

The Life of Christ

Book V - His Essence and the Principles of Discipleship

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1. Who Is Christ And What Will He Do?

"Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.' Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him." (Mark 8:27-30)

Christ and his disciples travelled north, a trip of about two days, to the foot of Mt. Hermon near Caesarea Philippi. There, he asked them this question: "Who do people say I am?" As usual, he did not intend it to be a straightforward inquiry but a question that would benefit those he asked. He wanted them to inform him of peoples' opinion about him as the Son of Man, for the masses could only see his humanity. The disciples told him that the people were confused as to his person. They regarded him as a great prophet but did not consider him a new prophet. They thought he might be Elijah, Jeremiah, the Baptist, or another prophet of old who had reappeared. It seemed that no one was saying that he was the long-awaited Messiah.

Was this the result of his three years of service? Had all his labours been in vain? John, the beloved disciple, was right when he said, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it" (John 1:5). After he had fed the five thousand, the crowd said that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. By this, they were referring to the prophet who was supposed to precede Christ's coming and announce it (see Malachi 3:1; 4:5).

Christ's question about peoples' opinion of him was an introduction to the more important inquiry of what his followers -- those remaining after the majority had deserted -- thought about him. After all those years of teaching and training, the hour had come to test their understanding of his person. Therefore, he asked them who they thought he was without restricting his question, as he had done previously.

No doubt, in the past, they had discussed and argued about this subject; and now Jesus wanted a reply. All their lives, they had clung to the political, worldly aspirations connected with the coming of the Messiah; it was very difficult to abandon these ideas completely. Christ, however, wanted to erase these thoughts from their minds and remove them once and for all. If only all people would realise the necessity of being decisive in this matter, making a final decision about Christ and living according to their faith practically, without fluctuating or hesitating.

How great was Christ's joy when he obtained this clear reply from Peter: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Christ's first question was concerned with what people thought of him as the Son of Man. In the answer to his second question, he was told, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." How great was the "mystery of godliness", referred to by the Apostle Paul, concerning how God appeared in the flesh (1 Timothy 3:16).

It is true to speak of Christ as being both the Son of Man and the Son of the living God, in spite of the seeming contradiction. Christ had used his title of humility, whereas Peter confessed his sublime title. Christ did not glory at being referred to in illustrious terms, for before that, even the demons acknowledged his exalted position. John the Baptist, Nathanael, and even Peter himself had spoken in these terms. Christ rejoiced, instead, over the spirit of Peter and his colleagues, and over their steadfast faith, in the wake of their recent testings. Christ immediately praised Peter, calling him "blessed -- an expression with which he had not described anyone else. He told him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah..." (Matthew 16:17).

In this blessing, there was no praise for Peter, for this truth was not revealed to him by man but by the Father in heaven. Nothing that Peter had said or done by himself earned him this commendation, but only that which he had spoken through inspiration of God. We know that the light of salvation -- like this revelation to Peter -- does not originate from man because man only prepares the lamp and the oil; but the light is the work of God. The Apostle Paul said, "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3).

1.1. I Will Give You the Keys of the Kingdom

"Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not over-come it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ." (Matthew 16:16-20)

In this passage, it is as though Jesus were telling his foremost apostle the following: "You, Peter, have demonstrated your rock-like stability in these difficult circumstances when you declared the reality of my existence as being both the human Christ and the Son of the Living God in one person. I tell you that I will build my Church on the rock of this fundamental truth which you have now uttered through revelation from my heavenly Father. All the world's opposition and hell's power will never be able to defeat the Church because it is founded on this truth. I see in you, my disciples, the signs of fitness to undertake this great work for which I have authorised you. I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven so that through your witness, you will be able to open salvation's door in all countries, bringing into my Church those who will belong to the family of the saved because they have accepted the conditions of salvation. I also give you authority to declare eternal damnation to those who reject the terms of salvation, putting off repentance, faith, and righteousness. Through the accounts of the Gospel, which the Lord's Spirit will inspire you to write, this authority will be established. Thus, each of the accounts that you place in this Book will be approved in heaven, and all that you leave out will be left out in heaven. This Book will therefore be the

rule for my Church for all time because the commands and prohibitions you will write in it will be those which you have heard from me or received through divine inspiration. I have appointed you to represent me and to finish my work after I have ascended into heaven. I shall also give you a special anointing of the spirit of prophecy, and of discernment, to equip you for this extraordinary task. By a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon you, I will make you my authorised representatives. I will seal this authority by giving you power to perform great miracles. I am entrusting you with this momentous work because I will empower you to accomplish it."

1.2. What Will Christ Do?

"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" (Mark 8:31-33)

After Peter confessed Christ as the Son of the living God, Jesus requested his disciples not to tell anyone because his hour had not yet come. He went on to declare to them plainly, for the first time, the purpose of his coming from heaven. He started to teach them that he would suffer many things in Jerusalem. He would be rejected by the elders, be put to death, and would rise again on the third day. He waited until they understood the mystery of his incarnation clearly, and were confessing it openly, before he told them that he would suffer, die, and rise from the dead. In order for them to understand the work of Redemption, through his death, they had to first understand the Incarnation; that is, his being both God and man at the same time. Unless they knew him as the Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, they would not understand the full meaning of his death and resurrection. Whoever denies the fact of the Incarnation will also deny the Redemption. Those who deny the divinity of Christ will also deny his sacrificial death because the two themes are inextricably bound.

This new declaration was contrary to all the aspirations of the disciples, however. Thus, Peter could not keep quiet. He took Christ aside and started to rebuke him. How strange! The one who had just confessed -- not only that his master was the great Messiah but also the Son of the Living God -- was contradicting him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall never happen to you!" What Peter thought was loving zeal towards his Master was, in reality, a satanic utterance. The Devil who, like a roaring lion, lay waiting for this important apostle, sprang on him in his hour of exaltation and dragged him to the ground, wounded! All successful people should be aware that the Devil has destructive tricks intended for their downfall. We find this warning in the words of the Apostle Paul: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12). The wise Solomon said: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

Christ could not tolerate these words, so he rebuked Satan who had spoken through Peter. He scolded him bitterly and said, "Get behind Me, Satan!" Jesus, who could see the hidden things of the heart, saw that Peter's motives were not free from worldly glory, and so he deserved this sharp correction. Because Peter was a true disciple, he accepted the rebuke in love, knowing that Christ was only interested in the very best for him. Solomon said: "...Rebuke a wise man and he will love you" (Proverbs 9:8); also, "... Rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge." (Proverbs 19:25).

1.3. Conditions for Following Christ

"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?'" (Mark 8:34-37)

Christ gathered his disciples to him and announced three conditions which those who follow him are expected to fulfil:

1. Denying oneself. This means giving control of one's personality and life to Jesus. When Peter denied Christ, he said, "I do not know him!" Whoever follows Christ in truth, and denies himself, will say: "I no longer consider myself to be in control of my life, but my Lord has full authority. I shall yield all areas of my life to Christ who loves me."
2. Carrying one's cross daily. This means following the example of Christ who carried a cross by his own free will. He purposed, raised, and carried it out of love, in order to save souls from Sin and hell. Carrying one's cross, after Christ's example, is to embrace hardships and calamities -- even death -- voluntarily. Our ultimate concern should be to save souls. We do not bear a cross that is forced upon us, but one of our own choosing, which we take up for the welfare of others.
3. Following Christ. This means walking carefully in his footsteps, without weariness, shyness, or turning back. He is the Shepherd who walks in front of his sheep and they follow behind, safe and secure.

Jesus made it clear that these three conditions are based on an important truth in the law of grace; namely, that those who first of all seek safety will lose it, while those who seek first to serve, will find it. When our first concern is self-preservation, the Lord will not protect us and we will suffer loss. By contrast, the one who devotes himself primarily to God's service and is willing to take risks in the process will be under God's care and protection.

Christ then added, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" Here, Christ is asking his listeners if the value of the entire world equals that of one human soul? The answer is, of course, "Impossible!" As long as the world and all its wealth and

glory pass away, the immortal soul remains infinitely more valuable. How great is the folly of the one who ignores the affairs of the Spirit in his quest for worldly gain! Supposing he did acquire the whole world, and, with it tried to buy his salvation. he would find his resources to be far too insufficient.

Christ warned his hearers not to be ashamed of him or his words. Even if his own wicked and sinful generation disowned him, there will come a day when he will return in the glory of his Father, with the angels, to reward everyone according to his works. He will then be ashamed of those who were ashamed of him.

2. Christ On The Mount Of Transfiguration

"After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters-- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead." (Mark 9:2-9)

Earlier, Jesus had revealed to his disciples that he would be killed and rise again three days later. However, the disciples rejected this idea because of their spokesman, Peter. But now, Christ wanted to confirm to them the absolute necessity of his Cross, so he took Peter, James, and John up with him to a high mountain. As for the remaining nine disciples, he left them with the crowd below.

We do not know all the details of what took place on that mountain which Peter later called "the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:18). Most likely, the four reached the summit at the end of the day. While Christ was completely taken up in prayer, the three disciples grew very sleepy. Had they but known what they would be missing by that sleep, they would have stayed awake and not left him alone; for, while they were slumbering, his appearance was wonderfully transformed. It was as though his earthly appearance as man were removed, and his true, original glory shone through. The Father had answered his prayer and had glorified him, in order to strengthen and establish his disciples. God the Father glorified Christ in his transfigured appearance, along with Moses and Elijah. He did not send an angel, as in the past, but sent two men who were also glorified: Moses, the final authority of the Law, and Elijah the chief of the prophets. Moses, God's spokesperson, of whom Israel was supremely proud, was noted for his meekness and humility. God had buried him some 1500 years previously on a mountaintop, and his tomb is unknown to this day. It is possible that his body was glorified without experiencing corruption. Elijah, God's mighty prophet, full of energy,

zeal, and hatred towards evil, has been called the "Fiery Prophet" who ascended to heaven in a fiery whirlwind some thousand years earlier. Death never touched him. God called these two men from the world of spirits to converse with Jesus about his Cross.

2.1. Christ Discusses His Coming Death on the Cross

The topic of conversation between Peter, James, and John concerned the imminent death of Christ which had upset the disciples so. The word which the Gospel uses here for "death" is "departure" -- the same noun we find in the Torah describing the passage of Israel from the bondage of Egypt to the Promised Land. Luke the Evangelist stated that Moses and Elijah spoke with Christ about his death which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). He was saying that Christ's death would not be forced upon him, but it would be by his own choosing -- something which he had purposed and would complete.

The Transfiguration was the only moment in history where the one, universal Christian Church of which Christ spoke was represented. Jesus, the only head of this Church, stood on that mountain, conversing with the two leaders of the Old Testament who represented that part of the Church already in heaven. Close by, stood the three great apostles -- the leaders of the New Testament age -- who represented the earthly component of this one Church.

The Apostle Paul took pride in the subject and importance of this conversation, for he said, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). In their praises, the angels and saints in heaven repeat the theme of the glorious death of Christ, his splendid crown of glory for which the Father loves him. Those who are silent about the redemptive death of Jesus or deny it, do not profit from the knowledge of Christ themselves, nor do those around them, for Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24).

2.2. The Amazement of the Disciples

Christ may have ended his conversation with these two heavenly visitors as his three disciples awoke from their deep sleep. They suddenly noticed that their master was no longer kneeling in prayer but that he was in the company of two others whom they knew had not come up to the mountain with them. The sight of the two glorified prophets made a greater impact on them than if they had been in the presence of angels. Here they saw their friend and master, wonderfully glorified. With him, were Moses and Elijah, clothed in heavenly splendour. They were now fully awake and knew that they were not having a vision. They probably were upset at having missed this glory while they were sleeping; and now Moses and Elijah were preparing to depart. Thus, we are not surprised that Peter, in his impulsiveness, tried to prevent them from leaving.

We have already seen Peter, in his boldness, trying to hinder Christ, but now, in his enthusiasm, he attempted to offer Christ a plan of action. He had forgotten that it was his duty to await Jesus' ideas and perfect will, and not offer his own, as if he were wiser than his master. He suggested that he and his two companions would get to work in order to erect some booths, like the ones they set up in the outskirts of Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Heaven responded to Peter's suggestion, for we are told that a voice came from the cloud. The disciples' fear heightened and they fell down on their faces and heard these words: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

When Christ stated that he would be crucified, Peter rebuked him and said, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall never happen to you!" But when the heavenly voice of God, on the Mount of Transfiguration, testified about Christ's identity and authority, it said, "Listen to him!" It was as though God were telling the disciples, "Accept what Christ is telling you; the Cross is a predetermined necessity."

2.3. The Testimony of God about His Son

The previous week, Christ had accepted the disciples' testimony concerning his being the Son of God, not merely the Son of Man. Now, the voice of God was confirming this testimony, proving to them what their eyes had seen and their ears had heard on the Mount of Transfiguration. Was there any room left for doubt? When these men spoke about this truth later, they based their case on this unique incident.

The disciples learned a very important lesson from the heavenly voice which told them to seek divine approval, not human admiration. All those who obtain God's approval do not fear the anger of the greatest man. They are not frightened by opposition, however fierce. In the phrase, "Listen to him", the disciples were given the exhortation to listen to Christ, not the chief scribes, Pharisees, and High Priests. Although Moses and Elijah were also present, the divine order told them not to listen to them. Does not this heavenly voice ring in the ear of every believer, telling him to listen to Christ alone? When he does, it will prevent him from following human teaching, unless that teaching is an echo of the Divine Teacher's instruction.

While those three lay on the ground in fear, a cloud carried Moses and Elijah back to heaven, for they had fulfilled their purpose. Heaven did not approve of the fact that the disciples welcomed Moses and Elijah more than they did the voice which ordered them to listen to Christ, the beloved Son. The voice gently rebuked the disciples for their preoccupation with Moses and Elijah. They were acting as if they had profited more, by their presence, than they already had from Christ. It was also as though the voice were telling them, "Your future does not depend on those who will not remain with you (such as the Lawgiver and the Prophet) but on the one who is your permanent companion, even though you have not realised his true

worth yet."

The disciples did not realise the absence of Moses and Elijah in the cloud until Christ touched them and said, "Arise, and do not fear." They looked up suddenly and found Jesus alone with them. How wonderful is the fear which is followed by the peace of mind from the Lord! How blessed is the vision which concentrates on Christ alone! This was the case with Peter, James, and John at that moment. Now, they did not see anyone else except the one who is the All in All, for there is no need of another. Jesus is the only Saviour, Mediator, and Lord of our lives.

2.4. A Proof of Immortality

Every doubt concerning life after death vanished from the minds of these men after seeing Moses and Elijah. For the disciples, who would be the teachers of the new Christian Church, this incident was an important proof against the Sadducees who denied life after death and the world of spirits. It was made evident to them that the faithful dead are not asleep, awaiting the Day of Resurrection, as some claimed, but that they are already standing before the throne of God, ready to serve him. These three also learned that every believer will have a glorified body after death because they saw a definite connection between glorified and earthly bodies. The glorified body is not subject to the restrictions to which it is limited on earth.

3. Christ Heals A Man Possessed By An Evil Spirit

"When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. 'What are you arguing with them about?' he asked. A man in the crowd answered, 'Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.' 'O unbelieving generation', Jesus replied, 'how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.' So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, 'How long has he been like this?' 'From childhood', he answered. 'It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.' 'If you can'?' said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for him who believes.' Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. 'You deaf and mute spirit', he said, 'I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.' The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, 'He's dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?' He replied, 'This kind can come out only by prayer.' " (Mark 9:14-29)

Before this incident, Christ had been rising from the "valley of temptation and lowliness" toward the exalted Mount of Transfiguration. From it, he would eventually descend to an even deeper valley when he would suffer and die on the Cross, at the end of his ministry. While it was glory on the top of the Mount of Transfiguration, it was defeat at the bottom; for while Peter, James, and John were beholding the glory of the transfigured Christ, their unfortunate companions below were in a state of disillusionment over their own failure. They had not received anything of what those three had obtained by having had their faith confirmed by hearing the news of Christ's forthcoming death. Their faith was shaken because they were unable to perform the miracles which Christ had previously given them power to perform. We see them, in the absence of their master, trying to drive out an evil spirit from a boy whose father had faith in Jesus. But they were unsuccessful, due to their weak faith. This failure, and the resulting public scorn, left them deeply ashamed. Their embarrassment deepened when the educated among the crowd argued with them and asked them questions which they, as simple people, were unable to answer. People sensed that Christ's following, which others had joined when they came down the mountain, was getting close. Since Jesus knew what had happened before he arrived, he asked the scribes to tell him why they were arguing with the disciples. The boy's father intervened, however, and he came forward, kneeling before Christ, asking him to do what the disciples had failed to accomplish. He told Christ that his son was an only child and how an evil spirit caused him great suffering, endangering his life by attacking him and throwing him to the ground.

If we believe that there is a close connection between physical and spiritual disease in many instances, we can easily understand that this young man's deafness and muteness were due to a satanic power over him. Thus, we find Christ dealing first with the cause instead of the symptoms. The boy's father used the failure of those nine disciples as a reason for seeking Christ's help. Jesus' response came as a general rebuke to those present; it was aimed at the arguing scribes, the defeated disciples, and the father with the inadequate faith. He chided them as an "unbelieving generation". These words helped to humble the father, creating within him the faith he needed. Christ did not leave him discouraged, however, but encouraged him by saying, "Bring the boy to me." Bringing children to Christ is what parents do today when they submit their infant children to the rite of Christian Baptism. This is also what every Christian does by praying in faith for the salvation of family members who are still in Satan's power.

Christ sought to renew the faith of the father and demonstrate his love by simply asking him how long his son had been afflicted. His answer indicated that although he had not met Christ before, he did understand that the disciples had been given divine authority to cast out spirits. Thus, when they failed, he imagined that Christ would fail too. But Jesus said to him: "Everything is possible for him who believes." It was as though he were telling the man: "The problem is not that I am unable to heal but that your faith is inadequate." This Divine Physician's medicine had its effect on the sick soul, for the father cried out with tears, "I do

believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" He was right in asking for his faith to be strengthened.

This despairing man's plea is a beautiful prayer for all who are conscious of the importance of faith, realising their own inadequacy. Faith in Christ is the key that unlocks all divine mercies. This key is the only effective means to obtaining all of the blessings in God's rich storehouse. This man's tears have become an example of the inner spiritual transformation which accompanies Christ's healing miracles. The words of the prophet David ring true: "He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:6). Christ, by his authority, then ordered the evil spirit to leave the boy and not return.

Satan did his utmost to torture and destroy his victim, but then he met Christ who was more than his equal. Jesus had specifically come to overthrow his evil works. As it is always darkest just before dawn, so it was with this boy. The Devil shouted and struggled fiercely with him before finally leaving him, and it looked as if the boy had died, but Christ stretched out his lovely hand -- the hand that brings hope out of despair, and unites beggar and benefactor -- and lifted the youth from the gate of hell, making him whole again. He then returned the boy to his father. Likewise, the sinner who is under Satan's control does not hear heavenly voices nor speak of God's glory, but those whom Christ liberates can hear his teaching and speak forth his praises.

All of those present understood that Christ had done this in his Father's name and for his glory. Therefore, they were amazed at God's greatness. The majority in that Gentile area were heathen and, for the first time, they had actual proof of the difference between their worthless deities and Israel's living and almighty God.

Later, Christ and his disciples entered a house, and it was here that the nine disciples asked him why they had failed. They had not yet learned that the source of every outward failure is internal. They did not think of looking inside their own hearts for the cause of their defeat. It is quite possible that selfishness prevented them from rejoicing at their master's success. Since unbelief was behind it all, Christ told them, "This kind can come out only by prayer." Christ declared the necessity of faith by saying: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you..." (Matthew 17:20). This statement is not easy to explain, but let no one imagine that Christ meant it literally. It is used rather in a figurative, spiritual sense. How many mountains of difficulties have vanished when believers have had faith in the power of their Saviour!

3.1. Christ Pays the Temple Tax

"After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to

Peter and asked, 'Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?' 'Yes, he does', he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. 'What do you think, Simon?' he asked. 'From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes-- from their own sons or from others?' 'From others', Peter answered. 'Then the sons are exempt', Jesus said to him. 'But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.'" (Matthew 17:24-27)

Christ returned to his place in Capernaum after a long absence. By that time, the tax collectors at the Temple were awaiting his return in order to demand from him the two drachmas imposed on every Jew twenty years old and over. Maybe the demand was first made at the request of the leaders who wanted to humiliate Jesus by making him pay a tax that prophets and religious teachers did not have to pay. They may also have wanted to see if he would refuse payment, so that they would have reason to accuse him. It is possible that Christ used to pay this small tax every year. The tax collectors met Peter outside the house and asked him: "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

Peter should have asked the Master what to do before he answered. In his impulsive way, he said, "Yes, he does." After they had gone into the house, Christ showed him his mistake by asking him: "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes-- from their own sons or from others?" Peter replied, "From strangers." Christ then said, "Then the sons are exempt." He was, in effect, telling Peter, "You yourself have confessed that I am God's Son; how can it be that they demand the tax from me for my Father's house?"

Christ was content to state his rights, without insisting on them. Had he refused to pay outright, he would have offended the others; for, the rulers and the public did not recognise him as the Messiah. His refusal would have been interpreted as rebellion and an insult to the dignity of the Temple and religion. This tax did not originate from the elders' tradition but was Mosaic in origin. He did not intend to abolish ordinances of a divine nature until they had been fulfilled -- after his redemptive work on the Cross was accomplished. Therefore, he obeyed the law. In so doing, he gave his followers an example of not insisting on their rights in situations where it might result in harm, quarrelling, or suspicions. If people would only not insist on their own rights, most of the problems and friction between people could be alleviated.

It is possible that the money bag entrusted to Judas Iscariot was empty at that time. Christ may have wished to unite his submission to the Law with a miracle, strengthening Peter's faith while, at the same time, showing that his yielding was not out of weakness. Thus, while submitting himself to an injustice in his Father's earthly house -- the Temple -- he would exercise his legitimate authority in his Father's larger house which is nature. He instructed Peter to fetch a hook and told him that when he opened the mouth of his first catch, he would find a four-drachma coin -- just enough to pay both his and his master's tax. He added, "...give it to them for my tax and yours", not "...for both of us", since Peter was legally

responsible, whereas Christ was not. Thus, payment would be voluntary and in a liberal spirit.

4. Christ Teaches About True Greatness

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.'" (Matthew 18:1-5)

After returning from the Mount of Transfiguration, some of the disciples were debating about who among them was the greatest. Naturally, those who did not claim superiority for themselves took sides with those who did. The result was that there was jealousy and complaining based on the hope of receiving some personal favours from Christ. What a disappointment to Jesus' tender, loving heart to see this kind of immature competition among those whom he had chosen as his apostles. What a great frustration after all the time he had spent training them!

When Christ asked them what the topic of their debate was, they became quiet. They should have confessed and corrected their error. The wise king Solomon said, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). The prophet David wrote: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:5). Later, the disciples asked Christ to advise them about the subject of greatness in the kingdom of heaven. He called the twelve to him and had a child stand among them, as if to say that, in his kingdom, greatness is only for those who do not seek it, and that those who want to enter can only do so if they return to him and become as little children.

Children have a beautiful simplicity of character and are not concerned, like adults, with rank or greatness. They are easily led and are quick to forgive and forget injury. They also do what they're told much more easily than adults. They do not hold grudges for long, and do not know the meaning of worry or depression. They look forward to every day with joy and are content with simple pleasures.

For this reason, Christ said, "The smallest among you will be greatest." Nineteen centuries have passed and this lesson still needs to be learned by many, for only a few understand true humility. Even Christ's disciples learned this lesson imperfectly, for they renewed this argument at a later date when they again wanted to determine who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Thus, they were in danger, not only of losing rank, but of failing to enter the kingdom themselves. In our day, those who seek greatness for themselves and do not become humble like children will never enter the kingdom of heaven. They need to give

up their quest for greatness, and concern themselves, instead, with entering the kingdom.

Christ then taught the disciples something regarding things done in his name. He said that anything done for his sake is counted as an honour to him. Thus, any service rendered to the lowliest individual in Christ's name is like serving him, and serving him is equal to honouring the Father who sent him. How beautiful is this tie which, in Christ's name, binds the Father to the Son, and the Son with the least of believers.

""Teacher', said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.' 'Do not stop him', Jesus said. 'No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.'" (Mark 9:38-41)

In these verses, John tells Christ of an incident where he and the other disciples came across a man who was driving out devils in his name, even though he was not a follower of Jesus. The disciples thought that they alone had this privilege from the Master. But since Christ alone grants this power, the man may have obtained it from him without the disciples' knowledge. Christ could have allowed this man to use his holy name without needing to follow him and without letting the disciples know about it. Accordingly, Jesus corrected John by pointing out that those who were not against him were with him; that is, there is no neutrality in relation to the kingdom of heaven. In religion, it is quite wrong to say, "One is neither with us nor against us." John should have known that every righteous person who uses Christ's name in his work is upheld by Christ. Whoever uses Christ's name worthily is under his protection. Anyone hurting the disciples is punished by the Master who also rewards those who render them a service in his name.

4.1. Warning against Offences

"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell." (Matthew 18:6-9)

Here, Jesus is speaking about another important subject; namely, offences. He had already mentioned it in his Sermon on the Mount, and was now repeating it privately for the benefit of his disciples. By his paying the temple tax, he gave a guideline for instructing them in avoiding offences and paying taxes. Then, he rebuked them for offending the unknown disciple who was casting out devils in Christ's name. Now, he is saying that it is preferable to

drown in the sea rather than give offence to one of the little ones. No doubt, what he meant by an offence was causing others to stumble and fall into sin, as well as causing annoyance and insult without cause. Whoever does that to a true believer will reap a dreadful retribution. worse than sinking with a millstone round ones neck.

To avoid giving them the impression that offences could be stopped in this world entirely, he said, "...Offences must come." Is this an excuse for continual offending? To prevent any such misunderstanding, he quickly added, "...but woe to the man through whom they come!"

Christ then said, "...If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away ... And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away." Of course, Jesus was speaking figuratively, because removing these members literally does not remove the sin which is in the heart of man; every sin is first committed in the mind and heart. God who alone is judge in the matter of sin and damnation, looks at what is in the heart, not at what is in the members of the body. These words mean that everything which leads a man to sin should be put away, even though it may be as dear to him as his right hand or eye.

The Creator intended each member of the body to be a blessing and an instrument of good in the service of others. That is why the Apostle Paul described our bodies as "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Whoever disfigures or misuses this temple insults the Maker. Jesus, therefore, did not ask us to amputate parts of our bodies but to care for them and set them apart for his rightful service. This service would, of course, be impossible for the one who would destroy his members.

Christ added that everyone who causes others to stumble is in danger of hellfire, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. These words are not meant to frighten but are a caution and a warning from the mouth of the Loving One who came down from heaven to save us from this fearful, eternal punishment. It is impossible to overemphasise the terrors of hell. Christ described hell to us because he wants those whom he loves to escape this damnation by repenting and returning to the Father.

4.2. Warning Against Offending the Little Ones

"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. The Son of Man came to save what was lost. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost." (Matthew 18:10-14)

Christ warned his disciples not to despise people who seem unimportant because God cares for them. Indeed, he provides special angelic protection for them. What right do people have

to scorn those whose angels behold the very countenance of God? He made it clear that his salvation includes all children by saying, "your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost". This not only applies to those who are young in years but also includes those with childlike hearts -- especially those undergoing persecution, or those who are about to sink in the sea of ridicule.

Using his title, Son of Man, Christ said something beautiful about the purpose of his coming from heaven: "The Son of Man came to save what was lost." He likened his task to a man who leaves the ninety-nine sheep which are not lost, in order to find the one which has gone astray. When he finds it, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine. Truly, God's concern and joy over one sinner's repentance is greater than over all the rest who do not need to repent. It is something which is beyond human understanding, for his thoughts are not our thoughts!

4.3. If Your Brother Sins Against You

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:15-20)

Christ went on to address another vital issue occurring among believers in the Church: How does a believer behave when a brother offends him? First, he should not enter into a quarrel with him but should keep himself from anger. Then, he should maintain brotherly love by not allowing the matter to spread and become harder to correct. He should explain the matter to the offender privately and kindly, in the hope that he will not become angry and uncontrolled, but will recognise his error quickly, so as not to repeat it. Quite often, when the offender encounters a spirit of love and peace, he will become ashamed and sorry. This will lead him to stop the offence and try to correct the matter. For this reason, Jesus said, "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

If the offender hardens his heart against his brother, however, and does not feel shame nor the need to repent, a small group should try to solve the problem, acting as a referee between the two. But, if even this well-intended intervention is unsuccessful, the problem is to be turned over to the Church to investigate and to seek to reform the offender. This approach is helpful, for it helps the offender to submit. If he does not recognise the judgement of the Church, the one who has been wronged has the right to avoid him and not regard him as a brother because he has proven, by his conduct, that he lacks the basic quality of Christian

love.

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" (Matthew 18:21-22)

According to Jewish law, one could forgive another's offence three times, but if the offender did not stop, one was under no obligation to continue forgiving. Peter, feeling that Christ's law was more generous than that, asked him if he should forgive someone up to seven times. He evidently thought that seven times was the most which would be expected; thus, thought he was being generous. But how ashamed he was of himself when Jesus replied, "...seventy-seven times." By saying this, Jesus meant that forgiveness should have no limits.

How difficult this matter is in practice, because human nature cannot forgive in this way without the help of divine grace. But the Spirit which leads to heartfelt forgiveness the first time, leads again the second time, and so on infinitely. This is especially true because the person who forgives once is strengthened to do it again and again. On the other hand, the one who cannot pardon the hundredth time shows that his first act of forgiveness was not done in a true Christian spirit. Everyone who is conscious of God's forgiveness cannot possibly bring his brother to account, however greatly he may have been offended by him.

4.4. The Example of a King who Forgave

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me', he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant', he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:23-35)

It was necessary to explain the basis of this difficult rule in order to convince the disciples that it is possible. Jesus clarified the issue through the example of an unmerciful servant. This man, despite having been forgiven a large debt by his king, would not cancel a much smaller debt which one of his fellow servants owed him, but insisted on having him arrested

and thrown into prison. When the others heard of this, they reported it to the king who became furious. He called the man, rebuked him for not being merciful, and then delivered him to the jailers until he paid all his debt. Little chance did he have to repay all those thousands while in prison!

In this parable, Christ likened God to a king and sinners to debtors. Since a sinner's debt to God is enormous, it is impossible for him to repay it. But God, in his mercy, and on the basis of Christ's work of Redemption, forgives even the greatest sinner when he confesses, asks for mercy, and chooses to lead a new life. A man's debt to his fellow man is insignificant when compared with what he owes God. When a person receives God's forgiveness, he has no right to withhold pardon from someone else who has wronged him, however often that may occur. He also has no right to judge his brother before meeting him and listening to his case. It may be that he has sinned unintentionally or was a victim of slander. How terrifying is the final statement Christ used in response to Peter: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

In the Lord's Prayer, we have proof of the importance of not harbouring hatred: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). An innocent person should not wait for the guilty party to come and seek forgiveness but should be the first to seek reconciliation, in accordance with the command: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." (Matthew 18:15). By doing this, we will be like Christ who did not wait for sinners to repent and come to him first, but came down from heaven in order "to save what was lost." (Matthew 18:11).

5. Christ Forgives A Woman Caught In Adultery

"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir', she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you', Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'" (John 8:3-11)

Christ went to Jerusalem and entered the Temple. He started teaching and expounding the truths of his spiritual kingdom. After a while, there was a disturbance in the crowd; a group of religious teachers was trying to force its way to Christ, dragging along a poor woman caught in adultery. In their usual hypocrisy, they pretended to be zealous about the law of

chastity, and to be respectful toward Christ whom they wanted to have judge a matter according to their holy Law. They called him by their highest title, "Teacher", and, standing the woman before the group, they asked him to judge if she should be sentenced according to the Law of Moses, which prescribed stoning for such an offence.

The Roman authorities had forbidden the Jewish religious courts to pass the death sentence. Had Christ passed the judgement of stoning that she deserved, he would have contradicted the governing authority. He would also have angered many in the crowd who were accustomed to leniency in such cases. If, on the other hand, he had said she should not be stoned, he would have opened himself up to the accusation that he was an enemy of their sacred Law. They hoped he would again take liberties in interpreting the Law as he had done in the matter of the Sabbath, claiming to be superior to Moses. By asking Jesus what he thought about Moses' words, they were implying that he felt he could contradict the Law whenever he wanted to. This would have got him into trouble with the conservative members of the group.

Christ's attention was not focused on the sinful woman but on her accusers whose guilt was even greater. Jesus could not tolerate these oppressive and wicked people. His first response was to bend down and write with his finger on the ground, maybe to give the accusers time to reconsider. When they persisted, he gave them his legal opinion with words similar to the following: "According to your Law, when an accusation against an adulterous woman is established, the witnesses should be the first to stone her. Those of you who have also been guilty under the Law have no right to expect her to be punished before you. Therefore, let only the innocent cast the first stone!"

After these words, he bent down again and wrote on the ground. By the time he straightened up, all her accusers had left in the same order they arrived, beginning with the oldest and ending with the younger ones. Indeed, their consciences made them into cowards!

Most likely, his disciples did not leave with the others but stayed to hear the conclusion of the matter. With the woman still standing there, Christ's thoughts now focused on her. Had he not come to seek and save the lost? God did not send Jesus to condemn the world but to save it. He asked her: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, sir." He told her: "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

By saying "Neither do I condemn you", he acted legally, because, since her accusers left before their examination started, the case was dropped. By these words, Christ was not condoning the sin she was accused of. Because he hates Sin, yet loves the sinner, he gave her the opportunity to leave her sins behind.

"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' The Pharisees challenged him, 'Here you are,

appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.' Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me.' Then they asked him, 'Where is your father?' 'You do not know me or my Father', Jesus replied. 'If you knew me, you would know my Father also.' He spoke these words while teaching in the temple area near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his time had not yet come. Once more Jesus said to them, 'I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come.' This made the Jews ask, 'Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, "Where I go, you cannot come"?' But he continued, 'You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.' 'Who are you?' they asked. 'Just what I have been claiming all along', Jesus replied. 'I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.' They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.'" (John 8:12-29)

After the incident with the woman, Christ resumed his teaching, likening himself and his work to light; one of his most noble titles is "The Light of the World". The Pharisees objected to this claim on the grounds that a man's testimony concerning himself could not stand. Jesus replied that even if this rule were true of sinners, blinded by egotism or deceit, it did not apply to him since he, as the sinless Christ, was "at the Father's side" (John 1:18). This is in addition to the Father's witness which rules out any doubt or protest. When they asked him where his Father was, he replied with words which no human could use, for he said, "You do not know me or my Father." When he told them that he would go to a place where they could not follow, they scornfully hinted that he was threatening to take his own life. He again responded by saying, "You are from below...." No mere human could make such a statement.

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' They answered him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?' Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father.' 'Abraham is our father', they answered. 'If you were Abraham's children', said Jesus, 'then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does.' 'We are not illegitimate children', they protested. 'The only Father we have is God himself.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry

out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.' The Jews answered him, 'Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?'" (John 8:31-48)

After Jesus referred to himself as "The Light of the World", many believed in him. He went on to say that those who accept this truth will certainly be set free, because he will truly do this for them. When they said that they did not need to be freed, he told them that anyone who sins is in slavery to Sin. To those who had determined to kill him, he said they wanted to do this because his words had no place in their hearts. He declared that they were slaves to Sin because they were the Devil's children. Thus, their claim to be children of Abraham was invalid because they did the Devil's deeds, not Abraham's. Likewise, their practising lies was a clear reflection of their true origin because the Devil is called "the Father of Lies".

Then he continued, saying that no other man could claim to be sinless. All the prophets confessed their sins with sorrow. Who is this man who can make such a claim for himself? He must surely be superior to everyone else! Then he added, "I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (John 8:51). Again, these are words which no man has a right to say -- they are the words of the only Son of God!

"'I am not possessed by a demon', said Jesus, 'but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.' At this the Jews exclaimed, 'Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?' Jesus replied, 'If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' 'You are not yet fifty years old', the Jews said to him, 'and you have seen Abraham!' 'I tell you the truth', Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!' At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.'" (John 8:49-59)

Jesus said that the truth sets a man free. Upon hearing this, his enemies accused him of being a Samaritan and of having an evil spirit. They challenged his statement that whoever keeps his words will live forever, using the argument that Abraham and all the patriarchs and prophets had died. They asked him who he thought he was. In reply, he made the famous statement about his existence before Abraham, which undeniably proved his divine origin. How could he have claimed to have existed before Abraham, unless he indeed had a divine nature which was from the beginning? (John 1:1). Also, his use of the expression, "I am", is the same as the name of God, declared to Moses long ago (Exodus 3:14). They fully understood him to mean that he was the eternal God, and this made them furious. They

wanted to stone him, but he escaped; his hour had not yet come.

6. Conditions For Following Christ

"As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and he said, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village.'" (Luke 9:51-56)

During Christ's last trip from Galilee to Judea, he wanted to pass through Samaria which was the part of the country known as "beyond Jordan" in Isaiah's prophecy -- the area whose people would "see a great light" (Isaiah 9:2).

Jesus sent word ahead to a Samaritan village where he planned to spend the night with his disciples. This news greatly displeased the inhabitants because it came from a group of Jews whose famous Teacher had largely neglected their territory in his ministry. Maybe an element of jealousy also played a part in their refusal to host him and his disciples.

When the messengers returned with the news of rejection, the disciples were very upset. They would have expected Peter to leap into action, but the Sons of Zebedee, whom Christ had nicknamed "Sons of Thunder", beat him to it by asking the Master if they could call down fire from heaven to destroy those Samaritans. Did not Elijah the prophet, in that same location, call down the fire which destroyed a hundred of King Ahaziah's soldiers which had been sent to capture him? (2 Kings 1:10). Had they not learned, on the Mount of Transfiguration, that their master was greater than Elijah? How could he refrain from punishing those who had insulted him, the one whom they knew and confessed to be God's Son and his Anointed?

One should not follow the example of the prophets in all cases, however. Christ rebuked those two disciples with words to this effect: "This should not be the spirit of those who walk with me. Your request shows that you are driven by a different spirit -- one of bigotry and revenge. Did you ever see me act in that way when the crowd in Nazareth wanted to harm me, or when I was nearly stoned in Judea, or when I was expelled from the country of the Gadarenes? Did I resist at all? Have I not repeatedly taught you to love your enemies and do good to those who hate you? How can you now ask me to destroy the people of this village with fire? You should have known by now that I did not come to destroy people's bodies or souls but to save them!"

Christ rejected the two disciples' suggestion to destroy those hostile Samaritans. He moved instead to another village, most likely outside their borders. In so doing, he gave an example

of kindness, compassion, and meekness in response to hostility. The works of healing on this trip were more than enough to fill his time, but it is recorded that he taught three parables containing lessons, which those engaged in physical works of mercy should learn.

"As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'" (Luke 9:57-62)

A man approached Jesus and, after the usual greeting, said, "I will follow You wherever You go." Possibly, he thought that Jesus would be proud to have another follower. But Christ's reply suggests to us that this man's motives were not the best -- maybe even worldly. Thus, he was not suited to be among his disciples. Christ, as God incarnate, had come down to the lowest degree of human deprivation, in order to comfort the poor of this world and make it easier for them to follow him. Both his cradle and his tomb were borrowed, as were all of this world's goods which he used. He was supported financially from those who loved him, and left behind only his clothes and the grave sheets which he discarded when he rose from death. Thus, his reply to this man was, "...The Son of Man has no place to lay his head." This signified how little he had to offer this man, in the way of worldly goods. We hear nothing further about this man.

Later, Jesus gave one of his believing friends an opportunity to become his disciple. The man accepted and then asked if he could remain with his old father until he died. This was a sacred parental duty in those days. Christ was not mild with him for putting his parental duties above his responsibility to God. Thus, he advised him to leave the spiritually dead to take care of the physically dead. In other words, he, being spiritually alive through conversion, should join others who, like him, were spiritually awakened. No doubt, Christ upheld the command to honour one's parents, as was demonstrated during his early years in Nazareth. One is also reminded that Jesus rebuked those Jewish leaders who tried to escape family duties by giving corban, an official gift, to the Temple, which they should have given to their parents instead (Mark 7:10-13). Therefore, Jesus advised this man to follow him and leave his father, recognising God's exclusive rights over his life. Whenever God's rights conflict with those of our relatives, we should give priority to him.

A third man also approached Christ, wanting to follow him. But first, he wanted to bid his family farewell. Christ did not give him permission to do so. It is probable that he lived some distance away, and Jesus knew that if he went home, he would lose his determination or his parents might prevent him from returning. Another explanation could be that Christ wanted to make it clear to all present that, under no circumstances, should one put off the call of the

Master. Jesus responded to this man's plea by saying that those who decide to follow Christ should press on without procrastination or hesitation, just as a ploughman should not look back once he begins to till the soil.

6.1. Practical Discipleship

"After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. When you enter a house, first say, "Peace to this house." If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, "The kingdom of God is near you." But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near." I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.'" (Luke 10:1-12)

There is no doubt that a large number of people followed Jesus as disciples. Among those, were seventy-two men who were sent out in pairs. They were to preach, teach, and heal in the villages and towns, just as Christ had done with the twelve. Having them go in pairs would be more effective, for one could encourage the other, and they could take turns speaking and serving. More than two would be a strain on their hosts and their opportunities to, preach would be lessened. By having the power to heal diseases, they could capture the attention of the people, gaining their confidence and affection. In this way, they would show their master's concern for the temporal and spiritual welfare of all. They would spread word of the kingdom which was now near and the king who had sent them as ambassadors.

He gave these seventy-two men advice and instruction similar to that which he had given the twelve. However, he also told them not to greet anyone on the way, due to the shortness of the time. Easterners are fond of lengthy greetings which tend to be time-consuming. Furthermore, he advised them to eat whatever was offered, without question or comment, ignoring the Jewish ceremonial laws concerning food. These could be a barrier between them and those who would receive them in their homes. He supported this by saying, "...the worker deserves his wages."

"The seventy-two returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.' He replied, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'" (Luke 10:17-20)

Most likely, this group of disciples returned gradually. But they all came back joyful and amazed. The authority which Christ granted them may not have specifically included the driving out evil spirits, so when they attempted this task and were successful, they were overjoyed. This accomplishment was foremost in their reports to the one who had sent them, for they told him, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."

Why was this achieved in Christ's name and not God's? What effectiveness could there have been in a mere name, unless Christ was truly there with them in spirit?

In his reply, Christ pointed out that their success was due to his earlier, divine act of casting Satan out of heaven because of his pride. It was as though he were saying, "You have witnessed the defeat of some soldiers, but I have seen the defeat and fall of their commander -- his ultimate defeat." Christ will take him captive who had always enslaved men and bound them with the shackles of a corrupt nature and despicable habits. From Satan's title, "prince of this world" (John 16:11), we recognise his kingdom, and from his description, "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Ephesians 2:2), we see his residence. From his realm, "the dominion of darkness" (Colossians 1:13), we understand the nature of his works, and from the phrase, "those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 2:2), we see the behaviour of those who are his subjects.

Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:22,23). Did they not realise that their true success was not in casting out demons, which would likely make them proud because it would seem to have been the result of their own actions? True success, however, would consist in having their names written in heaven -- a work of God and a free gift of his grace. Blessed are those to whom Christ confirms the reality of their names being written in the Book of Life. Can a mere man have the right to tell people that their names are written in heaven? Does this not tell us clearly that Christ is both the Son of Man and the Son of God?

6.2. Christ Rejoices over the Ministry of His Followers

"At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.'" (Luke 10:21-24)

In all of Christ's earthly life, we do not read that he was full of joy except here. However, we do know of three instances where he wept, and of several occasions when he was annoyed, troubled in spirit, or sorrowful. He was very happy to see his disciples' victory over Satan and the resulting blessings for the people. It was the greatest success of his ministry. In his joy, his soul naturally reached out, not toward people, but to his heavenly Father. Jesus thanked him in words that he had used previously. Then, he turned his attention to the disciples, telling them privately that many prophets and kings had not been as privileged as they were, considering what they had just experienced.

We should not overlook the great benefits which those seventy gained, and which we ourselves enjoy today as a result of their service. When Jesus entrusted these men with the work he had previously given the twelve, he taught us that the work of evangelism is not limited to clergy, but rather, it is a privileged duty of every believer who should devote part of his time and money to spreading the Gospel. If only all Christians would understand this truth and follow it, they could accomplish miracles! Christ was referring to this when he said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). The truth of this principle was manifested in the history of the early Church. This truth is manifested today as well, with the spread of the Gospel throughout many lands.

7. Who Is My Neighbour?

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher', he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered: "'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 neighbor as yourself.'" 'You have answered correctly', Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.' But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him", he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Luke 10:25-37)

After the return of the seventy-two, a teacher of the Law came to test Christ. He asked him what he should do to obtain eternal life. Had this question been hostile, Christ would most likely have censured him firmly, but it was a juridical approach, and so it deserved an appropriate reply. By turning the question around to the inquirer, Jesus allowed him to

answer from the Law. This scribe's answer turned out to be as good as his question. He said: "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 neighbor as yourself." Christ told him that he had answered correctly and that, if he obeyed this commandment, he would live. This man had an adequate idea of the divine Law but knew very well that he could neither love God nor his neighbour to that extent and, therefore, had no right to eternal life. Knowledge alone does not ease the conscience but convicts it; scholarship does not remove judgement but increases it; and keeping the Law does not guarantee salvation unless it is kept perfectly, which is impossible!

For this reason, God expects each sinner to know, not only the Law, but also his own shortcomings and weakness. This teacher of the Law lacked this necessary self-knowledge, and yet somehow sought to justify himself while being less than righteous. He dared not ask who God was so that he could love him. Instead, he asked who his neighbour was in order to know whether or not he loved him as himself, for he wanted to inherit eternal life. Once again, Christ replied with another question to make the inquirer answer his own question. In order to provide an introduction to the second question, he told the story which we now know as the "Parable of the Good Samaritan."

Christ related the story of a Jewish traveller who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was attacked by bandits who robbed him of everything, even his clothes. They also beat and wounded him and left him for dead. It happened that a priest came that way and took notice of him. As far as the priest was concerned, he had stumbled across this victim by chance. In reality, however, this situation was ordained of God. By such "accidents", God tests each one of us. Will we respond to the inner voice which tells us to show compassion and mercy?

When the priest saw him, he passed by on the other side. No doubt, he tried to justify himself with feeble excuses; but what he did was inexcusable. The victim was a fellow Jew, and the priest was officially supposed to help him. Since he was a religious leader, charged with serving the people in every way possible, he had been ordained to be an example to the nation in all his actions. Therefore, evading this responsibility was a serious shortcoming.

Next, came a Levite, a colleague of the priest who was second in importance among the clergy. We read that he was slightly more compassionate than the priest because he stopped to look at the poor man. Perhaps he even had feelings of pity towards him. However, he did not translate his feelings into action, for he too passed by on the other side.

Neither the priest nor the Levite were ignorant of the command in the Law to help a brother in need. What is one to think of two religious men, seeing their brother in a terrible plight, yet not extending a helping hand? Did they excuse themselves for ignoring this man because they had already done their duty to God and humanity by performing all their religious

duties? Did they think that this man was too close to death to be helped? Indeed, if he died on their hands, they would become "unclean", and this would prevent them from performing certain religious tasks for a while. They should have remembered the divine order which says, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice...." (Hosea 6:6). Perhaps they hid behind the excuse that this was obviously a dangerous road, and they had to hurry along for their own safety. Maybe the priest thought he would leave this task to the Levite behind him. On the other hand, maybe the Levite felt no responsibility because the priest ahead of him, who was his senior, had not done anything. Can such excuses ever be justified in the eyes of God?

Christ condemned the priest and the Levite, and in this we have strong evidence that a man is not only judged for the evil he commits but also for the good he fails to do. Public opinion would also blame these two men, not for any wrong that they had done, but for ignoring the plight of a fellow man in desperate need.

We now turn our thoughts from the priest and the Levite to one who immediately gladdens our hearts -- the third traveller, a Samaritan, a natural enemy of the victim who had fallen among thieves. Under normal circumstances, the bruised victim would most likely have spat at the Samaritan and felt a revulsion towards him, for he was socially inferior.

Maybe this third traveller realised that this wounded man's countrymen had passed him without stopping to help. Yet, in spite of all these feelings, he obeyed the divine command to love his neighbour. This command is present in all five books of Moses, and it was also recognised by the Samaritans (Leviticus 19:15). Once more, Christ's words about the last being first and the first being last showed themselves to be true.

The Samaritan dismounted, attended to the victim's injuries, and placed him on his donkey, supporting him along the rough road until they reached an inn. Here, he did not forsake his responsibility, but paid an amount equal to two days' wages for the man's care. He then promised to pay any further expenses necessary to ensure the victim's complete recovery.

When Christ finished his parable, he asked the religious expert which one he thought behaved like one who loved his neighbour as himself. The answer should have been, "The man from Samaria." But religious pride did not allow him to answer plainly that the Samaritan was a better example than the Jewish priest and Levite. He was content to say, "The one who had mercy on him." Christ was satisfied with this answer and said, "Go and do likewise." In other words, show kindness to all who need your help, even your enemies!

Christ praised this Samaritan, not to pay him reverence nor to insult priests and Levites, but to teach that a person of another faith, who obeys the law of love, is better than a clergyman who ignores it. The scribe asked, "And who is my neighbour?" when he should have asked the following question: "Is not everyone my neighbour? Should I not treat everyone as my neighbour and love him as myself?" A neighbour is one whose path crosses mine and to

whom my hand can reach out. No matter how distant his heart is from mine, nor how alienated he is from me, he is still my neighbour. God wants us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, and treat them in a way which shows that this love is genuine.

In this story, Jesus repeated his basic teaching which the behaviour of the priest and Levite contradicted: Religion does not consist of outward pious observances while, at the same time, the fundamental principle of loving one's neighbour is broken. The priest and Levite did not really love God and their observances were futile. In contrast, God accepted the Samaritan who demonstrated that he loved God by loving his fellow man, even though he did not fulfil his religious duties and was not a Jew.

In this parable, Christ destroyed the barrier between denominations and made it clear that the heart of religion is love, not what group one is a member of. A spiritual bond of love should exist between the various denominations, confirming the unity of faith, despite slight doctrinal differences. These differences should not be adhered to at the expense of brotherly love. Real truth and goodness are one, and the purpose of the various branches of the true faith of Christianity is to lead mankind to God.

7.1. Martha and Mary Welcome Christ

"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha', the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'" (Luke 10:38-42)

Christ and his disciples continued their journey towards Jerusalem until they reached Bethany which is three quarters of an hour's walk from the city. It occupies a special place in history because of a devout family that lived there. The members of that family were personal friends of Jesus and they offered him and his disciples comfortable accommodations whenever they were in need. When Jesus and his disciples entered this home, others from the village joined them and he would teach them, as was his habit. It was then that the two sisters, Martha and Mary, served their distinguished guest, although in different ways. Martha, the older of the two, was in charge of the house and looked after their physical needs. She was kept very busy with preparing food for the crowds that came to their door whenever the great Prophet and Miracle-worker visited them.

As for Mary, she understood that Christ was not a typical teacher who wanted lavish treatment, but one whose true joy lay in the people's attentiveness to his instructions. He had said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled"

(Matthew 5:6). Therefore, Mary sat at his feet, listening to his words. In so doing, she beautifully represented that small minority of people for whom everything the world offers is far inferior to faith in God. These people do not seek to leave the world and its evils; they place their faith above it. They are those whose names are written in the Book of Life because God has chosen them for everlasting glory.

Martha's error was in putting the world's good above faith in God. How often is the "good" the enemy of the "best"! Because sin leads to more sin, she grumbled at her sister in her heart and envied her for sitting at the feet of Jesus. This led her to complain to the Master himself. She should have been glad that her sister had this unique opportunity to learn. She could have at least said to her, "Please help me first, and then we can sit together at the Teacher's feet." But instead, she objected, saying, "...Tell her to help me!"

Christ well understood the necessity of material things and often met those needs along with the spiritual ones. However, he made it clear that he preferred that she should sit and listen to him instead of attending to his physical needs.

"Martha, Martha", he said to her, "you are worried and upset about many things." It was as if he were telling her that being occupied with worldly matters robbed her of the peace, quiet, and joy she would have found by seeking first God's kingdom instead of material well-being. Only one thing was important; and Mary had chosen that which could not be taken away from her.

8. Christ Opens The Eyes Of A Man Born Blind

"As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned', said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. 'Go', he told him, 'wash in the Pool of Siloam' (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing." (John 9:1-7)

As Christ was walking in Jerusalem, he passed a man who had been born blind. His disciples asked him, "...Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus replied that it was not a result of either party's sin but it happened so that the works of God could be shown in him.

How great was the difference between these comforting words of Jesus and the discouraging words of others, which the man usually heard regarding the cause of his blindness. For the first time, he realised that he was not cursed or forsaken of God. On the contrary, he was the object of God's favour and was playing a role in his good purposes. This realisation transported him from the world of despair to that of hope. When he asked the name of the

speaker, he was told that it was "Jesus". How regrettable that he was blind and not able to see the one who triumphed on his behalf that moment. Even if Christ had given this man gold, instead of the bronze coins he was used to receiving, he would not have done him as great a favour as he did by his reply to the disciples' question.

This reply marked the beginning of Christ's good work in his life. Jesus first drew the attention of his hearers to the shortness of time left for him to work. He said, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me." He then referred to his being the "Light of the World" which illuminates every man. Jesus meant that the darkness which had afflicted this blind man was in direct opposition to the light of his perfect nature, and so he would remove it. He spat on the ground and made some mud, covering the man's eyes with it. He then ordered him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man went, washed, and returned seeing.

Divine power was manifested in this deed through the great difference between the method of healing and its results. Mud normally blinds a seeing eye, but covering this man's eyes with it was necessary in order to make him understand the connection between Christ and his miracle. It also awakened faith in the blind man's soul and helped him to understand the importance of obedience, the fruit of faith. He had to obey or else he would not benefit from Christ's deed. The amazing cure which followed, though not the result of the man's action, was a result of his obedient faith. Had he not believed, he would not have obeyed. Furthermore, had he not obeyed after believing, one could not say that he really had true faith. He was healed because he had faith which resulted in obedience. These are the two principles of salvation: faith and obedience. The one who believes is saved because he will surely act on his faith. If he does not act when given the opportunity, it is probably because he does not truly believe to begin with. He perishes, not because he did not act, but because he did not have true faith.

We can visualise this blind man walking as fast as possible to the pool of Siloam. Maybe he was ridiculed because of the mud on his face, but this did not deter him from being obedient; neither did the advice of the religious leaders who told him not to obey Christ's directions. He did not care if he angered them for doing work on the Sabbath. The harshness of the religious leaders did not extinguish his weak faith, nor did it stop him from going where Christ had ordered him. When he received his sight, he returned to the place where he had left Jesus. He wanted to see the one who had bestowed this priceless gift on him, to offer him his gratitude, and to receive new spiritual guidance. However, he did not find Christ there and no one was around who could tell him where he had gone.

This miracle is a very appropriate symbol of salvation. It gave this man, who had been born blind, something he did not possess before. He had been born spiritually blind because he had been born in Sin, as the elders continued to remind him. Christ, therefore, while granting him new physical sight, also gave him something immeasurably greater: spiritual vision. We

too are born into this world spiritually blind and are given ``sight" by Jesus Christ, through faith and obedience.

"Therefore the neighbours and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, 'Is not this he who sat and begged?' Some said, 'This is he.' Others said, 'He is like him.' He said, 'I am he.' Therefore they said to him, 'How were your eyes opened?' He answered and said, 'A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, "Go to the pool of Siloam and wash." So I went and washed, and I received sight.' Then they said to him, 'Where is He?' He said, 'I do not know.'" (John 9:8-12)

The blind man received sight on a Sabbath which was a day of rest for the Jews. Thus, when the fanatic legalists understood that he had received healing on the Sabbath, they were angry and wanted to punish him. No one dared to defend what Jesus had done, nor uphold what had happened to the blind man because the elders had declared publicly that anyone who confessed Jesus as the Christ would be shut out from the synagogue and deprived of any religious or civil rights.

When the man could not find Christ, he returned to his home to see his parents and neighbours. He was thirty years old and would be seeing them for the first time in his life!

How great was the transformation in this man's appearance due to what had happened to him; his eyes were opened, his face was lit up with joy, his manner was so different that those who only knew him superficially no longer recognised him. For this reason, there were conflicting reports as to what had taken place. Some thought this cure was mere deception and that this man was not the same as the blind man they had known before, but only resembled him. But he insisted, saying, "I am he."

When he was asked what had happened to him and who was responsible for it, he stated the facts. But when he was asked where his healer had gone, he could only say, "I do not know." He wished he was able to direct them to where Christ was.

"They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. 'He put mud on my eyes', the man replied, 'and I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.' But others asked, 'How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?' So they were divided. Finally they turned again to the blind man, 'What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' The man replied, 'He is a prophet.' The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. 'Is this your son?' they asked. 'Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?' 'We know he is our son', the parents answered, 'and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'" (John 9:13-23)

The fanatic legalists could not find the one who had caused this so-called "violation of the Sabbath", and so they dragged the man who had been blind to their council to question him. After hearing the story from the man himself and learning that Jesus whom they hated and wanted to kill was the cause of it, they were not sure what to do. If they judged Christ for breaking the Sabbath, they would confirm the miracle and spread news about it. This could possibly have increased the crowds' attachment to Christ and could have even provoked a political movement to make him king, because it was the time of the Great Feast. However, if they denied the miracle, their accusation of his breaking the Sabbath would collapse. Therefore, they hesitated and argued among themselves. At first, they had confirmed the miracle, but now they wanted to neutralise its positive effect by saying that since it was done on the Sabbath, its author was not of God but was acting by the power of Satan! Some in the council objected by saying, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?"

This caused a split between them and they changed their plan of action. They would now try to deny it had happened, accusing Jesus of trickery. But first they would need to force the man and his parents to deny that it had happened. They could not, however, for the truth of his cure was confirmed by his words: "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" This saying is the confession of many who have experienced salvation in Christ through living faith in him.

"A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. 'Give glory to God', they said. 'We know this man is a sinner.' He replied, 'Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!' Then they asked him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered, 'I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?' Then they hurled insults at him and said, 'You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' To this they replied, 'You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!' And they threw him out." (John 9:24-34)

When the elders questioned the man whose sight was restored, he answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" On hearing that, they reviled him, expressing pride in being disciples of Moses instead of being a follower of an unknown Galilean like he was. They cursed him, alleging that he had veered from the true path and denied God by calling Christ a prophet. He criticised them for their ignorance of the origin of one whose deeds demonstrated that he was from God. He concluded with some strong words which showed his discernment, courage, and faith. He reminded them that never before had there been mention of sight being restored to one who had been born blind. Furthermore, he said, "We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will." They answered and said to him,

"You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" Then, they cast him out.

By saying these words, the man was relying on some scriptural texts, for the only sinner, to whom God listens, is the one who does his will. This made them furious; they again cursed him and then cast him out of the congregation.

"Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' 'Who is he, sir?' the man asked. 'Tell me so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said, 'You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.' Then the man said, 'Lord, I believe', and he worshipped him." (John 9:35-38)

After being expelled from the congregation, he went out and Christ met him, asking, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus did not reveal himself as the Son of God to the wise, but rather to this poor man who was ready to believe. He expressed what was in his inner heart when he said, "Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him." And Jesus said to him, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then he said, "Lord, I believe!"

How hard this answer must have been for this man who, as a Jew, was used to the idea of the oneness of God. How could the man Jesus, in front of him, be the Son of God? He had two options before him: either to fall down immediately and worship him, or not to do so. If he did the former, and if Jesus were not indeed God, it would be a great sin. Previously, he had confessed that Christ was a prophet but had not worshipped him. Now, however, he worshipped Christ because he believed that he was God's Son, deserving much more honour than that given to a prophet, king, or angel.

It was at that moment that he was healed of his spiritual blindness. Now he could see clearly with his physical eyes and with his "spiritual eyes of faith" that Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Mary, was God's only Son. This poor man had received insults and rejection from the elders but Christ repaid him with multiplied blessings and salvation. The "religious men" expelled him from the synagogue and shut the door of religious privileges in his face, but Christ ushered him into the kingdom of God, opening for him the door of heaven. As a result of his blindness, he received eternal salvation, gained the friendship of the Heavenly Companion, and earned an honourable mention in the annals of history that will last eternally. He was able to serve Christ by spreading his fame by his testimony. He also helped those around him, who had willing hearts, by giving them sufficient reason to come to the Saviour and receive salvation from him. Can you not imagine him among the saints in heaven, forever grateful for having been born blind?

9. Christ, The Good Shepherd

"Jesus said, 'For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will

become blind.' Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, 'What? Are we blind too?' Jesus said, 'If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.' Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them." (John 9:39-10:6)

After Christ opened the eyes of the man born blind, the elders opposed him. Then, they reviled the man and expelled him from the congregation. How was Christ to speak to them? He applied the terms, "thieves and robbers", because they did not enter their shepherding position through the one Door appointed by God: Christ himself. Instead, they climbed in another way. Without a divine call or eligibility, they simply gained their status through political circles. They crawled in through gaps in the sheep pen, gaining their priestly, pastoral office by heredity, influence, flattery, bribery, trickery, or oppression. What good was there in their succession from Aaron the high priest, their legalistic ordination, or similar externals, as long as they missed the Door?

9.1. Christ is the Door

"Therefore Jesus said again, 'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'" (John 10:7-10)

A theologian once wrote: "The true shepherd of men is the one who assumes his position out of love for Christ, seeking to glorify Christ, doing his work in Christ's strength, teaching his teachings, walking in his steps, and seeking to bring souls to him." There is no entry into pastoral service except through Christ, "the door". There is also no exit except through him. A pastor is not permitted to leave this work without the permission of Christ, for he said, "I am the door." Moreover, the door for the shepherds is also the door for the sheep, the individual believers.

Some have interpreted the door, mentioned here, to be the Holy Spirit, meaning that the shepherd's spiritual ability to lead and feed his flock cannot take place except through the working of the Spirit. In support of this interpretation, we can draw on the fact that Christ's influential and powerful preaching came directly from the Holy Spirit.

9.2. Christ is the Good Shepherd

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

Christ described himself as the Good Shepherd. The Psalmist said, "Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth" (Psalm 80:1). The prophet Isaiah said: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isaiah 40:11). The most beautiful Psalm is that of the Shepherd: "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want..." (Psalm 23:1).

A shepherd's job is not an easy one. It is subject to hardships and danger from wild beasts. Christ, as the Good Shepherd, endured the greatest hardships and perils, and then laid down his life to save his own sheep. By contrast, those whom he called "thieves" do not come except to steal and kill; those he called "hired hands" do not defend the sheep when they are in danger, but run away, leaving the flock to scatter and perish because they do not really care for the sheep.

Christ is the Good Shepherd who has given his life for the sheep. In order to spare the sheep from Satan's grasp, he experienced a death which he did not deserve and brought life to those who were spiritually dead. This shows the great value he places on his sheep, both corporately and individually. He knows all members in his flock personally, including their names and innermost secrets. His wonderful knowledge and care for each of his own is measureless and is the same today as when he laid down his life on the Cross.

9.3. The Shepherd Gives His Life

""The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-- only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."" (John 10:12-18)

Christ noticed that they had not understood his words and so he repeated them, explaining that he would lay down his life willingly. He alone had the right to say, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life...." Those words are similar to those of Isaiah who declared:

"After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:11,12)

Christ also made it clear to them that he had the power to take up his life again after laying it down, meaning that he would rise from death in his own strength after his voluntary submission to it. Then, he stated his interest in those "not of this sheep pen", saying, "...I must bring them also." These words refer to the foreign Gentile nations.

"At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, 'He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?' But others said, 'These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?' Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The Jews gathered around him, saying, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.'" (John 10:19-30)

These teachings were too lofty for his listeners. Some said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" Others disagreed, saying, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon." These dissenters based their response on his latest miracle which they said could not possibly be attributed to Satan. We could add another argument: Supposing Satan had the power to open the eyes of the blind; would he do anything good for man? If he would, surely he would not be Satan, the adversary!

The elders showed how foolish they were by attributing Christ's good works to Satan, confirming the truth of Christ's judgement against those that are spiritually blind. Why did these scholars forget that, in the Torah, giving sight to the blind was to be one of the signs of the Messiah?

Christ clearly stated that he was the Good Shepherd and that his sheep hear his voice and follow him. These Jewish leaders were not his sheep. They denied the clearest evidence of his being their Messiah, rejecting him because he did not conform to their wishes. But his strong attraction to those who were true "sheep" in the spiritual sense is proof that he was their coming Saviour. These were drawn to the Good Shepherd through the working of the Divine Spirit in their rebirth, and like sheep, they followed him.

Jesus spoke to his sheep concerning their eternal security. As for those who are commonly supposed to be his sheep, but who backslide from the faith, their case is described in the words of the Apostle John: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19). Whoever is sure that he is one of Christ's sheep has come into his care and will not perish. No power can take him out of the Heavenly Shepherd's care. Jesus will restore his soul and lead him in paths of righteousness for his

name's sake (Psalm 23:3).

When the believer puts his trust in God's promises, he finds a secure anchor for his soul -- especially in the hour of defeat. But in case some imagine that their security in Christ permits them freedom to indulge in sin, we say that the eternal life, which Christ gives, causes his sheep to hate sin and love pleasing the heavenly Father. All those who are content to remain in any kind of sin, nurturing it in their heart, prove that they are not one of his true sheep. Those who only seek to escape eternal punishment will have no place among the sheep whom the King will gather on his right hand on the Day of Judgement. All who love the Saviour sincerely and seek honestly to be saved from all that opposes his will can rest secure, despite their occasional falls. They can claim the words of the Apostle Paul: "...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). The Wise Man said: "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity" (Proverbs 24:16). It is not reasonable that the Saviour, who was God Incarnate, would start a salvation and fail to complete it. This is a mystery which those who are not his sheep never understand, for it concerns only his own.

In this address, we have clear proof of the divine nature of Christ which enabled him to speak in a way no mere human could. He called all true believers his sheep and said that they will hear his voice, not the voice of the God, as the prophets had in the past. He said that his sheep would hear his words and follow him and that he would give them eternal life and no one would snatch them from his hand. Then, he added that no one could take them out of his Father's hand either. The last few statements seem to contradict each other, but they really point more clearly to the unity of the Godhead. Jesus himself said, "I and the Father are one."

This grave conclusion was like a thunderbolt in the elders' ears. They were left with only two choices: Either worship him as the Messiah, the only Son of God, or stone him as a blasphemer, in accordance with their Law. They decided to pick up stones to stone him. He faced this bravely, asking them for which of the many good deeds of his Father they were stoning him. They replied, "...because you, a mere man, claim to be God." He responded: "...what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:33,36-38).

No prophet says of himself that the Father set him apart as his very own and sent him into the world. When Christ denied that he had blasphemed, the truth of his words were clear. When the Jews again tried to seize him, he escaped and went to the place where John had baptised. Here, his preaching had great effect, for many believed in him.

10. Various Teachings Of Christ

10.1. How We Should Pray

"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

"Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation."

Then he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him." Then the one inside answers, "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything." I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'" (Luke 11:1-13).

Once, when Christ had finished praying, one of his disciples asked him to teach them to pray as the Baptist had taught his followers. He replied by repeating the "Lord's Prayer" slightly different from the form given in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9-13). He followed it with the parable of a man who tried to borrow some bread from his friend at night, but was at first unsuccessful. He eventually succeeded by his energetic persistence. Expounding on this parable, Jesus said: "...Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you." In other words, first make a simple request, then, if unsuccessful, a more urgent one. If that also fails, one should knock. What we obtain immediately is good; what we find after seeking actively is greater; and what we obtain after knocking is the best.

Christ went on to clarify the believers' affectionate relationship with God. This relationship ensures their receiving good from him since it is impossible for him to withhold good from those he loves as his children. If a human father does not hesitate to give good things to his children, how can the perfect heavenly Father delay giving good things to his children, especially if they request the gift of the Holy Spirit, the choicest of gifts.

10.2. Teaching About Greed

"Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?' Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.' And he told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' " But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.' Then Jesus said to his disciples: 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'" (Luke 12:13-34)

When a man came to Christ, asking him to intervene in the matter of dividing his inheritance, Jesus refused to interfere because he restricted his work to essentials which none other could perform. Christ did not do his work with any leanings toward certain religious or political groups. He did not want people to regard him as the head of a denomination, acting as a judge in his subjects' worldly affairs. In this instance, Christ attacked a sin that is common and generally tolerated: the sin of greed, the heart's fondness for money.

To clarify what greed is, Jesus told his disciples the story of one whose wealth increased. But instead of being grateful to God, he chose to live independently of him. He should have realised that his riches were not his but the Lord's; he was only a steward over them, to use in responsible and unselfish ways. What right did he have to God's care as long as he lived only

for himself? His life was cut short, even as his wealth increased. God told him: "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you." God does not restrict earthly riches to those who love him but gives sunshine and water to the unjust as well as the just (Matthew 5:45). He does this so that religion will not be corrupted by reducing it to the fulfilling of earthly aspirations.

After telling his disciples the reality of God's care for their earthly needs, using illustrations from nature, Jesus reassured them that the Father was pleased to give them the kingdom despite their utter weakness. He encouraged them to give because only that which a man expends in doing good will remain, whereas that which he stores up for himself will be lost. When you give money for the sake of righteousness, it will draw your heart closer to God, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34).

10.3. Teaching About His Second Coming

"Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." (Luke 12:35-40)

Christ described his Second Coming as unexpected. His servants need to be watchful so that they will be ready to welcome him gladly, for those who are ready will be rewarded and counted blessed. When Peter asked him if he were telling this parable only to them or to everyone, Jesus told them another parable to show his displeasure at unfaithful stewards. He will cut all those who are unfaithful in two, and appoint for them a portion with the unbelievers (Luke 12:46). He expects much from those to whom he gives much, and little from those who have little (Luke 12:48). No one is exempt from Jesus' claims. Not only does God make demands from what a man possesses, and what has been bestowed on him, but he also demands from him what he could have achieved, had he worked earnestly. God punishes a person not only for neglecting his duty, but also for failing to do what he knows he should have done.

10.4. Teaching About Repentance

"Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" "Sir", the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

In this speech, Christ showed that he had come to the world with teachings which, like fire, would consume the thorns of falsehood and its followers. When light comes into the world and men prefer darkness, it is inevitable that conflict will arise between its followers and the followers darkness. Conflict is the nature of darkness. Wherever there is total darkness or total light, there is no conflict. But when light approaches darkness, the darkness attacks it and a rift occurs. Thus, division is an inevitable result of the coming of Christ and the spread of his teachings.

Christ then likened his Jewish nation to a fig tree, condemned to be cut down for unfruitfulness. He likened the Father with the owner of the vineyard, and himself with the man who took care of it. He was the mediator between God and man who holds back divine wrath on humanity. He begged the Father to be patient with them until he could complete his plans for their salvation. He admitted that God was patient with them three years while he was teaching and serving them in different ways. His last act was to offer himself as a sacrifice in their place. If they would have accepted him, they would have been safe, if not, they would be cut off. History has recorded for us the sad ending of the nation depicted in this parable. John the Baptist's words were fulfilled when he said, "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:10).

10.5. Teaching About Doing Good on the Sabbath

"On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.' The Lord answered him, 'You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?' When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing." (Luke 13:10-17)

Christ entered a synagogue in a village one Sabbath, and started teaching. Among the worshippers was a woman with a bent back who, for eighteen years, was not able to stand upright. She had lost all hope of regaining her health, but her piety kept her attending worship despite her disability. Apparently, she did not ask to be healed, for she was listening intently to Jesus. He called her to himself in order to heal her and illustrate his teaching on the subject of the Sabbath and its blessings. When she came forward, he touched her like a physician, straightening her back. He said, "...You are set free from your infirmity." She

immediately straightened up and showed her faith by praising God. The synagogue ruler was upset. Although he respected Jesus, he advised the congregation not to come for healing on the Sabbath, since there were six other days for that.

Christ, however, released this poor woman and the others from this oppressive law. He reminded this hypocritical ruler that, on the Sabbath, people were permitted to perform tasks for their animals, whenever the need suddenly arose. Those tasks often required more labour than what he had done in healing this woman. For instance, they could untie and lead an animal to water. Why should Christ not untie her from her physical and spiritual bondage after she had been oppressed by Satan for so many years? The people were pleased with his words and glorious works, and those who opposed him were put to shame.

10.6. Teaching about the Poor in Spirit

"One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?' But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away. Then he asked them, '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?' And they had nothing to say. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: 'When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, "Give this man your seat." Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, "Friend, move up to a better place." Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'" (Luke 14:1-14)

A Pharisee invited Jesus to a meal on the Sabbath where he saw a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked those present if it was permissible to heal on the Sabbath. They realised that if they said anything, they would be confounded like they were at the synagogue; so they kept quiet. Christ healed the sick man and sent him away after rebuking his opponents for their evil thoughts and criticism. Christ also noticed how the guests at this meal fought for the best seats. He used this situation to teach them a lesson in humility: God exalts the humble and puts the proud to shame.

Jesus then turned to his host and reminded him that the one who invites his friends and the rich to his banquets earns his reward in this world, because they usually invite him back to their feasts. However, the one seeking reward at the resurrection will invite and feed those

who are poor and despised. True hospitality is extended to others, out of love for God, regardless of compensation either in this world or the next. This kind of hospitality is assured God's favour and reward.

10.7. Eating Bread in the Kingdom of Heaven

"When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, 'Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.' Jesus replied: 'A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me." Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me." Still another said, "I just got married, so I can't come." The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." "Sir", the servant said, "what you ordered has been done, but there is still room." Then the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." ' ' (Luke 14:15-24)

One of those present commented on Christ's teaching pertaining to banquets, saying, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." He was sure that he would be included among such. Christ presented a parable, using the banquet as a symbol of religion because true religion or spirituality feeds and delights the soul. God offers us this feast freely and gives us complete liberty to accept or reject the invitation. He embraces all those who heed the divine bidding. In the parable, Jesus told of a nobleman who invited many guests to a great feast in his home, but they gave many excuses and stayed away.

Christ invited the religious, but since they refused to come, he invited the tax gatherers and sinners, similar to the man who invited the poor and crippled in the parable. He opened his great feast to those in the streets and alleys -- that is, the Gentiles who would accept what the Jews had rejected, finding their way to repentance and faith.

Christ likened the religious leaders with those who say, "I have just bought a field" or "I have just bought five yoke of oxen" or "I just got married, so I can't come." False excuses in matters of religion are common; they are widespread and dangerous. Christ declared God's wrath at people who make excuses, because that indicates a disrespect towards his divine feast of salvation. They also demonstrate the folly of those who place worldly profit above heavenly gain. Such people think their lame excuses will help them, or that the door to eternal life will always remain open for them.

Dear Reader,

Has Christ's invitation to his love feast reached you so that you want to find satisfaction for

your soul? He wants to feast with you (Revelation 3:20). Will you accept the invitation? Will you open the door of your heart to him? Leave your excuses and let your soul feast with him at the great banquet.

11. Quiz

If you have studied this book, you will be able to answer the following questions easily. Mail them to us.

Please do not forget to write your full name and address clearly.

1. What was Peter's reply to Christ's question: "Who do you say that I am?"
2. From whom did Peter receive the light that enabled him to reply correctly to Christ's question?
3. Why did Christ come into the world?
4. There are three conditions for following Christ. What are they?
5. What was the subject of the conversation between Moses, Elijah, and Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration?
6. Why did God tell Christ's disciples: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"
7. What do we learn from Jesus' words: "Bring the boy to me"?
8. How did Christ arrange to pay the tax for himself and Peter?
9. What do we learn from the example of Christ paying the Temple tax?
10. Mention some childlike qualities which a believer in Christ should possess.
11. What should you do if your brother offends you?
12. Summarise the story of the king who forgave the two debtors.
13. On what occasion did Jesus write on the ground with his finger?
14. What do we learn from Christ's question to his enemies: "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?"
15. Christ said, "Before Abraham was born, I Am." Why were the Jews angry at these words?
16. Explain Christ's statement, "I Am." Why did he not say, "I was"?
17. Give three examples of Christ's patience and forgiveness toward his enemies.
18. Who is your "neighbour"?
19. Why do we find fault with the Priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan?
20. In what ways did Martha and her sister, Mary, serve Christ?

21. Why was the man, in the incident in John chapter 9, born blind?
22. Why did the people not recognise the man born after he received his sight?
23. List three things which the Good Shepherd did for his sheep.
24. In Luke 12:16-21, we read the parable of the foolish, rich man. Write a summary of it.
25. If you hold a banquet, whom should you invite? Why should you especially invite these people?

If you have any questions about the Christian faith, we will be happy to answer them for you. Do not forget to write your full name and address inside the letter as well as on the envelope.

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