that He would give to Him the keys to the kingdom of heaven and whatever He bound on earth would be bound in heaven. Whatever he loosed on earth would also be loosed in heaven (see Matthew 16:19). There has been some division of opinion here over this statement. Some feel that this statement applied only to Peter, giving him special power and privilege on earth as

God's representative. This does not seem to bear itself out in the rest of Scripture. This authority was given not only to Peter but to the rest of the apostles as well. That authority is also given to us as representatives of the Lord Jesus.

What did Jesus mean when He told Peter that whatever he bound would be bound or loosed would be bound or loosed in heaven? We must remember here that we are in the midst of a spiritual warfare. The kingdom of God is pushing back the forces of darkness. As we step out in the name of the Lord to do battle, we do so by binding the hands of our enemy. We destroy his plans and purposes and bind him so that he can no longer influence and hurt those around him. Jesus promises that as we step out to battle the enemy and expand His kingdom, His presence and authority will be with us. When we move out to bind the efforts of Satan and his angels God stands behind us. We have His full authority.

The same principle is true for delivering those who have been oppressed and defeated by the enemy. Already the enemy has been doing a work in the lives of people all around us. He has bound them up in sin and emotional, physical and spiritual problems. There are strongholds in their lives that he has built up against God and His purposes. Many are trapped in bitterness and anger. They are captured by the world and its influences. They cannot seem to escape the grip of Satan and the world. Jesus tells us that as we step out to release prisoners from the clutches of sin and rebellion, God will stand with us. We move in the authority of God. When we step out to deliver those who are in bondage we do so with the full authority of God in heaven. Satan cannot resist us.

It is significant that this statement about binding and loosing is found in the context of Jesus being the one to build His church. We have been given authority but we take that authority with the understanding that we are to be submissive to the leading and direction of the Lord as the Master of the church. God will use us to build His church. He empowers us and gives us His authority to conquer, bind and loose. He fully stands with us in this matter when we are in subjection to Him and His purposes as the master builder of His church.

As Jesus concluded this time with his disciples, He warned them not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. This was only a temporary command. The day would come when they would go out and tell everyone. That day came when the Holy Spirit fell on them in the book of Acts. For the moment, it was not the time to share that message. Jesus asked them to wait.

For Consideration:

- When we say that Jesus is the Christ what do we mean? What are the implications of this statement?
- When we understand that Jesus will build His church how does this change how we do the work of God?
- Jesus tells us that He would build his church on the confession that He was the Christ the Son of the Living God. How does having this as the foundation for our faith affect how we do the work of the church?

- What do we learn here about the authority that God has given us as a church today? Are we using that authority?

For Prayer:

- Thank God for the fact that He has opened your eyes to know Him as the Christ.
- Thank the Lord that the work of building the church is His work. Thank Him that He desires to use us in this wonderful work.
- Ask the Lord what role He would have you to play in the building of His church.
- Ask God to give you a deeper understanding of the authority that is yours in Him. Ask Him to help you to walk more fully in that authority.

22

JESUS

FORETELLS HIS DEATH

Read Matthew 16:21-23; Mark 8:31-33; Luke 9:22

Peter had just confessed that the Lord Jesus was the Christ the Son of the Living God. It was important that the disciples understand this truth. The truth they confessed that day would be put to the test. In the days following that declaration, the Lord Jesus would be arrested, tried and crucified. It would be important that His disciples cling to Peter's confession in the coming days of trial and difficulty. It would be this belief in Jesus as the Son of God that would keep them through these difficulties.

At this point in His ministry Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He would have to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. He reminded them that He would have to die but that on the third day He would rise from the dead.

It was one thing for Peter to accept that Jesus was the Christ the Son of the living God but quite another to accept

His death and suffering. Peter, who had so powerfully proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, rejected what Jesus was saying about His death and suffering. Taking Jesus aside he rebuked Him saying, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22).

In saying this, Peter seems to be taking it on himself to protect his Lord. In some ways, he was committing himself to do whatever he could to keep Jesus from suffering and dying. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus Peter drew his sword to defend his Lord. At one point he even committed himself to die for Him. Peter was very serious about doing everything to keep his Lord alive and protected. He did not yet understand how important it was for Jesus to die.

Jesus' response to Peter would have taken him by surprise. Turning to Peter He said, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of man" (Matthew 16:23). These are very strong words. According to Jesus, Peter had become an instrument of Satan to cause Him to stumble. Satan was using Peter and his words in an attempt to test Jesus. Satan will stop at nothing. He is extremely bold. He will use every opportunity he can to thwart the work of God. He can even use the children of God to do his work. What better way to disguise his efforts than through someone we respect or admire.

Peter had a hard time accepting the suffering of the Lord. He wanted the glory but not the pain. Satan still uses this tactic in our day. He will tell us that God is a God of such love that he could never condemn anyone to a lost eternity. He will tell you that it is not the will of God that anyone suffers pain or sickness or distress in their lives. He will tell

you that God always wants you to take the easy road. When we face difficulty and suffering we are devastated. We feel that God has abandoned us.

The fact of the matter is that those who follow the Lord Jesus will have to suffer. The Lord challenges us to take up our cross and follow Him. For some that cross will be a cross of rejection and ridicule. For others it will be a cross of physical suffering and death. Imagine a soldier going to war with the idea that he should never be shot at, or wounded or suffer any inconvenience in the battle. What would you say to a soldier who believed that the battle should always be fun-filled and exciting? What would you say to the soldier who felt it was the proper thing to retreat if things got the least bit difficult? How far would an army of soldiers with this attitude get in their efforts to overcome the enemy? We will have to suffer and face the opposition of the enemy if we are going to advance the kingdom of God.

While we should not seek persecution, neither should we flee from it when it comes. There are times when we will not understand the will and purpose of the Lord. There are times when He will send us to the front lines to face the enemy's arrows and bullets. Things will not always be easy. We will be called on to suffer for the cause of the Lord and the advancement of His Kingdom. Jesus was ready to do this. Peter was not at this point ready to accept that the Lord had to suffer to bring victory. Are you ready to stand firm and hold your ground when things get difficult?

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself retreating from the battle when things started to get difficult? What were the evidences of your retreat?
- Do you hear the teaching that things should always be easy for the believer in your church or society? What do we learn about this teaching in this passage?
- Are you ready to stand firm and suffer for the cause of the Lord Jesus?
- What does it mean for us to take up our cross to follow the Lord?
- What do we learn here about the tactics of Satan? Who can he use in his attempt to hinder the advancing of the kingdom of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to stand firm for Him no matter the cost
- Thank the Lord that He was willing to face the enemy for us and He did not give up when things got difficult.
- Ask the Lord to ground you more solidly in His Word so that you will not fall prey to the lies of the enemy.

23

TAKING UP THE CROSS

Read Matthew 16:24-28; Mark 8:34-9:1; Luke 9:23-27

In the last meditation we saw how Peter had a problem with the fact that the Lord Jesus would have to die. For Peter, the Son of God should not have to suffer and die. The Lord rebuked Peter because he did not understand the purpose of God in this matter. Here in this passage Jesus told His disciples that they too needed to be willing to suffer for His name. He reminded them that suffering and persecution would be a part of their lives as His servants.

Jesus made it clear to His disciples that they would have to deny themselves and take up their cross if they were going to follow Him. Notice that Jesus used the word, "must." This is a very important word in this context. Jesus does not leave this matter open for discussion. If you want to be a follower of the Lord Jesus, you must deny yourself and take up your cross. There is no option. I like to compare what Jesus is saying here to a man who comes to the doorway of the Christian life. As he arrives, he is carrying a backpack filled with his own interests and plans for life. As he approaches the gate he realizes that it is very

narrow. He tries to get through but he can't squeeze through because of his backpack. Try as he may, he cannot get through with that pack on his back. He has a decision to make. Either he will take the back pack off and walk through without it or he will keep his backpack and not pass through the gate. He has no option. Jesus tells us that we have a choice to make. Either we continue with all our own desires and interests or we die to them and pass through the gate to follow Him.

As we die to ourselves and pass through the gate, we are each given a cross to bear. Those who have left their bag on the other side are now asked to take up another burden. This cross is different for each person. For the Lord Jesus it meant putting aside His privileges as God and taking on the form of a man. It meant being willing to suffer the insults and mocking of those who hated Him. Ultimately, it meant that He be willing to lay down His life. We must each be willing to follow the steps of the Lord Jesus. If we want to follow Him, we will have to lay everything on the altar. We will have to be willing to say, "Lord, whatever you want I will do." We need to be willing to lay aside our comfort and our own ideas. We must be willing to give Him first place. We are called each day to live with the reality of the cross that we are to bear for Him.

All too many people come to the Lord for what they can get from Him. This is how the crowds treated Jesus. They came to be healed. They came to be ministered to but very few of them were willing to lay down their lives for Him. Very few were willing to suffer and be rejected by their families and friends. Their reputation and their possessions meant more to them than the Lord Jesus.

Luke makes it clear to us that we must be willing to take up our cross daily. This is not something we do just once in our lives. We must daily pick up our cross. Each morning I must be willing to surrender my plans and agendas to the Lord. Each day we pick up that cross we are telling the Lord that we want Him to have His way with us that day. We do not complain and grumble when He brings circumstances to us that we do not like. Instead we accept what He gives and allow Him to do what He wants in us.

Jesus gave His disciples a very important warning in this passage. He told them that if they wanted to save their lives they would lose them. In other words, if they wanted to live their own life and do their own thing, they would perish in the end with nothing to show for it. If, on the other hand, they chose to give everything to Christ by dying to all they had, they would truly find life. Some of the strongest believers I have met are those who have had to face great persecution and trouble in their life. It is in these times of persecution and trial that the Lord Jesus becomes more real to us. Likewise, I have met believers who were so caught up in the things of this world that the Lord became distant. If you want the Lord Jesus to become real to you, you must be willing to give everything to Him. You must be willing to lay down your life in order that out of the death of your own plans and agendas new life will flow.

Jesus challenged His disciples to consider what good it would be for a person to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul. All too many people have become attracted to the glitter of this world and what it has to offer. Satan has used this to keep many people from accepting the Lord and becoming his follower. Satan tempted Eve by showing her the fruit on the tree. He showed her how good it looked

and how good it tasted and she fell into his trap. Sin entered the world and destroyed her relationship with God.

There are times when we are so concerned with our reputation and image that we do not speak out for the Lord God. We are ashamed to be known as one of His disciples because we are too concerned about our image. Jesus told His disciples that if they were ashamed of Him in this generation the Lord would be ashamed of them when He came again. What a terrible thing it would be for the Lord to be ashamed of us. If you want to be a servant of the Lord Jesus you must be willing to lay everything down and die to what people think of you. They mocked and slandered the Lord Jesus and they will mock and slander us. Let us count it a privilege to be His servant. Let us count it a privilege to suffer insult for His name. Do soldiers go to war thinking that their enemy will like them? Neither will the enemy like us.

Jesus reminded His disciples that the day was coming when those who were present with Him would see the kingdom of God coming with power (Luke 9:27). There are various interpretations of this verse. Some see a reference to the time when the Lord would shortly take some of His disciples with Him to the Mount of Transfiguration to see His glory. Others see, in this verse, a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit who would empower the disciples and enable them to live in the reality of the Kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus is calling us to be true soldiers of the cross. As soldiers we must be willing to lay everything down. Nothing must distract us from our service. No soldier goes to war without the understanding that there will be some sacrifices necessary. No soldier can be of any use to the army if they are more interested in themselves and their

comforts than they are in the cause they represent. Imagine a soldier that was so ashamed of his cause that he would not wear the uniform. What kind of soldier would this person be? The Lord Jesus is looking for soldiers who are unashamedly committed to His cause, who are willing to lay down everything to follow Him and fight in His army.

He promises to empower and enable those soldiers. He will honour them as they serve Him faithfully. He is proud to call them His own. He not only notices their efforts but will reward them for those efforts. They will know His favour and blessing in their lives and hearts. The battle will not be easy but victory is assured and there is great reward for all who persevere faithfully to the end.

For Consideration:

- Are their things in your life that you have not yet surrendered to the Lord God? What are they?
- What sacrifices have you made in your service for the Lord God?
- To what extent has your obedience and willingness to sacrifice for the Lord drawn you closer to Him?
- Are you willing to be known as a follower of Jesus? What in particular holds you back from being a true follower?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you any area of your life that you have not yet surrendered to Him?
- Ask the Lord to make you bold for Him and unashamed of His name.
- Thank the Lord that as we step out He promises to be with us and to minister to us and through us.
- Thank the Lord that He was willing to sacrifice everything for you.

24

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Read Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36

The story of the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus is quite a fascinating one. This miraculous event took place about six days after the Lord Jesus had been teaching His disciples about the importance of taking up their cross. He told them at that time that there were some among them that would see the kingdom of God come in power. Some commentators see this as a direct fulfilment of those words of Jesus.

Jesus took only three of his disciples with Him to a high mountain. It is unclear why Jesus singled out these particular disciples. It is clear, however, that these men would have a very important ministry in the early church. We read of the vital role that Peter would play at Pentecost and in the expansion of the church among the Jews in the book of Acts. Peter was known for his bold statements and willingness to jump into any situation for the Lord (even though this would often get him into trouble). James was the brother of John. Both he and his brother John were nicknamed the “Sons of Thunder” probably due to their

energy and zeal (see Mark 3:17). James would become the very first martyr of the early church. As for John, he would become the leader in the church of Jerusalem. Because of his bold stand for the truth of the Word of God he would be banished to the island of Patmos where the Lord would reveal to him, in the form of a great vision, the things that were to come. The vision is recorded for us in the book of Revelation. It was these three men that Jesus took with Him up the mountain. Luke tells us that they went to the mountain to pray (Luke 9:28).

As they prayed, Jesus' appearance changed. As the disciples watched, His face began to shine. They described the Lord's face as being as bright as the sun. In other words, His appearance was so bright they could not look at Him. The disciples tell us that His clothes also were white like a bright light. Mark says that His clothes were brighter than any bleach could bleach them. Luke describes them as being like the brightness of a great flash of lightening. The whole incident would have been very overwhelming for the disciples.

As the scene unfolded, two other figures appeared with Jesus. The disciples saw Moses and Elijah speaking to the Lord Jesus. The question could be asked, how would the disciples have known Moses and Elijah? They had never seen either man. There were no photographs of these men passed down through the years. It is obvious from the context that God gave them this understanding in their spirit. Not only did they see but they were also given a measure of understanding.

Luke says that the disciples could hear some of the discussion between Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Luke 9:30 tells us that they spoke about Jesus' departure. Jesus had

already told His disciples that He would be handed over to the enemy to be killed. Jesus speaks here to these two men about this coming death. There are several things we need to examine in this context.

Why did Jesus speak to Moses and Elijah about His death? Moses was the one through whom the Old Testament law was given. He represented the law of the Old Testament. Elijah was one of the first great prophets of the Old Testament. He represented the prophets. Why were the Law and the prophets represented here? Both the Law and the prophets looked forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus. The Law with all its sacrifices would be fulfilled through the final sacrifice of the Lord Jesus for our sins. All these sacrifices looked forward to the day when the Lord Jesus would make one final sacrifice for all time. The prophets spoke of the day when the Messiah would come and usher in His kingdom. They too longed for this day. They gave their lives to proclaim this day of the Lord. The representatives of the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament stand now with Jesus who was to be the fulfilment of everything they preached.

These two great figures understood the significance of Christ's death. They came in a sense to minister and encourage the Lord Jesus as He prepared for His death. They came as a reminder that His death was prophesied long ago and would be the fulfilment of everything they stood for in their day. The disciples did not understand that the Lord Jesus needed to die. Seeing Moses and Elijah showed them that His death was a necessary part of the purpose of God for the salvation of His people.

As Moses and Elijah were leaving, Peter asked if they wanted him to put up three shelters, one for each of them.

The Bible tells us that Peter did not know what he was saying. The word translated “shelter” can be translated “tabernacle” or “temple.” This seems to be what Peter is saying here. He is so filled with awe that he felt they needed to build three small temples in their honour.

While Peter spoke, a bright cloud enveloped them and a great voice from heaven spoke saying, “This is my Son whom I love: with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!” (Matthew 17:5). The disciples fell to the ground when they heard this voice. They were filled with fear and terror. Almost in answer to the words of Peter the Lord God sent a cloud to take up Moses and Elijah. They had no need of an earthly temple. They dwelt in heaven with the Father. The voice came also to confirm the Lord Jesus in His commitment to go to the cross and die for the sins of the world. God the Father confirmed Him in His work before the disciples present that day.

As the disciples lay terrified on the ground they had much to think about. That day they had seen Moses and Elijah, respected men of God, speaking with Jesus about His need to die. They had also heard the voice of God testifying to the importance and His pleasure in the work that Christ would do through His death. How could they doubt that this was the purpose of God and the fulfilment of all Scripture now? This sign was a sign for the disciples but also for us. Jesus’ life was not taken from Him by the will and purpose of evil men. His death was in the will and purpose of God from the very beginning. What a challenge this would have been to the disciples as they reflected on what Jesus was telling them about His coming death. God was not only preparing the Lord Jesus for his death but He was also preparing His disciples so that they would not lose heart when that tragic day came.

As the disciples lay on the ground a hand reached down and touched them. It was the hand of Jesus. He told them to get up. They rose and looked around but the other men had left. They were alone with Jesus again. He told them not to be afraid.

Luke tells us that the disciples kept this matter to themselves. Jesus told them that they were not to speak to anyone about this until after He had risen from the dead. In time they would be able to encourage their brothers with what they had seen but for now they were to keep the matter between themselves.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you did not seem to have anyone you could talk with who understood what you were facing? What does this passage teach us?
- What do we learn in this passage about the principal message of the Law and the Prophets? To what did they look forward?
- We see here the pleasure of the Father in the absolute obedience of His Son to His purpose for him. Have you been obedient to the purpose of the Father for your life?
- God prepared His servants for the coming death of His Son. What does this tell us about God and His understanding of our needs?

- Are there individuals that you need to take time with to encourage and bless in their difficult ministries?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord Jesus for His resolve to be obedient to death
- Thank the Lord that He understands our need of encouragement and support.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be an encouragement for those around you.
- Thank the Lord that he came to fulfil what the Old Testament Law and the Prophets predicted.

25

QUESTIONS ABOUT ELIJAH

Read Matthew 17:9-13; Mark 9:9-13

Jesus and His disciples had just been on the mountain. Jesus was transfigured before their eyes and spoke with Moses and Elijah. While the disciples were still somewhat confused about what they had seen and heard, they would not soon forget that moment. It would, no doubt, have had a lifelong impact on them.

As they came down the mountain, the Lord Jesus instructed His disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen until He had been raised from the dead. It is important to note here that while this message about His death was not well received the last time Jesus spoke to his disciples, this time the reaction is quite different. The last time we read about Jesus speaking of His death to the disciples, Peter rebuked Him. Their time on the mountain influenced their thinking about Christ's death. They did not understand why Jesus would have to die but they were more willing to accept this as the will of the Father.

The second thing we need to see is that Jesus also spoke to the disciples about His rising from the dead. Mark tells us that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was speaking about. They were coming to accept the fact that Jesus would have to die but they did not yet understand what He meant by coming back to life. They did not dare to question Jesus about this. Mark tells us that they discussed this issue among themselves but they could not grasp what Jesus was saying.

While the disciples did not understand the prophecies about how the Lord Jesus would suffer, die and be raised from the dead, they did understand the prophecies to teach that Elijah would come before the Messiah. This understanding came very likely from a prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

Malachi prophesied that before the coming of the Messiah, Elijah the prophet would come. He would turn the hearts of the children back to the fathers. This prophecy perplexed the disciples. They had just seen Elijah but Jesus had been around for some time.

Understanding their confusion on this matter, Jesus told them that Elijah had already come but people did not recognize him. In saying this, Jesus showed His disciples that the Elijah who was to come was not the Elijah they saw on the mountain. The Elijah that Jesus spoke about was John the Baptist (see Matthew 17:13). It was John who prepared

the way for the Messiah. He came to preach a message of repentance and to tell those who would listen that the Kingdom of God was near. Jesus reminded His disciples that the world did not recognize John as the Elijah who was to come and they rejected His message.

Jesus also told the disciples that what they did to John the Baptist they would also do to Him. They did not recognize John nor would they recognize the Messiah. They killed John and they would also kill the Lord Jesus.

How blind our hearts can be. How many times has the Lord worked in our midst and we have not recognized His work? How often has the Lord sought to lead us and direct us but we have not recognized His voice? We need our spiritual eyes opened to the work and ministry of the Lord Jesus in our midst. We have, in our blindness, like the people of Jesus day, fought against the purpose of God in our lives. Instead of surrendering and accepting His purpose we have resisted and moved in the opposite direction. May God give us ears to hear and eyes to see Him and His purposes for our lives.

For Consideration:

- The disciples wrestled to understand the work and purpose of the Lord God. What does teach us about the type of person God can use?
- Have you ever missed seeing what the Lord was doing? Have you ever found yourself fighting against His work in your life?

- How do we recognize the presence of the Lord and His leading? What keeps us from hearing and seeing what God is doing?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to His work and leading in your life.
- Thank the Lord that just as He could use the disciples in their imperfection He can also use you as you are.
- Thank the Lord that His purposes are being fulfilled even when we don't understand or we miss what He is doing.

26

THE DEMONIAC BOY

Read Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43

While Jesus was on the mountain with Peter, James and John the other disciples had their own problems to deal with. This becomes evident as Jesus, Peter, James and John approached the place where the other disciples had been staying. They noticed a large crowd and the teachers of the law were arguing with the disciples. There appeared to be quite a commotion. When the crowd saw the Lord Jesus, they ran to Him. Jesus asked them what they were arguing about. A man in that crowd told Jesus that his son had a spirit who had robbed him of his speech and caused him to have seizures. At times, the spirit would cause such seizures that his son would foam at the mouth, gnash his teeth, fall into fire or water and become rigid. Luke tells us that this spirit would rarely leave this boy and was destroying his life.

There are a couple of things we need to see from the father's description of his son's problem. Notice first that the spirit rarely left the boy. Though it was rare, we are left with the impression that there were times when the spirit did leave the boy. We see a similar thing in the life of King

Saul. The evil spirit who afflicted him came on him from time to time but would leave when David played the harp (see 1 Samuel 16:23). We learn from this that evil spirits seem to be free to roam as they please.

Secondly, notice the nature of the work of these evil spirits. They are intent on destruction. They have the ability to inflict physical pain and suffering. They care nothing for the individual.

The father of this demon possessed boy had brought his son to the disciples but they were unable to deal with this particular spirit. When He heard these things Jesus responded, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Matthew 17:17). He attributes the disciple's inability to cast out this demon to a lack of faith and to unbelief. It is unclear who Jesus is addressing in these words. Was Jesus speaking to the unbelieving crowd who did not believe that this child could be delivered? Was He speaking to the disciples and accusing them of not having the faith necessary to deliver this child? The answer is not clear. It is evident however, that neither the disciples, the teachers of the law or the crowd had the faith required to see this boy delivered of his demon. What this shows us is that authority alone is not sufficient for deliverance. Jesus had already given His disciples authority when He sent them out on a short mission trip some time prior to this. They had authority but they did not have faith for this particular situation. Faith and authority must walk hand in hand. We may have authority given to us by God but if we do not have faith for that particular situation we may very well fail.

Jesus asked that the boy be brought to Him. The child was brought to Jesus. When the evil spirit saw Jesus, he threw

the boy into a convulsion. The child fell to the ground, began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father how long the child had been oppressed by the evil spirit. The father told Jesus that it was from his childhood. This boy really knew nothing about living a normal life. The evil spirit cared nothing about the age of the child it was oppressing. The father asked Jesus to heal him if He could. Jesus challenged the father on this statement. The father was not sure, at this point, that Jesus was able to heal the boy. He demonstrated a lack of faith in Jesus' ability. Not only does Jesus rebuke the man's lack of faith but he reminded him that all things were possible for the one who believed.

It is important that we examine this statement. Jesus is not telling us that we can satisfy our greed if we simply believe that Jesus can do whatever we ask Him. We know that Jesus can do all things. The question is will He do something in your particular situation. There is a world of difference between the word "can" and the word "will." The faith we speak about here is a faith that understands that it is His purpose for that particular situation. This type of faith is a gift from God for the each situation we face. There have been times in my life, as I prayed, that God gave me the faith and assurance that He was going to work in that situation. There have been other times when I have not had that faith. I believe that there are many things the Lord God wants to do. He is looking for hearts to receive the faith necessary to do those things. If you will make your heart available to Him, He will give you the faith to do what He wants to do through you.

The father in this passage lacked the faith necessary. He was willing however, to open his heart for Jesus to give him the faith to see his son healed. "I believe," he told

Jesus, but my faith is very small. I need you to help my unbelief. I need you to increase my faith for this situation. I need you to show me your purpose so I can believe. There are times when we will all have to pray this prayer.

Jesus spoke to the demon and told it to leave the boy and never come back. The demon shrieked and came out so violently that the boy lay convulsing on the ground. Eventually he settled down and was so quiet that the people thought he had died. Jesus took the boy by the hand and the boy rose to his feet and stood on his own, untroubled. The people were amazed at the wonderful power of God.

When the disciples were alone with Jesus they asked Him why they were not able to drive that demon out themselves. Jesus told them that it was because they had little faith. He told them that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed they could tell the mountain to move and be cast into the sea and it would be done. There are those who want this faith so that they can look good before others. They want to be able to satisfy their worldly lust for possessions and praise. The Lord God gives faith for those things He wants to accomplish. That is to say, we are not given faith to do anything we want. He may give us faith for one issue and not for another. This sort of faith is given for each situation we encounter. When you come up against a situation where God wants to use you, He will also give you the faith necessary if you are willing to receive it.

What is important here is that we seek the will and purpose of the Lord for each situation we encounter. We need to ask the Lord what He wants to do in any given situation. We also need to ask Him if we are the ones He wants to use. When we have this assurance we can step out with

great boldness and assurance of faith being confident that what He wants to accomplish will be done in us and through us for His glory.

Notice that Mark 9:29 tells us that Jesus told His disciples that this particular kind of spirit could not come out except by prayer (some translations add fasting). Jesus seems to be saying that there are times when we have to do just what the father in this story did. We are going to have to get down on our knees and ask the Lord Jesus to increase our faith so that we can deal with the battle before us. Notice here that the demon was not cast out by prayer but those who cast the demon out were prepared by prayer to do the work.

God delights to work through believing hearts. Unbelief keeps Him from ministering. Faith is a necessary ingredient in our service of the Lord. The wonderful thing here is that God is willing to give us everything we need to accomplish the ministry He has for us. He is looking for people who are not only aware of His power but who also have a clear understanding of what He wants to do. This can only come by knowing His leading in any given situation. This requires time with the Lord seeking His direction and will. When you are assured of His purpose, you can step out believing that what He has made clear to you, He will also accomplish through you.

For Consideration:

- Is it possible to want to do great things for God for the wrong reason? Explain.

- What do we learn here about the importance of faith in the life of the believer?
- What is the difference between believing that God is an all-powerful God and having faith for a particular situation we are facing?
- How has God been stretching your faith as a believer?
- Have you had times when the Lord has given you specific faith that what you prayed He would indeed answer? Have you had times when He has just not given you that faith? Explain?
- What is the connection between faith and seeking the specific will and purpose of God for a given situation?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is willing to do far more through us than we could ever imagine.
- Ask the Lord to stretch and increase your faith in Him and His purpose.
- Ask God to give you a deeper understanding of His particular purpose in your ministry or in a personal situation you are facing. Ask Him to show you His purpose and give you faith to face your situation.
- Thank God that His provision will always be equal to our need.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION FORETOLD

Read Matthew 17:22-23; Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:44-45

From the time of His transfiguration the Lord Jesus seems to intensify His focus on preparation for the cross. This was why He came to earth. For over thirty years He has been preparing for this time. Here in this section He makes it clear to His disciples what was going to happen to Him.

Mark tells us that Jesus took His disciples away to a place where He could be alone with them. He did not want anyone to know where He was. What He was going to share was only for His disciples to hear. When they were alone, Jesus told them that the Son of Man was going to be betrayed into the hands of men.

For Jesus it was important that the disciples hear what He was telling them about His death. The time would come when they would have to face this harsh reality. Jesus wanted them to be prepared. He told them clearly that He

would be killed but He would not remain in the grave. He would be raised to life on the third day.

The disciples found this news difficult to handle. Matthew tells us that they were filled with grief.

While the disciples understood the words Jesus spoke, they really did not understand their significance. Why did Jesus have to die? What did He mean by rising from the dead? How would this take place? When would it take place? The disciples likely had many questions about what Jesus was telling them.

Luke tells us that the disciples could not grasp the meaning of what Jesus was telling them because it was hidden from them, and they were afraid to ask Jesus what He meant. It is unclear what would cause this fear on their part. Were they afraid to let their ignorance be seen? Was it because they simply had a hard time accepting that Jesus would have to die? We are not told.

One thing is certain—the disciples were not, at this point, ready to receive more information. They were simply to understand that trials were coming. In time they would be shown more.

Those of us who have had children understand that there are times when our children are not ready to hear all the details. We reveal truth to them as they are able to handle it. Sometimes their minds need to mature before they can grasp the deeper truths of life. The Lord will show us only what we need for the moment. He will give us only what we can handle or what we need for each day.

Often I have wanted to know all the details. Sometimes God only gives us the information we need to take the first step. There have been times when I have wanted to know all the details before taking that first step. I have not been able to advance because of this. Sometimes I must act on what the Lord has given me before more information will be given.

I can identify with the confusion of the disciples. I have had many times in my life where I was not sure I understood what God was doing. Maybe you are in such a situation right now. Maybe you are not seeing the answer to your prayer for a certain thing in your life. Maybe you are not sure you understand why God is closing certain doors. Don't fret because you do not have the answer. Imagine your young child trying to understand the answers to life's most complicated problems. As a parent are you not going to tell them not to worry themselves about such matters? Some details are too heavy for us for the moment. Instead, we need to rest in the knowledge that the Lord God knows what He is doing. He will take care of us and when the time is right, He may reveal the answers to these hard questions. For the moment, we are to simply rest in Him and patiently wait for His timing.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever been in the situation the disciples were in in this passage? Have there been times in your life when you simply did not understand what the Lord was doing or saying?

- Take a moment to consider a time when you were uncertain about what the Lord was doing? How did this matter work out for good in your life?
- Have you been hindered in stepping out because you do not understand all the details? What does God want you to do in that situation?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He gives us only what we need at the time we need it.
- Ask the Lord to give you the ability to rest in Him despite the fact that you do not always understand what He is doing.
- Thank the Lord that He is in complete control of all the situations you will have to face in life.

JESUS PAYS HIS TAXES

Read Matthew 17:24-27

Throughout his ministry the Lord Jesus was often questioned by both political and religious leaders. These leaders tried to test Him in an attempt to make Him fall into a trap. They wanted to discredit Him before the people. Others have faced similar situations in their day. Daniel's enemies sought to find a means of discrediting him, but they could find none (Daniel 6:4-5). When Nehemiah returned to rebuild the city of Jerusalem the enemy tried to discredit him as well (Nehemiah 6:5-9). For days Job's friends picked at one thing after another in his life to find some fault that could explain why he was suffering. Modern history also shows that the enemy, who is an accuser and liar, will stop at nothing in his attempt to discredit God's people in the eyes of the world. If he can tarnish our reputation people will not listen seriously to what we say.

The tax collectors come to Peter and asked him if the Lord Jesus paid His temple tax. It appears that this particular tax was a religious tax used for the work of the temple. The way this question was worded implied that Jesus did not pay His taxes. "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

they asked Peter (Matthew 17:24). It is uncertain why they did not approach Jesus directly. Peter reassures them that Jesus did pay His taxes.

From the context of verse 25, we get the impression, however, that this question troubled Peter. When Peter saw the Lord, he spoke directly to Him about this matter. Jesus asked Peter if the kings of the earth collected their taxes from their own children or from their subjects. The answer to this was quite simple. The king did not require his own son to pay taxes.

What was Jesus saying here? He was trying to say that as the Son of God He did not have to pay this temple tax. He was the one to whom the tax should be paid. He was the Son of God and was exempt from this tax. While He was exempt from the tax, however, He did not want to offend anyone. He told the disciples to go to the lake, throw out a line and take the first fish they caught. When they opened its mouth they would find a coin. Peter was to take that coin and pay the collectors for Jesus and for himself.

There are several important matters in this passage. First, we need to understand the wonderful power and provision of the Lord. A fish becomes the means God uses to provide for the need of Jesus at that moment. As I have been involved in the distribution of these books to Christian workers in various parts of the world, I have often been amazed at the provision of the Lord. Maybe you are in a situation where you just can't see how the Lord is going to provide. The Lord provides in mysterious ways at times. Who would have thought that a fish would be the answer to the problem of where the money was going to come from to pay the temple tax?

Notice secondly that Peter needed to listen to and obey the voice of the Lord for this provision. We can be sure of one thing. Peter, in all his imagination, would never have been able to come up with the idea of looking in the mouth of a fish for the provision of his need. We have already seen that the provision of the Lord comes from strange sources at times. The Lord will lead us in ways that may seem unusual. There are times that we may feel somewhat foolish. At times we may not understand what God is saying. As we obey, however, we see His provision. Many of us are so busy trying to figure things out in our own way. What would have happened had Peter not obeyed this strange command of the Lord? What would have happened had he said, "Lord, what you are saying is rather foolish? Who ever heard of opening up a fish's mouth and finding a coin big enough to pay our taxes? There must be a better solution. Give me a moment and I will think of something." Would it not be foolish for Peter to say these things? How often, however, do we say similar things? We distrust the leading of the Lord and find what we consider a better way. How much further ahead we would be if only we listened and obeyed the Lord.

Notice here how the Lord paid not only his taxes but Peter's as well. This cannot go unnoticed. Jesus was expecting Peter to follow His example. It was for this reason that Jesus paid Peter's temple tax. He was telling Peter in this that he was not to give the enemy any opportunity to cast doubt on his ministry. Like Jesus, he was to be an honourable citizen and pay what was expected of him.

There is one final point we need to make. Jesus had the freedom not to pay this temple tax but He chose to do so in order that He would not be a stumbling block to anyone. There are times in our ministries and lives when we will

have to sacrifice our freedom so that we do not cause a weaker brother or sister to fall. We need to understand that in the Christian life there are times when we can do things with a clean conscience before God but our brother or sister does not have that same freedom. It is far better to sacrifice that freedom than to cause someone to fall into sin. Jesus gives us a very important principle to follow in our ministries and spiritual walk.

For Consideration:

- We learn in this passage that God's ways are sometimes strange to us. Have you ever seen God lead you in a very strange way? Explain.
- Why is it so important for us to listen to the Lord and seek His direction in our ministry? What would happen if we only did what made sense to us?
- Is your spiritual freedom a stumbling block to someone else? In what way could your freedom cause someone to fall? What do we learn from this passage about the importance of sacrificing our freedom for others?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way he provides for your particular needs. Be specific.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be sensitive and to trust His leading even when you don't understand what He is doing. Thank the Lord that His ways are best.

- Ask the Lord to show you if there are any freedoms you have in your walk with Him that cause a stumbling block for someone else.
- Ask the Lord to help you to respect the authorities He has put over you.

29

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

Read Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:34-37; Luke 9:46-48

While Jesus and His disciples were going to the region of Capernaum there was a discussion among the disciples about who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Luke tells us that this discussion revolved around which of the disciples would be the greatest in the coming kingdom.

When Jesus asked His disciples what they were arguing about they did not know what to tell Him. While Jesus already knew what the argument was about He wanted to hear it from them. While the Lord knows our thoughts and attitudes, He still wants us to confess them to Him. There are people who think that they do not need to confess their sins because the Lord already knows what they have done or thought. Here in this passage the Lord asks His disciples to admit to Him what they were thinking.

There have been times in my life when I have not been willing to agree with the Lord that I have been wrong. Here the Lord asked His disciples to tell Him honestly what they were saying. I can imagine that as they answered this

question they came to realize how much they were acting like little children.

It is in this context that Jesus had a little child stand beside Him. He then told His disciples that if they wanted to be great in the kingdom of heaven, they needed to become like this little child. In fact if they did not become like this little child, they would not enter the kingdom of heaven at all.

There are some important details we need to see in this statement. The principles of the kingdom of God are very different from the principles we live by in this world. In this world, if you want to be great, you need to have money, reputation and influence. The person who is great in this world's eyes is one who lives a life of ease and comfort and people look up to them because of what they have.

The kingdom of God operates on a very different principle. To be great in the kingdom of God, we must be humble. While the world sees a great person as one who is independent and confident, the Lord sees a great person as one who is absolutely dependent on Him. The little child Jesus brought into His presence was still dependent on his or her parents. This is how the Lord wants us to be. There are many people who don't understand their need to live in absolute dependence on God every moment of the day. They trust their skills and understanding instead of listening moment by moment for the direction of the Lord. The writer of the book of Proverbs tells us in Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Do you see what the passage is telling us? It tells us not to lean on our own understanding. If we are leaning on our own understanding we are disobeying God and His Word. Instead we are to acknowledge God in all our ways bringing Him into our plans and thoughts. In other words, we consult Him and seek His direction and guidance. We do not trust what we think. This is part of what it means to become like a little child. A child is dependent on his or her parents. We, too, need to recognize our need of God in all things. We need to confess that we do not have the wisdom, ability or strength to accomplish the purposes of God. Like a little child we are in need of God in everything we do. To become like a little child is to recognize our weakness and lack of understanding. It is to rely on our heavenly Father's wisdom, strength and enabling.

In recent years the Lord has impressed on me the intimacy of this sort of dependent relationship with Him. God has chosen to keep us dependent on Him. God keeps us in need of Him for a very good reason. He wants to maintain a level of intimate communion with us, not just when we are stuck and find that our human strength and wisdom is not enough, but on a moment by moment basis. He wants to be part of our decisions and actions.

Jesus speaks of this moment by moment connection in the illustration of the vine and the branches in John 15. In that passage, He reminded His listeners that without Him they could do nothing. If they did not remain on the vine they would perish. This is how God has designed our relationship with Him. At best, we are absolutely dependant on Him. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the person who realizes his or her total inability to do anything without God and depends fully and totally on Him for everything. There is no room for boasting here. Everything we have

comes from God. Everything of value we have ever done has been through His strength and enabling. We stand before God like helpless children; children He dearly loves and wants to use. If there is any boasting, it can only be in what the Lord has done.

Jesus told his disciples that if they humbled themselves they would become great in the kingdom of God. How do we humble ourselves? I believe first we must admit to our weakness and inability. Then we must make a conscious decision not to trust in our frail and faulty strength and wisdom but instead in God and His direction. We must seek the Lord's wisdom, purpose and strength in all we do.

Mark adds something further to this teaching of Jesus in Mark 9:35. Here he tells us that if we want to be first in the kingdom of God we must be last. Jesus taught that the greatest person in the kingdom of heaven is one who serves. When God looks down from heaven and sees a servant offering himself or herself in a self-sacrificing way He is pleased. His richest blessings are for those who minister to others with no desire to receive anything in return. This is how the Lord Jesus lived His life.

Looking to the child in their midst, Jesus told His disciples that if they received one of these little children in His name, they received Him as well. While in part, the Lord is telling us that He values little children, the context refers more directly to those who have become like little children in humility, obedience and dependence. When we see these humble servants of God, we are to receive and honour them. In the eyes of the world these servants are often overlooked. They do not always occupy places of importance in the world but, in God's eyes, they are of great value. We can only imagine how the disciples felt as they

considered this teaching of Jesus in light of their discussion about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the importance of confession?
- What does Jesus mean when He says we need to become like children? What are the characteristics of a little child? Do you demonstrate these characteristics in your own life? What characteristics do you need to develop more fully?
- Why do you suppose God wants us to remain in a state of constant dependence? Are you living in a state of dependence on God or are you taking care of things yourself?
- What difference do you think it would make if we sought the Lord and His purpose in everything we did?
- Are there areas in your life and ministry where you are relying on your own strength and wisdom? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He has chosen to maintain a very close and intimate relationship with us.

Ask Him to help you to live in a childlike dependence and on Him.

- Ask the Lord to show you your need of Him in your life and ministry. Ask Him to help you to turn away from your self-reliant and independent attitude.
- Ask God to give you more of a servant's heart.
- Take a moment to thank God for a particular servant who has demonstrated this servant heart.

KNOWING THE ENEMY

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

Jesus was been speaking about what it meant to be great in the Kingdom of God. He reminded His disciples that the standards of the Kingdom of God are very different from the standards of this world. He told them that they were to become like little children if they were to be great in the kingdom of God.

These statements of Jesus about who was great in the kingdom of God brought up another issue for the disciples. They had seen an individual using the name of Jesus to cast out demons. This individual was not one of them so they told him to stop casting out demons in Jesus' name.

It is unclear what was behind this unwillingness, on the part of the disciples, to see this person minister in the name of Jesus but it is clear that they had rejected his ministry. They saw the work he was doing but could not accept it. Demons were being cast out. The kingdom of God was advancing. You would have thought that this would have

made the disciples happy, but instead, they rejected his efforts.

Jesus told the disciples that they were wrong to stop this person. People were being freed from the power of darkness. The disciples did not question the fruit but they did question the person who was producing the fruit. This individual did not belong to their group. This same problem exists in the church of Jesus Christ in our day.

There are many reasons for not accepting the ministry of others. Sometimes we judge people on the basis of their education. There are some individuals who have been educated in schools of questionable theology. We have all met individuals who feel that the value of a person's ministry is in direct proportion to the respectability of the school they attended. They can't imagine how someone who attended an "inferior school" could have a valid ministry. Sometimes it is the level of education we use to judge the value of a person's ministry. Maybe you have had more education than another. Maybe you have gone to Bible School and Seminary. Maybe you wonder how someone who never went to Bible School or had any formal education could have a valid ministry.

I have also seen this division made on the basis of denominational affiliation. More than once in my life I have found myself in a situation where people turned their backs on me because I did not belong to their particular group. I have even found myself judging the value of someone else's ministry based on the particular church they attended. Maybe the doctrine of that particular church is not exactly like ours. How easy it is to judge the value of a person's ministry by the type of church he or she attends.

There are any number of reasons why people reject the ministry of others.

Very often, like the disciples, we can see the impact a particular group is having for the kingdom but we still reject them. If we took a moment to examine their ministry we would see that the Kingdom of God was indeed advancing through them. People are coming to the Lord. The power of darkness is being destroyed. Satan's kingdom is being pushed back. Maybe it is not being done in the way we would like, but God is still using these people.

Jesus made it quite clear that His disciples were not to fall into this trap. He told them that they were not to stop this man or anyone else like him. The apostle Paul had to deal with a similar situation when he was in prison. With Paul no longer able to preach openly, other people took on this ministry. Some of these individuals did not minister the way Paul ministered. Listen to Paul's response to this in Philippians 1:15-18:

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.

What was important to Paul was that the Gospel of Christ be preached. In this he would rejoice. How often has the body of Christ turned against each other? We spend our

time questioning each other over matters of secondary doctrine or practices. The enemy has often succeeded in keeping us from advancing the kingdom by causing us to spend more and more of our effort fighting among ourselves. As long as we fight among ourselves, Satan has no real fear of the kingdom of God advancing.

Jesus reminded his disciples that what they had done was wrong. They were judging the individual on the basis of externals. They were not to reject others who ministered in His name. Jesus reminded His disciples that no one could perform a miracle in His name and quickly say anything bad about Him. This particular man knew the power of the name of Jesus. He knew that in that name the powers of darkness would flee.

Jesus went on to tell the disciples that those who were not against them were for them. He makes an important point here that we need to remember. There are times when we reject people not because we believe them to be our enemies but rather because they don't do things or see things the way we do. We are more than willing to admit that these people know the Lord and are Christians. We are even willing to admit that the Spirit of God is using them to advance the kingdom of God. We know that they will be with us in heaven. We reject them simply because they are not like us. Jesus reminds us that we need to understand who our enemy really is. Have we been fighting the enemy or have we been caught up in fighting our fellow believer? In light of the battle before us, we need to know who our enemy is. No army can succeed if it spends its time fighting itself.

Jesus went on in Mark 9:41 to tell His disciples that if they gave a cup of water in His name to one of His servants,

they would not lose their reward. The context of this statement is quite important. Remember that this statement comes in the context of the disciples telling Jesus that they had rejected a certain man's ministry because he was not part of their little group. Jesus was telling them here that instead of rejecting him, they needed to stand behind his ministry. The offering of a cup of cold water was a symbol of support. Jesus was telling His disciples that they needed to get behind this man and bless him instead of rejecting him because he was not one of their group.

This has practical implications in our own lives as believers. Instead of dividing the body of Christ further, we need to stand behind each other's ministries. I have seen all too many churches focus on their own efforts and not the kingdom of God as a whole. We have all seen situations where churches were struggling but would not consider joining with others in the same city to increase their impact. What does Jesus mean by offering a cup of water to one of His children? In this context maybe it has to do with praying for the churches in your area. Why should you only pray for and bless your own church? When the church next door advances, doesn't the kingdom of God advance? When people are brought to the Lord in the church down the street doesn't that bring honour to the Lord Jesus? Offering a cup of water may have to do with learning to rejoice with the success of our brothers and sisters in other works. How refreshing it is when we see others rejoicing with us in the success of our ministry. How sad it is that we cannot offer a cup of encouragement to refresh those who minister alongside us. It is important for us to understand what the Lord Jesus is telling His disciples here. He is telling them that one of the first things we need to learn in the battle before us is to recognize our enemy. If the person beside us is not our enemy, we need to embrace him as

our ally and do all we can to encourage and bless him or her. Our goal is not to build our own particular ministry but to see the kingdom of God advance.

For Consideration:

- What things divide believers today? Are they legitimate reasons for division?
- Why is it so hard to accept each other's differences?
- What are some practical things you can do to stand behind the ministry of someone else in your community?
- How would you distinguish between an enemy and a fellow worker?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the greater work of the kingdom of God in the lives and ministries of those around you.
- Take a moment to consider what God is doing in your region outside of your own personal ministry and church. Thank the Lord for the way He is using other ministries and churches in your area to expand His kingdom.

- Ask the Lord to give you the humility necessary to accept and rejoice in what He is doing in the lives of others.
- Ask the Lord to show you how you can encourage and bless the ministries of those in your community.

OFFENDING A LITTLE ONE

Read Matthew 18:6-14; Mark 9:42-48; Luke 17:1-2

One of the greatest things that the Lord God has been teaching me over the last couple of years is how valuable we are in His eyes. It is true that we do not always feel important. There are times when we feel unworthy and, in a sense, we are unworthy. What is important for us to understand, however, is that the Lord Jesus has placed a very high value on us because we are His children. In this section we see something of the value He has placed on even the smallest or most insignificant of His children.

In the first part of Matthew 18, the Lord reminded His disciples that, if they wanted to be part of the Kingdom of God, they would have to become like little children. In the next section Jesus goes on to tell them how serious a matter it was to offend one of these little ones who belonged to Him.

The word “offend” used in the New International Version has the idea of putting a stumbling block in front of someone in order to cause them to fall. It can also have the sense of enticing to sin.

Jesus told His disciples that it was a serious matter to cause one of His children to fall into sin. He went as far as to say that it would be better for them to have a millstone tied to their neck and be cast into the sea than to be responsible for causing one of God's children to fall into sin.

Let's examine this passage more closely? Jesus seems to be telling us that it would be better to die than to be a means of anyone falling into sin and wandering from the Lord. When we have this attitude we are careful about the words we speak and what we do. If what we eat, drink or do is offensive we willingly surrender these things so as not to cause them to fall into sin (see Romans 14:15-16). The Lord Jesus died for sin. He offered His life on the cross so that we could be set free from sin and its affects in our life. Those who understand why He came will make it a priority to live in such a way that no one falls into the sin on account of their actions or words.

We need to give some serious thought to this matter of offending a brother or sister in the Lord. We are in the midst of a spiritual warfare. Satan is doing his utmost to promote and encourage unrighteousness. It is important that we do not become instruments in his hands. We need to be willing to lay down our lives rather than be a means by which a child of God would fall into sin? Satan, as the enemy of righteousness, will not hesitate to use believers in his efforts against the kingdom of God. Careless words can be the means of discouraging a fellow believer. Our actions and our attitudes can cause another believer to fall into sin. We must give the enemy no occasion to use us. We must always be on our guard so that all we do will be a blessing and example to our fellow believer.

Jesus told His disciples that if their hand or foot caused them to sin, it would be better for them to cut it off and go to heaven crippled than to be thrown into hell fire. It would be better to pluck out an eye than to cause it to allow them to fall into sin. There are a couple of matters that we need to examine here in this regard.

Jesus is using symbolic language in these verses. He is not encouraging us to literally cut off our hands or pluck out our eyes. You can be blind and still have a problem with lust. You may be crippled and unable to walk and still be capable of sin. Cutting off our hand is not a guarantee that we will not fall into sin. What Jesus is telling us here is that we need to cut off every source of sin. He is showing us how important it is to do everything in our power to keep from falling into sin and evil in our lives. If your television causes you to stumble in your walk with God or is a means by which you cause someone else to stumble, get rid of it so that you are not tempted. If your friends are a temptation for you, then find other friends. We must remove whatever there is in our lives that would cause us to stumble or be an instrument for even the weakest of God's children to stumble.

Notice also in Matthew 18:10 that Jesus told His disciples that they were not to look down on His little ones. We differ as believers in many ways. We have differences in our understanding of Scripture. We also have differences in practice. We need to be reminded that in this context the disciples have just spoken to Jesus about a man they found casting out demons who did not belong to their group. Jesus told His disciples that they were not to hinder this man from doing his work. Instead, they were to encourage him in it. How easy it is for us to look down on other believers because they do not have the same beliefs

or methods we have. How easy it is to feel superior because we have a certain religious freedom that someone else does not have. Jesus challenges us here about our attitudes toward other believers. We can act politely toward them but what are our inner thoughts about the believers in the church on the other side of town? Do we see them as inferior because they are not like us? Do we look down on them? Jesus is telling us that “offering a cup of cold water” is not enough. We need God to change the attitudes of our hearts toward our brothers and sisters. This will sometimes require much prayer, forgiveness and understanding.

Jesus reminded His disciples that the angels of these little ones saw the face of God in heaven (Matthew 18:10). Jesus seems to be telling His disciples that the angels who have been given charge over these little one also have access to God in heaven. Will these angels not give an account of the actions of those who have offended those under their charge? Notice that God cares enough for His children that He has given His angels charge over them. These angels care for God’s children. They take special note of those who seek to harm His little children or who becomes the means of them falling into sin. If only we could see these angels, would it not change what we said or how we responded to our brother or sister? Would it not cause us to fear offending or being and offense to them?

Jesus gave an example in Matthew 18:12 of a man who had one hundred sheep and one of them wandered away. Despite the fact that this was only one among one hundred sheep, the shepherd did everything in his power to find that one sheep and bring it back to the fold. When the shepherd found that one sheep that was lost he rejoiced more in him than over all the others who had remained in the fold. In

the same way, the Lord God cares for His children. He is not willing that any one of them be lost. He will do His utmost to minister to that one sheep. While that sheep has been offended and has stumbled because of someone else's actions or words, the Lord will not abandon it. He will reach out and do everything in his power to bring it back to Himself.

There are two things that strike me in this passage. The first is the seriousness of sin. This passage challenges us to do all we can to live righteous lives before our brothers and sisters and before the world. Our lives and words can be used of the enemy to advance His cause and cause someone else to stumble. We do battle with the enemy by being an example of godliness and righteousness to those around us.

The second thing that strikes me in this passage is the incredible love of God for His children. This passage tells us that God takes it very seriously when someone is responsible for causing one of His children to stumble. He does not appreciate it when we look down on one of His children because they are not like us. We may not like the way a brother or sister does things but God loves them and all who offend them will have to answer to Him. God places such a value on His children and their welfare that He has assigned His angels to watch over them. What an honour to know that God cares for us in this way. When we honour one of the least of these His children we honour Him.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to consider what we have learned here about what our attitude toward sin ought to be. What does this passage teach us about the attitude we need to have toward sin? What is the attitude of your church or society toward sin?
- What do we learn about how much the Lord values His children? What does this teach us about the attitude we need to have toward them as well?
- Have you ever found yourself looking down at another believer? What caused you to look down on them? What do you need to do to make things right?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a greater love for all His children. Ask Him to break down the barriers between true believers.
- Thank the Lord that He came to deal with sin. Ask Him to give you His heart when it comes to sin.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to live a life that is an example of righteousness to all around you.

32

SALT

Read Mark 9:49-50

Salt has many uses. One of the primary uses of salt is to purify and preserve. In the Scriptures, salt is seen as a symbol of purity. It could be for this reason that according to Leviticus 2:13 all offerings were to be seasoned with salt:

Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings.

Jesus tells us in Mark 9:49 that everyone will be salted with fire. We have already seen that salting an offering purified it. Fire, like salt, also purifies and cleanses. What Jesus is saying here is that He will work in the lives of those who belong to Him to purify and cleanse them. Those God wants to use He will purify and prepare for His purposes. It is not without reason that when the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples at Pentecost, He appeared as “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:1-4). The Holy Spirit will do His work in the lives of His people purifying them and making them more like their

Lord. This purifying is not always easy. We will be stretched in ways we have never been stretched before. Paul makes it clear that all of us who want to live a godly life will have to suffer. Writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:12 the apostle said:

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

God's intention is to make us more like Him. Notice that Mark 9:49 tells us that we will all be salted with fire. Like the salt used on the offerings of the Old Testament purified them, so the Holy Spirit will come on us like a fire to purify us and prepare us to be with our Lord forever. He comes to make us effective in service. He comes to draw us closer to our Lord. We are not left alone. The Lord Jesus gives us His Holy Spirit to minister to us, train us in righteousness and to equip us to be effective in the expansion of His kingdom. Every believer will know this work of God in their lives though not everyone will respond to it in the same way.

The second statement that Jesus makes in this passage is that while salt is good, if it loses its saltiness, it can never get that saltiness back again. This is a difficult passage to understand. We have already said that salt purifies and cleanses. As believers we are to be like salt in this world (Matthew 5:13). Our presence in the world ought to have a purifying and cleansing affect. As believers, we stand for and promote righteousness. Our lives and our testimonies ought to keep sin and evil from spreading. What happens, however, when we no longer function as salt in the world? What happens when a believer no longer lives for his or her Lord?

The unbelieving world is not the only threat to the church today. The church is also threatened by brothers and sisters who do not live for the Lord. Those who claim to be Christians but do not walk with God are like Christians who have lost their saltiness. They do not impact the world or the church for good. Instead they have a negative impact. The result of bad testimony cannot be measured. How many people have wandered from the faith because of a bad Christian testimony? How much damage has been caused because believers have not been the salt they were intended to be? Jesus is not telling us here that when we fall into sin we can never be restored. What He is saying, however, is that it is often extremely difficult to repair the damage caused by our bad testimony and influence on this world. The scars left by those who have misrepresented the truth of God's Word or who have caused a fellow believer to fall can last a lifetime. Maybe you have met unbelievers who refuse to come to Christ simply because of a bad example they saw in a believer.

What happens when a believer falls? How long does it take for a believer who falls into sin to regain his or her place of honour in the eyes of the community? Satan has a way of never letting the unbelieving world forget our failures as believers. To this day, we remember Peter for denying the Lord. Maybe you know a pastor that has fallen into the sin. How long does it take for people to place their full confidence in that pastor again? The damage has been done. Trying to restore our testimony after it has been shattered is like trying to put together a broken glass. When confidence is broken it is difficult to restore.

What we need to understand here is that while it is humanly difficult for us to restore our testimony, with God all things are possible. God is able to take us, broken as we

are and restore us to faith. He can renew us and bring us into a place of complete healing. He can restore our ministry and make us fruitful again. If you have found yourself in that place of brokenness you need to lift up your eyes to the God who alone can restore the saltiness.

Jesus concludes these verses with a challenge to His disciples to have the qualities of salt and to be at peace with each other. As salt we have a purifying and cleansing influence on those around us. As salt we create thirst in those around us for God. Our presence in this world helps to arrest the spread of sin and corruption. It brings a measure of wholeness and health to the communities where we live.

There is a connection between our saltiness in this world and being at peace with each other. John 13:35 tells us:

By this all men will know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another.

What a testimony it is to the world when believers love each other and live at peace with each other. What a poor witness it is, on the other hand, when believers cannot get along. Jesus tells us that there is a direct relationship between living in harmony with each other and our witness in the world. When the world sees how we live in peace with each other, they know that we belong to Christ and have His love in our hearts. If we are to be salt in this earth we will need to watch our relationships with those around us. We must make it our priority to live at peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ and also with those we come into contact with on a daily basis.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to be the salt of the earth? What impact are you having as salt in your community?
- To what extent is your life like salt to those around you?
- Have you ever lost your testimony? How difficult was it to restore that testimony? Can Christ bring healing in your situation?
- What is the connection between our testimony in the world and our relationship with each other as believers?

For Prayer:

- Have you lost your good testimony as a believer? Ask the Lord to restore that testimony.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be a greater witness for Him and to have a greater impact on those around you for the cause of righteousness.
- Thank the Lord for the way another believer has influenced you for good.

DEALING WITH OFFENCES

Read Matthew 18:15-20; Luke 17:3-4

It would be nice to live in a perfect world where no one was ever offended or hurt but this is not reality. As long as we live in a sinful world there will always be problems and pain. In these next passages Jesus gave His disciples instructions on how to deal with offenses that came their way. He gives us four simple steps to follow when a hurt develops between a brother or sister. Let's examine these four steps.

Step One: Speak Personally with your Brother or Sister

What do you do when your brother or sister sins against you? Jesus tells us that we are to go to them personally and explain their fault. Notice here that He specifically tells us that this first step is between our brother or sister and ourselves, no one else is to be involved.

Very often we want to bypass this step. It is not always easy to approach a brother or sister about their offense. Some time ago I was a pastor in a small church on the

Island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean. I received a phone call from a lady in the church telling me that she wanted to see me immediately. When I arrived at her home, she told me of a problem that had arisen between her and another lady in the church. She wanted me to see this other lady and deal with her on this matter. I asked her if she had spoken personally with the lady who had offended her. She told me she had not. I explained to her the principle Jesus speaks about here. She told me that she was afraid that the lady would get angry with her and maybe even hit her if she went to see her. I told her that until she did things God's way, I would not get involved. Finally, she agreed to phone the lady who had offended her. She was on the phone for no more than two minutes when she came back into the room to see me. She told me that God had been speaking to the lady who had offended her and that they had settled their differences.

This whole incident reminded me of the danger of not doing things God's way. Had the church got involved at this stage, this whole situation would have blown up into something very big. It could have even led to people in the church taking sides and causing division in the church. Very often we get into problems because we take out our biggest guns to deal with a small problem. The vast majority of problems are dealt with at this personal level. You don't have to get anyone else involved. Nobody else even needs to know about the offense. The key here is to deal with the problem by getting the least amount of people involved as possible. One of the tactics of the enemy is to have us spread the news of what someone else has done. When we spread stories of what a brother or sister has done to us, we put the tools in Satan's hands to cause those who hear these stories to become angry, bitter or resentful with the person concerned. We must not fall into this trap.

It goes without saying that our attitude is very important when we approach our brother or sister about something they have done. It is quite possible to make matters worse by our attitude. If the situation between us is like a fire then a bad attitude is the gas poured onto that fire. An angry or bitter attitude will only increase the tension that already exists. It is quite possible for us to obey this principle and sin because we go to our brother or sister with the wrong attitude. Remember that the reason we go to our brother or sister is to be reconciled. If you cannot go with a desire in your heart to be reconciled with your brother or sister then first go to the Lord and ask Him to forgive you for your anger and bitterness. If our brother or sister repents and is reconciled with us, there is no need for this matter to go any further. The matter is resolved.

Step Two: Take a Witness

There are times when speaking to a brother or sister is not enough. Sometimes, even when we go with the right attitude, our brother or sister refuses to deal with the offense. What are we to do when we cannot solve the problem between us personally? Jesus told His disciples that if the first step failed, they were to take one or two witness along with them to speak to the individual who had caused the offense. Again it is important to keep this matter as quiet as possible. These witnesses should be people of confidence. They should not be people who will spread the news of this problem.

It is important that these witnesses have reconciliation on their heart. It is quite possible to choose a witness who is on our side and will confirm our position on the matter between us and our brother or sister. We should be careful of trying to find witnesses who can take our side. These

witnesses ought to be very objective. The believer who truly wants to resolve his or her problem must be willing to admit that they may be wrong. The witnesses may be able to give counselling to both parties so that they can resolve their differences. They may also give greater Biblical understanding so that either party can see where they have gone wrong. The witnesses do much more than look at the situation, they try to bring reconciliation. These witnesses also intensify the prayer that is being made about this matter. Again if the matter is resolved at this point it does not need to go any further.

Step Three: Tell the Church

Sometimes even through the efforts of the witnesses, the offense is still not resolved. If our brother or sister still refuses to be reconciled even in the presence of witnesses then we are forced to move to the third step. The third step involves taking the matter to the church. The second step is preparation for this third step. The witnesses are needed so that it is not simply my word against a brother or sister. We are only to approach the church when we have gone through steps one and two and have made every effort to be reconciled. I believe that when Jesus speaks about the church here he is speaking about the leadership of the church and not necessarily the entire membership. This is still not the time to make the matter public to the whole assembly.

The spiritual leadership of the church should meet quietly with the individuals concerned to pray for them and to deal with the matter at hand offering their advice and counsel. They should also make it clear that there needs to be reconciliation for the sake of the church. What we need to understand here is that this offense between two believers

becomes a matter for the church to deal with because it can affect the work of the church and God's blessing on that church. When a church has members who are not living in agreement this impacts the ministry of the church. It is to the advantage of the whole church that this matter be solved quickly.

We also need to understand that to this point no judgment has been made. We do not bring our brother or sister to the church leadership to be judged here but to be reconciled. The effort of the leadership is to restore the relationship between the offended parties and restore them to a right relationship with God and the church. It should be remembered here that the Lord God has put the leaders of our church in their position. Scripture exhorts us to submit to those God has put over us (Romans 13:1, Hebrews 13:17). To refuse to listen to the leadership God has established in the church is an offense against God.

Step Four: Church Discipline

If even at this stage, the individual concerned is unwilling to repent he or she should then be disciplined by the church. This sin is not only a sin against the offended brother or sister but also a sin against the body of Christ and against God Himself. Jesus told His disciples that if the person who has sinned still refuses to repent he or she was to be treated like a pagan or a tax collector. This needs to be examined carefully.

When we refuse to be reconciled with our brother or sister we stand in the way of the work God is doing. If we refuse to be reconciled with a brother or sister, we harm the unity of the body. This is a serious matter. The church cannot have individuals in its midst who are unwilling to deal with

their sin and rebellion. They become a hindrance to the blessing of God. For the good of the church the offending brother or sister must be removed for a time until reconciliation and repentance takes place.

There is another important matter we must address here. Some have used this verse as a means to mistreat a fellow believer. We have seen terrible things said and done to believers who have refused to repent. Jesus tells us that we should treat them as a pagan or a tax collector but I am afraid that there are times when the church has gone further than this and treated these brothers worse than pagans and tax collectors. Take a moment to consider how you treat an unbeliever. Do you shun them and reject them? Do you speak evil of them? If you do, you are not acting like the Lord Jesus nor walking according to His teaching. Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies and do good to those who harm us (Luke 6:27). He was considered to be a friend of publicans and sinners (Luke 7:34).

When Jesus tells us that we are to treat this brother or sister as an unbeliever he is showing us that this individual has in reality, chosen to side with the enemy in this matter. He cannot be used in the ministry of the church. This would only harm the work of God. The church, however, should still do all they can to love and win this person back to Christ and the fellowship of His people, just as they would do for an unbeliever.

I have seen situations where reconciliation was made impossible because the church had become hard and critical of a believer under discipline. It is quite possible for the church to develop an angry and bitter spirit toward the

offending party. If they do this they fall prey to sin themselves.

When this matter is dealt with properly, we have the promise of God's support. Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:18 that whatever we bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven. The Lord stands behind the discipline of the church. Beyond this, however, we need to understand that as the church cries out to God on behalf of this individual under discipline, the Lord will hear and restore that person to the fellowship of the church. The church binds this individual for a time in discipline but prays that God would loose him or her from the chains of sin. God promises that as the church cries out on behalf of the unrepentant believer, He will hear their prayer and loose this brother or sister from their sin.

It is in this context that Jesus tells us that if two agree about anything on earth it will be done for them by their father in heaven. The immediate context relates to a brother or sister being disciplined. Notice here that the discipline of our brother or sister moves the church to deeper prayer. Believers gather to pray for that individual and his or her reconciliation. They gather in the name of the Lord to do battle on behalf of the wanderer. The Lord promises to hear them as they cry out. The church never ceased to seek reconciliation. They are not content to see their brother or sister wandering from the fold. Ultimately, it is the power of prayer that restores the one who has sinned.

While the context of these verses is the context of church discipline the principle can apply to other situations as well. The Lord has been recently showing me that there are times in my life when my own prayers are insufficient. There have been times when I have prayed for victory over

a particular stronghold in my life and not seen victory. Sometimes we need to find brothers and sisters who will agree with us about a certain matter. We need to increase the strength of our prayer by calling on others to join us. It is humbling to realize that there are times when the only way for us to have victory is to join with others in seeking God. No battle can be won by one person alone. We must join our gifts, talents and prayers if we are going to win the battle. This is why it is so important for us to deal with any matter that separates us as believers. We need each other. We must serve and minister together in Christ's name. We cannot afford to be divided.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever had a conflict with a brother or sister in Christ that was very difficult to resolve? How did you deal with it? What are the four steps Christ teaches us here to dealing with conflicts?
- How important is our attitude in the resolving of conflicts between brothers and sisters?
- Why is it so important for us to deal with conflicts between believers? What happens if these conflicts are not addressed in the church?
- What do we learn here about the importance of joining hands with others in doing battle with the enemy? Why do we need each other?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to pray for the unity of the body of Christ.
- Thank the Lord that He has placed you in the body of Christ and made you stronger as you work with others. Ask God to help you to be a good team member.
- Thank the Lord that He promises to stand with us in the battle for unity and the advancing of His kingdom.
- Do you have a problem with another believer? Ask God to bring reconciliation.

34

THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Read Matthew 18:21-35

In the last meditation we examined the teaching of the Lord Jesus regarding how we are to handle difficulties among believers in the body of Christ. Jesus knew that we were not living in a perfect world. He knew that there would be difficulties. It is for this reason that He took the time to teach His disciples how to handle these difficulties when they arose.

On this occasion Peter came to the Lord with a question about how many times he should forgive his brother who had sinned against him. He began by asking the Lord if he should forgive his brother up to seven times. For Peter seven times seemed to be sufficient. Maybe you have had this experience. It is not easy to forgive someone for what they have done. It becomes even more difficult, however, when the offense is repeated over and over again. I think about the prophet Hosea and how his wife consistently was unfaithful to him (see Hosea 3). It is hard enough to

forgive once but what happens when that same offense keeps being repeated? How many times can our brother or sister hurt us in the same way and be forgiven for that sin? Peter seems to believe that he is being very generous by suggesting that a believer forgive up to seven times.

Jesus told Peter that he was not to forgive just seven times but seventy times seven (four hundred and ninety) times. In saying this Jesus is telling Peter that he was not ever to limit the number of times he was to forgive his brother or sister for an offense. Jesus is willing to forgive us as often as we come to Him in repentance. Have you ever repeatedly fallen into a particular sin and wondered how the Lord could ever forgive you for falling into it yet another time? We need to take courage. Jesus is telling Peter that he needed to forgive his brother or sister every time they come to him for forgiveness. Jesus will do the same for you when you come to Him.

Jesus takes advantage of this question to speak to Peter about the importance of forgiveness. He told him a story of a master who wanted to settle his accounts with his servants. As he examined his financial accounts, he noticed that there was a man who owed him ten thousand talents. This would be the equivalent to millions of dollars in our present day economy. The servant who owed this money was brought before the master and asked to pay his debt. The amount owed was so large that the man could not possibly pay. The master ordered, therefore, that his wife and children be sold into slavery to pay his debt. Hearing this, the man got down on his knees and begged the master to be patient with him and he would pay him back. The master took pity on him and chose instead to cancel his debt and let him go free with no obligation.

This same servant went out from his master and found another servant who owed him a hundred denarii, the equivalent to a few dollars. He grabbed the man and demanded that he pay him back. The servant fell on his knees and begged him to be patient and he would pay him back what he owed. He refused this request and threw his debtor into prison until he could pay his debt. He who was forgiven such a large debt could not forgive his brother for a much smaller debt.

When the Master heard what his servant had done, he asked him why, after his large debt had been forgiven, he would not forgive his brother for a much smaller debt. The master then ordered that the servant be sent to jail and tortured until he paid back the millions he owed.

Jesus concluded His parable by telling Peter that this is how the heavenly Father would treat those who did not forgive his or her brother from their heart. In using the phrase "from the heart" Jesus does not leave any room for insincerity. It is quite easy to say: "I forgive you" but not mean it deep down in our heart. Jesus tells us that if our forgiveness is not from the heart it does not count before God.

Forgiveness is not an option. The Bible teaches that it is an obligation. No matter how often our brother or sister sins against us, we must forgive. Failure to do so is sin. If we want to be forgiven we must forgive. While Jesus is willing to forgive all our sins He may refuse to do so until we ourselves are willing to forgive those who have sinned against us. He makes this clear in Matthew 6:14-15 when He says:

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Forgiveness for our sins is possible but not guaranteed. There are sins that are not forgiven because we first need to forgive those who have offended us. Have you forgiven your brother or sister from the heart? Could it be that deep down inside you still harbour resentment and anger for what they have done? This is not something you can take lightly. You must forgive your brother or sister from the heart. To refuse to do so is to hinder your own spiritual growth and to risk not receiving the forgiveness of God ourselves.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever been seriously hurt by a brother or sister in Christ? Have you been able to forgive that brother or sister from the heart?
- When Jesus tells us that forgiveness needs to be from the heart what does He mean?
- According to this passage, do we ever have a right not to forgive our brother or sister?
- Where does the strength come from to truly forgive a brother or sister?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to consider your life. Thank the Lord Jesus for the way He has forgiven you. List specific ways in which the Lord has forgiven you.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to forgive all who have offended you. Take a moment to pray for some of those people. Ask the Lord to bless them.
- Ask the Lord to search your heart to be sure that there is no anger or bitterness that would keep you from a right relationship with your brother or sister.

DON'T LOOK BACK

Read Matthew 8:19-22; Luke 9:51-62

The time for Jesus to be crucified was drawing near. Jesus understood this. The cross was a horrible reality for Jesus. Luke tells us, however, that as the time approached, Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). The word used here shows us that Jesus gathered up strength and set His mind to going to Jerusalem and the cross.

It is important that we note that this act of setting His mind to go to Jerusalem was a conscious decision on the part of our Lord. There are times in our lives when we will have to strengthen our resolve to do the will of the Father. Not everything we do in the Christian life is going to be easy. Sometimes, like Jesus, we have to face the enemy head on. In times like this we need to make a conscious effort to strengthen our resolve to do what we know God is calling us to do.

In Luke 9 we read how Jesus sent messengers ahead of him into the region of Samaria to prepare for their arrival. Samaria was on the way to Jerusalem. These messengers

may have gone ahead to find a place to stay and some food for them to eat when they arrived. When the messengers arrived in Samaria, however, they were not welcomed. The reason seems to be that they were going to Jerusalem (see verse 53). There was not a good relationship between Samaria and Jerusalem. We can be sure that after a long journey this refusal to welcome Jesus and His disciples was discouraging.

The reaction of the disciples to this reception in Samaria was quite strong. They asked the Lord if He wanted them to call fire down from heaven to destroy the region. It could be that the old prejudices between the Jews and the Samaritans were showing through here. The Jews did not like the Samaritans. The intensity of hatred here is an indication that the disciples still carried this bitterness and prejudice in their hearts. Jesus rebuked them for their attitude.

As they went from this place to another village they were met by an individual who wanted to follow Jesus. Jesus reminded the man, however, that while the foxes had holes and the birds of the air had their nests, He did not even have a place to lay His head. Could it be that the Lord is thinking here about the recent refusal of the Samaritans to welcome Him? He was literally without a place to lay His head and rest from His long journey? The comforts of life were stripped from Jesus in His ministry. There are pastors who chose a church based on the benefits they will receive from that church. Jesus tells us that those who serve Him will sometimes have to do without the comforts and luxuries of life. Those who minister for the Lord need to be willing to make sacrifices.

Another man approached Jesus and said that he wanted to follow Him but he wanted first to take care of his father.

The man's father was very likely old and sick. It may be that he wanted to care for his father until he died and then he would follow Jesus. Jesus told him that he was to let the dead bury the dead.

The phrase let the dead bury the dead is not easy to understand. It may be that the Lord Jesus is telling the man to let his spiritually dead or unbelieving family take care of his father. As a believer, he had a higher calling on his life. God was calling him to leave his father to serve Him. Jesus is not telling us to ignore the obvious needs in our family here. What he is saying, however, is that there are times when the Lord calls us to leave our families and our comforts to follow Him.

This same idea comes through in Luke 9:61. Here another man came to Jesus and told Him that he wanted to return to say good-bye to his family before he followed him. Jesus told him that if he put his hand to the plough and looked back, he was not worthy of the kingdom of God.

These encounters come in the context of Jesus setting His mind to go to Jerusalem. As we commit ourselves to serving the Lord, the enemy will try to discourage us in our resolve. He will put obstacles in our path. He will tempt us with more money or more comfort. He will place good things in front of us to distract us from our calling. Here in this passage those who came to Jesus were distracted with family needs. There are many obstacles that line our path. Jesus demonstrates to us, by His attitude, that there are times when we will have to consciously set our minds to doing what we know God is calling us to do. This will require that we turn from the distractions on our path and give our mind a single focus. It will also require that we actively resist the enemy and his temptation to discourage.

If God has called you to do something, expect opposition on the part of the enemy. Like Jesus, however, set your mind to do the will and purpose of God. Actively resist Satan's efforts to discourage and weaken your resolve. When God calls, He expects us to move forward in that calling. When He gives us gifts, He expects us to use those gifts. Don't lose heart. Like Jesus, set your mind to do the will of God and make it your resolve to break through all obstacles the enemy places on your path.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever felt the enemy trying to discourage you in your ministry and walk with the Lord? Explain.
- What kind of obstacles has the enemy placed in your path?
- How can the enemy use good and legitimate needs to keep us from the specific will of God?
- Have you ever found yourself being side-tracked doing good things that were not the will of God for your life? What were they?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a deep assurance of His purpose and will for your life.

- Ask the Lord to help you to resist the tactics of the enemy to discourage you in your ministry and walk with the Lord.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be focused in your ministry.
- Thank the Lord that He resolved to go to the cross for us. Thank Him that He overcame the temptations and discouragements that plagued His path to that cross.

36

THE SEVENTY-TWO ARE SENT OUT

Read Luke 10:1-20

We have already seen how the Lord Jesus, some time prior to the events of this chapter, sent out His disciples, giving them power to heal all manner of sickness and to cast out demons. Here again the Lord sends out a team to minister in His name. This time the Lord sent out seventy-two disciples. Some manuscripts indicate seventy disciples instead of seventy-two. The problem seems to be a grammatical one. Did Jesus send out seventy disciples two by two or seventy-two disciples by two? It is not our purpose to decide which number is correct. What is significant here is that the number has grown.

Here is a group of seventy-two individuals leaving on a mission trip with the power of God on them to preach and minister in the name of the Lord Jesus. These individuals went out two by two. We need each other in ministry. As these disciples went in pairs they would be able to watch out for each other and support each other. Notice that the

Lord sent these disciples ahead of Him to the places He was about to go. They were to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

We should not miss the fact that these individuals were to go to the places where Jesus was going. They needed to be in tune with what the Lord Jesus wanted to do. They were not to make their own itinerary. They were to follow the Lord's purposes. There is an important spiritual lesson here for us. How often do we make our plans and do what we think is right instead of seeking the Lord and His purpose? If we want to be effective in our ministries, we need to be aware of what the Lord wants us to do. We need to seek Him and His purpose. We need to bless what He is blessing. We need to seek His heart in where and how we minister.

Jesus reminded His disciples, as they went out, that the harvest was plentiful but the workers were few. He encouraged them to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out workers into this field. We have already examined this verse in another context. It is important to note, however, that it is the Lord who chooses and sends out workers for the harvest in answer to prayer. In light of the need for workers in the harvest, the disciples were to pray. The Lord would listen to their cry for help and send workers of His choosing. There are workers in the harvest fields who have never been called of God. God does the calling and sending. Again it is important that we know that call on our lives and do what He is asking us to do.

Jesus reminded the seventy-two disciples that He was sending them out like lambs among wolves. The lamb is a gentle and weak creature. It is very susceptible to the attack of the wolf. The wolves prey on lambs. Notice that

Jesus uses the word “lamb” and not sheep here in this translation. A lamb is an immature sheep. He does not have the strength and wisdom of a mature sheep. Jesus does not hesitate to send these disciples out as lambs among wolves. He knew that even as lambs they would be able to overcome the attacks of the evil wolves around them. These disciples were not as mature as they could have been. They did not have years of experience behind them but Jesus sent them out anyway. He did so to show them that the battle is not for the strong but for those who trust Him. This is encouraging but also humbling. God does not need our strength and wisdom. He is able to use us as we are. How easy it would be for the twelve disciples who had lived and worked with Jesus for almost three years now to look at these young lambs and question the wisdom of the Lord in sending them into the harvest. We dare not limit the Lord and his ability. I am so thankful that he can use the efforts of “young lambs” to accomplish His purposes.

Notice that the Lord challenged these disciples not to take a purse or a bag for their journey. In other words, they were not to take any money or provisions for this journey. They were to trust the Lord and His provision for their journey. The worker was worthy of his hire. It is important that we realize that this was a specific command of Jesus for this group at that time. He wanted to strengthen their faith and teach them about His provision. We should not see this passage as teaching that every servant of God needs to go without provisions. God has various means of providing for our needs. We need to seek His heart for our situation personally.

Notice that these disciples were not to greet anyone on the way. We need to understand here that the greeting spoken

of here was not merely the wave of the hand or a friendly “hello”. In this culture greeting one another was a significant event that required much time and effort. What Jesus seems to be telling His disciples is that they were men on a mission. They were not to get distracted from that mission. They were to forgo the pleasures of life for a time in order to accomplish their mission. They did not have time to socialize and be entertained. Jesus had set His face to Jerusalem and the death that awaited Him there. His disciples were to do the same. There was much to do, the day of Christ’s death was drawing near; there was no time to waste.

Again, we need to see this command as a special command of Jesus for the seventy-two disciples He was sending out. There is certainly nothing wrong with being hospitable and spending time socializing with people. In fact, the New Testament encourages hospitality (Romans 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9) and makes hospitality one of the characteristics of an overseer (1 Timothy 3:2).

Notice what Jesus told His disciples in verses five to seven. He told them that they were to find a home in the town where they were ministering. If they were well received in that home they were to bless it by saying, “peace to this house” (verse 5). These were not mere words. There was a reason why the Lord called them to speak these words. The Lord would hear this and bring a blessing of peace on the house that received His servants. God would honour that household for their kindness to His ministering servants. If they found a house where they were welcome they were to stay in that house as long as they ministered in that town. The blessing of God would be on that family and God would reward them for the kindness shown to His servants.

The Lord told His disciples that they were not to move from home to home. Instead, they were to be content with what God had given them. Could it be that this command was intended to keep the workers from looking around for better homes where they could be more comfortable? This was not to be their concern. They were to be content with the provision of the Lord and not go searching for more than He wanted to provide.

How important it is for us to understand the principle behind this command of the Lord. Maybe you have met Christian workers who move from one place to another in search of larger salaries or more comfortable surroundings. Instead of spending their effort on doing the work, they focus attention on their personal comfort and ease. They are constantly looking around for a better church with greater benefits and higher salary. Jesus told His disciples that the worker was worthy of his wages but they were not to waste their time searching for bigger and better things. They were to learn to be content with the provision of God for the moment. When they went to a town they were to eat what was put before them and be content with what they received. They were to receive it with gratitude, as from the Lord.

The seventy-two disciples were given the task of healing the sick and telling those they met that the Kingdom of God was near. They were to demonstrate the reality of that kingdom by setting people free from the power of the devil.

If they entered a town where they were not well received, they were to wipe the dust off their feet and leave. They were not to stay where they were not well received. There were too many people and too many needs to remain where they were unwelcome. The Lord would take notice

of those who rejected his servants. He told them that it would be better for Sodom than for the town that rejected them. Sodom was destroyed by judgment of God in the days of Abraham (see Genesis 19). God stands fully behind His servants. To reject them is to reject their Lord.

Jesus prophesied devastation for the cities that saw the wonderful works of God in their midst but rejected Him. Korazin and Bethsaida were cursed. Jesus told them that if the cities of Tyre and Sidon, which God judged had seen the miracles they had seen, they would have repented. The same message went out to Capernaum. They thought they would be honoured but they would be brought down to the depths. They had seen the works of God and had rejected what they saw. They would be humbled and judged by God. The judgment of God is most severe on those who have opportunity to hear but reject His message. As Jesus sent out these seventy-two disciples, He sent them with His authority. Whoever listened to them listened to their Lord. Whoever rejected them rejected Him.

These seventy-two disciples went out with the assurance that the defeat of Satan was sure. Jesus told them that He saw Satan falling like lightening from heaven. This had already happened. Satan was now on the earth doing all he could to destroy the work of God. These little lambs were being sent out into his territory. To these lambs, Jesus gave power and authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome the enemy. Nothing would harm them. God's protecting hand would be on them to keep them from the attacks of the evil one. While this promise was particularly for the seventy-two, it also has application to us today as we minister in His name. He will protect and keep us as we move in His calling to accomplish His purpose.

What a wonderful privilege these disciples had as they went out in the name of the Lord with His authority to heal and set people free from the bondage of the enemy. It would be easy for these disciples to rejoice in the power and authority the Lord had given them. There are many who worship the authority and power given them. Notice, however, that Jesus tells these disciples to rejoice in the fact that they were the children of God. Their focus was to be on God not in the authority He had given them. They were to find more joy in their relationship with God than in what they could do for Him.

We see here in this section how the Lord specifically called out seventy-two individuals to minister in His name. They were to go where He was going. They were not to get wrapped up in the pursuit of the pleasures and riches of this world. They were to learn how to be content with the provision of their Lord and trust Him for all things. As they went in His name, they went with His authority and protection. They would be His representatives in a dark world. They would speak in His name and be victorious. Though they were little lambs, Satan would flee from them because they moved in the authority of the Lord. They were not to get caught with this authority and power but instead to learn to rejoice in their relationship with God.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the type of people God can use? Do we have to be mature and well-educated for God to use us? What is the significance of the use of the word “lamb” here in this passage?

- Have you ever found yourself rejoicing in your position as a spiritual leader or the wonderful gifts and authority God has given you? What challenge does this passage bring to this attitude? What does this passage teach us about the object of our rejoicing?
- What kind of things does Satan use to distract you in your ministry and spiritual walk?
- We see here that the Lord challenged His disciples to go where He was going and not to waste time on those people who were unwilling to receive their ministry. When do you know that it is time for you to move on in your ministry to someone or somewhere else?

For Prayer

- Ask the Lord to help you to see more clearly the ministry to which He has called you.
- Ask the Lord to protect you from the temptation of rejoicing in your position and gifting more than in your relationship with Him.
- Ask the Lord to increase His power and authority in your life.
- Thank the Lord that even though we are not always where we should be in our maturity with Him, He still can use us for the advancing of His kingdom.

37

REVEALED TO LITTLE CHILDREN

Read Luke 10:21-24

The Lord Jesus had just sent out seventy-two disciples to minister in His name. They were to go to the places where He would go. Jesus told them that they were like lambs going out among wolves. The battle would be intense. He did not hesitate to send them as lambs among wolves, however, because He knew that they were going in the protection and direction of the Father who would surround and empower them.

As Jesus gave the disciples instructions for the journey He seemed to explode in joy. Verse 21 tells us that being full of joy through the Holy Spirit He broke out in praise to the Father. What was it that caused this explosion of joy in the Holy Spirit? The context would indicate that it has something to do with the disciples He was sending out into the harvest. There is something very wonderful about the picture of the Lord Jesus rejoicing here. He rejoiced because of His workers. Notice particularly, however, the reason

why He rejoiced in them. Verse 21 tells us that He praised the Father because He had hidden things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. The “things” the Father revealed to these children were spiritual in nature. They were matters relating to the kingdom of God. As Jesus watched His disciples leave on their mission he saw weak and helpless children. They were inexperienced lambs, but they had something that the wisest, strongest and most experienced did not have. They had an understanding of the power and anointing of God. They went in the authority of the Father. As Jesus watched these little children leave, He rejoiced in His heart because He knew that they would overcome the enemy. He knew that the kingdom of Satan did not have a chance against them.

Don't you find it amazing that the Lord God looks down from heaven and rejoices in your ministry? It thrills His heart to see you moving into the territory of the enemy and experiencing wonderful victory. We move out as little children with no real experience. We move out as helpless lambs facing ferocious wolves but as we move, the heart of Jesus leaps with joy because He knows how hell trembles at the sight of these lambs. His heart is thrilled because the power of God is being demonstrated to the forces of hell through seemingly insignificant and helpless children.

The important thing for us to understand here is that the secrets of the kingdom are revealed to the simple. They are not revealed to those who believe they do not need them. The power of God is not given to those who believe that they are strong in themselves. The wisdom of God is hidden from those who believe that their own wisdom is sufficient. If we go into the battle with a sense that our

training and experience will be enough, we will be defeated. If, on the other hand, we go with the sense that we must trust in the direction and leading of the Lord, we will surely succeed. The forces of hell will not be able to conquer us.

The Father had committed all things into the hands of His Son. The salvation of the world depended on the Lord Jesus Christ and His work. The power to overcome was in the Lord Jesus Christ. The forces of hell tremble at this thought. They retreat at the mention of his name. In the name of Jesus, prisoners bound by Satan are loosed. Jesus now commissioned these disciples to go in His authority. These disciples went in the enabling and wisdom of the Son of God who had received all authority from the Father. There could be no greater authority or calling.

In verse 23, Jesus looked at His disciples and reminded them of how blessed they were because they had been given the ability to see. They had seen Jesus, the hope of the nations. They had heard His voice and were now moving out in the power of His Holy Spirit. The prophets longed for the day when the Messiah would be revealed. They longed to be alive and sit at his feet. They longed to know the power of His presence and enabling in their lives. These disciples experienced what the prophets of old could only speak about. They were moving into the world with a truth that could radically transform. They moved out with a truth that would send the powers of darkness into hiding. These little children had a life transforming message. They were an army to be feared. In this the Lord Jesus rejoiced.

The power for ministry does not reside in our experience or eloquence. Even simple believers can be mightily used

of God when they know that the source of their power and enabling is not in themselves. The Lord Jesus rejoices to use little children and inexperienced lambs to destroy the powerful forces of darkness.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about how Christ delights in our ministries?
- What do we learn here about the secret to a powerful ministry?
- To what extent do you depend on your own abilities in ministry? What does this passage teach us about our need to rely on Christ?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you believed that your own strength and wisdom were sufficient for the ministry.
- Thank the Lord that he takes great delight in your ministry and gives you all that is necessary to overcome.
- Thank the Lord for the way He empowers us as little children to overcome even the fiercest forces of darkness.

38

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Read Luke 10:25-37

On one occasion an expert of the law approached Jesus to test Him. The teachers of the law were always trying to find fault with the Lord Jesus and His doctrine. This particular teacher asked Jesus what he could do to inherit eternal life. The fact that he was trying to test Jesus puts his sincerity into question. It seems that he is more concerned about tricking Jesus into saying something that he could use against him than that he was about actually understanding what he could do to have eternal life. Obviously he already had his opinion on the subject.

Jesus had often told those who listened to Him that He was the way to God. This particular teaching disturbed the teachers of the law. They did not see how Jesus could be so bold as to proclaim that He alone was the way to God. For them, this claim was blasphemous. Maybe this teacher was trying to get Jesus to say that He was the only way so they could accuse Him of blasphemy.

Jesus was aware of what this man was trying to do. He did not fall into his trap. Instead, He threw a question back at him. "What is written in the Law?" "How do you read it?" Jesus asked (verse 26).

The teacher answered Jesus in verse 27 by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and, love your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus told the teacher that he had answered correctly. He told the man that if he could love the Lord his God with all his heart and soul and mind and his neighbour as himself, he would live. This statement needs to be considered in greater detail.

Is Jesus telling this man that if he obeyed this commandment he could go to heaven? What we need to understand here is that if it were possible for us to love the Lord God with all our strength and heart and soul and our neighbour as ourselves we could go to heaven. The problem is that there has never been anyone in the history of this world who was ever able to do this apart from the Lord Jesus. Our sinful human nature keeps us from loving the Lord with all our heart. We are by nature a self-centred people. We are often unable to love our neighbours as ourselves. If we could obey this commandment we would be perfect. We all fall short, however, of the standard God has set out for us. This is why Jesus came. He came because we were incapable of loving God with all our heart, soul and mind. He came because we could not love our neighbour as ourselves. If you can be perfect, you can have eternal life is

what Jesus is really telling this man. If you can't you need a Saviour.

The man understood what Jesus was saying to him. As Jesus spoke, the man began to examine himself. He knew he had fallen short of the standard God had laid out in His Word and he felt the need to justify himself. In particular, he knew that he was guilty of not loving his neighbour. In order to justify himself he asked Jesus: "Who is my neighbour" (verse 29).

There is something we need to note here in the approach of this teacher of the law. Here was a man who understood the law. He was an intelligent man and could recite the Scriptures by heart. He was also able to reason and twist the Scriptures to suit his need. I have seen this happen many times. Maybe you have met individuals who, wanting to justify their sin, twist the Scriptures so that they convince themselves that what they are doing is not wrong. If you take a Scripture passage out of its context you can make it say whatever you want it to say. The Scripture said that this teacher of the law was to love his neighbour as himself. Instead of taking this verse at face value, he asks the question: "Who is my neighbour" (verse 29). He knew the obvious meaning of the word but to justify his sin he wanted to re-define the word "neighbour" so that it did not include certain people. He wanted to create a doctrine that would enable him to hate certain people and still be in agreement with Scriptures. We see this kind of misinterpretation of Scripture in our day. Satan is a master at twisting the Scripture. He caused Eve to fall into sin by twisting the Scripture to suit his own need. Listen to what Satan told Eve in Genesis 3:1:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

Satan was really saying something like this: "Eve, you know what God said but is that really what He meant?" This is what the teacher of the law is asking here. "Jesus," he said, "I know that the law says that I am to love my neighbour but who really is my neighbour." Who he loved depended on how he defined his "neighbour." He could define neighbour anyway he saw fit to justify his hatred. We must be careful not to fall into this trap.

In answer to his question, Jesus told a story. The story Jesus told was quite simple. He told a story of a man who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. This was a distance of about nineteen miles or about thirty-one kilometres. As he travelled, he fell into the hands of some robbers who stripped him of his clothes, beat him and left him half dead on the road. A priest came down the road and, when he saw the man, passed by on the other side unwilling to defile himself. By law a priest could not touch a dead body. Could it be that he used the law as an excuse not to minister to this man?

The second person to pass by was a Levite. The Levites were chosen by God to care for the temple and were involved in a variety of tasks in the worship of God. This Levite also passed by the man and went on his way without helping him. Maybe he had duties to perform at the temple that day and was busy trying to get there on time.

Finally a Samaritan came by. The Jews hated the Samaritans. They did everything in their power to avoid contact

with them. This Samaritan, unlike the others, took pity on the man who had been robbed. He cared for his wounds. He put the injured man on his donkey and brought him to an inn where he could recover. The next day, he made arrangements with the innkeeper to provide for the man's needs and to put any expenses on his bill.

When He finished telling His story, Jesus asked the teacher of the law, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers" (verse 37). The answer was obvious. The teacher replied, "The one who had mercy on him." It was the hated and despised Samaritan who was neighbour to the injured man.

What was Jesus saying to the teacher of the law? He was telling him that even the hated Samaritans were his neighbours. He was telling him that he was to love even his enemies and to care for anyone in need whoever that person might be. He was telling the teacher that he was not to twist the Scriptures to suit his needs or prejudices but to love as God loved. Jesus concluded His conversation by telling the teacher to "go and do likewise" (verse 37). He was to love his worst enemies like himself.

Jesus is not telling the teacher that if only he could love his enemies he could go to heaven. Jesus was showing him his sin. He had come to Jesus to trick him. He had come to Jesus to try and find a reason to accuse him. He came with deceit and hatred in his heart. He came with evil intentions. He was rebuked by his own words. He returned realizing that his own heart was filled with evil, deceit and hatred. He came to accuse but he returned understanding how far from the kingdom of God he was. The teacher condemned himself with his own words. He needed a Saviour.

For Consideration:

- Have you or someone you know ever been guilty of trying to justify their actions by twisting the Scriptures? Give some examples of how we can twist Scripture to justify our sin?
- Why do we need a Saviour according to this passage?
- Take a moment to examine how Jesus dealt with this man who came to Him with hostile intent. How did Jesus' approach help to diffuse what could have been a very explosive situation?
- Do you have any enemies? What does this passage teach us about the kind of relationship we need to have with them?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He sent His Son to be our Saviour. Thank Him that our salvation does not rest on how well we keep the law but on the finished work of Christ on the cross.
- Ask the Lord to show you if you have ever been guilty of justifying your sin by twisting the Scriptures. Ask Him to give you the grace to live in absolute obedience.

- Do you have problems with a particular person in your life? Ask the Lord to give you grace to love them as He calls you to love them.

39

MARY AND MARTHA

Read Luke 10:38-42

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. As they travelled, they came to a village where a woman by the name of Martha lived. She had a sister named Mary. From what we know about Martha, she seems to have the gift of hospitality. When she heard that Jesus and His disciples were coming to town she invited them to her home for a meal.

It should be noted here that the ministry of the Lord and His disciples was supported by individuals like Martha. This would continue to be the pattern in the early church. While the individuals who stood behind these travelling preachers and evangelists are not always mentioned, they were very necessary to the advancing of the gospel. Maybe you do not have a calling to go out to preach the gospel like the disciples but you can stand behind those who do. These support ministries do not always receive the honour they deserve. Martha was involved in a support ministry. She could not preach but she was able to offer hospitality to those who did.

I remember someone telling me one day that my greatest strength was also my greatest weakness. In other words, if we do not control our greatest strengths they can quickly become a hindrance to us. I have often been aware of this in my life and ministry. This was a problem Martha had to deal with in her life as well. The very gift she used for the Lord became a barrier in her walk with the Lord and her relationship with her sister. We need to learn how to use our gifts. While the gifts the Lord gives us are wonderful and useful to the kingdom of God, if not used properly, they can hinder the work. Notice what happened to Martha in this passage.

Martha had a sister named Mary. When Jesus and His disciples came to stay at Martha's house, Mary decided that she was going to sit at His feet and listen to what He had to say. This was a wonderful opportunity for Mary. She listened to Jesus and soaked up every word He spoke.

Martha, on the other hand, was very distracted by all the meal preparations. The word "distraction" in Greek has the sense of being drawn away or over-occupied. Do you see what is happening here? Martha was using her gift but in the use of the gift she had been distracted from what was most important. The gift began to take priority over the Lord himself.

How easy it is for this to happen. We can become so intensely focused on our ministry that we no longer have time to develop our relationship with the Lord. Jesus often had to leave the people who flocked to see Him to spend time with His father. There are individuals who live to use their gifts. They are driven to preach, evangelize or to minister in some way or another but they have lost sight of the Lord and their personal relationship with Him. If God were

to remove their gift, they would have nothing to live for. They have forgotten their first love. Their ministries have distracted them.

Martha experienced another problem that day. Verse 40 tells us that she noticed Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus and spoke to Jesus about it. She asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her. She even began to accuse Jesus of not caring for her in all her busyness. We often see things through the eyeglasses of our spiritual gifts. If you are an evangelist you see the need to share the message of salvation with those you meet. Those who have gifts of helps will see people's practical need. This is as it should be but what we need to understand here is that our gifts can often keep us from seeing things from someone else's perspective. Martha's gift kept her from seeing Mary's perspective. All Martha could see was the need to get the meal prepared. She could not see Mary's perspective.

God has given us different gifts and enabled us to see the world through those gifts. Those with the gift of mercy will have different perspective than those who have the gift of evangelism. Teachers will see needs differently from those with gifts to help. God has designed the body this way so that each member sees different needs and reaches out to those needs. The problem, however, is that if we are not careful, these different priorities can also divide us.

Martha allowed her gift to cause a division between her and her sister. She allowed her gift to distract her in her relationship with the Lord. Jesus patiently listened to Martha's request and told her that she was upset about many things. He reminded her in verse 42 that the one thing she needed right then was to do what Mary was doing. In other words, she needed to stop for a moment and catch her

breath. She needed to stop and refocus. She needed to slow down enough to see her Lord again.

It is important for us to note here that the Lord never condemned Martha's ministry. Her ministry was essential. What He does speak to her about is gaining perspective. She had allowed her ministry to take over and become a barrier between her Lord and her sister Mary. How important it is that we keep things in perspective. We need to remember why we serve. We must never allow our busyness or ministries take our eyes away from the Lord Jesus and our relationship with Him.

For Consideration:

- What gifts or strengths has the Lord given you? How could these gifts or strengths become a weakness?
- Have you ever been critical of someone else's ministry because they did not have the same focus as you did? What do we learn in this passage that can help us deal with this attitude?
- Take a moment to examine your ministry and walk with the Lord. What things have been distracting you from your focus on the Lord Jesus?
- What do we learn here about the importance of "behind the scenes" support ministries? Give some examples of this kind of ministry.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to keep your eyes on Him.
- Thank the Lord for those who have stood behind you in your ministry and spiritual walk.
- Ask the Lord to give you a deeper appreciation for the ministries and gifting of those who minister around you.

TEACH US TO PRAY

Read Luke 11:1-13

We have already examined the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-14. From the context, it appears that the Lord repeats some of His teaching from Matthew 6. For a greater exposition of this prayer see the comments on Matthew 6:9-14.

Chapter 11 begins with the Lord Jesus praying in a certain place. The passage tells us that the disciples approached Jesus when He finished praying and asked Him to teach them to pray just as John taught his disciples. We do not have a record of John's teaching on prayer.

The disciples were obviously touched by the way Jesus prayed. Jesus taught first by example. His disciples saw how important prayer was to Him and how it played an important role in His life and ministry. Watching Jesus, the disciples realized they needed to learn how to pray if they were going to be effective in ministry. Their ministry depended on seeking God in prayer. I find it rather strange that in many Bible Schools and seminaries we have very little emphasis on prayer. John the Baptist taught his

disciples to pray. Jesus demonstrated by His example the importance of prayer. He too taught His disciples to pray.

While prayer is a simple matter of talking with God, it is much more complicated than this. How do we know what to pray for? How do we recognize the Lord's voice and leading when we pray? The repetition of a list of requests is not the kind of prayer we are talking about here. The disciples saw something in the prayer life of Jesus that attracted them. They saw intimacy and fellowship. The disciples saw passion and power in Jesus' prayers. They were so moved by the relationship that Jesus had with His Father that they wanted to have that same kind of relationship themselves. They saw the power that came from the time Jesus spent with the Father. They saw the wisdom He drew from those times of prayer. Is your time of prayer an intimate time between you and the Lord? Do you find strength and wisdom in this time to face the day? Are you empowered through your prayer times? Does your life and ministry reflect the fact that you have been with God? Do you know His leading and direction through those times? The type of prayer the disciples wanted to learn was the type that broke through to God and experienced His presence.

Jesus responded to the disciple's request by teaching them the Lord's Prayer. This prayer was designed to serve as a model prayer. See notes on Matthew 6:9-14 for a fuller explanation of this prayer.

In verse 5 Jesus taught His disciples the importance of perseverance in prayer. One of the greatest obstacles in prayer is a lack of persevering faith. Jesus taught His disciples a lesson on persevering by telling them a story about a man who had a visitor arrive at midnight. He had

nothing to feed him so he went to visit his neighbour to ask for three loaves of bread. The neighbour told him that he and his children were in bed and he could not get up to give him anything. Jesus told his disciples that though he did not want to get out of bed, if the man continued to knock, he would get up and give him his bread for the sake of peace and quiet.

Jesus went on to tell his disciples that if they asked, it would be given to them. The tense of the verb “ask” here indicates a continuous asking. This is not just a one-time asking but a continuous asking. The same idea is repeated in the word “seek” and “knock.” Jesus was teaching His disciples that they were not to give up praying. Jesus said whoever keeps on asking, will receive. If you keep seeking you will find and if you keep knocking the door will be opened up to you.

It might be easy for us to assume from this that God hesitates to answer our prayers. The man who was asked for bread gave only when his friend kept asking. Sometimes we feel that this how God sees our prayers. This passage is designed, however, to show us that if we as human beings are willing to answer the requests of our fellow human beings when they ask us for something, how much more will God answer our requests? We find this in verses 11 to 13.

In verses 11 to 13 Jesus gave another example. If your son asks you for a fish would you give him a snake? If he were to ask you for an egg would you be so cruel as to give him a scorpion? The answer is obvious. Though we are sinful human beings, we still have respect for our children and provide for their needs. As evil as we are, we still know how to give good gifts to our children. Jesus reminds

us that our heavenly Father, who is perfect, knows how to give us what we need.

Notice in verse 13 that Jesus particularly mentions that His Father will give His Holy Spirit to all who ask. Why is the Holy Spirit mentioned in this context? Could it be because these wonderful gifts and blessings we ask for come through the Holy Spirit? He is the source of our salvation. He is the source of our wisdom and empowering. Through Him we are gifted and equipped for ministry. He is the one who produces in us the fruit of peace, love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness and all the other fruit of the Spirit. All we need, we receive through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. If we ask the Father He will send us His Holy Spirit to equip us and bless us with all the blessings we need for our ministry and walk in Christ.

Jesus taught His disciples that true prayer is persevering prayer. We are to keep seeking, keep asking and keep knocking. Why does God not answer our prayer right away? There are many possible reasons for this. Sometimes He does not answer right away so that we understand that He is the one who is in control. Knowing our human hearts, if we were to ask and receive what we wanted right away we would begin to think that God owed us an answer. When you have to wait for an answer remember that it is God who determines the time. It is He who determines when and where and how your request will be answered.

Sometimes God delays to see how serious we are about our requests. How many times do we bring our request to God without thinking about them? It is easy for us to ask for whatever comes to our mind. How much do you really want that request from God? Do you want it enough to pray

for a year? Would you pray faithfully for fifteen years for that request? Sometimes we ask God for things we really do not want ourselves.

Jesus also taught His disciples that not only were they to demonstrate their seriousness in prayer by persevering but they were also to come to their heavenly Father with expectancy. If we who are evil give good gifts to each other then we should assume that God will answer our prayers when we ask for those things that are necessary for the furtherance of His kingdom in our lives. There are times when we come to God without this expectation. This verse tells us that sometimes we expect more from sinful human beings than we do from a holy God.

If we want to know how to pray Jesus tells us that we need to be serious enough about our requests that we will not let God go until He answers. We must take God at His word and not let go. We must persevere. Don't pray for things you are not ready to persist in prayer for. If we are going to learn how to pray we must also come with expectation and faith. Let's go to prayer realizing that God wants to give every good gift through His Holy Spirit. Let's go with the understanding that He delights in us more than our earthly friends and parents and wants to provide all we need for life and godliness. Our doubting only keeps Him from responding. If we want to learn to pray we must cast off doubt and come with open arms, expecting that when He promises to provide He will provide. Expect great things from Him and persevere until he shows Himself to be faithful to His Word. This was the advice of Jesus to His disciples wanting to learn how to pray.

For Consideration:

- Why do you suppose God delays in answering our prayers?
- Have you ever asked for things from God you were not serious about? Explain.
- What do we learn in this passage about the importance of perseverance and expectancy in prayer?
- What role does prayer have in your ministry and walk with the Lord?
- Do you pray with perseverance and expectancy? How does this passage encourage you in prayer?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to increase your expectancy and faith in prayer.
- Thank the Lord that He promises to provide for your every need.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have not been faithful in prayer and for the times you have doubted Him.

41

WOE TO THE PHARISEES

Read Luke 11:37-54

Jesus often had problems with the Pharisees. They were always looking for an occasion to find fault with His doctrine or ministry. Of all the people that Jesus ministered to, the Pharisees were the most religious. They were also the farthest from the truth.

On this occasion, a Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him. This in itself was quite a step for a Pharisee to take. To invite someone to eat with you was a means of honouring that person. The Pharisees kept away from people of questionable faith and practice. They certainly considered Jesus to be in this category. It is uncertain whether this Pharisee was interested in hearing what Jesus had to say or whether he was only interested in using this occasion to find fault with Him.

Jesus accepted the invitation to go to the home of this Pharisee and reclined at the table with him. It was the

custom of the Pharisees to ceremonially wash their hands before a meal. In the mind of the Pharisees, to forsake this practice was to become unclean and defiled before God. This practice was something the Pharisees added to their practice of the Law of Moses. They often placed their human traditions on the same level with the Law of Moses. When the Pharisee noticed that Jesus did not wash his hands in the ceremonial way he was surprised.

The Lord took advantage of this situation to speak to him about how his group emphasized cleanliness of the body but neglected their hearts and minds. Jesus went on to compare the Pharisees to a cup that was clean on the outside but still dirty on the inside. The Pharisees religiously cleaned their hands and practised the law. While they were a very religious people on the outside, they were filled with greed and wickedness on the inside.

Jesus reminded the Pharisee in verse 40 that the God who made the outside also made the inside. He expected that they keep their hearts and minds clean as well. The Pharisees were very religious but their hearts were far from God. It is relatively easy to do and speak the right things. It is more difficult to have the right attitudes and thoughts. You can worship God on the outside but still be far from Him in your heart. You can help your neighbours but still harbour bitterness in your heart toward them. God expects the inside to be as clean as the outside. True holiness comes from the heart.

Jesus makes an interesting statement in verse 41:

But give what is inside [the dish] to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

What are we to understand by this statement? We are not sure what Jesus was saying in particular to this Pharisee but it appears that he is dealing with a very personal issue here. Did Jesus understand the attitude of this Pharisee's heart and speak to it? Did this Pharisee struggle with greed and accumulating possessions in this life? Was Jesus telling him that he needed to deal with the greediness of his heart and give those things he had been accumulating in life? When he was set free on the inside from his sin problem then he would be truly clean. No amount of hand washing could set the Pharisee free from his sinful heart. He could have clean hands but his heart would still be dirty before God.

The Pharisees were very good at maintaining the rituals of their faith. They religiously set aside one-tenth of their mint and garden seed for the Lord. You can imagine just how devoted these Pharisees would have to be to count out their seeds in this fashion. As devoted as they were to this type of giving, they had neglected justice and love of God. They did all the right things on the outside but failed to love God and their fellow human beings. What good is all this outward show of religion if you hate your brother in your heart? What good is our ministry if we do not love the Lord God? Jesus told the Pharisee that he was to love the Lord and do justice to his neighbour first. He does not condemn his practice of tithing but it was not as important as getting his heart right with God and his neighbour.

The Pharisees loved to find the best seats in the synagogues and sit in places of honour. They delighted in the attention of people at the marketplace. They wore fancy clothes so people would look at them and respect them for their position. There are pastors and church leaders like this. They love to sit up in the front of the church dressed

in their fancy clothes. They love people to look at them. They love people to praise them and respect them for their high office. This is what the Pharisees did. They loved the praise of people but they were not right on the inside.

As Jesus spoke about the Pharisees, the teachers of the Law also began to feel convicted. They heard the cutting remarks of Jesus toward the Pharisees and said: "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also" (verse 46). They saw that much of what Jesus was saying applied to them. Jesus turned His attention to the teachers of the Law and said:

You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them. (Luke 11:46)

Jesus accused the teachers of the Law of not practicing what they taught. They told others what to do but they did not do it themselves. They loaded them down with requirements but did nothing to help them. What good is knowledge of the truth if it does not impact our lives and change our heart? These teachers of the law did not make it easy for those they taught to walk in holiness. They piled law after law on them and made holiness so difficult that no one could attain it. They taught the truth but their teaching did not change lives or draw people closer to God.

These teachers built tombs for the prophets and honoured them with their actions but they were the children of those who killed these prophets (verse 47). They did not listen to the words of the prophets they honoured. God would hold them accountable for the blood of the prophets. While they did not physically kill these prophets themselves they were

as guilty as their ancestors for rejecting them. Verse 50 is striking. Jesus told the teachers of the Law that their generation would be responsible for the blood of all the prophets from the beginning of the world! If we reject the words of the prophets we are as guilty as those who killed them. God sees our rejection to be on the same level as those who rejected His servants in Bible times. We kill these prophets in our heart and will have to answer for their blood. Again we see the importance of the attitude of the heart.

Jesus accused the teachers of the law of taking away the key to knowledge (verse 52). What is the key to knowledge? While there are various opinions concerning this, we need to understand that the Lord Jesus and His work are the keys to the knowledge of God and His purposes. There are many people who are trying to understand life and its purpose without Jesus and the cross. They will always fall short. These teachers of the law fell short of the truth because they did not understand the person and work of the Lord Jesus. They had thrown away and rejected the key to understanding the purpose of God in this world.

These words of Jesus did not go over well with the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. Luke tells us that they “began to oppose Him fiercely and to besiege Him with questions waiting to catch Him in something He might say” (verses 53-54).

There are some powerful truths here in this passage. God calls us to a righteousness that is far deeper than the surface. He calls us to care for our attitudes and thoughts as well as our outward actions. He sees what is on the inside and will hold us accountable for what He sees.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the importance of sincerity in our walk with God?
- Have you ever found yourself seeking the praise and respect of men like the Pharisees? What challenge does this passage bring to us?
- Why is it such a serious matter to reject the Word of God? How does God see our rejection of His Word today?
- How is Jesus the key to knowledge? Can we truly understand life without Jesus?

For Prayer:

- If you know the Lord Jesus as your Saviour, thank Him that He has shown you the purpose and meaning of life.
- If you have never accepted the Lord Jesus open your heart to Him right now and ask Him to forgive you for your rejection of His work on your behalf.
- Take a moment to pray for someone who, like the Pharisees and teachers of the law, has never understood his or her need of Jesus.
- Ask the Lord to search your heart to show you anything that is not in line with Him and His teaching.

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Read Luke 12:13-21

Many people came to Jesus with their sickness and diseases. Others asked Him to heal those oppressed by demons. Here in Luke 12 Jesus received a very peculiar request. An individual in the crowd asked Jesus to speak to his brother about dividing his inheritance with him.

As servants of God we will be called on to deal with all kinds of problems. The reality of the matter is that some of the problems brought to us will only distract us from the real focus we need to have in ministry. Jesus listened to this individual's request but does not get caught up in this problem. "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Jesus asked the man in verse 14. Jesus looked beyond this request to the real issue. In verse 15, He spoke to the crowd and told them that they needed to be on their guard for greed.

It is uncertain whose greed Jesus addressed here. It could be that the brother who was withholding the inheritance or brother seeking his inheritance.

In a recent trip to Haiti I was struck by the need I saw all around me. Over and over people would come to me with their hands outstretched looking for money or food. How easy it is to feel guilty in a situation like this. You can hear the enemy saying: "What kind of Christian are you if you don't give to everyone that asks?" I had to learn to listen to God and not the enemy whispering in my ear. When God spoke to me about an individual and their need I would give. We cannot and should not respond to every request that comes our way. The enemy will overwhelm us with needs if we are not careful. Jesus did not get caught up in this man's problem. There were times when Jesus simply walked away from a problem because it was not His father's purpose for Him to get involved. We need real discernment to know the leading of the Lord.

A second lesson we need to learn here is that it is quite possible for us to bring requests to the Lord that are sinful in nature. This man came to the Lord with his request but behind that request was the sin of greed. How careful we need to be when we pray. We need to examine the motives of our requests. Do these requests come from a heart that is in tune with the Father and His kingdom? Are we asking the Lord Jesus to support our sinful desires? The Lord Jesus is not fooled. He sees behind those requests to the motive and attitude beneath.

Jesus rebuked the greed that had caused this division between brothers. He used this man's problem as a lesson for all those present. He reminded them that a person's life did not consist of the abundance of possessions. The sin

of greed is not a sin of the wealthy alone. Those who do not have much in this life can also get caught up in the pursuit of possessions.

To illustrate the danger of greed, Jesus told the people a story of a rich man who produced a good crop. When he saw the abundance of his crop he said to himself: "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops" (verse 17). As he looked at his abundance he became greedy. He decided to build bigger barns in order to have more place to store his crops. He told himself: "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry" (verse 19). This man set his mind to living the good life. He was going to lay back and take it easy. He wouldn't have to worry again about what to eat. He determined in his heart that he would keep his wealth for himself. There is no mention here of sharing what he had with others. There was no concern for anyone but himself. This is what greed does. It blinds our eyes and hearts to the need of those around us.

As the man prepared to build bigger barns, God told him that he was a fool. That very night God would take his life. All his plans would amount to nothing. He would die without ever enjoying what he had stored up for himself. Jesus concluded the parable by telling those present that this is how it would be with anyone who stored up things for himself but was not rich toward God.

There is a powerful warning here in his parable. Jesus condemned the man in the parable because he stored up possessions for himself and was not rich toward God. What does it mean to be rich toward God? Matthew 25:45 tells us:

He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

We see clearly here that when we give to others we give to God. We can be rich to God by using the resources He has given us to minister to others in need.

Jesus speaks here to the sin of greed. It is not wrong to allow the Lord to bless us. We cannot give if we have not received. God blessed the man in the parable. The blessing was not a sin. What was a sin was his unwillingness to use what he had received from the Lord to bless others. Instead of overflowing to others, he stored up his blessings for himself. He was not willing to let his life be a channel through which the blessing of God could overflow to others. Jesus condemns this selfish attitude. May our lives overflow to others with the abundance God has given us.

For Consideration:

- What is the sin of greed?
- Is it wrong to seek the blessing of God in our lives? How do we find the balance between actively seeking the blessing of God and becoming greedy? Why should we seek the blessing of God?
- What has God blessed you with today? How is that blessing overflowing to others around you?
- Have you ever found yourself falling into the enemy's trap of ministering to those the Lord has not

called you to minister to? How do we know the difference between the distractions of the enemy and the Lord's call?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He has blessed you? Thank Him for some specific blessings.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to share His blessing with others.
- Ask the Lord to give you discernment to recognize His leading from the enemy's attempt to distract you in ministry.

43

THE PARABLE OF THE WATCHFUL SERVANTS

Read Luke 12:35-48

This section begins with a challenge from Jesus to His servants to be dressed and ready for Him with their lamps burning. To illustrate what He meant Jesus used an illustration of a servant waiting for his master to return from a wedding banquet. Imagine the master returning late at night to find his servants asleep in bed, the door locked and the lights turned out. He waits at the gate in the cold and dark while his servant gets dressed, finds oil for his lamp and fills it before coming to open the door. What would the master of the house think of such a servant? Would he not be angry with him? If the servant was doing his job, he would wait for his master to come home before going to bed. He would be fully dressed and have the lamps filled with oil so that at his master's return he would be able to open the door and receive him immediately.

Jesus reminds His listeners that it would be good for the servant whose master found him or her watching and

waiting for his return. Though he is master, he would have this faithful servant recline at the table and wait on him because of his faithful service. He would receive the master's special favour because of his devotion.

Jesus told His listeners that the master could return at any time of the night. The faithful servant will be ready, even if his master didn't return until the early hours of the morning.

If we knew that a thief was coming at a certain time, we would be ready for him. We would bar our windows and lock our doors. We may even stay awake so that when he arrived we would be ready to defend our home. Jesus reminds us here that he would come like a thief (see verse 39). He will come when His servants are not expecting Him.

While it is quite easy for us to understand the meaning of this parable, it was not so easy for the disciples at that time to grasp its significance. When Peter heard what Jesus said he wondered about its meaning. "Lord, are you telling this parable to us or to everyone," he asked (verse 41)? Jesus answered Peter by telling him another parable.

In this second parable Jesus told a story about a manager whose master put him in charge of his servants. He told Peter that it would go well for that manager when the master returned if he found that he had been faithful in providing for his servants. What was Jesus telling Peter?

The parable about a servant who has been given responsibility over other servants was particularly significant for Peter. In John 21:15 Jesus told Peter to feed His lambs. Peter and the other apostles were servants of the Lord who were given responsibility to minister as shepherds to

His people. Peter had been called to be a manager. Jesus expected him to be faithful in that task. He expected that when he returned he would see that he had done what He had called him to do.

Notice in verse 44 what Jesus told Peter concerning how the master would reward the servant who faithfully carried out his duties. If he was faithful in the small tasks, the master would be able to trust him with even greater responsibilities. All too often we want bigger responsibility without ever proving our faithfulness in smaller things. God gives great responsibility to those who have been faithful in little responsibilities.

Jesus went on to remind Peter in verse 42, of the dangers of unfaithfulness.

But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk.

Imagine that instead of serving his master's workers, this servant took advantage of them and treated them with cruelty. Imagine that instead of working hard to carry out his master's requirements, the servant decided to eat, drink and get drunk. What would happen when the master returned? When his master returned and discovered that he had been living a wild life and beating his servants would the master not deal harshly with him? Jesus told Peter that the master would cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. He would be cast aside like someone unworthy of trust. He would be judged severely because of his unfaithfulness. Verse 47 tells us that the servant who

knew his master's will but did not do it would be beaten with many blows for his disobedience.

Notice in verse 48 that while there was a severe punishment for those who acted knowingly against the will of the master, those who acted without knowledge of the master's will, would also be beaten but with only a few blows. Jesus distinguished here between wilful disobedience and disobedience that came from ignorance of His purpose. Peter and the apostles had every opportunity to hear the teaching of the Lord and understand His purpose. They had spent time with Him and ministered at His side. They had been given a greater responsibility. More would be required of them than from others.

Jesus concluded with a powerful statement in verse 48:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

In answer to Peter's question about the application of this teaching, Jesus told him that while everyone needed to be ready, those who had been given greater responsibility would have more to answer for when their master returned. I have met many people who wanted to be pastors and have a place of authority. They want the honour but they do not fully realize that with this honour comes great responsibility. Taking a place of authority in the kingdom is not something to be taken lightly. The more responsibility we have, the more we will have to answer to God.

There is a tremendous reward for faithfulness. In this passage the Lord tells us that those who have been faithful will be given even more. The master will put them in a

place of honour and serve them Himself. The master will provide them with all they need. He will serve them from his own table. What an honour it is to eat from the master's table. What a privilege it is to be honoured by God. Proverbs 11:25 says:

A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

This does not come without a price, however. Refreshing others costs much. There will be late nights. There will be much sacrifice. Will you be ready for the Lord to return? Have you been faithful? Have you been feeding the flock? Have you been caring for the wounded? What has God called and gifted you to do? Give yourself to that task. Commit yourself to serve Him with all your heart so that He will be pleased with you and your service.

For Consideration:

- Why should we not take our responsibility lightly?
- What has God called you to do? Have you been faithful in doing what He has called you to do?
- Take a moment to examine your ministry and walk with the Lord. Is there anything that you would be ashamed of if the Lord were to demand an accounting?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you the assurance of your calling and ministry.
- Thank the Lord that He promised to let us feast at His table as we faithfully serve Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to faithfully serve Him so you will not be ashamed at His return.

DIVISION

Read Luke 12:49-59

Jesus knew that His death was coming soon. Here in this section He reflects on His coming death and the things that would come to pass as a result. Jesus begins by reminding his listeners that He came to bring fire on the earth. In verse 49 He told them that He wished that this fire had already been kindled. What is Jesus saying here?

In Scripture, fire represents the judging and purifying work of God. This is why Jesus came. He came to judge, to purify and to offer the forgiveness of God. Jesus would have to lay down His life so that sin could be judged and forgiveness extended. Like a fiery judgment, the wrath of God would fall on Him as He carried our sins to the cross. He told His disciples that He wished that this fire had already been kindled. Jesus knew that His death would not be easy. He also knew what it would accomplish. It would bring new life and hope to a world living in sin and rebellion. Relationships would be restored. God's people would be united with Him and the barrier of sin would be broken. The kingdom of God would move across the earth like a

mighty fire consuming sin and evil and destroying the works of the enemy.

We are seeing the fruit of Christ's death in our day. The death of Christ has opened the door for men and women of all races and nations to come to God. The power of the cross, like a raging fire, is ravaging the kingdom of darkness. Satan is helpless against the cleansing and purifying work of that cross.

In verse 50 Jesus compared His death to a baptism. The day would come when He would be overwhelmed with grief. Like those immersed in the waters of baptism, Jesus would soon be immersed in suffering and agony. He would have to pass through deep waters for you and me. He reminded His disciples that this would not be easy. He told them that His soul was in distress. For weeks prior to offering His life on the cross, the Lord Jesus agonized over the pain and suffering He would endure.

Have you ever been distressed? There are times when we believe that if we are living in tune with the Spirit of God nothing should ever distress or disturb us. This is not the case. Like Jesus, we will sometimes be immersed in pain and agony. Jesus was filled with the Spirit and did not doubt the goodness and mercy of the Father. He knew that the Father would care for Him but He was still distressed. He knew what it was like to face emotional and spiritual struggles. Though He was filled with the Holy Spirit, there were times when His heart was deeply troubled. While His soul was distressed, He did not allow that distress to keep Him from doing what He knew was right.

There will be times in our life and ministry when we will feel overwhelmed. The thought of what are facing or will have

to face will not be pleasant. Jesus knows what it is like to feel this way. He gives us an example to follow. He shows us that in these times we are to follow the clear direction of the Lord. We are not to allow our feelings to cause us to doubt the provision and guidance of God. Though you may feel overwhelmed and distressed, step out in what you know to be the purpose and will of the Father. He will provide for you and minister to you in your time of need.

In verse 51 the Lord told His disciples that one of the results of his death would be that homes would be divided. It was true that He had come to bring peace but His death would also separate friends and family members. As much as we would like to think that all of our family will accept the Lord, the reality of the matter is that there may be some who never accept Him. There will be children brought up in Christian homes who choose to reject what they have been taught. There will be children who grieve over the lost condition of their parents. There will be brothers and sister divided because of Christ. Parents will reject their own children because these children love the Lord. Life-long friends will separate over the things of the Lord. Even husbands and wives will be divided because one has chosen to follow Christ. The time would come when those who were His would have to choose between Him and their loved ones.

Jesus reminded His listeners that His death on the cross would usher in a new age (verse 54). This would be a glorious age where the gospel would go forth like a raging fire, consuming the strongholds of the enemy. On the other hand, this new age would cause tremendous struggle for the believer.

Jesus challenged His listeners to watch the signs of the times. Take a moment to examine the condition of your society. Do you see the immorality that abounds? Do you see the influence of Satan in your society? Are people caught up in the abuse of alcohol, drugs and sex? Are families being broken? Are people in your society turning from the Word of God? Are community leaders rejecting the teaching of Scripture? How long will it be before God judges our society? Look at the spiritual signs around you. What will tomorrow bring? Will it bring the sunshine of his favour or the storm of His wrath and judgment?

Scripture speaks of many signs that will take place before the Lord Jesus comes again. One of the signs is that believers will be looked down on and falsely accused, or even thrown in prison. Believers will become the object of the enemy's attack. Jesus knew that He would be falsely accused and pay the penalty for a crime He did not commit. He warned His disciples that they too would face what He had to face. They were to make every effort to live at peace with their adversaries lest they give them opportunity to accuse them or put them in prison.

While the death of the Lord Jesus would bring salvation and deliverance for his people, at the same time it would usher in an age of persecution for the believer. Jesus warned His disciples of the dangers that were coming. There would be times of great distress. There would be times when their hearts would be overwhelmed with grief and pain. The enemy would unleash his evil against them. Their own families would rise up against them. They would need to be strong if they were going to overcome.

For Consideration:

- Is it possible for a Spirit-filled believer to be distressed? What do we learn here in this passage?
- What do we learn here about dealing with distress? How did Jesus deal with his distress? What distress are you facing? What is God's heart for you in that distress?
- Has your faith ever caused division in your family or among your friends?
- Take a moment to examine the spiritual signs in your community? What is the condition of your society? What do these things indicate to you?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you strength to face the struggles you will inevitably face as believers in this world.
- Take a moment to ask the Lord to open the eyes of your unsaved loved ones to the truth of Jesus.
- Thank the Lord for the assurance that, while we may face many difficulties and struggles in this life, we have a hope of eternity with Him.
- Thank the Lord that, despite the hardship of the cross, He willingly persevered to the end for your salvation.

UNLESS YOU REPENT

Read Luke 13:1-5

In Luke 13 some individuals approached Jesus and told Him about a situation where Pilate had mixed the blood of some Galilean with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1, NIV). We do not have a record in the Scriptures of this event. Many commentators, however, see here a reference to what happened in Acts 5:37:

After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

What we have recorded in Acts 5 is an account of a man by the name of Judas, a Galilean. Historians tell us that Judas believed that Jews should not pay taxes to Rome. He gathered a following around him and revolted against Rome and its authority. Rome retaliated by slaying a large number of his following while they were offering sacrifices. In this sense, the blood of these Galileans was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. During these events Judas

was killed and his band disbanded. It may be that the Jews were referring to this incident as they spoke with Jesus.

It is uncertain why these individuals felt compelled to share this incident with Jesus. The context would indicate, however, that the Galilean followers of Judas were despised as rebels and sinners. No doubt, they caused problems for the rest of the community because of their radical views. Rome would be very suspicious of the Jewish community because of what they saw in these Galilean followers of Judas.

Jesus knew the thoughts of those present. "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way," he asked in verse 2. It was easy for those present to say: "They got what was coming to them." It was easy to see their guilt. Jesus reminded the people that day, however, that there were many others in Galilee equally as guilty as those who suffered this cruel death at the hands of Rome. He told them, in verse 3, that unless they repented they too would perish in their sins.

These words would have been difficult for those present to understand. Those who listened to Jesus that day were no doubt upstanding citizens who paid their taxes and worshiped God each week. They did not see themselves in the same class as these rebellious followers of Judas. God, however, made no distinction. He looked at the heart and saw beyond their outward actions. God was not fooled by the externals. Those who stood before Jesus that day also needed the forgiveness of God.

Is it possible that some of the fine members of your congregation are destined for an eternity without God?

Sometimes we forget that even in the church are those who are just as lost in sin as those outside the church. Jesus sees beneath the externals. He sees the heart and soul.

Jesus spoke about another incident in verse 4. He told His listeners about eighteen individuals who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them. We have no further record of this event in the Scriptures. Those present would have understood what Jesus was speaking about. The news of the collapse of this tower would have been devastating in that day. After reminding His people about this incident, Jesus asked them if those eighteen people who perished in this tragic accident were more guilty than the rest of the people who lived in Jerusalem. Were these eighteen people killed in this tragic incident because they deserved to die more than the rest of the city of Jerusalem? The answer was quite obvious. These people were no worse than the other citizens of Jerusalem in that day. Why do some perish and other live? There is no easy answer to this question. What we need to understand, however, is that there are times when good people perish and bad people live. Sometimes the righteous struggle in life and the evil-doers prosper. We cannot pretend to understand the mind and purpose of God in these things. What we need to understand, however, is that we cannot judge according to externals. We cannot look at what happens to an individual and judge him or her on that basis.

God looks beyond the externals to the heart. Don't be fooled by what you see. Only God truly knows the heart. This passage calls us to examine our own hearts in a deeper way. It is a challenge to those who consider themselves religious and better than those who have fallen into obvious sin. God isn't fooled by our religious activities, He

looks at our heart. When God looks beyond the externals of our life what does He see?

For Consideration:

- Have you ever judged people by what you see on the outside? What does this passage teach us about judging on this basis?
- Do you ever find yourself rating sin so that if someone is guilty of a particular sin he or she is worse than someone guilty of a lesser sin? Is this acceptable? What do we learn from this passage?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to search your heart to see if it is right before Him.
- Ask the Lord to keep you from judging your brother or sister based on the externals.
- Thank the Lord that He knows the thoughts and attitudes of your heart.

46

THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE

Read Luke 13:6-9

In the last meditation Jesus spoke to the crowd about judging on the basis of the outward appearance. Jesus continued on this same theme with an illustration of a fig tree.

Jesus told a parable about a man who planted a fig tree in his garden. This location was specifically chosen because it was the ideal place for a fig tree to grow. The man returned to see how the fig tree was growing and whether it had produced any fruit but he could not find any. He was angry that the fig tree had not produced fruit so he called for the gardener and told him to cut the tree down. It was using up space in his garden by not producing fruit.

What should we understand from this parable? The Lord was speaking to the Jews in this context. He was telling them that they had benefited for three years from His ministry but had not produced any fruit. Because they had not produced fruit he would cut them off and turn His attention

to others. Through the apostles, the gospel would move from the Jews to the rest of the world. Foreigners would be grafted on to the stump that was cut down in the garden (Romans 11:17-18).

It is important to note in verses 8 and 9 that the gardener asked the master permission to work some more with the fig tree. He would work with that tree for another year giving it special attention. He would dig around it and fertilize it in the hope that it would be stimulated to produce fruit. If after that time it did not produce fruit he would cut it down.

God is very gracious. How often He has given His people a second chance. While the Jews had not accepted the Lord Jesus, He would give them another opportunity. He is not finished with them as His people. Scripture seems to indicate that He will once again move among the Jewish nation calling them to Himself. He does not easily cut off His people. He offers them every opportunity to repent.

While the first application of this passage is to the Jew, this Scripture has much to say to us as well. Let's consider briefly what this has to do with us.

First, we need to understand that the master specifically chose to plant the fig tree in the garden. He chose this location because it was the ideal location for the tree to grow. We need to understand that God has also carefully chosen the soil in which we have been planted as well. He knows what we need. He knows the trials we need to face. He knows the people we need in our lives. He knows the environment we need to become productive and fruitful for Him. There are times when we don't like what God is doing or where He has placed us but we need to be assured that He makes no mistake. He has chosen to take you through

the circumstance and trials you face for a reason. Sometimes it is only when we look back that we can fully appreciate the soil He chose for us.

Second, we need to understand that God expects us to produce fruit. It is His purpose to produce fruit in us. He has put much effort into us. He has given much time to shaping and forming us into instruments He can use. What a shame it would be if after all this effort we do not produce fruit for His glory. When you cry out to God to use you, it is His delight to answer that prayer. Not only will He make you productive for the sake of his kingdom but more importantly He will produce the fruit of His Spirit in your life. When your life is not producing this fruit you need to examine it to see what stands in the way. This must become a priority in your life. It will not do to stand before God on the Day of Judgment with nothing to show for all He has given you. If you are not fruitful, like the gardener in this parable, you need to dig deeply to find what it is that keeps you from being productive.

Notice also in this parable that when the fig tree was not producing fruit the master called for it to be uprooted because it was taking up space that could be used more profitably. In Matthew's gospel Jesus told a parable about a servant who did not use the talent his master had given him. The master commanded his servant to take away what he had because he had not been faithful with it saying:

For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him (Matthew 25:29).

There are times when the Lord will take what He has given to us away because we have not been faithful with it. On the other hand, those who have been faithful with what He has given them will receive even greater responsibility. The fig tree in this parable was going to be uprooted and that space given to something more profitable. If we want to keep what we have, we need to use it. God expects our gifts and resources to be used for His kingdom. If we do not use them the Lord may take them from us and give them to someone who will?

There is another important point to make here from this parable. Jesus emphasized the importance of being fruitful in our Christian walk but we need to be careful in how we define "fruitfulness." There are many who measure fruitfulness on the basis of how many people come to the Lord or how many accept their message. We need to keep the context of this chapter in mind. The Lord Jesus is speaking here to the Jews of His day who for three years had not accepted His message. They refused Him as the Messiah. When He went to the cross the number of people who actually accepted Him was very small indeed. Did He produce fruit? There can be no question that the Lord Jesus accomplished everything the Father intended Him to accomplish. His life and death opened the door for us to come to the Father and for our sins to be forgiven. What we need to understand is that the fruit we are to bear cannot always be counted in numbers. The people in Jesus day could not count the converts and the number of churches He planted. Nor should the fruit be seen only as external. The fruit of the Spirit also needs to be produced in us. I believe Christ is more concerned about our character and godliness than He is about how much we do for Him. We need to be careful about measuring fruit by counting numbers.

There is one final thing we need to see in this parable. The master permitted the gardener to cultivate the fig tree for one more year. While the tree was not productive, he gave it another chance. That same opportunity is given to us today. Perhaps God has been speaking to you through this passage about your need to be more fruitful for the kingdom. Maybe many years have been wasted and you have not yet made your life count for the sake of the kingdom. You are being challenged today. God is giving you this final chance to repent and allow Him to use you. This means stepping out to follow His leading and dealing with the pride and sin that stands in the way.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the importance of being fruitful in the kingdom of God? Is all fruit measured in numbers? What kind of fruit does God want to produce in our heart?
- What kind of fruit does God want you to produce for the kingdom? What gifts has He given you? Have you been using them?
- What hinders you from becoming more productive in the kingdom of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the ministry opportunities He places before you each day.
- Thank the Lord for the way He has trained and equipped you through the circumstances in life to become more fruitful.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for someone He has used to minister to you in your life.
- Have you ever complained about where God has planted you or the circumstances He has used in your life? Ask Him to forgive you for this. Thank Him that all these things are in His hand and He will use them to make you even more productive for the sake of His kingdom.

47

A DAUGHTER OF ABRAHAM SET FREE

Read Luke 13:10-17

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath when He noticed a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. We are told that this crippled woman was bent over and could not straighten up. When Jesus looked at her He knew that this woman's affliction was the result of an evil spirit. We need to understand that evil spirits are able to afflict human beings physically. They may cause an illness or disease. Notice that this spirit had bound the woman for eighteen years.

This woman was not a bad woman. Sometimes, when we think of people who are afflicted by evil spirits, we think of evil people. This is not always the case. Not all people afflicted by evil spirits are criminals or evil people. They may love the Lord and serve him with all their heart and be afflicted in some way. Satan severely afflicted Job in the Old Testament. Job was considered to be blameless and one who loved the Lord God (see Job 1:1) In the New

Testament we have the example of Paul who was “buffeted” by a “messenger of Satan” that God refused to take away.

It is important that we see in this chapter that Jesus has been speaking about not judging on the basis of outward appearance. He reminded His listeners in verses 1 to 3 that the Galileans whose blood Pilot had mixed with their sacrifices were no worse than the other people in Jerusalem in that day. Those on whom the tower of Siloam fell were no worse than those who were spared. Satan does not only attack and afflict bad people. He will attack even those who love and serve the Lord. Here in this section of Scripture, Jesus speaks very kindly of this woman. He shows deep love and compassion for her. Notice that He calls this woman a “daughter of Abraham” (verse 16). This phrase is significant. By calling her a “daughter of Abraham” Jesus shows us that she was a child of the promise. Not everyone could be addressed as a child of Abraham. The Pharisees and the Jews of that day liked to think of themselves as children of Abraham but in Matthew 3:8-9 Jesus rebuked them for this saying:

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

Jesus told the people of his day that they had no right to call themselves “children of Abraham” if they were not producing fruit worthy of repentance. It is significant, therefore, that while Jesus refused to address the Pharisees with this title, He is quite willing to speak of this woman as a daughter of Abraham. This reflects something of her character.

Though she was a “daughter of Abraham,” this woman was afflicted by one of Satan’s spirits. Notice that the Lord Jesus felt compassion for her and called her forward. The woman did not take the initiative herself. She did not ask for healing. Jesus called her and said, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity” (verse 12). After speaking these words, Jesus placed His hands on her and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

There were times, when the Lord set people free, that the evil spirits would leave screeching and throwing the individual to the ground in convulsions. This is not the case here. The evil spirit released its victim without any manifestations. The whole incident was very quiet. Many present may not have even realized what had taken place. While in the case of the apostle Paul there was a particular reason for keeping the thorn in his flesh, in this situation, the Lord wanted to release the woman from the enemy’s grip.

Notice the response of the woman when she was set free. She praised and worshiped the Lord for her deliverance. The healing of her body caused her to lift up her heart in thanksgiving and worship to God. There was no question in her mind. God had set her free.

The ruler of the synagogue became angry when he saw that Jesus had healed this woman on the Sabbath. He accused Jesus of breaking the law. Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of this ruler in making this accusation. He did not hesitate to untie his ox and lead it out to water on the Sabbath. This woman, who had been bound by Satan for eighteen years, had been untied from her chains to drink the refreshing water of freedom from affliction. If it was

acceptable to set a donkey free, how much more a child of the promise?

Realizing that Jesus had exposed their hypocrisy, the leaders were humiliated. They had nothing more to say. As for the people, however, they were thrilled at what God had done that day. They rejoiced to see this woman freed from her affliction.

We see from this passage that the enemy will not hesitate to attack and afflict even those who belong to God. Could it be that there are people in our churches held in bondage and afflicted by Satan and his angels? The Lord Jesus is willing and able to set us free. This passage encourages us to come to Jesus for victory. I believe there is more victory for us than we ever thought possible.

For Consideration:

- Is it possible for a believer to be afflicted by Satan or one of his evil spirits? What does this passage teach us?
- How do we find a balance between accepting your lot in life like Paul and seeking victory over the affliction of the enemy?
- What does this passage teach us about the victory that God wants to give us? Was Paul victorious despite the “messenger from Satan” that afflicted him? Can God give us victory and still leave a physical ailment? Have you seen examples of this?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He delights in giving us victory.
- Ask the Lord to reveal any stronghold of the enemy from which He wants to set you free.
- Thank the Lord that He is able to give you victory even if He does not heal you physically.

THE SALVATION OF THE FEW

Read Luke 13:22-30

The Lord Jesus often addressed the hypocrisy of His day. For the most part, the people and religious leaders saw themselves as being very religious. They attended the worship in the synagogues and temple. They faithfully observed the customs and the laws of Moses. To all outward appearances, everything seemed to be in place. Jesus saw deeper than the externals. He saw a people who had rejected Him and the message He brought from His father.

As the Lord Jesus moved from town to town on His way to Jerusalem, He met many people and taught them the ways of His Father. Someone in the crowd asked Jesus; “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved” (verse 23)? It is unclear what brought up this question.

Jesus answered with an illustration of a narrow door. In verse 24 He told the people that they were to make every effort to enter through the narrow door. He told them that many would try to enter and would not be able. Let’s take

a moment to consider what the Lord Jesus was saying here.

Jesus was the door. It is clear from Scriptures that He alone is the way to the Father. In John 14:6 Jesus made this clear when He said:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

As the only way to God, He is a narrow door. There is no other way. This is not an easy truth for many to swallow. They believe that it is narrow-minded to believe that Jesus is the only way? What about all the other religions and philosophies in the world? Isn't there any other way to God? Can we really believe that Jesus is the only way and that all who do not come to God through Him will really be separated from God for all eternity? Jesus makes it clear that this is exactly what He is saying. If a person does not come through Him, there is no hope of eternal life or forgiveness of sin. That is why the Lord tells us that the door is narrow. Only those who pass through Him can experience His salvation and the acceptance of the Father.

There is another important point we need to emphasize here. The New International Version tells us that we are to "make every effort" to enter through that narrow door. The idea is to fight, labour or to strain. This is what an athlete does when he uses all his strength and energy to defeat his opponent. Jesus is telling us that we are to give this sort of effort to finding and entering that narrow door.

Because this door is the only way, if we want to have life, we must give everything to find that door. Imagine you have a disease that will eventually take your life. You know

that there is a cure for your disease. You understand that finding this cure will not be easy but it will save your life. Would you not commit yourself to finding that cure no matter how much it cost or how long it took to find it? This is how it is with the salvation the Lord offers us. It costs nothing but we must seek it with all our heart. It must become our priority in life. All else must be put aside. We must be willing to deny ourselves, to leave our friends and family behind to find this salvation. The enemy will do his best to keep us from finding the cure. We must do battle with ourselves and the enemy, endeavouring with zeal to find the door that leads to salvation. Our eternal destiny hinges on finding that door.

Jesus told His listeners that many would try to enter the narrow door but they would not be able to. Again it is important that we understand what the Lord Jesus is saying. He is telling us that many will come to Jesus but not be truly saved. How can this be? Throughout the history of this world, many have claimed to be followers of Jesus. They have preached in His name and have even done miracles in His name (see Matthew 7:22). Some have written books about Christ and taught in Bible schools and seminaries. They are busy serving Jesus but have never understood what it means to be saved from their sin. They come to the door, speak about the door, pray and worship the door but they have fallen short of entering through it. They somehow feel that their efforts in the name of the Lord are sufficient. They come with all their efforts to please God. Like the Pharisees, however, they are trusting in what they do. They have never come to understand just how narrow that door is. If they want to get through it they will have to lay aside all their efforts. They cannot depend on anything they have done. All their trust and dependence must be fully on the Lord.

In verse 25, the Lord told those listening to Him that the narrow door would not always be open. The day was coming when the master of the house would close the door. All those who have not entered would knock but it would be too late. They would plead with the master to let them in but he would not open it for them. This door of salvation will not be opened forever. If you do not enter through that door before it closes, you will remain outside forever.

The door of salvation can be closed in many ways. For some it will be closed by unexpected death. For others it is closed because they have become so hard that they can no longer find it in their heart to go through it. For many more it will close by the return of the Lord Jesus to judge. When that door is closed, it will never be opened again.

There is a doctrine that says that ultimately everyone will be saved. This is not what the Lord teaches us here. He speaks of a day when men and women will plead to enter heaven but will be refused entrance. I can imagine that when Noah built his ark, there were many who mocked him and scoffed at his invitation to join him in the ark. When the rains fell and the waters rose, however, those same people must have pleaded with Noah to open the door of the ark. It was not in Noah's power to open that door. God had closed the door and no human being could open it. The people of Noah's day perished pleading for salvation but it was too late. This is why Jesus tells us that we must "make every effort" to enter the door while we still have the opportunity. The day is coming when, though we seek to enter, we will be denied. Now is the time. Don't delay. Make it your greatest priority in life to be sure of your salvation.

In that day people will be astonished that they are denied entrance. They will remember how they ate with the Lord and how He taught in the streets of their city. People will remember the times they attended evangelistic meetings and responded when the invitation was given to come to the Lord Jesus, how they were healed of their diseases, how they sat week after week in their churches and prayer meetings, and how they read the Scriptures and heard Him speaking to their hearts. Despite all these influences, they will also remember that, though they had every opportunity, they did not truly open their heart to His salvation. The day is coming when they will hear the Lord say: "I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers" (verse 27)!

What a tragic day that will be. Those who had every opportunity are now denied entrance into this wonderful salvation. Jesus tells us that, on that day, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. They would see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the presence of God but they would be rejected. They would understand that all that these prophets said was true. What grief this will bring to their hearts. Now, though they plead with Him, they will be rejected.

Jesus told the Jews that the day was coming when many would come from the east, west, north and the south to take their places in the kingdom of God. The message of the Gospel would spread throughout the earth. Those who were last would be first and those who were first would be last. In other words, the Jews who were given the first opportunity to come to the Lord had rejected Him. Now that opportunity would be given to the Gentile. The Gospel would spread to the far corners of the earth. Those who were not of Jewish ancestry would be used to bring His

kingdom to the entire world. Notice, however, that while the Jews are “last” they have not been completely forsaken. The first would be last but last does not mean lost. I expect that there will yet be a great move of God to bring the Jewish nation into His kingdom.

When asked who could be saved, Jesus told those present that only a few would be saved. Many would put off this decision for too long. Others would not make it a priority to seek this salvation with all their heart. This passage challenges us to be sure of our salvation. If you do not have the assurance of your salvation you need right now to commit yourself to seeking Him with all your heart. Don't put this matter off another minute. Make it your first priority to find and enter through that narrow door before it is closed and you are shut out forever.

For Consideration:

- Do you have the assurance of your salvation? How do you know you are a child of God?
- Have you ever faced opposition from those who say you are too narrow in your thinking about this matter of salvation? What does this passage tell us about this?
- To what extent do you have this zeal that Jesus speaks about to know and be assured of your salvation? What challenge does this passage give us to share the message of salvation with others?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to pray that the Lord would open the heart of a friend or loved one to their need of His salvation.
- Ask God to give you the assurance of your salvation.
- Take a moment to pray for the Jewish nation that was given the first chance to hear the message of salvation. Ask God to open their hearts to this message again.

REJOICING IN JERUSALEM

Read Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 13:31-35

While the Pharisees were probably the greatest enemies of the Lord Jesus during His ministry, they were not the only enemy. There were others who sought to take His life as well. Here in this section, the Pharisees came to Jesus with the news that Herod wanted to kill Him. They told Jesus that He should leave the region. On the outside, it seemed like they were interested in saving His life but we understand from their hatred of Him that this was not likely the case. The Pharisees would have been delighted to see Jesus killed. They often sought to kill Him themselves.

We are left wondering why the Pharisees would have warned Jesus about Herod's desire to kill Him. This has led some commentators to believe that the Pharisees were coming as Herod's messengers to warn Jesus to leave the region. While we cannot be sure of this, we do understand that Herod was afraid of the Lord. Mark 6 tells us that when Herod heard that Jesus was in his region, he thought he was John the Baptist whom he had beheaded. Herod was very uncomfortable with the presence of Jesus. John the Baptist had rebuked Herod because of his relationship with

his brother's wife. The presence of Jesus would certainly have been a reminder to Herod of his sin. Could it be that the conviction was so powerful that his way of dealing with it was to kill Jesus as well?

The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin so that we might turn from it to the Lord. If we resist that conviction, however, we place ourselves in dangerous territory. We have seen the lengths to which people will go to resist the conviction of the Spirit. Herod wanted to kill Jesus. People under conviction will stop coming to church. Some will become bitter and angry with the Lord and with all believers. Some will begin to criticize and find fault with the church. Some, like Jonah, will run as fast as they can from the Lord. Some stop reading Scripture because it is a constant reminder to them of their sin. In every case, they lose their joy and peace in the Lord. All this happens because they did not deal with the conviction of the Holy Spirit. They resist and run from Him instead of listening to Him and confessing their sin. Herod's way of dealing with conviction was to seek to kill the source of conviction.

Having Jesus leave the region would have pleased the Pharisees. Though they often wanted to kill Jesus they were afraid of the people. If they couldn't kill Him for fear of the people, at least they could try to cause enough fear that He would leave. Maybe this is part of their plan.

Jesus does not fall into their trap. He gave the Pharisees a message for Herod. The fact that Jesus tells them to give this message to Herod may indicate that both Herod and the Pharisees were in this plot to get rid of Jesus together.

Notice in verse 32 that Jesus speaks of Herod as a fox. The fox was a cruel and crafty animal. Jesus saw Herod

as being very cruel and deceitful, stooping to anything to get his way. He had taken his brother's wife from him and now he was trying to get rid of Jesus.

Despite Herod's plan, the Lord was not distracted from His mission. He was determined to go to Jerusalem and nothing would stop Him. Jesus did not fear for His life. He came to die. He would not be governed by the fear of man. He placed Himself in the hands of His Father and moved ahead with purpose. The enemy will often try to discourage us in our walk with God. Here he threatens Jesus in an attempt to keep Him from Jerusalem and His death on the cross.

Jesus told Herod that He was going to continue to drive out demons and heal people as He had been doing. He would do this today and tomorrow. On the third day He would reach His goal. His goal was the city of Jerusalem. Notice how Jesus told Herod that He needed to go to Jerusalem because no prophet could die outside of Jerusalem. Jesus knew His death was fast approaching. In the meantime He would keep busy doing the will of the Father.

While the enemy tried to distract the Lord by issuing death threats, Jesus set His eyes on the goal and kept moving ahead. He would not stop what He was doing. He very calmly told Herod (and Satan too, for that matter) that He was going to reach His goal no matter what they said. Jesus continued to heal and deliver people from their evil spirits. His father was leading Him to Jerusalem and that is where He was going to go.

Satan will come with the cunning and deceit of the fox. He will hide this deceit in the cloak of compassion and pity. He will come under the pretence of caring deeply. He may

even use our closest friends and loved ones. In Job's case it was his wife who told him to curse God and die (see Job 2:9). God calls us to set our mind on the goal. Don't let yourself be distracted by the cunning of the enemy.

Notice also that Jesus told Herod and the Pharisees that no prophet could die outside of Jerusalem. Jesus understood that He was going to die. Jerusalem was the place where that would take place. Notice that He called Himself a prophet. He identified with the prophets who came before Him. They too had been rejected. They too had laid down their lives. They did so in the centre of the Jewish faith, the city of Jerusalem. Like the prophets before Him, Jesus was going to lay down His life in the city of Jerusalem. His condemnation and death did not take Him by surprise. This is why He had come.

As Jesus reflects on the history of the city of Jerusalem He grieves in His heart. Listen to His cry in Luke 13:34:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!

The city that would kill Him was the object of His affection. Jesus longed for the people of Jerusalem to come to Him but they rejected Him just as they had rejected the prophets. How this grieved Him. With this desire for Jerusalem on His heart He would go to the cross sealing their fate, but it would break His heart to do so.

It breaks the heart of God to see those He created turn their backs on Him and His offer of salvation. This will not

stop Him from judging, however. He will pronounce His sentence. “Look, your house is left to you desolate,” Jesus said (Luke 13:35). You have turned your back on me and now have suffered the consequence. You will lose everything. He told them that they would not see Him again until they said: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 13:35). Jesus is referring to His return in glory to judge the earth. On that day, their judgment would be sealed. They would stand before the one they rejected and see Him in His glorified state. What fear they would feel on that day. They would recall how they had mocked and crucified Him. They would remember how they had seen His miracles and heard Him preach but they had not listened. Herod and the Pharisees had threatened Jesus with death. Jesus turned the whole threat around and reminded them that and even greater terror awaited them because they had rejected the Son of God.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about the tactic of the enemy to distract us in our calling? Have you ever experienced the enemy trying to distract you? Explain.
- Why is it dangerous to resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Do you know of an individual who is resisting the conviction of the Holy Spirit? How has this been affecting his or her spiritual walk?
- What do we learn here about the heart of the Father for those who resist His call?

- Would you be ready to suffer or even die to accomplish the will and purpose of the Father for your life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a clear sense of His calling in your life. Ask Him to help you to keep focused on that call. Ask Him to protect you from the distractions of the enemy.
- Take a moment to pray for a brother or sister who is resisting the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life. Ask God to break through that resistance.
- Do you live in a city that, like Jerusalem, has resisted the Word of the Lord? Take a moment to pray that that Lord would move in your town or city and break through the resistance.
- Thank the Lord that He resisted every temptation not to go to the cross. Thank Him that He went for you personally.

CAREFULLY WATCHED

Read Luke 14:1-6

Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees continued. Here in this passage the Lord went to eat at the home of a Pharisee. Luke tells us that Jesus was being carefully watched. The reason His enemies were watching was to find some means of accusing Him.

The enemies of our Lord were always looking for a way of finding fault with Him and accusing Him of some kind of inconsistency. We need to understand that, if they watched the Lord Jesus, they will also watch us. Satan loves to find some inconsistency in us. He loves to expose whatever he can to tarnish our reputation in the eyes of the community. This tactic of the enemy goes way back in history. The enemies of Daniel tried to find some fault with him as well. Satan also tried his best to break Job so that his testimony would be called into question.

The church in the book of Acts understood how important it was to maintain a good testimony in the community. In Acts 2:46-47 we read:

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The testimony of the early church had a powerful impact on their community. Because of their testimony, people were being added to the church. They saw the sincerity of these believers and their concern for each other and were touched.

Paul spoke to the Romans about their testimony. In Romans 2:23-24 he asks:

You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Paul tells the Romans in this verse that because of their testimony the name of the Lord was being blasphemed among the Gentiles. The unbelieving world saw through their talk. They saw them for who they were. These believers carried with them the name of the Lord Jesus but they did not honour Him in their lifestyle. The result was devastating. Unbelievers mocked the name of Jesus. They wanted nothing to do with a faith that produced this type of follower.

Satan loves to find fault with believers and publicize this to the unbelieving world. He loves to lift up our failures and show them off to these who are seeking the Lord. How important it is that we live lives that are pure and godly.

Unbelievers are watching us just like they watched Jesus. It should be understood also that it is not just the unbeliever who is watching us; it is the weaker brother or sister as well. We cannot live our lives in isolation from each other. Your life is being watched and will impact those around you either for good or for evil.

There is another detail we need to see in verse 1. Notice how Jesus was quite willing to take a meal with a Pharisee. He is often seen in the homes of the Pharisees. He does not fear to be in their presence. He associates with sinners but maintains a godly testimony. Jesus does not separate Himself from those to whom He came to minister. He came to share the message of salvation with those who were lost in their sin. He could not share that message if He was afraid of associating with them. While Jesus associated with sinners, He did not practice their ways. This is often where many fall. They believe that they have to do what the unbeliever does if they are going to reach the unbeliever. Jesus lives in perfect obedience to His father in the presence of sinners. This is not always an easy thing to do.

As Jesus was eating with the Pharisee, a man was brought in to Him who was suffering from dropsy. It appears that this was an ailment that caused a very severe swelling due to the accumulation of fluid in the body. The Pharisees watched carefully to see what Jesus would do. From the context we understand that it was the Sabbath day. Jesus knew that if He healed the man, the Pharisees would have the ammunition they wanted to accuse Him of breaking the Law. Jesus decided to speak directly to the situation.

He asked the Pharisees if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. The Pharisees remained silent. They did not want to

enter into a debate over this issue. They had certainly heard how the Lord Jesus had healed on the Sabbath and how He had often put them to shame with His arguments. Maybe they were afraid of entering a discussion they could not win.

Seeing the silence of the Pharisees, Jesus took hold of the man and healed him. When He was healed Jesus sent him away. This left Jesus alone to deal with the reaction of the Pharisees. He challenged them with an example. "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" asked Jesus in verse 5. The Pharisees understood what Jesus was saying. If their son or daughter fell in a well, none of them would leave them there until the Sabbath was over. Even if their ox fell in the well on the Sabbath, they would do their best to get it out without regard for the day.

Jesus had an important lesson to teach the Pharisees here. The law was never intended to oppress people. Legalism elevates the law above the higher principles of love, compassion and mercy. Even the Pharisees had to admit that there were times when the Law had to be broken out of compassion for those who suffered. They had nothing to say to Jesus because they saw the inconsistency in their own lives.

We have seen how the Lord was being carefully watched. The knowledge that we are being carefully watched could cause us to live in the fear of what people think about us. This too is a tactic of Satan. Satan can paralyze us with fear. We can become so focused on what others might think and maintaining a good testimony that we may not be able to advance the kingdom of God. Satan would have loved to have Jesus be so concerned about not causing a

stir that this man with dropsy would never have been healed. There are times when the enemy causes us to be so afraid of what people might think that we refuse to preach the word God calls us to preach. We can become so concerned about not giving anyone an opportunity to say anything against us that we refuse to reach out to the unbeliever just in case someone might see us with them and think we are one of them. While Jesus maintains His testimony, He does not fall into the trap of pleasing people or fearing their response. He boldly went to the Pharisee's home. He boldly healed the man with dropsy. He knew that this would not go over well with everyone but He did what He knew the Father was calling him to do.

If we focus on how people see us, we will quickly fall into the trap of the enemy. We will become so concerned with how people feel that we will not advance. If, on the other hand, we focus our attention on doing the will of the Father, people can think what they want but they will have nothing to say against us because we are living in obedience to His purpose and plan. The apostle Paul had to learn this lesson. In Galatians 1:10 he said:

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

It is clear from this, that while we are being closely watched, our focus cannot be on seeking the approval of people. We must set our eyes on pleasing God and doing His will and purpose. Jesus was not governed by what the Pharisees or anyone else thought of Him. His heart was to do the will and purpose of the Father alone. If we want to

maintain a good testimony before the world this too must be our focus.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to examine your testimony. Is there anything in your life that would give the unbeliever cause to blaspheme the Lord?
- Have you ever been held back by the fear of people? What do we learn here about how to deal with the fear of people?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to focus on doing His will in your life so that you are not hindered by what others think about you.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from the fear of people or an excessive focus on what they think of you.
- Ask the Lord to examine your heart to see if there is anything in you that would cause others to blaspheme His name. Ask Him to give you victory in that matter.

51

THE PLACE OF HONOUR

Read Luke 14:7-11

As Jesus was at the Pharisees home for a meal, He watched as the guests arrived and took the places of honour at the table before Him. This would have been quite a scene. The guests would have been dressed in their finest clothes. People noticed them and they rejoiced in this attention. Verse 7 indicates that the seats were not assigned to the guests but were taken by them as they arrived. There may have been a certain competition for the best seats in the house. Jesus saw what was unfolding and spoke to the crowd in Luke 14:8:

When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

In this illustration a guest comes to a wedding banquet and takes the best seat. He proudly sits in front of the people, quite content to be noticed. He feels important as he sits in this seat of honour. Suddenly the host comes to him accompanied by a second individual. He approaches the

man seated in the place of honour and says: "Give this man your seat." Humiliated, the first man surrenders his seat to the second and takes a place of less importance. He has been embarrassed and humiliated before the guests.

Jesus tells His listeners that when they were invited to a banquet they were to take the lowest place so that when the host came in he could honour them by offering them a place of greater honour. Instead of being humiliated before those present, they would be exalted. Jesus concluded His illustration with the statement in verse 11:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

There are many details we need to consider in this statement. Notice first the temptation to seek the place of honour. All of us have struggled with this in our lives. When you minister, have you ever felt the desire to be noticed? The temptation to be noticed is very real for all of us. Jesus challenged His listeners to recognize the danger. When we seek to be noticed, we take the glory God deserves and claim it for ourselves.

Jesus commands us to take the lowest place. What does it mean to take the lowest place? We need to be able to distinguish "taking the lowest place" from false humility. False humility delights in remaining in the lowest place. It somehow believes that there is value in being at the bottom of the pile. Sometimes those who fall prey to false humility have a need for attention. If they cannot get this attention by sitting in the seat of honour they will get it by sitting in the lowest seat. People will notice them for their humility.

False humility is often unwilling to take a higher place because it lacks confidence in God and His purposes. It is possible to sit in the lowest seat because we do not have the faith to believe God for anything more. False humility may be the result of a false understanding of who we are in Christ. Those who suffer from false humility do not believe that they could ever be a person of significance in the kingdom of God. They do not believe that God could ever use them to do a wonderful and powerful work for the kingdom. They take the lowest place because they feel that they are less worthy than someone else.

The person caught in the trap of false humility is often unable to do great things for God because he or she may have an unhealthy fear of pride. This person is unable to trust the Lord to give him or her victory over pride and keep them humble. They equate success with pride. Their fear of becoming proud is such that they refuse to move out lest they fall into the sin of pride. The enemy keeps these people from moving ahead for the Lord by this unhealthy fear. True humility is able to step out. It trusts God for bigger and better things. True humility can sit in the place of honour and still be humble.

The focus in these verses is not so much on sitting in the "lowest seat" as on being in the place the Lord has assigned to us. The person who took the place of honour in reality was sitting in someone else's seat. The host asks him to leave because this seat did not belong to him. True humility enables us to see ourselves for who we really are, no more and no less. To think more of ourselves and our ability than we should is pride. To think less is false humility. The man in this parable thought more of himself than he should have. Because of this, he took a seat that was not his to take. He needed to find his proper seat. We all

need to find our proper seat. God has a place for each of us in the kingdom.

When Jesus tells us to take the lowest seat He is calling us to be willing to let someone else have a seat of honour when that is the purpose of God. True humility enables us to serve even when we are not noticed. The person who sits in the lowest seat does not need everyone's attention. This is the seat of a servant. The Lord calls us to be servants.

It should be said, however, that if we are true servants, when the master calls us to a place of honour we must be willing to leave our humble seat to obey. This illustration is not just about sitting in the lowest seat, but also about sitting in the seat of honour. The master called one to the low seat and another to the seat of honour. Whether we are called to a place of honour or to sit in the lowest seat, we delight in doing the will of the Master. There are some who become quite comfortable in their lowest seats. Those who sit in the higher seats sometimes have more responsibility. With the place of honour comes more responsibility and obligation.

Here at this meal people clamoured to find the best seats. Jesus challenged them to seat themselves in the place the master had for them and to be content with that seat. If the master called them to another place they were not to hesitate to move. Have you been struggling for a seat of honour that was not yours to take? Stop your struggling and content yourself to sit in the place the Lord has assigned you. Have you been unwilling to take a place of honour? Cast off false humility and take your place in the Lord's leading. The best seat is the place God wants you to be.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever felt the pull to be noticed? Give an example.
- What is false humility? Why is it dangerous?
- True humility has to do with surrendering to the purpose and will of God? Do you agree with this statement? Are you demonstrating true humility in your life? What is the difference between true humility and false humility?
- Can we be humble and take a seat of honour?
- What is the role God has assigned you in the kingdom? Are you where He wants you to be?
- How can false humility keep us from doing the will of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to teach you to have his view of yourself, nothing more but nothing less.
- Has the Lord been convicting you of pride or false humility? Ask Him to give you complete victory over this so that you can become everything He wants you to become.

- Ask the Lord to give you a clear sense of your place in the kingdom of God? Ask Him to give you grace to be content in that role.

52

THE BANQUET

Read Luke 14:12-24

Jesus very often used every day events to teach spiritual lessons. In the context of this chapter, the Lord Jesus has been invited to the home of a Pharisee. In the last section, after watching how the guests sought the best seats, Jesus taught a lesson about true humility. Jesus noticed something else at this meal. He noticed that those who came were all friends and, for the most part, every one of those attending was a relatively wealthy person. Here in the room were people of clear standing in society. These people would be invited to each other's homes. In fact, it was expected that those who had been invited to the home would one day return the favour. Seeing this, Jesus rebuked the host about inviting only those who could return his invitation.

It is helpful in this context to examine what Jesus has to say in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:1-4:

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will

have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

It is clear from Matthew 6 that we have a choice to make. We can receive our reward here on this earth or we can receive our reward in heaven. Jesus was telling His host that if he invited his friends and relatives to his home, knowing that they would one day return the favour, he would lose his heavenly reward. His earthly reward would be an invitation from his friends and relatives to their home but that was all the reward he would get. The Lord reminded His host that if he wanted to receive a heavenly reward, he was to invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind. These individuals would not be able to repay him.

Let's consider several details here. Jesus is not telling us that we should never invite our friends and neighbours to our home. Jesus often dined with His disciples and friends. There is nothing wrong with being rewarded here below by our fellow human being. Jesus challenges us to open our hearts to minister to those who cannot return the favour. He challenges us to give with no intention of receiving in return. He challenges us to serve with no desire to be noticed. Would you give if you did not receive a benefit?

Some people prefer to receive a reward today than to have to wait for eternity. Jesus challenges us to a level of

ministry where we move away from the pursuit of rewards to a ministry where we are free to serve because we have the heart of God. We minister because it is our heart to minister, not because we want to receive anything for it. One of the fruit of the Spirit is the fruit of goodness. We serve because it is good to serve. We minister because it is part of our nature as believers to do so, not because we will be rewarded.

As they were eating around the table one of those present made a comment: "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God," he said (verse 15). This man was obviously thinking about how he would join his friends and loved ones around the table in heaven.

Jesus considered these words and told those present a parable. A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. When the meal was ready, he sent out his servants to invite the guests to the table. One by one they began to make excuses. One said that he had just bought a field and had to go and see it. Another said he had just bought five yoke of oxen and had to try them out. Still another said that he had just been married and couldn't come.

The servant who was sent to call people to the table, returned to his master and reported what these invited guests had said. When he heard the report, the master became angry. The meal was ready but the guests were not willing to come. He told the servant to invite the people in the alleys and the streets. He was to find the poor, the crippled and the lame and call them to the banquet. If his friends did not take the invitation seriously, then he would invite those who really needed the meal.

The servant went out as the master told him and invited the poor and needy. He soon discovered that there was still room for more. The master told him to go out into the countryside inviting more people to come. He was to invite all he could so that the house would be full. The banquet would still be served but those who had initially been invited would not be there.

What was Jesus teaching through this parable? The Jews were the first people invited to the banquet. The banquet was the salvation God offered through His Son Jesus. They all had their excuses for not accepting the offer. Jesus was telling those present that the day was coming when the invitation of God would go out beyond the Jews. God would extend His salvation to the non-Jew and to the far corners of the world. They would come in great numbers to receive the salvation He offered. We have seen this in our day as the message of the gospel is going out from one nation to another. Thousands of people every day are coming to Christ and accepting His wonderful salvation.

All the individuals of this parable had an excuse for not coming to the banquet. Many of these excuses sounded legitimate. They were busy with their business. Maybe you, too, are busy doing the business of the Lord. Maybe you are too busy to accept the Lord's invitation. The banquet is now being served. The feast will not wait. The master is calling right now.

In this chapter the Lord teaches some very important lessons. The first relates to serving the Lord with no need to be noticed. He challenges us to live our lives and minister free from the need to be rewarded here below. Jesus also teaches us that He wants to minister through us to those in need. He shares His heart for the poor, the needy and

the infirmed. Beyond these lessons, however, the Lord reminds us that His pleading will not be forever. There comes a time when His invitation will cease. Will you be part of that banquet? You will only be part of it if you accept the invitation. Don't assume that you will be there if you have never accepted His invitation. Too many people believe they can put off this decision and there will always be a place for them. We cannot afford to make that mistake. When the master's friends did not accept the invitation, their seats were given to someone else.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to examine your motives in serving the Lord. Do you expect a reward here on this earth for your service?
- To what extent is your giving and service governed by what people think?
- Who are the needy God has put in front of you? What would God have you do for them?
- Will you be part of the great banquet in heaven? How do you know?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to open your heart to the needs around you.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from the need of reward in service.
- Do you have the assurance that you will be part of the great heavenly banquet that Jesus speaks of here in this passage? If so, thank the Lord for this assurance. If not, ask the Lord to give you the assurance of your salvation.

53

COUNTING THE COST

Read Luke 14:25-35

Jesus has been working His way to Jerusalem. Very shortly He will be crucified. Large crowds followed Him on the way to this great city. It is quite likely that the crowds that followed Jesus were going to Jerusalem for the Pass-over.

Jesus had an incredible way of using ordinary circumstances to teach lessons. We saw in the last few meditations how He used a meal with the Pharisees to teach about humility. Here the Lord noticed the crowds and used the opportunity to teach a spiritual lesson on what it meant to truly follow Him.

Notice what Jesus told His disciples in verse 26:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple.

We need to consider this statement in more detail. Jesus' comment needs to be taken in the context of the rest of the Scriptures. In His ministry, Jesus taught the importance of love (see John 13:34-35; Romans 13:8; 1 John 4:7). Jesus is not commanding us to hate our children, parents and neighbours. This would clearly go against the rest of Scripture. He does, however, make it clear that those who come to Him will have to make a choice between Him and their loved ones. He told His followers in Matthew 10:35-37:

For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law-- a man's enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

When we come to the Lord and choose to live for Him, we will sometimes be rejected by our own family. Our love for the Lord Jesus needs to be stronger than our love for those who are closest to us on earth. When Jesus uses the word "hate" in this context He shows us that our relationship with Him needs to be such that we would willingly turn our backs on our family if they kept us from following Him. As Jesus hung on the cross the Father had to turn His head from Him (Matthew 27:46). This is what the Lord is calling us to do. We are to turn from anyone or anything that would keep us from the Lord God. He must be first in our lives and hearts. In Matthew 19:29 He promised to bless those who were forced to leave brother, sister, parent or child for His sake:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for

my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

We need to understand that this is not an excuse to ignore or walk away from our family obligations. Scripture is also clear that we need to provide and care for our families. Paul told Timothy that the believer who did not care for his own relatives was worse than an unbeliever. Writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:8 he said:

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Scripture teaches us that we must care for and provide for our family, but we must never allow our allegiance to our family to distract us from our higher allegiance to God.

In verse 27 the Lord reminded those present that if they wanted to follow Him they would have to be willing to take up their cross. Jesus was, at that point, heading to Jerusalem where He would have to pick up His own cross. He was telling those who walked with Him that there would be a cross for each of them to bear. There would be sacrifices to make. There would be persecution. Some of them would be rejected and mocked. All of them would have to be willing to die to themselves and their own ideas. Others would have to walk away from friends and families. Some would have to leave their places of employment. We must be willing to suffer whatever comes our way because of our commitment to the Lord. Jesus told the people that day that if they were not willing to take up their own cross they could not be His disciple. We can put no confidence in a soldier who is not willing to suffer and die for the cause He represents.

As the crowd journeyed to Jerusalem that day they followed Jesus. He was a great miracle worker and teacher. He demonstrated the power of God in His life and ministry. People were proud to be able to walk with Him. Jesus understood, however, that the commitment of this people would end with the first sign of trouble. This grieved Him. He spoke directly to this by giving them two illustrations.

The first illustration is about an individual building a tower. "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?" Jesus asked in verse 28. Before starting a project we need to be sure that we have enough money to complete it.

The second illustration is about a king preparing for battle. Jesus reminded His listeners that no king in his right mind would go to battle without first considering whether he had a chance of winning that battle. If he only had ten thousand men and the enemy had twenty thousand, the king would first consult his counsellors to see if victory was possible. If not, he would quickly send a delegation to make peace with the enemy. Why should he lose everything when he had no hope of victory?

In the same way, no one should make a commitment to the Lord Jesus without considering the cost of that commitment. If you are going to give your heart to the Lord Jesus, you need to be sure that you are willing to be faithful to that commitment. Before giving your life to follow Jesus, listen to what He says. He calls us to take up a cross. We may suffer rebuke, loss or even death for His name. We may have to leave our loved ones. We will have to die to our own interests and desires and accept what the Lord wants from us. His purpose and will must be everything. A

soldier does not always live a life of ease. If we are not willing to make this commitment we are not ready to be His disciple. Notice in verse 33 that the Lord told His listeners that they needed to be willing to give up everything. Jesus must have full control of every aspect of our life. When we come to Him we surrender all our rights and privileges. He becomes our Lord, and we become His servants.

Many people followed the Lord that day but few of them were willing to meet His conditions. Many people today are happy with going to church and living a good life. Few are ready to die to all they have and say, "Lord Jesus, I surrender my heart, will, possessions, rights, privileges and ambitions in life. Everything I am and have is yours. I will go where you want me to go and do what you want me to do. I will listen to your call and do nothing without first seeking you and your will." Jesus expects nothing less than total commitment to him. Will you come to Him under these terms?

Jesus ends this teaching by speaking about salt. He told those present that salt was good but if it has lost its saltiness it is useless. It has to be thrown out. In the same way, a follower of Jesus who is unwilling to leave everything behind is like salt that has lost its flavour. Of what use to the kingdom of God is a believer who is so caught up in his or her own interests that they cannot follow the leading of the Lord? If you want to be of use in the kingdom of God, you must be willing to surrender everything. God must be able to call on you and your resources at any moment. Will you surrender everything? Only then can you be His true disciple.

For Consideration:

- What is a disciple of Jesus according to this passage?
- What does it mean to hate our mother, father, sister or brother in this context?
- Are you willing to surrender all you have to the Lord Jesus? Is there anything you are not ready to surrender to Him?
- What sacrifices have you made for the sake of the kingdom of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you the things you have yet to surrender to Him.
- Take a moment to commit yourself afresh to the Lord and His purpose. Offer him all you have.

54

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP AND THE LOST COIN

Read Luke 15:1-7

As Jesus ministered, tax collectors and sinners gathered around to listen. Jesus welcomed them. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law struggled with the fact that Jesus would associate with such people.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law took pride in the fact that they were different from the ordinary person. They felt that they were above the rest of society. They gave themselves to studying and following the law. They kept themselves pure, not associating with sinners. Jesus, on the other hand, ate with sinners and was often in their presence.

Jesus listened to the Pharisee's objections and told them a parable. Suppose a man has a hundred sheep, and he lost one of them. Would he not leave the other ninety-nine

who were safe in the fold and look for the one that was lost and in danger? When he found it, would he not return home with it on his shoulders shouting with joy to his neighbours? (Luke 15:4-6).

Jesus reminded the Pharisees that the same principle was true in heaven. He told them that heaven exploded with joy when a lost sinner repented and came to know the Lord. The joy over this one who repented was far greater than the joy in those who did not need to repent. This is not to say that the Lord does not take joy in all His people. The repentance of a sinner, however, is a very joyous occasion in heaven.

Jesus used another illustration in verse 8:

Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? (Verse 8)

The woman in this parable could not afford to lose this money. When she found her coin, she would be thrilled. She would not be able to keep the joy to herself but would tell others about it. Again Jesus reminded those present that this is how it would be in heaven when a sinner repented.

Let me make a few general comments here. First, notice the value placed on a sinner. In these parables the Lord spoke of a sheep and ten coins. The ten coins represented about ten day's wages. The lady of the house was not a rich lady. She could not afford to lose two weeks wages. There was a real value to these coins. The same is true of the sheep. No shepherd wants to lose even one sheep. That sheep is their livelihood. We need to see the value of

these articles that were lost. These parables show us that God places a high value on the soul of a sinner.

Because these articles were highly valued, the owners were willing to do whatever it required to get them back. Notice how the shepherd went into the wild to find his sheep. We are not told how many dangers the shepherd had to face. He was willing to face these obstacles and dangers, however, for the sake of sheep. The Pharisees had accused Jesus of associating with sinners. To them He would dirty Himself by associating with them. Because of the value Jesus placed on the sinner, He was willing to risk everything to reach them. He paid the ultimate price for our salvation. He took on the burden of our sins as He went to the cross. He willingly laid down His life so that we could live.

What is the value of a soul in your eyes? Jesus laid down His life. He offered all He had. The apostles faced the same opposition. They were stoned, mocked and beaten. They had to lay down their life for the cause of the Lord and for the souls they sought to reach. They did so because they placed the same value on a soul as Jesus did. They were willing to suffer and get dirty to reach that soul. This was something the Pharisees were unwilling to do.

The joy of the Father and the angels in heaven cannot be contained when a sinner repents and comes to the Lord Jesus. Can you imagine God so bursting with joy over a repentant sinner that He shares that joy with all of heaven. Why should the heart of Almighty God burst with joy over my repentance? He cares deeply and intimately for even the least of his creation. The poor are as important as the rich. The beggar is as important as the king. God rejoices in them all and celebrates, with great joy, their restoration

to the fold. He is a celebrating and rejoicing God and you and I are the cause of that celebration.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the value God places on a sinner?
- What value do you place on a soul? What are you willing to suffer for the cause of a soul?
- Are you willing to “get dirty” to reach a soul for the Lord? What have you suffered for the cause of reaching the world with the gospel?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the value He places on your life.
- Ask the Lord to give you a greater sense of the value of a soul so that you will be willing to risk more to see those souls saved.
- Thank the Lord for His rejoicing and celebrating nature. Ask Him to make you more like Him. Ask Him to give you more of his heart.

55

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Read Luke 15:11-32

The Lord Jesus has been telling a series of parables. He has just told the parable of the lost coin and the lost sheep. In the context of this chapter, Jesus is answering the Pharisees who have been questioning His practice of eating with sinners. Through these parables, the Lord reminds His listeners of the value He places on the soul of a sinner.

In this parable, Jesus spoke of a man who had two sons. The younger of the two sons asked his father to give him his inheritance. The father agreed and the inheritance is divided between the two sons.

The younger of the two sons decided it was time for him to have his independence. He no longer wanted to remain at home and so he set out for a distant country. Not having the maturity required to be responsible with his

inheritance, the younger son lived a wild and careless life-style. It was not long before his inheritance was gone and he began to be in need. Added to this was the fact that there was a severe famine in the country. He had made no provision for the future and now feared for his life.

To provide for his needs, the younger son had to hire himself out to a citizen of that country. He got a job feeding pigs. It should be understood here that the pig was an unclean animal in the Jewish mind. The son had to do something that he would never have done in his own country. In many ways, he had reached the bottom. From verse 16 we understand that the job did not pay enough to provide him with his needs. He worked hard but he was still hungry. He would have gladly eaten the pig's food just to survive but no one offered him any so he went hungry.

This whole incident made him think, "What am I doing here in this place?" He thought about his home. He remembered the servants who worked on his father's property. He said to himself: "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death" (verse 17)! After being through the events of the last few months he began to appreciate what he had at home. His father's servants were better treated than he was treated in this foreign country.

These thoughts brought him to a point of decision in his life. He decided to return to his father and tell him what he had done. He recognized his sinful life and how he had wasted his inheritance. Notice in verse 18 that the son recognized that he had not only sinned against his father but he had also sinned against heaven. He had not honoured his earthly father in the use of his inheritance. His father had worked hard all his life to give his son this inheritance

but the son had not appreciated what the father had done for him. He was also guilty before his heavenly father of a number of sins. His life in this foreign country had been a wild life.

The young man made up his mind to return to his father and confess his sin. He understood that he was no longer worthy to be called a son. He would ask his father if he could be one of his hired servants. His mind made up, he set off without delay to see his father in the hope that he would hire him as a servant.

Meanwhile back at home, the father saw his young son coming. Even at a distance it would be obvious that the son was in very bad shape. He had made a long trip home. He would have been very thin and sickly. We do not know how long it had been since he had eaten anything. The father looked at his son and his heart was moved with compassion for him. He ran to him, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The father threw his arms around a very dirty and sinful son. The Pharisees had been accusing Jesus of associating with sinners. They kept themselves separate from people like this. They wondered why Jesus would associate with sinners if He was a man of God. Jesus was showing the Pharisees that because of His love for the sinner He was not afraid to touch them. The father did not care about getting dirty by touching the son he loved. Jesus reached out to us in our sinful condition. We come as unworthy sinners but He reaches out and touches us.

The young son felt unworthy of this attention. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son," he said (verse 21).

Despite his son's words, the father called for his servants in verses 22-23 saying:

Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

Notice the word "quick" here. There was urgency to the father's request. His son was not well. He was sick and hungry. The father did not want to waste any time. His son needed immediate attention and so he called his servants to immediate action.

It is important that we examine the articles the father provided his son. Notice that the father called for the best robe to be brought. In Zechariah 3:3-4 we read about Joshua the priest standing before God in dirty clothes:

Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you."

Notice the connection here between the dirty clothes being taken from Joshua and the forgiveness of his sin. What we see here is the father forgiving his son for his rebellion. The son stood before the father in the rags of his rebellion. The father takes those rags off him and puts his best robe on him to cover his shame. The Lord is willing to forgive us of our sins if we will come to him. He is willing to clothe us with his robe of forgiveness.

Notice that the father also put a ring on his finger. The ring was a symbol of authority. When a king placed a ring on the finger of an individual, he was giving that person authority to speak in his name. Consider an example of this in Genesis 41:41-44:

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt."

The man who wore the king's ring also carried his authority. The ring was the proof of his authority.

This son had wasted his inheritance. He had not proven to be worthy of any authority. Now, however, with this ring on his finger he is given the authority of the father. His sins are forgiven and now the father places his authority on him. Despite our failures and sins, the Lord God wants to use us to advance his kingdom. We go in His name and by His authority to trample on the forces of Satan. Why He would give us this trust is beyond our ability to understand, but what a privilege it is to be His representatives and ambassadors on this earth.

Notice also that the Father called for sandals to be brought for his son. We are told that the servants did not wear sandals. The young son came with the intention of being a servant but the father recognizes him as much more than

a servant. He was his son. As his son he was to wear sandals and walk proudly. Despite his sinful actions, the father still accepted this young man as his son. While sin may affect your fellowship with God it will not affect your position as His son or daughter.

In celebration of this wonderful event, the father called a celebration. There was great joy in the household that day. The father was unable to contain the joy he felt for the return of his son. He shares that joy with his whole household.

What a wonderful picture of what the Lord wants to do for us. We are unworthy of His attention. This son did not appreciate the richness he had with his father until he understood his sinfulness. He thought it was his right to be the son of his father and have all the privileges of that position. Now he saw things in a new light. He knew he did not deserve these blessings but his father gave them to him anyway. He would serve with a different attitude now. He would appreciate what he had and rejoice in his blessings in a brand new way.

We need to see the response of the older son to what was taking place that day. When he heard the music and dancing, he came to the house to see what was going on. He called one of the servants to ask what was happening. When the servant told him how his younger brother had come home and the father had called for a celebration, the older brother became angry. He refused to go into the house to welcome his younger brother or to join in the celebrations.

When the father went out to plead with his older son to join the festivities he replied in Luke 15:29-30:

Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

There is jealousy in the heart of this older son. "Why do you treat him this way when he has wasted your inheritance," he asked. "I have faithfully served you all this time but you have not honoured me in this way."

Hearing the response of his oldest son, the father reminded him that all these blessings were already his. He was already dressed in his fine robe. He already carried the authority of his father. He wore the sandals of a son. He ate regularly at the table of his father and enjoyed the constant blessing of his home. All these things were his already.

The oldest son did not appreciate what he had. He had failed to rejoice in his rich blessings. We are the inheritors of the Kingdom of God but at times we have not understood the riches that are ours in Christ. We wear the robe of righteousness. We have been forgiven of our sins and will live in the presence of God in heaven. We wear the ring of his authority but we rarely tap into this wonderful authority. Satan retreats at the authority God has given us. We wear the sandals of a son. As sons we have a wonderful communion with our Father. We are more than servants. Though we are unworthy of His attention, we have a special relationship with God. As sons we have His attention and blessing. We enjoy the richness of what God has for us each day. We are honoured and privileged people.

Like the oldest son however, we have often failed to understand our richness in Christ.

There is something else we need to understand from the attitude of the older son as well. While the father was more than willing to restore his younger son to himself and to his responsibilities in the household, the big obstacle was the older brother and his attitude. How often this is true in the church today as well. Maybe you know of a brother or sister who has fallen into sin and so you hesitate to ever accept them into ministry again. God is far more willing to restore His fallen servants than we are. The father's arms are open wide to receive the wanderer and restore him or her but we do not have the forgiveness God has for our brother and sister. The passage challenges us to open our arms more fully to those who return with a repentant heart. Those whom God forgives we must also forgive.

This passage reminds us of our position in Christ. If we have accepted Him and His forgiveness, we are His sons and daughters. Nothing can take that from us. Though we fall, we still belong to Him. We are also reminded of how many times we have failed to appreciate what we have in the Lord. The passage calls us to examine afresh the richness and fullness of our relationship with God. It also calls us to open our arms to receive the wanderer back. God not only wants to forgive but restore the wanderer to ministry and service for the sake of His kingdom. May we have His heart for our brothers and sisters.

For Consideration:

- What does this parable teach us about the willingness of the Lord Jesus to reach out to us in our sin and rebellion?

- Take a moment to consider what the Lord has given you. Have you fully appreciated the blessing of these things in your life? Make a list of some of these blessings.
- Have you tapped into the blessings of God and His authority in your life and ministry?
- Have you ever felt jealous over the blessing of others? How does what we have learned here help us to deal with that jealousy.
- What do we learn here about the restoration of those who have fallen into sin? Can those who have fallen into sin be restored to ministry? What does this parable teach us?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He has blessed you so abundantly.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from jealousy and bitterness in your life toward other brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Ask the Lord to give you a more accepting and compassionate heart for those who have wandered from Him.
- Take a moment to pray for a brother or sister who has fallen. Ask God to show them His love. Ask God that the church where they belong would minister in Christ's love to them. Ask God to show you

if there is anything you can do to help, and minister to, this brother or sister.

THE UNFAITHFUL MANAGER

Read Luke 16:1-18

In 1 Timothy 6:10, the apostle Paul, speaking to the young Timothy, warned him of the dangers of the love of money:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Jesus also warned His listeners about the love of money. As He often did, the Lord Jesus used an illustration to teach this lesson. He told a story of a rich man with a manager who had been accused of wasting his master's resources. The rich man called his manager to give an account of his actions.

The manager, knowing he would lose his job, wondered what he was going to do. He was not strong enough to work with his hands and he was too proud to beg for money. He thought about his situation and decided on a plan of action. He understood that he needed to do something that would give him favour with the people in the community so that when he lost his job they would take

pity on him, welcome him into their homes and provide for his need.

The manager called all his master's debtors together. He asked the first person how much he owed his master. The man told him that he owed his master eight hundred gallons of olive oil. The manager cut his bill in half and asked him to pay right away. The second man owed a thousand bushels of wheat. The manager cut this to eight hundred and also asked him to pay right away.

What was this manager really doing? First he was gaining the favour of those who owed his master. These individuals received a large discount on their bill. They would be very happy about this and bless the manager. They would remember that the manager had done them a big favour and open up their hands to him in his time of need. By offering this discount he was securing his own future.

The other thing we need to see here is that before leaving his master, the manager was able to give him a large portion of what was owed to him. By offering a discount to the debtors, his master's debtors paid immediately. This was money in the master's pocket. There was no telling how long it would have taken for these debts to be paid otherwise. The master would have been pleased with this money in his pocket. The manager would also gain the favour of his master before he left. We read in verse 8 that the master was pleased. He commended the manager because he acted shrewdly.

In verse 8, Jesus told His listeners that often the people of this world are wiser in dealing with their own kind than the people of the light. He challenged them to use their worldly wealth to gain friends so that when it is gone they will be

welcomed into eternal dwellings. This statement of Jesus needs careful consideration.

In this parable, the Lord showed how the manager used his wealth to guarantee his future. A quick look at the people of this world will show us that they are very concerned about their financial security. In the country where I live, we are constantly told how important it is to invest money now so that when we retire we will have enough to live comfortably. In business dealings, this same principle applies. Business people do “favours” for their clients so that they will keep coming back. Sometime ago my wife and I were at a car dealership looking for a car. We were thinking about a certain car but needed time to pray and talk about it in private. We explained this to the salesman. He immediately went to the accountant and returned with money for us to go to lunch and think it over. He was making friends with his money. He showed us this kindness with the idea that we would return and purchase the car. How many business deals have been made over a free meal? These meals are legitimate expenses for most businesses because through them they can “make friends” with a prospective customer or client. The whole idea is that if you “make friends” with your money these individuals will remember what you have done and return the favour. This is the way of the world.

The Lord makes it clear to us in other passages that if we do our deeds of kindness to be noticed here below we will not receive a heavenly reward. Consider the teaching of Jesus on this in Matthew 6:2-4

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men.

I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

While we are not to do our deeds in order to be seen, we can learn something from the way the people of this world live. They are quite willing to spend their money to “make friends” so that they will receive an earthly benefit. Jesus is telling us that we need to learn how to use our resources so that we can receive a heavenly benefit. In other words, we need to learn how to give to those in need and use the wealth and possessions the Lord has given us to bless others so that, in the world to come, we will receive a blessing from our Heavenly Father. Some people believe that it is wrong to desire a blessing from God for the things we do on this earth. Is there anything wrong with giving so that we can please and honour the Father in heaven? Don't we want to hear him say “well done?” We are told in Scripture to lay up treasures in heaven. There will be a reward for those who serve faithfully here below. The athlete competes to win the prize. We too need to live and serve to win the prize. While the focus of the children of this world is on this earth and its possessions, the focus of the children of the light is in heaven and storing up treasures where they cannot be destroyed.

The second lesson Jesus wanted to teach from this parable is that if we can be trusted with little responsibilities we can also be trusted with more (verse 10). If we prove to be dishonest in the little things, we will be dishonest in the larger things. Jesus tells us in verse 11 that if we have not been faithful in the handling of the riches of this world how

can we be trusted to handle spiritual things which are of much greater value. In this parable, the master wanted to fire his manager because he had not been honest in dealing with his affairs. He could not trust him with any more responsibility. Only when we have been faithful with what we have can God release us into greater responsibilities.

In verse 13, Jesus reminded His listeners that they could not serve two masters. He speaks particularly here about money. He called those who listened to Him to choose whom they would serve. We have already seen that the focus of the people of this world is often on their possessions. They live for things. They accumulate riches and live for the things that these riches can buy. Jesus challenged those who belonged to Him to hold onto their possessions lightly. He challenged them to use their possessions for the sake of the kingdom. While it is not evil to enjoy the things God has given us, they should never become our focus in life.

When the Pharisees heard this teaching, they mocked Jesus. Verse 14 tells us that they loved money. They did not like to think that money had become their god. They did not like the idea that they were to release their money for the sake of the kingdom of God. Jesus knew their thoughts. He knew how they were trapped by the love of money and possessions. They were a religious people. They ministered in the temple and taught the Word of God but they did so for earthly gain. Their hearts were not set on the expansion of the kingdom of God but on their own comfort and pleasure. They were investing in things that would perish. Unlike the manager in this parable they were living for the present. They were not making provision for their eternal future. They loved money too much to let it go. They loved money too much to invest in eternity.

Jesus reminded those present that day that “what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight” (verse 15). What are the things we value in this world? Are these things really important? We can become so focused on our comforts and how the world sees us that we lose sight of what is important to God. His heart is for the souls of men and women lost in sin. He longs to see believers who have lost their way return to the fold. While God's heart breaks for His people, believers are often focused on their reputation, comfort and financial security.

Jesus reminds us here how important it is for us to use what God has given us to invest in our eternal future. The people of this world focus on the things of this earth. They invest in their earthly future with great wisdom and cunning to advance their cause. God calls us to lift up our eyes to greater things. He challenges us to use what He has given us to invest in eternity.

For Consideration:

- How are you investing your resources? Are you investing in eternity?
- Is it wrong to serve in order to receive a reward from God?
- What is the difference between enjoying the good things God has given and allowing these things to become our focus in life?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to enable you to be wise in the use of your resources.
- Ask the Lord to help you to see how you can invest more into His kingdom.
- Thank the Lord for the blessings He has given you in this life. Be specific.
- Thank God for the greater blessing He has promised you in heaven.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

Luke 16:19-31

In the earlier part of chapter 16 the Lord spoke about the importance of using our resources for the kingdom of God. He reminded His listeners that they were investing treasures in heaven when they used their resources to minister to those in need. Here in this final section of the chapter the Lord gives an example of an individual who did not use His money in this way.

In verse 19 the Lord told the story of a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. Purple was the colour of royalty. Only the rich would wear fine line. This rich man did not have to do any manual labour so his fine linen clothes were not dirtied. He had servants to do this work for him.

Outside the gate where this rich man lived was a poor beggar named Lazarus. It is interesting to note that the poor man is called by name while we have no record of the

name of the rich man. There may be a couple of reasons for this. First, this may be an indication of how much God valued the poor beggar. To remember a name is to honour the person who bears that name. God's way of seeing people is very different from ours. Those who are important in this life do not necessarily have the same importance in the kingdom of God.

There may also be another reason why this beggar has a name. The name Lazarus literally means "whom God helps." This cannot go unnoticed. The rich man had all he needed. He did not see his need for God. By calling this poor man Lazarus, Jesus is showing us that while people turned their backs on the beggar, God noticed him and would care for him.

Notice what Jesus told the people about Lazarus. He was covered with sores. His health was poor. He was starving and was quite happy to eat whatever fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs felt compassion for the man and would lick his sores. It should be remembered that the dog was an unclean animal in the Jewish mind. It would have been quite repulsive for those present to think of this man allowing a dog to lick his sores.

There is a real contrast in this passage between the rich man and the dogs. While the dogs had enough compassion to care for Lazarus and his physical needs, there was no compassion at all in the heart of the rich man. While the rich man had all the resources necessary to take this poor man out of his misery he refused to help.

The day came when the beggar died and was taken to heaven. The idea here is that this man went to join

Abraham and the other fathers who were in the presence of the Lord. Matthew speaks of this in Matthew 8:11

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Some translations use the phrase "Abraham's bosom." The idea here is illustrated in how the Jew would recline at the table to eat. We have an example of this in John 13:23 where we read:

Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. (KJV)

This is a picture of intimacy. The poor man joined his spiritual father Abraham and reclined with him at the great banquet table of heaven. The fact that he is reclined on the bosom of Abraham shows that he was accepted and loved. He now reclines at a banquet table and has all he can eat. God was taking care of him as his name suggests.

In time, the rich man also died and was buried. His situation, however, was very different. He was in torment in hell. He looked up from his place in hell and saw Abraham with Lazarus by his side. He called out to Abraham and asked him to have pity on him. He begged him to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his burning tongue. While the fire did not consume him, he was being tormented by its flames. This is a picture of hell. It is a place of unending torment.

Abraham responded in verse 25:

Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.

Abraham also told the rich man that it was impossible for Lazarus to cross the chasm that separated them to touch the rich man's tongue with water. It is important that we understand what Abraham is saying here. There will be no second chance when you die, no way of crossing from hell to heaven. When you die your destiny is sealed and cannot be changed. No prayers will change your destiny. The chasm is such that no one will ever be able to cross it.

Seeing that it was impossible for Lazarus to cross over to relieve his torment, the rich man then begged Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house to warn his five brothers about the torment of hell. He did not want to see his brothers follow his footsteps. He did not wish this horrible torment on them.

Abraham reminded the rich man that his brothers had the Law of Moses and the words of the Prophets. They were to listen to them. The rich man did not feel that this would be enough. He understood how he had turned his back on the Law of God and the words of the Prophets. He felt that if someone came back from the dead, his brothers would take note and repent of their evil. Abraham told the rich man, however, that if his brothers did not listen to the law of God and his prophets, they would not be convinced if someone rose from the dead to speak to them. This is a very sad but true commentary on the hardness of the human heart.

The reality of the matter is that all you may ever have is the Word of God. Some people are waiting for a thunderbolt from heaven. Some want to see a sign from God or a miracle but God has given His Word and that is all they need.

The rich man was guilty of hardening his heart both to the needs of the poor and needy around him but also to the truth of God. The Pharisees of Jesus day also did the same. They saw Jesus heal the sick. They saw Him raise Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha from the dead but they still rejected Him. They remained hardened to the Word of God. Nothing would change their mind.

There are several key lessons we need to see here in this passage. We see that God cares deeply for the poor and needy. We are challenged to turn our hearts to the poor and needy in our midst. We see the hardness of the rich man's heart to Lazarus and how God judged him for this.

The reality of hell is also clearly seen in this passage. Hell is a real place and we must avoid it at all costs. Jesus makes it clear that when we die our destiny will be sealed. There is a chasm between heaven and hell that cannot be crossed no matter how much we may want to cross it.

This passage also shows us how hard the human heart can be. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that if we can hear the voice of God we are not to harden our hearts. Listen to what he tells his readers in Hebrews 3:7-8:

So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert."

May God give us grace to hear and respond to His call before it is too late.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the concern of God for the poor and needy?
- What is your attitude toward those who do not have much in this life?
- What is the warning of this passage about not listening to the Word of God?
- What was it that broke the hardness of your heart so that you were able to accept the Lord Jesus?
- What do we learn here about the finality of death? Will there be any further chances to repent after we die?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He softened your heart so that you could respond to His Word.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the needs around you.
- Take a moment to pray that the Lord would open the heart of a friend or relative who does not yet know Him.

- Thank God for his Word that reveals our need and the solution to that need in the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE DUTIFUL SERVANT

Read Luke 17:7-10

Jesus shares a variety of teachings in this section of Luke. In verses 7 to 10 He speaks about the role of a servant in the kingdom of God. As was His custom, the Lord taught in a parable.

Jesus told His listeners about a servant who faithfully ploughed his master's fields and took care of his master's sheep. This servant was busy all day in the field. When he came home after his day's work, would the master say to him: "Come along now and sit down to eat" (verse 8)? Would the master prepare his servant food to eat? This was not the responsibility of the master. The servant was being paid to serve the master. The master did not serve the servant. When the servant came home from the field, his master would call him to prepare his supper and wait on him. Only after the master had eaten could the servant eat.

Would the master feel he owed the servant anything because he had served him all day and prepared his meals?

No, the servant was simply doing his duty. He was not doing the master any special favours. He owed this service to the master. If he did not serve his master, he would be punished. Jesus went on to tell his listeners that this is how we need to see our relationship with God. When we have done all we can possibly do, we have merely done our duty as His servants.

There are several things we need to understand from this passage. First, this passage is not intended to say that God does not appreciate our service and faithfulness to Him. There are many other passages in Scripture that remind us that God does notice and reward our faithfulness. In Matthew 25:21 Jesus told another parable about how a master rewarded his servant for his faithfulness:

His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

Scripture speaks often about the rewards awaiting those who faithfully serve the Lord Jesus. God is even now preparing a place for us in heaven. We will one day sit down at His table and eat the banquet He is preparing for all who will faithfully honour Him. Jesus uses an example of an earthly master to show how He was not obligated to serve His servants. Jesus example, however, showed another way. As a master, He served. He washed His disciple's feet and cared for them. While God has no obligation to His servants, He still reaches out to them in tenderness and loving concern.

Second, we need to see an example to follow in this passage. The Pharisees, who were likely among those who

were listening to the teaching of the Lord Jesus that day, were an example of the type of attitude that Jesus was trying to condemn. The Pharisees lifted themselves up above others. They felt that because they obeyed the Law of God they were doing God a favour. They believed that God was in their debt because they had obeyed Him and honoured His law. How easy it is for us to fall into this trap. Maybe you have done much for the kingdom of God so you believe that God owes you something. I have heard people say to me that, because they had to go through so much suffering, God owed them a blessing. Do you think that because you have left everything to serve Him that God owes you a favour? Do you think that because you have preached the gospel faithfully for so many years that God is obliged to treat you better than someone else? Jesus condemns this attitude in this parable.

The Lord Jesus reminds us here of our duty to Him and his kingdom. When we have given all, we have only done what God requires. One of the requirements for those who accept the Lord Jesus is that they take up their cross to follow Him (Matthew 16:24). This may mean losing friends and loved ones. It may mean laying down our lives. All who follow Christ must be willing to make these sacrifices.

We do not congratulate ourselves because we have done just what was required. All too many people pat themselves on the back because they have been obedient. Somehow we have lowered the standard. We feel that those who give everything to the Lord are very special people. We feel that they have gone beyond the call of duty by laying everything on the altar. We look at missionaries who have left everything to serve the Lord and feel that they are in a special class. We lift up our pastors as if they have done more than God has required of them. The reality of

the matter is that they are only being obedient. God expects us all to do the same. It may not be in the same calling but we are all called to give everything we have. We are all called to surrender our resources, our wills, our hearts and our minds for the cause of the Lord Jesus. Anything less than this is less than our basic duty and obligation to God. You do not congratulate a worker for doing much less than is required of him.

There is another thing we need to mention in this context. "Duty" can be a very impersonal word. We do God no honour if we serve Him out of obligation and duty if that duty is not accompanied by love. The apostle Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 13:3:

If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

You can give all that you have and even offer your body to be burned in the flames out of duty and faithfulness to the Lord but if this is not done in love, it is of no value in the eyes of the Lord. Jesus condemned the people of His day because while they honoured Him with their lips, their heart was far from Him. He said in Matthew 15:8:

These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

It is important that love for God be part of our service. We need to serve and offer ourselves to Him out of love and devotion. Jesus is not teaching a heartless legalism in this passage. He is calling us to give our heart, soul and body out of love and devotion to Him.

When David spoke his last words to his son Solomon this is what he told him in 1 Chronicles 28:9:

And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him *with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind*, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts” (emphasis mine).

The Lord Jesus expects nothing less from us today. Surrender is a delight to those who offer themselves as God requires. They give freely what they have with joy, love and wholehearted devotion. They do so, however, with a sense of humility, realizing that when they have given everything they have only done their basic duty.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the attitude we need to have in service?
- What does this passage teach us about our duty to God?
- Have you given all to the Lord? What are you holding back?
- Have you ever felt that God owed you a favour because you have done so much for Him? What does this passage have to say about this mentality?
- Are you experiencing delight and joy in your service of the Lord or do you serve Him out of duty?

Why is love and joy an important ingredient in service for the Lord? How do you feel when someone does something for you out of duty but has no love?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to surrender your life afresh to the Lord.
- Ask the Lord to give you greater humility as you serve Him.
- Ask the Lord to increase your delight and joy in service.
- Thank the Lord that He so willingly gave all He had to you.

59

THE TEN LEPERS

Read Luke 17:11-19

Jesus continued on His way to Jerusalem. He was traveling along the border of Samara and Galilee when ten men with leprosy came out to meet Him. They stood at a distance and called out to Jesus to have mercy on them. According to the Law of Moses, a leper was not permitted to come near a clean person. We read in Leviticus 13:45-46:

The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp.

The leper was separated from the rest of society. It is for this reason that these lepers stood a certain distance from Jesus and cried out to Him to have pity on them. They do not tell Him what to do, they simply ask for compassion.

Jesus did not approach the lepers. He shouted back to them, "Go, show yourselves to the priests" (verse 14). This would have been a necessary step in that culture for the lepers to be declared clean and return to society again. Going to the priest would have required a step of faith on the part of the lepers. We are told that it was only as they obeyed that they were cleansed. It is important for us to see the point here. There are times when the Lord calls us to step out in faith before we see anything happen. If we do not act on the knowledge we have, we may never receive any more. God very often does not give us the complete picture all at once. Sometimes He only gives us the first step. If we are willing to take that first step, He will show us the second.

The lepers were healed on the way to see the priest. One of these ten lepers, seeing that He was healed, came back to the Lord praising God in a loud voice. When He saw Jesus, he fell at His feet and thanked Him. Luke particularly mentions that this man was a Samaritan.

Jesus saw him and asked him about the others. "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" Jesus asks (verse 17). Notice that Jesus knew that all ten of them were healed. This one man alone, however, returned to thank Him for his healing. Jesus told the man to get up and go because his faith had made him well.

There is an interesting point we need to see here. When the ten lepers called out to Jesus He told them to go to the priest, who would examine them and declare them pure. They would offer sacrifices and be able to return to their community to live as a normal person. Jesus made it clear that all ten of the lepers were healed. We can assume that the other nine continued on their way to the priest and

were ultimately declared pure. This one Samaritan, however, returned to Jesus. Did he disobey the Lord by not going to the priest? Could it be that this man saw Jesus as a priest? Could it be that he was saying: "If ever there was a priest it is Jesus. If ever there was a man who could declare me pure and clean it is Him." This is exactly what Jesus did. He told the man to get up. His faith had made him well. In saying this Jesus was telling him that He was whole and clean.

There are several points we need to make here. First we need to see the compassion of the Lord Jesus toward this Samaritan leper. Jesus cared for those the rest of the world cast aside. He loved the leper. He had compassion on the Samaritan. Others would have rejected him but Jesus openly received him.

Of the ten who were healed, this one man returned to thank the Lord. The others returned to their own priest, their traditions, rituals and their old way of life. Nine of these individuals walked away from the Lord. We have no record of them ever coming back to Him. How often has this happened in our day? Men and women are touched and healed by the Lord God and they walk away from Him and return to their old way of life. One man, however, refused to do this. He returned to Jesus to thank Him and to honour Him. His life was radically changed not only on the outside but also on the inside.

Maybe as you look back at your life you can see how the Lord has ministered to you. Maybe way back you made a decision for the Lord Jesus but you have, like these nine lepers, since walked away from Him. It is not too late for you to realise what you have done. It is not too late for you to come back to Him and fall down at His feet. Don't walk

away any longer. Turn around, run back to Him and bow down before Him in humble submission and worship.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the compassion and love of the Lord for the outcast?
- Have you met individuals who were touched by the Lord but walked away from Him? What keeps them from coming back to the Lord?
- Have you ever found yourself taking what God has done for you for granted? What do you have to be thankful to the Lord for today?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the blessings He has given you.
- Do you know someone who has walked away from the Lord like these nine lepers? Take a moment to pray that God would convict them of their sin and bring them back.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have taken His blessings for granted and not been as thankful as you needed to be.

THE COMING KINGDOM

Luke 17:20-37

One of the central hopes of the Jewish faith was the coming of the Messiah to set up His physical kingdom. They saw this kingdom as an earthly kingdom with the Messiah as their king and ruler. On one particular occasion, the Pharisees asked the Lord about the kingdom of God and when it was going to come.

In answering this question, the Lord told the Pharisees that the kingdom of God would not come with signs that they could observe. The day is coming when the Lord Jesus will return. Jesus told us that as the day for his return approached there would be signs and wonders on the earth and in the sky (see Matthew 24). Jesus reminded the Pharisees, however, that people would not be able to say this about the coming of the kingdom of God (verse 21). Jesus makes a clear distinction between the coming of the Kingdom of God and His personal return to rule over that Kingdom.

What is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is where men and women bow their hearts in surrender to the purpose and lordship of Jesus Christ. The territory of this kingdom is not earthly land or countries but the hearts of men and women. Jesus reigns as Lord in hearts and lives. This kingdom is not limited to earthly political boundaries. It is not limited to language or cultural barriers. Man and women from every nation are bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus. They are surrendering to Him in their hearts as their only King and Lord. Their allegiance to Him is greater than their allegiance to any earthly king or government. They lay down their life for Him and they have committed themselves to serving and honouring Him. His kingdom is already here. It is expanding all over the world as men and women surrender to Him and His lordship in their lives.

While His kingdom is already here, Jesus told His listeners in verse 23 that one day He would return to physically reign over that kingdom. Before His return there would be many false prophets and false messiahs. He told them that, as the days of His return approached, people would come to them and say, "He is here." Jesus warned His followers not to be deceived by these claims. They were not to go running after these false messiahs. When He returned physically to establish His reign, there would be clear signs. These signs would be from one end of the earth to the other. He would announce His coming in a global way. Jesus would not come quietly. There would be powerful signs in the sky. He would come with flashes of lightening. The sky would light up from one end of the earth to the other. Everyone will know when the Lord returns. No one will have to tell you He is here. He will make it abundantly clear.

Another sign of the coming physical return of the Lord would be that his followers will suffer and be rejected by their generation (verse 25). Jesus told His people that even as it was in the days of Noah, so it would be in the days before the Lord returns. In the days of Noah, people were not concerned about the things of the Lord. They were too busy eating, drinking, marrying and giving their children to be married. They were living their lives with no concern about judgment. The fact that they were eating and drinking and marrying indicates that life was quite comfortable and easy. In Noah's day people were quite content and happy with what they had. They did not see their need of God or His ways. Suddenly the flood came and destroyed them.

The same thing happened in the days of Lot. People were living their lives with no concern for God or His Word. They were content to eat, drink, buy, sell, plant and build. These were days of prosperity and blessing. People saw no need of the Lord. They had all they wanted. In a single day, fire and sulphur rained down on Sodom. The city was destroyed. All they had worked for was taken from them. They perished in an instant.

Jesus was telling His disciples that the days prior to His return would be days when people would not see their need of God. They would have no use for spiritual matters and reject those who lived for the Lord.

When the Lord returns, He will come to judge. The Pharisees were expecting the Messiah to set up an earthly kingdom and set them free from their political oppressors. They looked forward with great delight to His coming. They missed his first coming because it did not look the way they

thought it should. Even at His second coming they would be taken by surprise.

Jesus gives an illustration in verse 31 of a person on the roof of their house when the Lord returned. Another was in the field. Jesus told His people that when He returned they were not to pack their belongings. They were not to run home from the field and gather their possessions to take with them. These things would be of no use to them. Lot's wife looked longingly back to Sodom when the judgment of God fell. She perished because her heart was not devoted to her Lord. She loved her possessions too much.

What a challenge this passage is to us. God has blessed us with many things but we cannot allow these things to become so important to us that we cannot let them go. All we have will be taken from us in an instant. In the days prior to the Lord's return, men and women will be caught up in the things of this world. Material possessions will take hold of them and keep them from God. They will mock and scoff those who are willing to give all for His kingdom. In the end, however, they will lose everything.

When the Lord returns, families will be divided. Two people will be in a bed but only one will be taken to be with the Lord. The other would suffer His judgment. Though they were close in this world, they will be separated eternally from each other. Two women will be working together grinding grain but only one will be taken to be with the Lord. The Pharisees asked Jesus about the Kingdom of God. Jesus told them that this Kingdom was in the hearts and lives of those who loved Him. While the individuals described here were associated with each other, they belonged to different kingdoms.

After listening to the teaching of Jesus on the kingdom, the disciples asked Him where all these things were going to take place. Jesus told them that where the dead body was, the vultures would gather. In other words, just like the rotting carcasses attracted the vultures, so the rottenness of sin and evil on the earth would bring the judgment of God and usher in the physical kingdom of God.

In the meantime, the Kingdom of God is already in our midst. Men, women, boys and girls are already being added to this kingdom on a daily basis as they surrender to Christ's lordship and accept His offer of salvation. In God's time, the Lord will return, set up His physical kingdom and reign over those who belong to Him and His kingdom. Are you part of his kingdom today? Have you submitted to His reign in your life? If so you can look forward with great delight to His return.

For Consideration:

- Is the kingdom of God within your life? What is the evidence of this?
- Are you willing to surrender all you have to the Lord as a subject of His kingdom?
- What encouragement do you find in the fact that the Kingdom of God is already here.
- What evidences is there that the physical return of the Lord Jesus is drawing near?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your heart in a new way to the reality of the Kingdom of God in your life. Ask Him to help you to surrender more fully to His present reign in your heart.
- Ask the Lord to reach out to your friends, neighbours and loved ones to draw them into his Kingdom.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to place all you have in His hands to use as He sees fit. Ask Him to protect you from loving this world and the things of this world.
- Take a moment to praise the Lord for the wonderful promise that He will return to physically reign over His kingdom.

61

THE UNJUST JUDGE

Read Luke 18:1-8

In chapter 17 of the Gospel of Luke, the Lord told His disciples that as the end approached, there would be a turning away from God and His ways. Those who loved the Lord God would be mocked and ridiculed. Life for the people of God would become difficult. He encouraged them not to lose hope because He would bring justice.

Jesus told the story of a widow who was oppressed. She was treated unfairly by individuals in her community and came to the judge to find justice. The judge did not fear God, nor did he care about people. The poor widow who came to this judge had no money to pay for his services. The judge did not care about her problems. There was nothing in this widow's case that would profit him so he told her to go away.

The widow would not give up. She kept coming back to him and asking for justice. Each time the judge told her to go away. The widow was not discouraged, and she persisted in her request. Eventually, the judge realised that

this woman would give him no rest until he gave her what she asked. He said to himself in Luke 18:4-5:

Even though I don't fear God or care about men,
yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will
see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventu-
ally wear me out with her coming!

The widow got the justice she sought, not because the judge was an honourable man but because she kept bothering him.

Jesus told His listeners that if this wicked judge brought justice to the widow, how much more would God, who is perfect, good and holy, hear the cries of His children calling out day and night. This evil judge cared nothing about the widow yet he gave her justice. We are the children of God. He loves us dearly. Unlike the wicked judge, God's heart is touched and moved by our condition.

Will God continue to put us off when we cry out to Him for justice? Will He respond when we ask Him for those things we need in our service for Him? At times we may feel that God is like this judge. We may feel that we have to beg and plead with Him for favour while He holds His blessings with a tight fist. We feel that we dare not come to him to ask him for anything because we are unworthy of his blessings. This widow gives us an example. She had nothing to offer the judge for his services but she came anyway.

God delights in ministering to His servants. He offered His Son to save us from our sins. Listen to what the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:32:

He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all--how will he not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?

The Lord has invested much into our lives. He has adopted us as His children and cares deeply for us and our needs. If your sinful earthly parents cared for you and provided for your every need as a child, how much more will God care and provide for you.

We often have a higher opinion of our earthly parents and officials than we have of God. While we can trust our earthly parents, we fail to trust God. We trust our employer to provide us with our salary but we cannot trust God to provide our basic needs. We trust our schools and our teachers to train us and equip us for life but we cannot trust the Holy Spirit to train us and lead us. How this must grieve our Heavenly Father.

Jesus promised that justice would come for His people. He promised that God would not turn a blind eye to the needs of His children. He would hear and answer their cries for help. Jesus ended His parable with a very important question: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth" (verse 8)? God promises to care for us and our need. The problem, however, is that we very often do not trust and believe Him. We don't have the faith to believe that He will do what He says. So many believers cannot trust the Lord to provide and care for them. We are hindered in our service and ministry because we do not have the faith to step out and trust what He says. We pull back and fall short of seeing His full provision. Do we really believe what Jesus says here? Do we believe that He will care for us and provide for all our need? If we do, it will be evident in our walk and ministry. When Jesus returns will

He find us believing His promises and stepping out in faithful obedience? May God give us grace to do so.

For Consideration:

- How does this section challenge us in regards to our view of God?
- Have you ever doubted God and His provision for you? How does this doubt dishonour Him and His Word?
- Does your Christian life and ministry reflect your confidence in God and His provision?
- Have you ever failed to step out because you lacked confidence in the Lord's provision and guidance? What is the challenge for you here in this section?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to understand His provision and care in a deeper way.
- Ask the Lord to give you the courage to step out in confidence in His provision and justice.
- Thank the Lord for how much he delights in caring for us as His children.

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

Read Luke 18:9-14

Over the last few meditations we have examined what Jesus had to say to the religious leaders who looked down on others. The brother of the prodigal son felt he deserved more honour than the son who had wasted his resources. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man looked down on poor Lazarus all his life but was judged for it in the end. In the parable of the dutiful servant, the Lord reminded His listeners that when we have done everything we have only done our duty and have no reason to boast. The Pharisees felt they should be honoured because they faithfully did their duty. Jesus had much to say to those who felt they were better than others because they practiced their faith with greater zeal.

How easy it is to compare ourselves to others. Very often we measure our spirituality in this way. If we are more faithful in church attendance than others in the church, we feel more spiritual than them. If we have a one hour quiet time

with the Lord we feel that we are more spiritual than those who only spend half an hour. If we are full time Christian workers we feel that we are at a higher level than someone who works in a secular job. Jesus reminds us in this passage that we cannot measure our spirituality by these externals.

Jesus told a story about two men who went to the temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee and the second was a tax collector. The Pharisees were known for their careful observation of God's external requirements. The tax collector, on the other hand, was hated by the people. Very often tax collectors were dishonest in their dealings and collected more money than was required, filling their pockets at the expense of those from whom they collected. The two men in this story were very different.

As the Pharisee prayed, he thanked God that he was not like the others who had come that day. He looked at the tax collector and thanked God that he was not like him. He told God how he had never been a robber, an evil-doer or an adulterer. He reminded Him that he fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of all he had. He looked at all the things he did and believed that somehow he was a better man than the tax collector.

The tax collector stood some distance off and, in his unworthiness, did not dare to look upward to heaven. Instead he humbly cried out to God to have mercy on him because he knew he was a sinner. He had nothing to offer the Lord as he came. He knew that he had lived a terrible life. He knew he had robbed and cheated his brothers and sisters. He had not shown mercy and compassion to those in need. The tax collector saw himself as unworthy of

entering God's presence. He came to repent and to seek the forgiveness of God for his sinful lifestyle.

When Jesus finished His story He told those present that the tax collector went home justified before God but the Pharisee did not. That is to say, this tax collector went home in a right relationship with God while the Pharisee, though very religious, was very far from God. God heard the prayer of the tax collector and honoured him but he refused to listen to the prayer of the Pharisee. Those who exalt themselves would be humbled but those who humble themselves would be exalted.

In the story of the prodigal son, the older brother felt he should have received a greater reward because he had stayed with his father and served him faithfully. We think that because we have done much for God He owes us special favours. It grieves us to think that the person next to us who has wasted most of his or her life could be as close to God as we are.

Maybe you have not been very faithful to the Lord. Maybe your prayer life has suffered over the last year. Perhaps you wish you could have read your Bible or served Him more diligently. Does God reject you because of this? Certainly not! His love for you remains the same. He does not love you more if you serve Him more. He does not love you less if you serve Him less. It is true that there are rewards for faithful service but faithfulness is not necessarily an indication of the condition of the heart. You can be very faithful in service and be far from God.

The Pharisee in this story seemed to live for spiritual disciplines and achievements but he did not live for the Lord. It is very easy for us to fall into this trap. Sometimes our

faith consists only of a series of "do's and don'ts." We live to serve the Lord and accomplish great things for Him. We live by all kinds of rules and regulations. We have our correct theology but we do not have a close relationship with God. Our focus becomes service and doctrine rather than God and a personal relationship with Him.

God is not fooled by the exterior. He looks at the heart. In this story, the Pharisees' heart was far from God. It was a heart that was puffed up with pride and arrogance. He boasted of all he did for God. The tax collector, on the other hand, was broken before his Lord. He came with a repentant heart seeking God. The Pharisee did not see his need of God. The tax collector did. God opened His heart to the tax collector but resisted the Pharisee.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever measured your relationship with God by comparing yourself with others? What does this passage teach us?
- What is the true measure of spirituality?
- Have you ever boasted of your spiritual achievements? What does this passage teach us about this?
- What is the difference between serving God and knowing God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord for forgive you for the times you have judged your brother or sister like the Pharisee in this passage.
- Thank the Lord that His love for us remains constant. Thank Him that He loves us no matter where we are spiritually.
- Ask the Lord to help you to set your heart on Him and not on what you can do for Him.

THE QUESTION OF DIVORCE

Read Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18

In this next section we will deal with the teachings of Jesus related to divorce. In Matthew's account, Jesus had just left the region of Galilee and was now in the area east of the Jordan River. Large crowds were following Him as usual. (Matthew 19:2, Mark 10:1). Jesus healed the sick and spent time teaching the crowd. There were Pharisees present in the crowd that day.

As always, the Pharisees were seeking a means to trap Jesus. They wanted nothing more than to find some fault with Him and prove that He was a false teacher. On this occasion, some Pharisees came to Jesus and asked Him a question about divorce. "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any reason?" they asked (Matthew 19:3).

There were two schools of thought among the Jewish leadership of the day regarding divorce. In Deuteronomy 24:1 Moses taught that a man could write a certificate of divorce for a woman in whom he found "something indecent."

The School of Shammai taught that the expression “something indecent” referred only to adultery. The school of Hillel, on the other hand, taught that the expression referred to anything the husband found offensive in his wife. This opened the door for a man to divorce his wife for any reason. This issue was fiercely debated among the Jews of Jesus’ day. When the Pharisees brought this question to Jesus, they were calling on Him to take a side in this heated debate.

Jesus threw the question back at them. In Mark 10:3 he asked, “What did Moses command you?” The Pharisees responded by stating that “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away” (Mark 10:4).

Jesus then explained the reason Moses permitted divorce. He reminded them that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of the human heart. This was, however, not the real desire of God for marriage. We need to consider this statement in greater detail. God’s plan is that marriage last forever. This was His design from the beginning. Due to the hardness of people’s hearts, however, there were times when the greater good could only be achieved by divorce.

We understand here that the law of God was intended for the good of His people. There are times when the breaking of the law is for the greater good. To illustrate this I often use the example of a man taking his dying friend to the hospital. He knows that if he does not get his friend to the hospital on time, he could die. As he drives his friend to the hospital he sees the speed limit signs on the road. Not wanting to break the law by speeding in his vehicle, he drives the speed limit all the way to the hospital, knowing that his friend could die because he did not get to the

hospital on time. Would the greater good not be to care for friend and ignore the law of the land? Would it not be better to break the law of the land to save the life of his dying friend? The law itself allows for this when it permits police and emergency vehicles to exceed the speed limit in an emergency without penalty. Jesus taught that it was acceptable to break the law of the Sabbath if doing so showed compassion to someone in need. It was acceptable to rescue a sheep from a pit on the Sabbath or to take an ox to a watering hole on the Sabbath. The law was not intended to destroy people but to guide and help them.

Legalism places law before compassion, mercy and justice. Legalism will think nothing of harming a person for the sake of obedience. We have all seen churches crush their members in the name of the Law of God. Jesus challenged this attitude. Moses gave room for compassion. The law was a guideline but it was never intended to replace compassion and mercy. This is why Moses permitted divorce.

Jesus reminded the Pharisees of the original intent of God in the law regarding marriage. God created male and female from the beginning. It was His intention that they join together and become one flesh. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that what God joined together no one should separate. He made it clear that if a man or woman divorced their partner *in order to marry someone else*, they were guilty of committing adultery (Matthew 19:9). The purpose of God is that a husband and wife work through their difficulties and be together for life.

Notice the response of the disciples. Listening to this discussion, they approached Jesus and said: "Then it is better not to marry!" (Matthew 19:11). They certainly understood what Jesus was saying. They were struck with the

seriousness of marriage and the challenge of working out the problems. They wondered if it would not be better for a person never to be married rather than to deal with the issues that would come up by taking a partner. Jesus told His disciples, however, that the ability to live as a single person was not given to everyone.

Jesus taught His disciples that some people could live without being married. He called these individuals "eunuchs." According to Jesus, there were three types of eunuchs. The first are those who were born eunuchs. These individuals were born either with a physical, mental or emotional handicap stripped them of all sexual desire or kept them from sexual activity.

The second type of eunuch was one who had been made a eunuch by man. In those days, masters would sometimes castrate servants who were in charge over the king's harem. These men could be trusted because they were physically incapable of any sexual activity. Others in this second group became eunuchs as a result of the cruel torture of men. These individuals were abused physically or emotionally to a point where they became incapable of entering into any kind of intimate or sexual relationship.

There is one final type of eunuch. This, according to Jesus, is the eunuch who has voluntarily given himself to the work of God. In order to advance the kingdom of God, this person has decided that he or she will live as a single person. They are able to put aside their sexual desires and their need of a companion for the sake of the kingdom of God. Paul was such a man. Jesus chose not to marry but to serve the cause of the Kingdom of God. This is a gift given to some but not to all. Jesus ends this teaching by saying, "the one who can accept this should accept it" (Matthew

19:12). In other words, if you have the gift from God to remain single in order to devote yourself to the work of the kingdom, you should use the gift and remain single. On the other hand, if you do not have this gift, you should seek a marriage partner.

The teaching of the Lord is that when you choose a marriage partner you need to commit yourself to that partner for life. This is the purpose of God for marriage. Jesus makes this purpose clear but allows for compassion due to the hardness and inflexibility of the sinful human heart. While He allows divorce in the case of "unfaithfulness," it is His will for married believers to make every effort to work out their problems. While restoration is not always possible and certainly never easy, God will give us strength as we trust Him and His purposes for our marriages.

Having said this, we need to understand that sometimes a partner will resist the Lord's purpose and remain in their sinful ways. This can become a heavy burden for a partner and family to bear. In fact in some cases the life and well-being of the other partner and children are at stake. We would do well to follow the Lord's teaching on divorce but also remember the higher call of compassion and mercy. If we would, without question, break the law of the Sabbath to heal a man or take our sheep out of a pit, surely the release of a partner from the unholy pit of an abusive and violent marriage should also be considered on the basis of the compassion that Moses taught.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the role of compassion in the practice of the law of God?
- What is legalism? What is the opposite of legalism? How do we find a balance?
- What is the gift of celibacy? How do you know if you have this gift? Have you ever met someone who had this particular gift?
- What does this passage teach us about divorce? Is divorce ever acceptable?

For Prayer:

- If you are married take a moment to pray that the Lord would help you and your spouse to be an encouragement to each other. Ask Him to help you to find a resolution to the issues that divide you as a couple.
- Do you have the gift of celibacy? Ask the Lord to protect you and keep you so that you can give yourself fully to Him and His service.
- Do you know of a couple who is struggling in their marriage? Take a moment to pray that the Lord would minister to them and bring harmony to their marriage.
- Ask God to give you greater compassion. Ask Him to keep you from a legalism that has no compassion.

JESUS BLESSES THE LITTLE CHILDREN

Read Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17

As Jesus ministered, many people crowded around Him with their problems and difficulties. In this passage parents brought their children to Jesus to have Him place His hands on them and pray for them. They were seeking His blessing on their children's lives.

When the disciples saw these parents coming with their children they rebuked them. We are not specifically told why the disciples responded in this way. It could be because they felt that Jesus was already so busy with the other needs around them. There were people who were sick and bound by evil spirits. Others were in need of salvation. Could it be that the disciples felt that the needs of these children were not big enough to take the Lord's time?

When Jesus heard what had happened, Mark tells us that He was indignant. The word indignant means to be displeased or even offended. He was offended by the fact that

the disciples had turned the children away. When the disciples rejected these little children, they hurt the Lord Jesus.

Jesus used this situation to teach His disciples some very important lessons. The first lesson was that they needed to be very careful how they treated those He loved. They were not to turn their backs on these little children or reject them. To do so was to offend the one who created and loved them.

The second lesson the Lord taught His disciples had to do with the nature of those to whom the kingdom of God belonged. Jesus told His disciples that the kingdom of God belonged to “such as these.” The phrase “such as these,” is important. He is not saying that all children belong to the kingdom of God or that all children go to heaven. He is telling us, however, that heaven belongs to people who have a childlike attitude. We need to consider this in greater detail.

There are many childlike characteristics we should demonstrate as believers. Children have a humility that we, as adults, very often do not have. Young children cannot care for themselves. They are totally dependent on their parents to provide and care for them. They do not have strength or experience in life. They have to rely on their parent’s wisdom and experience. This is where the Lord wants us all to be with Him. He wants us to be in that place of absolute dependence. We often trust in our own strength. God calls us to rely on Him like little a little child relies on his or her parents. The kingdom of God is made up of those who, like these children, rely totally and fully on their heavenly Father for everything.

Young children do not worry about the future because they trust their parents to take care of them. How often have I worried about where the money was going to come from to pay my bills? I have questioned the direction and leading of the Lord. We need to get back to this place of simple childlike trust in our heavenly Father. Jesus reminded His disciples that if anyone wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven they would have to become like one of these little children humbling themselves and trusting the Lord fully.

Jesus was happy to place His hands on these children and bless them. In so doing, He demonstrated to those present the importance of little children. He demonstrated also His heart for those who are rejected and ignored in the society. He showed that He always has time for even those who seem to be insignificant. We should never hesitate to come to Him. His arms are always open to receive us and care for us.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the dangers of rejecting or ignoring those the Lord loves?
- What does this passage teach us about the concern of the Lord Jesus for children?
- What characteristics of the child do we need to demonstrate in our walk with God? Where do you fall short?
- What does this passage tell us about how the Lord feels our pains and hurts?

- Who are the people most likely to be ignored in your society? What is the challenge of this passage for your church toward these people?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your heart to feel what He feels for those around you.
- Thank the Lord that He cares deeply for you and always has time for you personally.
- Do you know of someone who had been rejected and pushed aside by the church or the society? Take a moment to pray for them and their needs. Ask God to show you what He would have you to do about this.

THE RICH RULER

Read Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30

As Jesus was ministering, a ruler came and fell down in front of Him. He had a very important question. "Teacher, he asked, "what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). This is a question that many people ask even in our day. The ruler came to Jesus because he was concerned about his eternal destiny. He was of the opinion that there was something he could do to have eternal life. As a ruler, he was quite used to having what he wanted. He had obviously heard Jesus speak about this matter of eternal life and wanted to have it.

Notice how the ruler called Jesus a good master. In calling Him good, the ruler felt that Jesus had the qualities necessary for eternal life. He respected His life and ministry and believed He had something to say as a teacher of truth. He felt that if there was anyone who knew the answer to this question it would be Jesus. He was not, however, confessing Him to be the Son of God. He came to Him, not because He saw Him as the Messiah, but because he saw Him as a good teacher who could instruct him in the way to find eternal life.

Jesus picked up on this expression “good master.” He challenged the man’s statement. He reminded the ruler that there was only one person who was good. That was God. Everyone else was a sinner. Why did Jesus emphasize this point? Jesus understood that the ruler felt he could inherit eternal life by being good or by doing something worthy. Jesus was breaking down his argument about being good enough to have eternal life. Only God was good. The rest of us fall short of His standard. If we had to inherit eternal life by being good, then none of us could ever experience this life.

Jesus then addressed a second false idea in this ruler’s mind. He believed he could somehow inherit eternal life by doing something worthy. Jesus told the ruler that if he wanted to inherit eternal life he was to obey the commandments. We need to understand here that the Lord is trying to show the man the impossibility of having eternal life by doing good things. Throughout the Old Testament we see that God’s people consistently failed to keep the commandments of God. No one was able to live a life of perfect obedience to the will of God. Jesus was telling the man that if he wanted to inherit eternal life by his own efforts he would have to do what no person had ever done in the history of the world. He was to live a perfect life.

Not completely understanding what Jesus was communicating, the ruler asked Jesus which commandments he was to obey (Matthew 19:18). In some ways he was admitting that it was not possible to keep all the commandments. Maybe he could try to keep the most important ones. Jesus lists some of the commandments that God gave Moses. He told him that he was not to murder, commit adultery, steal or lie. He was to honour his father and his mother and to love his neighbour as himself.

The ruler thought for a moment and said, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" (Matthew 19:21). As he looked at his life, he believed he had already obeyed these particular commandments but he knew deep down inside there was still something missing. He was not satisfied in his soul. There was still emptiness in his life. He lived a good life but he did not feel close to God. He was a good man but he still came to Jesus with the understanding that he did not yet have eternal life.

This man understood something that many people don't. He understood that his good works left him empty. This is why he came to Jesus. He came asking the Lord what was missing. He had done everything right but he didn't have the assurance of eternal life. Many people will go to their grave deceived into thinking that they have eternal life because they did good things. I believe this man was sincerely seeking an answer. He cried out to Jesus to show him what he is missing.

In Mark 10:21 Jesus responded to this question by telling the ruler, "One thing you lack, go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Jesus felt his pain. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. When Jesus told the man to sell his possessions, give them to the poor and leave everything and follow him, he identified a particular barrier in this man's spiritual life. The barrier was wealth.

The words that Jesus spoke that day struck their mark. The man was very sad. He was a wealthy man and was not yet willing to sacrifice his wealth to follow Jesus. This was too high a price for him to pay. He had another god in his life. He worshipped the god of wealth and possessions.

This kept him from experiencing the life that Jesus came to offer.

Jesus loved the ruler and had compassion on him. The ruler came with an empty heart seeking answers but these things were not enough. Jesus explained what the man needed to do and what the barrier was to his coming to eternal life but as far as we know the ruler walked away from Jesus without the assurance of eternal life. The reason for this was that he loved his wealth more than he loved Jesus. He was unwilling to part with the things of this world for the eternal life Jesus offered. There are many people like this in our day.

Seeing the response of the ruler, Jesus turned to His disciples and told them that it was very difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It would be easier, Jesus told them, for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The call of this world is very powerful. The love of money and possessions can keep us from turning to the Lord. Many have fallen prey to its temptation and sacrificed the forgiveness of sin and eternal life in the presence of Christ.

When the disciples watched the man walk away they asked the Lord who could be saved. They understood the attraction of the things of the world. If Jesus could not convince this man, who was truly seeking eternal life, how could anyone ever be convinced? The disciples understood just how difficult it was to convince anyone to follow the Lord. Few people are willing to leave everything to follow the Lord Jesus, especially those who have everything they need in this life.

Jesus reminded His disciples that the task of convincing men and women to become followers of Jesus was impossible in human wisdom and strength but, with God, all things were possible. We will never be able to convince anyone to turn from this world to the things of God. We are not alone in the task of reaching the world for Christ. The Holy Spirit goes before us preparing hearts. He comes with us to empower us and remains with those with whom we share the wonderful message of hope in Christ. Only as we go in His strength can we be successful in reaching this world for Christ.

Peter reminded the Lord how they had left everything to follow Him. It would be nice to think that Peter was trying to encourage the Lord when the young ruler walked away. Peter's intentions were not so honourable, however. Matthew 19:27 tells us that he was wondering what the result of their leaving everything would be. "What then will there be for us?" he asked (Matthew 19:27). What do we get out of leaving everything to follow you?

Jesus reminded Peter that they would one day sit with Him on thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. The apostles would reign with Christ. Beyond this, however, Jesus reminded His disciples that whoever left their house or family for the sake of the Kingdom of God would gain one hundred times as much in the kingdom of heaven and also receive eternal life. We never really sacrifice anything for the Lord; we merely invest it in eternity.

Jesus concluded His conversation by reminding the disciples that many people who were first in this life will be last in the days to come. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is an example of this. The rich man was first in this life. He had all he wanted in this world but lost everything

in the life to come. The rich man could not see beyond his present situation. He loved his wealth. He wanted to enjoy that wealth right now. He walked away from the Lord that day and lost everything he had. Ultimately he would lose his wealth but he would also lose his opportunity to inherit eternal life. By keeping what he had he lost everything.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the power of wealth and possessions?
- What do we learn in this passage about the difficulty of evangelism? Can we persuade or convince people to turn from this world? What role does the Holy Spirit play in evangelism?
- What is the cost of eternal life? Does this mean that we can't have anything in this life? Does surrendering all mean that we will always be poor?
- Is there anything that you would not be ready to surrender to the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Examine your walk with the Lord. Is there something missing? Ask the Lord to reveal to you what it is.
- Do you know someone who is being pulled by the things of this world? Take a moment to ask the Lord to break through to them.

- Ask the Lord to show you how He wants you to invest in His kingdom.
- Take a moment to surrender all you have to the Lord for Him to use as He pleases.

66

LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20:1-16

There is a reward for those who faithfully serve the Lord. God challenges us to lay up treasures in heaven and not become so attached to our worldly wealth and possessions that we could never give them up for the sake of the kingdom. This was the problem of the rich ruler in the last section. He could not leave his riches to follow the Lord. Jesus taught His disciples that those who left everything to follow Him would receive one hundred-fold in the life to come (Matthew 19:27). While there are rewards in heaven for faithful service, we can come to believe that God owes us these rewards. The Lord Jesus taught His disciples about the danger of this attitude.

In this parable the Lord compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He found some people who agreed to work that day for a denarius (the money of that land).

Later in the day, about nine o'clock in the morning, the landowner went out again and found some men in the marketplace with nothing to do. He told them to go to his vineyard and he would pay them for the day's work. The men joined the others who had already been working for three hours.

Still later in the day the landowner went out again. This time it was about noon. He found more men and sent them to join the crew. At three o'clock in the afternoon he found more and also at five o'clock. Each group joined the other and worked with them for the remainder of the day.

When the evening came, the owner of the vineyard asked his foreman to gather the workers together for their pay. The last ones to arrive were paid first. They were paid one denarius for their work. When the workers who had been hired first saw this, they expected that they would receive more because they had worked much longer. They, however, only received one denarius just like the others.

When the workers who had come first saw that they received the same as those who came last they began to grumble and complain. The last ones only had to work for one hour and yet they received the same wages as those who had worked for twelve hours. They did not feel they were being treated fairly.

The landowner reminded the workers, however, that they had agreed to work for one denarius and he was giving them what they had agreed on. He was not treating them unfairly. He was, however, showing generosity to the others. While they received what they deserved, the others received what they did not deserve. The master had the right to be generous.

There are some powerful lessons in this parable we cannot miss. First, we need to see how easy it is for us to become jealous of what others have received from God. Have you ever found yourself looking at someone and envying their spiritual gifts? How often have you wished you could experience the same success as someone else in ministry? We look at how few problems our brother has and we become angry with God because He does not give us the same lot in life. How many problems come about in the body of Christ because we do not want God to honour one person above another? The work of God in Corinth was being hindered because the church body was spending so much time arguing over whose gift was more important (see 1 Corinthians 12). We will never advance the kingdom of God if we cannot allow God to give gifts as He sees fit. The kingdom of God will never advance if we spend our time comparing ourselves to others instead of accepting God's purpose for our lives.

There is something wrong with the attitude that cannot rejoice in the blessing of another person. We see this attitude in our children. It is a sign of immaturity when we cannot rejoice with someone else because we did not receive the same blessing. The eldest son in the parable of the prodigal son could not rejoice in his brother's return because he was jealous of the blessing his father had given the rebellious runaway (see Luke 15:25-30).

We need to understand that God has the right to do what He pleases with His resources. We fail to understand that God's blessings are not a right but an act of generosity and compassion on His part. God is not unfair because He is generous to some. Imagine that you were walking down the street and met a beggar. Out of generosity you reach into your pocket and give him a few coins. Ten other

beggars see you giving this man a gift and come over asking for the same. Are you being unfair if you do not give each of them the same amount of money you gave to the first man? Does the presence of ten other beggars now cause your act of generosity to one beggar to become sin?

This is how it is with God. He is not obligated to give to any of us but out of a generous and compassionate heart He does give. The problem with the labourers was not with the landowner but with themselves. Their hearts were full of pride, jealousy and envy. They complained and grumbled because they did not want anyone else to get more than them. They resented the blessing of God in the lives of their brothers.

This parable shows us just how important it is for us to deal with jealousy and envy in our lives. This is a powerful story of the human heart. We see a picture of our own hearts in the story of these labourers. We need to ask God to break the pride, jealousy and envy that would keep us from rejoicing in God's blessing in someone else's life.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever been jealous of an individual because he or she received something you didn't? What do we learn about the attitude of our heart in this parable?
- How much of what we receive from God is our right and how much is simply because God is a gracious and compassionate God?

- How does understanding that what we receive is a gift of grace and not a right change how we see what God has given us?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to deal with jealousy and envy in your life.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the blessings He has given you.
- Do you have people in your church who are very gifted and blessed by God in a special way? Thank the Lord for the blessings He has given them.

JESUS PREDICTS HIS CRUCIFIXION

Matthew 20:17-28; Mark 10:32-45; Luke 18:31-34

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. He knew that the time was approaching when He would lay down His life. His disciples did not fully realize what was coming. They did not understand why He would have to die. Jesus reminded His disciple in this section that His time with them would soon be coming to an end.

On this occasion, the Lord took His disciples aside to speak with them. He reminded them that He would be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the Law in Jerusalem. They would condemn Him to death. Notice that He called Himself the “Son of Man.” The title emphasized His humanity. He was the one who came as a little child and identified with our weaknesses and infirmities. As man, He would die and feel our pain.

Jesus warned His disciples that the chief priests and the teachers of the Law would hand Him over to the Gentiles.

He would be mocked, flogged and crucified at their hands. He also told them in Luke 18:31 that these things were the fulfilment of the words of the prophets. All of the details and events that were about to unfold were in God's plan from the beginning of time.

Jesus also told his disciples that he would rise from the dead in three days. The grave would not hold him. He faced his death with confidence in the plan of his Father. He knew that while the way was filled with difficulties and trials, it was the path of victory. We need to learn how to face our problems with this same confidence. Our God is in control. Our fellow human beings can persecute and mock us. They can beat and kill us but they cannot defeat us because God is on our side and he is working out all things for His purpose. What trials are before you today? Be confident that God is in control. Don't let the enemy rob you of confidence in your heavenly Father.

Luke 18:34 tells us that while the disciples heard the words Jesus spoke, they did not understand what He was trying to tell them. They understood that Jesus was going to die but they did not understand why He had to die. They heard Him say that He would rise from the dead but they did not understand how that could be. The words of Jesus were very confusing to His disciples. Only when the events unfolded did they fully grasp what He was saying.

As Jesus spoke to His disciples, the mother of the son's of Zebedee (James and John) approached Him with a request. From Mark's account we learn that the request originated from James and John.

Prior to this event, mothers brought their children to Jesus for Him to bless. While the disciples had rebuked these

mothers for coming with their children, Jesus insisted that they allow them to bring their children to Him. Here we have a case of the mother of James and John bringing her adult children to Jesus. She wanted the very best for them.

This mother came to Jesus and asked Him to grant that her children (James and John) be given a place of honour in the kingdom that He was coming to set up. She may have believed that the kingdom Jesus was going to set up was a physical kingdom on this earth where James and John could have a position of authority. She asked that James and John would sit one at his right hand and the other on his left hand in His coming kingdom.

Jesus did not condemn James, John or their mother for their bold request. He did remind them, however, that they really did not understand what they were asking. He asked them if they were able to drink the cup He was going to drink. The cup Jesus was going to drink was a cup of suffering and death. It was more than a simple death, however. Jesus died the death of an innocent and perfect man. He died as a perfect sacrificial lamb to pay for the sins of the world.

Not understanding what Jesus was saying, James and John felt quite certain that they could drink from that same cup. They were willing to die for the Lord and His honour. Without getting into all the details of what His death would accomplish, Jesus told them that they would indeed be called on to die for their Lord but the place of honour was not for Him to grant. That authority belonged to His Father alone.

When the other disciples heard what James, John and their mother had requested, they were angry. The disciples

were angry because they felt that James and John were trying to get ahead of them. In the last section we saw the reaction of the labourers in the vineyard when those who were hired last received the same wage as those who had worked all day. There is a similar reaction here. There seems to be a competition among the disciples. They resented the request of James and John.

Seeing the conflict between His disciples, Jesus called them together to teach them a lesson. He called their attention to how ungodly rulers lord it over others. He reminded them that, in the kingdom of God, the one who wanted to be greatest needed to become the servant of all. He gave them the example of His own leadership and what He had just taught them about going to the cross to die. Jesus, as the Lord of all, was a servant. He gained His place of honour because He became a servant unto death. The path to greatness in the kingdom is through humble service. This was perfectly demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus. He did not come to be served like other world leaders. He came to serve. If James and John were going to have a place of honour, they needed to humble themselves. The path of true honour is through humility.

For Consideration:

- The death of the Lord Jesus was predicted by the prophets long before it happened. What does this teach us about the control of God over circumstances? How does this encourage you in what you are facing today?

- What do we learn in this section about bringing bold requests to the Lord that we are really not ready to receive? Have you ever brought such requests to God?
- What is the difference between inheriting a title and earning that title? Why is it important for us to realize that the Lord Jesus both inherited and earned His title?
- What is the pathway to true greatness in the kingdom of God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is in control of your circumstances.
- Ask the Lord to strip away your pride and make you more like Him.
- Thank the Lord that even the reality of the cross did not stop Him from ministering to those in need. Ask Him to make you this type of servant.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you felt the need to compete with your brother or sister for a place of honour.

BARTIMAEUS

Read Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43

The Lord Jesus is in the region of Jericho. A large crowd followed Him as He travelled. Matthew tells us that two blind men were sitting by the roadside as Jesus passed by (Matthew 20:30). Mark and Luke only mention one man in their account. While there were two men present, the focus is on one. Mark tells us more about this blind man. His name was Bartimaeus. His name simply meant "Son of Timaeus."

Why does Mark specifically mention this man's name and the name of his father? It is interesting to note that the name "Timaeus" in the Hebrew language comes from a word meaning "defiled, polluted or unclean." Bartimaeus is the son of the defiled one. Is there a connection between this man's blindness and his father's name and character? Remember that names were significant in Bible times. There may have been some reason why the father was called the defiled one. It is not a coincidence here that Mark specifically brings this to our attention.

As Jesus passed by, Bartimaeus cried out to Him, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47). He addressed Jesus as the "Son of David." In addressing Him this way, Bartimaeus showed that he believed Him to be the Messiah who was to come from the line of David. Bartimaeus asked Jesus to have mercy on him. He saw his blindness as an affliction and appealed to the mercy of the Lord Jesus.

It is important to notice the response of the crowd to the cries of Bartimaeus. The crowd rebuked him and told him to be quiet. The more they rebuked him the more he shouted. I find it interesting that the crowd tried to silence Bartimaeus. People were coming all the time to Jesus to be healed. Why would the crowd try to push this particular man away? Did it have something to do with his name? He was the son of the "defiled one." Did they see him as unworthy of the Lord's attention? Were they repulsed by his presence? Did they see him as an unclean and defiled man?

Bartimaeus was not discouraged by the attempt of the crowd to silence him. He persevered in calling out to Jesus. His request was bold. He did not have the support of those around him but he still asked. We need more people like this who will persevere in prayer until they have the ear of the Lord.

The perseverance of Bartimaeus struck its mark. Jesus stopped and called for Bartimaeus. Someone went to him and said, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you" (Mark 10:49). From this we understand that the heart of Bartimaeus was broken. He was grieving over his condition. He cried out to Jesus with the understanding that if Jesus did not heal him there was no other hope. When he heard that

Jesus was calling for him, his spirits were revived. Mark tells us that he threw his cloak aside and came to Jesus. Is there any significance in the fact that he threw his garment aside? As a beggar he would not have had much more than this garment. When he heard that Jesus was calling him, however, he cast that garment aside. He did not have time to put it on. There were more important things to do. Though this garment was one of the few possessions he had, he threw it aside to come to Jesus. What a contrast this was to the rich young ruler who walked away from the Lord because he was unwilling to give up his possessions.

Jesus asked Bartimaeus what he wanted. He told Jesus he wanted to see. Jesus had compassion on him and touched his eyes (Matthew 20:34) saying "Go, your faith has healed you" (Mark 10:52). Immediately he was healed and followed Jesus praising God to the amazement of the people present.

It is significant that Jesus spoke of the faith of Bartimaeus. It was faith in Jesus that healed him. His faith in Jesus was such that even when everyone else tried to silence his cries, Bartimaeus continued to ask. This story gives us an example of persevering faith. He did not give up until he had an answer from Jesus. We need to see more of this type of faith. All around, people told him to be quiet and not to bother the Lord with his request but his heart would not let it go. Maybe others felt he was unworthy but he came anyway. He believed that the Lord would receive him even when others turned him away. When he heard the Lord call his name, he left all he had, cast his cloak aside and came. He gives us a wonderful example to follow.

For Consideration:

- Are there people in your society who are generally considered unworthy? Who are they? What does this passage tell us about the love of the Lord for them?
- What do we learn here about persevering faith? Are there requests you have stopped bringing to the Lord because you have not seen an immediate answer?
- Have you ever felt that you were not worthy to come to the Lord or bring your specific requests to Him? What does this passage teach us?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a persevering faith like Bartimaeus.
- Thank the Lord that while we are all unworthy, He will still listen to our requests.
- Ask the Lord to give you a more open and compassionate heart for those who are outcasts of society.

69

ZACCHAEUS

Read Luke 19:1-10

Jesus was passing through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. In Jericho He met a man by the name of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. There are several things we need to note about this man.

First, tax collectors were among the most hated people in Bible times. They gathered money for the Roman authorities. They made money by overcharging people and keeping the excess money for themselves. Generally, the Roman government said nothing about this practice. Their only concern was that the taxes be paid.

Notice second that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. As the chief of the tax collectors he would have been even more hated by the Jews of his day. He was extremely wealthy which shows us how much he had cheated and stolen from the people in his community. This would have been the cause for much bitterness on the part of the Jews.

Third, the name Zacchaeus seems to come from a Hebrew word meaning “pure.” Those in the community who understood the origin of his name and its meaning would have seen the hypocrisy. He was called “pure” but his lifestyle was far from pure. He was one of the most corrupt people in his community.

We are told in verse 3 that Zacchaeus was interested in seeing Jesus. Luke tells us that he wanted to see who Jesus was. No doubt he had heard about Jesus but he had not made up his mind about Him. He was very curious. He wanted to see for himself what all this talk about Jesus was about. In fact, Zacchaeus was so interested in seeing Jesus that he ran ahead, found a sycamore tree and climbed it so he could see over the heads of the people as He passed by.

When Jesus passed by the tree where Zacchaeus was, He stopped and looked up. He called Zacchaeus by name and told him that He needed to go to his house that day. There are several things we need to notice in this verse 5.

The Lord Jesus stopped under that particular tree, looked up and called Zacchaeus by name. Jesus knew his name and he knew Zacchaeus had a place where He and His disciples could stay on their way through Jericho. Jesus knew all about Zacchaeus.

Verse 5 tells us that Jesus *needed* to go to his house. There was a practical reason for this. Zacchaeus was a rich man and was able to offer them hospitality. Beyond this practical reason, however, there was a much deeper spiritual reason for Jesus going to the home of this tax collector. It appears that Jesus knew His Father’s heart for Zacchaeus. The Father directed Jesus to this man.

It was important for the Lord Jesus to be sensitive to the leading and direction of His Father. Of all the people in the crowd that day the last person anyone would have thought would be ready to turn his heart and life over to the Lord would be Zacchaeus. If we depend on our own understanding and wisdom we may fail to see God's plan. We need to have the heart of God. We need to know His leading and prompting. The fact that Jesus told Zacchaeus that He needed to stay at his house that day was an indication that He knew his Father had a purpose for him.

Zacchaeus came down from the tree at once. He was glad to have this opportunity to welcome Jesus and His disciples into his home. When the crowd saw this, their hatred of Zacchaeus began to show. "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner," they said about Jesus (Luke 19:7). They found it very hard to accept that the Lord Jesus would associate with this sinful man. They had judged him. They had been cheated by him and his team of tax collectors.

Zacchaeus knew what the people were saying about him. He understood how much he was hated in the community. He understood that he was wrong. That day, however, his heart was powerfully touched by the Spirit of God. In the presence of Jesus, Zacchaeus was broken. All his sins came flooding to his mind. He knew that he needed to do something about those sins. He did not need anyone to tell him what he needed to do. The Spirit of God was speaking to his heart. He knew that he would have no peace in his heart until he had made things right. That day, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, Zacchaeus stood up and announced that he would give half of his possessions to the poor and if he had cheated anyone he would pay them back four times what he had cheated them.

The Law of Moses required that if a man wronged another he would have to repay him and add one-fifth more to the debt. We read in Numbers 5:6-7:

Say to the Israelites: 'When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged.'

It seems that while Jewish law required one-fifth added to the debt the Roman law required that a man pay back four times what he owed. Zacchaeus follows the Roman law here. Zacchaeus was not looking for an easy way out. He was quite willing to pay the price for his sin. A great stronghold was broken that day in his life. Here was a man who understood that all the possessions in the world would never satisfy his soul. In Jesus he found an answer that no money could buy. When he met Jesus, the attraction to this wealth and possessions seemed to lose its grip. He had lived for money, now he had found something of far greater value. Salvation had come to his house (Luke 19:9). A life had been radically changed by the power of God. Jesus was encouraged by what He saw in Zacchaeus. He reminded those present that this was the reason He had come to this earth. He had come to seek and to save those who were lost like Zacchaeus.

There are some important applications in this passage to our lives. The first relates to Zacchaeus and the way the Spirit of God moved him to repentance and reconciliation with those he had offended. Zacchaeus would not have had any testimony in the community unless he made things right. People would never have accepted him or his

word if he had not paid back what he had taken from them. He could have talked about the Lord all he wanted and it would have done no good. Without this reconciliation, people would always have seen him as the man who stole from them and cheated them out of their money. When Zacchaeus gave up his wealth and restored four times what he owed, that barrier was broken. From that time on he would be worthy of his name. He would be seen as “the pure one.” They would see him as the one who sought so much to be right with God that he gave up his wealth and returned everything he owed. He was no longer in their debt. Now people would respect, honour and listen to him. There are times when our past blocks our ministry and testimony. Sometimes we need to make things right and be reconciled with our brothers and sisters before we can hope to have an impact on this world.

The other thing we need to see here is that when we follow the leading and direction of the Lord God, powerful things happen. Jesus did not have to convince Zacchaeus to do anything. We have no record of Jesus even speaking to Zacchaeus about his lifestyle. The Spirit of God seems to have done this. Jesus stepped out in obedience. The Spirit of God did the rest. I believe God is looking for a people who will pick the ripe fruit He leads them to pick. How often have we tried to pick fruit that was not ripe? If we listen, God will show us the people He is preparing for a great work. If we follow His leading we will see what the Spirit of God can do.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the importance of making things right with our brothers and sisters?
- How important is it for us to be sensitive to the leading of the Lord in our ministries?
- Are there things you need to deal with in your life before you can be set free to minister in Christ's name? Is your heart pure before God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you any area of your life you need to make right.
- Ask the Lord to give you strength to obey Him and the courage to make things right.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have failed to minister in His leading. Ask God to give you a greater sensitivity to His leading and direction in your life and ministry.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you did not feel He could work in the life a hardened sinner. Take a moment to pray for someone who seems to be firmly settled in a life of sin. Ask God to soften their heart.

THE PARABLE OF THE MINAS

Read Luke 19:11-28

The time Jesus had with Zacchaeus had reminded Him of the reason He had come. He concluded His time with Zacchaeus by telling the people that He had come to seek and to save those who were lost (Luke 19:10). The salvation of those who were lost required His death. This got Jesus thinking about Jerusalem. As He approached the city, He understood that the time of His death was near. With Jerusalem nearby the expectations of the people were rising. The crowds felt that something was going to happen. They were expecting to see Jesus set up His kingdom and take His throne. Jesus knew their thoughts and told them this parable.

A man of noble birth went to a distant country to be anointed king. Before he left, however, he called ten servants to himself and gave them each a mina. A mina was the equivalent to three months wages. He obviously

expected to be away for some time. The master told his servants to put this money to work for him until he returned.

While those present did not fully understand what Jesus was saying, we have the advantage of looking back in time. Jesus was this man of noble birth who went off to be crowned king. While the Lord was always king, by His obedience unto death He demonstrated to all that He was worthy of such honour. Revelation 5 describes a great celebration in heaven. Here Jesus as the Lamb who had been slain was given a scroll with the purposes and plan of God for humanity. He alone was found worthy of opening the scroll because He had purchased men for God from every tribe, language and nation. Listen to what the heavenly beings sing to the Lamb in Revelation 5:9-10:

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.

Does this not describe something of what happened when the Lord Jesus returned to heaven after his time on earth? Heaven exploded in praise and thanksgiving. He was honoured as King of kings and Lord of lords. This, in part, is what the parable seems to be describing.

Jesus continued His parable. He told His listeners that the new king's subjects hated him. They sent a delegation after him saying that they did not want him to be their king. The people of Jesus day did not accept him. They crucified him on the cross in the ultimate statement of rejection. We

can expect even more rejection of Jesus and His purposes as the day of His return draws nearer. Many will rise up, mock and even persecute those who belong to the Lord Jesus (see John 16:1-4).

When the king returned, he sent for his servants to see what they had done with the money he had given to them. The servants approached their new king. The first came and told him that he had used his mina to earn ten more. The master commended him for his faithfulness and told him that because he had been found trustworthy he was to take charge of ten cities. The second servant told his master that he had earned five more minas. The master gave him charge over five cities. The third servant brought back the mina he had received saying that he had kept it hidden away in a piece of cloth. He told his master that he did not want to take a chance on losing his money by unwisely investing it so he hid it away so it would not be lost.

Listen to the response of the master to this third servant in Luke 19:22-23:

I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you not, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?

Because of his unfaithfulness, the master told those who were standing by to take away his mina and give it to the one who had ten minas. This request was met with a certain resistance. The servants wondered why the one who had the most minas already was to be given this mina on

top of what he already had. "He already has ten," they said (verse 25).

The master told them, however, that the one who was faithful with what he had would receive even more. Those who were unfaithful, however, would lose the little they had. How important it is that we use the gifts we have. Would you give more responsibility to a worker who had proven to be unfaithful? Would you trust that worker with more responsibility? Common sense tells us that a person who is faithful in the little things will also be faithful in bigger things. If you want to be used in big things you must first prove yourself in the small.

When the master returned home after being crowned king, he came to do two things. He returned first to reward his servants for how they had invested his resources. He also will come, however, to judge those who had rejected him as king. In verse 27 the master called for the death of all those who refused him as king. They were brought before him and killed in his presence.

When the Lord returns, he will return as king. He will come to reward us for our faithful service. Will Jesus find us faithful when He returns? Jesus will also return to this earth to judge those who have rejected Him. That day will be a very difficult day for those who have rejected Him. We don't like to think about this kind of judgment but the passage makes it quite clear that there is a day of judgment coming for all who refuse the offer of Christ for their salvation.

This parable reminded His disciples that Jesus would soon leave them. He would return, however, as a king to judge and to reward. In the meantime, He would leave them to work for Him and to prepare for His return. May He find us

faithfully serving when He returns to set up His physical kingdom.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the importance of being faithful in small things?
- What gifts has the Lord given you? How have you been using them? Is there more you could do?
- What is the difference between the spiritual kingdom we are now experiencing and the physical kingdom of Jesus?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you how He would have you use the gifts He has given you.
- Thank the Lord for the gifts He has given. Thank Him that He has determined to use us in the advancing of His kingdom.
- Do you have a friend or loved one who has, like the people here in this parable, rejected the Lord as their King? Take a moment to pray that God would show him or her the error of their ways before it is too late.

INDEX OF BIBLE PASSAGES

Passage	Chapter
Matthew	
Matthew 8:18-22	Chapter 1
Matthew 8:19-22	Chapter 35
Matthew 8:23-27	Chapter 2
Matthew 8:28-34	Chapter 3
Matthew 9:18-22	Chapter 4
Matthew 9:23-26	Chapter 5
Matthew 9:27-34	Chapter 6
Matthew 9:35-38	Chapter 8
Matthew 10:1-15	Chapter 9
Matthew 10:16-33	Chapter 10
Matthew 10:34-11:1	Chapter 11
Matthew 13:54-58	Chapter 7
Matthew 14:1-12	Chapter 12
Matthew 14:13-21	Chapter 13
Matthew 14:22-33	Chapter 14
Matthew 14:34-15:20	Chapter 15
Matthew 15:21-28	Chapter 16
Matthew 15:29-31	Chapter 17
Matthew 15:39-16:4	Chapter 18
Matthew 16:5-12	Chapter 19
Matthew 16:13-20	Chapter 21
Matthew 16:21-23	Chapter 22

Matthew 16:24-28	Chapter 23
Matthew 17:1-8	Chapter 24
Matthew 17:9-13	Chapter 25
Matthew 17:14-21	Chapter 26
Matthew 17:22-23	Chapter 27
Matthew 17:24-27	Chapter 28
Matthew 18:1-5	Chapter 29
Matthew 18:6-14	Chapter 31
Matthew 18:15-20	Chapter 33
Matthew 18:21-35	Chapter 34
Matthew 19:1-12	Chapter 63
Matthew 19:13-15	Chapter 64
Matthew 19:16-30	Chapter 65
Matthew 20:1-16	Chapter 66
Matthew 20:17-28	Chapter 67
Matthew 20:29-34	Chapter 68
Matthew 23:37-39	Chapter 49

Mark

Mark 5:1-20	Chapter 3
Mark 5:21-34	Chapter 4
Mark 5:35-43	Chapter 5
Mark 6:1-6	Chapter 7
Mark 6:7-13	Chapter 9
Mark 6:12-13	Chapter 11
Mark 6:14-29	Chapter 12
Mark 6:30-44	Chapter 13
Mark 6:45-52	Chapter 14
Mark 7:1-23	Chapter 15
Mark 7:24-30	Chapter 16
Mark 7:31-8:9	Chapter 17
Mark 8:10-12	Chapter 18
Mark 8:13-21	Chapter 19
Mark 8:22-26	Chapter 20
Mark 8:27-30	Chapter 21

Mark 8:31-33	Chapter 22
Mark 8:34-9:1	Chapter 23
Mark 9:2-8	Chapter 24
Mark 9:9-13	Chapter 25
Mark 9:14-29	Chapter 26
Mark 9:30-32	Chapter 27
Mark 9:34-37	Chapter 29
Mark 9:38-41	Chapter 30
Mark 9:42-48	Chapter 31
Mark 9:49-50	Chapter 32
Mark 10:1-12	Chapter 63
Mark 10:13-16	Chapter 64
Mark 10:17-31	Chapter 65
Mark 10:32-45	Chapter 67
Mark 10:46-52	Chapter 68

Luke

Luke 8:22-25	Chapter 2
Luke 8:26-39	Chapter 3
Luke 8:40-48	Chapter 4
Luke 8:49-56	Chapter 5
Luke 9:1-5	Chapter 9
Luke 9:6	Chapter 11
Luke 9:7-9	Chapter 12
Luke 9:10-17	Chapter 13
Luke 9:18-21	Chapter 21
Luke 9:22	Chapter 22
Luke 9:23-27	Chapter 23
Luke 9:28-36	Chapter 24
Luke 9:37-43	Chapter 25
Luke 9:44-45	Chapter 27
Luke 9:46-48	Chapter 29
Luke 9:49-50	Chapter 30
Luke 9:51-62	Chapter 35
Luke 10:1-20	Chapter 36

Luke 10:21-24	Chapter 37
Luke 10:25-27	Chapter 38
Luke 10:38-42	Chapter 39
Luke 11:1-13	Chapter 40
Luke 11:37-54	Chapter 41
Luke 12:13-21	Chapter 42
Luke 12:35-48	Chapter 43
Luke 12:49-59	Chapter 44
Luke 13:1-5	Chapter 45
Luke 13:6-9	Chapter 46
Luke 13:10-17	Chapter 47
Luke 13:22-30	Chapter 48
Luke 13:31-55	Chapter 49
Luke 14:1-6	Chapter 50
Luke 14:7-11	Chapter 51
Luke 14:12-24	Chapter 52
Luke 14:25-35	Chapter 53
Luke 15:1-7	Chapter 54
Luke 15:11-32	Chapter 55
Luke 16:1-18	Chapter 56
Luke 16:18	Chapter 63
Luke 16:19-31	Chapter 57
Luke 17:1-2	Chapter 31
Luke 17:3-4	Chapter 33
Luke 17:7-10	Chapter 58
Luke 17:11-19	Chapter 59
Luke 17:20-37	Chapter 60
Luke 18:1-8	Chapter 61
Luke 18:9-14	Chapter 62
Luke 18:15-17	Chapter 64
Luke 18:18-30	Chapter 65
Luke 18:31-34	Chapter 67
Luke 18:35-43	Chapter 68
Luke 19:1-10	Chapter 69
Luke 19:11-28	Chapter 70

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