

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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1. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

THE KING (Matthew 4:23-25)

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

From the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, one emphasis has been that Jesus fulfills the biblical promises and predictions, that what the covenant community has been expecting through the centuries has now appeared in this person, and that as John the Baptist has come to announce the kingdom of heaven and its king, Jesus has come to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven *as its king*. The Sermon on the Mount continues and reinforces this emphasis. We will take a quick look at the passages immediately preceding the Sermon, to see that Christ's ministry and message fit into such a context, and how they lead up to the Sermon itself.

First, Matthew shows that Jesus fulfills the requirements of the law. When John the Baptist hesitates to baptize Jesus (Matthew 3:14), Jesus does not deny that he is different from all the others who come for baptism, but he says, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15).¹ After his baptism, Jesus completes a forty-day fast in the desert, and overcomes several temptations from the devil (4:1-11). In this manner, Christ demonstrates perfect ceremonial and moral obedience to God's law.

Christ's work of redemption includes not only his voluntary acceptance of extreme suffering (Philippians 2:8), which theologians call his passive obedience, but to redeem God's elect, Christ has to excel where Adam failed, so that he has to also demonstrate perfect active obedience to God's laws and precepts. Paul explains, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). As a Jew "born under law" (Galatians 4:4), Jesus identifies with God's covenant people by submitting under the law; however, unlike everyone else, he perfectly fulfills the requirements of the law. He demonstrates perfect active obedience and perfect passive obedience, so that God is

¹ Jesus is probably going through the final steps in becoming a priest of God as defined by the law. Under the law, it seems that a priest begins his ministry at the age of thirty (Numbers 4:3, 47), and so Jesus begins his ministry at this age (Luke 3:23). Among other things, the law requires a priest to be sprinkled with water by one who is already a priest (Numbers 8:6-7), and thus as Jesus begins his ministry, he comes to John (who has inherited his priesthood from his father) to be baptized. Jesus is not a Levite, and his priesthood is not under the order of Aaron, but the order of Melchizedek; that is, he is a priest by divine appointment, not by human heritage. (See Jay E. Adams, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975; p. 16-20.)

perfectly pleased with him: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Second, Matthew shows that Jesus fulfills the predictions of the prophets. He offers numerous examples of how Jesus fulfills everything that the prophets said about the characteristics of and the circumstances around the Messiah (4:12-16). Since the Messiah would be "the king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) with his own heavenly kingdom (John 18:36), and since Jesus fulfills the prophecies about this Messiah, this means that Jesus is the Messiah, and that he is the king.

Just as John the Baptist came as a herald to announce the coming of the king and his kingdom, Jesus has come as this king to announce the coming of his kingdom. Therefore, Jesus often speaks of "the kingdom of heaven" (4:17), and he preaches "the good news of the kingdom" (v. 23). He chooses and calls people to follow him and to become his subjects. One purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to explain the characteristics of those who belong to his kingdom (5:3, 10).

The "kingdom of heaven" and the "kingdom of God" are synonymous. For example, whereas Matthew 4:17 says, "Repent, for the *kingdom of heaven* is near," the parallel verse in Mark 1 says, "The *kingdom of God* is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (v. 15). And where Matthew 8:11 says, "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the *kingdom of heaven*," Luke 13:28 says, "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the *kingdom of God*, but you yourselves thrown out."

The two terms are used interchangeably in the parallel accounts of the Sermon on the Mount, so that where Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the *kingdom of heaven*" (5:3), Luke says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the *kingdom of God*" (6:20).² They are also used interchangeably within the Gospel of Matthew itself: "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of heaven*. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of God*" (19:23-24).

The "kingdom" carries the idea of a territory over which a king rules. Since God rules over everything through Christ (Matthew 28:18), in this broad sense, the kingdom of God is universal. However, Scripture often uses the term in a narrower sense. The Sermon indicates that the kingdom of heaven does not include everyone. For example, the Beatitudes (5:3-10) specify the characteristics of those to whom belong the kingdom of heaven, implying that those who do not possess these characteristics will not inherit the kingdom. Then, 7:21 shows that not all those who think that they will enter the kingdom of heaven will indeed enter. In fact, verse 22 refers to "many" people, and indicates that "many" are excluded from the kingdom.

² Other examples include: Matthew 13:11 and Mark 4:11; Matthew 13:31 and Mark 4:30; Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20; Matthew 18:3 and Mark 10:15; Matthew 19:14 and Mark 10:14.

Other biblical passages not only reinforce the idea that the kingdom of heaven excludes many people, but they also clarify what kind of people it includes, and what it means to "enter the kingdom." Matthew 18:8 contrasts "enter life" with "be thrown into eternal fire." Mark 9:43 and 45 likewise contrast "enter life" with "go into hell" and "be thrown into hell." In other words, entering life is the opposite of entering hell. Then, verse 47 makes the same contrast but interchanges "enter life" with "enter the kingdom of God." In Matthew 19:16 and 23, it appears that "to get eternal life" and "to enter the kingdom of heaven" are interchangeable. Jesus says in John 3:3 and 3:5 that unless a person is "born again," he can neither "see" nor "enter" the kingdom of God. Therefore, when Jesus lists the characteristics of those to whom belong the kingdom of heaven, he is listing the characteristics of "born again" people, so that there appears to be a salvific relationship between the king and his subjects.

Theologians often refer to the "already" and the "not yet" aspects of the kingdom. They mean that although the kingdom has already come in Jesus Christ, its full manifestation remains in the future. As Hebrews 2:8 says, "In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him." Therefore, although Jesus says that "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28), he also teaches his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come" (6:10), as they continue to look for "his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1).³

As Jesus carries out his ministry, he preaches the "good news of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). This preaching ministry would continue through the apostles, so that Paul also describes his own work as "preaching the kingdom" (Acts 20:25), declaring the presence and authority of the heavenly kingdom and its king, and calling people to submit and become its subjects.

As Jesus preaches this message of the kingdom and as he performs many miracles of healing, large crowds of people begin to follow him. However, God has said regarding many worshipers, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8). Many of those who appear to follow Jesus are not sincere disciples or true worshipers. Jesus would warn his hearers about this soon enough, but first he begins the Sermon by describing those who would enter the kingdom of heaven.

HIS SERVANTS (Matthew 5:1-12)

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

**"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

³ It seems that the kingdom also has a close relationship to the covenant community, so that when Jesus talks about building his "church," he also refers to the "keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:18-19). This explains how some of "the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside" (Matthew 8:12). The Jews were the natural members of the kingdom, born into God's covenant community, but because of their unbelief, they were thrown outside. God took the kingdom away from them and gave it to the Gentiles (Matthew 21:43).

**Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

As large crowds of people gather around Jesus, he goes up on a mountainside and sits down. Some commentators see parallels to how Moses delivered God's law at Mount Sinai, but it is difficult to make much out of this. Nevertheless, verses 1 and 2 are far from useless. They tell us that Jesus sits down to assume the traditional position of the teacher in a school or synagogue. And where the NIV has "he began to teach them," more literal translations read, "he opened his mouth, and taught them" (KJV) or "opening His mouth, He began to teach them" (NASB) – a Jewish idiom that emphasizes the authority and solemnity of the discourse to follow. Thus the Sermon begins with Jesus assuming a position of authority, and ends with the audience being amazed at his authority: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (7:28-29).

There are some indications of logical progressions and divisions in the Sermon. Based on these, our exposition will be divided into three large sections: Matthew 5:1-16, in which Jesus, the king of the kingdom of heaven, appears to describe the characteristics of those who are subjects of his kingdom; Matthew 5:17-7:12, in which Jesus declares the true interpretations and implications of the law, and the law's relationship to his subjects; and Matthew 7:13-27, in which Jesus distinguishes between his true and false followers.

These divisions are marked by Jesus' use of *inclusio*, the rhetorical device where the same words or expressions are used at the beginning and end of each section, so that "the kingdom of heaven" brackets the section that we call the Beatitudes, and "the Law and the Prophets" brackets the larger second section. Of course, "the kingdom of heaven" is one of the Sermon's main themes, since the term appears prominently in each of the three sections.

The Beatitudes (5:3-10) is called such because in it Jesus begins each statement with a blessing, and "beatitude" is derived from the Latin *beatus*, meaning "blessed." The Greek word translated "blessed" is *makarios*, rendered as "happy" in some translations. "Happy" can be misleading because it is often understood as a description of one's subjective state, but *makarios* refers to a person's objective state. "Happy" is acceptable if one understands it in the objective sense, as in one's "happy condition." As John Stott explains, "He is declaring not what they may feel like..., but what God thinks of them...."⁴ R. T. France suggests a less ambiguous rendering like "well off."⁵

Since the beatitudes describe the objective qualities and privileges of the true followers of Christ, their thrust is not "Do X, and you will get Y," but rather, "Those who have the spiritual quality X are well off, because they have or will have Y." As R. T. France explains, "The beatitudes thus outline the attitudes of the true disciples, the one who has accepted the demands of God's kingdom, in contrast with the attitudes of the 'man of the world'; and they present this as the best way of life not only in its intrinsic goodness but in its results."⁶

"Blessed are the poor in spirit..." (v. 3)

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the "poor" – not those who are poor in material things, but those who are "poor in spirit." Since those who are poor in material things are often very conscious of their dependence on God for their necessities, and since some of the Hebrew words for "poor" can also mean "lowly" and "humble," the "poor" has come to be closely associated with those who look to God in reverence and humility, with a contrite and repentant heart (Psalms 40:17, 69:32-33; Isaiah 41:17, 57:15, 61:1).

Because the "poor" is so identified with those who not only need God's help, but with those who *acknowledge* that they need God's help, the "poor in spirit" refers not only to those who are spiritually destitute, which would include everyone, but it refers to those who also *acknowledge* that they are spiritually destitute, and thus those who cry out to God for grace and mercy. D. A. Carson writes:

Poverty of spirit is the personal acknowledgment of spiritual bankruptcy. It is the conscious confession of unworth before God. As such, it is the deepest form of repentance...From within such a framework, poverty of spirit becomes a general confession of a man's need for God, a humble admission of impotence without him.⁷

Jesus is talking about those who have an acute awareness of their spiritual need, but more than that, they are those who exercise conscious dependence on God and confidence in him to meet that need. To these people belong the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*; InterVarsity Press, 1978; p. 33.

⁵ R. T. France, *Matthew* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries); William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985; p. 108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷ D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount*; Global Christian Publishers, 1999; p. 18.

Since the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, and since the poor in spirit are those who acknowledge that they have nothing in themselves by which they may obtain God's approval, this beatitude excludes salvation by works, and is consistent only with justification by faith. The poor in spirit are those who know and admit their depravity, and look to God for mercy, knowing that in themselves they cannot hope to gain God's approval. Their confidence is only in God and not in themselves.

This is contrary to what non-Christians think. In one way or another, non-Christians have confidence in their own goodness and sufficiency. They acknowledge neither God's holiness nor man's depravity, but they think that God's standard is low, and that man's nature is good. Some people claim to have been Christians for many years, although they have never acknowledged their comprehensive sinfulness. Others talk about man's depravity, but they become offended if you apply it to them. They will acknowledge that all men are sinful as long as no one points out that this includes them, that they are also sinners. For still others, the most that they will admit is that "nobody's perfect." All of these people have not even started to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Many hardened and unrepentant sinners think that Jesus is on their side. Jesus saves even murderers and prostitutes, does he not? Of course he does, but what kind of murderers and prostitutes does he save? He does not save the murderers and prostitutes who insist on remaining murderers and prostitutes, but he saves those who by God's sovereign grace confess their sinfulness and resolve to stop being murderers and prostitutes. He does not save murderers who think that it is right to murder, and he does not save the prostitutes who think that they are full of merit. Instead, he saves those who are "poor in spirit" – those who know that they have nothing, and plead for his mercy.

Many of those who appeal to Jesus' gracious treatment of sinners have no interest in becoming Christians, but they wish to silence the Christians who tell them to repent. They are nothing like the sinners that Jesus accepts in the Bible. For example, the homosexuals often do not hate and curse themselves for their perversion. They do not cry out for God's forgiveness, and for his grace to regenerate and deliver them. Rather, they claim that God accepts them as homosexuals, that God approves of their lifestyle, that homosexuality is not sinful, and they demand that Christians honor their deviant desires and relationships as legitimate and good. As Paul writes, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (Romans 1:32). These people are far from the kingdom of heaven, and God will torture them forever in hell.

The people in the Beatitudes are different from the people of this world. The two groups are as different as light is to darkness, as the kingdom of heaven is to the kingdom of hell, and as Christ is to Satan. Instead of calling all of humanity to become one, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not be like them" (Matthew 6:8). It is stupid and dangerous to imitate the thinking and the behavior of the insane, but it is far more stupid and dangerous to imitate the thinking and the behavior of non-Christians. There is nothing admirable about them. There is nothing good about them. Every non-Christian is filthy and despicable, just as we were filthy and despicable before God sovereignly converted us.

Jesus does not call his church to think and behave like the world. As Stott writes, "There is no single paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount in which this contrast between Christian and non-Christian standards is not drawn. It is the underlying and uniting theme of the Sermon; everything else is a variation of it."⁸ Rather, Jesus calls his church to be the "counter-culture"⁹ – to use all the biblically approved means to distinguish ourselves from non-Christians, to oppose their agenda, and to tear down their culture (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

In our teaching and evangelism, on the one hand, we should encourage poverty of spirit, the awareness and acknowledgement of spiritual destitution apart from God's mercy and riches; on the other hand, we should subvert non-Christian thinking and behavior. When we preach the gospel, we should deliberately defy unbiblical moral standards, social etiquettes, and psychological theories.

Christians often approach sinners with a self-centered gospel. They tell them, "God has a great plan for your life," "You are someone special," "You are valuable to God," and even "God needs you." One would think that they are "head-hunters" for God's corporation, but the biblical picture of evangelism is more like picking up trash and refuse from the side of the road so that God may transform them into useful things by his sovereign mercy and power. Paul writes that non-Christians are "worthless," that not one of them does good, "not even one" (Romans 3:12). Whereas Onesimus was "useless" before his conversion, he became "useful" after he was converted (Philemon 11).

The Christians in the Bible do not declare a message of self-esteem and self-sufficiency, but a message of repentance. Both John and Jesus tell people, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). Likewise, Peter preaches, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (Acts 3:19), and Paul tells the philosophers, "Now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

Jesus never teaches tolerance toward non-Christian religions and lifestyles. The fact that he tells people to repent means that there is something wrong with them, and that he sees no problem in telling people that there is something wrong with them. He associates with sinners and outcasts, but he does not say to them, "I accept you as you are"; rather, he insists, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14), and "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

In fact, Jesus is the least tolerant person of all. Because of our sinfulness, we will often excuse the sins in ourselves and in others, or at least regard them with some leniency. As for Jesus, he says, "I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36). How many thousands of careless words have you spoken this week, let alone in your lifetime? If non-Christians claim that Jesus is tolerant, then they ought to think that Christians are already tolerant enough. But

⁸ Stott, p. 19.

⁹ Ibid., p. 15-19.

the church is to be a counter-culture, so that instead of conforming to the world's standard of morality and propriety, we must imitate the intolerance of Christ.

When accused of intolerance, Christians often scramble to argue that the Christian faith is tolerant, but I despise them, and I refuse to do the same. The Bible never teaches tolerance. In fact, it commands us to imitate Christ's intolerance against sin, unbelief, and false religions, and to employ all the approved means to berate, resist, and destroy all non-Christian beliefs and agendas.

People are horrified at this teaching, and some have suggested that this is the same kind of thinking that leads to Islamic terrorism. However, intolerance does not necessarily lead to violence – it depends on what the intolerant system teaches. But the objection betrays inferior intelligence and knowledge.

First, it betrays inferior intelligence, because it is an obviously irrational objection. Even if doctrine X could lead to a disastrous Y, it does not follow that X is false. The objection is based on the assumption that a doctrine that leads to terrorism must be false, but why is this assumption true? Proper reasoning would affirm that if Islam is true, and if it leads to terrorism, then terrorism is justified as right and good.

Islam indeed promotes terrorism, but it is irrational to reject Islam for this reason. Rather, I reject Islam because it is a false religion, and because it is a false religion, it cannot justify terrorism as right and good. It is not that Islam is wrong because terrorism is wrong; instead, terrorism is wrong because Islam is wrong. It is irrational to judge whether something is true by whether the result is good, for then where is the true standard to define what is good? One must judge whether the result is good by whether it is the product of something that is true.¹⁰

Second, it betrays inferior knowledge, because the Bible insists on non-violent intolerance, so that the doctrine does not lead to terrorism. It does not teach us to use all possible means to promote the Christian faith. It excludes violence as a way to further the Christian cause, for as Paul writes:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Thus biblical intolerance produces spiritual vigilance and intellectual aggression in Christians, but not violence and terrorism. To advance the kingdom of Christ and to demolish the kingdom of Satan, we use biblically approved means and divinely empowered methods, not guns and bombs. So Christian intolerance promotes truth and righteousness,

¹⁰ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Captive to Reason, and Invincible Faith*.

but Islamic intolerance produces terror and destruction. The Christian message has the spiritual power to do what no physical weapon can do – it can genuinely change people's hearts and minds. Islam cannot do this, and so it must resort to beastly means, but even then, it can only change one kind of sinners into another kind of sinners, both doomed endless suffering in hellfire.

The truth is that those who advocate tolerance often display strong intolerance. Their idea of tolerance permits only what they regard as tolerable. They do not in fact respect all opinions, and they despise what they regard as intolerant and hateful ideas. Whereas I freely admit that I despise all non-Christian ideas and refuse to pretend that I respect all opinions, they also despise many opinions, but the difference is that they lie about it, and pretend to be tolerant people. They are self-righteous hypocrites.

Returning to our initial point, our message must not conform to unbiblical views about human nature, but we must tell our hearers, "There is indeed something wrong with you, and you must turn from your sins and come to Christ for salvation. Otherwise, there is no hope for you, and you will suffer extreme and endless torture in hell." Even those who claim to be Christians often lack this "poverty of spirit," so that they say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing," to which Christ replies, "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). What is the solution? You must come to Jesus Christ, and he will give you true riches, true covering, and true wisdom (v. 18). You must repent (v. 19). Until then, you are still outside the kingdom of heaven, even if you have settled into the church on earth.

"Blessed are those who mourn..." (v. 4)

Since a person cannot come to Christ unless the Father first changes his heart, one who is poor in spirit is also one whose heart God has already softened; therefore, a man who acknowledges his sinfulness and helplessness before God naturally mourns his depraved condition (5:4). This mourning is neither a general sadness nor an emotional upheaval, but it is an intelligent grief and repulsion resulting from the realization of his wickedness. He does not wallow in carnal and self-centered depression, but he laments his sins because he cares about what God thinks, and now that he sees sin as it is, he also learns how his wickedness offends the holiness of God.

A man may regret his sinful deed after he has been discovered, although he does not truly identify with the biblical condemnation against it. Or, a person may follow a non-Christian religion or philosophy, and grieves over his failure to live up to its standard. God will not comfort these false mourners, because Jesus refers to a kind of sorrow that comes from true repentance and humility, and not the kind that comes from false piety and personal frustrations. He refers to godly sorrow and not worldly sorrow: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). As Paul exclaims, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

The righteous man is one whom God has convinced, convicted, and converted. He does not mourn only over his own sins, but also the sins of others, especially the sins among believers. When God reveals his holiness to Isaiah, the prophet is so overwhelmed that he cries, "Woe is me!...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5). He bewails his own sinfulness, and also the sinfulness of those around him.

Likewise, Jeremiah mourns over the sins of his people, and in accordance with his prophecies, God expelled the people from their land. Later, when Daniel speaks to God about Jeremiah's prediction of the people's return, he again mourns over the sins of his people: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws" (Daniel 9:4-5). He goes on to mourn about the punishments that his people received because of their sins (v. 11-14).

In this context, Jesus may also have in mind the mourning that results when believers are oppressed and persecuted by non-Christians (5:10-12). When he says that those who mourn are "blessed," he does not mean that the act of mourning in itself pleases God, but he refers to the kind of people who are blessed, and listing their characteristics. He does not say, "Mourn so that you may be comforted," but rather, "Blessed are *those who* mourn – they are blessed because they will receive divine comfort." Non-Christians hate God and his servants (Luke 21:17; John 15:18-19), so that they are eager to oppress and persecute those who preach and practice God's precepts. Thus they inflict much suffering on God's people, who mourn under such pressure and trust God for comfort and deliverance.

Jesus again promotes counter-cultural thinking. Just as many spiritually destitute people think that they are spiritually rich, instead of mourning over their sins, many people are proud of their sins. White-collar criminals boast about taking advantage of legal loopholes for their own profit, street thugs boast about their toughness and gang affiliations, adulterers and fornicators boast about their sexual escapades, and instead of being ashamed and afraid, homosexuals are "proud to be gay."

They have no fear of God. If they talk about God at all, they often think that God approves of them. Or, sometimes they glibly say, "God will forgive me – that's his job." But the Bible never teaches that God is obligated to forgive anyone. He forgives only those to whom he sovereignly grants repentance of sin and faith in Christ; other than that, his "job" is to condemn sinners to endless torture in hell.

These people not only boast about their shameful deeds, but they approve of others who do the same (Romans 1:32), and encourage them to pursue their wicked ways. Even some who call themselves Christians applaud those who defy the Bible. To cite some recent examples, members of a prominent evangelical society voted to retain certain theologians who hold heretical views regarding the inerrancy of Scripture and the nature of God, and several large denominations have ordained homosexuals to lead their people.

They are proud to be so "open-minded" to the devil, but Paul condemns this attitude: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?" (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). Instead of being proud of the sinners among us, instead of being proud of ourselves for tolerating them, and instead of giving our approval to heretics, criminals, and deviants, we must confront them, and expel those who refuse to repent.

Yet very few churches confront and expel those who affirm open theism, reject biblical inerrancy, practice divination and necromancy, and who commit abortion, adultery, fornication, sodomy, and blasphemy. Worse than that, the trend is to let these people govern and teach the people in our churches. Whereas "God's righteous decree" is that "those who do such things deserve death," Christians often think that these people should be promoted (Romans 1:32). These are false Christians, and God will make sure that they burn in hell along with the sinners that they endorse.

The righteous and the unrighteous have very different attitudes toward sin, and God has ordained very different destinies for them. God will pour out his wrath against those who tolerate sin in themselves and in others (Romans 1:18, 32). As Jesus says, "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25). Are you proud of doing something that the Bible condemns? You may be proud now, but soon God will humiliate you, and you may laugh now, but soon God will cause you to weep.

Some people insist that God mainly wants them to be happy, and this assumption becomes for them a principle for guidance in decision-making. Since God wants them to be happy, then God's will must be for them to pursue the course that maximizes their happiness. Even some Christian ministers are sympathetic to this view. It is then used to justify illegitimate marriages, divorces, homosexual relationships, covetous ambitions, and various unbiblical and unproductive social gatherings and relationships.

The Bible, however, does not teach the pursuit of happiness as a principle of guidance; instead, it teaches the pursuit of holiness:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8)

Preachers must not tell people, "God wants you to be happy; therefore, you may do whatever you wish," but rather, "God wants you to be holy, and therefore you must do whatever he commands; otherwise, 'The Lord will punish.'" Those who ignore God's

precepts to pursue happiness may laugh now, but Jesus promises that they will mourn and weep later.

On the other hand, those who mourn now will be comforted (Matthew 5:4). As Isaiah prophesied:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.... (Isaiah 61:1-3)

Jesus reads from this passage and announces, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The proper response to our sinfulness is deep mourning, and the true comfort to our mourning is the atoning work of Jesus Christ. When Isaiah cries, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5), the passage continues, "Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for'" (v. 6-7). And when Paul exclaims, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24), he answers, "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v. 25).

It is God's grace that convicts us of our sinfulness, it is God's grace that converts and comforts us. As "Amazing Grace" has it, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved!" It is God's grace that first convinces us about human depravity and divine judgment, leading to fear and despair, before the same divine grace rescues us from this fear and despair through faith in Jesus Christ.

"Blessed are the meek..." (v. 5)

A person who recognizes his spiritual destitution and who mourns over his sinfulness is also a meek person (Matthew 5:5). The word "meek" is sometimes translated "humble" or "gentle," so that the REB says, "Blessed are the gentle." However, meekness does not imply weakness. Since this beatitude is an allusion to Psalm 37, a reliable way for finding out what meekness means is to examine how the idea appears in the context of this Psalm.

Every verse in Psalm 37 makes such a valuable contribution to our understanding of meekness that I am tempted to reproduce the entire Psalm, but since it contains forty verses, I will restrict myself to the first several verses and other especially relevant ones. You can pick just about any stanza from this Psalm, and it will give you a good representation of what meekness is like, but I recommend that you read the entire Psalm for yourself.

Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. (Psalm 37:1-7)

These and other verses suggest that there are two different and distinguishable people on the earth – the righteous and the wicked. The wicked have no respect for God or trust in him. Instead, they strive and scheme to get what they want, even if that means oppressing other people and violating God's laws (v. 14), and they often obtain the material and political success that they desire.

The Psalm begins by telling the righteous not to worry about these wicked people or to be envious of them, because no matter how much they achieve, their success is only superficial and temporary. So the Psalm tells the righteous not to imitate the wicked men. Instead of striving and scheming like the wicked men, the righteous must trust in God to fulfill their desires and uphold their cause (v. 4, 6). In the face of failure, difficulty, and oppression, they must "wait patiently" (v. 7) for God to act on their behalf and to vindicate them.

It is in this context that we find verse 11, which says, "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace." Other verses offer us additional information about "the meek" and the promises given to them. The righteous are those who "trust in the Lord and do good" (v. 3), "wait patiently for him" (v. 7), "turn from evil and do good" (v. 27), "wait for the Lord and keep his way" (v. 34), and "take refuge in him" (v. 40). The Psalm promises that God will bless, protect, favor, and vindicate these righteous people, and that God will give them an everlasting inheritance (v. 18); on the other hand, the wicked will be "cut off" (v. 38).

This is the perspective from which we understand the beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Thayer's Lexicon says:

Meekness toward God is that disposition of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting. In the Old Testament, the meek are those wholly relying on God rather than their own strength to defend them against injustice. Thus, meekness toward evil people means knowing God is permitting the injuries they inflict, that He is using them to purify His elect, and that He will deliver His elect in His time. Gentleness or meekness is the opposite to self-assertiveness and self-interest. It stems from trust in God's goodness and control over the situation.

The gentle person is not occupied with self at all. This is a work of the Holy Spirit, not of the human will (Gal. 5:23).¹¹

Therefore, meekness has to do with an exercise of faith and self-restraint resulting from our knowledge of God and our relationship with God. It does not represent a lack of ability and courage for self-assertion.

For example, when Abraham and Lot decided to separate, Abraham did not strive with Lot to get a better territory for himself, but he allowed Lot to make the first choice (Genesis 13:8-12). Later, Lot lost everything he had, but because Abraham trusted in God, he became even more wealthy and powerful.

Another example comes from the life of Moses. He had a sense that he was destined to deliver the people (Acts 7:25), but at the beginning he did not rely on God to fulfill this calling. Rather, he was so impetuous that he murdered an Egyptian who was mistreating one of his own people (7:24). After forty years in exile, much of the impetuosity had gone from him, and he even hesitated when God called him to return to Egypt. He was a changed man – instead of depending on his own strength, he repeatedly pleaded with God to be with him and his people, saying, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here" (Exodus 33:15), and "O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes...then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance" (34:9). He was so changed that Scripture testifies, "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3, KJV). He was the meekest, but certainly not the weakest.

Jesus was our supreme example of meekness. He said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle [or "meek"] and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Although he was promised a kingdom, he overcame the temptation to obtain it by a painless but demonic method (Matthew 4:8-10), and he refused to seize it by human support or military might (John 6:15, 18:36). Instead, he gained God's approval through obedience, patience, and endurance. He rode into Jerusalem to die for the chosen ones, fulfilling prophecy: "See, your king comes to you, gentle [or "meek"] and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matthew 21:5).¹²

We are to follow the examples of these biblical characters. Paul instructs us to adorn our lives with meekness, among other things: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness [or "meekness"] and patience" (Colossians 3:12). He refers to it as a fruit of the Spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [or "meekness"] and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Because "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5), Peter writes, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due

¹¹ *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; Hendrickson Publishers.

¹² Also see my exposition of Philippians 2:5-11 in *Commentary on Philipians*.

time" (v. 6). This reinforces the exhortations in Psalm 37 against envying and imitating evil men, but instead to trust in God, patiently waiting for him to deliver and vindicate us "in due time."

The meek person possesses the rare spiritual strength to restrain the self and to rely on God. He is gentle with others because he does not need to strive or care to scheme so that he may seize that which satisfies his selfish desires. Rather, he submits the exercise of his abilities to God, and restrains himself from using unbiblical ways to get ahead in this world. He trusts God to promote him, so he does not try to step on others in order to exalt himself.

As with other characteristics described in the Beatitudes, biblical meekness contradicts the way non-Christians think and behave. Some of them equate meekness with weakness, and so they reject and despise it. Although this betrays a misunderstanding of biblical meekness, even many Christians think the same way, so that for them, to be meek is to be weak. It is true that the meek person both restrains himself and submits to God, so that he tends to be less assertive when it comes to protecting his own interests; however, because he has dedicated himself to serve God, he can be very aggressive when it comes to defending God's cause and God's truth.

The meek person restrains himself not because he is timid, but because he trusts in God to vindicate and promote him. In fact, the righteous are more courageous than the wicked because he is secure and confident in God: "The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion" (Proverbs 28:1). He is bold to assert God's rule and to proclaim God's word. This is not true with the wicked – all he has is himself, and all he lives for is himself, and so he exerts all his efforts and even sells his soul, but whatever he gains is insufficient and fleeting.

Then, some non-Christians do not explicitly reject and despise biblical meekness, but they produce a false version of it in their own lives. They act out in their lives the distortions and misconceptions of biblical meekness, and then they think that they have developed character or even spirituality.

They may have the idea that meekness involves constant self-degradation, but Scripture calls for an accurate view of oneself. Romans 12:3 says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Of course, the problem is often an overly exalted view of oneself, and thus Paul warns about it. But in this same verse he assumes that there is a view of yourself that you "ought" to have, and that is in accordance with "sober judgment" and "the measure of faith God has given you." Meekness indeed implies some level of self-effacement (Mark 12:38-40; Luke 14:7-11), but not in a forced or insincere manner, and not to the point of being obnoxious. There is often little difference between one person's false meekness than another person's arrogance and hypocrisy.

In any case, non-Christian worldviews cannot provide the intellectual foundation for true meekness. Since non-Christians do not affirm or worship God as he has revealed himself in Scripture, they cannot then trust in this God to favor or to vindicate them. In their view,

there is no divine providence that works out all things for the good of the righteous. Since they do not affirm the afterlife as revealed in Scripture, they can focus only on this life, and their priorities pertain only to this life. Since they do not believe in judgment, there is little to prevent them from striving and scheming, even at the expense of others, to attain what they consider success in this world. Of course, even if they get what they want, since death is final for them, everything is ultimately futile. As Jesus says, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

On the other hand, although God's precepts sometimes render Christians "as sheep to be slaughtered" (Romans 8:36), because God is sovereign and faithful, we may boldly declare that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37). In fact, in this beatitude, Jesus states that the meek will "inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). This is an unexpected end from the non-Christian perspective, but it is a promise stated long ago in the Old Testament.

Although expressions like "inherit the land" and "inherit the earth" often allude to entering the "promised land," in this beatitude the meaning is not entirely territorial or material. This is because the idea has become a metaphor for God's people obtaining the total fulfillment of God's promises, and the total consummation of God's kingdom (Hebrews 4). As "the ultimate vindication of the meek," God will fulfill all his wonderful promises to them, and "God will give them the high place they would not seize for themselves."¹³

Nevertheless, the promise is not entirely spiritual or metaphorical. As the supreme example of meekness and gentleness, Jesus indeed inherited the whole earth: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). In addition, some theologians consider this beatitude consistent with the numerous passages throughout the Bible that affirm the postmillennial view of eschatology.

For example, Habakkuk 2:14 says, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." Contrary to a popular view of eschatology, the Bible does not say that Christ will come to subdue his enemies at his return, and only then to reign over the earth. Instead, it teaches that Christ is now reigning over all the earth at the right hand of God, and that having sat down at the right hand of God, "he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool" (Hebrews 10:13). Paul writes, "He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25). So it appears that the beatitude is consistent with the postmillennial expectation, that the righteous will displace the wicked by the power of the gospel before the return of Christ.¹⁴

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..." (v. 6)

God's people are convinced of their spiritual poverty. They are convicted about their sins and the sins of their people, so that they mourn over their wickedness. And they exhibit genuine meekness, humility, and gentleness because of God's work in their lives. Then, God's work of conversion in them has produced a new basic desire, so that whereas they

¹³ France, p. 110.

¹⁴ Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*; P & R Publishing Company, 1999.

were the enemies of righteousness, now they "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6).

As Paul teaches, no one can attain righteousness by their good works, but it is God who sovereignly justifies a person by imputing to his account the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Therefore, although the Christian falls far short of perfect obedience to God's laws, so that he does not possess perfect righteousness in himself, he possesses perfect righteousness in Christ, and it is on this basis that God accepts the believer.

Since this is a pervasive teaching in the Bible, it is easy to impose this concept of righteousness in every place where it uses the word. However, the Bible does not always use the word with this meaning of **imputed righteousness**. Matthew appears to use the word mainly in reference to a righteousness that satisfies the requirements of God's laws, and in terms of actual good works and behavior. He mainly refers to a right relationship with God based on obedience to his laws.

For example, in Matthew 3:15, Jesus tells John to baptize him "**to fulfill all righteousness.**" This "righteousness" does not refer to an imputed righteousness, but the **personal righteousness** of Christ as he obeys all of God's requirements.

Then, within the Sermon, the word is used several times to denote personal righteousness rather than imputed righteousness. Matthew 5:10 refers to those who are persecuted because of **their righteousness**. In the context of the Beatitudes, this clearly refers to the righteous behavior and lifestyle of God's people, and not a righteousness that has been imputed to them.

As Peter writes, "If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:20), and "Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed" (3:14). Jesus and Peter are talking about persecution that comes because our righteous behavior and lifestyle offend non-Christians. They are not talking about the **imputed righteousness** that is associated with our justification, but the personal righteousness with which we interact with this world, and that is associated with our sanctification.

Matthew 5:20 says that **our righteousness must surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees**, and then the Sermon goes on to explain how to truly obey God's laws in various areas. Then, **Matthew 6:1 tells us not to perform our "acts of righteousness" before other people to be seen by them, showing that righteousness here refers to our personal righteousness, and not our legal standing before God.**

Of course, Matthew is consistent with Paul, for as we have seen, the first beatitude already establishes that the only way to attain salvation is by a **complete dependence on God's mercy**, which is to say, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But now the purpose is to discover what righteousness means in this context, so that we know what kind of righteousness God's people desire.

Again, Jesus is mainly not telling people how to be born again, but he is describing the characteristics of those who have been born again. He does not say, "If you want to be born again, then you must desire personal righteousness," but instead, "Those who are born again desire personal righteousness." He is not teaching salvation by good works, but he is telling us what attitude born again people have toward good works.

God's people do not mourn only about their individual sins, but also about humanity's general state of sinfulness, and especially the sinfulness within the covenant community. Likewise, God's people desire not only their individual righteousness, but they also desire a broader righteousness – they desire to see righteousness done in society. They desire to see righteousness established in the church and in the world.

This desire is more than a preference. The beatitude says that they "hunger and thirst" for righteousness. Hunger and thirst refer to our most basic physical need and desire. They are related to our survival, so that they are not optional, and we cannot be nonchalant or indifferent about them. In a similar way, God's people hunger and thirst for personal righteousness. It is not just a preference, but a basic need.

Christians and non-Christians have very different spiritual appetites, and they desire even opposite things. This hunger for righteousness is another trait that distinguishes Christians from non-Christians.

Christians "crave pure spiritual milk" (1 Peter 2:2), and the beatitude says that they hunger and thirst for righteousness. As Henry Scougal says, "The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love."¹⁵ And Jonathan Edwards writes, "The first effect of the power of God in the heart in regeneration is to give the heart a divine taste or sense; to cause it to have a relish of the loveliness and sweetness of the supreme excellency of the divine nature."¹⁶

The minister is often urged to make biblical doctrine interesting to the people, but the Bible does not make this his responsibility. If the minister happens to be an engaging speaker or writer, he may have a practical advantage, but the Bible holds him responsible only for content and clarity (2 Timothy 4:2; Colossians 4:4). His preaching and writing must be biblical and intelligible. Christians should have a ferocious appetite for the things of God, and non-Christians are condemned for scoffing at God's words. If the people are not interested in the things of God, it is their fault.

If you are a Christian, then you enjoy reading theological books and listening to biblical sermons. It is in your regenerated nature to enjoy these things. Moreover, you hunger to do righteousness and to see righteousness done. As Jesus says, "My food... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34). If you are a Christian, then you have an appetite to do the will of God.

¹⁵ Henry Scougal, *The Words of Henry Scougal*; Soli Deo Gloria, 2002; p. 12. See W. Gary Crampton, *What the Puritans Taught*; Soli Deo Gloria, 2003; p. 23-24.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*; James Clarke and Co., 1971, p. 49.

In contrast, non-Christians have a perverse appetite. Instead of following God's commands and treating his words as his "necessary food" (Job 23:12, KJV), each non-Christian "pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle (Jeremiah 8:6). He has "a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil" (Proverbs 6:18).

Non-Christians do not just prefer wickedness, but they pursue it. They eagerly look for opportunities, and come up with new ideas and ways to sin: "Even on his bed he plots evil; he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong" (Psalm 36:4). They do not hunger for the knowledge and righteousness of God, but "They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence" (Proverbs 4:17).

The appetite for wickedness in some non-Christians is more obvious than in others, and some non-Christians appear somewhat decent according to their own false standards. But when we measure them according to God's standard as revealed in the Bible, we see that all non-Christians have an insatiable appetite for wickedness.

Non-Christians are often very blatant in their appetite for wickedness, as when they commit acts of fraud, violence, sexual immorality, and so on. They would even demand the government and the church to condone their perversions. Other non-Christians hunger after wickedness in less obvious ways, as when they imitate Christian faith and love out of their hypocrisy. So they claim to be Christians, and they are excited about going to church. But they go not because they desire to worship God, but because the hymns relax them and make them feel spiritual. They desire to be entertained, and not to labor for the benefit of the church. Or, they go not because they want to hear the word of God, but because they want to socialize, and make some new business contacts.

No matter how they present themselves, they do not truly hunger after righteousness, but they wrap up their wickedness in Christian garb. Although they claim to seek God, theirs is a self-centered spirituality, and a counterfeit Christianity. The world claims that Christians are hypocrites, but these are often non-Christians pretending to be Christians and failing at it. The non-Christians are the actual hypocrites.

As for those who genuinely hunger and thirst for righteousness out of a regenerated heart, Jesus promises that "they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). The righteous and the wicked desire opposite things, and God has ordained opposite destinies for them: "The desire of the righteous ends only in good, but the hope of the wicked only in wrath" (Proverbs 11:23).

God's people hunger and thirst for righteousness, and "What the righteous desire will be granted" (Proverbs 10:24). Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Just as God has foreordained the salvation that we have received, he has also foreordained the good works that we would perform, so that just as he produces in us a hunger for righteousness at conversion, he also satisfies this hunger with good works that he has "prepared in advance for us to do."

Although this beatitude seems to focus on personal righteousness and not **universal righteousness** or social justice, a Christian desires a broader righteousness than on the individual level. He desires to see righteousness done in the church and in the world. God has given us weapons to combat wickedness that is spiritual, not physical or political. Therefore, although Christians may participate in political activities, so as to promote laws to maintain some semblance of righteousness in the land, they must not depend on the government to curb sin and injustice. Instead, they must focus on declaring the word of God to the church and to the world, because sin is first a matter of the heart, which only a spiritual conversion can change.

Since Christians desire to establish righteousness in themselves, in the church, and in the world, it appears that the promise, "they will be filled," is again consistent with postmillennial eschatology, so that there will be a definite and broad fulfillment of this promise before the return of Jesus Christ, even if the ultimate fulfillment must await his return.

"Blessed are the merciful..." (v. 7)

At this point, some commentators suggest that Jesus moves from emphasizing our relationship with God to our relationship with other people: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Right away, we need to stress that this beatitude does not teach a tit-for-tat policy of giving and receiving mercy from God. The verse cannot be saying that one must earn the mercy that he receives by giving out a corresponding measure of mercy.

First, elsewhere the Bible teaches against a tit-for-tat policy when it comes to God's grace and mercy. Second, we have already noted that **Jesus is describing the characteristics of born again people, rather than prescribing the conditions for being born again.** For sure, the beatitude cannot be teaching that we must earn God's mercy to save us from sin by first showing mercy to others, since if we could show genuine mercy to others, then it would mean that we have already been saved and converted.

Jesus is not saying, "If you will be merciful, then you are blessed, because then you will receive mercy." Rather, he is saying, "God's people are merciful people – they are 'the merciful' – and merciful people are blessed, because they will receive mercy." He calls them "the merciful" to identify them – he is not describing something that they have achieved or earned by being merciful. The Bible teaches that someone is merciful only because God has changed him and made him merciful, so that a merciful person is one who has already been converted by God. He is saved not because he has been merciful, but he is merciful because he has been saved.

Some commentators distinguish grace and mercy in that they take grace as that which deals with sin and mercy as that which deals with the results of sin.¹⁷ For example, in Luke 10:37, the Samaritan who took care of the injured traveler is described as "the one who showed

¹⁷ Terry L. Johnson, *When Grace Transforms*; Christian Focus Publications, 2002; p. 85.

mercy" (NASB). Nevertheless, even if this distinction is legitimate, the two are "frequently synonymous."¹⁸

Non-Christians do not possess mercy, and they cannot truly imitate it. Some of them are more obviously merciless, as Psalm 109:16 says, "For he never thought of doing a kindness, but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted." They consider the needs of others immaterial, and mercy inefficient. Hitler was such a person, but less obvious examples are everywhere. They appear as politicians, businessmen, Catholic priests, adulterous spouses, and abusive parents. Non-Christian children can be some of the cruelest people in the world, their damage limited only by their lack of ability and resources.¹⁹

Other non-Christians are not as obvious, but even as they put up a good front, they are cruel and vicious at heart. Some of them can appear merciful and generous, but what is the intellectual and ethical foundation for their actions? They can only have selfish and humanistic motives, so that they do what they do to better themselves and others on the animalistic and material level, not to honor or express gratitude to God, but to exalt humanity and assert autonomy from God. Therefore, although they sometimes outwardly imitate Christian mercy, they are in fact inwardly wicked and defiant. They are hypocrites.

With the non-Christians, even what appears to be outward acts of mercy are often contrary to Scripture. For example, the church collects money through the voluntary giving of its members, and distributes part of this wealth to legitimate recipients, such as widows and orphans who have no other sources of help. In contrast, a secularized government whose laws rest on an unbiblical philosophy collects money through confiscatory taxation, and distributes much of this wealth to illegitimate recipients, such as people who refuse to work.

Against this perverse system, the Bible does not define mercy as something that demands us to help every seemingly needy person regardless of the reason for his situation. Rather, the church is to help those who are truly in need, and not those who are lazy and irresponsible. Paul teaches that not every widow qualifies for church aid, but only if she is of a certain age, has been faithful to her husband, and is known for her good deeds (1 Timothy 5:9-10). Moreover, he writes, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat'" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

These two rules alone exclude many or even most people from receiving aid, but churches that follow these and other related biblical instructions will certainly be called hard and merciless, even by church members. When Christians follow biblical instructions, and refuse to accommodate humanistic definitions of kindness and courtesy, they are often accused of denying the teaching and example of Christ. Instead of letting them get away

¹⁸ Carson, *Jesus' Sermon*; p. 24.

¹⁹ People are shocked at news of children committing acts of violence like murder and rape. Perhaps they suppose that people are born good and innocent, but the Bible teaches otherwise: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him" (Proverbs 22:15). Children can be every bit as ruthless and manipulative as adults.

with this, Christians should rebuke these people for their ignorance of the Bible and their disobedience toward it. True mercy is that which is defined, commanded, and generated by God, exercised and expressed for the honor of God. Humanistic mercy is no mercy at all; rather, it comes from a defiant heart that seeks to "save" humanity apart from God.

"Blessed are the pure in heart..." (v. 8)

The next beatitude says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). Jesus is referring to a purity that is deeper than an external conformity to God's precepts, but he is speaking of a purity in the "heart."

Many theologians and commentators make a false distinction between the heart and the mind. Some seem to think that the heart is the whole or the deepest aspect of a person's personality, whereas the mind is just one aspect of the heart. Others claim that the heart consists of the mind (or intellect), the will, and the emotion, although the Bible does not suggest this list.

It is a grave error to list the will and the emotion as if they are different parts from the mind within the human person, and as if the will and the emotion are non-mental. The will and the emotion are simply functions of the mind – it is the mind that decides and emotes – so that they are mental in their very nature. Since this is the case, then to say that the heart consists of the mind, the will, and the emotion, is just an awkward way of saying that the heart is the mind.²⁰

From the ontological perspective, the heart and the mind are identical and interchangeable. Therefore, to be pure in the heart is to be pure in the mind, and in all the functions that the mind performs. To have an impure heart, then, is to have an impure mind, thus impure thoughts, beliefs, motives, decisions, and emotions.

The idea of a "pure heart" appears several times elsewhere in the Bible, and Jesus uses the term in a way that is consistent with its biblical meaning. With this in mind, Psalm 24 offers a perspective on the kind of person who is pure in heart: "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false" (v. 3-4).

The person who is pure in heart "does not lift up his soul to an idol."²¹ His "purity" consists of a single-minded devotion to God. He belongs to "the generation of those who seek him" (v. 6). There are no "idols" – abominable and distracting things – to obscure his focus on Jesus Christ. To the "double-minded," James says, "purify your hearts" (James 4:8).

²⁰ To illustrate, it is awkward to say that the stomach consists of the stomach and digestion. No, the stomach is the stomach, and digestion is one of its functions. These are not two different parts within the human body.

²¹ The HCSB states that he "has not set his mind on what is false." Purity of heart refers to the condition of one's mind.

Jesus is describing those to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. God's people are those whose basic dispositions has been so transformed that, although they still struggle against sin, they are "pure in heart," and to the extent that God's people allow idols and distractions to remain in their lives, they suffer a lack of assurance.

Pure devotion to God – faithful service to him without mixture or deceit – also conditions the way we relate to other people. So Psalm 24:6 continues to say that he who is pure in heart does not "swear by what is false" – he "has not sworn deceitfully" (NASB). The pure in heart will deal with people with sincerity, without deceit and ulterior motives.

If even Christians struggle to maintain purity in the heart, then non-Christians cannot even begin, because their hearts are thoroughly corrupt and depraved. Jesus says, "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:21-23).

Since man's heart is utterly ruined, he has no power or desire to change. Any change in him must be initiated and performed by God. God effects this change only in those whom he has chosen, and he does it by giving them faith in Christ. As Peter says, "He purified their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9). God promised by Ezekiel: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:25-26).

As for the reprobates, they can never be pure in heart. Some of them freely indulge in evil thoughts and imaginations. Their minds are full of idols, lies, and lusts for various things. They love what God hates, and they hate what God loves. Others imitate inward purity, but because God has not chosen them and transformed them by faith in Jesus Christ, they remain evil to the core, and their attempts to become spiritual are never based on a sincere desire to honor God. Their efforts are only attempts at self-salvation, and serves to build up their self-righteousness more and more. They will not escape the everlasting fires of hell.

To those who are pure in heart, Jesus promises that "they will see God." He is not necessarily referring to an empirical sensation or experience in which we physically "look at" God. Even in English, besides "to perceive by sight," the word "see" can mean "to come to know: DISCOVER," "to perceive the meaning or importance of: UNDERSTAND," "to be aware of: RECOGNIZE," "to imagine as a possibility: SUPPOSE," "to regard as: JUDGE," and "to grasp something mentally."²²

To illustrate, Jesus says in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." He does not mean that the kingdom is empirically invisible to the non-Christians, but then it suddenly becomes empirically visible to those whom God regenerates. Rather, his meaning corresponds with something that he says in verse 5: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the

²² *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.*

Spirit." It is more appropriate to regard the meaning of "see" in verse 3 as something like "discover," "understand," or "come to know."

Another example comes from John 12:40, which is a quotation from Isaiah: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them." In its context, it is obvious that the words "blinded their eyes" do not refer to a physical blindness, but carry the meaning of "deadened their hearts." That they cannot "see with their eyes" refers to the fact that they cannot "understand with their hearts." Again, "see" here does not refer to anything empirical, but it refers to something intellectual.

"They will see God" cannot refer to an empirical sensation or experience; that is, Jesus cannot be promising that the "pure in heart" will physically "look at" God. This is because "God is spirit" (John 4:24), so that he is invisible (Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27). Nevertheless, people do "see" God in a sense, as when Manoah, Samson's father, exclaims, "We have seen God!" (Judges 13:22). However, Manoah did not physically perceive God in his divine essence, but he saw only "the angel of the Lord."

Whenever biblical characters "see" God in a physical sense, they perceive a manifestation or revelation that God generates. God in his essence remains invisible. He is unknowable unless he chooses to disclose himself, as when John writes, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). You cannot go somewhere to "look at" God, but he has spoken to us by his prophets and apostles, and he has revealed himself by the incarnation of Christ.

What, then, does it mean to "see" God? John writes, "Anyone who does what is good is *from God*. Anyone who does what is evil has not *seen God*" (3 John 11), as if he who does what is good has indeed "seen God." In the sense that he who does evil has not seen God, he who does good has seen God, and in the verse, having "seen God" parallels being "from God." Therefore, instead of referring to an empirical sensation or experience, to "see" God is an expression referring to a relationship with God and a revelation from God. To see God is to grasp him with the mind and to be transformed by him. The word "see" is used with intellectual and relational connotations; it is not used in the empirical sense. D. A. Carson equates "seeing God" with "fellowship with God."²³

Thus Jesus' promise is not, "If you will become pure enough in your heart, I will let you take a look at God," but rather, "Those of you who are pure in heart – the Christians – are blessed, because God will reveal himself to you and cause you to know him!" Of course, Christians already know God to a certain extent, and thus they have already "seen" him in a sense. However, just as the other characteristics described in the Beatitudes will not reach perfection until the consummation of God's kingdom, these promises will not be completely fulfilled until that time. Just as God will perfect the hearts of his people when Christ comes, God will also grant them a fuller revelation of himself. As Scripture says, "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2), and "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to

²³ Carson, *Jesus' Sermon*; p. 26.

face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).²⁴

"Blessed are the peacemakers..." (v. 9)

Then, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). He is talking about an objective and relational peace, not a subjective and emotional one. It refers to peaceful relationships.

The blessing is not for those who merely love or desire peace, it is not for those who merely have a friendly or sociable disposition, and it is not for those who passively accept or tolerate unrighteousness. Instead, just as Christ blesses those who not merely accept righteousness but who also hunger for it, he blesses those who "make" peace. His blessing is for those who actively make peaceful relationships happen. As Psalm 34:14 says, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." Since peacemaking involves active interventions in difficult relational conflicts, and since it works against the sinful dispositions of man, it is not a weakness, but a spiritual strength by which the peacemaker overcomes evil with goodness and wisdom.

God himself sets the supreme example of peacemaking in the plan of redemption. Paul writes:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16; also Colossians 1:19-20).

The peacemaker's goal is to end the hostility between two parties and lead them to reconciliation.

Humankind consists of rebellious creatures who hate God and defy his will. They are his enemies. But then, God reaches out to his chosen ones and establishes peace with them through the redemptive work of Christ. To reconcile the chosen sinners to God, Christ took upon himself a human nature, and died a violent death on the cross. True peace comes by satisfying divine justice, not by ignoring it. It does not imply acceptance or tolerance, but taking action to make things right. This also means that peacemaking can be very costly.

The peacemakers will be called "the sons of God." This refers not only to the doctrine of adoption, whereby God establishes a filial relationship with those whom he has chosen, but it is also an expression in which to be the "sons" of someone or something means to bear the likeness or the characteristic of someone or something.

²⁴ Note that the word "see" here again means something other than empirical perception, but it corresponds with "know," and refers to one's intellectual comprehension.

To illustrate, 1 Samuel 2:12 says, "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial" (KJV). In terms of blood relations, they were the sons of Eli, but they took after the demonic traits of Belial, and so the verse continues to say, "They knew not the Lord." As the NIV has it, "Eli's sons were wicked men." Paul calls non-Christians "the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2, 5:6; Colossians 3:6; NASB) – obviously not referring to their blood relations, but to their character.

God establishes a filial relationship with his chosen ones by the redemptive work of Christ, and his children exhibit a family resemblance to their Father. Since the Father is the supreme peacemaker, his children imitate him in loving and making peace, and in facilitating reconciliation.

There are several ways in which God's children are to be peacemakers.

First, they participate in reconciling the chosen ones to God by preaching the gospel. Just as God the Father sets the supreme example of making peace, God the Son sets the supreme example of preaching peace, so much so that he is called "the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Peter says that God sent Jesus Christ to preach "the good news of peace" (Acts 10:36), and Paul writes, "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17).

The gospel of peace is not a message of appeasement or compromise. While instructing his readers to "put on the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:13), Paul writes that they are to have their "feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (v. 15). He sees the Christian as a soldier, preaching the gospel in the context of a spiritual war. In this war, the gospel of peace is as the footwear by which a soldier advances and stands his ground (v. 13-14).

When Isaiah considers those who "bring good news," he says that they proclaim "peace," "good news," and "salvation." However, the message is not one that suggests a truce between God and men, but it is one that declares, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7). The gospel message facilitates reconciliation by proclaiming God's sovereign rule, not by agreeing with man's illusion about human freedom and goodness. True peace is secured not by appeasement or compromise, but by conquering the hearts of men by the word of God.

God has committed to Christians "the ministry of reconciliation," to preach "the message of reconciliation":

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his

appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:18-20)

The message of reconciliation does not teach that God indiscriminately pardons all human beings, but that he pardons only those to whom he sovereignly grants repentance from sin and faith in Christ.

Instead of ignoring his conflict with men, God chooses to resolve it. Rather than making peace by suspending his standard of justice, or by surrendering to or compromising with mankind, God makes peace on his terms. One way or another, he refuses to let matters stand unresolved – a person will either believe in Christ and be saved, or he will suffer endless torture in hell

Second, in addition to reconciling the chosen ones to God by the gospel, peacemaking also applies to human relationships. God commands Christians to live in peace among themselves; however, they seldom live in perfect harmony because they are people who still sin. Even true Christians can sometimes be selfish, contentious, and dishonest. Adding to this the fact that many people are not Christians at all but are imposters and false converts, it is not surprising that disputes and disagreements often occur in the churches.

God has made provisions for this in Scripture. He has established procedures by which Christians can and must resolve their disputes and disagreements. As Jesus teaches in Matthew 18:

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. (v. 15-17)

The process begins by a private confrontation between the parties involved, escalating the situation and making it more public with each step as the offender refuses to admit his fault and ask for forgiveness. If he refuses to hear even the elders and the church, then the entire community must expel and shun him forever, or until he repents.

Churches are afraid to obey God when it comes to conflict resolution, discipline, and excommunication. Christians often prefer to have unbelievers judge their cases in a secular court, as if they are better at conflict resolution and peacemaking. To the Corinthians, Paul writes, "I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another – and this in front of unbelievers!" (1 Corinthians 6:5-6). Many church members are foolish and disobedient, refusing to initiate the process of confrontation and reconciliation that Christ teaches, and many church leaders are useless and spineless people, refusing to hear and judge disputes among their people.

Again, we notice that reconciliation does not imply appeasement, surrender, ignoring the problem, or pretending that the offence does not exist; rather, God commands reconciliation by resolution, and by explicitly dealing with the dispute. Sometimes Christians think that they are being unforgiving if they demand the offender's repentance, but Jesus says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents*, forgive him" (Luke 17:3).

Biblical peacemaking does not entail hiding our problems, but it demands reconciliation, which requires an explicit confrontation with the dispute and the parties involved. In addition, we must resolve such disputes only on the basis of biblical principles, for just as God makes peace only on his own terms, God's children also must make peace only on his terms, and not on their own terms or on the offenders' terms.

Third, besides calling for reconciliation with the chosen ones and then among the chosen ones, God also wants his people to live in peace with those outside of the covenant community as much as possible. We live among non-Christians and must have dealings with them. Our remaining sinfulness already causes enough problems, but the wickedness of non-Christians burden society with even more disputes and disagreements. Many conflicts arise between Christians and non-Christians just because both are sinful human beings, but many other conflicts arise because of their fundamentally different beliefs.

The Bible teaches, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men," but it also recognizes that not everything is within our control, so that Paul writes, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). He implies that it is not always possible to maintain peaceful relationships, and that it is not always up to us to maintain peace in these relationships.

Some people seem to assume that Jesus and the apostles lived in peace with everyone, and that it is possible for us to do so. This is false – they did not do it. It is not always possible, and it is not always up to us. Even when we make every effort to maintain the peace in a relationship, the other party may disregard biblical principles, human laws, and common decency when dealing with us.

We may still try to make peace, at times by enduring injustice and suffering loss, but there are occasions when it is proper to bring the matter before the secular court. Paul says there should not be lawsuits among Christians (1 Corinthians 6:7), and this is why we must first follow Christ's procedure of confrontation, escalation, and excommunication. He says that we should treat the excommunicated person as "a pagan" (Matthew 18:17), or a non-Christian. This means that the matter may then be taken to court if the situation demands it. In every case, we must seek to minimize the conflict and to effect reconciliation without compromising biblical principles.

Non-Christians cannot be peacemakers. Of course, many of them do not care about making peace, but even those who claim that they care cannot be true peacemakers. They do not follow God's definition of peace or God's procedure for peacemaking. They have their own

false ideas of peace, and the ways to secure and maintain it. Some of them assume a passive attitude about disputes and disagreements, so that they will not confront the offender. And even if some of them seek confrontation, they do not define peace as reconciliation by biblical principles and procedures, and they will not follow God's instructions on the matter.

Non-Christian peacemaking is humanistic. Their main concern is human welfare, human unity, and human principles – not to obey and honor God. Many of them tend to compromise religious principles – even the principles of false religions – to appease others. Therefore, it is not rare for non-Christians to become intimate friends even when their religious views are very different, and it is commonplace for a non-Christian to convert to another religion in order to marry someone.

Many people have the strange idea that the Christian faith does not cause divisions among people. But Jesus says:

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:34-37)

Christ demands our total loyalty, so that instead of maintaining a false peace at the expense of our faith, if it comes to a choice, we must maintain and assert our faith at the expense of peace. Without faith in Jesus Christ, there is no peace, and the term is mere vanity.

Humanistic values have infiltrated our churches, and it is common for the people to desire and celebrate a false peace. This only covers up genuine and persisting problems, but false peacemakers would rather cover up the problems than to confront and resolve them. Thus some of those who claim to be Christians attempt to find common ground with Catholics, Mormons, Muslims, Buddhists, evolutionists, and atheists. They can do this only by compromising the Christian faith, and this leads to a false peace that causes more problems and that invites divine wrath.

On the other hand, the message of Jesus Christ divides humanity into two groups of people – the Christians and the non-Christians. The gospel is a great light that exposes our evil deeds and evil hearts, and that removes ambiguities in our beliefs, so that we either reject Christ and be condemned to hell, or accept him by God's grace and be saved. Christians are true peacemakers, and are called the sons of God, but non-Christians are false peacemakers, and they are called the sons of disobedience.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness..." (v. 10)

One might think that the world would welcome the people that these beatitudes describe. Surely no one in his right mind would hate or oppose those who are humble, godly, and merciful. But non-Christians are mentally and morally defective (Romans 1), so that none of them is in his right mind, and it is precisely those who are humble, godly, and merciful that they hate and oppose.

Christians and non-Christians are spiritual opposites, and the more developed the Christians are, the more this contrast becomes evident to the non-Christians. Jesus exhibited perfect righteousness, and the non-Christians murdered him for it. Although we do not exhibit perfect righteousness, to the extent that we follow Christ's teaching and example, and to the extent that we preach the biblical doctrines, our righteousness and our message will stand in stark contrast against the wickedness and the unbelief of the non-Christians. Despite their talk about tolerance, non-Christians are self-righteous hypocrites, and they will not tolerate being exposed and embarrassed by God's people.

Thus as Jesus concludes the Beatitudes, he says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). Although verse 11 begins with the word "blessed," we know that verse 10 is the final beatitude in the series for several reasons. First, in terms of construction, verse 11 is different from verse 10 and the previous beatitudes. Second, in terms of content, verse 11 does not proceed to a different characteristic, but it expands on what is said in verse 10. Third, whereas verse 10 and the previous beatitudes are stated in the third person ("blessed are those"), verses 11 and 12 are stated in the second person ("blessed are you"). Fourth, as mentioned, Jesus uses the *inclusio* when he repeats the blessing or promise, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3, 10), effectively concluding in verse 10 the series of beatitudes that started in verse 3.

Since verses 11 and 12 expand on what is said in verse 10, they help us to understand the meaning and implications of verse 10. Jesus blesses those who are "persecuted." Verse 11 expands on the idea of persecution and says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you."

The word "insult" refers to verbal abuse. Non-Christians often verbally attack us with derogatory names and labels. Because of our justified skepticism and denial of their false intellectual theories and assertions, they call us stupid, gullible, and irrational. Because of our stand for righteousness as defined by Scripture, they call us bigots, haters, and narrow-minded. Christian teenagers are mocked because of their chastity; Christian businessmen are ridiculed for their honesty; and all kinds of Christians are insulted and criticized for exhibiting the true charity that God commands, rather than the false charity that the world demands. Non-Christians blaspheme God and mock his people; they label the divine standard of morality as immorality. What is evil, they call good; what is good, they call evil.

Non-Christians do not limit themselves to attacking Christians with insults, but they also "persecute" them. This emphasizes the actions that they take to oppose and suppress God's people. Persecution comes in various forms, from the mild and inconvenient, to the severe and extreme. Some new converts are shunned by their families and friends. Some Christian

students are openly harassed by their professors and classmates, perhaps for believing in biblical moral absolutes, the blood atonement, heaven and hell, and divine judgment. Some universities have withheld degrees from students who affirm the biblical account of creation. Governments often enact policies that restrict the Christians' freedom of speech, and some places even forbid Christians to promote certain biblical teachings and practices in their own homes. In some situations, for Christians to profess and practice their faith may entail loss of finances and opportunities. Then, in some places, Christians are often beaten, jailed, and even killed.

However, non-Christians behave this way not because truth is on their side, and deep in their hearts – and at times it is clear in their consciousness – they know that the Christian faith is true, and that all those who remain non-Christians are doomed to hellfire and endless suffering. As they try to convince themselves otherwise, they lash out against those who constantly remind them of their foolishness and wickedness, and their impending torment in hell. But if they were to see and speak the truth, they would condemn themselves, and so they "falsely say" all kinds of evil things against Christians and Christianity, trying to discredit what they innately perceive to be the truth.

All non-Christians are mentally and morally defective, and spiritually unenlightened and depraved; therefore, their response to the truth of the Christian faith can barely rise above the level of stupid beasts. Thus instead of challenging Christians with sound argumentation, they resort to mockery and persecution that are based on nothing more than slander.

This does not mean that if you claim to be a Christian, then all non-Christians are necessarily wrong whenever they oppose you. The beatitude refers only to those who are persecuted "because of righteousness" (v. 10). As Peter explains, "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer *as a Christian*, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:15-16).

If you claim to be a Christian but then steal from someone, then you ought to be prosecuted and punished, and be fined or jailed. If you claim to be a Christian but then murder someone, then you ought to be tried and convicted, and perhaps executed. In these cases, you would not be persecuted "as a Christian," nor would you suffer "because of righteousness," but you would be receiving the just punishment due to a criminal.

If you engage in activities that the Bible forbids, then even if you suffer punishment or mistreatment from improper or unauthorized sources, you still may not construe it as persecution because of righteousness. For example, when one gangster kills another gangster, it does not mean that the one who gets killed dies because of his righteousness. He dies as a criminal, not a Christian.

Likewise, if a man blows up an abortion clinic and kills numerous abortionists, although the Bible opposes his violence, this does not make the abortionists into righteous martyrs. Rather, both the man and the abortionists will be condemned to hell for their sins. Again, a homosexual who is cruelly beaten by a group of people because of his sexual orientation

is not suffering because of righteousness, but because of his sin of homosexuality. He suffers as a sinner and a criminal, even though the Bible also condemns those who assault him.

This does not mean that Christians should have no sympathy for those who suffer or offer no help to them because of their wickedness – such as those who suffer permanent physical damage for having undergone abortions, or homosexuals who have contracted AIDS because of their deviant lifestyle. But we must not deceive them as to why they are suffering. They are not heroes, but sinners and criminals. If they deny this, then they will die in their sins, and our unbiblical and humanistic sympathy will be powerless to help them.

In verse 11, Christ equates "because of righteousness" (v.10) with "because of me." This immediately restricts the meaning of righteousness, and thus the application of this beatitude. To suffer because of righteousness is to suffer because of Christ; therefore, no non-Christian can ever suffer because of righteousness – they always suffer for other reasons.

You object, "But what about those non-Christians who labored and suffered much for the welfare of humanity?" Since our verse is a biblical blessing for those who suffer because of righteousness, we must also employ the biblical definition of righteousness. Suffering for a purely humanistic cause or agenda does not count as suffering because of righteousness. Christ says that to suffer because of righteousness means to suffer because of him, and Peter echoes this when he says that one should suffer only "as a Christian." Therefore, to suffer because of righteousness means to suffer as a Christian, as a follower of Christ in creed and in conduct.

In John 15, Jesus says something to his disciples that corresponds with equating suffering because of righteousness with suffering because of Christ:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: "No servant is greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. (v. 18-20)

Christianity endorses only biblical righteousness, which is inseparably identified with Christ. Indeed, if you were to advocate and practice a humanistic righteousness, the world would "love you as its own." But whereas humanistic righteousness is admired and encouraged, Christian righteousness is despised and persecuted.

If you are a Christian, then Christ has "chosen you out of the world." Whereas the world follows the devil as its leader, you have been sovereignly chosen to follow Christ as your

king. Non-Christians resent Christ and his intrusion into their lives, and therefore they will resent you for being a Christian.

The Beatitudes describe the characteristics of the subjects of Christ's kingdom. Although Christ rules over the whole world, non-Christians reject his authority, and these rebels persecute the subjects because they hate the king. Of course, they claim to be righteous, and some of them even claim to be followers of Christ. But Christ says, "If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." Do these people affirm and obey the apostolic teachings that we show them from the Bible? If they do not, then they are not the followers of Christ, but they are liars and imposters.

Since Christ identifies suffering for righteousness with suffering for him, the inevitable conclusion is that no non-Christian can suffer for righteousness. They never suffer for what is right, but at best they suffer for what *they think* is right. The two are very different – as different as heaven and hell. They may claim that they are suffering because of righteousness and even because of Christ, but if they are not suffering for what the Bible teaches as right, then they are suffering only for themselves.

As one writer notes, "Don't make a martyr out of yourself and call everyone else Pharisees and hypocrites."²⁵ This is what many people do when they are criticized for their moral perversion (divorce, homosexuality, etc.) or their doctrinal aberration (open theism, cessationism, etc.). Christ refers to those who suffer for what the Bible defines as righteousness – one who suffers not for biblical righteousness, but only for what *he thinks* is right, in the end suffers for nothing other than *self-righteousness*.

However, it remains that there are those who are persecuted because of true righteousness, that is, because they affirm and obey the teachings of Christ. Jesus says that the proper response is, "Rejoice and be glad" (Matthew 5:12). As Peter writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

The apostles rejoiced "because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). They were able to rejoice not because they had gone insane, but because they had a firm grasp of reality, as to for what and for whom they were enduring persecution and reproach. Peter writes, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14). He regards the reality and purity of his faith as more precious than his comfort and convenience: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1:6-7).

Matthew 5:10 tells us why those who suffer persecution because of Christ are blessed: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, *for theirs is the kingdom*

²⁵ Johnson, p. 125.

of heaven." Again, Jesus is not so much *prescribing* the conditions for entering the kingdom of heaven as he is *describing* the characteristics of those to whom the kingdom belongs. He is not saying, "If you will get persecuted enough because of righteousness, then you will inherit the kingdom of heaven," but rather, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness – that is, blessed are the Christians – because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."

Verse 12 expands on this and says, "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." We can rejoice when we suffer for Christ because God approves of us and he will reward us. Also, we can rejoice because when we suffer for Christ, we are identified with the prophets who suffered for their righteous obedience toward God.

The reward does not refer to a tit-for-tat principle, but to "a freely given recompense, out of all proportion to the service."²⁶ Any reward that God gives us is in reality "out of all proportion to the service," because any service that we render to God is owed to him in the first place. As Jesus teaches, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10). God rewards us because of his sovereign kindness, and not because he owes us a compensation. Concerning Moses, Hebrews 11:26 says, "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward." This is the attitude of the righteous.

The Jews would consider it a great honor to be identified with the biblical prophets, and we ought to think the same way. Just as the ancient prophets suffered for God, we follow in their footsteps when we suffer for Christ (v. 12). By saying that those who suffer for him are as the prophets who suffered for God, Jesus makes an implicit but unambiguous claim to deity.

Because so many people falsely claim to be Christians, and because so many people falsely claim to suffer for Christ or for righteousness, Christians must maintain a clear distinction between the true and false definitions of righteousness, and draw a clear line between the church and the world.

However, false teachers and false doctrines have brought an unprecedented number of false converts into our churches. Since most of those who claim to be Christians are in fact non-Christians, so that their hearts have never been transformed by God, it is not surprising that there is such an overwhelming number of church scandals involving sexual immorality, financial mismanagement, and other wicked behaviors that ought to be found in the world and not in the church.

It often seems that Christians sin just as severely and just as frequently as non-Christians, because most of those who claim to be Christians are in fact non-Christians. So non-Christians ridicule the gospel because so-called Christians demonstrate little to no difference in their use of language, choice of entertainment, and their degree of honesty,

²⁶ France, p. 112.

courage, and intelligence. Others argue that the gospel has no impact in people's lives because these so-called Christians seem to have just as high a divorce rate as the non-Christians.

The solution is to make a clearer distinction between Christians and non-Christians (which includes false converts) through biblical preaching and church discipline. By boldly and clearly preaching the biblical message, we will attract fewer false converts into our churches, and repel many of those who are already in our churches. More of our hearers will either be converted, or remain outside of the covenant community (Acts 5:13). By requiring a basic doctrinal test of their profession, we will make fewer mistakes in extending "the right hand of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9) to those who desire to be members or leaders in our congregations. By faithfully exercising church discipline, including excommunication, we will remove from our midst false converts and sinners who bring shame and disgrace to the church and the name of Christ.

For example, those recent scandals about the homosexuality and pedophilia among Catholic priests should have no bearing on Christian churches if we have all along made it clear that Catholicism is not Christianity, but an anti-Christian religion. The same goes for the several Mormon kidnappers. Since Catholics and Mormons are not Christians, we expect some of them to be homosexuals, pedophiles, and kidnappers. Just as the Christian is not required to offer any defense for what an atheist or Satanist does, the credibility of his faith has no relationship to what Catholics and Mormons do. It is consistent with biblical teaching that non-Christians would participate in the most perverse and basest of sins. Because they are not Christians, we expect them to do these things.

This does not imply that true Christians are perfect and sinless, but it relieves us of the responsibility to answer for those people who really have nothing to do with us in the first place. As for the sins within the true covenant community, we must exercise church discipline to deal with them swiftly and decisively, so that by the time the world finds out about these sins, we will have already done something about them. This way, we will show those who are inside and outside of the community that we declare and enforce the biblical standard of morality without hesitation or hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, as our final beatitude shows, non-Christians will not thank us for our righteousness, but it will insult, persecute, and slander us. However, they are able to do so only "if it is God's will" (1 Peter 3:17; also Philippians 1:29). Just as God controls the smallest thought, action, and event, he exercises complete control over how and when non-Christians persecute his people, and he decrees everything to happen for the edification of the Christians, and the damnation of the non-Christians (Romans 8:28, 9:22-24).

As Christians, when we suffer persecution because of our faith in Christ (2 Timothy 3:12), we know that a better future awaits us, and so we are blessed: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17). On the other hand, God will punish the non-Christians, and he will torture them forever in hellfire.

THEIR INFLUENCE (Matthew 5:13-16)

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

If in verses 10-12 Jesus describes the approach that non-Christians take toward Christians, then in verses 13-16 he prescribes the approach that Christians should take toward non-Christians. And whereas in verses 10-12 Jesus tells us that non-Christians are persecutors and slanderers, in verses 13-16 he tells us that Christians are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

"You" is emphatic in the Greek, thus accentuating the contrast between the church and the world, the followers of Christ and the followers of Satan. It also reinforces the fact that Christ is referring only to Christians, and not the non-Christians. Christians are as salt and light in this world, but the non-Christians are not.

Salt was one of the most useful substances in the ancient world. It could function as a purifier and seasoning, but the people used it primarily as a preservative. Rubbing salt into meat retards its decay. At that time, most salt was dug from the shores of the Dead Sea instead of obtained by the evaporation of salt water. Since there were no refineries, what was called salt was in fact a mixture of actual salt and other minerals.

Actual salt could not lose its flavor, but it was the most soluble, so that it could be dissolved or washed away. Although the residue looked similar to the original compound, having lost the properties and benefits of salt, it could no longer function as a preservative. Or, the actual salt could be mixed with so many impurities as to render the actual salt impotent and ineffective.

The people would then throw out this "salt" on to the road, or scatter it on the top of their houses to harden their flat roofs and to prevent leaks. Since the roads were for commute and the roofs were for group gatherings and for children to play on, the "salt" that had lost its flavor became road dust, to be stepped on by people.

Non-Christians are evil to the core – they have no power to prevent their own deterioration, and if left to themselves, all human societies would become increasingly perverse and corrupt. But Christians are the salt of the earth. Although genuine transformation can come only by spiritual regeneration, God preserves the world from plunging into complete chaos and insanity by applying Christian influence to it.

As the world heads toward greater corruption and ultimate destruction, Christians labor toward the opposite direction by their distinctives, such as those listed in the Beatitudes. This generates great hostility from the unbelievers, so that they insult, persecute, and slander the Christians, although Christians are precisely what the world needs for civilization to survive.

Christians face constant resistance from unbelievers, and they often sense the pressure to compromise their distinctives and to conform to the world. Just as salt becomes useless when it is dissolved or diluted, Christians lose their effectiveness when they allow their beliefs and practices to be dissolved by fear and compromise, and their influence is diluted when they allow false doctrines to invade their minds, and false converts to infiltrate their churches.

Examples of compromise abound in the lives of Christians. Sometimes they conform their thinking and behavior to the non-Christian culture around them, and sometimes they compromise the gospel message to please those who hear them. Sinclair Ferguson says it well:

Cease to be different, and we cease to be Christians. How slow we often are to learn this lesson. At times we fall into the trap of being blackmailed by a world that says, "Unless I find your life attractive *on my own terms*, I will not respond to the message of the gospel." But if we yield at that point, we become prisoners of perpetual blackmail.

I have sometimes heard Christians witness to people in these terms: "You mustn't think being a Christian takes away your fun. I can enjoy doing the same things you do. Being a Christian isn't a series of don'ts!" Much of this may be true, but why should the church be so concerned to tell the world that it is not really very different from the world?²⁷ The church then becomes both powerless and pointless.²⁸

Churches have embraced religious pluralism, moral relativism, political activism, and biological evolutionism. They have adopted secular and unbiblical theories on everything from psychology to cosmology, and from education to administration. They encourage abortionists to promote their cause, and ordain homosexuals to the ministry.

"Salt" in rabbinic metaphorical language often carries the idea of "wisdom." As Paul writes, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6). Christ's use of salt as a metaphor implies that Christians are the sages, whereas non-Christians are the fools of this world. The words, "loses its saltiness" (v. 13; *mōranthē*), in other contexts mean "to become foolish."

²⁷ The non-Christian's idea of "fun" should not be a test for truth in the first place. Even if one would lose all his "fun" as a Christian, so what? It would not mean that the Christian faith is false.

²⁸ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987; p. 61.

Claiming to be houses of worship, many churches have become dens of morons – they are filled with non-Christians. God disapproves of them, and even though they have become diluted, the world still laughs at them. They have become worthless.

Helmut Thielicke remarks that we are not supposed to be the honey of this world, but the salt. We are not supposed to be entirely pleasant, but there is supposed to be a biting quality about us. Whether non-Christians experience a sting of conscience or a surge of resentment when we are around, we are not supposed to let them sin in comfort.

In another place, Jesus says that Christians are "not of the world" (John 17:16) even as they live in the world. Rather, Christians are from God, sanctified by his word (v. 17) and sent into the world by Christ (v. 18). Does this mean that Christians are superior? It most certainly does. Many of those who claim to be Christians would cringe at this, but if it is false, then it is not better to be a Christian than it is to be a non-Christian.

The notion that Christians are not superior to non-Christians undermines the gospel, and reeks of false humility. Christians are not inherently superior, but they have been made superior by God's sovereign grace and power. It is because God has made us superior that we are able to function as "salt" to influence this world. If we are not better than unbelievers, then we *are* unbelievers.

The passage is clear even if we do not consider the historical background on salt. The people described by the Beatitudes are the salt of the earth. Instead of taking them out of the world, God applies this salt to the world. However, if they lose their characteristics, so that they no longer exhibit them or interact with the world with them, then they are no longer effective as the followers of Christ. Instead of affecting the world, they will be trampled by it. Therefore, Christ warns that our Christian qualities must not be dissolved or diluted by the world. "Christians should not blend in with everyone else,"²⁹ because Christ has called them to be different and superior.

Jesus says that Christians are also like light. Light is often taken for granted nowadays, especially by those who live in developed areas. Power outages may be rare, but when they happen, they remind us of the inconveniences, the inefficiencies, and the dangers that darkness can cause. The greater the darkness, the less we are able to effectively function, and the more we are vulnerable to the dangers in our environment.

People in the ancient world were acutely aware of the hindrances and dangers accompanied by darkness, and also the benefits that light brings. Whereas we may seldom visit any place where light is unavailable, they had to tolerate times of relative, and sometimes complete, darkness. In contrast to the darkness, a city on a hill, with many lights lit within its walls, would have been visible many miles away, and certainly would have been a welcome sight. Likewise, a lamp in the home would have been very important, and elevated to more effectively illuminate the room.

²⁹ *Life Application*, p. 84.

Light is a frequent and positive metaphor in Scripture. Many professing Christians use light as a mystical metaphor, adopting almost an occult understanding of the term. This is wrong, since the Bible uses it in clear and definite ways. When light is used as a metaphor, it almost always has positive intellectual and moral connotations. And when darkness is used as a metaphor, it almost always has negative intellectual and moral connotations.

For example, John writes, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:6-7). Whether one lives by the truth is designated by whether one walks in the light or in the darkness.

Due to an anti-intellectual tendency, those who recognize light and darkness as moral metaphors often fail to recognize them as also intellectual metaphors. But the Bible frequently uses them as intellectual metaphors. For example, 2 Corinthians 4:4 tells us that non-Christians cannot see the *light* of the gospel because their *minds* have been blinded. They are intellectually blind.

Some Christians insist that non-Christians can be highly intelligent, and to maintain this assertion, they construe verses like this to convey only a moral blindness, as if morality is non-mental. What is morality but the mind's dispositions and decisions in relation to God's law? The Bible teaches that non-Christians reject the gospel not only because they are morally inferior and defective, but because they are also intellectually inferior and defective. People are non-Christians because they are evil and stupid. They are wicked and irrational. This is what the Bible explicitly teaches. It is better for one to disagree with Scripture and admit it, and to admit that this exposes him as an unbeliever, than to disagree with Scripture and then lie about it, and thus incur greater judgment.

With the above in mind, Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). In the context of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible says, "The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16). Simeon calls Jesus "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). Jesus is as a great light, showing us the way to salvation and freedom, the way out of the intellectual futility and moral depravity that continue to enslave non-Christians.

Then, Jesus tells his followers, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). Now, we are not the light of the world in the same sense and to the same degree as Christ. Paul writes, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light *in the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:8). We are light "in the Lord," so that our light is derivative and reflective, and does not come in and of ourselves.

In another place, Jesus says, "Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light" (John 12:36). Jesus is the light of the world, who dwelled on this earth for a little while, and those who trust in him become like him, that is, the sons of light. Again, the metaphor does not convey only moral connotations, but also intellectual ones:

"The entrance of Christ into the life and heart enables the mind to become intelligent and intellectual."³⁰

As Psalm 36 says, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (v. 9). Apart from God's illumination, there can be no life and no light, and this is why I emphasize the need to depend on Christ as the foundation of all our thinking, and to depend on Scripture as the first principle of our worldview (Colossians 2:8). In contrast, "The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going" (John 12:35). The non-Christian is stupid and wicked – intellectually and morally, he has no idea what he is doing or where he is going.

Non-Christians vehemently deny that they are trapped in intellectual and moral darkness; rather, they boast of their spiritual enlightenment, scientific understanding, and moral progress. However, just as an insane person is not qualified to evaluate his own mental condition, the non-Christian mind is so darkened and damaged that it is unaware of its own condition.

Non-Christians judge divine revelation by their human limitations. They claim that they are on a progressive pursuit for enlightenment in all areas of thought, that they are gaining in knowledge and revising their theories and principles. They further claim that the fact that the Bible has remained the same since the beginning means that it must be outdated, and that the information in it must be false.

This loaded language is just an attempt to hide their ignorance, and it is an unintentional admission to intellectual incompetence.

First, they assume that they are indeed making progress, that they are getting better instead of getting worse. When it comes to science, even if we assume that they are making progress in terms of the practical effects that are produced, when it comes to the scientific theories that seek to describe and explain reality, although the scientists use more complex language to express themselves, their basic theories and assumptions have not progressed beyond those espoused by some of the ancient philosophers. If those philosophers were wrong then, the scientists are wrong now. And in areas where they have made changes, we may argue that their new or revised theories are still false, that they have merely exchanged old errors for new ones.

Second, claiming that their progressive discovery is superior to the Bible's constant revelation presupposes that the Bible has been wrong from the beginning. If the Bible was wrong then, it is wrong now. But this also means that if the Bible was right from the beginning, then it has always been right, and it is right today. Contrary to their view that the Bible is outdated because it has been completed and unaltered for centuries, we would say that because the Bible has set forth the truth since the beginning, this means that for so many centuries non-Christians have been left behind in their knowledge about reality and morality, and they are no better today.

³⁰ Walter L. Wilson, *A Dictionary of Bible Type*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1999; p. 259.

Some Christians are intimidated by the non-Christians' claim to intellectual and even spiritual enlightenment, but this is unnecessary. Against their claim of progress, we can boldly respond, "Just because you are stupid does not mean that the Bible is wrong. Just because you need to constantly revise your theories does not mean that the Bible needs to be revised. Just because it takes you hundreds of years to produce so little of what you call progress does not mean that the Bible was not perfect from the very beginning. To refute the Bible, you must directly confront its claims. Human limitations are inapplicable to divine revelation; the argument from alleged progress is irrelevant and false."

Continuing with the metaphor, Jesus says, "Let your *light* shine before men, that they may see your *good deeds* and praise your Father in heaven." The metaphor of light carries intellectual and moral connotations. In this verse, to let our "light" shine means to let people see our "good deeds." What kind of good deeds? In the context of the Sermon, these good deeds would include exhibiting all the characteristics listed in the Beatitudes, as well as obeying all the commandments that Jesus expounds on in the coming sections. Therefore, we are to show mercy, make peace, and to obey God's commands regarding murder, adultery, divorce, swearing, and so on.

When Paul uses light as a metaphor in Ephesians 5, he writes:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible... (v. 8-13)

To let our light shine includes displaying "all goodness, righteousness and truth," and to find out and do all that "pleases the Lord." It also includes refraining from the deeds of darkness, but beyond that, Paul tells us to "expose them."

The "good deeds" Jesus mentions include what some people fail to consider, namely, that we are to shine as light by our preaching. The metaphor of light does not include only a moral dimension, but also an intellectual dimension, and here is where preaching comes in.

In the Sermon, Jesus refers to a person as great in the kingdom of heaven who both practices "and teaches" God's commandments. Acts 26:23 says that "Christ... would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles," so that light is something that can be proclaimed and not only exhibited by our actions. Then, when the Jews reject the gospel in Acts 13, the apostles say to them:

We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made

you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (v. 46-47).

Since the context refers to preaching, by making them "a light for the Gentiles," God has not made them into mere moral examples, but into preachers of the gospel. Elsewhere, Paul indicates that to "shine like stars in the universe" means not only to "become blameless and pure," but also to "hold out the word of life" (Philippians 2:15-16).

Thus the "good deeds" Jesus mentions refer to both our gospel preaching and our moral example. He adds that such good deeds should lead people to "praise your Father in heaven." This restricts the intended meaning and effect of the good deeds. If your so-called good deeds mainly draw attention and praise to yourself, then you have failed to shine as light and exhibit the good deeds that Jesus has in mind. This also means that the good deeds do not include what the non-Christians may consider as good. Jesus is not commanding us to merely recycle our trash, to rescue strayed cats, or to save endangered animals, even though the world considers these things good and noble. Rather, he is referring to deeds that the Bible defines as good, and that exhibits your Christian identity; otherwise, how will people know to praise your Father in heaven?

Looking back to the passage from Ephesians 5, Paul teaches that as children of the light, not only do we shine as light, but corresponding to the nature of light, we also expose the deeds of darkness. As he says elsewhere, "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:5). Unlike the non-Christians, "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 9). And this is also why the world hates us, because God has made us as different as light is to darkness, and because as "the people of the light" (Luke 16:8), we expose their beliefs and actions as evil, by our example and by our testimony.

Since non-Christians are as darkness, for Christians to shine as light means that they are to be the spiritual opposite of all the unbelievers. And since non-Christians are everywhere, darkness is everywhere, and this means that Christians must remain committed to stand their ground as the counter-culture, even as they are hated, threatened, and persecuted. Many Christians are intimidated by the pressure to conform to the world. However, Jesus says that just as one would not cover up a lamp, but would place it at an elevated position to maximize its effectiveness, Christians should not retreat from the world, but should let their light shine before the world, so that the church may be as a city on a hill, its brilliance visible from far away.

Many churches eagerly conform to the beliefs and practices of the world, some claim to do this in the name of Christ. But those who do this cannot function as salt and light, because the metaphors themselves depend on making a distinction between the church and the world, and between believers and unbelievers.

There are those who try to convince us that the church is to fulfill its mission by losing its flavor and hiding its light, as if we will convert the world by becoming non-Christians ourselves. Ever since the Tower of Babel, the enemies of God have been attempting to

unite humanity, not for the sake of true worship, but for the sake of superficial peace and comfort at the expense of true worship. Contrary to this mentality, Jesus teaches, "Let *your* light shine before men, that *they* may see your good deeds." He encourages the "we versus they" thinking that the world so strongly opposes.

The two metaphors cover both the negative and the positive aspects of Christian influence. Salt is mainly a negative metaphor by which Jesus warns his followers against being neutralized by the world's influence. Light is mainly a positive metaphor by which Jesus tells us followers to actively exert their Christian influence on this world. The first metaphor tells Christians that they are a force to hinder the spread of evil; the second one tells them that they are a force to promote the spread of truth. The former warns disciples against conforming to the world; the latter warns them against withdrawing from the world. One warns believers against secularism, and the other warns believers against isolationism.

As Christians, our influence is powerful and universal. Jesus says that we are "the salt of *the earth*" and "the light of *the world*." The Christian faith is powerful to preserve and transform every people group and every aspect of society. Whereas non-Christian religions and philosophies are constantly revising their beliefs and theories in their desperate attempts to maintain the illusion of relevance, the Christian faith has always been and always will be relevant. Christ is relevant at any time and in any culture, and therefore so are we.

2. THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS

LAW (Matthew 5:17-20)

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Despite Christ's clear teaching on the subject, very few people affirm the correct view of the authority and relevance of the Old Testament. Rather, many hold to destructive ideas about the Old Testament, including its place for Christians, because they fail to grasp the structure of biblical revelation, and because they misconstrue portions of the New Testament.

For example, some believe that Christ has abolished the Old Testament, so that its teachings are no longer directly relevant to Christians, and that its contents can at best serve illustrative purposes. Others believe that various parts of the Bible pertain to different "dispensations," so that the principles and teachings addressing previous dispensations no longer apply to those who live in the present dispensation.

Still others believe that Christ came to give us a new commandment, namely, the commandment to walk in love. They believe that this commandment replaces the Old Testament commandments, including the Ten Commandments. Some people from this group believe that if one walks in love, he will never break the Ten Commandments; nevertheless, the Ten Commandments themselves have been abolished, so that instead of deliberately obeying them, we should just walk in love. There are others from this group who believe that walking in love will sometimes entail breaking the Ten Commandments, but since the Ten Commandments have been abolished, it is no longer sinful to break them, as long as one breaks them for the sake of love.

Then, there are even those who believe that since Christ himself lived under the Old Testament, some of the things that he taught are now irrelevant for Christians, including the Lord's Prayer. Others go as far as to teach that under the Old Testament, God's people were saved by obeying the law, whereas under the New Testament, they are saved by believing in Christ. However, Paul says that no one has ever been saved by obeying the law, and indeed the law was never given for salvation. Rather, salvation has always come by grace, as God chooses to save a person and gives him the gift of faith.

Jesus himself encountered similar misunderstandings in his ministry. This was not because he taught against the Old Testament; in fact, the very opposite was true. One problem was that the Jewish religious authorities had added so many human traditions to God's law, that when Jesus opposed and disobeyed these traditions, people mistook him as opposing and disobeying the law itself.

Against their misconceptions, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." By "the Law" and "the Prophets," Jesus includes all that the Jewish people regarded as Scripture, or what we now call the Old Testament. He denies that he has come to abolish the Old Testament; rather, he has come to fulfill it.

Jesus likely has in mind several meanings when he uses the word "fulfill." First, he means that he has come to fully expound the law against human traditions and misinterpretations, so that God's demands may be truly known, and that God's people may learn and obey the whole and intended meaning of the law. Second, he means that he has come to fully perform the true requirements of the law. He has come as one born under the law to fully obey the law, so that he may be a perfect redeemer for his people. Third, he means that he has come to fully fulfill the prophecies in the law concerning the Messiah. All that the law says about the Christ would be fulfilled in him.

Although many commentators affirm that Jesus fulfills the law in all three senses, some suggest that even if this is true, he intends only the third sense when he uses the word "fulfill." They observe that in the next verse Jesus says that nothing in the law shall disappear until everything is "accomplished," which seems to indicate that by "fulfill," he means that what the law says will finally happen in the person of Christ.

By using the word "accomplished," although verse 18 affirms the third sense of fulfillment, it does not automatically exclude the other two senses. In fact, by affirming the third sense, the second sense must also be included, because the second sense is subsumed under the third sense. By affirming that what the law says concerning the Messiah would be fulfilled in Jesus (the third sense), we also affirm that Jesus would perform all the requirements of the law (the second sense). As Hebrews 10:7 says, "Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, O God."

As for the first sense, that Jesus has come to "fulfill" the law by fully expounding its meanings, demands, and implications, verse 19 says that one who "practices and teaches" the commands of the law is great in the kingdom of heaven, and verse 20 refers to a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees. After this comes a lengthy exposition in which Jesus opposes and corrects the false teachings and practices of the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. Therefore, when Jesus says he has come to "fulfill" the law, he has in mind all three senses of fulfillment.

Again, Jesus says that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law. Thus our starting premise must be that no matter what position we take regarding the law, it cannot be that Jesus has abolished it. If there is to be any change when it comes to the relationship between

God's people and God's law, it must be understood in the context of its fulfillment and not its nullification.

This is important in explaining why we have ceased observing the ceremonial aspects of the law. Several New Testament passages have been construed to say that Christ's coming has indeed abolished the law along with all its commandments. However, whatever these passages are saying, they cannot be understood as nullifying the law. Again, Jesus says in verses 17 and 18 that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law. Then, verse 19 says that one who practices and teaches the commandments in the law is called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The truth is simple. In Ephesians 2:14, Paul mentions that there was a "barrier" or "dividing wall of hostility" between the Jews and the Gentiles. What was this barrier or dividing wall? In verses 11-13, he writes:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

The barrier or dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentiles consisted of the external ceremonies and regulations that God commanded the Jews to keep, so that the Jews were called "the circumcision" and the Gentiles were called the "uncircumcised."

Paul takes care to specify that by circumcision, he refers to only that which was "done in the body by the hands of men." Elsewhere he explains that not all who were outwardly circumcised were saved, but only those who were inwardly circumcised, so that not all Jews were saved, but only the chosen ones in whom God sovereignly performed the "circumcision of the heart" (Romans 2:29). Although relatively few Gentiles were saved up to that time, God indeed saved some of them, and performed this inward circumcision in them.

Again, this barrier or dividing wall consisted of external ceremonies and regulations, and it is this barrier or wall that Jesus abolished. As Paul writes, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations" (Ephesians 2:14-15). "The law with its commandments *and* regulations" in the NIV is a misleading translation. The more literal NASB says, "The Law of commandments *contained in* ordinances," and the HCSB says, "The law of the commandments *in* regulations" (see also the KJV and NKJV).

Hebrews 9:10 says, "They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order." What are the things that have been stopped because of Christ's coming? What are the things that applied "until the time of the new order"? Certainly not the entire law or the entire Old Testament and its commandments, but only the "external regulations," namely, those things that are "a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings" (see Mark 7:19 and Acts 10:9-16).

Elsewhere, Paul explains, "These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:17). These ceremonies and regulations have ceased not because they have somehow become false, but because their purpose was to prefigure Christ, and since Christ has come, the ceremonies and regulations have been fulfilled, and remained fulfilled in Christ. Those who observed them looked forward to Christ through them, but since Christ has come, to continue observing them would suggest ignorance and unbelief, as if Christ has not come.

Yet the Old Testament passages regarding these ceremonies and regulations have not become useless, since they remain instructive concerning God's plan of salvation, the work of Christ, and the doctrines that they prefigure and illustrate, as demonstrated by the letter to the Hebrews and in the letters of Paul. Therefore, God's people have ceased observing these ceremonies and regulations, not that they have become false, but because they have become true at the coming of Christ. For example, we have no animal sacrifices at church not because there is no need for a sacrifice, but because Christ is our once-for-all and all-sufficient sacrifice.

On the other hand, this point concerning the ceremonies and regulations do not apply to God's moral commandments, such as the Ten Commandments. Just because Christ has come does not mean that we may now worship idols and commit murder. As mentioned, Matthew 5:19 says that we should continue to practice and to teach the commandments written in the Law and the Prophets.

Some people claim that although we must not worship idols, commit murder, and the like, these restrictions exist not because the Ten Commandments are still in force, but because we are now under the law of love, and love prevents us from doing these things. However, what we have said above refutes this claim. Moreover, it was Moses who said, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5), which is "the first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:38) in both the Old and the New Testaments. And the statement, "Love your neighbor as yourself," does not originate in the Gospels, but it comes from Leviticus 19:18.

As for the Ten Commandments, Paul explains that they are summarized – not replaced – by the commandment to love, so that love is not something that is altogether different: "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and *whatever other commandment* there may be, are *summed up* in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Romans 13:9). In fact, this means that love itself is defined by

these various commandments, and that it is undefined without them. He concludes, "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (v. 10).

You walk in love by obeying the commandments, and so if you walk in love, you have fulfilled the requirements of the law. "It is a great mistake, then, to think that Jesus abolished the commandments and taught us that 'all you need is love.' For love *means* fulfilling the law (Rom. 13:10)."³¹ This is not an isolated or obscure teaching, and it is not difficult to grasp, so it is strange that so many people completely miss it. The greatness of the new covenant is not that God no longer requires you to obey the law, but that he enables you to obey the law: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds" (Hebrews 10:16). "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (Romans 3:31).

In verse 17, Jesus denies that he has come to abolish the law, but he has come to fulfill it. Then, in verse 18, he further affirms the law's inspiration and authority. He says, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." Some commentators believe that the words "until heaven and earth disappear" constitute an eschatological expression pointing to the end of the existing order, but this is not the best interpretation. Jesus is not telling us when, or even if, the law will pass away, but his emphasis is on the permanence and the inevitable fulfillment of all that the law teaches. As R. T. France writes, "The expression is probably less a specific note of time than an idiom for something inconceivable."³²

Jesus expresses the highest view of Scripture, saying that "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen" in the law shall disappear or fail to be accomplished. The Greek for "the smallest letter" is *iota*, referring to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet *yod*, which is almost as small as a comma, like an apostrophe or an accent mark. "The least stroke of a pen" (*keraiá*) refers to one of the tiny hooks and projections that distinguish some Hebrew letters from others, like the serif in modern typefaces.

In other words, Jesus asserts that all of Scripture is inspired, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative to the letter. Therefore, the proper view of biblical inerrancy affirms not only the general events and doctrines taught in Scripture, but it affirms that God has infallibly caused to be written the very words and the very letters used in the Bible. To deny this or to affirm anything short of this is to call Jesus a liar and to renounce the Christian faith.

For this reason, I disagree with Article 19 of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The Article begins with an affirmation: "We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ." Of course I agree with this part, but then the Article follows with a denial: "We deny that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further

³¹ Ferguson, p. 74.

³² France, p. 115.

deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the church."

R. C. Sproul clarifies the denial in the official commentary on the Chicago Statement. He writes:

The denial in Article XIX is very important. The framers of the confession are saying unambiguously that confession of belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is not an essential of the Christian faith necessary for salvation. We gladly acknowledge that people who do not hold to this doctrine may be earnest and genuine, zealous, and in many ways dedicated Christians. We do not regard acceptance of inerrancy to be a test for salvation.³³

Although he claims that the Article intends to be unambiguous, its exact meaning remains unclear. There are several possible meanings to the Article and Sproul's exposition:

1. *Without* some definite knowledge of Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *implicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.
2. *With* some definite knowledge of Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *implicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.
3. *Without* some definite knowledge of Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *explicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.
4. *With* some definite knowledge of Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *explicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.

It is unclear what Sproul means by "people who *do not hold* to this doctrine." Does he refer to those who simply neglect to affirm this doctrine, or also to those who consciously reject this doctrine? It is almost certain that Sproul and the Article mean the latter, since the Article says, "We further deny that inerrancy can be *rejected* without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the church." The framers were thinking of those who *reject* the doctrine, and not just those who neglect to affirm it, such as those who have never considered the subject.

In other words, Sproul and the Article appear to affirm all four propositions. If this is indeed the case, then I condemn them. Instead, we must reject at least the final proposition.

We have established that Jesus held to the highest view of Scripture, affirming that the Bible is inspired, inerrant, and infallible to the letter. If this point is made clear to a person, and he still rejects biblical inerrancy, the necessary implication is that he believes that Jesus made a mistake on this issue or that he lied about it. However, salvation demands a

³³ R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*; International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980; p. 56.

confession of the deity and lordship of Jesus Christ, and it is inconsistent for a person to confess the deity and lordship of Christ but at the same time charge him with error or dishonesty. It is impossible to confess Christ as Lord and liar at the same time, so that an explicit affirmation of Christ as Lord is also an implicit affirmation of biblical inerrancy, and an explicit denial of biblical inerrancy is also an implicit denial of Christ as Lord.

This does not mean that a person must explicitly affirm biblical inerrancy to be a Christian. Perhaps he has never considered the subject. Perhaps he is unaware that Christ, the apostles, and the prophets insist on biblical inerrancy. Or, perhaps he has been misinformed. Under these circumstances, it is conceivable for one to be a Christian with an effective confession of Christ without affirming biblical inerrancy. However, once a person has been confronted with the numerous passages in which Christ, the apostles, and the prophets insist on biblical inerrancy, he may no longer plead ignorance, and we may not think that he has never considered the subject. Rather, he must now explicitly affirm or reject biblical inerrancy, and thus implicitly affirm or reject the integrity and authority of Jesus Christ.

Once a person knows that the Scripture claims to be inspired, inerrant, and infallible, if he rejects the doctrine of inerrancy, but still claims to believe the gospel, then this can only mean that his faith rests on his own opinion and judgment, and not on God's promise as revealed in Scripture. Rather than trusting God's revelation, this person stands in judgment over it, affirming portions of it while rejecting other parts, so that his faith rests in himself, not God's power and wisdom. Thus his faith is exposed as false. If you believe that Jesus is wrong when he talks about Scripture, then on what basis other than your own opinion and preference, or some other standard external to Scripture, can you believe that Jesus is right when he talks about salvation?

Taking a random verse as illustration, a person can explicitly affirm biblical inerrancy without explicitly affirming or denying the proposition, "Jehoshaphat lived in Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 19:4). This is because he may not know about the verse. However, since the proposition is contained in the Bible, his explicit affirmation of biblical inerrancy is also an implicit affirmation of 2 Chronicles 19:4. But if someone confronts him with the verse and he rejects it, then this necessarily implies that his affirmation of biblical inerrancy is a lie – he does not in fact believe in biblical inerrancy.

In the same way, a person may explicitly affirm Christ as Lord without explicitly affirming or denying biblical inerrancy. This is probably because he has never considered the subject, or because he has never been confronted with the relevant biblical passages. However, his explicit affirmation of Christ as Lord is also an implicit affirmation of all that Christ has said. And since Christ has asserted biblical inerrancy, this person's explicit affirmation of Christ as Lord is also an implicit affirmation of biblical inerrancy. If someone confronts him with Christ's teaching on biblical inerrancy, and he rejects it, then this necessarily implies that his affirmation of Christ as Lord is a lie.

If he claims that Scripture's teaching about Christ's redemptive work is true, whereas its teaching about Christ's position on biblical inerrancy is false, then this person is using his own opinion and preference, or some other standard external to the Bible, to judge God's

revelation. This means that his faith is false, since it rests on his own opinion and preference, and not on God's promise as recorded in Scripture.

The conclusion is that no one who has been confronted with Christ's teaching on biblical inerrancy can reject biblical inerrancy and still be considered a Christian. However, Sproul and the Chicago Statement teach the opposite, and therefore we must denounce them.

Sproul is known for affirming and defending The Westminster Confession of Faith, but in the chapter where the Confession discusses "Saving Faith," it says, "By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true *whatsoever is revealed in the Word*, for the authority of God Himself speaketh therein" (14.2).

As with Sproul and the Chicago Statement, the Confession also lacks precision. It says, "by this faith," and not, "if one has this faith," but it is doubtful that this intends to leave room for unbelief, as if to say, "He might not believe all of the Bible, but if he believes all of it, then it is by this faith that he does it."

It seems that the Confession is referring an actual (even if sometimes implicit) belief in all of Scripture, and not merely a potential belief that can leave room for a rejection of any part of Scripture. This is because it appeals to God's authority as the reason for this faith in the whole Bible. So the Confession does not refer to a mere potential, since faith is actual and not merely potential belief in God's authority.

Several commentaries on the Confession agree with this:

As faith, in general, is an assent to truth upon testimony, so divine faith is an assent to divine truth upon divine testimony. Saving faith, therefore, includes an assent of the heart to all the truths revealed in the Word of God, whether they relate to the law or to the gospel; and that, not upon the testimony of any man or Church, nor because they appear agreeable to the dictates of natural reason, but on the ground of the truth and authority of God himself, speaking in the Scriptures, and evidencing themselves, by their own distinguishing light and power, to the mind. (Robert Shaw)³⁴

...a picking and choosing from among all the biblical details shows that these so-called conservatives are using a criterion of truth other than the Bible itself...In other words, they do not accept any verse in the Bible "for the authority of God himself speaking therein." If they accepted even one verse on God's authority, they would believe "to be true *whatsoever is revealed in the Word*," that is, all of it. For the Bible is the Word of God, as Chapter 1 said, and God speaks the

³⁴ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*; Christian Focus Publications, 1998; p. 193.

truth...the Confession says that saving faith accepts everything that is revealed in the Word... (Gordon H. Clark)³⁵

The general effect of the Spirit's work is to produce faith in WHATEVER IS REVEALED IN THE WORD...The Roman Catholic doctrine of *implicit faith* teaches that Catholics accept all that their church officially teaches implicitly, even before they learn what it is. This is a travesty of the true doctrine here presented in the *Westminster Confession* – regenerate Christians have faith in the word of God, not in the word of men. Implicit faith in the Scripture is actually what the Spirit works in the hearts of the elect. (Gerstner, Kelly, and Rollinson)³⁶

Saving faith receives as true all the contents of God's Word, without exception...the whole must be received as equally the Word of God, and must in all its parts be accepted with equal faith. The same illumination of the understanding and renewal of the affections which lays the foundation for the soul's acting faith in any one portion of God's testimony, lays the same foundation for its acting faith in every other portion. The whole Word of God, therefore, as far as known to the individual, to the exclusion of all traditions, doctrines of men, or pretended private revelations, is the object of saving faith. (A. A. Hodge)³⁷

The Confession and these commentaries are correct. This chapter in the Confession addresses saving faith. It is talking about the faith that any Christian should possess. Therefore, since Sproul has previously affirmed the Westminster Confession, he contradicts himself in also affirming Article 19 of the Chicago Statement and in his exposition of the Article.

The church must confront those who deny biblical inerrancy, showing them the biblical passages that affirm the doctrine, and showing them that a rejection of biblical inerrancy also constitutes a rejection of Christ. Then, since a rejection of biblical inerrancy also constitutes a rejection of Christ, those who continue to reject biblical inerrancy after repeated confrontations by the church must be excommunicated. The church must regard their profession of Christ as insincere and false, and so treat them as unbelievers and expel them from the community.

This proposal may shock some church leaders and members. However, it is more shocking that many churches would rightly expel those who commit other sins and refuse to repent, especially after repeated warnings and confrontations, but these same churches would

³⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965; p. 148-149.

³⁶ John H. Gerstner, Douglas F. Kelly, and Philip Rollinson, *A Guide to The Westminster Confession of Faith*; Summertown Texts, 1992; p. 72.

³⁷ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998 (original: 1869); p. 205-206.

continue to embrace those who deny biblical inerrancy, when biblical inerrancy is the basis upon which they expel the other offenders.

In fact, church leaders who refuse to deal with those who reject biblical inerrancy should be removed from office, because they are not doing what it takes to honor the Lord and to protect the people. Of course, many churches prefer to please men rather than to please God. They prefer human-centered harmony instead of God-centered purity, and so heretics and apostates remain and continue to vex the congregations, until God either awakens them or destroys them.

The Chicago Statement and Sproul's exposition amount to an official and public declaration that belief in biblical inerrancy is optional. It is true that Article 19 warns about the "grave consequences" of rejecting biblical inerrancy, but how grave can these consequences be, when the official exposition says, "We gladly acknowledge that people do not hold to this doctrine may be earnest and genuine, zealous and in many ways dedicated Christians"?

They do not assert this reluctantly or grudgingly, but gladly. As for the description, "earnest and genuine, zealous and in many ways dedicated," even those Christians who affirm biblical inerrancy often do not deserve such commendation. Sproul's exposition assures those who reject biblical inerrancy that the consequences are never so grave as to entail damnation. He even asserts that, "in many ways," these individuals can be excellent Christians without affirming the doctrine. Against this blatant disdain for Jesus Christ and the Bible, we must insist that biblical inerrancy is nonnegotiable. It is not optional.

Since Christ comes not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and since Scripture is infallible and authoritative to the letter, God still requires all people to obey the Old Testament commandments, and those who teach otherwise are opposing Christ's authority and agenda. So Jesus says in verse 19, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

The word translated "breaks" in the NIV means to loosen, so that "relaxes" (ESV) is probably a better translation. The idea may include breaking the commandments, but in keeping with the context of the passage, the word also suggests the reason for breaking them. That is, Jesus opposes those who relaxes the commandments and so to break them. Moreover, he also opposes those who then teach other people this loose view of the commandments. He not only refuses to abolish the law's commandments, but he does not even relax them. Many speak as if those who *uphold* the least of God's commandments will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus teaches the opposite.

People often object that strict obedience to the commandments is legalism, but this misrepresents the nature of legalism.³⁸ The legalism that Scripture opposes commits one

³⁸ *Merriam-Webster* defines legalism as, "strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code." This reflects the popular usage, which is probably what a dictionary is supposed to tell us. However, the definition is flawed, and becomes absurd when used in theological discussions. There is no

or both of the following errors. First, legalism teaches one to attain righteousness by works, in order to merit God's favor or salvation. Second, legalism teaches obedience to human traditions in addition to or even instead of God's commandments, as if those traditions carry the same or even greater authority than God's word. A legalistic person is not one who obeys God's commandments, but one who undermines and disobeys them. A legalistic person, or a legalist, is not someone who follows God's commands too much or too carefully, as if that is possible, but he is someone who does not follow them nearly enough, even as he claims otherwise.

Many people declare that we ought to follow the way of love instead of the way of legalism. Although it sounds correct, most of those who say this have no understanding of love and legalism. Rather than teaching people to obey God, legalism teaches them to disobey him. Legalism is pretended obedience, because in reality it follows its own rules instead of God's laws. On the other hand, to teach people to walk in love is to teach them to truly and fully obey God's commands: "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:3) and "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10).

Teaching obedience to the Law and the Prophets does not undermine or contradict the doctrine of justification by faith. This is because justification by faith is an Old Testament teaching in the first place. Faith has always been the way God saves his people (Hebrews 11). As Paul writes, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:21-22).

When we teach people to obey God's commandments, we do not undermine or contradict justification by faith, because we are not telling them to obey the law *so that* they may be saved. Rather, since no one can perfectly obey the law, the preaching of God's righteous requirements drives sinners to desperation. We then preach the gospel to them and call them to faith and repentance, *so that* they may then obey the law. We do not tell them to obey the law so that they may be saved, but we tell them to be saved (by faith in Christ) so that they may obey the law (Jeremiah 31:33; Ephesians 2:10). Therefore, the Law and the Prophets by no means undermine or contradict justification by faith, but constitute its foundation. And to live under grace does not mean that you do not need to keep God's law. You must keep the law, but it is not for salvation.

Verse 19 warns against relaxing even the least of the commandments and then teaching others to do the same, but it commends one who "practices and teaches" them. "He is saying that our attitude to the law of God is an index of our attitude to God himself,"³⁹ so that "greatness in the kingdom of God will be measured by conformity to it."⁴⁰ However, God is not satisfied even if you have a correct view of the commandments, and if you are

such thing as *excessive* conformity to God's law, as in obeying God too much. In any case, we are attempting to establish what legalism means in Scripture, as in the legalism of the Pharisees. Our conclusion will contradict the dictionary definition, or the popular usage.

³⁹ Ferguson, p. 77.

⁴⁰ Stott, p. 74.

obeying them. He is also concerned about what you tell others about these commandments. Personal obedience is incomplete. You must also teach obedience to others.

Many Christians think that to fulfill the Great Commission only means to "preach the gospel," but their concept of the gospel and of our mandate is usually too narrow. Jesus says that we must go into the nations, "*teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:19). This is the Great Commission. The whole Bible is one enduring and authoritative book, to be studied and obeyed by everyone, and those who teach the Bible must teach it this way. "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52).

Verse 20 might surprise some people, because Jesus continues, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees are members of a largely lay movement supposedly dedicated to the faithful observance of the law, and "the teachers of the law," or the scribes, are the professional teachers and students of the law. If it requires a righteousness superior to that of the Pharisees and the scribes to be a member of God's kingdom, this means that the Pharisees and the scribes themselves are not admitted. They are unsaved and damned. As Jesus says to them elsewhere, "How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33).

Since Jesus urges obedience to even the least of God's commandments, should he not commend the Pharisees and the scribes, and set them up as examples? Are not the Pharisees and the scribes those who most faithfully uphold the commandments? Do they not insist on the most meticulous understanding and obedience to the law? Are they not supreme examples of those who practice and teach the commandments, so that they should be called great in the kingdom of heaven?

The Pharisees and the scribes think of themselves this way, and they manage to convince many others that they are indeed supreme examples of obedience. Long ago it was said, "If only two men are allowed to enter heaven, then one will certainly be a teacher of the law and the other a Pharisee."⁴¹ Verse 20 is especially shocking to those who perceive the Pharisees and the scribes this way, since it seems that they are doing exactly what verse 19 demands. Jesus corrects this misconception, and tells the people that although the Pharisees and the scribes claim to be obedient to the law, and even appear so to the people, theirs is in reality a false righteousness that disobeys and subverts God's commandments.

Some people might misconstrue the kind of righteousness in view and suggest, "Perhaps Jesus is referring to the imputed righteousness that we receive by faith. We can never perfectly obey the commandments, but Jesus obeyed them perfectly as our representative. When we believe the gospel, we are identified with him, so that God credits his perfect righteousness to our account." Although it is true that we are saved by the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith, he is not referring to this when he says that we must have a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes.

⁴¹ Ferguson, p. 76.

We have seen that Matthew stresses a righteousness that satisfies the requirements of God's law in terms of actual good works and behavior. Matthew 3:15 records that Christ submitted to baptism "to fulfill all righteousness." Matthew 5:10 refers to those who are persecuted because of their righteousness. Matthew 5:19 refers to one who "practices and teaches" the commandments. After Matthew 5:20, the verse under discussion, Jesus immediately proceeds to expound on the proper understanding of several commandments and what it means to obey them. Matthew 6:1 then mentions "acts of righteousness" that the hypocrites perform to obtain praise from men. Therefore, in Matthew 5:20, when Jesus says that those who enter the kingdom of heaven must exhibit a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes, he is not referring to an imputed righteousness, but to a righteousness characterized by an actual obedience and conformity to God's commandments.

As with the Beatitudes, this does not undermine or contradict the doctrine of justification by faith, since we are not talking about justification. Jesus asserts that those who enter the kingdom of heaven must have a righteousness that surpasses the false righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes, and Scripture teaches that it is by first receiving imputed righteousness by faith that we then receive the ability to obey God's commands: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:26-27). God gives us his Spirit when he saves us, and the Spirit then moves us to obey God's commands. So we are not saved because we obey, but we obey because we are saved.

The Pharisees and the scribes are legalists, in both of the ways explained earlier. First, they seek to attain a righteousness by their works. However, God demands a perfect righteousness, which they can never achieve. Second, they do not go about establishing their own righteousness by truly obeying God's laws; rather, they have constructed an elaborate system of human traditions permitting them to disobey God's commandments while still offering the impression of piety. When they interpret and apply God's commandments, they find ways to excuse themselves, and they redefine the terms and heap up traditions to neutralize the clear demands of the commandments. This is why Jesus says elsewhere, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9).

In the coming passages, Jesus will offer some examples on how God's commands have been distorted and overturned, and he will explain what it really means to obey them. As Stott observes:

What the scribes and the Pharisees were doing, in order to make obedience more readily attainable, was to restrict the commandments and extend the permissions of the law. They made the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive. What Jesus did was to reverse both tendencies. He insisted instead that the full implications of God's commandments

must be accepted without imposing any artificial limits, whereas the limits which God had set to his permissions must also be accepted and not arbitrarily increased.⁴²

People have the misconception that Jesus condemns the Pharisees and the scribes because they are too meticulous in studying and obeying God's laws. They think that a strict application of God's laws constitutes legalism. Precisely the opposite is true. The Pharisees and the scribes – commonly considered legalists – are the ones who relax God's commandments and teach others to do the same. In contrast, Jesus calls his followers to exhibit a superior righteousness by truly practicing and teaching God's laws and their various implications (v. 19).

MURDER (Matthew 5:21-26)

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

Jesus calls his followers to exhibit a righteousness superior to that of the Pharisees and the scribes. Instead of relaxing the strict demands of the law, this genuine and superior righteousness is one that truly practices and teaches even the least of God's commands (v. 19).

The Pharisees claim that they obey the law with precision, and the scribes claim that they teach it with exactitude, but in reality both of them attempt to cheat the law by redefining and reinterpreting its intention and meaning. They distort and restrict the law in a way that sin is redefined, so that it refers only to things that they have not done. They avoid sin by redefining it, and not by obeying the law. It is easy to see why the true followers of God must have a superior righteousness, for the Pharisees and the scribes are not righteous at all.

Jesus now begins to offer some examples of common misinterpretations and misapplications of God's commandments, and in the process also provides the correct

⁴² Stott, p. 79.

interpretations and applications (v. 21-48). He begins each section by saying, "You have heard that it was said."⁴³ He might be using or alluding to a rabbinical method where the teacher would begin with such an expression. He would state a false but seemingly possible interpretation of Scripture, and then he would refute the error and provide the correct understanding of the passage.

So Jesus is not contradicting the Old Testament commandments in these sections. He has just said that he comes not to abolish but to fulfill them, and that his disciples should practice and teach them. He does not say, "It is written," which is his customary introduction for a direct quotation from Scripture, but he says, "You have heard that it was said," which seems to be his way for referring to men's religious traditions and their interpretations of Scripture. He begins these examples immediately after stating that one must have a righteousness superior to that of the Pharisees and the scribes relative to these commandments. Thus he is not contradicting the commandments, but how the Pharisees and the scribes practice and teach them. He has come not to overturn the commandments, but to enforce them.

Whether the correct translation should be "to the people long ago" or "by the people long ago" in verse 21 cannot damage the point we are making. There are strong arguments showing that the latter is correct, and either way, Jesus could be referring to the oral traditions of the Jewish rabbis and elders that have been adopted by the Pharisees and the scribes.

The first example that Jesus uses is the sixth commandment, which forbids murder: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'" But what is murder? May I beat a man until he is almost dead and still claim that I have not violated the sixth commandment? What if instead of killing a person, I hire someone to do it for me? Am I still guilty of murder? Or, what if, seething with anger and resentment, I wish that someone were dead, but I lack the means or the audacity to make it happen? Does this mean that I am innocent of breaking the sixth commandment?

Legalistic people like the Pharisees and the scribes tend to restrict God's commandments so that they refer only to the most obvious and outrageous acts. Thus although they would not kill Jesus with their own hands, they wish to have him killed, and they conspire to make it happen. By their twisted definition of murder and interpretation of the commandment, they would assure themselves of their innocence.

Jesus corrects the illegitimate restriction of God's law, and says, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." This is not a correction or an extension of the sixth commandment, but he is stating what the sixth commandment truly means.

⁴³ The passage on divorce (v. 31-32) begins with "It has been said," possibly because this section is part of or an extension of the previous section on adultery (v. 27-30). In any case, what we observe about how he begins the other sections also applies.

This understanding of the sixth commandment has always been clearly portrayed in Scripture. Through Moses, God forbids not only the act of murder in the sense of the unwarranted, deliberate, and physical termination of human life.

Moses wrote that anger had a prominent role in the first murder, when Cain killed his brother Abel. God told Cain that his anger would be the root of sin, and told him to "master it" (Genesis 4:5-8). Cain committed murder in his heart before it became a physical act.

In Leviticus, God says through Moses, "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life" (Leviticus 19:16). God does not forbid only the actual act of murder, but he forbids doing anything that endangers another person's life. Then, the next verse says, "Do not hate your brother in your heart" (v. 17), and the verse after that says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 18).

God never intended for his commandments to forbid only the actual and obvious act of murder. From the beginning, his commandments address our daily practices relating to other people's safety, and beyond that, they address our thoughts and motives, forbidding us to "hate your brother" or to "bear a grudge." Instead of correcting or adding to God's law, Jesus is removing the false restrictions imposed by the Pharisees and the scribes upon God's law, and drawing out its original and complete meaning.

Some people try to distinguish between the offenses and the punishments in verse 22, and suggest that there is a gradation with "the fire of hell" as the climax. Commentators usually do not favor this interpretation; instead, it appears that Jesus is repeating the same idea to communicate his point, that is, God's law does not forbid only the physical act of murder, but also illegitimate and personal anger, contempt, and insults. He speaks against only illegitimate and personal anger and insults, because the Bible teaches that some anger and insults are righteous and justified, as demonstrated by the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord himself.

There is such a thing as righteous anger. For example, in Mark 3, Jesus asks the people, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (v. 4). They remain silent, so that they can watch if Jesus would break, not God's law, but their traditions about the Sabbath. So Jesus looks around "in anger," because of "their stubborn hearts" (v. 5). He is angry not because of some petty or private matter, but because of their spiritual stubbornness.

Likewise, some who call themselves Christians would rather defend their theological and denominational heritage than to welcome God's healing power to relieve people's suffering. They honor God with their lips, but their hearts are hard like rocks, and poisonous like scorpions. If one stands up to them as Jesus stood against the Pharisees, they would slash his throat with their pens and bury his corpse with their politics. They are the successors of the Pharisees, the children of hell.

Then, the verse says, "But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." However, the Bible teaches that there are instances when we should call someone a fool. In Matthew 23:17, Jesus calls the Pharisees and the scribes "blind fools," because they teach and practice traditions that undermine God's law. In Luke 24:25, Jesus calls his own disciples "foolish," because they are "slow of heart to believe." In 1 Corinthians 15:36, Paul calls the Corinthians "foolish," because of their misconceptions about the resurrection. In Galatians 3:1, Paul calls the Galatians "foolish," because they have been "bewitched" by false doctrine. In James 2:20, James calls a person "foolish," because he distorts the teaching on faith. And Psalm 14:1 and 53:1 say, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" It is appropriate to call someone a fool when we are calling attention to his unbiblical beliefs and actions. If you are a non-Christian, you are stupid. If you are a heretic, you are a moron. If you are a sinner, you are an idiot. As Matthew Henry writes, "Atheism is folly, and atheists are the greatest fools in nature."⁴⁴

Nevertheless, we must not soften or distort what Jesus teaches, or we would be committing the same error that he is correcting. It is true that there is such a thing as righteous anger and insult, but we are often angry because of personal offenses, and out of this unrighteous anger comes the kind of insult that Jesus denounces. As James writes, "But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20, NASB).

The punishment for violating the sixth commandment is most severe. Anyone who transgresses is "subject to judgment" and "in danger of the fire of hell." Just like the person who commits the act of murder, one who merely entertains the things that lead to murder or the things that belong to the same category as murder, even if he does not commit the physical act of murder, is subject to the ultimate punishment.

"The fire of hell" is literally "the hell of fire" or "the gehenna of fire." Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom, located at the south of Jerusalem. The place was once used for burning children as sacrifices to the false god Molech (or Moloch; 2 Kings 23:10). King Josiah stopped the sacrifices and made the place a dumping ground for rubbish and corpses of criminals.⁴⁵ By the first century, the Jews were still disposing of their garbage there. They kept the fire burning to destroy the garbage and the worms infesting it.⁴⁶ Jesus uses Gehenna to symbolize the final place of punishment where God will send the non-Christians. The implication is that non-Christians are garbage, and that God will send them to a place of endless torment, where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48).

The passage is disturbing in itself, because Jesus has in effect condemned all of humanity to hell by a strict but correct exposition and application of the sixth commandment. One can escape the fire of hell only through faith in Jesus Christ.

⁴⁴ *The Matthew Henry Study Bible*; World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1997; p. 1.

⁴⁵ D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary); Zondervan Publishing House, 1984; p. 149.

⁴⁶ *Life Application*, p. 93.

Some years before my conversion, and when I was still a child, I pestered my mother into buying me a Bible. When I came to this passage, fear struck my heart, because I knew that even though I was so young, I had already committed the sin of unrighteous anger, insult, and the like – many, many, many times.

Jesus made his point clear. Even as a little child, I understood what he meant, and I realized that I stood condemned. On the other hand, many pastors can preach right through the Sermon on the Mount and fail to declare the strict demands of God's law, the terrifying punishment for breaking it, and the inescapable doom of those who do not trust Christ for salvation. It seems that their reading and exegetical skills cannot measure up to a child reading the Bible for the first time in his second language. I have discovered that this is true with most preachers and theologians.

I entered the ministry when I was sixteen and started an adult Bible class. One week I spoke to a new arrival and asked her several things to assess her spiritual condition. The woman was at least forty years old, but she told me that she had never sinned in her life – not even once. Of course, I was sure that she had a mistaken concept of sin if she thought that she had never sinned during all this time. Besides 1 John 1:8, I read our passage to her: "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment...anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (v. 22). And I asked, "Can you say that you have never been angry with someone or insulted someone in your life? Not once? Not even an angry or hateful thought?"

She could not answer. As spiritually dull as she was, once the sixth commandment was explained to her, even she realized that she had violated it numerous times. Before our conversation, she had defined sin to include only those things that she thought she had never done. But Christ exposed her self-deception.

Perhaps you think that you are not a sinner, or even think that you have never sinned in your whole life. Like this woman, you probably define sin in a way that includes only those things that you think you have never done. But you cannot escape God's judgment simply by redefining sin or distorting the commandments. God will judge you on his terms, not yours.

In verses 21-22, Jesus teaches that the commandment against murder does not forbid only the physical act of murder, but everything that leads to it as well, including angry thoughts and hateful words. And there is still more to the sixth commandment. In verses 23-26, Jesus teaches that the commandment does not forbid only destructive thoughts and words, but it also demands a person to pursue reconciliation.

A "negative" command from God does not only forbid the sinful thoughts and actions that it specifies, but it also implies a positive duty to perform the corresponding righteous thoughts and actions. For example, the command against adultery does not only forbid promiscuity and infidelity, but it also implies a positive duty to maintain one's purity and love one's spouse. Likewise, the command against idol worship also implies the positive

duty to love and worship the true God. And a thief stops being a thief not just when he stops stealing, but when he starts giving (Ephesians 4:28).

This is not a novel use of the commandments, but it is consistent with the teaching of Moses, who said long ago: "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life" (Leviticus 19:16), and as a case law, said, "When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof" (Deuteronomy 22:8). We are to take measures to ensure other people's safety.

Jesus offers two scenarios to illustrate the necessity (v. 23-24) and the urgency (v. 25-26) of reconciliation.

In the first one, Jesus says, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

If God commands us to perform a certain religious ceremony or ritual, then of course it is right to do it. But it is often easier for us to go through the outward motions of a religious ceremony than to practice the inward virtues that God also commands, such as honesty, humility, purity, and love.

Here a person is about to offer a gift to God. It is a solemn occasion, and outwardly speaking, it is commendable. But Jesus says that if this person remembers that his "brother" has something against him, he should stop what he is doing, and first seek reconciliation with his brother, and then return to offer his gift.

Whereas Jesus at first applies the sixth commandment to our hateful attitudes and actions against others, now he teaches that we have a duty to seek reconciliation when other people have something against us. We are not just to master our own thoughts and actions, but we should actively repair our damaged relationships.

Jesus does not say that we ought to seek reconciliation only when we are in the wrong, but that we are to go to the person who has "something against us." Of course, just because a person has something against you does not mean that you have done something wrong, and the Bible offers procedures by which you are to discuss and resolve the problems in your relationships.

If your brother falsely blames you for something, then once you show him the truth, he should stop being angry at you or even ask you to forgive him. If he continues to be angry, then you are innocent of wrongdoing, but he who falsely blames you and continues to be angry with you is in the wrong. Of course, if he rightly blames you for something, then you must go and ask for his forgiveness, and the Bible commands him to forgive you (Luke 17:4).

Whether or not his complaint is legitimate, you should go and seek reconciliation, but you cannot control the outcome. The Bible also commands the brother who has something against you to come to you and seek reconciliation (Matthew 18:15), but you must go to him whether or not he comes to you. The ideal situation is for each of you to seek reconciliation, and meet the other person on the way.

In the second scenario, instead of speaking about "your brother," Jesus refers to "your adversary." Someone is taking you to court because of a dispute. Again, his complain may or may not be legitimate, but it is wise to settle matters out of court, since you may lose your case and get into greater trouble. Sometimes people become so contentious that they prefer to go through all the inconveniences of court trials to vindicate themselves. But if it is possible, it is better to seek reconciliation even with your adversary.

The Pharisees and the scribes use the commandment, not according to its true intent, but as a license to think and do all the things that come short of the act of murder. But there are other ways to distort the sixth commandment.

For example, many people use this commandment to claim that God forbids the death penalty for criminals. But when they say this, they mishandle God's law like the Pharisees. Instead of allowing the Bible to define the terms used in God's commandments – instead of allowing God to define his own terms – they take their definitions and impose them on the Bible, and on God.

The sixth commandment does not state that capital punishment is not murder. However, this is not an argument that the commandment forbids capital punishment, since it also does not mention other things. It does not say that it is limited to human life, and some people have applied it even to animals, insisting that it is murder to kill them for food. However, if this is a correct use of the commandment, then it also applies to insects, plants, and germs. Yet these same people do not hesitate to eat salads, and they are killing germs just by staying alive. They are arbitrary hypocrites.

For those who oppose the death penalty on the basis of this commandment, it is murder to kill any human life for any reason, but they ignore or reject the other biblical passages that command the execution of certain criminals. If they ignore or reject some parts of the Bible, then they have no right to appeal to any part of the Bible, because then their assertions are in reality based only on their own opinion and preference. Capital punishment is not murder, but a duty of human government, because God says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6). Paul writes that the official "does not bear the sword for nothing," but that he is "an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4).

There are still other abuses. Some people misrepresent the sixth commandment to mean that one may not kill another person in self-defense. They would say that it is murder to kill an intruder who breaks into your home. But God's law says, "If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed" (Exodus

22:2). The defender is innocent. And if to kill someone in self-defense is not murder, then this means that it is not always murder to kill a man.

Just as we must not allow human traditions to relax God's commandments, we must not distort them to forbid things that the Bible never defines as wrong. Murder cannot mean just anything that we want it to mean. We may consider the Ten Commandments as the foundation of biblical ethics, but we may not then ignore or reject other parts of the Bible that define and explain these very commandments, or forget that the Bible is one whole and united revelation from God. Therefore, to know what murder means, we must consider what the whole of Scripture says on the subject. This also implies that an understanding of systematic theology is the necessary prerequisite for an understanding of biblical ethics.

ADULTERY (Matthew 5:27-30)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Jesus moves on to talk about the seventh commandment, which prohibits adultery. What we have observed about how God's commands have been distorted also apply here. Jesus is not contradicting or adding to the seventh commandment, but he is counteracting the false interpretation that has been adopted. The Pharisees and the scribes distort God's commandments by redefining the terms and restricting their applications, so as to make them easier to obey. All this means is that they are breaking the commandments without admitting it. They subvert the commandments and teach others to do the same, but they insist that they are following them.

Our sinful minds tend to distort God's law, making its application so narrow that we are less likely to come under its condemnation. So we distort the sixth commandment and claim that it forbids only the final act of murder, and then we declare ourselves free from all vengeful sins. Likewise, we distort the seventh commandment and claim that it forbids only the final act of adultery, and then we declare ourselves free from all lustful sins. This is a convenient way to achieve "righteousness"; however, this righteousness is an illusion that comes from distorting God's law and redefining the terms, and not a true righteousness that comes from a clean and transformed heart that pursues genuine obedience. God does not accept justification by redefinition, and those who try to cheat his demands would only end up in the fire of hell.

The seventh commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Does this mean that anything short of adulterous sexual intercourse is acceptable? The Jews have no excuse for restricting this commandment to the overt, physical, and final act of adultery, since the tenth commandment makes it clear that God's law rules over both the body and the mind, saying, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (v. 17). You must not take,

and you must not even covet. God claims authority over all aspects of our lives, and he leaves nothing to ourselves. He claims the right to rule not only our physical actions, but also our thoughts, desires, and motives.

As they do with other commandments, people are eager to find ways to distort and break the seventh commandment. Clichés like "Follow your heart" and "Do what makes you happy" are often sufficient justification for them to commit adultery, or for them to think that what they do is not sinful. Some people pay lip service to the seventh commandment, but at the same time insist that if two people come short of having sexual intercourse, then whatever they do, they have not committed adultery. Some venture that the commandment permits fornication. They know to call it fornication, but they still think that they could do it. Why do they still bother? With such an approach to God, they can hardly escape hellfire.

As Paul writes, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators...nor adulterers...nor homosexuals...shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NASB). He realizes that it is possible to be deceived, so that a person would think that even fornicators, adulterers, and homosexuals could be saved. The apostle insists that these people will be condemned to hell.

When it comes to knowing what they can get away with and how far they can go without breaking God's law, they become very careful and precise, attempting to find every possible loophole, and demanding airtight arguments for every prohibition. But when it comes to the positive demands of God's law, and the fine points of biblical doctrines, they yawn and moan, and complain that these things should be left to the theologians.

In verses 29 and 30, Jesus suggests what seems a surprising and extreme solution: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Whatever we make of these verses, what Jesus says is true in the literal sense – it is indeed far better to be maimed than to be condemned to hell. They remind us that we often do not take sin seriously enough, but God takes it very seriously. Nevertheless, Jesus is not commanding self-mutilation as the solution to sexual sins. Indeed, the thrust of verse 28 is that it is possible to commit adultery in our minds, so that even if we gouge out our eyes and cut off our hands, the mind could continue to sin.

Rather than calling for self-mutilation, Jesus is using a striking imagery to convey what the apostles call the mortification of sin, that is, putting our sin to death. As Paul writes, "For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13). And mortification is not limited to the body, since elsewhere he writes, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

The mortification of sin involves "putting to death" the sin that remains in us by the power of God's Spirit. Matthew 5 suggests that this sometimes involves drastic practical measures by which we cut off something that "causes you to sin." Depending on the situation, this may include breaking off certain activities and relationships. You may enjoy swimming as a hobby or sport, but if going to the pool or the beach provides occasions for uncontrollable lustful thoughts because of how the people are dressed, then it is better to stop going, and if necessary, to quit swimming.

This is not legalism. It might be legalistic if I say that the seventh commandment in itself forbids you to go to the pool or the beach, or that it forbids you to swim regardless of your dispositions and vulnerabilities. It would be legalistic to add human traditions to the commandment to supposedly help you obey that commandment, and then elevate these traditions to the level of the commandment itself. Jesus says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away." He does not say to do it no matter what, but he tells us to take the practical measures needed to obey God's commands. If this means that you must stop going to the beach, or that you must throw away your television, or that you must cut off a friend, then you should do it.

There is a kind of thinking that says, "It is not wrong if you only think it but do not act on it." But Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications...These are the things which defile the man" (Matthew 15:19-20, NASB). It is sinful to entertain sinful thoughts. Then comes the response, "Oh, then if you think it, you might as well do it." But this is wrong also. As Cain was being overtaken by hatred, God said to him, "You must master it" (Genesis 4:7). When sinful thoughts surface, refuse to entertain them, and refuse to sit back and watch them develop, but resist them right away. Condemn them, argue against them, and cast them out. If to overcome them requires taking drastic practical measures, then do it.

DIVORCE (Matthew 5:31-32)

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Since Jesus proceeds to discuss divorce, it may appear that he is moving on to the next subject, but several indications suggest that verses 31 and 32 are a continuation or extension of what he started in the previous verses.

First, the beginning of verse 31 in fact contains the Greek connective *de*, which can be translated as "also," "and," or "moreover." It is often unexpressed in English, so that it is absent from the KJV and NIV, but it shows up in the NASB, so that it reads, "*And* it was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" Second, whereas the other five sections or examples all begin with "You have heard that it was said" (v. 21, 27, 33, 38, 43), verse 31 begins with the words, "It has been said." This could

mean that he is citing a new quotation without starting a new topic. Third, although the subject seems to be about divorce, the sin under discussion is still "adultery" (v. 32), which is the topic of the previous passage (v. 27-30). Fourth, after this passage on divorce, Jesus begins the next example by saying, "again" (v. 33), which probably signals to the audience that he is starting a new topic. Therefore, it seems that verse 31 does not begin an entirely new topic, but follows what Jesus has just said about adultery (v. 27-30).

Now, it has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce" (v. 31). This alludes to how the Jews understand Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which reads:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

In Matthew 5:31, Jesus does not directly cite this passage, but he refers to the Jews' interpretation of it.

First, even if the passage really says, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce," it would not mean that God approves of divorce, or that he regards it as insignificant. In some areas, convicted sex offenders are required to register with the local police – that is, "If you are a sex offender, then you must register." But this does not mean that the government approves of the sex crimes as long as the offenders register with the police. The requirement is intended to protect the people from sex crimes. Likewise, even if God's law says, "If you divorce your wife, then you must write her a certificate of divorce," it does not mean that he regards divorce as good or neutral. Rather, the custom is most likely in place for the benefit of the "victim" in a divorce, which would almost certainly be the woman in those days.

In fact, Moses does not command the man to write a certificate of divorce, but he assumes the practice and mentions it in passing as he makes his point. The thrust of this passage is not immediately obvious because of its numerous details and qualifications, but if we remove most of the clauses for the moment, we see that it reads, "If a man...sends [his wife] from his house...and...she becomes the wife of another man...[he] is not allowed to marry her again." That is, "If you divorce your wife, and if she marries another man, then you must not marry her again." A man must not remarry his former wife once she has married a second man, even if the second man dies or divorces her. This, and not the certificate, is the point.

Among other reasons, this regulation is probably meant to prevent hasty divorce and wife swapping. If the law permits men to marry, divorce, and remarry whomever and whenever they wish, then the men could practice wife swapping – marrying, divorcing, exchanging, and then remarrying the women. They could technically remain innocent from adultery, since each man would be married to the woman that he has during the time that he has her. God regards this and other such practices as "detestable."

However, rather than acknowledging the obvious meaning of the command, the Jews have made it into a law about writing out the certificate. In Matthew 19, the Pharisees come to test Jesus, and ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (v. 3). When Jesus, in effect, answers in the negative (v. 4-6), they ask, "Why then...did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Thus the Pharisees indeed interpret Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as granting them permission to divorce "for any and every reason," so long as they write out a certificate of divorce. But the thrust of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is to decree a *prohibition* related to remarriage, and not a *permission* related to divorce.

Against their distortion of God's law, Jesus declares, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:32). Since what we call the exception clause ("except for marital unfaithfulness") is exactly that – it states an *exception* – it would be helpful to first read the verse without it, so that we could focus on the main point, and after that return to it. Without the exception clause, the verse reads, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

The statement declares a general disapproval of divorce, and warns about its consequences. Although the verse is clear, we could derive a fuller understanding of Christ's teaching on divorce if we also look at what he says about it elsewhere.

First, there are the verses in which Christ offers a positive statement about marriage, which also help us understand his teaching on divorce:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate....Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."
(Matthew 19:4-6, 8)

Marriage is not a human invention, but it is a creation ordinance initiated by God. Since it is God who joins together the man and the woman in a marriage, only God can properly dissolve it, and he does this only by the death of at least one of the two. This is an

established teaching, so that Paul uses it as an illustration when he makes a point about something else:

For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. (Romans 7:2-3)

A marriage is properly dissolved only by the death of at least one of the two. Paul does not say that the woman commits adultery if she marries another man without first getting a divorce, but he says that she commits adultery if she marries another man if the original husband is "still alive." Elsewhere Paul writes, "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives" (1 Corinthians 7:39) – not just as long as they do not get a divorce. A divorce does not dissolve a marriage, but only death does. If you are married now, even if you divorce your spouse before a human court, you are still not allowed to marry again. If you marry again, then you commit adultery, and God will hold you accountable.

Let us turn to the parallel passages where Jesus describes what happens when people divorce their spouses. Again, for now we will remove the exception clause from each verse where it appears:

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32)

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:11-12)

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Luke 16:18)

Thus when a divorce occurs, these people will end up committing adultery:

1. The man who divorces, and then remarries.
2. The woman who divorces, and then remarries.
3. The man who marries the divorced woman.

4. The woman who marries the divorced man.⁴⁷

So we summarize Christ's teaching this way: "It is God who joins together a man and a woman in marriage, so that only God can and may dissolve it by the death of at least one of the two; therefore, *do not divorce at all.*"

We see that this is the correct understanding of Christ's teaching by noting how Paul restates it to the Corinthians: "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Although he is the one writing to the Corinthians, he says, "not I, but the Lord," because he is merely restating what Jesus says in the Gospels.

What Paul says is identical to what Jesus teaches, and is summarized as follows:

1. A wife must not divorce her husband.
2. A husband must not divorce his wife.
3. If they do separate,⁴⁸ then they must remain unmarried.
4. Otherwise, they must be reconciled to one another.

Christ's teaching on divorce is such that the disciples say to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). This strong reaction from the disciples further confirms our understanding, that Christ intends to assert a strict view on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Indeed, the Bible's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage is so strict that, although we must not back away from marriage, we must not rush into it and think that we may always get a divorce and remarry if it does not work out. Since God says that he hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), we must adopt the same attitude.

Let us return to the exception clause. Since the exception clause is an *exception* clause, it is not even mentioned in the parallel verses in Mark and Luke, and Paul also omits it when he restates Christ's teaching. An exception is an *exception* – it is not something that should usually happen. This is important, because wicked men and women, including those who claim to be Christians, would seize on any provision for an exception to distort it and universalize it, to broaden what is supposed to be a narrow allowance.

Only Matthew includes the exception clause. The two verses in which it appears are as follows:

⁴⁷ The fourth proposition is the only one not directly stated in these verses, but if the man who divorces and then remarries commits adultery, then it is necessarily true that the woman who marries such a man also commits adultery. The fourth proposition is true for the same reason that the third proposition is true.

⁴⁸ Paul is probably referring to a separation that occurs when one of the two has committed fornication; otherwise, he is assuming that one might separate in disobedience to Christ's teaching.

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32)

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

Jesus teaches that a person is not permitted to divorce for any reason, but he offers one exception, and only one very narrow and specific exception – namely, when there is "marital unfaithfulness." Even so, one is not commanded to divorce the unfaithful spouse, but merely permitted to do so.⁴⁹ Then, although many biblical scholars argue that a divorce caused by marital unfaithfulness properly ends the marriage, so that at least the innocent party is free to remarry, others have convincingly argued otherwise, so that even the innocent one must remain unmarried, or be reconciled with the spouse (1 Corinthians 7:11).⁵⁰

The Pharisees approach God's commandments with the intent to define how far they can go without committing sin. With this attitude, they invariably twist and distort God's law to make more room for their wickedness. If a person is obsessed with finding out how he can get out of a marriage, then he is already guilty of subverting God's commandments. Instead, based on the understanding that marriage is to endure for life, he should actively pursue ways to solidify, improve, and repair his marriage.

Just as Jesus is not limiting his ethical teaching to those examples that he cites in the Sermon on the Mount, rebellious men do not limit themselves to distorting God's commandments on marriage. For example, many theologians spend their time arguing for the minimum of what it takes to become a Christian, or to obtain salvation. They ask, "What is the minimum of what a person must believe to receive salvation? What is the least that one must do? How sinful and corrupt can a person be in his lifestyle, and still be called a Christian?" This is not the kind of ministry that honors Christ, who says, "Go and make disciples...teaching them to *obey everything* I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Many who claim to be Christians often divorce one another for almost any reason, and their churches do not stop them. In some congregations, the members have divorced and remarried so often that, in effect, they have been swapping spouses with one another and with the world. They commit adultery with one another, divorce their spouses, and then marry one another. After a while, they cheat again, divorce again, and remarry again. God detests this abomination. In contrast, if we truly follow Jesus Christ, then we must practice and teach what he commands. Marriage is for life, and there is to be no divorce at all.

⁴⁹ Some have argued with some skill that what is translated "marital unfaithfulness" refers only to gross and extreme perversion (such as incest), and that alone is legitimate grounds for divorce. See J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth*; Bethany House, 1981.

⁵⁰ See David J. Engelsma, *Better to Marry*; Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1993.

OATHS (Matthew 5:33-37)

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

In verse 33, the statement that Jesus cites seems to be a summary of several Old Testament verses: "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:12); "When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said" (Numbers 30:2); "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin" (Deuteronomy 23:21). Although it does not cover all that the Old Testament teaches on the subject, it seems accurate as far as it goes.

However, the Pharisees and the scribes would not truly follow and teach God's law, but they would impose their own definitions and traditions upon it. The commandments demand the people to fulfill their vows.⁵¹ If you say that something is true, then it better be true, and if you say that you will do something, then you must do it. But the Pharisees and the scribes think that if the law says, "Do not swear falsely *by my name*," then it means that they may swear falsely as long as they do not swear by God's name!

So they designed an elaborate system to indicate whether or not an oath is binding, depending on the formula used – specifically, on how closely the vow is associated with God or his name. They invented human traditions and regulations never taught by the law, and imposed these on it, in order to subvert the command to tell the truth and keep their vows.

In Matthew 23, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and the scribes about the same thing, and there he says:

"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells

⁵¹ Although some commentators distinguish between oaths and vows, I will use them interchangeably, since even if they are different, our discussion will equally apply to both.

in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it." (v. 16-22)

He is referring to the way the Pharisees and the scribes make fine distinctions between how one makes an oath, so that if an oath is made a certain way, they would even say that "it means nothing." But if an oath is an oath at all, one wonders how it could ever mean nothing. For all their fine distinctions, their theological reasoning is poor and makes no sense. The traditions by which they subvert God's law are not that clever. It is not that the Pharisees are too intellectual for their own good, but that their minds are too feeble to invent a half-decent excuse for their disobedience.

Contrary to what many people think, the Bible never opposes "hairsplitting" precision when it comes to understanding God's law *in order to obey it*. They think that Jesus faults the Pharisees for being so meticulous about obeying the law that they neglect to show mercy. But the opposite is true – he accuses the Pharisees for being too meticulous about *disobeying* the law. It is God's law that commands us to show mercy in the first place. As Micah says, "And what does the LORD require of you? To *act justly* and to *love mercy* and to *walk humbly* with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Justice, mercy, and humility are all Old Testament teachings. Those who think that these are characteristics newly emphasized by the New Testament show that they misunderstand both the Old and the New. It is a mistake to think that the Old Testament teaches a morality of the law, while the New Testament teaches a morality of the heart. God has always taught a morality of the heart *by the law* – the problem is that those who follow human traditions refuse to obey him.

Some people resist what they falsely perceive as legalism, and they claim to emphasize mercy instead of law. But it becomes clear that they do not know what mercy is when they think that to show mercy is to relax the law's requirements. Jesus says, "Anyone who breaks [literally, "relaxes" or "loosens"] one of *the least* of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

Returning to our passage, Jesus refers to several similar ways by which the Pharisees and the scribes attempt to justify false oaths, and he says that these are also based on inferior theological reasoning. They say that since the law teaches that an oath made before God or in his name is binding, then if one wishes to make an oath that is not binding, he could simply avoid making direct or close reference to God, such as to swear by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem, or by one's head (v. 34-36).

Jesus responds with what the Pharisees and the scribes should know very well, that heaven is said to be God's throne, that the earth is said to be his footstool (Isaiah 66:1), and that Jerusalem is said to be the city of the Great King (Psalm 48:2). As for our head, even our own hairs are under God's control (Matthew 10:29-30). Since God knows and rules all of creation, it is impossible to make an oath without making him a witness to it. Therefore, in the place of false swearing and hypocritical oaths, Jesus commands, "Do not swear at all...Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'" (v. 34, 37).

All this is not Jesus' novel ethical teaching, but he is drawing out what the Old Testament plainly teaches, and what the Pharisees and the scribes should already know, yet refuse to follow:

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the [temple] messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God. (Ecclesiastes 5:4-7)

"These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD. (Zechariah 8:16-17)

It is futile to claim that your vow is not binding, or that you have made a mistake, so it is better not to make a vow at all than to make one and then break it. However, this does not mean that you may lie as long as you do not swear to the tell the truth! This would be just another way of distorting biblical teaching.

We must note the thrust of the passage, so that we do not misapply what Jesus says. He is denouncing those who permit themselves to make empty oaths by redefining and distorting God's law. His concern is for people to tell the truth and mean what they say (v. 37), so that your "Yes" should mean "Yes," and your "No" should mean "No." If this is your practice, then there should be no need for you to swear at all. People should be able to trust what you say even if you do not explicitly swear to God or appeal to him as your witness. So his emphasis is more like, "Do not swear," rather than, "You must refuse to swear" or "I forbid you to swear."

It is impossible to understand our passage as an absolute prohibition against swearing for any reason, as when one offers a formal court testimony. This is because Jesus already said that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17), and he opposes those who relax even the least of the commandments (v. 19). So he would not contradict the law, and the law teaches:

You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him, and *swear by His name*. (Deuteronomy 6:13, NASB)

But the king will rejoice in God; *all who swear by God's name will praise him*, while the mouths of liars will be silenced. (Psalm 63:11)

Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered

in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; *by me every tongue will swear*. (Isaiah 45:22-23)

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will *swear by the God of truth*. For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes. (Isaiah 65:16)

"If you will return, O Israel, return to me," declares the LORD. "If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray, and if in a truthful, just and righteous way *you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives,'* then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory." (Jeremiah 4:1-2)

Swearing itself is not the problem. In fact, when you reverently swear by the name of God, you are declaring that God is your Sovereign Lord, to whom you offer worship and to whom you are accountable, and that you are ever conscious of his presence and power. Swearing rightly on proper occasions actually honors God.

The trouble is with casual and false swearing. Jeremiah refers to those who, "Although they say, 'As surely as the LORD lives,' still they are swearing falsely" (Jeremiah 5:2). They acknowledge God by their words, but the things that they say are false, which means that they falsely claim to fear him, and they profane his name by associating it with lies. Scripture is against this in both the Old and New Testaments, and it is especially this kind of false swearing that Jesus opposes.

Besides Matthew 5:17-19, Jesus confirms this understanding of his teaching on oaths by his example. At his trial under the high priest, Jesus remains silent as he is questioned and as false witnesses testify against him (Matthew 26:59-63). He fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, who wrote, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7; see Acts 8:32-35). But then, the high priest charges Jesus to speak by invoking God's name: "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (v. 63). At that, Jesus answers, "Yes, it is as you say" (v. 64).

Paul also demonstrates the proper manner and occasion for a formal appeal to God. He writes to the Galatians, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12). Then, he solemnly declares that he is telling the truth by appealing to God as a witness: "I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie" (v. 20). Paul is attempting to correct serious doctrinal errors that have infiltrated the church, and he finds it appropriate to begin by establishing the origin of the gospel, and his authority as its apostle.

Then, when he writes to the Corinthians, he again finds it necessary to defend his calling as an apostle, especially because false apostles have infiltrated the church. So he cites his qualifications and experiences as an apostle, and solemnly declares that he is telling the truth by appealing to God as a witness: "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying" (2 Corinthians 11:31).

Paul is facing severe problems in these churches, and his appeals to God are solemn and sincere. He is not lying and attempting to deceive his readers into believing him. He is telling the truth, but since the claims and the oppositions are serious, he assures his readers that he is conscious that his words are said before God, and that God would hold him accountable. He appeals to God not for personal benefit and convenience, or to facilitate some trivial transaction, but he declares that he is telling the truth for the sake of the gospel.

Ordination to the ministry seems to be an occasion where it is proper to appeal to God as witness (2 Timothy 4:1). Another example is marriage. Since marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman (Malachi 2:14), it involves a vow. If we apply Jesus' teaching to the marriage vow, we would say that he is not against the vow as such, but if you were to claim that the vow is not binding because it was not formulated in a particular way, then this is what he condemns.⁵²

Although there are these cases where a formal appeal to God is appropriate, swearing remains unnecessary and even sinful for most occasions and purposes, such as to make our ordinary and trivial statements more credible. A formal appeal to God as witness is made only on special occasions and for special purposes, so that it should rarely happen. In addition, this does not mean that we may be less truthful in our daily conversations, when we make no formal appeal to God. Whether we swear or not, our "Yes" should mean "Yes," and our "No" should mean "No."

People have invented various ways to disobey Jesus' teaching. Sometimes they defend their lies, and sometimes they attack the truth. Some people claim that they will do something, but then later dismiss it and say, "But I never promised" or "I said that with my fingers crossed." Others adopt some form of relativism or situational ethics to excuse themselves.

There are many pragmatists, and they are pragmatists because they are selfish and stupid. They believe that the end justifies the means, so that whether they tell the truth depends on whether it will produce the result they desire. However, they cannot defend the principle that the end justifies the means, and they have no rational standard to determine what results they ought to desire. Pragmatism is an irrational position, and it contradicts Scripture, which says, "He whose walk is blameless...keeps his oath even when it hurts" (Psalm 15:2, 4). So Christians must denounce pragmatism because it is irrational and unbiblical. We must speak the truth and fulfill our promises even if it costs us.

⁵² Scripture allows a vow to be nullified in certain situations, such as by a father or a husband at the time when he hears about it, but not afterward (Numbers 30:3-15). Since something like the Roman Catholic teaching of annulment goes beyond and against what Scripture permits and specifies, it is an abomination, and it commits the kind of wickedness that Jesus condemns.

People trivialize the truth by adding expressions like, "I swear to God," "Honest to God," or "I swear on my mother's grave." Even when they are telling the truth, they abuse the truth. They might present the truth in a partial and deceptive manner, so that it ends up misleading the hearer. Or, they might use it to promote and defend gossip, claiming that they are just telling the truth. But all "this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

Before my conversion, when I was still a child, if someone was unsure that I was telling the truth, he could make me tell the truth by reminding me that God could hear me. Since this appears to show that I had some fear of God, it may seem commendable. However, what it shows is that I was a liar, and the truth had to be extracted from me by threatening me in the name of God. If I truly feared God, I would have told the truth all the time, and others would not have needed to remind me about him.

Then, as I was growing up, I became a pragmatist when it came to telling the truth. I did not think in terms of the true and the false, but I would say anything that was to my advantage. Truth was worthless to me, and so whenever I did not lie, it was only because that was not in my interest, or because I was afraid of getting caught.

It is bad enough when a person must swear to be believed, and it is worse when a person swears to deceive, or swears with a method or a formula that he thinks leaves his oath non-binding. This person is a liar whether or not he swears; in contrast, Jesus teaches that we should tell the truth and fulfill our promises whether or not we swear. The Bible says that for "all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (Revelation 21:8). And James writes, "Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned" (James 5:12). God takes the truth much more seriously than some people think.

After I became a Christian, I immediately stopped lying. From that time on, I wanted to tell the truth, even at times when telling the truth could generate problems for me. If I told someone that something was true, then it was true. If I told someone that I would do something, then it would be done. If I told someone that I would meet him somewhere at a certain time, then this usually means that I would be there thirty minutes early.

If the situation changed so that I could not perform what I had promised, then I would tell the person as soon as possible. Whenever I thought that I had even unintentionally misstated something or misled someone, conviction would strike my conscience, and I would find the person to correct the false statement or impression. I became ever conscious of living and speaking before God, not just when someone appeals to him or mentions him.

It became unnecessary for me to swear, or for others to extract the truth from me, because God sovereignly chose and saved me, and performed what he had promised long ago: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33), and "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27).

Jesus' teaching is just as true and applicable today, and church leaders should teach it much more often and with greater conviction. Even atheists glibly say, "I swear to God." This is

a misuse of God's name, and if God does not save them, then they will burn in hell for it. But those who claim to be Christians also often misuse God's name – they use it to joke, to curse, and to lie. Of course, these are most likely false converts, because true Christians would be terrified to abuse God's name like this. Ministers must warn, rebuke, and if needed, excommunicate those who commit this most serious sin.

RETALIATION (Matthew 5:38-42)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

This passage on retaliation can be difficult for two reasons. First, one may find it hard to make sense of it just because he does not want to accept what it means or what it appears to mean. But our preferences and reservations should not determine how we understand a passage. Second, it is difficult because it can be easily misinterpreted if one fails to take into account the context. Although one should always observe the context when reading anything, the correct understanding of this passage depends on the context more than many other passages.

Take the commandment against murder as an example. People often isolate the statement, "You should not murder" (Exodus 20:13), and then claim that the commandment forbids war and the death penalty. However, other passages in the Bible teaches that war is right in some cases, and that the death penalty is right in some cases. These passages do not contradict the commandment against murder, but they tell us what murder is not. The killings that occur in biblically justified wars and executions are not murders. But when people isolate this verse from the rest of the Bible, they impose on it a personal and unbiblical definition of murder, so that their understanding of this commandment has little relevance to what it actually says.

Likewise, it is important to consider the broad and the narrow contexts of our passage. Jesus sets forth a conflict in each of the several sections that we have been examining. The conflict in each section is not between Moses and Jesus, but between the false interpretation of the law imposed by human tradition, taught by the Pharisees and the scribes, and the true meaning of the law as expressed by divine revelation, now reaffirmed by Jesus Christ. This means that what Jesus says in each section is directed against a specific distortion of the law. If we isolate Jesus' answer from the distortion, then we will probably fail to grasp what he is saying. Therefore, when reading our passage, we must not isolate verses 39-42 from verse 38, from the rest of the Sermon (v. 17-20), or from the rest of the Bible.

Jesus initiates the conflict by saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'" (v. 38). By now, we should immediately realize that he is speaking against a distortion of the law, and not the law itself. The statement alludes to several passages in

the Old Testament, and since these passages must be read in context also, we will cite the entire paragraphs in which the relevant verses appear:

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take *life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise*. (Exodus 21:22-25)

If anyone takes the life of a human being, he must be put to death. Anyone who takes the life of someone's animal must make restitution – life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him: *fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth*. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured. Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a man must be put to death. You are to have the same law for the alien and the native-born. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 24:17-22)

If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: *life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*. (Deuteronomy 19:16-21)

The law of retribution in these passages has a double effect on the nation's judicial system, namely, it prevents the court from issuing punishments that are either too severe or too lenient. It serves as a guiding principle for judges, teaching them that the punishment must be appropriate for and proportional to the crime.

It also prevents one party from exacting disproportional recompense on another party, and in turn prevents perpetual personal vendettas and family feuds. If someone from your family injures someone from my family, and as revenge my family kills this person from your family, then the problem has escalated, and a bloodbath almost inevitably ensues.

On the other hand, if the power to punish belongs to the court instead of the individual, and if the court faithfully issues punishments that are proportional to the crime, then this not only ensures that justice is done, but it also prevents escalation of the dispute. Thus the law of retribution is both a prescription and a restriction – prescribing righteous punishments, and restricting excessive compensations.

As a side note, more than a few commentators suggest that the law of retribution does not require the courts to punish, but merely allows them to punish. This is false. Exodus 21 says, "The offender *must be fined*...But if there is serious injury, *you are to take life for life*." Leviticus 24 teaches, "Whoever kills an animal *must make restitution*, but whoever kills a man *must be put to death*." And Deuteronomy 19 says, "The judges *must make a thorough investigation*...*You must purge the evil* from among you...*Show no pity*." The law of retribution explicitly requires the courts to uphold justice, and to issue punishments proportional to the crime. Judges are not allowed to be too severe or too lenient.

Then, Jesus says, "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person" (Matthew 5:39). Throughout the Sermon, he has been directing his remarks to individuals, and the present passage is no exception. Whereas the law of retribution governs the courts, Jesus is speaking to the individuals about a misinterpretation and misapplication of this law. It appears that the Jews have adopted the law of retribution as warrant for personal vengeance. So one who has been wronged would require the offender to compensate him to the fullest extent of the law. Jesus is speaking against this. He is not addressing the courts, the police, or the military.

The passage is often used to support non-violent resistance or peaceful protests, but this is a blatant misuse of what Jesus says. He is directing his remarks to individuals, and not to groups or political movements. Moreover, the passage does not teach non-violent resistance, but it teaches non-resistance – no resistance at all! So it is self-defeating to apply it to these protests and movements. Others use it to support pacifism, that people should not engage in war for any reason. Again, Jesus is addressing individuals, and not the government or the military. But when Scripture refers to government officials, it says, "He does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4).

A study of verses 39-42 reveal the personal application of what Jesus has in mind for this section.

Beginning from verse 39, striking someone on the right cheek is just as much an act of insult as it is an act of assault. Assuming that the one who strikes is right-handed, as most people are, then to strike the victim on the right cheek might mean hitting him with the back of one's hand – an insult even today, and especially at that time.

Proceeding to the next verse, the law forbids that a person's cloak be permanently taken from him: "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate" (Exodus 22:26-27). But Jesus says, "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Matthew 5:40). This does not contradict the law. Exodus 22 addresses the legal obligation of the one who takes someone's cloak, but Jesus refers to the one whose tunic and cloak are being taken.

Verse 41 alludes to the practice where the officials of a nation has the right to demand, within certain limitations, the service of the members of a conquered nation. Specific to the New Testament context, a Roman soldier has the right to commandeer a Jewish citizen for his service and assistance, such as to carry the soldier's load for one mile (or one thousand paces). For example, the Roman soldiers forced Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Christ (Matthew 27:32).

Finally, verse 42 says, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Jesus is merely reaffirming what the law teaches all along. As Deuteronomy 15 says, "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (v. 7-8).

Again, we must not take this passage out of context and isolating it from the rest of the Bible. Deuteronomy 15:7-8 teaches generosity, but we will misapply it if we isolate it from verses like the following:

He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe. (Proverbs 11:15)

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)

Although the Bible commands us to be generous, it also teaches against unwise lending and giving. There is no contradiction, but taken together, the passages tell us what biblical generosity means. It means lending and giving to those who are truly in need, but withholding from those who would abuse our generosity, so that "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

Jesus reaffirms the law. There is no basis to assert that he contradicts the law or moves beyond it in teaching generosity, because 2 Thessalonians is written by Paul after Moses and Jesus, and after Deuteronomy 15 and Matthew 5. It shows that Moses and Jesus never intended to command an absolute and non-discriminating practice of lending and giving.

Likewise, isolating the other verses will prevent us from a true understanding; instead, we must derive a coherent position from the whole of Scripture. When Jesus is struck on the face at his trial, he responds, "If I said something wrong...testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" (John 18:23). When the high priest orders Paul to be struck on the mouth, the apostle answers, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!" (Acts 23:3). And as mentioned earlier in another setting, the law never forbids self-defense, even to the point of killing the criminal: "If a thief is caught

breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed" (Exodus 22:2). Then, on several occasions, Paul asserts his rights as a Roman citizen when he is persecuted by the authorities (Acts 16:36-39, 22:23-29, 25:11).

Just as Jesus is correcting an abuse of Scripture, to take his remarks out of context or to isolate them from the rest of the Bible, as many people have done, becomes just another way to abuse Scripture. It results in theological positions that the Bible does not really intend to convey, and thus frustrates the very purpose for which Jesus makes these comments.

We have enough for a summary and conclusion. Jesus is teaching his followers to maintain a loose hold on their personal dignity (v. 39), their personal rights (v. 40), their personal liberty (v. 41), and their personal property (v. 42). He does not repeal the law of retribution, but he does not want it to justify a vengeful attitude. So he calls his followers to take up an attitude of sacrifice and generosity, which the law has been teaching all along: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18); "Do not say, 'I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did'" (Proverbs 24:29).

Sometimes people invent doctrines and traditions that are unbiblical, but that run in the opposite direction of the Jewish misinterpretation. It would surprise them to learn that the Bible never opposes revenge as such, but it forbids personal vengeance. In fact, the Bible declares that revenge is right, and that justice demands it, only that we are not the ones who should carry it out; instead, we should leave it up to God to avenge us: "For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you" (2 Thessalonians 1:6, NASB). So Paul summarizes the teaching as follows:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

LOVE (Matthew 5:43-47)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

Love is not a revolutionary commandment, because it has been the law's teaching all along, even though it has been distorted. Jesus comes to reaffirm this all-important commandment, and to call his people to truly obey it.

He alludes to the Jewish interpretation of Leviticus 19:18, where it says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." The verse indeed refers to "one of your people," but it does not make the command to "hate your enemy," although this may have been inferred from some Old Testament passages.

In the spirit of the subversive exegesis of the Pharisees and the scribes, the question is posed as to the meaning of "neighbor." This is done not with the intention to fully obey the commandment, but to restrict its application.

On one occasion, "an expert in the law" (Luke 10:25) who is concerned to "justify himself" (v. 29) tests Jesus with the question. Jesus responds with what we call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It shows that a neighbor is not just one who is within our small group, but he could be anyone that we encounter in life who needs our compassion and assistance, including someone that we would regard as an enemy (v. 33). In fact, it seems that Jesus turns the question around, and says in effect, "Instead of focusing so much attention on defining your 'neighbor' with the evil intention to limit the scope of your love, why don't you *be a neighbor* to someone who is in need?" (v. 36).

Against the misuse of this commandment, Jesus declares, "But I tell you: Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). The meaning is simple, but both Christians and non-Christians have such a warped concept of love that, for the commandment to be intelligible, we must explain what the Bible means by love.

The Bible defines love toward people as a volitional and non-emotional benevolence that results in helpful words and actions. Some theologians and commentators acknowledge this, but others wish to include an emotional element to love. D. A. Carson disagrees with the definition, and writes, "If this were so, 1 Corinthians 13:3 could not disavow 'love' that gives everything to the poor and suffers even to martyrdom; for these are 'concrete actions.'"⁵³ This is an invalid argument, and involves an astoundingly stupid inference from the New Testament scholar.

Paul is alluding to the fact that one can perform an act of sacrifice without having love. From this, Carson infers that the missing element must be the emotion, and that emotion must be involved in order to make this into true love. Why? He gives no justification for it. I could just as easily assert that what is missing is a full stomach, or that the man needs to sing a few songs in order to turn this into true love. His argument is arbitrary and dishonest.

He misses the point. The definition indicates that love would necessarily result in these actions even without an emotional element, but it does not claim that these actions necessarily reveal true love. To illustrate, a man who has faith will preach Christ to others,

⁵³ Carson, *Matthew*; p. 158.

but this does not mean that someone who preaches Christ necessarily has faith or does it out of faith. As Paul writes, "Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry" (Philippians 1:15). One could have this love even before he performs charitable acts, and if he has this love, then he will perform these acts. But a person who performs these acts does not necessarily have this love, because he could be doing them from a different motive. In all of this, there is no room to introduce the idea that love must have an emotional element.

Then, Carson mentions 2 Samuel 13:1, 2 Timothy 4:10, and Matthew 5:46, presumably to show that, as the Bible uses the word, love includes the emotion. However, as he explicitly acknowledges, the first example refers to incest, the second to worldliness, and the third to the very kind of restrictive love that Jesus is speaking against. So this does nothing to include emotion in the Bible's meaning of love. When he expresses his agreement that love must include actions, he cites several biblical references, such as Luke 6:32-33 and Matthew 5:44. However, when he asserts that love must include the emotion, he has no biblical support, but refers to verses whose relevance that he himself refutes.

Many of the words in a language carry more than one possible meaning, and the actual meaning of a word as it is used must be discerned from the context. For this reason, even the fact that the word "love" sometimes includes an emotional element when it is used in the Bible is insufficient and irrelevant. Rather, we need to establish whether the love *that the Bible commands* us to have contains such an emotional element. Carson fails to demonstrate that it does, and instead, he commits some of the same errors that he denounces in his *Exegetical Fallacies*.⁵⁴ There he correctly points out that a word can mean different things depending on the context, so that the origins, the dictionary definitions, and the usage of the word in dissimilar contexts cannot be determinative. But these are the very strategies that he uses in his attempt to show that biblical love includes the emotion.

The love that the Bible commands us to have is defined by obedience to the law in all of our relationships (Romans 13:9-10). This includes the commands that the law makes to both the mind and the body. Although the law may prohibit certain negative emotions, so that it commands us to master our anger (Matthew 5:22), the love that it commands is mainly not a positive emotion or a romantic feeling, but a benevolent volition resulting in practical action. Therefore, biblical love can be sincere and benevolent without necessarily being emotional.

Our passage suggests that Jesus assumes this understanding of love when he cites the Father's example: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). The Father does not necessarily feel a certain emotion toward the unrighteous – if anything, he "feels" extreme wrath toward them – but the kind of "love" that Jesus refers to is demonstrated by the Father's practical benevolence toward both the evil and the good.

The context determines the meaning of the word. Jesus is not speaking of a love that saves, but a love that does not necessarily include any spiritual blessing. It is a love that offers practical benefits. He is referring to a general benevolence that God shows toward his

⁵⁴ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*; Baker Book House, 1996.

creatures, and not the special love that results in salvation, which he reserves for his chosen ones. When it comes to this second kind of love – a love that saves – God declares, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13).⁵⁵

It is this practical "love" that we are to show all human beings, so that in a parallel passage, Jesus says, "Love your enemies, *do good* to those who hate you, *bless* those who curse you, *pray* for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). This love is offered to both the evil and the good, but just by saying this, we affirm that it does not blur the distinctions between Christians and non-Christians, the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (v. 45). This love does not allow us to think of non-Christians as better than they are, for they are indeed unrighteous and evil, only that we are to offer them the same kind of practical benevolence that we offer to the righteous and the good. Nevertheless, we are to favor Christians, especially when we must choose between the two: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).

Jesus is not teaching something entirely new. It is a mistake to think that the Old Testament demands us to love only our inner circle, and that Jesus expands this commandment to include those on the outside. He is reaffirming what the law teaches all along. The Old Testament never limits practical love to one's inner circle, but in the same chapter where it says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), it also says, "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. *Love him as yourself*, for you were aliens in Egypt" (v. 33-34).

Moreover, the Old Testament also commands love, in the sense of practical benevolence, toward one's enemy: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it" (Exodus 23:4-5); "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Proverbs 25:21).

Paul echoes the teaching in Romans 12:20, and writes, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." However, when it comes to spiritual things, he does not compromise with the non-Christian in the name of "love," but he even curses him, saying, "If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him" (1 Corinthians 16:22). This clear understanding of what it means to love our enemies will not only promote accurate obedience, but it will also prevent non-Christians from manipulating us by making illegitimate appeals to this biblical command, as they sometimes attempt to do.

PERFECTION (Matthew 5:48)

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

⁵⁵ For more on what the Bible teaches about love and hate, see my *Systematic Theology*.

In Bible translations that group the verses into paragraphs, Matthew 5:48 is usually attached to the section on love. However, it seems that the verse is intended as a summary and conclusion to the several sections that we have studied, so that it applies to verses 17-47, and not just verses 43-47.⁵⁶

Verse 48 finishes the thought that Jesus begins in verse 20, where he says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." After exposing the abuses of the law by the Pharisees and the scribes, and then providing his corrections, he now explains what he means by a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes. Instead of the counterfeit righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes, Jesus demands perfect obedience to the law.

Some scholars hasten to point out that the word translated "perfect" often means "mature," perhaps with the intention to weaken Jesus' statement. However, even if this is somehow relevant, it cannot determine our interpretation of verse 48, because it tells us to be perfect as God is perfect. It would be very strange for this verse to mean, "Be mature, just like God is mature." By perfection, Jesus is obviously referring to a flawless condition and a full attainment. As the law says, "You must be blameless before the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13).

Jesus does not say that we can achieve perfect obedience in this life – he assumes that we will sin (6:12) – but corresponding to verse 20, he refers to a kind of righteousness that is flawless and complete. Just as God's commandments reflect his perfection, Jesus demands the kind of righteousness that truly obeys these commandments, and not the kind of false righteousness that claims to obey them, when in reality it distorts and subverts them.

This understanding accords with the corresponding verses in the law. For example, Leviticus 19:2 says, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." This is said in the context of commanding the people to observe the law, and thus God and Christ have in mind that, as we truly follow God's commandments, we are in essence imitating and reflecting God's holiness and perfection. Anything short of this is unworthy of the kingdom of heaven.

HYPOCRISY (Matthew 6:1-18)

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵⁶ See Carson, *Matthew*, p. 160; France, p. 129.

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"This, then, is how you should pray:

**"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
 your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.**

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

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Jesus has been contrasting the true righteousness that he requires from his followers with the false righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes (5:20). He has offered several examples of how they misinterpret the law in order to lower its demands, enabling them to put up an appearance of obedience and righteousness (5:21-48). Now he addresses another aspect of their false righteousness, and continues to contrast that with what he requires from his followers (6:1-18).

Jesus has been calling his followers to live a counter-cultural life – to affirm beliefs and exhibit actions that are different from and even contradictory to both unbelievers and false believers. They are to be salt and light not only before the Pharisees and the scribes, but to "the earth" and "the world" (5:13-14). Those who remain unbelievers are obviously not God's people, and they will be condemned to hell. False believers like the Pharisees and the scribes are no better, for they also cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20). Therefore, Jesus calls for a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes. This entails a true understanding of and obedience to God's law (5:21-48).

Although he seems to shift the focus, he has not moved to a whole new direction. He is still calling his followers to exhibit true righteousness from the heart (6:33), especially in contrast to the hypocrites⁵⁷ (6:2, 5, 16) and the pagans (6:7, 32). The overarching thrust of 6:1-34 remains the same, since this large section falls within the *inclusio* of "the Law and the Prophets" (5:17, 7:12). Whereas he has been dealing with true and false righteousness from the perspective of the moral law, now he deals with the topic from the perspective of religious and pious actions.

Jesus mentions what the people regard as the three most central acts of religious piety – giving, praying, and fasting. Since he tells his followers not to be like the "hypocrites" (v. 2, 5, 16), and since the words "hypocrites" and "hypocrisy" are often used in discussions on religion, we should understand what it is to be a hypocrite.

The word translated "hypocrite" originally refers to an actor. He assumes the personality of a scripted character, and pretends to be this character on stage. The English dictionary defines "hypocrisy" as "a feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not."⁵⁸ So a hypocrite is a person who presents himself as something or someone that he is not, or who presents himself as believing something that he does not believe. He may claim to possess a virtue or to affirm a doctrine, and he may take steps to convince you that he indeed possesses this virtue or affirms this doctrine, but in reality, he is just putting on a show – he is acting.

This definition is consistent with how Jesus uses the term. To illustrate, later in Matthew, he says:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (23:25-28)

He accuses the Pharisees and the scribes for their hypocrisy, because they make themselves look clean on the outside, when they are unclean on the inside. He says, "On the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." The Pharisees and the scribes are hypocrites because they are mere actors when it comes to their faith and religion.

⁵⁷ Such as the Pharisees and the scribes. See Matthew 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29.

⁵⁸ *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.*

Keeping in mind the meaning of hypocrisy, Jesus offers some examples of religious hypocrisy in Matthew 6.

The first example has to do with giving (v. 2-4). According to Scripture, charitable giving is a religious duty (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). However, it is possible for a person to display the outward motion of charitable giving without having a charitable heart.

When hypocrites give, they find ways to ensure that people pay attention (v. 2). They are hypocrites because they present themselves as spiritual and generous, who desire God's approval and the people's welfare, but in reality, they are not looking to please God or to help people. Their giving is calculated to impress others and to establish a reputation, and this is why they must draw attention to themselves. They purchase men's approval and admiration with their money. Jesus says that this is what they will get. They will get what they pay for and nothing more (v. 2). They will not receive anything from God.

People exhibit the same hypocrisy today. They give money to charities, but they do all kinds of things to draw attention to their large donations. At the least, they will send out press releases to publicize them. Sometimes they want benches, halls, or entire buildings named after them. Corporations support charities for the sake of marketing and public image, so that their names must be prominently displayed at the causes and events that they sponsor.

Professing Christians are often no better than the non-Christians. They make donations to their churches to have their names appear on the pews, or to have plaques on the walls to recognize their contribution. Some of them make large donations so that they can assert their place in the church, and influence church policies and decisions.

Churches and ministries regularly encourage rather than denounce this abominable attitude. They offer large donors the "VIP treatment," giving them the best seats in their gatherings, and holding special dinners and conferences for those who have given the most money. Even though the Bible denounces these wicked practices (James 2:1-9), they are very rampant in Christian organizations.

Instead of encouraging and honoring hypocritical donors, Christian ministers should expose these people and rebuke them. Of course, churches and ministries are under pressure to compromise because most Christians are shameless freeloaders. The freeloaders readily partake of the benefits given to them without lifting a finger to help. To make sacrificial donations is out of the question. They would rather have their ministers starve to death than to give up going to their favorite restaurant or buying a better television.

Since this attitude prevails, when those who desire men's approval and admiration practice hypocritical giving, the churches and ministries are under pressure to allow it, and even encourage it. May God Christian leaders the strength to do what is right, and so to expose and rebuke hypocritical givers, as well as the shameless freeloaders in our midst.

The rich has a duty to support churches and ministries with their money. Instead of expecting dinners and conferences to honor them, let them give in private, and let their reward come from God (v. 4). As for the relatively poor and even the destitute, rather than using their poverty as an excuse, let them learn sacrificial giving. And if the ministers themselves do not teach duty and practice sacrifice, let them admit that they are unworthy of the ministry and resign from office.

People often make the accusation that Christian ministers wish to *get* money because of greed; however, we can just as readily say that these people make the accusation because they wish to *keep* their money because of greed. For every greedy minister, there must be tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of greedy church members, if for no other reason than that there are many more of them than there are ministers. Both church leaders and church members can be guilty of greed, and both are wrong when this happens. This fact does not negate what the Bible commands about duty and sacrifice when it comes to money, but makes its importance more evident.

One woman announced on the evening news that her family had been attending a church for several generations, and had donated pews and other things to it. Since the church was now closing despite her objection, she was demanding a refund for the things that her family had donated, and was planning to sue the church for it. Someone who acts this way probably has never been converted, and so acts like any non-Christian might act. In the end, that might be all the woman ended up with – pews and things – but she had lost God's approval, and probably her soul as well.

Jesus commands his followers to be different from the hypocrites. When we give, we must not make a show of it. We must not treat our charitable acts as business transactions to purchase people's approval and admiration.

Some record keeping is inevitable, and you ought to discuss with your spouse how to spend the family's money. An accountant who handles your taxes will know about your charitable donations. The point is to avoid hypocrisy. Your thoughts should be consistent with your actions, so that you act generously because you are indeed generous, and you act spiritually because you are indeed spiritual. You are not trying to impress others. Therefore, as much as possible, you would perform your charitable acts in private. If you are only trying to obey God and help people, there is no need to publicize your donations and good deeds.

The sinful mind will find a way to sin in any situation, and it will distort any divine command to justify its wicked deeds and intentions. So as we avoid one form of hypocrisy, we must guard against other manifestations of hypocrisy. Thus to say that you should avoid drawing attention does not mean that you should make such a big deal about avoiding attention that everyone knows about it! Then, a person might appear to obey Christ's teaching, and avoids drawing attention when performing his charity. But having made his donation in private, he might then congratulate himself for his "sincere" generosity and obedience. He becomes arrogant because of his apparent humility.

Therefore, it is not enough just to avoid drawing attention, but we must also refrain from self-congratulation, from constantly dwelling on our giving, and how we have managed to keep it private (v. 3). The proper focus is to please God in obeying his command to support the gospel and to help people in need. You give because God tells you to be generous, and because you are thankful that he has been generous toward you. You desire God's approval instead of people's approval or your self-approval.

Jesus' second example is on praying (v. 5-15). He contrasts the proper approach to prayer against that of the hypocrites and the pagans.

Just as the hypocrites draw attention to themselves when they perform their charitable deeds, they also find ways to get noticed when they pray (v. 5). They may deliberately pray in public places, not because they are suddenly overcome with a sense of spiritual urgency, but because they want other people to see them and admire them for their display of piety.

This is hypocritical, because they present themselves as people who are mindful of spiritual things, and who constantly worship and petition God, when in reality they pray only for show, to impress other people. By the way they pray, they convey an image of themselves that is the opposite of what they are like. They are impious and unspiritual, but they wish people to think otherwise.

They turn their prayers into business transactions, so that with their effort they purchase the people's admiration. Jesus says that those who pray like this might just get what they want, but nothing more. They might fool observers into thinking that they are spiritual, but God is not deceived, and he does not accept their prayers. Spiritually speaking, their prayers are futile.

Jesus says that his followers should be different. Rather than praying before other people to impress them, you should pray to your Father in private. You must pray to the Father out of a sincere reverence and a genuine desire to worship and petition him. You are not performing in front of other people to gain their applause.

Then, Jesus says that we must not only be different from the religious hypocrites, but we must be different from the pagans also. The pagans have many faults, but he refers to how they "keep on babbling" in prayer, because they think that "they will be heard because of their many words" (v. 7). The error stems from a view of God that is far from the truth, at least when it comes to the true God, the God of the Christians, so that when the pagans practice their religions, they pray in the wrong way and to the wrong gods, who are in fact demons and fables. This is the case with all non-Christians.

Against this, Jesus repeats a common admonition in the Sermon: "Do not be like them." Do not be like the non-Christians; rather, Christian prayers must be founded on a biblical view of God, knowing that "your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (v. 8). This is one example of how systematic theology is necessary for Christian piety. Contrary to what many believe, to belittle theology is not to rescue spirituality, but to destroy it.

Jesus then offers a model or outline that we call the Lord's Prayer (v. 9-13), instructing his followers to pray in a way that is consistent with what Scripture reveals about God, his kingdom and providence, and the condition of man. The Lord's Prayer teaches reverence for God's name, concern for his kingdom, dependence on his provision, forgiveness for our neighbors, and deliverance from evil. As Jesus says later, we are to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (6:33). The form and the content of our prayers reveal our priorities and concerns.

Wishing to encourage prayer, sometimes people push aside things that they regard as unimportant, and so instead of developing a theology of prayer, they say, "Just pray!" However, Jesus stresses that there is a wrong way to pray, and there is a right way to pray. The wrong way is hypocritical and repetitious; the right way is sincere and succinct. The wrong way follows from a false theology; the right way follows from a biblical theology. You cannot get better at praying by praying; rather, you can get better at praying only by reading and thinking about what the Bible teaches, not just about prayer, but about the whole scope of divine revelation.⁵⁹

The disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). It has been said that spiritual things are "caught, not taught," but the Bible teaches the opposite. Spiritual things are taught. Both Jesus and John taught their disciples the correct way to pray. They did not expect the disciples to learn by practice and observation. Christians do a lot of wrong and useless things, thinking that they are learning and contributing, when they should sit down to read a book or listen to instruction.

Professing Christians are often hypocrites in prayer. They deliberately pray in public to be seen by other people, or they pray long – very long – prayers so that others will hear and admire their spiritual dedication and their ability to form beautiful sentences. However, most of these people are so theologically inept that the longer they pray, the less likely they are to fool the informed. We are more impressed with the endurance of those who suffer these long and stupid prayers, but they are also in the wrong, since they should rebuke the hypocrites and not tolerate them.

Some people bow their heads in prayer before their meals in public places. This is fine if this is really their custom, and if they are offering sincere thanks to God. But some of them do this to be seen. When they incite admiration in others, they feel spiritual, and when they incite disdain and anger, they feel heroic. Either way, they pray in public to generate a response, and not as a sincere act of worship and thanksgiving. It is better for them not to pray at all. Instead, they should return to their own homes, and see if they are still interested in praying. And some people may cry, "Praise the Lord!" or "Thank you, Jesus!" when they are not really praising the Lord or thanking Jesus. They are saying this to sound spiritual. This is also hypocritical.

People commit the same type of hypocrisy when they perform other acts of worship, such as when they sing at church. We sometimes see them singing with tears on their faces, kneeling down, or prostrate on the floor. These things are not wrong in themselves, but

⁵⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *Prayer and Revelation*.

when people behave like this to look spiritual or to appear as if they have received a special touch from God, they are hypocrites. They are not spiritual people, but they are actors. When you see someone who is obviously forcing himself to burst out in tears in church, or to assume a contrived pious posture, he has just exposed himself as not spiritual.

The third example of religious hypocrisy is on fasting (v. 16-18). When the hypocrites fast, they make sure everyone knows about it. They make themselves look distressed and unkempt. The Jews would smear their faces with ashes, making it obvious that they are "humbling" themselves. They want people's admiration, and Jesus says this is what they will get, but nothing more (v. 16). Their fasting would have no spiritual effect.

Jesus calls his followers to be different. Rather than announcing your fast, he says to take measures "so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting." Instead of looking distraught and untidy, make yourself look clean and cheerful, so that you may practice self-denial and self-discipline, dedicate your time to worship and prayer, and show mercy to the poor and the hungry (Isaiah 58:6-9).

Jesus' description of hypocritical fasting may appear almost comical, but it is not an exaggeration. I knew a person who fasted occasionally. Sometimes he would announce it before beginning the fast. Then, when someone asked him about lunch or dinner, he would put on a frown and rub his stomach, and complained that although he was famished, he could not eat because he was on a fast. Sometimes he would say this even when no one asked. His fasting had no spiritual value.

There is the common accusation that Christians are hypocrites. People say, "The church is full of hypocrites!" or "Christians are hypocrites, and I don't want to have anything to do with them!" This is usually said not only as a criticism of individual Christians, but of most or even all Christians, and it is often intended as a criticism of Christianity itself. The reasoning seems to be that Christianity is unworthy of belief because Christians are hypocrites.

We must remind ourselves of what it means to be a hypocrite. The hypocrite is an actor. He is one who claims that he is someone that he is not, or who claims to believe something that he does not really believe. This definition agrees with the English dictionaries, and it agrees with how the Bible uses the term.

Then, we must also specify what it means to be a Christian. We must find our definition of a Christian from the Bible. If "Christian" means whatever one wants it to mean, then he can call a Buddhist or even an atheist a "Christian," but then his criticisms against "Christians" would no longer apply to followers of the biblical religion. They would apply only to the sort of people he strangely calls Christians, namely, the Buddhists and atheists. When that happens, there is no longer any need to defend Christians against the accusation of hypocrisy, since he is not even talking about Christians anymore, but he is merely using the word to talk about non-Christians.

What is a Christian? A Christian is one who has been chosen and changed by God, and who exhibits his faith in Christ both in creed and in conduct. This is how the Bible defines a Christian. Even without examining the rest of the Bible, Jesus insists in the Sermon that his disciples must have a righteousness surpassing that of the Pharisees and the scribes, in that they must truly affirm and follow the demands of the law.⁶⁰

Keeping this in mind, we ask, "What makes a Christian a hypocrite?" or "What makes one a Christian and a hypocrite?" First, he must really be a Christian as defined by the Bible. Second, for this Christian to be a hypocrite, he must claim to be someone that he is not, or he must claim to believe something that he does not really believe.

Now, when people make the accusation that Christians are hypocrites, what do they have in mind? What do Christians claim to be that they are not? And what do they claim to believe that they do not? What do Christians pretend to be? And what do they pretend to believe?

Suppose a person tells you that he is a Christian, and he knows and affirms the basic doctrines of the Bible. If he sins, can you call him a hypocrite? You cannot, because one who truly affirms the basic doctrines of the Bible would tell you it teaches that Christians are not perfect and sinless, and so Christians do not claim to be perfect and sinless.

Therefore, when the Christian sins, he is doing exactly what he tells you that he would do. He does not claim to be someone that he is not, and he does not claim to believe something that he does not. He tells you that he has been changed, but that he still strives with sin as he matures in holiness. The sin that you observe is exactly what he tells you to expect from him. Where is the hypocrisy?

On the other hand, if a person claims to be a Christian, and also claims to be perfect and sinless, then he does not hold to the doctrines of the Bible. Whatever criticism directed toward him is irrelevant to Christianity. It is applicable only to him as an individual, and not to all Christians or to the Christian faith. Christian theology does not claim that Christians are sinless; therefore, someone who claims to be a Christian is not a hypocrite when he sins unless he also claims to be sinless.

Likewise, a person who claims to be a Christian, but who denies the doctrines of the Bible such as biblical inerrancy and the atonement, cannot represent the Christian religion. Otherwise, anyone could discredit atheism by claiming to be an atheist, even when he is not, and then rob a bank or murder someone. Probably no one would accept this as proof against atheism, or as proof that all atheists are robbers and murderers. But when it comes

⁶⁰ Jesus does not say that the Pharisees are hypocrites but are nevertheless the true people of God; rather, he says that they are hypocrites and thus cannot escape the condemnation of hell (Matthew 23:33). Therefore, to attack the Pharisees is not to attack the religion revealed through Moses, since the Pharisees do not in fact affirm or follow what Moses had written. Likewise, to attack "Christians" who are truly and consistently hypocritical is not to attack Christianity or Christians, but to attack non-Christians who are pretending to be Christians.

to the Christian faith, many people consider this kind of argument legitimate and persuasive.

The argument of hypocrisy may discredit the person, but not the worldview that he claims to affirm, unless there is something inherent in the worldview that necessarily produces self-contradictory beliefs and actions. When this is the case – if the worldview is self-contradictory – then the correct approach is to deal with the worldview itself. So the argument of hypocrisy is often irrelevant when the debate is about a worldview and not about a person.

If a person claims to be righteous, but he habitually commits murder, theft, adultery, perjury, and other such things, then he is not a Christian. The Bible would not admit that he is a Christian, and I would not admit that he is a Christian. He has the ability to say that he is a Christian, just as he has the ability to say that he is a dog, a tree, an atheist, or king of the universe, but the ability to say that he is these things does not make him any of these things. He can claim to be a Christian, but that does not make him one. A "Christian" who murders, steals, and lies, is really a non-Christian who is killing, stealing, and lying.

If I say that I am a mathematics teacher, but I cannot teach or even understand mathematics, then the correct conclusion is that I am not really a mathematics teacher, even though I claim to be one. You would be wrong to then tell people that mathematics teachers are hypocrites, since it is one who is not a mathematics teacher who claims to be something that he is not.

Likewise, the religious hypocrite is not a Christian, but a non-Christian. Unless those who make the accusation that Christians are hypocrites can prove that these are actually Christians instead of imposters, these hypocrites are non-Christians. The non-Christians are the hypocrites. Thus we answer:

"Non-Christians, hypocrites! You are not Christians, but many of you present yourselves as Christians. Then, when you reveal your true character by your evil deeds, you make the accusation that Christians are hypocrites, when you – the non-Christians – are the ones pretending to be something that you are not, and the ones performing these evil deeds.

"Non-Christians, hypocrites! You complain that there are many hypocrites in order to excuse your unbelief and disobedience. But when you do this, you are also hypocrites, and in judging other people for being hypocrites, you also condemn yourself for being hypocrites. You are like the people you judge.

"Non-Christians, hypocrites! When you accuse someone who claims to be a Christian, but who does not believe or follow the doctrines of the Bible, you in fact accuse a non-Christian who pretends to be a Christian. You are accusing one of your own, and

exposing one of your own as a hypocrite. As many as these 'Christians' that you accuse of hypocrisy, you are accusing that many non-Christians of hypocrisy.

"Non-Christians, hypocrites! You say things like, 'History is full of atrocities committed by Christians in the name of Christ.' But unless you can prove that these were true Christians in a way that we must accept, that they were Christians according to the Christian definition, you are assuming that anyone who claims to be a Christian is really a Christian. The Bible denies that these were Christians, so that we should rather say, 'History is full of atrocities committed by non-Christians misusing the name of Christ.'"

The accusation of hypocrisy is one of the most common arguments against the Christian faith. It is also one of the most stupid arguments. Christians should never be intimidated by the intellectual sophistry of the non-Christians, but should devestate unbelief by the wisdom and power of Christ.

MATERIALISM (Matthew 6:19-34)

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that 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, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,

and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Jesus has been expounding on the superior righteousness that he demands from his disciples, and the passage that we now take up still falls within the large section bracketed by the *inclusio*, "The Law and the Prophets" (5:17, 7:12). Therefore, we must not suppose that Jesus has entirely altered the direction of his Sermon, but we should read our passage in the context of the same overarching theme.

Since the beginning of the Sermon, Jesus has been teaching his disciples to be different from the world, and to be a counter-cultural force. This entails adopting beliefs and practices that are radically different from the hypocrites and the pagans.

The hypocrites are those who claim to obey God's law, but in reality they do everything they can to undermine and subvert it (5:21-48). They claim to honor and worship God, but in reality they are seeking the admiration of men (6:1-18). The religious hypocrites are in essence not very different from the pagans, only that the pagans are more explicitly non-Christian. Jesus now discusses something that the pagans are more obviously concerned about, but we know that greed also fills the hearts of religious hypocrites (Matthew 23:25). The most important issue is not to distinguish the distinctive sins of these groups, but to know that Jesus calls us to differ from both. He demands Christians to be different from all kinds of non-Christians, to have a different kind of religion and a different set of priorities.

Just as the religious hypocrites are interested in establishing a reputation of piety with people, with little regard for how God perceives them, the pagans – religious or not – are obsessed with accumulating treasures on earth rather than in heaven. This perspective is unwise and shortsighted (6:19-20), but it characterizes the hearts of non-Christians. They focus on earthly treasures because their hearts are bound to the earth. But Jesus teaches us to turn our hearts to heaven, and accumulate our treasures there (v. 21).

Then, Jesus offers a metaphor that may seem obscure to some (v. 22-23), but it is not too difficult to understand when we read it in its context. The eye is a metaphor for the heart, which leads the whole self. He contrasts the "good" eyes against the "bad" eyes. The word translated "good" is *haplous*, as opposed to *diplous*, which means double (1 Timothy 5:17). In this context and in biblical usage elsewhere, the word also implies generosity and liberality (Romans 12:8; James 1:5).

Therefore, a "good" or "single" eye refers to both a detached attitude toward wealth and an undivided loyalty toward God. Jesus has just finished speaking about the former (v. 19-21), and he is about to speak on the latter (v. 24). The "evil" eye, of course, refers to the opposite of what is represented by the good eye, and he says that it will ruin the whole self, causing it to be "full of darkness."

Although it is possible to work for two employers, it is impossible to serve two masters, because a master owns the slave. Jesus declares that a person is either a slave to God or to Money. The word translated "Money" is *mammon*, which refers to wealth and property, and is here personified as a slave owner. You will either be a slave to God or to Money, and to serve Money rather than God is more than greed – it is also idolatry. As Paul writes, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and *greed, which is idolatry*" (Colossians 3:5). Just as a Christian must not worship pagan idols, a Christian must serve God rather than Money.

Verse 25 begins with the word "therefore," connecting what follows (v. 25-34) with what Jesus has just said (v. 19-24). The command, "do not worry," thus follows from the previous verses. That is, because you cannot serve two masters, because you will serve either God or Money, and because serving Money is idolatry, *therefore* "do not worry about your life."

Idolatry is rooted in the mind. Ezekiel refers to some who have "set up idols in their hearts" (Ezekiel 14:3), and whose "hearts were devoted to their idols" (20:16). Worrying about material things is one symptom of Mammon worship. But then, biblical worship, the opposite of idolatry, is also rooted in the mind, so that worry is soon contrasted with faith (v. 30).

The implication is that in turning people from their idols to God, and in helping people progress in sanctification, the correct approach is to apply God's word to the mind through biblical argumentation. This is what Jesus does in the verses that follow. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Paul also uses this approach in evangelism and in teaching, and he writes that true worship and transformation comes from the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:1-2).

Jesus uses a rhetorical question to state that one's life and body are more important than mere food and clothing. Elsewhere, also in the context of opposing "all kinds of greed," he states, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Since life is more than food, clothing, and possessions, we should never become obsessed with these things.

You may say, "Although life is more than food and clothing, it is certainly not less than food and clothing. We still need these things, don't we? But if they are difficult to obtain, then we would naturally worry about them." Jesus responds from the biblical doctrines of divine providence (v. 26-30) and divine omniscience (v. 31-32). Again, he reminds us that theology is the foundation of spirituality. Theology saves us from idolatry and unbelief.

His answer includes two *a fortiori* arguments. To paraphrase, the first one says, "God feeds the birds; you are more important than the birds; therefore, God will also feed you" (see v. 26). And the second one says, "God clothes the grass; you are more important than the grass; therefore, God will also cloth you" (see v. 28-30).

He also reminds us that we cannot change our lives by worrying (v. 27). In effect, he is saying, "You worry about your life, about food and clothing, as if by worrying you will make a difference, but worrying will not change your life, and it has no power to obtain food and clothing for you. Therefore, do not worry." Finally, Jesus argues against worry by reminding his hearers about the knowledge and benevolence of God (v. 32). As Christians, we do not need to "run after all these things" as the pagans do, as if it depends on us to obtain them because God does not know or care about what we need.

Jesus calls his followers to be different from the unbelievers, and he reinforces the point by making a number of contrasts since the beginning of the Sermon. Then since 6:19, he has contrasted earthly treasures against heavenly treasures, the good eyes and the evil eyes, God and Money, and now he contrasts faith against worry. The pagans are characterized by their worry about material things, and instead of imitating them, Christians should be characterized by faith in their Father's provision. So instead of revolving their lives around the pursuit of material things, Christians are to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" – to actively promote his rule and obey his will.

One man, when confronted with this verse, answered that since great wealth can help promote the kingdom of God, to seek first the kingdom of God means to strive first to become wealthy, so that one may give large amounts of money to churches and ministries. But this is to promote the very attitude that Jesus has been opposing since verse 19. He commands us to "seek first his kingdom" (v. 33) precisely to forbid us from first seeking wealth. To seek the kingdom first is to not seek wealth first, and to serve God is to not serve Money. In order to justify lust and greed, this man applied the same kind of subversive interpretation as the Pharisees and the scribes, and subjected himself to the same condemnation.

Jesus teaches us to have faith in God, because God knows and cares about our needs. But even if we have faith, it does not mean that we will never experience problems. Jesus embeds this point in his final statement about worry: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (v. 34). He does not say, "Do not worry about the future, because no trouble will come," but rather, "Do not worry about the future, because you have enough trouble today!" Faith does not exempt us from difficult situations, but it will keep us conscious of God's power, knowledge, and benevolence toward us as we encounter and overcome them.

JUDGMENT (Matthew 7:1-6)

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

Jesus has been expounding on the strict demands of the law, and by this time certainly none of us emerges unscathed or innocent. In fact, all of us are probably guilty of all the sins that he has mentioned. For the same reason – because God's standard of righteousness is so high and strict – if we wish to maliciously attack other people, we will find ample ammunition from the Sermon on the Mount. However, to do this would be to disregard the ethic that Jesus has been teaching us. It would be to become like the Pharisees and the scribes, the very people that he forbids us to imitate.

Jesus proceeds, as if to answer the question, "Given what I have been teaching, what should be your attitude toward one another?" His answer is, "Do not judge." As the Sermon approaches its conclusion, this is an extremely important lesson, teaching us how to relate to one another in the light of what has been said. But instead of being correctly explained and followed, this is one of the most abused passages in the Bible.

Non-Christians, and also some of those who claim to be Christians, often use our passage to assert that we should not make moral judgments and evaluations of other people. However, they do not hesitate to *judge* very harshly those who make these judgments and evaluations, calling them judgmental and hateful. One man said, "Jesus taught that we should never say that someone is wrong." But this man readily accused those he considered judgmental as utterly wicked and unspiritual people.

The interpretation that Jesus forbids all moral judgments is impossible. It contradicts not only the teaching of hundreds of other biblical passages (Matthew 18:15-17; John 7:24; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:1-4), but it also contradicts what Jesus says in the next several verses. He does not stop at verses 1-2, but proceeds to explain what he means. As we continue to read, we can easily see that he is speaking against hypocritical judgment, and only hypocritical judgment. We have defined the hypocrite – he is an actor, claiming to be someone that he is not, and to believe something that he does not.

Jesus says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?...You hypocrite." (v. 3, 5). This man draws attention to a fault in another person, but he disregards a bigger fault in himself. An example of this hypocrisy is a non-Christian who judges the Christian for being judgmental. But the context in verses 3-5 seems to mainly address the relationships between the followers of Christ, although the principle applies in other relationships as well. In any case, we will turn to the unbelievers soon enough (v. 6).

Jesus does not speak against moral judgments, but against hypocritical judgments. He says, "*First* take the plank out of your own eye, *and then* you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." *First* examine yourself, *and then* (not "never") you will have the spiritual vision to help your brother. Do not use the Sermon on the Mount to criticize

everyone and exempt yourself, but *first* examine yourself in the light of its teaching, *and then* proceed to help other people, albeit not with a malicious and destructive attitude.

Moving on to verse 6, "dogs" and "pigs" are derogatory terms for unbelievers. The dogs are not friendly household pets, but vicious scavenger dogs, and pigs are considered unclean animals. Jesus warns us against offering sacred things to the likes of dogs and pigs. Although this applies to all spiritually obstinate people in principle, it mainly refers to non-Christians who persist in rejecting the gospel. They refuse to appreciate the Christian message, but they will "turn and tear you to pieces" – perhaps by citing Matthew 7:1 to call you a judgmental and narrow-minded bigot! Jesus enables us to see the non-Christians as they are – vicious dogs and filthy pigs.

If you are a Christian, then before I rebuke you about a sin that I perceive in you, I ought to first examine myself, lest my own moral shortcomings obscure my spiritual vision and cause me to make a false judgment. After I have examined myself, then I should rebuke you about your sin. The Bible regards this as good and noble, not unloving or judgmental: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). In all of this, I should not suggest that I am perfect or sinless.

On the other hand, if you are a non-Christian, then I am never hypocritical when I speak to you about your sin and about your need for salvation. As a Christian, I have confessed in myself the sinfulness that I tell you to confess, and I have believed for myself the message that I tell you to believe. There is no false judgment. There is no hypocrisy. If you continue to resist the gospel, then I am not hypocritical to call you a dog or a pig, because I readily acknowledge that I would have been a dog or a pig like you, if I had resisted the gospel as you do now.

If you persist in unbelief despite my efforts, then Jesus teaches me to treat you like the dog or pig that you are. Instead of cheapening the sacred gospel by keep offering it to a mad dog like you, and instead of continuing to allow occasions for a disgusting pig like you to blaspheme, I should move on to other people (Matthew 10:14; Luke 10:10-12; Acts 13:44-46, 18:5-6). Of course people are offended, and even those who claim to be Christians are often offended, although these are biblical expressions. We are to call stubborn unbelievers dogs and pigs anyway, and if some Christians are distressed by this, then perhaps they are also dogs and pigs, and not Christians in the first place. Do you suppose the Sermon on the Mount pleased everybody when Jesus preached it? But he preached it anyway. And do you suppose the unbelievers enjoyed being called dogs and pigs? But he said it anyway.

Non-Christians often cite Matthew 7:1 when they attempt to silence our outcry against their depraved conducts and perversions. But their usage distorts the express meaning of the passage, and completely suppresses verse 6. Then, they judge us for being judgmental. We must confront their intimidation and manipulation, and answer:

"You hypocrites! You distort the words of Jesus and turn them into a prohibition against making judgments about you, but then you pronounce all sorts of judgmental criticisms against Christians for being judgmental. Thus you expose and condemn yourself.

"You cowards! You claim to be the intellectual leaders of this world, but you are nothing more than filthy dogs and pigs. Instead of hiding behind a distortion of the words of Christ, why don't you face the claims of the Christian faith and defeat them? But in your heart you realize that the Christian faith is true, and instead of overcoming our preaching and argumentation, you attempt to escape their convicting power by lashing out and by running away."

Many non-Christians have learned fragments of biblical passages, often incorrectly cited or understood, and they will use them against you. Some of them have read the Bible, and they will try to intimidate and manipulate you by twisting its words. Do not be reduced to silence or bullied into submission, but challenge their use of Scripture. Demand the exact references of the verses used. Demand sound exegesis to support the application. Demand definitions for the essential terms and reasons to justify these definitions. Then, demand arguments that show the relevance between the verses and the topic of discussion. Do not back down. Step forward and fight. If they cannot satisfy these demands, then you have uncovered their intellectual dishonesty and incompetence. Instead of letting them bully you, expose them and embarrass them.

Some misinterpretations of the Bible have been repeated by non-Christians for so long that even Christians have adopted them. There are Christians who have been immobilized by a sinful timidity, and a demonic distortion of love and gentleness (also reinforced by non-Christians), so that they do very little to challenge the abuse of the Bible.

We must crush this foolishness. If the non-Christians dare to hijack the Bible to manipulate us, then let them argue for their use of it. When they fail, we must advertise their errors for everyone to see, and declare, "Look everybody! These non-Christians could not defend their own beliefs, and so they tried to manipulate and silence us by distorting the Bible. But they could not present sound biblical arguments to turn away our attacks. Now their dishonesty and incompetence are exposed. Come! Let us hunt them down. Look! Let us laugh at them together."

SEEKING (Matthew 7:7-11)

"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, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 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 good gifts to those who ask him!"

Since no one is perfect and sinless by the standard of the Sermon, if we use it to find fault with other people, then we will certainly be successful. But if this is all we do with it, then we have missed its purpose. Jesus is speaking to us as his disciples, so that we would grasp the strict demands of the law, and pursue a true righteousness that is superior to the counterfeit and hypocritical righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes.

Therefore, we should examine ourselves by the Sermon, and then help our fellow disciples. Of course, it is not that we must be perfect before we say anything about other people, but the point is that we should not be hypocritical, disregarding our own sins and pretending that we are perfect.

However, when we examine ourselves by the Sermon on the Mount, we invariably discover that God's standard of righteousness is impossible to attain by our own power. Yet this is the standard by which he judges everyone. If left unchanged and without a way of escape, all sinners would be doomed to endless suffering in hell. But God made a way to justify us apart from the works of the law, that is, by faith in Jesus Christ.

When we are regenerated by God, he puts his Spirit into us, and gives us the power to obey. As he said through Ezekiel, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27). Then, Paul writes, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). Christian obedience begins at conversion. It is not optional, and it is not to begin later as one matures.

This obedience is to continue, but based on what Jesus has said so far, we realize that we have not developed very far in the righteousness that he demands. Although we have been justified by the imputed righteousness of Christ, we will be dissatisfied as long as we continue to fall short. Thus the Sermon, rather than encouraging us to practice hypocritical faultfinding, in fact drives us to persistently seek God for help.

Accordingly, Jesus tells us to literally "keep on asking," "keep on seeking," and "keep on knocking" (v. 7). Although many commentators relate this passage only to prayer, it is uncertain that Jesus intends to limit what he says this way. The action and the result in, "Ask and it will be given to you," obviously apply to prayer. However, Jesus does not stop here, but he continues to say, "Seek and you will find" and "Knock and the door will be opened to you." These two actions are not necessarily limited to prayer, and the two results should be applicable to other things as well.⁶¹ Carson seems to agree, since he thinks that "seek" refers to an "active, diligent pursuit of God's way."⁶²

⁶¹ Although it is possible that Jesus is using the common rhetorical device of repetition to reinforce the same idea, it remains that the expressions do not seem to restrict the application to prayer alone.

⁶² Carson, *Matthew*; p. 186.

So even if the main idea is persistent prayer, the teaching is not limited to prayer, but it applies to all the ways of seeking God that the Bible teaches, such as study and fellowship. Therefore, although God's standard of righteousness is high, it should not drive his children to despondency, but it should incite them to persistently ask, seek, and knock, in all the ways that God teaches them to ask, seek, and knock. Their efforts will not be in vain, because Jesus promises that those who ask and seek, will receive and find (v. 8).

Then, Jesus reinforces this teaching with an *a fortiori* argument in verses 9-11. He says, in effect, "You who are sinful nevertheless show natural benevolence to your children, and do not mock them when they ask from you. Since God the Father is righteous and perfect, how much more will he not mock but grant good things to those who ask from him!"

Verses 9-11 make an important qualification. Jesus is not promising that any human being who asks for anything will receive what he asks, as long as he seeks it with persistence. Rather, he is speaking to God's children, those who have the Holy Spirit to call God their "Father." Therefore, the main application of this passage excludes unbelievers.

Jesus says that both a human parent and the heavenly Father are willing to give "good gifts" to their children. Just as you would never give your son a snake when he asks for a fish, you would not give him a gun even if he persistently asks for it, or a bottle of poison even if he persistently seeks it. In the illustration, the son asks for "bread" and "fish" – things that are good for him. Likewise, the Father will give "good gifts" to his children, among which are the qualities praised in the Beatitudes, and the power to conform to his will by obeying his commandments.

SUMMARY (Matthew 7:12)

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus concludes the main body of the Sermon by stating what has been called the Golden Rule. In translations that group the verses into paragraphs, this verse is usually attached to verses 9-11; however, it is clear that Jesus applies the statement to the entire section starting from 5:17 to this verse. The message of the verse, "do to others what you would have them do to you," echoes a recurring point that he makes throughout the Sermon. And the verse obviously serves as the closing bracket of the *inclusio* on "the Law and the Prophets" (5:17, 7:12).

Jesus says that the statement "sums up" the Law and the Prophets. It is a summary of Old Testament ethical teachings. A summary is a *summary*. People understand what that means in other contexts, but when it comes to spiritual things, they often become stupid and confused.

One preacher said that since this commandment sums up all the ethical commandments, this means that, "If you know and keep this commandment, you don't need all the other commandments." If this is true, then Jesus needs to speak on only this one commandment

whenever he addresses ethical issues, but instead, he has expounded on a number of commandments in depth and detail.

To illustrate, if I were to write a set of safety guidelines for operating a dangerous machine, and I conclude the manual by stating, "In summary, take the necessary precautions to protect yourself and others from injuries." Most people would not conclude from this that the summary alone is sufficient and that they should discard all the guidelines I have written. How do I protect myself and others? What are the necessary precautions? What injuries may result if these precautions are not taken? The precautions are defined by what harm the equipment can cause. Would this machine explode, release toxic fumes, sever limbs, or what? The summary is fine for its purpose, which is to provide a way to learn the details and how they relate to one another. It does not replace the details.

Moreover, to isolate verse 12 from the rest of the Bible's ethical teachings is to expose it to all sorts of distortions from which it would otherwise be immune. Suppose you are an alcoholic, so that you crave alcohol all the time. If we isolate the words, "Do to others what you would have them do to you," then this could mean that it is your moral obligation to serve alcohol to all the people that you meet, including babies and children. But this perverts the verse in the very manner that Jesus denounces throughout the Sermon. Then, suppose a man wishes to die. He considers death a relief, and he hopes that someone would end his life. If we isolate the words, "Do to others what you would have them to do you," this would translate into a moral obligation for him to kill as many people as he can. However, Jesus has already expounded on the commandment against murder (5:21-26), so 7:12 cannot be twisted in this manner.

A summary is a *summary*, not a *substitute*. By definition, a summary leaves out most of the details. To apply the summary to each situation, one must discover the details that are relevant to that case. So in order to understand and follow 7:12, we need to learn the details that the verse summarizes. To isolate the summary and discard the details is to destroy the summary itself. Therefore, although 7:12 is a summary of the Law and the Prophets, we may not discard all that Jesus has said in the Sermon, and we may not disregard the ethical teachings in the rest of the Bible.

The verse also reinforces something that Jesus has emphasized. That is, the moral law indeed forbids us to harm other people, but it moves beyond that to command an active consideration of their welfare. It is not enough to be harmless, stay out of trouble, and leave people alone; rather, we must deliberately and sacrificially do good to them. What would be good if done for you, actively do that for others. This is a summary, but not a substitute, of God's commandments.

3. CONCLUSION

As Jesus brings his Sermon to a close, he specifies the impact that it should have in his hearers. Are his words to be heard and admired, but then forgotten? Can one be a true disciple who hears but does not obey them? Are the Father's arms opened wide, ready to welcome anyone who nonchalantly wanders into his embrace? Or, is the way to the kingdom restrictive and hard to find? To illustrate his answer, and to conclude the Sermon, Jesus uses several pairs of contrasts: the two ways (v. 13-14), the two trees (v. 15-20), and the two builders (v. 21-27).⁶³

TWO WAYS (Matthew 7:13-14)

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Many professing Christians are imposters. Other than the "Christian" label, their lives suggest nothing remotely Christian. Since they are really non-Christians posing as Christians, they cannot avoid smuggling unbiblical beliefs and practices into their false versions of Christianity. Among other things, they take the ethical standard that is popular in the non-Christian world, and bring it into the church by claiming that it is really a Christian ethical standard.

One of the things that non-Christians have smuggled into the church, with barely noticeable resistance from the Christian community, is the notion that the Christian faith is an open, tolerant, and inclusive religion. They declare that it provides the most number of options, embraces all different kinds of people without demanding them to change, and makes the way of salvation easy, broad, and inclusive.

However, even other non-Christians are not fooled by this nonsense. They perceive that the Christian faith is the most exclusive, restrictive, and narrow religion. But when they criticize it for this, Christians often scramble to say that it is not as narrow and intolerant as it seems.

Christianity is much more narrow and intolerant than most Christians and non-Christians realize. When people bring this up to attack our faith, Christian apologists should not dilute or explain away this truth, but should answer, "That's a statement, not an argument. So what if Christianity is narrow? You may not like it, but that in itself does not make Christianity wrong. So what if Christianity is exclusive? What are you going to do about it?"

⁶³ Carson divides 7:13-27 into four sections: two ways (v. 13-14), two trees (v. 15-20), two claims (v. 21-23), and two builders (v. 24-27). See Carson, *Matthew*; p. 188. I attach v. 21-23 to v. 24-27, which, judging by the content of these verses, seems to be permissible, if not preferable.

Christians often rush to defend a doctrine when the non-Christians have not even started their attack. Pointing out something that we teach is different from giving an argument against it. They say, "You Christians believe that God sends people to hell!" And the Christians hurry to respond, "Yes, but...", and then make up some unbiblical nonsense to defend it, as if we should be embarrassed about the doctrine.

Instead, we ought to say, "Yes, but so what? You have not stated an argument against it. You dislike the doctrine, but that does not make it wrong. I dislike your beliefs a lot more, does that mean I win the debate? And if I dislike your face, would you erase it? What is wrong with hell? Is it unfair? According to what standard? Is it too harsh? According to what authority? Give me a real argument, starting from premises that you can show to be true, and that inevitably lead to your conclusion." Hell is not a doctrine that we should be timid about – it is a display of God's glorious justice and wrath!

Jesus explains that the road to destruction is wide and broad – it is a big, open road. It is easy and comfortable. It offers many options, and it emphasizes diversity and tolerance. It embraces many beliefs, although they contradict one another. It is inclusive, and it does not offend. On this road, you will find many companions, willing to accept you as you are, without demanding you to change your beliefs and repent of your sins. What sins? That is an ugly word that they do not use. After all, everything is relative, so who are they to judge you? People love to travel on this road. It is easy to find – you are probably already on it.

Then, there is this other road. It is small and narrow, and often difficult to travel on. It allows for only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God (Ephesians 4:4-6). It is exclusive and offensive, and completely intolerant of diverse beliefs. It claims total control of all aspects of your life, so that there is no room for you to smuggle in your private thoughts and secret sins – you must leave all that behind. In fact, you must renounce all your previous beliefs and actions as futile and wicked. Although there are other travelers on this road, you will often seem alone, walking in the opposite direction that everyone else is going. People hate the very idea of this road, and only a few people even find it.

Nevertheless, one road leads to hell and the other leads to life. The choice is clear to God's chosen ones – they will "enter through the narrow gate" and persevere until they reach their destination. As for all others – idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, slanderers, liars, sorcerers, murderers, and all non-Christians – they will not enter the kingdom of heaven, but they will suffer extreme and endless torture in the lake of fire, where there will be no escape and no pardon, forever (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 21:8).

Jesus has explained the true demands of the law, and the true meaning of righteousness. Now he tells us what his teaching implies about true discipleship. The reprobates claim that there are many ways to God, but instead, Jesus says that there are many ways to hell, and only one narrow way to life. To those who would be his disciples, although the road may be difficult and unpopular, he teaches, "Enter through the narrow gate."

TWO TREES (Matthew 7:15-20)

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."

Watch out! Watch out for false prophets. Warnings about false prophets are widely applicable, and this one is no exception. However, since it is placed within the context of the Sermon and right after the teaching on the narrow way, it means that we must note its relationship to the Sermon in general, and to the teaching on the narrow way in particular. Before that, we will first consider what Jesus and several biblical passages say about false prophets.

False prophets will come to you "in sheep's clothing." Sheep is a metaphor for God's people. Among other things, they are gentle and trusting followers of their shepherd, and they need their shepherd to guide and protect them, and to bring them to green pastures to feed. Because of their amiable nature, sheep can be a little gullible.

By covering themselves with sheep skin, the false prophets make themselves appear as Christians. In many ways, they look like the real thing. They appear as understanding and compassionate people. In fact, they can be so accommodating that they would modify the church's doctrines and policies to avoid making you feel inferior, and they would redefine biblical discipleship so that you can call yourself a disciple without making any changes in your life.

In reality, these people are "ferocious wolves" – enemies and predators of the sheep. They are not there to promote right worship and holy conduct, but their aim is to devour your faith and erode the church from within. They are the opposite of what they present themselves to be.

We need to be forewarned and prepared. Jesus says that we will recognize these false prophets "by their fruit." This is a metaphor for the natural and necessary outworking of one's inner life. An apple tree produces apples, not oranges or some other kind of fruit, so that when there are apples on a tree, it means that the tree is an apple tree, not some other kind of tree.

Likewise, no matter what a person claims about himself, the kind of spiritual fruit that he produces reveals his true spiritual condition. Although the false prophets come in sheep's clothing, in reality they are ferocious wolves. The cover does not change their nature, so what is on the inside will manifest itself on the outside in various ways. Because they are wolves, they will exhibit the behaviors of wolves, even as they try to present themselves as sheep.

Commentators say that this instruction to observe the fruit amounts to an ethical test, or an examination of behavior, and it indeed includes this. But when they suggest that it is mainly or even solely such an ethical test, the biblical evidence is against them.

Elsewhere, Jesus uses the metaphor of the tree when he responds to something that the Pharisees have said about him:

"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:33-37; see also Luke 6:45)

Then, when he speaks about the relationship between what is in the heart and what comes out of it, he says:

"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'" (Matthew 15:17-20)

An evil heart (a bad tree) produces both evil speech and behavior, not just evil behavior. This means that when we examine the "fruit" in one's life, we are to examine both his words and deeds, both his creed and his conduct.

When Paul uses the metaphor of wolves to talk about false prophets and teachers, he says, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:29-31). He uses one of the same metaphors in giving the same warning to the church as Jesus does, and he says that the wolves are those who would "arise and distort the truth." Spiritual wolves are doctrinal predators, and not just ethical predators. They wish to destroy both the sound doctrines and the lofty ethics that you have been taught from the Bible by faithful ministers of God.

The Bible has warned about false prophets since the beginning. Without belittling the ethical test, it teaches the primacy of the doctrinal test. In fact, even if all indications seem

to validate a man's ministry, if he fails the doctrinal test, then this alone is sufficient to overturn all other considerations and expose him as a false prophet:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

Even if a person announced a "miraculous sign or wonder" that indeed took place, he was exposed as a false prophet if he had "preached rebellion" (v. 5). Why would a person who preaches false doctrines be seemingly validated by other signs? It is because "the Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul." He may seem zealous in evangelism, but does he deny the inerrancy of the Bible? He may abound in charitable deeds, but does he teach the demonic doctrine of cessationism? The man is a false prophet.

God's chosen ones remain steadfast. In fact, throughout church history, heresies generated numerous occasions for them to renew their doctrinal commitments and refine their theological formulations. On the other hand, these heresies were effective in drawing false converts away from the church. It is when the heresies are preached in congregations everywhere that the reprobates remain, because then the church is saying the same things that the world affirms.

As mentioned, since Jesus' warning is placed within the context of the Sermon and right after his teaching on the narrow way, it means that we must note its relationship to the Sermon in general, and to the teaching on the narrow way in particular.

Jesus has been teaching on the true demands of the law and the characteristics of his true followers throughout the Sermon. Then, right before his warning about the false prophets, he tells his hearers to enter through the narrow gate. Therefore, it seems that in our context, his warning pertains particularly to those who would contradict his teaching on the demands of the law and the narrowness of the way.

False prophets promote moral laxity and discourage spiritual vigilance. Jeremiah referred to false prophets who preached peace, when there was no peace (Jeremiah 6:14), and to

scribes who claimed to be wise by the law of the Lord, but in reality they "handled it falsely" (8:8). Ezekiel faced the same problem (Ezekiel 13:1-16).

The false prophets in our day include those who promote religious pluralism and moral relativism. They teach that there is more than one way to God, or that the way to salvation is easy and wide. They teach that some non-Christians will go to heaven, or even that God will not send anyone to hell at all. Many of them teach that man is saved by his own choice instead of by God's sovereign decision. Some of them regard abortion as a woman's right, thus rejecting God's right over the body and his commandment against murder. Others think that homosexuals can be true Christians, and become ordained ministers who lead the church. And some of them teach that you can be saved without then exhibiting a natural obedience to God's law.

Paul complains that the Corinthians have been led astray from a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ," because "if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, *you put up with it easily enough*" (2 Corinthians 11:3-4). In Revelation, Jesus rebukes the church of Thyatira for tolerating a false prophetess, who among other things leads people into sexual immorality "by her teaching" (2:20). On the other hand, he commends those who "cannot tolerate wicked men," and who have exposed those who falsely claimed to be apostles (2:2).

If a man tells you that you can be a Christian other than by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, or that this faith does not necessarily produce obedience to God's law, then he is a false prophet. Do not accept or tolerate him, but renounce and expose him, and remove him from the community.

If this seems too harsh, it is because you are confusing the sheepdog with the wolf. The sheepdog looks fierce at times, growling and barking when you go astray, but it is because of this that he is the shepherd's servant, and your friend and protector. On the other hand, a wolf who puts on sheep skin is still a wolf. He looks gentle and kind on the outside, but he is vicious and cruel on the inside, and there is nothing he wants more than to devour you.

TWO BUILDERS (Matthew 7:21-27)

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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!'"

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came

down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

After his exhortation to enter through the narrow way and his warning against false prophets who would teach you otherwise, Jesus concludes the whole discussion and states the proper response to his Sermon.

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 10:8-10)

From what he says, it seems all that is needed is for one to believe and confess Jesus as Lord. But Jesus says that not everyone who calls him Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. There is no contradiction between the two, since a confession of Jesus as Lord might not come from faith. It is true that if you both believe and confess Jesus as Lord, then you indeed have salvation. However, it is possible that your confession is a lie – you can disbelieve but make the confession anyway. Such a confession is futile, and there is no salvation.

We discover whether your confession is true by whether you begin to obey God's commandments. As John writes, "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). If you say, "I have faith in Jesus Christ," then this confession should show that you have salvation, that is, if you indeed have faith in him. But as James writes, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26). Salvation is indeed by faith and not by works – that is not in debate. The issue is whether the faith that you claim to have is real.

Faith is the product of God's sovereign work of regeneration in the heart, and so a person who has faith is also one whom God has changed. Therefore, faith leads to transformation and obedience. If there is no transformation and no obedience in a person, then there has never been faith in the first place. Since there has never been faith, his confession of Christ is a lie, and he does not have salvation.

Paul and Jesus are addressing different issues in the same subject. Paul tells us the way to salvation – believe and confess Jesus Christ. And Jesus stresses that this confession must come from true faith. Paul says that if you become a Christian, you will be saved. Jesus agrees, but he warns that you can claim to be a Christian without really being a Christian. You become a Christian by faith, not by works; however, if you claim to be a Christian but do not exhibit works that are consistent with this claim, then the claim is false, and you are

not a Christian. As 2 Timothy 2:19 says, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

Cessationists sometimes use verse 22 to belittle the ministry of miracles, but this is to commit the same evil as the Pharisees, who distort God's word in order to excuse their unbelief and rebellion. First, to belittle the ministry of miracles – in any way, from any angle – is to belittle the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus. This alone warrants excommunication. Second, the verse would not make sense if it is intended to belittle the ministry of miracles. Jesus does not mean, "Even though you have done bad things, you are rejected because you have done bad things." The second part would be pointless if the first part already refers to things that are inferior or even merely neutral. Rather, it is implied that the first part refers to things that are obviously excellent, but the people's expectation is crushed because they have disobeyed God's commands.

Thus instead of belittling it, the verse elevates the ministry of miracles, but it elevates at least as much a life of obedience. Christ declares that he will reject them, because these people are in fact "evildoers," or literally, they are those who "practice lawlessness" (NASB). Again, as Paul says, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Galatians 3:11). Justification by faith is not the issue, but the point is that once someone has been justified by faith, he will no longer be a "lawless" person.

Jesus guarantees that lawless people will be rejected. Even charismatic powers and activities cannot take the place of obedience to the commandments. God has said, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27). You do not obey God's laws so that he will save you; rather, God saves you so that you will obey his laws. If you remain a lawless person, then this can only mean that God has never saved you, and he has not given you the desire and ability to obey. Therefore, you are not a Christian.

Jesus contrasts the lawless one with "he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Thus to obey God's commandments is to do the Father's will, and it is the opposite of lawlessness.

"Therefore" (v. 24) – because only he who does the will of the Father shall enter into life – "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (v. 24). On the other hand, "everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand" (v. 26).

Jesus declares that your eternal destiny hinges on how you respond to his teaching. If you are wise, then you will hear and obey his words, and construct your life on his teaching. But if you build your life on anything other than his teaching, then you are stupid.

This is the Jesus of the Bible. He commands people to wholly follow him, and tells them, "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

God justifies us by grace through faith, but it is a faith that produces obedience, given to his chosen ones according to his will. Thus Jesus refuses to relax even the least of God's commandments. He demands your complete attention and obedience, and he calls you a fool if you do not hear and obey him.

Of course, most people are fools. They build their lives on the teachings of scientists, philosophers, non-Christian religions, traditions, cultures, and their personal opinions and worldviews. But Jesus says that if you build your life on anything other than the Bible, then everything that you think you have attained and achieved, and all the good that you think you have done, will all count for nothing. When the storms of divine judgment come, all that you have built will come crashing down. By then, there will be no hope, no escape, and no second chance for you.